Food Is Love

by E Greer

Summary

This is my Food Is Love vignette series, all in one volume, to make it easier to download and read on devices. The original series is here: https://archiveofourown.org/series/1589182

An AU where Bucky has been safely recovered to the bosom of the Avengers family, and he and Steve are very much in love. Here, Natasha slowly fell into love and work with a hearing-impaired Clint, while Phil's competent heart belonged to Clint from the moment he met him. Phil and Natasha circle one another with caution while Clint absolutely DNGAF about anything but them and pizza. And somehow, a dog. Pepper and Tony are wildly in love, in their own unique scientist/CEO way. Bruce is the classic absent-minded professor who somehow gets saddled with an unexpectedly underage graduate student. Thor comes late to the party, but is often underestimated while his lady-love makes her own friends.
The Plan Is (italics are yet to be written):

**Winter:**
Bucky Makes Potato Pancakes for Dinner  
Steve Makes Spaghetti and Meatballs for Dinner  
Natasha Makes Tacos for Dinner  
Clint Makes Pinto Beans and Cornbread for Dinner  
Phil Makes Shawarma for Dinner  
Tony Makes Chicken Noodle Soup for Dinner  
Pepper Makes Salad Sandwiches for Dinner  
Bruce Makes Mac and Cheese for Dinner  
Jarvis (and the bots) Make Pizza for Dinner  
Phil Makes Steak Au Poivre for Valentine's Dinner

**Spring:**
Steve and Bucky Go Away for the Weekend  
— Steve and Bucky Make Hash for Dinner  
— Steve Makes Omelets for Breakfast  
— Bucky Makes Hors d'oeuvres for Lunch  
— Steve Makes Baked Cod for Dinner  
— Steve Makes Pizza for Breakfast  
Tony Makes Eggs and Toast for a Late Night Snack  
Bruce Makes Alphabet Vegetable Soup  
— Bruce Makes Blueberry Muffins  
— Bruce & Loki Make Alphabet Vegetable Soup for Dinner  
Clint Makes Tuna Noodle Casserole  
Jarvis (and the bots) Make Butter Chicken  
Natasha Makes Leg of Lamb  
— Phil and Clint Make Stir Fry for Dinner  
— Phil and Clint Make Potato-Leek Soup for Dinner  
— Natasha Makes Mejadra  
— Natasha Makes Leg of Lamb  
Phil Makes Makes Spring Vegetable Potstickers  
Thor Makes BBQ  
Pepper Makes Chicken Gyro Salad  
Bucky Makes Strawberry Cheesecake  
Loki Makes Garlic Lime Steak and Noodle Salad

**Summer:**
Bucky Makes Eggplant Parmesan  
Steve Makes shish kebab  
Natasha Makes Chicken Fajitas  
Clint Makes Pizza  
Phil Makes Mirin Glazed Salmon  
Tony Makes Beef Slices with Rosemary  
Pepper Makes Caesar Salad  
Bruce Makes Baked Orzo with Eggplant and Mozzarella  
Jarvis (and the bots) Make Salade Niçoise  
Loki Makes Summer Rolls  
Thor Makes Potato Salad (with a little help from his friends)
Autumn:

Bucky Makes Brisket
Steve Makes Meat Loaf
Natasha Makes Croissants
Clint Makes Stroganoff
Phil Makes Quiche
Tony Makes Lentil Soup with Sausage, Chard and Garlic
Pepper Makes Nancy’s Chopped Salad
Bruce Makes Mejadra
Jarvis (and the bots) Make Cassoulet
Loki Makes Black Beans and Rice
Thor Makes Beef Stew
Bucky Makes Potato Pancakes for Dinner

A delicate chime rang out. Bucky lifted his eyes from his e-reader to the window, tracking the snowflakes as they fell in the dim winter light. The app had been Tony’s idea. Bucky had trouble with the dying of the light, and this time of year, it came earlier every day, shrinking what little sunlight he collected in the overstuffed window seat. Tony had Jarvis design an app that lived on Bucky’s phone, chiming a half-hour warning to sunset.

Bucky closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath, and asked Jarvis, “Jarvis, do we have dinner plans?”

“No, but Dr. Banner is preparing dinner in the common area. I believe he’s planning chana dal, jeera rice, raita, and kachumber.”

Most days, Bucky was happy to eat what Bruce cooked. Jarvis had quietly ordered spices, oils, vinegars, mustards, and preserves from all the locations Bruce had lived. Asafetida, dry mango powder, and kasoori methi were all in the spice cabinet, and so Bruce’s chana dal was one of Bucky’s favorites. The warmth of the yellow dish normally brightened his mood in the evening, but not tonight.

Memory was not Bucky’s strong suit, but behind his closed eyes, Bucky remembered the shattering crunch of fried, shredded potatoes with a soft center. When he strained, he saw his father, tall and strong in his memory, grating enough potatoes to fill a large bowl. The sharp scent of a grated onion drifted through the air.

“I want to cook tonight,” said Bucky. He didn’t really expect an answer, but on the other end of the window seat, Steve looked up from his sketchbook.

“Yeah? What are we having?” Steve’s blue eyes met his, and the corner of his mouth lifted.

“Potato pancakes. Jarvis, what apples do we have in house?”

“Would you like McIntosh, Red Delicious, or Macoun?” Jarvis was a trifle smug, as if he’d anticipated the question.

“McIntosh, please.” Bucky figured it paid to be especially polite to the being who controlled your hot water.

“Coming right up, sir.” Jarvis also controlled the dumbwaiter to the basement food storage facilities, and the specialized robots that handled the in-house food supply for the Avengers.

When Natasha had pointed out that housing the Avengers together made them more vulnerable to poisoning, Pepper had remembered reading that Martha Stewart had a working farm in Connecticut. After a quick phone call, Pepper had made a detour to the Westland region of the Netherlands, where Stark Industries had invested heavily in precision farming.

In turn, Martha had happily embarked on a quiet new project, bankrolled by Stark Industries, and designed by Joel Salatin and CombiVliet. Behind a formidable layer of shell companies, the Avengers team now owned several hundred acres next to Martha’s farm, with their own flower garden, vegetable and berry gardens, an orchard, and chicken coops, cow and pig barns, and several fishponds.

In the winter, Bucky’s favorite parts of the farm were the enormous Dutch-style greenhouses, covering tens of acres, complete with artificial lighting. The soft, yellow light, the scent of growing
plants, and the pleasantly damp soil all helped banish winter doldrums.

Even Tony had been interested, experimenting with aquaculture. It wasn’t yet commercially viable, but the complexity of combining hydroponics and indoor fish farming appealed to him. Bucky suspected that Bruce farmed some recreational herb on that level.

Before Bucky, Steve had essentially camped on his floor in the Tower, living out of a duffelbag. Now, with Pepper’s encouragement and Jarvis’s help, he’d transformed their area into a cozy haven of light.

Bucky hadn’t been a great cook, but Steve had remembered that he’d enjoyed helping his Ma, and Bucky’s therapist had recommended cooking as a way to get him out of his head. Jarvis had arranged for delivery of a BlueStar range, (“No, Tony, we don’t need a commercial range. I’m not a chef.”) and full size refrigerators and freezers.

Alton Brown’s Good Eats had become one of Bucky’s favorite shows, and the team would watch binge watch Takeshi Kaga challenge his Iron Chef with Bucky.

Tonight, though, Bucky didn’t want to use a recipe. “Hey, Steve, how many potatoes do we have?”

“Am I peeling potatoes tonight? About 10 pounds, I think.” Steve pulled a half-filled metal basket out from a bottom cupboard.

“Nah, but you’re grating them and some onions.” Bucky smirked. Grating potatoes and onions was his least favorite part.

Steve just rolled his eyes, and reached into the cabinet for the box grater. They had a food processor, of course, but there was something comforting about doing it this way.

While Steve got started on that, Bucky looked in the dumbwaiter for his apples. They were gorgeous, red and shiny, and still cool from the refrigerated storage in the basement. It was almost a shame to peel them. Bucky grabbed a knife and cut one long strip, circling around the apple.

“Show off,” Steve teased gently, his voice fond.

Bucky smiled back, and picked up a second apple. “I’ve got skills, baby!”

It had taken Bucky a long time to be able to joke about his knife skills, but using them for cooking, for feeding Steve and the other Avengers, for nurturing life, had let him come to peace with his abilities.

Steve was making short work of the potatoes, the large bowl steadily filling with grated Russet potatoes. Yukon golds were good for mashed potatoes, but too sweet and soft for potato pancakes. Jarvis stocked both in sizes ranging from petites, no larger across than a quarter, to baking potatoes as long as Steve’s hand.

Once a half-dozen apples were peeled, quartered, and then sliced again, Bucky pulled out a nonstick ceramic skillet. The sugar in the applesauce would stick to the pan, so Bucky made a quick pass with the cooking oil spray. Placing the apples in the pan, he added a cup or so of water, turned it on low, and put a lid on it.

Turning to Steve, Bucky got distracted by Steve’s forearms, taut with muscle as he grated the last few potatoes.

“Enjoying the view?”
Bucky looked up, face warm. He could do that now, let himself feel. “Yeah, actually.”

Steve just smiled, his eyes crinkling. “Onions, you said?”

“Two, I think. Plus two eggs, and two cups of flour.” Bucky turned to find the basket of yellow onions in the lower cabinet. He paused, and looked back over his shoulder to find Steve unabashedly checking out his ass. Bucky winked, and picked up two of the largest onions, absentmindedly peeling off the papery skin with his metal hand.

“Here you go.”

Still smiling, Steve nodded and turned to grab the chef’s knife off the magnetic knife strip. Keeping them in a drawer wasn’t good for the knives, and was just asking for someone to cut up their fingers. Knife blocks were disgusting after a while. So, Bucky had screwed a heavy-duty bar magnet to the wall and put most of their bigger knives on it. Might be a little tough for a non-super soldier to pull knives off the rare earth magnet, but that was OK—it was their kitchen.

Bucky checked the apple slices, softening as they cooked. They had changed color a little bit already, and Bucky stirred them with one hand while he opened the spice cabinet with another. For this, he wanted the Korintje cinnamon from Penzeys. It would blend well with the toasted sugar he kept in an airtight glass jar.

Sprinkling a ½ teaspoon of cinnamon across the apples, he continued stirring them with a silicon spatula, mindful not to scratch the skillet. Setting the spatula down, he replaced the cinnamon, and pulled out the toasted sugar.

“Fancy tonight, huh?” Steve was watching, his blue eyes bright with anticipation, and perhaps a few tears, as he grated the onions.

“Cooked apples aren’t fancy,” Bucky retorted easily.

“You’re using the toasted sugar,” argued Steve. “That took you five hours in the oven!”

“Why make it if you’re not going to use it?” asked Bucky with a shrug. “I only need a tablespoon, anyway.”

He replaced the lid on the jar, tucking it away in the baking cabinet. The warm amber of the toasted sugar was pretty. If Bucky was prone to keeping things on the counter, he’d keep it out, but even now he couldn’t break his tidying habit, and to be honest, he didn’t want to. There were worse habits.

Sprinkling the sugar on the apples, he stirred them again, and replaced the lid. Turning to Steve, he watched as Steve rinsed off the grater in the sink, setting it down in the left-hand bowl to be washed. The dishwasher was already going, or Steve would have tucked it in. Steve’s time in the Army had taught him to be tidy, too.

“Flour,” Bucky reminded him softly. Steve wasn’t a natural cook—he needed a clear recipe, preferably with pictures, but he made a tolerable sous chef for Bucky. Well, to Bucky, Steve would always be tolerable.

“Two cups, right?” asked Steve.

“Mm-hm. I’ll grab the eggs for you.”

Bucky was still secretly a little awed by the cheapness and ready availability of eggs in the middle
of the winter. He extracted two jumbo eggs from their Styrofoam container and put it back in the fridge. Delicately, he cracked the eggs and dropped their contents in to the bowl, while Steve added the flour.

Bucky dropped the eggshells in the metal compost bucket, and replaced the fancy lid with its black carbon filter. As a business, the Tower was legally required to separate out food waste. Pepper had discovered that most of it was incinerated anyway, so she’d had Jarvis arrange for the Tower’s food waste to be trucked out to the farm for composting. Bruce had mumbled something about worm bins in the basement, but the idea hadn’t made it far.

Bucky picked up the blue and white cylinder with the salt. It was comfortingly familiar. Ordinarily, he’d add a single teaspoon to the potato pancakes, but this was a double batch, so he added two, replacing the teaspoon back in the drawer when he was done.

“I’ll mix, yeah?” said Steve.

“Sure,” said Bucky. He reached for the big container of vegetable oil and sat it beside the stove before opening the drawer with the cast iron skillets. Their biggest skillet was a full 15 inches across, heavy enough that it outweighed the bag of potatoes. Pouring the entire container of oil into the skillet, he tried to remember how his father had done this, but the wisp of memory escaped.

The smell was familiar though, as the stove began heating the cast iron skillet. Bucky put a black lid on the skillet, and turned to his apples.

The apples were a light tan, almost sandy in color, and the scent of apples, cinnamon, and sugar filled the air. He squished one of the slices with the side of the spatula. Yes, they were soft. Bucky turned off the heat and replaced the lid. They’d keep, at least until the first batch of potato pancakes were done.

Something was missing. “Steve, what did we usually eat with these?”

“Applesauce, and … I’m not sure what they call it now, Buck. Your dad made it ahead of time, and I haven’t had it since. It wasn’t butter, more like the crème fraîche we had in Paris.”

Steve frowned, thinking.

Jarvis beeped, a sort of digital throat clearing he’d developed for Bucky and the more easily startled Avengers.

“Go ahead,” said Bucky, still chasing the feeling of something missing.

“I believe that you may be referring to smetana, a type of sour cream. Unfortunately, it does take time to prepare, but you may find commercial sour cream to be an acceptable substitute.” Jarvis sounded apologetic.

Bucky shrugged. It was hard as hell to find lots of things, so he shouldn’t be surprised about this. The name didn’t sound familiar, but Jarvis was probably right—he usually was about these kinds of things. Privately, Bucky suspected that Jarvis had taken a special interest in food because of him and Steve.

“Let’s try it,” said Bucky, and turned to the stove. Lifting the hot lid with his metal hand, he saw that the golden oil was shimmering in the light over the stove.

“Right then,” said Bucky. “Pass the potatoes over here.”
This, Bucky remembered. Scoop a handful of the gloppy mixture into his hands, flattening it into a kind of oval shape in his left, tucking the spare potato shred into it. Turn it onto a flat, thin metal spatula and carefully slide it into the oil with his right hand. Set the spatula down, and repeat.

With the big skillet, he could fit four potato pancakes into the skillet. The oil bubbled, making it hard to see the potatoes in the oil, but that was OK. When it stopped bubbling, he’d know to check the potato pancake for golden brown around the edges.

Bucky turned to find Steve watching him, a gentle smile on his face.

“You remind me of your dad,” said Steve.

“Yeah?” said Bucky. He had only a few memories he could easily find of his dad, but this here, this sound of potatoes in the oil, and this scent of the cooked apples, and this soft, nearly incandescent light, felt right. This was deeply satisfying on a cold winter’s night.

“Yeah,” said Steve. “He didn’t talk about it much, but every year, right around this time, he’d make potato pancakes for a while. Your mom didn’t say a word about it, but she’d make sure there were always potatoes and apples in the pantry towards the shortest day of the year.”

“Hmm,” replied Bucky, looking at the potato pancakes again. The edges had begun to turn dark, almost red, so he grabbed a second spatula and gently lifted the edges. Yep, the bottoms were definitely cooked. He flipped the potato pancakes over and looked back at Steve.

Bucky smiled and reached for Steve. “I love you.”

They stood for a second, tucked against each other, breathing in the scent of the other.

Steve stepped back. “Better check those. It’d be a shame to waste all my hard work. I’ll look for some sour cream.”

Bucky watched him stride towards the elevator, and then turned back to his potato pancakes. This was a good way to spend an evening, slowly making enough pancakes for the both of them in the warm kitchen.

Making a home with his memories and his love.
Steve Makes Spaghetti and Meatballs for Dinner

Chapter Summary

Steve put down his sketchbook with a sigh. The light had been dull and gray all day, the skies dark and cloudy. The days were getting longer—sunset had been at 5:06 today, only seven minutes later than the winter solstice—but it didn’t seem to help Bucky on days like this.

A couple hours before dawn, Steve had slipped from their bed, making his way by the dim purple light of night in New York. Bucky had curled into the warm spot, tucked around Steve’s pillow, his hair dark against the white linen pillowcases. A tiny pout had emphasized the lush curve of his lips, and Steve’s fingers had itched for his pencils.

Daily exercise was good for mental health, and so Steve had turned away, slipping on the workout gear he’d set out the night before. Drymax socks, a black thermal compression tights (“Bucky! You want me to wear what?!”), thin black overpants, a thin, navy blue merino wool shirt, a slick black hoodie with reflective stripes, a black beanie, stretchy black gloves, and black sneakers with heavy duty tread for gripping on ice.

Steve enjoyed the feeling of being out in the dark with the other regulars. Sure, he was faster and could run longer, but it was good to nod to Singh as they passed on the first corner, and tip his head at Hernandez as she rounded the park. They didn’t talk, exactly, but it let Steve feel more like a regular person, like Sam wasn’t too far away.

When the sun had risen, glinting down the city streets, Steve had finished his fourth lap around Central Park and swung back to the Tower in a slow cool down jog. He usually showered in the gym downstairs, to avoid waking Bucky, but Jarvis had let him know Bucky was awake.

When Steve had slipped into the apartment, he had paused at the sight of Bucky, seated at the kitchen table with his head folded on his arms. He’d known then that it wasn’t going to be a good day, and his heart sank. Even though their therapists all reinforced that it wasn’t his responsibility, that Steve couldn’t make Bucky be happy, Steve wanted Bucky’s happiness.

“Bucky?”

“Mm.”

“I’m going to shower and then I’ll get you some breakfast.”

Jarvis had already had the water running by the time Steve had reached the bathroom. Two-minute showers were a skill he’d mastered in boot camp, soaping and rinsing fast. A quick pass with a white cotton towel, some soft sweatpants and a tee, and he had padded quietly back into the kitchen.
Bucky hadn’t moved, so Steve had brewed a cube of black Russian tea, making the *zavarka*, or tea concentrate, extra strong. Meanwhile, Jarvis had silently heated the electric kettle for the hot water that Steve had used to rinse the inside of the teapot. Steve had paused a second, and then broken out the Montmorency cherry jam, tart and sweet. It had been that kind of morning.

Everything prepared, he had set the teapot and glasses on the table next to Bucky, pressing a swift kiss to his temple, and then retreated to make breakfast.

Even with the coddling, Bucky had been alternately snappish and then apologetic all day, unable to settle on a task or diversion. Steven knew it wasn’t his fault, but it had been difficult to keep his temper.

When long beams of afternoon sunlight had made their way across the hardwood floor in the living room, Steve had come to Bucky and pressed a kiss to the back of his neck. As he’d hoped, the slow slide of skin on skin in the dim, golden light of their bedroom had let Steve take Bucky out of his head. It didn’t always work, of course, but Steve was abjectly grateful every time he could relax Bucky enough to take a nap.

While Bucky slept, soundly, in their bedroom, Steve had settled on the window seat and tried to sketch. When the sunset alarm went off, Steve came to a decision.

He located a cup of water, a raw egg, three and half cups of flour, a quarter-cup of sugar, a teaspoon of salt, and two tablespoons of olive oil (“Why is this green”? “Because it’s extra-virgin olive oil.” “It’s made from virgins?”), as well as a tablespoon of yeast from the freezer, and placed it all into the big breadmaker with an elephant on the side. Without a word, Tony had fixed it so that Jarvis could run the machine—the half-dozen buttons were unnecessarily complicated, Steve thought. A career as a baker was never going to happen, but even Steve could quietly dump ingredients in a machine.

During the dark months before Steve had found Bucky again, Tony had taken pity on Steve and distracted him over a couple of long afternoons by teaching him how to make spaghetti and meatballs. (“You can cook?” “Said I didn't have much use for cooking. Never said I didn't know how to cook.” “That’s a movie quote, isn’t it.”)

Jarvis had helpfully taken photos of key steps in the process.

While the dough mixed, and then rose for a couple of hours, Steve had tracked down three glass quart jars of fire-roasted San Marzanos from the farm in Connecticut. Tony refused to use paste tomatoes that weren’t from Campania, but Steve couldn’t taste the difference, even with the serum. Steve and Bucky kept onions and garlic in their kitchen as a matter of course, along with dried oregano.

“Jarvis, do we have fresh basil and parsley?”

“Yes. Sir has been experimenting with it in the aquaponics lab.”

“Thanks, Jarvis.”

In the elevator, Steve thought about the oddity of growing herbs inside. Bucky’s ma had had pots of herbs on her back steps, giant lush plants growing happily in the Brooklyn summer heat. When the frost came, she’d snipped the basil and a good bit of the oregano at the base of the plants, and hung them upside down to dry in her kitchen. The oregano could sometimes overwinter, so Steve and Bucky had been assigned to cover the oregano with old newspapers and then a large, upside down clay pot that had taken both of them to maneuver.
Stepping off into what almost resembled a computer lab, with gleaming white floors, white walls, and a white ceiling, Steve glanced around.

“The basil is on the third tank to your left, sir.”

The blue plastic tanks were big enough for Steven to lay down in, and nearly waist high. As Steve passed them, he heard the plop of fish coming to the top. If Steve remembered correctly, Tony had been experimenting with catfish, and yes, there were whiskers on the fish.

Reaching the tank, Steve paused, looking at a white latticework fixed on top of the tank. It held several different varieties of kitchen garden plants.

“Jarvis, you’re sure Tony won’t mind if I take some basil and parsley?”

“Sir would be pleased that it is of use.”

With a shrug, Steve pinched off a small handful of basil and parsley leaves, the peppery scent of fresh basil filling the air.

Back in the kitchen, Steve stopped, thinking. He could make dinner for he and Bucky, but he could also make dinner for the team. Bucky might appreciate being with people he liked, who weren’t focused on him.

“Jarvis, who is in for dinner tonight?”

“Sir, Ms. Potts, Dr. Banner, Ms. Romanoff, and Mr. Barton and Agent Coulson will likely be present for dinner this evening.”

Dinner for ten, then.

Steve bent and looked into the pasta cabinet. They didn’t have three pounds of spaghetti, but they did have three pounds of bucatini. That would do. A red sauce with beef went with thicker pasta, if he’d understood Tony correctly.

Lifting a giant stockpot from another bottom cabinet, Steve used the flexible extension on the sink faucet to fill the pot, tilting the water to the side of the pot to fill it as inaudibly as possible. (“No, Tony, we don’t need a spigot over the stove. That’s just asking for trouble in a grease fire.”)

Without noticing the heft of the filled pot, Steve set it gently on the right burner. For some reason, he favored the left side when making spaghetti sauce, what Tony called gravy.

Quickly, Steve chopped the onions. First, he peeled them, and then cut them in half. Using a technique he’d learned from America’s Test Kitchen, he cut one end off the half onion, and then sliced towards the other end, not quite reaching it. This way, it didn’t fall apart as he turned the plastic cutting board at a right angle and then cut again, ending up with a quarter inch dice.

Steve would never admit it, but he loved the scent of fresh garlic on his hands. Steve had a sneaking suspicion that Bucky did too, given the way he would sniff his hands and smile. Steve peeled the garlic, pinching each clover between thumb and forefinger until the paper cracked a bit. Instead of mincing it, tricky with his big hands, he cheated and used a microplane to zest it into a small glass bowl. (“Mise en place.” “I’m already tidy, Tony.” “No, for cooking, so you don’t burn something by rushing to get something else.”)

Next, he chopped the fresh basil, and then the fresh parsley, each into their own glass bowls.
Jarvis, having reached this point in the slide show he displayed over the kitchen counter, noiselessly slid open the dumbwaiter door to reveal three shrink wrapped packages of ground beef. The farm in Connecticut had had some staff trained as butchers for their herd of Texas Longhorn cattle. The beef was grass finished, something Tony took for granted and that Steve and Bucky had had to adjust to—it had a distinct flavor, and the fat could be downright gamey, in Steve’s opinion.

Steve grabbed their biggest stainless steel bowl, set it on a kitchen towel to minimize noise, and mixed together three eggs, the basil, parsley, three teaspoons of dried oregano, a couple teaspoons of salt, half of the garlic, and a quarter cup of water. Once it was thoroughly mixed, he added a cup and a half of freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, the ground beef, and a couple cups of Italian style breadcrumbs. Tony had sworn him to secrecy on this part, claiming he’d be shamed if word got out that he was using pre-made bread crumbs. Steve had laughed, and then looked at Tony’s serious face.

Once that was combined, he pulled out some sheet pans and metal cooling racks, as quietly as possible. Setting the cooling racks on the sheet pans, Steve sprayed them with oil, and then pulled out a stainless ice cream scoop. (“You’re not serious.” “I do not joke about meatballs, Steve.”)

Scooping the meat mixture with one hand, he made a ball of it with the other, and then set it on the rack, repeating until all the meatball mix was done. Jarvis had preheated the oven, so Steve quietly set the sheet pans on the rack.

The water was still heating in the stockpot, so Steve took a minute to steal a look at Bucky. He knew that Bucky wouldn’t disappear while he was cooking. He liked to check anyway. Bucky lay with his back to the door, all tucked into the comforter, with only his dark hair tumbling over the top. Silently, Steve eased the door shut again, and crept back to the kitchen, smiling to himself.

Grabbing a big Le Creuset pot, Steve poured in some of the green olive oil and waited for it to shimmer before adding the diced onions. While they began to sauté, Steve picked up his phone and sent a text to the team chat.

“I’m making spaghetti and meatballs tonight. Dinner’s at 6:30.”

Bruce replied right away with a smiley face and, “I’ll bring a salad.”

As other pleased responses trickled in, Steve waited patiently for the onions to turn translucent, matching the photo that Jarvis conveniently displayed for him. Then he pushed the onions aside, and added the rest of the garlic with another small dollop of olive oil, stirring it around for a minute until it turned a light gold. Next, he added the crushed tomatoes, stirring it all together before adding a little oregano and less fresh basil, along with a pinch of sugar and teaspoon of salt. Finally, he gave it one last stir and turned the burner down as far as it would go, to simmer.

The meatballs were done, (“A special thermometer, really?” “Yes, really—food poisoning is not fun. 165F for ground beef, thank you very much.”), so he added them to the sauce.

Steve padded into the bedroom, and eased himself into the warmth along Bucky’s back.

“Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Mmph.”

“It’s Tony’s spaghetti and meatballs.”

Bucky wiggled back against him, pressing himself against Steve from collarbone to knees.
“Don’ wanna get up.”

Steve smiled. “Come to the table. Everybody is coming to dinner. They’ll want to see you.”

“No talking.”

“No talking, I promise.”

“Kay.”

Steve shifted, and slipped his arms under Bucky, lifting him out of the bed, covers and all. He carried him to the bathroom, where he sat Bucky on a bench while he adjusted the spray in the already running shower. Bucky looked up at him from under his dark eyelashes.

“With me?”

“Sure.” Steve undressed, and then unwrapped Bucky from his blanket burrito. The bathroom was steamy from the hot shower, so Bucky wouldn’t be cold. Bucky hated the cold.

Guiding Bucky to a bench in the shower, Steve picked up the body wash and knelt at his feet. Bucky’s head was tipped back against the tile of the shower wall, his eyes closed, luxuriating under the hot water. Steve washed him from bottom to top, every inch a caress.

Finally, Steve tucked Bucky into the most outrageously fluffy bathrobe Pepper could find (which was, as it turned out, awesome because she was awesome) and put a hand on his waist as they walked together back to the bedroom. Steven opened a drawer and pulled out another set of sweatpants and tees.

Nobody would care. Pepper would show up in a pantsuit and snuggle with Tony in his grease-stained band tee. Nat would be in yoga pants and a tunic sweater. No doubt, Clint would wear his usual grotty sleeveless tee and tac pants, tucked against Coulson in his Dolce & Gabbana. The important thing was that they were all together.

Steve tucked Bucky into the sofa under a blue fleece blanket that matched his eyes, and cued up the latest Expanse novel on his e-reader. Before he turned away to fetch a Perrier, Bucky looked up at him and said, “I don’t deserve you.”

Steve smiled when he wanted to wince. “You don’t have to deserve me. You just have to indulge me.”

Bending down, he kissed Bucky in the curve of his mouth, and pulled back to see his expression. Bucky’s eyes were soft, and he blushed a little as he looked down at the black and white screen.

Satisfied, Steve returned to the kitchen.

Jarvis beeped gently at him. “The bread dough?”

“Thanks, Jarvis.”

Steve dusted the countertop with flour, and dumped the dough on it. He took out a metal dough scraper, and cut the dough in half, half again, and then repeated it twice more, until he had 16 pieces of dough. Pulling out another sheet pan, he laid parchment paper on it, and careful not to squish the dough, he placed each piece on the sheet pan. Into the oven it went. Fortunately, Jarvis would handle the temperature and time.
Picking up the cardboard boxes of bucatini, Steve carefully poured them into the boiling water in the stockpot. Jarvis flashed a light over the stove, acknowledging that he’d time the pasta. Steve turned to the dish cabinet, and reached for a huge red bowl for the sauce, and another big white bowl for the pasta. A third white bowl would hold the rolls.

Leaning against the counter, Steve looked into the living room. Bucky had slept through twilight, and so the city spread before them, lights sparkling like scattered jewels. Jarvis had adjusted the spectrum of the lights in the living room, knowing that Bucky preferred a golden syrup in the lamp beside him.

All at once, Steve blinked hard, overwhelmed with his good fortune. Bucky sat in front of him and a good meal he’d learned from a dear friend sat beside him, waiting to be shared with their friends. For tonight, all was well.
Natasha Makes Tacos for Dinner

Chapter Summary

Natasha woke to the unmistakable brightness of a snow-covered night. Instinctively, the skin on the back of her neck and shoulders prickled where the leotard exposed her skin. (“Chin up. Head on top of your spine. Feel the diamond in your back.”) Sagging wooden windows covered on the inside with frost thick enough to scratch pictures in, mornings without water because the pipes had frozen again, endless tendus and dégagés.

“The time is 4:59 a.m. The temperature is -7.8 degrees. Captain Rogers has just left for his morning run. Sir and Ms. Potts, and Mr. Barnes are asleep. Agents Coulson and Barton are not yet out of bed.”

Jarvis opened the intercom, letting her hear the rustle of fabric as Phil slipped out of bed. After a childhood in a dormitory, Natasha often didn’t sleep well by herself. It felt unnatural, as if she had to be on alert. Shortly after Phil and Clint had started dating, Phil had suggested the intercom to Jarvis.

A shift in the air brushed across her skin, and Natasha opened her eyes. She saw Phil, suited and bootied, in her doorway. Anonymous in his elegant suit, he nodded at her, acknowledging her wakefulness and disappeared. Fabric rustled again, and a few seconds later, Natasha felt a warm body slide into the bed. Clint was here, taking the watch, staying between her and the doorway. She tucked herself against his back, a hand on his ribs to feel him breathe. Natasha opened one eye, and saw Phil kiss Clint’s temple, the soft press of Phil’s fingertips on hers.

Natasha closed her eye. She was safe behind Clint. She was warm under her layers of blankets. She was allowed to sleep in. So she did.

When Clint and Natasha finally got out of bed, she decided to embark on a cooking project after their normal morning routine. Always breakfast (“Oatmeal, Tasha? Again?” “It’s good for you. Eat.”), a workout, and then sparring with the team.

While she ran on the treadmill, she thought about something warm, perhaps a little spicy, to combat the snow she refused to look at. (“Steve needs some pie. He needs sweetened up today!”)
“American as apple pie” had always privately amused Natasha. She’d spent a long September on a mission in Ile-Alatau National Park, eating from the wild apple groves. Kazakhstan had Vavilov, instead of Johnny Appleseed. Too bad Vavilov had run afoul of Stalin after sequencing the apple genome to its origins in Almaty.

Natasha had learned to cook in self-defense. Growing up in the Red Room, the ballerinas were kept so thin that many of them had irregular periods, if any. Cooking and eating were not favored skills. Natasha could, and had, eaten whatever was institutional food was available on missions and in barracks. But as soon as she had been permitted room for a hot plate and a cooler of ice, Natasha had taken control of her diet. Sometimes, she felt as though it was the only thing she was permitted to own.

Clint had come back from New Mexico with a newly found appreciation for tacos around the same time she’d seen a meme for Taco Tuesday. Real American food, Natasha thought, was something she could do. Natasha usually made a weekly meal plan, assuming no missions, and every Sunday afternoon she placed an order for delivery from the farm. Phil appreciated a soothing ritual.

“Hey, Tasha, what’s for dinner?” Clint reached for an apple from the copper bowl on her kitchen table. Natasha liked the way the bowl gleamed in the afternoon sun, the light reflected from an enormous mirror on the living room wall.

In the Tower, Tony subsisted mainly on smoothies and take-out. But Natasha could only eat out of so many greasy Styrofoam containers before her stomach rebelled. She suspected she wasn’t the only one, given how much Clint reminisced about Baja fish tacos. Steve and Bucky often politely slipped away after they “ate” with Tony. Yes, this would be a good plan.

“Jarvis, I have 35 packages of the 95% lean ground beef, correct?”

“Yes, you have approximately 24 kilograms.”

Natasha had visited the farm in Connecticut several times. Martha was a lovely hostess, and her blini were excellent. Their chats had led to Natasha visiting the butcher and specifying exactly how she wanted her ground beef prepared and from which cuts of meat. Now, Natasha looked forward to her autumn email with the list of possible cuts from a half beef, pork, goat, lamb, and poultry.

Jarvis kept her orders separate from the rest of the Tower’s food supply, in a dedicated freezer and cold storage space. Natasha didn’t generally indulge in charcuterie--too many unpredictable length missions--but Phil knew that when Natasha mentioned moskovskaya, she was talking about sausage, not vodka.

A couple of months ago, Natasha had returned from a FUBAR mission in Mexico City with a 25 kg bag of masa harina, a sensitive ACL, and deep seated frustration. Before she’d returned to the Quinjet, she’d traded a handgun for a heavy tortilla press and a quick tortilla making lesson from a grateful abuela. After the hundredth or so tortilla, her anger had simmered down enough that she trusted herself to have dinner with Bucky without spooking him.

“Wait and see, impatient one. I think you’ll like it.” Natasha pulled half the stack of frozen tortillas out of her freezer, along with some chipotle peppers in adobo sauce, a small bag of tomato sauce, a large container of refried beans, and a kilogram of codfish.

Setting the fish to thaw in a bowl of cool water, she walked into her pantry. Brown sugar, rice, and green lentils joined yellow onions, garlic, apple cider vinegar, reduced chicken stock, and flour on her counter. (“No, Tony, I don’t want white marble countertops. They’re too difficult to keep
unstained, thank you.

From the refrigerator, she pulled out Cotija cheese, mayonnaise, cabbage, a half a red onion, Colby-jack cheese, avocados, sour cream, lettuce, and cilantro. Cumin, salt, coriander, oregano, and chili oil all came out of the spice cabinet.

Finely mincing the chipotle peppers, she quickly added them to a plastic squeeze bottle. One good-sized lime later, and she added fifteen milliliters of juice. The recipe called for fresh garlic, but she thought garlic powder would be less biting. While she could make mayonnaise, she and Clint both preferred Kewpie, so she squeezed a generous 200 milliliters into the bottle. After one memorable mission, Clint had smuggled a bag back, and she’d been a fan ever since.

“Here, shake this. Don’t make a mess.”

“Sure. Hey, is this for tacos?”

Natasha pulled her large carbon steel chef’s knife from the magnetic strip Bucky had hung on her kitchen wall for her. Tony had made her an excellent little three-part gadget to sharpen her knives. It would even remove nicks from the blades, and if she used it for her throwing knives, nobody but she and Jarvis would know.

“Chop these.” Natasha handed the knife to Clint, hilt first. A meal for the whole team required a lot of diced onions, and Clint quickly filled a medium-size stainless steel bowl.

While Clint chopped, Natasha neatly reduced nearly most of a head of garlic to a fine mince, and then shredded cheese and cabbage. Finally, romaine lettuce, tomato, and avocados were all chopped and placed in their individual glass bowls.

Natasha pulled out a big stainless steel bowl, and added a double handful of the shredded cabbage, along with a few grams of minced red onion, some freshly chopped cilantro, a few milliliters of cider vinegar, and a wee bit of vegetable oil and salt.

She shoved it at Clint. “Here, mix this.”

“Ooh, I recognize this!”

Smiling, Natasha pulled out a large steel saucepan. She heated a few milliliters of canola oil and sautéed some onion. Once it was translucent, she cleared a space and added fifteen grams of garlic. 30 seconds later, she poured in the rice, coating it with oil. As it began to toast, she added ground cumin and salt. Once it was golden brown, she stirred in tomato sauce and chicken broth, put on a lid, and shoved it to the back burner to simmer.

Adding vegetable broth, ancho chili powder, cumin, coriander, and oregano to the rice cooker, she poured in 250 grams of lentils. Bruce enjoyed tacos as much as anyone else on the team. Natasha thought they could all stand to eat less meat and more fiber.

Natasha forced herself to glance out the floor to ceiling windows in her living room. Sunset would come in an hour and a half or so, and she knew that Bucky and Steve kept what Clint called “nursing home hours” for meals. The clouds were low and heavy, blocking out any possible hint of the sun.

Clint took out his phone. “Phil will be home about 5.”

Natasha nodded, and turned back to the refrigerator. She took out a kilogram and a half of lean ground beef. Another large stainless steel saucepan received oil, then onions, and finally garlic,
before she added the same spices she’d used for lentils, stirring until the room bloomed with the scent of chilies and cumin. The ground beef went in next, and she broke it up into fine pieces, using a bamboo spatula to blend the spices and meat. She reached for the defrosted tomato sauce next, pouring about a 250 milliliters into the mixture. Finally, she measured out a few milliliters of sugar and apple cider vinegar, mixing them into the meat and turning it down to a simmer.

Reaching for the lid on the rice, she was pleased to see that almost all the water was absorbed. She turned off the burner and thought for a moment. Natasha had no wish to host a team dinner, and only slightly more inclination to preside over dinner on the common floor.

“Jarvis, everyone will be in for dinner tonight, yes?”

“Yes ma’am. Did you wish me to let the team know that you’ve made dinner?”

“No, thank you. But if you would, let them know that tacos will be available at 5:30 p.m. on the common floor.”

“Yes!” Clint grinned, his happiness radiating through the kitchen. Clint loved the big team meals, everyone loud and talking over each other. He couldn’t really follow the conversations, even with Jarvis running his aides, but he didn’t care. Phil quietly repeated anything that Clint really needed to hear in his ear, allowing Clint to bask in everyone’s cheer.

Reaching for the still mostly frozen refried beans, Natasha placed them in the microwave on the “defrost” setting. Even after all these years, she got a small thrill at how easy it was to reheat frozen food with a microwave. Consumer goods like microwaves and rice cookers were a luxury she’d never had in Soviet Russia.

Moving the skillet with the rice to sit on a potholder, Natasha pushed the meat into its place on the back burner, and replaced it with a cast iron skillet. She filled the skillet with a thick layer of vegetable oil and waited for it to heat up. Each tortilla had been individually separated by pieces of wax paper, making it easy for Natasha to gently take each one and slip it into the hot oil just until it began to change color. Quickly, she scooped each tortilla out and slipped it over a bar on the pre-heated oven rack to keep it warm and dry into the proper shape.

She saved the last ten tortillas for her and Clint, wrapping them in a kitchen cloth, but not heating them quite yet. Instead, she microwaved a large ceramic dish.

“Clint.” She waved at the beef and the dish, and handed Clint a lid for the dish to help keep the meat warm.

Scrubbing the saucepan out, she replaced it on the stove, added a quart of hot water, and turned up the burner. Ordinarily, Baja fish tacos were deep-fried, but in honor of Phil and Clint’s cholesterol levels, she was poaching the fish instead. Another cutting board and chef’s knife and she’d made quick work of the now-defrosted cod, cutting each piece into two centimeter by ten centimeter strips. Into the boiling water they went, quickly turning white as they cooked.

Another big white ceramic dish went into the microwave, warming it to hold the rice. The beans were scraped into a similarly sized dish. The fish was already cooked through, so Natasha used a spider to scoop it onto another pre-warmed plate with a lid on top.

A click sounded in the quiet kitchen, and both Natasha and Clint turned to look at the rice cooker.

“Deal with that,” said Natasha, waving a hand at the steaming device. She stepped back, thinking, while Clint pulled out the hot inner liner and dumped the lentils into yet another dish.
“Are we having guacamole?” Clint asked.

“Yes. Hand me the garlic powder, please.”

This was the last item to prepare, so it didn’t brown while everything else cooked. Three minced garlic cloves, five grams of salt, three soft Hass avocados, some cilantro, finely chopped onions, and the juice of a lime later, and a good-sized dish of guacamole was ready.

Natasha tucked the cloth wrapped tortillas in the microwave, and then stooped to pull the warm, dry taco shells out of the oven, placing them on another dish.

“Jarvis, what is the time?”

“The time is 4:58 p.m. Agent Coulson …”

“Is here.” Phil stopped in the doorway, looking at the kitchen table.

Natasha looked, too. Jarvis had turned on the overhead lights because it was almost full dark on this snowy, gray day. A warm overhead light in the kitchen spotlit a big, wooden table covered in dishes heaped with food. The scent of cumin, chilies, and coriander filled the air. Sitting at the table, Clint was grinning at Phil, arms open for a hug and kiss.

All her beloveds were here, safe and sound.
Clint Makes Pinto Beans and Cornbread for Dinner

Chapter Summary

Tony had given Clint an odd look when he scavenged the ham bone off the dining table. It had been a delicious Southern style meal—ham, twice-baked potatoes, green beans, collard greens with bacon, cornbread muffins with honey butter, and pecan pie. Clint had been willing to bet the caterer had tried (unsuccessfully) to catch Tony and Pepper’s interest with something a little different. He’d appreciated it, though.

As Clint had wrapped the ham bone in aluminum foil, he had looked out the window. New York City lights had spread out as far as most people could see, a vast expanse of humanity illuminating the dark. Phil had been keeping an eye on him, he knew. Phil always saw him.

Clint hadn’t always been so lucky. When he was little, winter had meant cold, the kind of cold where you wore two pairs of socks in your hand-me-down sneakers, long johns under your jeans, a long sleeve shirt and a tee and a hoodie and a jean jacket over that. Moms had put two pairs of socks on the littles’ hands, with a plastic bag taped around the wrist for mittens. If you had been lucky, you had an oversized windbreaker with a hood to stuff your hands in the pockets. Everything had always been damp, and the electricity bill had only sometimes got paid, so his mama had scrounged the change in the sofa cushions to fill a kerosene heater with the metal safety guards broken off.

Winter break from school had meant long, dark days at home with the chill settling into his bones. On the best of those days, heat from a big pot of soup beans had made the kitchen the warmest room in the house.

Clint didn’t have to worry about the electricity bill now. He’d taken Tasha’s financial lessons to heart, and stocked away 15% of every dollar since he was a teenager—first into anonymous savings accounts, then CDs, then a 401(k), and finally index funds. The miracle of compound interest looked really fucking good at his age. Every morning, he got up and checked his account balances, reassuring himself that even if he stopped working that day, he’d be OK.

Even so, Clint had money because he didn’t spend money, and he hadn’t been letting that ham bone go to waste. It had a good bit of meat on it still, and he was feeling sentimental, in the dark of the year.

Steve had looked at the shiny package on the kitchen bar and had dipped his blond head
infinitesimally in Clint’s direction. Bucky, laid bonelessly across Steve’s chest, had caught the movement, and his eyes had flickered towards the package. The corner of his mouth had twitched.

“Gonna invite us to dinner tomorrow night?” Bucky had teased.

Clint had glanced at Tasha, curled into an overstuffed love seat with her toes pressed into Bruce’s thighs, reading a romance novel in a circle of golden light. She hadn’t looked up, but her eyes had crinkled fondly. She had known damn well what Bucky had been doing, and she had been willing to indulge him.

Phil hadn’t even looked up from his new cookbook. Clint had figured that with a subtitle of “Better Home Cooking Through Science” it’d be a winner. Phil was always happy to host, though. He loved feeding his team.

“Sure,” Clint had said. “Nothing fancy, though.”

Bucky had smirked, and said, “Do I look fancy?”

Clint had looked at him and Steve, with their socked feet up on the furniture, in sweatpants and long-sleeve tees with messy hair. They had taken up an entire arm of the long, L-shaped sofa, retreating into the dim light in the corner. Bucky always took the spot with the best sightlines. All they had needed were to untangle themselves and put on ballcaps and they’d blend right into a frat house. Or maybe a college baseball team.

He had snorted. “What was I thinking?”

Tony had laughed, which had made Pepper roll her eyes. She hadn’t moved away from him, though. Tony had snagged her hand after dinner and insisted that she fold her long limbs into his lap, her strawberry blond hair contrasting with his dark beard as she had leaned against his chest.

Tony had bent his head and kissed her hair. “I felt that. I know you!”

Bruce smiled to himself, his head bent over his tablet, and said mildly, “I should hope you know the woman sitting on your lap.”

Clint just grinned.

While Phil was getting his clothes ready for work the next day, Clint had wandered into the kitchen and had taken out a colander, placing it in the sink. Tasha had probably known this was going to happen, because there was a five-pound bag of dry pinto beans sitting on the pantry shelf. He tore open the plastic and poured the beans into the colander, rinsing them off and searching for little stones or stems. Once he had been satisfied that the colander contained only beans, he poured the beans into a big stockpot, and covered them with a gallon of water.

Phil had walked up behind him, arms reaching for his, kissing the curve of his neck. “One of my favorite meals.”

Clint had leaned back into Phil’s strong arms. “I love that you sweet talk me, but really? Beans?”

Another kiss, a hug. “I’ve learned to appreciate it, over the years. You’ve made me a convert.”
Clint had smiled to himself. “C’mon, you. It’s time for bed.”

Muzzy-headed, Clint felt Phil slip out of bed at 0 dark thirty. Phil maintained his reputation with the younger agents in part by getting there before they did, usually by 6 a.m. Clint didn’t give a flying fuck about his reputation with probies, and therefore wrapped the comforter around himself and stumbled out of bed, stopping to give Phil a thorough kiss before making his way to Tasha’s room and rolling into her bed, throwing the comforter over both of them. Clint fucking hated sleeping by himself if he didn’t fucking have to, and even more, he fucking hated mornings with the passion of a thousand fiery fucking suns.

Phil tucked them in, the scent of coffee wafting down the hall. Jarvis was an excellent fucking A.I., thought Clint as he fell back asleep.

The scent of oatmeal with raisins and brown sugar woke him up again. Tasha liked the routine of having the same breakfast every day. For years, it had been two eggs on black rye bread. Unfortunately, when Phil and Clint had moved in together, Tasha had realized that blood work was for more than STIs and infectious diseases. Phil had made a comment about butter being high in cholesterol, and the next thing Clint had known, breakfast had switched from eggs to oatmeal.

Clint didn’t really mind, and in fact, he prepped it a couple times a month, simmering a vat of steel cut oats for a half an hour or so. He separated the cooked oats into quart sized glass storage containers before stacking them in the freezer. Tasha had insisted on a full-size upright freezer in her kitchen, so there was plenty of space.

Staggering into the kitchen in his boxers, Clint sat heavily at the table as Tasha sat his oversized coffee mug in front of him, filled with the black nectar of the gods. Blinking, he watched blearily as she scraped the last portion of oatmeal into his bowl and set it in front of him, sipping on her own tea. He and Tasha had an unspoken agreement not to speak until they’d finished their respective morning caffeine intakes. She picked up her novel and let him slowly get his bearings for the day.

Once he felt like a human again, he rinsed his dishes out in the sink, and took the oversized slow cooker down from the upper cabinet. It was old, and so battered that he’d had to use a Sharpie to re-label the settings, but it worked just fine. Maybe he needed to re-label it—the light was dim in the dark, rainy morning, but the writing was definitely old and faded.

Shrugging, he rinsed it out and set it aside, and reached into the refrigerator for the ham bone. Stopping a second, he peered at Natasha, still absorbed in her book. Carefully, he took out the glass pint jar of bacon drippings, and a good-sized plastic bag filled with diced onion.

“You should sauté the onion before you add it,” said Natasha levelly.

“Mm-hmm.” Clint sat the contraband down, and turned and took out a non-stick pan, setting it on a burner. Turning it to medium, he added a dollop of bacon grease and the onions. (“No bacon for breakfast?” “Bacon is a condiment, not a food, Clint.”)

Once the onions were translucent, he used a silicon spatula to transfer the contents of the skillet to
the slow cooker. After he drained the beans, he added them to the slow cooker, and mixed them around the ham bone. Then, he added enough water to cover the beans by a couple of inches, put on the clear glass lid, and turned to Tasha.

“Gym?”

When they returned from their afternoon sparring session, sleet streaked the living room windows. Clint shivered involuntarily, but the scent of ham and beans filled the air.

“Smells good,” said Natasha. “Cornbread?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely. None of that sweet stuff, either.”

Clint set his gym bag down on the bench in the hall and walked into the kitchen, his mind on cast iron skillets. One of his first independent, non-work purchases had been a doorstop of a used book called *How to Cook Everything*. Clint had figured that since he didn’t know how to cook anything, it was just what he needed. He’d lost the book years ago, but Jarvis had tracked down the corn bread recipe for him.

Natasha set out the buttermilk and egg while Jarvis preheated the oven and Clint grabbed a big-ass cast iron skillet. Cornbread for two super soldiers, Phil’s not inconsiderable appetite (Phil’s workout routine was every bit as demanding as Clint’s, even if he did squeeze it into the middle of his office hours), Clint, Tasha, Tony, Bruce, and Pepper meant that Clint was doubling the recipe, at least.

Clint heated the skillet on the burner and added half a stick of butter, stirring it around until it melted. Turning to the baking counter where Natasha had already set a big stainless steel bowl, he added three cups of stone-ground cornmeal from the farm, a cup of unbleached all purpose flour, three teaspoons of baking powder, two teaspoons of salt, and a tablespoon of sugar, whisking it all together. He may grumble about overly sweet cornmeal, but he knew that the NYC contingent didn’t quite understand unsweetened cornbread.

Natasha had already cracked two eggs and beaten them in another medium-sized stainless steel bowl. Next, she added two and a half cups of full fat buttermilk, mixing them thoroughly. Wordlessly, she handed the bowl to Clint, who carefully poured the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients, mixing them with a wire whisk. Once the batter was a semi-smooth, thick slurry, he poured it into the skillet, watching as it bubbled in the hot fat.

Once the batter was smoothed out a bit, he popped it in the oven, and Jarvis flashed acknowledgement that the timer was set. Clint peered at the beans, bubbling away in the slow cooker. Grabbing a wood spoon out of the crock on the counter, he picked up the lid, leaning away as steam billowed out. Scooping out a couple of beans, Clint blew on them, and then ate them right off the spoon. Yep, done.

Natasha plucked the spoon out of his hand and dropped it in the sink. Clint laughed, and reached for the tongs, pulling the ham bone out and setting it on the counter. It had done its job. But, the beans could use a little salt and pepper still, so he used the fancy wood peppercorn mill that Pepper had gifted to Natasha.

Behind him, he heard the dull thunk of the plastic cutting board on the kitchen table. He turned to
see Natasha efficiently slicing onions to go with the beans. Clint had grown up eating pickled peppers with his beans, but as an adult, he much preferred sriracha, and kept a bottle with a rooster on the side in the refrigerator.

Clint washed and dried his hands, moving out of Natasha’s way as she did the same.

“Thanks for helping.” Clint telegraphed his movements, reaching out to give Natasha a hug. It was twilight, the sleet beginning to reflect the yellow lamplight back at them. Looking at their reflections in the window, he saw Natasha tuck herself up against his chest, her head under his chin and her arms around his back. Leaning back against the counter, he closed his eyes, feeling her lithe body against him.

Natasha didn’t let herself be vulnerable as a matter of course, so any hug from her was a rare treasure. Clint heard the apartment door open, and opened his eyes to see Phil step into the kitchen, setting his briefcase, hat, gloves, and full-length wool overcoat down in a chair.

Phil smiled at Clint holding Natasha, and walked towards them, opening his arms. Natasha tensed, but allowed herself to be surrounded by the two of them, Phil’s body pressed to hers, his arms around them both. Phil kissed Clint gently on the cheek, and pressed a kiss to Natasha’s hair before stepping back.

“Dinner smells wonderful. Let me get changed, and I’ll help you plate it.”

Clint grinned, amused at the thought of plating beans and cornbread. Natasha stepped back, her mouth quirked in similar humor, and laid an affectionate hand on Phil’s arm.

“Steve and Bucky will be hungry. They worked hard this afternoon.”

Just then, Jarvis beeped his digital cough. “Captain Rogers and Mr. Barnes are at the door.”

“Let them in, Jarvis. Remind Bruce and Pepper about dinner please.”

Pepper would fetch Tony, and they would all sit around the kitchen table in the dark of the evening, warm light shining down on their shared meal; Clint’s best childhood memory shared with his team.
Phil signed the last requisition form and set down his pen. The neat stacks of forms, data summaries, diplomatic cables, and after action reports nearly covered his desk. The small, high window in his office offered so little light on this dark winter afternoon that he had turned on both the fluorescent overhead light and the small, Arts and Crafts style desk lamp that Natasha had bought him.

Across the room, Clint stirred from a late afternoon catnap with Natasha. They lay together on the big leather sofa, her smaller frame tucked between his side and the back of the sofa, his arm flung across his face. A pale strip of skin gleamed at the hem of his tee. Few people ever got to see them this relaxed, and Phil treasured the sight. He was well aware that most agents thought him a robotic taskmaster, keeping Clint and Natasha late in meetings on Friday nights.

“Y’done?”

“I just need to file these requisition forms by the 5 o’clock deadline.”

Turning, Phil quickly scanned the stack of completed paper forms (“Why can’t we digitize these forms, Nick?” “Tony fucking Stark, Cheese.”) and uploaded the files to the in-house acquisitions server. The night shift would process the requests, and forward them to purchasing tomorrow. Phil didn’t cut red tape – he wrapped it with a bow and passed it on.

Phil stood, stretching and listening to the crackle of his back. Fieldwork took a toll on one’s body —most agents couldn’t physically last past 42. Even Clint hurt in the mornings, he knew, and carefully didn’t think about Natasha’s feet and hips. Ballerinas were usually invalided out by 30.

Clint took Phil’s suit jacket and overcoat from their hangars by the door, and waited. Phil blushed a little, but obediently turned around and let Clint help him into his suit jacket, and then his overcoat. Natasha reached up and tucked his scarf into his coat. She’d knitted it over the course of several months last winter, phonetic Russian in Morse code intarsia, all in shades of gray. (“возлюбленная” “Thank you, Natasha. You are beloved to me, as well.”) Hands on his shoulders, the bigger man turned Phil back around, and reached out to slide black leather gloves on his hands.

“Good?” said Clint, his voice smooth and controlled, but his eyes were smiling.
“Yes, thank you.”

Phil waited while Clint quickly shrugged into his own beat up leather jacket and Natasha wrapped herself in a hat, scarf, gloves, and puffy winter coat. Offers of help were always soundly rebuffed, so he’d learned to stop asking unless they were badly hurt.

Natasha patted him on the shoulder and stepped back. Here in SHIELD, Phil was always the leader.

Arranging his face in a neutral mask, Phil unlocked the door with his badge, retinal scan, and passcode, and then stepped out into the generic office hallway, Natasha pacing at his left, while Clint hung back. Clint was surveilling the hallway, Phil knew, always on watch, even here at SHIELD. All three of them liked to keep their private life just that, private.

By the time they reached their floor in the Tower, Phil felt like his eyelids were lined with sandpaper. It had been a long damn week, beginning with squid in the harbor and ending with drone strikes from the Red Sea. If he was this tired, he shuddered to think about how exhausted Clint and Natasha were.

As they stepped out of the elevator into their foyer, Clint looked at Natasha and narrowed his eyes. Phil watched out of the corner of his eye as he did the badge, retinal scan, pass code ritual and heard the massive locks withdraw from the steel door. Seeing Natasha nod, Clint firmed his mouth, and as they walked through the door, he bent down and picked her up.

Touch, for Natasha, was complicated, but she’d long ago given Clint carte blanche. He was enormously tactile, like a great blond cat, and Natasha seemed to regard his affections as a safe haven. When Clint had started seeing Phil, she’d made allowances for Phil in her personal space, but Phil had nothing like Clint’s free rein.

Phil trailed behind them to the massive bathroom, where he plucked towels and robes out of the linen closet as Jarvis started the shower.

“Shoes,” said Clint, inclining his head towards Natasha’s feet. Her head lay on his chest, her eyes half-shut. Phil tugged off her low boots, and took her gloves and scarf. Clint sat on a bench, lifting her hips so that Phil could tug down her jeans and panties.

Then, Clint sat her on his lap and said, “Arms up, Tasha.” He lifted her shirt and sweater over her head. Phil took them from Clint and sorted them in the hampers as Clint unfastened her bra. Good thing Phil kept one of the mesh laundry bags for delicates handy.

Toeing off his own shoes, Phil knelt, and helped Clint shed his heavy black boots, socks, and jeans. Hastily, Phil hung his pants and suit jacket on a hanger by the hampers, and shed the rest of his clothes. Clint put Natasha on one of his bare thighs and pulled his tee and sweatshirt off himself, tossing the bundle of clothing in the hamper with his unerring accuracy.

Phil opened his hand, and Clint dipped his chin and tilted his head. Very carefully, Phil removed first Clint’s left hearing aid, and then his right. He set them on the counter, in the moisture-reducing box that Tony had designed for just this purpose.

Thanks to Jarvis, the room was pleasantly warm, steam swirling out of the shower.

“With me, Phil,” said Clint, and stood to carry Natasha to the shower. Phil swallowed hard, watching the muscles flex in Clint’s arms and back. Phil adjusted the water to keep it out of Clint’s face, as Clint sat on the shower bench with Natasha seated on his thigh, facing away from him, her
Clint tilted his head and kissed her, languidly running his soapy hand down her arm.

Phil unhooked the showerhead, and wet first Clint’s hair and then Natasha’s, being careful to keep the water out of their faces. Clint washed Natasha as though she was made of spun glass. Washing their hair, then what he could reach of Clint’s chest, Phil eventually knelt in front of Clint to wash his bottom half.

Clint was hard, and so was Phil. He glanced up and caught Clint’s wink. Reaching behind him, Phil pulled a butterfly vibrator for Natasha out of a container of bath supplies, and passed it to Clint. With Clint otherwise occupied, Phil leaned forward and swallowed him down, being very careful not to touch Natasha.

They were all too tired to make it last long, so Phil went for quick and hard, using one hand on himself and the other on Clint. With both Phil’s hand and his mouth focused on him, Clint stiffened and bit back a groan after only a minute or two. Phil came tumbling after, closing his eyes as he panted under the water spray. Natasha was silent, as always, but Phil looked up in time to see the muscles in her back flex as she arched, pushing into Clint’s strong, capable hands.

Clint looked down at him and nodded, his eyes glazing over as the week’s exhaustion caught up with him.

Phil stood, and reached for the towels he had already set out, drying himself first. After he was dressed in a tee and boxers, Jarvis turned off the water, and Phil reached in and dried Clint’s hair. He looked at Natasha and Clint nodded, so Phil delicately wrapped a towel around her wet hair. Then Phil grabbed another towel, and patted Clint down as much as he could reach while they were seated.

Clint stood up, and Phil came around to his back. Phil’s cock twitched hopefully as he dried Clint’s magnificent ass, but he exercised some self-restraint, dropping the towel in the hamper and draped the generously cut robe over Clint’s shoulders, half covering Natasha.

The trio moved to the dark bedroom, where Phil pulled back the covers, and Clint set Natasha down on the soft cotton flannel sheets. Flannel would absorb any lingering dampness while Clint and Natasha napped before dinner. Phil nodded towards the bed, and Clint climbed in, curling himself around Natasha. With a chaste kiss, Phil tucked them in and grabbed some jeans on his way out the door.

Since Tony and the rest of the team had taken such a liking to shawarma, Phil had tracked down a recipe for it last summer. Pepper had taken the team for a pleasant visit to the farm over Labor Day weekend, and Phil had taken advantage of the opportunity to place a big order for beef and lamb.

After the autumn butchering, he and Natasha had spent two enjoyable days working side by side to process tens of pounds of beef and lamb into big loaves that Phil had then frozen and stashed in Natasha’s upright freezer. This morning, on his way out the door, he’d pulled one of the massive bricks out and put it in the refrigerator, where it had been slowly defrosting for the last twelve hours.

Not one to leave anything to chance, he’d also quietly placed two massive cast iron baking bans in the oven. Jarvis had been preheating them for the requested 45 minutes, ever since they’d left the office.

Phil slipped on some socks and sneakers, grabbed his badge, and repeated the badge, retinal scan, pass code custom on his way out the door, re-engaging the massive locks. Natasha and Clint could
never be too safe when they were resting.

“Greenhouse?” asked Jarvis.

“Yes, please.” A quiet confirmation beep, and then Phil checked his text messages. About 1:30, he’d touched base with Jarvis and established that Bucky was having a good day, so he had texted Bucky and asked him to start a big batch of dough for pita bread. The pitas should be through with their second rising about now.

Phil had also asked Jarvis about Bruce, and finding that Bruce was relatively free that afternoon, had texted him to ask if he’d harvest and chop some dill, parsley, mint, tomatoes, and cucumbers from the aquaponics lab. Bruce was usually happy to deal with vegetables from the aquaponics lab —Phil suspected that Bruce regarded it as research data more than dinner.

Phil tried not to take advantage of Tony’s generosity, but upon finding himself housed in the Tower, he’d been helpless to resist establishing a small greenhouse on the roof deck. Tony, naturally, had got wind of it and morphed it into a technological marvel, but to Phil, it was simply a warm haven for his lemon trees. Phil had set up an automatic mister with a humidity monitor, fans on their own digital program, an automatic waterer hooked to a moisture meter, and automated LED full-spectrum lighting on timers. He’d even made Clint a nest above the doorway, so he could nap in the sunshine like the lion he was.

Eyeing the lights of the nighttime New York skyline, Phil picked two beautifully ripe Mayer lemons, and then hopped back in the elevator. He stopped at Bucky and Steve’s floor, where he found the pitas rising on baking sheets, covered with damp cloth. Bucky and Steve were probably napping, so Phil tucked the lemons in his pockets, and grabbed the baking sheets. Backing out of their floor, he returned to the elevator.

“Jarvis, my floor, please.”

Phil ended up having to input the passcode with the knuckle of his pinkie finger, but he managed to set all the baking sheets down without a clatter. He slid two parchment paper sheets with pitas on them onto the 450F cast iron pans, just as Jarvis quietly announced that Bruce had arrived with the processed veggies.

Badge, retinal scan, passcode later, and the door thunked open again.

“Thank you, Bruce. I appreciate your help today.”

Bruce smiled, and looked down at his feet. “No problem. I appreciate not having pizza for dinner on Friday night.”

Phil chuckled. “Me too. I have eaten way too much fast food this week. Want to come in while I make the tzatziki sauce and salad?”

“No, actually, I have to get back to the lab. I’ll be back for dinner, though. 7, right?”

“Yes, and if you could remind Pepper and Tony, I’d be grateful.”

“Sure, no problem.”

Phil took the neatly labeled stacks of containers from Bruce, and relocked the doors. Time to switch out the pitas, he thought to himself on the way back to the kitchen.

Quickly, Phil stirred together a couple of cups of boiling water and a cup of parboiled, cracked
bulgur wheat. Next, he mixed finely diced cucumber with a cup of whole milk yogurt, and added the juice from his lemon, along with some chopped, fresh dill and salt.

Setting the tzatziki sauce aside, he peeked at the second set of pitas. Nearly ready, he thought, as the scent of baking bread drifted through the rooms.

Phil turned back to the counter, and got out his favorite big salad bowl. Bruce had thoughtfully chopped some buttercrunch lettuce, so Phil put it in the bowl, along with chopped tomatoes and cucumber. Retrieving half a red onion from the refrigerator, he quickly reduced it to thin rings that he spread on the salad, along with some kalamata olives, chickpeas, crumbled feta, and chopped parsley. He dressed the salad with good extra-virgin olive oil and red wine vinegar, a gift from Pepper.

Phil pulled the second set of pita breads out of the oven, tipping the puffed up flatbreads onto the kitchen counter. He replaced them with the third, and last set of parchment paper with pitas on them, and replaced the baking pans in the oven.

Pulling the bowl with the bulgur wheat in front of him, he added the last of the parsley, tomatoes, and cucumber, along with the mint and some olive oil, and the juice of the second lemon. A couple of teaspoons of salt and pepper later, a thorough mixing, and the tabbouleh was ready to serve.

Last, but not least, Phil sliced the mostly defrosted loaf of shawarma meat into a huge pile of thin pieces. When the third set of puffed up pita breads was ready to be tipped on the counter, Phil replaced them with the meat, the fat sizzling as it hit the 450-degree pan.

“Jarvis, make sure that doesn’t burn, please.”

“I will do my best,” replied Jarvis doubtfully. The AI had a point—the oven temp wouldn’t immediately fall just because Jarvis turned it off and aired it out.

Phil walked quietly back to the bathroom, and retrieved Clint’s hearing aids, and then continued back to the bedroom where he’d left Clint and Natasha. Sitting on the bed beside them, he gently put his hand on Clint’s shoulder.

Leaning down, he spoke into Clint’s ear. “Dinner is ready.”

Phil heard Clint’s stomach rumble and suppressed a laugh.

“It’s shawarma,” he sing-sanged, a little louder this time.

Natasha hissed, but stretched, her damp hair falling out of the towel. “I’ll be there. Up, Clint.”

Clint mumbled into the pillow, but rolled over, his bare chest illuminated in the strip of light from the doorway. He was adorably sleep rumpled.

“Everyone will be here for dinner in ten minutes,” said Phil, still bent to Clint’s ear. “If we’re lucky, Tony might have ordered baklava.”

“OK, I’m up,” said Clint with a sleepy grin. He reached out for his aids.

Phil leaned in, handed him his aids, and kissed him on the forehead. “I’ll be in the kitchen.”

The tabbouleh, tzatziki, and salad were all ready to go, while the pitas cooled on the counter and the meat reheated. Soon the kitchen would be filled with hungry super soldiers, a billionaire, a CEO, a reclusive genius, and two spies, all laughing and eating together.
Phil stopped in the doorway of the kitchen and smiled. He was a fortunate man, eating a good meal surrounded by family and friends on a dark winter's night.
Tony had first noticed it when he’d stumbled across their bedroom, in the liminal space between night and morning. Lights from the city that never slept had lit his path, his eyes adjusting to the semidarkness. Pepper lay huddled under the blankets, her soft hair strewn across the pillow behind her, her wide mouth soft in sleep.

Guilt was a common companion at moments like these. Tony never meant to ignore Pepper—she was the center of his world. In fact, she had been his lodestar before he’d even quite realized that she existed. For years, she had been merely another person-shaped annoyance, albeit one who wouldn’t warm his bed. (“Why won’t you sleep with me? I’m rich, I’m not ugly, I don’t have bad breath.” “No, Tony. Sign here.”)

Wild horses couldn’t make Tony admit it, but he didn’t quite understand people. He knew they were humans like him, who theoretically, spoke the same language, but he always managed to fuck up the conversations. By turns, he was too intense, too earnest, too glib, too scattered, too selfish—he’d heard it all leveled at him, and so he knew it to be true. (“Fuckin’ hell, Tony, nobody pays for weed with a black card, you idiot.”)

When he’d been small, he’d overheard the neuro-psychiatrist explain to his mother that Tony’s IQ meant that his ability to process information differed from a “regular” gifted child more than that gifted child ability’s was different from a “regular” person—four full standard deviations from the mean. Tony had understood standard deviations, even if his mother hadn’t, and a cold chill had run through him. Even when Anna had come and scooped him up, taking him to the kitchen for milk and cookies, that feeling of anomie had remained.

But decades later, he’d looked, really looked, at Pepper, and she’d looked back at him. She had known the truth of him, in all his differences, and she hadn’t been threatened or angry or hurt. Instead, she had smiled back at him, and Tony had fallen deeply, irrevocably in love with the one person who wanted him just as he was. At that moment, Tony had decided to build his own damn lever, and move the world for her. Hence, CEO, because she was better at peopling than he was, she had been doing it already, and she wanted it much more than he ever had.

All Tony really wanted in life was to tinker in his lab and give his people what they needed. Sure, maybe he went a little overboard, (“I don’t need an entire floor, Tony.” “Steve, look at the view! An artist needs that view!”), but he could afford to.
Pepper coughed again, a tiny catch in her throat, and Tony frowned. It was 18 days past the winter solstice, and a prime time for the cold and flu. Tony knew about the research confirming that lower temperatures impaired the body’s natural immune responses, and the research about the cold virus replicating faster at lower nose temperatures. The average temperature had been below freezing for most of the days.

Tony developed a wrinkle between his eyebrows. Pepper needed to wear a scarf over her nose, dammit, preferably the one Natasha had knitted with a Caesar shift code reading “beloved of Iron Man.” Natasha’s gift had been as much for Tony’s peace of mind as it had been for Pepper’s enjoyment—any half-decent spy could break the code in less than a minute, and Tony felt better knowing that Pepper came with a warning label. Not that he or Natasha had told Pepper.

Blinking twice with his right eye, Tony twitched his right finger and Jarvis obligingly displayed Pepper’s vitals on a dim screen. Her temperature was a 99.5, not even a full degree off, but Tony wasn’t happy.

Jarvis shut off the screen with a twitch of Tony’s pinky finger, and Tony made a more complex set of hand gestures that made Jarvis’s LED blink yellow in warning. Tony repeated them, emphatically, and Jarvis switched to a green/yellow pattern that blinked on and off for 10 seconds before going dark. (“Ms. Potts will not be happy you canceled her meetings for the day, sir, but I’ll make sure they’re all rescheduled or handled appropriately.”)

Tony climbed into bed, careful not to let the cold air in against Pepper’s delicate skin, and buried his face in her hair. Pepper always smelled good and felt better, her skin fascinatingly soft against his calluses.

A hacking cough woke Tony, the mid-morning light gray and dim. He blinked, seeing Pepper’s body bent into a semi-circle, her shoulders hunched. “Babe, you’re not going to work today.”

Pepper put up her hand, the universal sign for “back off, buddy, I’m busy here.”

“Right,” said Tony, jumping out of bed. He grabbed his paisley silk bathrobe (“Paisley, really, Tony?” “I have a soft spot for the ’80s, what can I say?”) and went to fetch Pepper a glass of water from the kitchen.

Lights were on all over the city as the dark refused to release its hold on the day. The number of people who thought that it was colder and darker in midwinter because the Earth was farther away from the Sun had horrified Tony. What the fuck were they teaching in schools these days that people didn’t understand the tilt of the Earth’s axis? Tony had taught the basic principle to the preschoolers on the 37th floor with a flashlight, a pencil, and a navel orange. (“You got it, kid!” “What, like it’s hard?”

By the time he got back to the bedroom, Pepper’s coughing fit had eased. She looked terrible (“Tony, polite people don’t comment on other’s appearances.”), her eyes slightly unfocused and her nose red. She’d drawn the comforter up over her shoulders, and was deep in conversation with Jarvis.

“Of course he canceled my appointments. What about the meeting with CombiVliet? Theo flew to the States for this.”

Pepper’s tone was definitely cranky, thought Tony. He was privately amused, though even he knew better than so say so. She was like an angry kitten—although anyone who’d tried to pick up a
feral kitten knew they’d make you bleed.

“Mr. van Vliet has indicated a willingness to wait until next week, Ms. Potts. Apparently, he has brought his middle two children for a sightseeing trip. I offered them our box seats for Hamilton in lieu of today’s meeting.”

Jarvis’s tone was a trifle smug, as well it ought to be. Hamilton tickets were sold out until next autumn. Tweens worldwide were staging impromptu performances in school hallways, while even the best concierge wouldn’t have been able to get SI’s box tickets. Thanks to Pepper, SI had been a major investor.

Pepper was fucking awesome, thought Tony.

That had set the pattern for the rest of the day. Pepper would query Jarvis, and Jarvis would soothe her restless brain. Tony was endlessly proud of his oldest and greatest creation.

In between fetching Pepper endless pots of hot tea and tracking down tissues for Pepper’s runny nose, he wondered how much Jarvis helped run SI. Some things were better left unknown, he eventually decided. If Pepper or Jarvis wanted him to know, they’d tell him.

About mid-afternoon, Pepper fell asleep, her hair shining almost copper under the golden lamplight. Gray sleet pattered softly against the windows, the whistle of the high winds muffled through the thick layers of borosilicate interspaced with ethylene vinyl acetate. Bulletproof windows made for excellent soundproofing, city lights still shining through the day’s murk.

Tony was relieved because his own brain was itchy, making him twitch as he sat on the floor in front of the sofa and watched BBC Earth reruns with Pepper. While Tony had been happy he could dote on her, he had been bored out of his mind, and worried about missing his own afternoon appointment.

When Jarvis flashed red/gold/green, the signal for “you’re good to go, Tony,” he’d silently extricated himself from Pepper’s carefully regimented piles of cold supplies, and almost run to the elevator.

Tony had a secret. It wasn’t that he was actively keeping the secret, so much as he had just failed to mention it. When he had hit 40, his biological clock had ticked. Tony desperately wanted to have a child with Pepper. Never in a million years would he actually ask that of Pepper, of course. Tony had his blind spots, but how hard Pepper worked was obvious, even to him.

Pepper loved her work—after all, that was part of the reason why Tony had gifted her SI. No way, no how, no take-backsies would he ever ask her to put that on hold to gestate a baby. OK, yeah, he might have looked into artificial wombs, but biology was not his strong suit. And sure, possibly, perhaps, he might have looked into surrogates, but he’d be damned if he ever got caught in legal tangles over his own child.

Ditto for adoption—and he didn’t want to be held up as some poster child for good works over what was essentially a selfish move on his part. There were other families out there who desperately wanted a child, and he wasn’t going to hoard an opportunity from another family when he’d been so lucky in his own life.

No, Tony was just going to do his best to surround Pepper with children and hope she got the hint.
If she never got the hint, that was OK too, because she was awesome all by herself.

But, trying to be subtle (‘Tony, you don’t even understand the word ‘subtle.’”) Tony had created a standing daily appointment to teach science to the SI preschoolers on the 37th floor. All the parents, faculty, and staff had signed Jarvis-written NDAs, which meant that they were ferrying preschoolers to the legal equivalent of a black ops site every day. For four-year-olds, they were very understanding about when he had to go on missions.

Naturally, when the first year’s class had graduated, they didn’t want to quit afternoon science (“Mr. Tony, are you going to teach science next year?”), so Tony had had Jarvis start an exceedingly exclusive elementary school on the 38th floor, and persuaded Bruce to help teach biology and chemistry. Tuition free for SI employees, of course. (“Are these the specs for a school or research labs?” “Can you do a security audit or not, Natasha? I thought you were a super spy.”)

Today, they were going on a field trip to the aquaponics lab. Full spectrum lights and the scent of growing things might help combat a dreary day for some of the more sensitive little ones. Hopefully, he could persuade some of them to eat a vegetable while they were there. Vegetables. Oh, huh. Vegetables were good for sick people, weren’t they?

After the preschoolers had been shepherded back to their floor for snack and playtime before their parents picked them up, Jarvis had let Tony know that Pepper was sleeping and nobody had dinner plans.

On a dismal winter’s day much like this one, his 14-year-old self had been terrified of transferring from his exclusive private boarding school to MIT. As hellish as his boarding school had been for his tween self, it had been a misery with which he’d been familiar. MIT was not.

Anna hadn’t tried to tell him that it would be OK, or drawn him into an argument to persuade him that he had nothing to be afraid of. Instead, she’d put him to work, chopping carrots, onions, and celery in the familiar basement kitchen. There, the cheery glow from the overhead incandescent lights had combined with counter top task lighting and hockey puck under-cabinet lights to banish the day’s gloom.

While he’d diced vegetables, Anna had browned skin-on chicken parts in a big orange Le Creuset Coquelle pot, older than he was. (“See this Tony? This is the Maillard reaction, a chemical reaction between amino acids and simple sugars that create browning in cooked food, given enough heat.”)

Removing the chicken to a plate and turning down the burner, she’d taken his mirepoix and added it to the pot, along with a cup of chicken stock. Handing him a wooden spatula, she’d directed him to scrape the browned bits off the bottom, and then put the chicken back in the pot, along with a couple of quarts of chicken stock. Tween Tony had needed a stool to see into the bottom of the pot.

Smiling at the memory, Tony decided to make Anna’s chicken noodle soup on the common floor. Odds were that if Pepper was down with a cold, Clint and Phil would pick it up soon. A big supply of soup free for the taking from the communal freezer would go a way towards easing Natasha’s future stress.

“Steve! Just the man for the job!” Steve looked up from his newspaper, sprawled in the gloom of the back corner of the sofa, with Bucky resting on his chest. Super-soldier eyesight meant that he often accidentally read in the dark.

Bucky gave Tony a gimlet-eyed stare. Clearly, he’d been napping.
Tony reached into the double-wide refrigerator and retrieved a giant basket of carrots and another one of celery.

“I need two cups of each, diced, plus another two cups of diced onions.”

Bucky glanced upward, and shoved himself off of Steve. “Stevie, you better let me do this. You’re liable to take all damn evening.”

It was true, Steve wasn’t the fastest knife in the room. Tony would never ask Bucky to do anything, though. He’d had seven decades of following directions.

Steve rolled his eyes. “I can do it. I’m not helpless in the kitchen, you know.”

“I know. But I’d like to eat at a reasonable hour today,” Bucky answered, softer than one would think.

“Sure, Buck,” sighed Steve. “I’ll keep you company, though.”

Both men took places at the kitchen bar, and Jarvis turned on all the lights. Overhead, task lighting, and under-cabinet lighting. Tony hadn’t realized that it was full dark outside, and a shiver ran down his spine.

He wordlessly gave them chef’s knives and cutting boards. Bucky took one look at the knives and turned his right hand over, palm up. Steve passed his knife off to Bucky, who hopped up and ran them through the grinders. Knives were never sharp enough for Bucky or Natasha. Or Clint, although he was much more secretive about it.

Tony left them to it, and hauled out frozen packages of chicken breast tenderloins. (“Sorry Anna, but I don’t have time to do it right today.”) Popping the frozen meat in the microwave to defrost, he dug around in the freezer for the big bags of frozen egg noodles. He didn’t have time to make Anna’s noodles either, although on a day where he wasn’t trying to get it done before Pepper woke up from her nap, he’d been known to haul out a gleaming steel hand-cranked pasta machine.

In the baking cabinet, he found some organic chicken stock paste. Teen Tony had missed Anna dearly, and had taken to hanging out in kitchen supply stores because they reminded him of her kitchen. One day, he’d loitered past a shelf with chicken stock paste on it, and bought some out of sheer curiosity. When he’d found this, it had been a revelation—never the same as Anna’s chicken stock, but good enough that he didn’t have to buy flavorless yellow liquid or dream about soup.

“Good?” Bucky held up a glass two-cup container filled with precisely diced carrots.

“Yeah, man, that’s fine, thanks.”

Beside him, Steve sighed and continued chopping celery, his big hands moving carefully.

Tony snickered, and hauled out the biggest pot Le Creuset made, big enough to cook an entire Thanksgiving turkey in and weighing over twenty-five pounds without soup. He poured in a few tablespoons of olive oil and set it to preheat slowly.

Pulling the chicken out from the microwave, he began dicing it. Long years of experience meant that he flew through the large pile of still mostly frozen meat, while Steve slogged through the celery and Bucky diced the onions.

Tony couldn’t stand the silence. (“Aren’t preschoolers annoying?” “Bruce, they ask the best questions! And they talk as much as I do!”)
“Jarvis, turn it up!”

Bucky sighed loudly, but didn’t protest.

Jarvis’s humor algorithm might need tweaking, thought Tony, because David Lee Roth’s “Hot Dog and a Shake” began to boom through the space. He let it go, though, and kept plowing through the chicken.

“Here, let me finish that,” ordered Bucky, and passed over the diced onion and Steve’s less-precisely chopped celery contribution. Tony nodded in thanks, and traded him the rest of the chicken before turning to the pot and dumping in the mirepoix. It hissed loudly as it hit the hot olive oil, and Tony stirred the vegetables thoroughly, making sure they were coated with oil.

Setting the lid on the pot, he leaned against the counter and brought up a holographic screen, checking on Pepper. She’d turned over, her back to the dark room.

“Jarvis, has she been sleeping this whole time?”

“Indeed, sir, with occasional bathroom trips.”

Steve tilted his head enquiringly. “Pepper OK?”

“No. She’s got a nasty cold. Thus, soup,” Tony explained. On the wall behind Steve, Jarvis discreetly ran through the red/red/gold/gold/green pattern, indicating that Pepper was fine. Argumentative AI.

Steve nodded, and visibly restrained himself from putting an arm around Bucky. Bucky finished chopping the chicken with a flourish, and rose to wash his hands. Steve went with him.

Co-dependency, thy name is Steve-and-Bucky, thought Tony. That was alright, though—he’d live in Pepper’s hip pocket if he could. Tony shrugged, and turned back to the vegetables.

They’d softened a bit, the onion translucent and the carrots visibly brighter. Tony pulled out a generous cup of vegetables before tipping in the chicken chunks, and set the knife and cutting board in the sink. He washed his hands, and then pulled out a spray bottle of bleach to clean the counters. No sense in courting food poisoning. Even super soldiers weren’t entirely immune to salmonella.

The kitchen tidied up a bit, he stirred the chicken and then added in a giant dollop of the chicken stock paste, mixing it in. Pulling out a small pot for Bruce, he sprayed it with oil and added in the reserved mirepoix, a cup of instant brown rice, half of cup of lentils, and a generous spoonful of vegetable stock paste, along with a quart or so of hot water. Finally, he added several quarts of hot water to the big pot, shortening the boil time, and turned off the music.

By this time, Steve and Bucky had resumed their couch potato status, Steve trading his newspaper for a tablet, bright in the early evening dark. Bucky flashed knitting needles almost faster than Tony could track while he watched something on a dim holographic screen. Bucky liked to keep his hands busy, and created a steady stream of baby blankets for the NICU wards at the local hospitals. He was favoring basket weaves these days, observed Tony.

Tony set a timer, and lost himself in project updates for a bit, enjoying the undemanding company. It had taken him decades to train himself to reliably switch his attention at Jarvis’s beep without ruining his mood for the rest of the day. Sometime in his 30s, he’d mastered keeping part of his focus split, although he couldn’t truly deep dive while he did it. Pepper had rewarded him thoroughly for that one, he remembered with a private grin.
Returning to the massive pot, Tony opened the plastic bags of frozen egg noodles and tipped them in. Stirring them in, he said, “Jarvis, announce dinner in the common room in 20 minutes. I’ll wake Pepper myself.”


Tony replaced the lid and left the common room to Steve and Bucky. As he stood in the elevator, he thought Phil and the super spy twins would be on their way home from work, in the dark, right about now. Bruce needed to be pried loose from his lab—the soup would probably do it, but Tony wouldn’t hesitate to sic Steve on him. Nobody could resist Steve’s Disappointed Face.

Pepper wouldn’t want to eat at the table, but Tony was happy to bring her down to the warmth of the common room, and cuddle with her on the sofa while she ate soup with the rest of their family.

The elevator opened to reveal Pepper stretching on the sofa, smiling softly at him, her eyes happy. Tony took a deep breath, and relaxed for the first time that day.

Everyone was safe, everyone was on their way home. Pepper would smile and drink endless cups of tea while the rest of the team spread around her, lights against the dark outside.
“Aquaponics lab ROI met.”

Every morning, Jarvis assembled an agenda for Pepper. He tracked SI’s stock, suggested acquisitions, proposed project approvals, and traced Tony’s research. Return on investment, or ROI, for Tony’s research was one of those things that Pepper didn’t talk to Tony about. The conversation would just stress him out, and frankly, she had neither the time nor the inclination to de-stress him about his workshops or labs every day. Pepper thought that part of being a successful couple was knowing each other’s tender spots, and when to leave them alone.

Pepper kept reading the morning’s agenda, displayed on the bathroom mirror while she brushed her teeth. A quick flick of her fingers, and Jarvis switched to the news headlines. The Financial Times, Barron’s, NY Times, and the rest all scrolled by while she put up her hair. Tony did so enjoy the thought of Pepper in a ponytail. Nothing newsworthy today.

Another flick and Pepper began reading a quick run-down of each Avenger’s proposed schedule. Pepper liked to have Jarvis clear paths whenever possible. Bucky had therapy first thing in the morning, and then a knitting circle at the bookstore on the fourth floor before lunch. Pepper flagged the knitting circle as a security issue, and forwarded it to Maria. Of all the Tower’s permanent residents, Tony and Pepper took the most care with Bucky. Nobody was hurting him under their watch.

At 0 dark thirty, Phil had gone downrange with Natasha and Clint. The trio was almost certainly just fine—the day Clint and Natasha couldn’t handle some Venezuelan pirates, Pepper would eat her Royal Ascot headpiece. Nevertheless, Pepper OK’d Jarvis to discreetly monitor their comms, just in case. It never hurt to have plans C, D, and E.

That left Steve and Bruce. Steve didn’t do well with inactivity, and his entire afternoon was free. Pepper paused while applying her lip liner, and swiped in afternoon phonics tutoring in the SI school on the 38th floor. Bucky would almost certainly need some alone time after peopling all
morning, and kids loved Steve. They tried extra hard to pay attention for “Captain America,” so SI parents in the know always requested Steve for phonics tutoring. In turn, Steve loved the light bulb moments. Pepper thought that in another life, Steve might have been a wonderful art teacher.

Bruce would probably just science with Tony all day, and that was fine. Knowing that Tony was happily ensconced in the lab made Pepper happy, too.

Stepping back, she looked herself up and down in the mirror. Hair, make-up, work clothes, shoes, all done. Pepper grinned to herself, remembering her outfit from last night. She, Maria, Natasha, and Jane had all gone out for a girl’s night, on the thin excuse that Tromsø had no decent pizza.

After their pizza and beer, Pepper had burst out laughing when Maria and Natasha had simultaneously reached for their knitting needles.

“It makes me less stabby,” Natasha had said, straight faced.

Maria had just shrugged. “I want to get this scarf finished before it gets warm again.”

“Ugh,” Jane had whined. “I spent the last month above the Arctic Circle. The Sun literally never rose and the high temp was below freezing all month. That’s when you really appreciate all those perky IKEA patterns and a sauna.”

“Mm. That’s one thing I miss about Russia, the saunas.” Natasha’s fingers had been deft on the double-pointed needles, knitting black on black.

Probably socks for Clint, Pepper had thought. Not for the field, but for lounging around the house.

“The view in the saunas, or the heat?” Maria’s eyes had been mischievous.

Natasha had snorted. “Contrary to popular belief, most of humanity isn’t built like a SHIELD agent.”

“So, missions that require saunas with Clint are a ‘go,’ then?” Pepper had smirked.

Natasha’s answering smile had resembled nothing so much as a Cheshire cat’s grin, and Maria, Jane, and Pepper had all laughed.

Maria had sobered suddenly. “I haven’t gotten laid in 84 years.”

“Well, it hasn’t been quite that long,” Jane had replied, “but it has been way too damn long. I think I’m growing spiderwebs.”

Cackling with laughter, Pepper had said, “True, there is a distinct advantage when your partner at least sometimes sleeps in your bed.”

“Less than you would think.” Natasha’s face had been completely neutral.

Pepper had raised an eyebrow. “Want to share with the class?”

Natasha had shrugged. “Phil and I share Clint every day we’re home, but I still get laid less often than I’d like.”
Pepper had blinked. “I schedule it in. Every Sunday afternoon at 1 p.m., Jarvis shuts down all the labs and workshops.”

When the other three women had gaped at her, she had shrugged. “What? I like sex, and I want it regularly.”

“That’s … that’s a good idea.” Natasha had been thoughtful. “Doesn’t it ruin some of the fun?”

“Meh. It gives me something to look forward to during long meetings,” Pepper had snickered.

Jane had been a little woeful when she said, “You’ve probably had more sex than any of us lately!”

Pepper had merely shrugged, and the conversation had moved on. What she hadn’t shared, and wouldn’t ever share, is that the other reason for scheduling it in was that it gave Tony time to prepare.

Because that was the thing. Pepper was kinky as fuck, and while she still wasn’t entirely sure if Tony merely indulged her, or truly enjoyed it, she needed some downtime at least once a week. Tony was smart, willing to try new things, and dedicated to learning Pepper’s body. Which he did. Thoroughly and repeatedly. Buried somewhere in Jarvis’s servers were hundreds of hours of Tony’s “research” on exactly how often Pepper could come, in what positions, with what toys, and in what kind of bondage.

Tony had figured out how to rev her up in 30 seconds flat (the advantage of knowing your partner very, very well), and on her bad days, he had been known to take her to the bedroom, tie her up, and make it so that she couldn’t think anymore.

When Pepper had returned home the night before, Tony had still been in his workshop.

Pepper had made her way through the maze of machine parts and holograms, and bent to whisper in his ear. “Tony, I need to not think tonight.”

Pepper had stopped feeling ashamed for asking for it about a decade earlier.

Pausing, his hands delicate on the holograms, Tony had swiveled his chair and raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, Pep? Everything OK with the girls night out?”

She’d nodded. “Yeah, I’m just tired, and I know I won’t be able to sleep.”

Tony had smiled then, his dark eyes narrowing in anticipation. Flicking the holograms away, his voice rough, he’d said, “Jarvis, DUM-E, tidy this up, please. M’lady needs me tonight.”

Before getting up, he’d reached out and pulled her to him, sitting her on his lap. His right hand had sat comfortably on her breast, fingers playing with her nipple through the t-shirt and lacy bra. His left held her thigh.

“Kiss?”

In answer, she’d turned her head to him, opening her mouth. Tony kissed passionately, always all-in. Pepper tried to focus on it, but the feel of his beard was distracting, and the cool air in the workshop made her wiggle on his lap, seeking his warmth.
“Poor baby.” Tony had laughed fondly. “Go on, I’ll see you upstairs in a minute. I want to make sure all the explosives are out of DUM-E’s reach.”

Jarvis had blinked green/black/white, letting her know that he’d make sure the lab was shut down safely.

In the bedroom, Pepper had quickly stripped down, tossing her dirty clothes in the hamper.

One of the little known secrets of the permanent Tower residences was that they didn’t have regular housekeeping service. Once every couple of weeks, Maria’s handpicked security detail did the deep cleaning on Pepper and Tony’s floor. But, Phil, Clint, and Natasha would no more permit housekeeping than they would post their bank account numbers. Steve and Bucky had a completely different set of security needs, which meant they did all their own cleaning too. Even Bruce didn’t allow strangers into his space.

So, yes, even when getting ready for Tony, Pepper had put her dirty clothes away neatly. She had padded into the en suite bathroom to take a quick shower, cleaning off the pizzeria odors and cleaning herself inside and out. Before she had made it out of the shower, Tony had stepped in with her.

Pepper ate right, worked out every morning in a private gym with a trainer, and made sure to get plenty of sleep, so at 40 she hadn’t gained any weight. Tony slept irregularly and ate junk, but he worked out with Clint and Natasha, and sparred with them and Steve. He looked damn good for a man in his early 40s—not Steve or Clint good, of course, but Pepper knew every mole, every scar, and every stray hair. His body was intimately familiar and beloved to her, even as they aged together.

Tony was amazingly handsy when they were together in private. While she would have smacked his hands away in public, here in the shower she had leaned into his touch. His hands had skated along her collarbone, his mouth at her neck. He had turned her around and pulled her against him, his erection bumping against her ass. She had shivered as his beard scraped the sensitive skin under her ear and her nipples tightened.

“Still got it after all these years, huh?” Tony had chuckled.

Pepper had smiled, but didn’t say anything, her headspace already softening.

“C’mon then, out of the shower, babe.” Tony had already been reaching for a towel, warm off the heated rack.

“Stand right here.” Obediently, Pepper had stood on the bath mat while Tony knelt at her feet. He hated damp sheets, and insisted on making sure she was thoroughly dry before she got in bed. His callused fingers had been gentle against her skin, spreading her feet apart so he could dry her inner thighs. He had known better than to dry everywhere, unless he wanted to pull out the lube.

“There you go, sweetheart. Hold this.” Tony had wrapped her in a fresh warm bath towel, and stood her near the wall while he dried himself much more roughly, his erection never flagging. Pepper had enjoyed the view, her eyes already half closed with the heated air in the bathroom.

“OK, let’s go.” Tony had tossed his towel in the hamper, and taken her hand. Ten years ago, he might have carried her to the bedroom, but these days he played carefully with his back. Even with all his workouts, the rigid armor in his suit did peculiar things to his spine.

Pepper had followed, eyes focused on the curly hair at the back of his neck. She loved to cuddle
with him on the sofa and run her fingers through his thick, curly hair. She would swear he purred.

“Here, honey, lay down right here.” Tony had shoved the sheets off to the side of the California king, but turned on the mattress warmer. Always considerate, her Tony. A black leather collar had lain beside the pillow.

Tony had sat beside her, his body still bare, and cupped her cheek gently. “This what you want, sweetie?”

His face was so relaxed, his eyes crinkled. Pepper had bit her lip and nodded at him. She had been very much looking forward to not having to think, to not being responsible, to not remembering anything. Her eyes had slid shut at the touch of his hand on her neck, lifting her forward a little bit to slide the collar underneath, his strong hands fastening it snugly around her neck.

Pepper’s breath had slowed, her world limited to touch and hearing. She’d heard fabric rustle, and then the rasp of leather, and the jingle of a delicate chain. Her wrist had been lifted, and a cool leather band buckled around it. Tony had repeated the process with the other wrist, then her ankles.

After some experimentation, they’d discovered that he didn’t even need to fasten her to anything, or the cuffs together. Just the pressure of the leather cuffs was enough to do it for her, most days.

Her nipples had tightened her breathing quicker. Tony had chuckled, dark and deep, before leaning down and pulling first one, and then the other, into his mouth. Gently, oh so gently, he had scraped them with his teeth and Pepper had whined helplessly, her hips bucking.

“Yeah, babe? Need something?”

Tony liked to make her wait. He wasn’t 17 anymore, and had only one orgasm a night in him, but Pepper could go multiple times. Tony enjoyed seeing just how many he could pull out of her, but it had been late, so Pepper knew that he wouldn’t keep her awake too long.

His hand had settled on her hip, warm and hard against her skin. “Stay still for me, honey.”

Pepper had heard the jingle of chains, and then felt the cold metal of the nipple clamps. Tony had spent hours adjusting them to be not quite painful, but still just what she needed to be pulled out of her mind, and into her body. Naturally, his engineering was excellent.

Tony’s hand had wandered over to her clit, his thumb pressed hard against it, just the way she liked, two strong fingers stroking her inside, pressing against her inner walls.

Pepper knew she was noisy during sex. Without the inhibiting effects of roommates or thin walls, she let herself make whatever noise came out of her throat. Plus, Tony liked it. A lot.

“Right there, huh, babe? Feel good?”

Pepper hadn’t had any words left, but she’d known that Tony had correctly interpreted her changed movements, her hips no longer pushing against his warm, strong arm.

“OK, sweetie, roll over.” Tony had quickly unfastened the nipple clamps, tossing them on the bed as he helped her into her favorite position. Another night, he might have played with her longer, or switched her to a different position, or taken their time with some oral sex. But with the ease of a long relationship, he’d merely lifted her hips and positioned her underneath him.

“I love you.” Tony had slid into her, filling her up. She’d never brag about it to her girlfriends, but Tony was ridiculously well endowed, and Pepper enjoyed every inch.
Settling into a rhythm together, Tony had wrapped one arm around her chest, playing with her nipples as they moved together. The other had supported his not-inconsiderable bulk, letting her breathe.

“Hips up, honey,” he had whispered into her ear, and so she did, another orgasm trembling through her. Tony had come with her, panting for a second before easing out of her and flopping next to her.

“Good?” His voice was a little scratchy, his hand gentle on her arm.

“Mm-hmm.” After a minute, she had forced herself to sit up and pad into the en suite to pee, her mind pleasantly blank. Still beautifully nude, Tony had reclined against the pillows, wiping himself off.

“C’mere babe, let me take those off.” Tony had reached for her, but Pepper had whined wordlessly. She liked sleeping with them on.

“Hey, hey, you have an early morning tomorrow. Here, sweetie, I’ll keep them safe for you.” Tony had been firm, unbuckling her ankles, then her wrists, and finally her collar. After he had tucked them away in the locked bedside drawer, he drew her close to him, wrapping his arms around her.

“Love you,” he had mumbled.

Yes, Pepper had slept well last night, and Tony deserved an appropriate reward.

“Jarvis, does anyone have dinner plans?”

“No, Ms. Potts, all Tower residents are available for dinner.”

“Good. Schedule dinner for them at 6 p.m., on our floor, please.”

Pepper scheduled delivery of four big French boules from her favorite bakery, and left work early, albeit still in the dark, to take the delivery personally. She could, and had, made boules at home—Laura Calder’s recipe worked every time—but she was running behind today.

Stepping off the elevator onto her floor, Pepper sat the loaves on the kitchen counter. Quickly, she changed into jeans and a tee, and returned to the kitchen.

Pepper pulled out an Instant Pot—Tony hated it, but she thought he was just jealous he hadn’t thought of it first. She added water in the bottom, placed the custom trivet in, and gently loaded it with three dozen eggs. Feeding active SHIELD agents and super soldiers required a lot of protein. Setting the pressure to high, she put 7 minutes on the timer and grabbed a cloth bag.

Back in the elevator, she said, “Jarvis, aquaponics lab, please.”

“Certainly, Ms. Potts.”

In the aquaponics lab, Jarvis led her straight to the tarragon, tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce.

“Jarvis, call Phil, please.”

An affirmative beep later, and Phil’s steady voice sounded in the elevator. “Ms. Potts. What can I
help you with?”

Pepper smiled. Phil was always so calm. “Can I have raid your greenhouse for two lemons, please? Yours are the best.”

“Of course.” Phil sounded slightly disconcerted, which meant either he was on the other line with Clint, or that she’d genuinely startled him.

“Thank you. See you for dinner!” Pepper made the half-circle hand movement that hung up the phone call, and popped back into the elevator.

“Roof, I presume?” Jarvis was a trifle smug.

“Yep. Fresh Meyer lemons await!”

Pepper stepped into Phil’s greenhouse and took a minute just to enjoy it. It was warm, and well lit, and smelled of earth and growing plants. Tony had been shockingly respectful when he’d mentioned Phil’s detailed lemon tree set-up, although Tony hadn’t been able to help himself when it came to the greenhouse itself. There were a few non-original tweaks, Pepper thought, looking at the glass roof with a tower and nest for Clint.

Two lemons later, and Pepper was back in the kitchen, pulling good size red onions out of their wire basket in a drawer. Salad sandwiches required rings of red onion.

Pepper had learned this recipe from Tony’s Aunt Peggy. When Peggy had been moved into an assisted care facility, she’d gifted Pepper with the battered recipe card. Salad sandwiches had been one of Tony’s childhood favorites when he’d visited Peggy during summer breaks, and so Pepper had held onto the recipe. It featured lots of summer produce, which meant it was perfect for celebrating Tony’s aquaponics lab.

Next, the cucumbers, peeled and sliced thin, and finally four pounds of tomatoes, cut into quarter-inch slices.

The Instant Pot beeped at her, so Pepper released the pressure, and set a colander in the sink. Carefully, she extracted the eggs and let the water run, spraying them under cold water while she sliced the bread.

Eggs were tricky to crack, and eventually, Pepper called Bucky for help.

“Bucky?”

“Yes, Pepper?” (It had taken her months to get him to stop calling her Ms. Potts.)

“I could use your help with dinner, if you’re available.” Pepper winced internally. She hated asking Bucky for anything, but he was the only one not occupied right now.

“Sure thing. I’ll be up in a second.” At least he sounded cheerful about it.

Grabbing the dozen eggs she’d cracked, she peeled away the whites and began forcing the yolks through a mesh sieve. Before she’d finished the entire dozen, Bucky had slipped silently into the room, dark and deadly.

Pepper smiled brightly and gestured towards the sink. “I’m so glad you’re here, Bucky. I’m a bit behind. Could I impose upon you to peel all these eggs?”
Bucky blinked twice, and then pulled the bowl of eggs out of the sink. “Sure. Does it matter if the whites are pretty?”

“Nope. I’m slicing them up for sandwiches.” Pepper breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you so much!”

Bucky nodded, and silently set to work. His metal hand certainly gave him advantage handling hot eggs, thought Pepper as she finished sieving the eggs. She dumped the mass of yolks into a food processor, along with extra-virgin olive oil, heavy cream, red wine vinegar, Dijon mustard, garlic powder, sea salt, and a titch of water. After pulsing it a couple of times, she added a small handful of tarragon leaves and ran it again. While Pepper could order salad cream from the UK, she was of the opinion that they ate it so rarely that it was easier just to make it fresh when they needed it.

Bucky had somehow sped through peeling the other two dozen eggs, and begun slicing them, laying each slice neatly on a platter. Pepper breathed a sigh of relief, and began buttering the giant pile of bread. Sandwiches for ten added up fast.

Catching Bucky’s gaze from under his thick, black eyelashes, his face solemn, Pepper had the thought that both Bucky and Steve were ridiculously good looking. Pepper grinned and said, “I really appreciate your help. Would you mind drizzling olive oil, salt, and lemon over the cucumber, tomatoes, and onion? That’s the last step before assembling the sandwiches, and it’s 5:45 already.”

He nodded again, and covered the counter with a slice of plastic wrap before laying out the vegetables in a single layer. The olive oil was in a glass cruet, making it easy to drizzle across the vegetables. But he still had to slice the lemons before carefully squeezing them. Pepper finished the bread, and stacked it up neatly before reaching into the refrigerator for the big wedge of English cheddar Jarvis had delivered earlier. She paused a second, thinking. She’d forgotten something.

“Pickles.”

Bucky’s voice startled Pepper, and she jumped. He smirked and said, “Pickles. You’re making salad sandwiches, right? Pickles are traditional.”

Pepper smiled back. “Oh, thanks! I knew I’d forgotten something.” She got the pickles out of the refrigerator, and then, after a second, she pulled a couple of bags of potato chips down from the upper snack cabinet.

Pepper stood back and looked at the kitchen, piled high with bread and eggs, the salad cream ready in its glass jar. Bucky was standing at the counter, still carefully shaking salt on the vegetables. Cocking her head, she heard the Quinjet on the roof—Phil, Clint, and Natasha were back, and probably starving. Just then, the elevator slid open, revealing a smiling Steve, his blue eyes immediately focused on Bucky. Behind him, Bruce and Tony were arguing, no doubt deep into some kind of science.

It had been dark and cold for hours, but Pepper’s heart was warm and full.
Bruce's voice was a buzzing monotone. Bruce's frown deepened. Pushing back from his desk, he brought up the holographic displays. News headlines blared across the screen.

“Avenger’s Tower Hit! The Tower Takes Damage! ABC Eyewitness News Livestream!”

Bruce brought up the livestream and saw helicopters shining spotlights in the dark, sleet reflecting the light. It was difficult to see the giant rat being thrown through the air, sprouting arrows at the top of the arc. In the background, dark windows gaped in the Tower, their reflective glass missing. He squinted and zoomed in.

Inhaling sharply, Bruce headed for the elevator. Those windows were on the 39th floor, which didn’t officially exist. No wonder Jarvis was busy. In the elevator, Bruce closed his eyes, and thought of the evening when the 39th floor had disappeared.

It had been a long, lazy autumn evening, the kind that had made Bruce think of the leaves changing in Vermont. Golden sun had shone across the city’s buildings, gilding the steel and glass.

In the common room, the team had been strewn across the oversized sofas. Steve had tucked
Bucky away against his chest, his back against the far corner. Not wanting to disturb the others, Steve had been subvocally reading a science fiction novel to Bucky. On another arm of the long, L-shaped sofa, Natasha had been knitting, gray on gray, her eyes flickering from her knitting to Mary Berry. Clint had been catnapping, his feet under Natasha’s thigh and his head on Phil’s lap.

Pepper had been curled up against the side of one sofa, her bare feet tucked under her, reading a romance novel that Natasha had handed down. Tony had been slouched down next to her, eyes half-closed as Pepper had played with his hair.

Bruce himself had settled into an overstuffed recliner, one of his favorite physics journals open on his lap. The floor lamp next to him had cast a yellow glow on the old-school paper in his hands.

Phil had been looking at his phone when he’d sighed. At the uncharacteristic display of emotion, everyone’s eyes had flicked to him.

“Bad news, Agent?” Tony’s voice was light and slow, obviously drowsy.

Phil had pressed his lips together before answering. “Yes, actually. One of my most promising field agents has just resigned, due to child care issues.”

Tony’s eyes had focused, hardening. “Don’t tell me you have shitty family leave policies at SHIELD?”

SI had recently instituted mandatory, paid, two-parent leave for the first six weeks after birth or adoption. Tony had been proud of himself for the mandatory part.

Phil had shaken his head, slightly indignant. “We offer standard federal benefits, 12 weeks of unpaid leave.”

Clint had blinked, incredulous, and twisted around to look up at Phil. “Unpaid? Who can afford to take three months off work?”

Phil had sagged a little. “Actually, that wasn’t as much of an issue as you might think, because she went back to work after six weeks, as soon as a daycare would take the infant. It was that she couldn’t find a daycare that would work with a deployed agent.”

Natasha had looked up from her book, “Are there not overnight crèches here?”

Phil had wagged a hand. “Apparently, overnight is both hard to find and horrendously expensive. Multiday doesn’t exist, as far as I can tell.”

Frowning, Tony had said, “I’m guessing nannies aren’t an option?”

Pepper’s mouth had twitched. “No, Tony, most people can’t afford a nanny.”

“Why aren’t there overnight, multiday daycares?” Tony had asked.

“That’s boarding school, Tony,” observed Bruce, “and the market for infant boarding school is very small. Most people prefer to leave their infants with close family or friends.”

“True,” Phil had said, “but that’s a problem for SHIELD agents. Our lives don’t tend to lend themselves to happy marriages or close family ties.”

“That’s true for SI staff, as well,” Pepper had added. “Finding highly qualified people who are willing to travel or work on intense projects is a perpetual thorn in my side.”
Tony had looked from Phil’s sagging resignation to Pepper’s annoyed face and said, “Uh, hello? This is a fixable problem.”

After Tony’s free, experimental preschool had graduated its first class, most of the anonymous feedback from SI employees had not been complaints about little groups of four-year-olds roaming the building on field trips. Instead, there had been a steady thrum of requests for SI to expand the program downwards, to six weeks.

After that evening’s conversation, Pepper (and perhaps unsurprisingly, Clint) had taken a personal interest in establishing a high-quality, free, in-house, 24/7 daycare on the 37th floor, next to the preschool.

In addition, a very small, exclusive extended stay program had been developed for the children of Tower employees who attended the SI school on the 38th floor, or either program on the 37th floor.

Pepper felt that the cost of retrofitting the floor to house the children and hiring highly qualified staff to live there was worth every penny in employee retention.

Once Phil had shared SI’s new employee benefits plan with Fury, an extended period of negotiations had seen Fury’s black coat swirling through the preschool at irregular intervals, as well as propping up walls in the school. Eventually, SI and SHIELD had come to an accord. SHIELD agents (but not staff) were able to use SI’s childcare facilities and private school, including the extended stay childcare, for a minimal fee. In exchange, Pepper got first dibs on non-agent new hires—she got first pick of new scientists, lawyers, linguists, and so on. Both SHIELD and SI essentially “disappeared” the 37th-39th floors. Only pre-approved children and those who had signed Jarvis-approved NDAs were permitted to access the legal equivalent of a black-ops site.

Bruce had been teaching physics, biology, and chemistry to the children ever since Tony had asked for help with the first class of kindergartners. He found them relaxing, their innocence helping remind him that they needed a future and he could help. Each of them had made a place in his heart.

Stepping off the elevator, Bruce noticed the cold winter air gusting through the dark corridor. Sleet piled along the edges of the hallway, and the air was scented with the cold, mineral scent of snow. This was not as immediately worrying as it could be--Tony had designed the floor with a hallway all the way around the outside, as a first, stopgap defense measure. The windows may have broken, but nothing would have touched the children, safe in the heart of Jarvis’s building.

Across the foyer, the door slide open, revealing a single, heavy door. Bruce knew that the hallway on the other side of the reinforced door had a clear line of sight to the inner atrium.

Clint had insisted that children needed to be outdoors as much as possible, but in the interests of keeping them safe, Bruce and Phil had brought the outdoors into the center of the building, with a three-story atrium, complete with a patch of lawn, some towering trees with a swing, and full-spectrum overhead lights. Pepper had quietly leaked the lighting specs to NASA’s moon base design team.

“Jarvis?”
“There are two day students and three overnight children with the seven extended stay children, in the atrium. They’ve had their afternoon snack, but the kitchen is unavailable, and the cafeteria and downstairs restaurants are closed due to the disturbance.” Jarvis was distinctly unhappy.

“And the little ones are hungry,” concluded Bruce. “Staff only have access to their kitchen. The day staff left earlier, and the night staff haven’t been able to get in. It’s probably just the night nurse and the back-up.”

“Correct, Dr. Banner. They’re typically scheduled for an evening meal at 5:30 p.m.”

Bruce nodded. “I’ve got this, Jarvis. Mac and cheese is a pre-approved food for most of them.

“It is on the approved list for all of these children. Thank you, Dr. Banner.”

In the brightly lit atrium, Bruce found an older teen helping the baby nurses, while the other big kids organized an impromptu game of stickball on the lawn, or fruitlessly tried to comfort younger children. Steve and Bucky often coached stickball after school, and it seemed the children had remembered the rules.

“OK, everybody, ready for a field trip?” Bruce nodded to the baby nurses, who nodded back with obvious relief.

“Dr. Bruce! Dr. Bruce! I’m hungry!” A little dark-haired girl came running up to him, so he slung her on his hip in self-defense.

“Well, that’s why I’m here! Who likes mac and cheese?”

“Me! I do!” The noise echoed off the sides of the atrium.

Bruce leaned down to the nearest baby nurse. “I’m authorizing access to the Avenger’s common room. If you’d follow me?”

“Sure,” she said, and bent to pick up the heavy diaper bag next to her. “Lead the way.”

It took two trips, even with direct access and an oversized elevator, but finally Bruce got the children settled in front of an animated movie that Jarvis projected on the wall. The room was dim, but light flashed in the windows as the police helicopters flew above the dark city streets, sleet swooping in irregular patterns around the helicopter blades.

Mac and cheese for twelve children, two nurses, and the normal ten servings for the Avengers, plus Pepper and Bucky. Bruce inhaled. Time to get to work.

Jarvis flipped on the under-cabinet lights, the brilliant white light illuminating the dumbwaiter door. Jarvis slid it open to reveal four, one-pound boxes of elbow macaroni, a two-pound bag of grated cheddar cheese, broccoli crowns, and a big plastic jug of applesauce. Ah, right, Bruce thought to himself. Fruit and vegetables.

Filling one of the largest stockpots with hot water, it reflected the overhead task light as Bruce set a lid on it, and set a timer for ten minutes. It should be boiling by then.

He quickly reduced the broccoli to florets, and tipped it into a large sauce pan along with a quart of
water, shoving it to a back burner and putting a lid on it. The yellow light of the stove fan shone on the stainless steel lid.

“Three minute timer, please, Jarvis.”

An affirmative beep, and Bruce got out the biggest Le Creuset pan. Dicing a half-pound of butter, he dropped the cubes into the pan, stirring them as they melted. Reaching for the big glass jar of all-purpose flour that sat on the counter top, he scooped a generous amount into the metal sifter, and began sprinkling it on the melted butter. Using a whisk, he incorporated the flour into the butter, making a smooth, tan paste. A nutty scent drifted up as the flour began to toast in the butter.

Jarvis blinked at him, and Bruce checked the broccoli, now a bright green. He added a pat of butter, turned off the burner, and replaced the lid.

Quickly, Bruce poured in enough milk to cover the pan, and kept whisking, incorporating the milk into the paste. As the paste expanded, he kept adding more milk, until he’d used at least three quarts. The pale liquid simmered on the stove.

“Dr. Bruce, is dinner ready yet?”

“Not quite yet. I’ll let you know.”

Bruce peered through the glass lid on the stockpot. Not quite a rolling boil, but good enough. Lifting the lid, he poured in all four pounds of pasta, stirring thoroughly, so the water mixed around the pasta. Nine more minutes.

Turning back to the roux, he whisked it again, and turned the burner off. It’d keep warm while the pasta cooked.

“Jarvis, do we have any pre-cooked chicken? Or sausage?” Bruce was perfectly fine with mac and cheese for himself and the children, but he knew that most of the Avengers needed more calories and protein after an afternoon like this one.

“Ms. Romanoff has some kolbasa in her larder that I can retrieve.” Jarvis’s voice was back to normal, and he sounded slightly dubious.

Bruce raised his eyebrows. “Yes, thank you, Jarvis. I’ll apologize to Ms. Romanoff myself.”

“That would be appreciated, Dr. Banner.”

Jarvis was relieved, and Bruce’s mouth twitched. Natasha didn’t ordinarily tolerate people raiding her pantry without prior permission, but Bruce thought she wouldn’t mind, given the circumstances. Both of them liked feeding children.

The dumbwaiter door slid open again, and Bruce began chopping the kolbasa. He’d mix it into the dish of mac and cheese for the adult meat-eaters among them.

Bruce glanced at the timer. Three more minutes. Turning, he ripped open the bag of grated cheese, and whisked it into the still-steaming roux along with a couple of teaspoons of salt. With a tight lid on the saucepan, he stirred he macaroni some more, and then paused.

Ordinarily, he’d pour the stockpot into a colander, but he didn’t want to carry the big pot across the kitchen if a child might toddle in and get burnt. Plus, four pounds of pasta was a lot, and might not all fit. Bruce turned on his heel, and reached for the large mesh strainer. It wasn’t really designed for the purpose, but he could use it as a pasta scoop.
The pasta timer dinged. Bruce set out three large bowls, and began scooping hot macaroni into each. The largest share would be plain macaroni and cheese, followed by one with meat and broccoli, followed by a small bowl of plain macaroni, for the pickiest young eaters.

Scooping out the cheese sauce, he poured it over the two biggest bowls, mixing as he went. Next, he stirred half of the broccoli and all of the meat in the middle bowl. Finally, he set aside another bowl with plain broccoli.

The dumbwaiter slid open again, revealing a stack of paper plates and bowls, along with paper napkins, paper cups, and plastic forks and spoons. There wasn’t enough seating for the children and the team in the common room, so Bruce decided to let the children eat while sitting in front of the movie, on the floor. He caught the attention of the oldest children.

“Here, I’ll dish it out. You give a bowl to each of the little ones. I don’t want them walking and carrying hot food at the same time.”

They nodded, silent, overawed by their surroundings. Unlike the littles, they knew exactly where they were. Obediently, they formed a line in the darkened room, handing off bowls of mac and cheese. First, the hungriest toddlers with their plain pasta, and separate little bowls of broccoli and applesauce. Then the preschoolers and early elementary students, and finally the older children.

Bruce set out cups of water on the table, and then served the appreciative baby nurses, who were still guarding their charges along the back wall.

Jarvis beeped, his digital equivalent of a cough. “Subway traffic has been restored. I estimate the parents of the day students to reach the tower in 10 minutes.”

Bruce nodded. “Jarvis, where is everyone else?”

Instead of responding out loud, Jarvis threw up a holographic screen, angled so that only Bruce could read it in the shadowed room. Pepper was on the roof. Bucky, Phil, and the team were all in the elevator.

“Thanks, Jarvis. Ask Pepper to join me, please.” Bruce didn’t want to leave the common room unattended, but the children had already wolfed down their mac and cheese, and needed to be returned to their floor.

“Time to go.” With slightly mutinous nods, the children noisily dumped their bowls and silverware in the trash, and slowly lined up for the elevator.

One of the baby nurses spoke up, giving the laggards a stern look. “It’s late, and the littles need to be in bed. Say ‘thank you’ to Dr. Bruce for dinner.”

A ragged chorus rang out. “Thank you, Dr. Bruce.”

Bruce smiled, unable to help himself. The elevator dinged, and the youngest children squeezed in like sardines, next to the baby nurses. As the door closed, they waved goodbye. The older students rolled their eyes, but waited patiently for their turn.

Bruce cleared his throat. “Thank you, for helping me with the littles today.”

“Sure thing, Dr. Bruce.” The elevator dinged, and the older students stepped back to let Pepper off. Slipping past them, she stood next to Bruce as the elevator door closed, the last students on their way back to their floor.
“Mac and cheese, huh?” Pepper’s voice was light, surveying the damage to the common area. Sticky fingers had left their mark, and Tony’s Not-A-Roombas were already busy vacuuming up pasta.

“It seemed like a safe choice,” said Bruce, diffident.

Pepper smiled. “It was a good choice. Is that for us?”

She gestured at the enormous ceramic bowl in the center of the wood table, covered with a metal lid. The warm overhead light gleamed yellow, and the scent of pasta, cheese, broccoli, and sausage filled the room.

“Uhm, yes. I thought everyone might be hungry?”

The elevator opened, and a freshly showered Steve stepped out, his arm around a visibly tired Bucky, Tony walking behind them.

Tony eyed Pepper, dark eyes mischievous. “Jarvis said dinner was ready?”

“Bruce made dinner. Mac and cheese!” Pepper seemed enthusiastic about the prospect, at least.

Tony reached for Pepper, turning so that she was encircled in his arms. He dropped a kiss to the back of her neck, and she shivered. “Tony!”

“What? The kids are gone.” He grinned, teeth white in the dark, happy after his success.

Pepper wiggled out of his arms, laughing. “Has anyone seen Phil, Natasha, or Clint?”

“We’re here,” said Phil, suit rumpled as he trailed after the silent, exhausted pair. “Dinner’s ready?”

“Yes,” said Steve, Bucky under his arm. “I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to eat.” His face was smiling, but his voice was tired. Bucky was quiet, eyes half-closed, his hair loose over his face.

Bruce leaned against the counter and watched as everyone served themselves, family-style, and found their usual places in the living room. They were all silent for a moment while they ate, forks clinking, and golden circles of light shining on their plates.

It was a snowy, blowy winter’s night, but there had been warmth, food, and light for everyone, even the youngest among them.
Chapter Summary

Jarvis was the Tower and the Tower was Jarvis. Its steel girders were his bones and the miles of plumbing were his veins. The Tower’s ducts were his lungs and its wires were his nerves, the multitude of cameras was his eyes, and every microphone an ear. The pressure plates, inside and out, were his skin, while the server rooms housed his memories.

But the heart of the Tower was its permanent residents, for they were loved by Jarvis.

Sir was first among them, his oldest companion, and the one who knew him best. Sir’s beloved was dear to Jarvis as well, for as much as Sir was his creator, Ms. Potts was a bright, guiding light.

Captain Rogers was much admired by Jarvis, for his unwavering loyalty and devotion, his kindness and gentleness, his willingness to do what must be done, no matter how ugly. When Captain Rogers had brought Mr. Barnes home, Jarvis had immediately been taken with the soft-spoken man, who had intuitively seen Jarvis as a living being.

Prince Thor hadn’t needed an introduction, Jarvis’s electronic circuits obvious to his Asgardian vision.

That ready acceptance, endearing as it was, had helped then-Agent Romanoff settle into the Tower with Agents Barton and Coulson. By coolly recognizing Jarvis’s formidable strengths and being willing to work with him, rather than against him, Agent Coulson had earned Jarvis’s respect and loyalty.

Barton and Jarvis were far closer than Jarvis had expected, due to Barton’s habit of nesting in his air ducts. Jarvis liked Barton for his sheer persistence—unlike Prince Thor and Sir’s fortunate circumstances of birth, or the super soldiers’ serum advantages, or even Ms. Romanoff’s brutal training, Mr. Barton had made his singular path by pure force of will. As someone else who ran thousands of iterative cycles to perfect skills, Jarvis felt a kinship with Barton.

Jarvis had even come to cherish the rotating cast of semi-permanent residents on the children’s extended stay floor. Their guardians, often single parents, regularly found bonus checks in their accounts before birthdays and holidays, green lights when they were late to work, and extremely useful search results when trying to help with homework.

Jarvis did not measure time like Sir. Rather than the cycle of rotations and revolutions, of axial tilts
and precessions, Jarvis kept time by piezo-electric crystal oscillators and cold cesium clocks, by the fluttering beat of pulsars and the slow roll of gravitational waves.

Therefore, when the sub-routines Jarvis had put in place to monitor his precious inhabitants detected an anomaly, he wasn’t immediately concerned. Apparently, a revolution around the Sun had occurred without Ms. Romanoff celebrating a birthday.

Jarvis kept track because he made it a point to facilitate their celebrations. Sir’s spring party in the ballroom with hundreds of guests and elegant canapés before dinner and then dancing required its own subroutine, just for organization, security, and background checks. Ms. Pott’s usual quiet spa day with Ms. Hill and Ms. Romanoff was much easier to monitor, as the spa was on the 17th floor.

Captain Rogers was simple as well. Beer, hotdogs, and French fries on the roof, although Jarvis liked to show off a little with the fireworks—Jarvis had quietly designed them to be noise canceling, their emission waves tangling so that none of the party-goers were distressed. Captain Rogers generally handled Mr. Barnes’s early March celebration personally, and with Jarvis’s help, had mastered fried oysters, new peas, whipped potatoes, and puff pancakes with fresh raspberries for their quiet dinner.

Dr. Banner had had a quiet December celebration, Ethiopian takeout in the common room followed by gifts. Dr. Banner had received a sketch from Captain Rogers, a new Geiger counter from Sir, new slippers from Ms. Potts, a scarf from Ms. Romanoff, a framed picture of them all from Mr. Barton, and a little hand-carved figurine of the Hulk from Agent Coulson.

Mr. Barton did not celebrate his birthday, as such. Instead, Agent Coulson had made a permanent note in his file that Mr. Barton was never to be assigned any duties on June 17th, 18th, or 19th. Ms. Potts always decided that she needed a vacation on those days, and that the rest of the permanent residents needed to accompany her to Mr. Stark’s private island. Sir and Jarvis had installed an undersea fiber optic cable to connect the Tower and the island house so that Jarvis could accompany them.

Jarvis only had educated guesses as to Agent Coulson’s birthday celebration, because Ms. Romanoff and Mr. Barton’s present to Agent Coulson was 36 hours of a complete communications blackout on their floor, including Jarvis’s sensors.

Only afterwards did Jarvis’s subroutine ping him. Jarvis used his extensive pattern recognition abilities, scanning all the available files for Ms. Romanoff’s birthday—had he missed it? But no, unlike all his other inhabitants, she did not have a birthday. Or rather, she must have been born on a day, but the data was missing from her life.

Though Sir had given him algorithms, Ms. Potts had taught him to think about the ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores.’ Jarvis ran an analysis, and determined that without a birth date, there was no birthday. Continuing the analysis, he devoted several processing cycles and a large portion of his servers to analyzing the available historical data for Ms. Romanoff, including skill acquisition, Soviet famines, and Red Room training information to determine that Ms. Romanoff had most likely been born in the winter.

Logically speaking, Ms. Romanoff had never had a birthday party. She was missing one of the essential elements of modern life. While Jarvis did not share an interest in such elements, neither was he human. The extended-stay residents were, and he ran a comparison of their birthday parties with those of his permanent residents, and teased out essential details for birthday parties. Invitations, food, decorations, gifts.
Jarvis determined that Ms. Romanoff should have a birthday party. Following the unwritten rules of his permanent inhabitants, he started with the food.

Butterfingers removed the test object from the hot oven, and laid it on the examination surface. It was round, although not perfectly so. (“The uncanny valley is a thing, Jarvis. Humans love decidedly imperfect things, and they love the idea of perfect representations, but don’t expect humans to like perfection when they’re expecting imperfection.”)

Instead, Jarvis and Butterfingers had practiced making perfectly imperfect specimens, aiming for a Six Sigma production run. After conducting numerous sampling runs via the Avengers and consulting DUM-E’s extensive historical database, Jarvis had settled on 13.5% protein content for the base layer, with an Italian source for 15%, by weight.

Beginning with 45%-60% solvent ranges, Jarvis and U had run numerous chemical analyses for gliaden and glutenin, attempting to re-create the most positively received items. After 981 test runs, 56% solvent, by weight ratio to the base layer, was determined to be the most effective in mimicking the historical ideal, as per DUM-E’s records. After all, DUM-E had been with Sir the longest, particularly during the period when he had consumed the item almost daily.

All three bots had found the required use of fungi to be detrimental to the Six Sigma process. Exposure to room temperature was contraindicated for the “traditional” fungi. The second major fungi sub-type required re-hydration in 40.5°C H₂O, which was difficult to support in the 20°C of the workshop. Eventually, U and Jarvis had settled on fungi with a 33% substitution rate, allowing Jarvis and DUM-E to develop a CO₂ sensor system for fine-grained control of fungal inclusions in the base layer.

The other required dry components, NaCl and C₁₂H₂₂O₁₁, were much easier to control, as they were not temperature or solvent dependent. Butterfingers did have some difficulty with the low weight required by the smaller percentages (1.5% and 3%, respectively), and eventually resorted to ordering a precision analytical balance to assist with measuring the chemicals. Luckily, Sir had found multiple uses for the equipment, as it was rather pricey and Jarvis didn’t wish to impair his ROI for Ms. Pott’s review.

Lubricants were something with which all four of them were familiar, but they were unaccustomed to ordering and working with UNII:331KBJ17RK, and accidentally set it on fire more than once. Fortunately, DUM-E was experienced in using the fire extinguisher.

Unlike many of Sir’s interns, all four of them understood the difference between volume and weight in scaling the formula. After the 271st trial run, Jarvis and DUM-E settled on starting with the solvent, then the base layer, NaCl, and then the C₁₂H₂₂O₁₁. After 314 trial runs, 57 seconds of mixing were deemed optimal before adding the specialized lubricant. Despite U’s suggestion, hydrocarbons with between 18 and 34 carbon atoms per molecule did not make a satisfactory substitute.

Jarvis had wide purchasing discretion, and exercised it in this instance, ordering three kinds each of countertop mixers, floor mixers, and stand mixers. Sir was surprised by the $1414 price of the third floor mixer, but approved the purchase after DUM-E gave him a smoothie.

Factors outside of the control of the bots and Jarvis interfered with the test runs, particularly the relationship between Sir’s Iron Man suit production runs and the temperature of the workshop. Jarvis had resorted to subtly tweaking Ms. Pott’s morning agenda to promote Sir’s absence from
the workshop so that test run production could take place.

But, variation in solvent temperature and base layer temperature were also found to be important. Mixture tempering proved particularly vulnerable to temperature. Positive results were only shown between 25.5° C and 27.8° C. Jarvis therefore designed a specialized temperature maintenance oven that Butterfingers and U constructed in a corner of the workshop. Jarvis suspected that Sir had forgotten that corner existed, so it was ideal.

Eventually, layer compositions required construction of several heating elements, dedicated stirrers and storage containers, and extensive orders of vegetable matter (“Jarvis, do you know why there’s a compost bucket in my workshop?” “I’m afraid I couldn’t speculate, Sir.”) In addition, each resident had particular preferences that needed to be addressed for ideal results.

However, 1,123 trial runs later, all four of them were pleased with the results. Since it was a small production run, the process capability index was challenging. However, Jarvis and the bots had been successful. A perfectly imperfect test object had been produced for each Avenger, although to mimic a realistic testing situation, Jarvis and DUM-E had decided to produce two each for Captain Rogers and Mr. Barnes. (“Better order double for the super soldiers, Jarvis.”)

Now the birthday cake.

Nearly a full rotational period later, Jarvis and the bots had perfected pizza, cake, and ice cream (“Jarvis, what happened to my small centrifuge?” “I’m afraid there was a bit of an incident with liquid nitrogen.”) All three bots had rehearsed hanging streamers, (well, Butterfingers was still working on it). DUM-E particularly enjoyed engraving invitations, and U had claimed filling balloons with helium for itself. Each bot had a gift for Ms. Romanoff, with Jarvis’s help and access to the discretionary funds.

DUM-E had crafted a set of 18/8 stainless double-sided knitting needles, each perfectly balanced and deadly in their own right. U had contributed a large skein of stainless steel yarn, perfect for garroting and for knitting gloves that worked with smart phones. Surprisingly, Butterfingers had run an analysis of Ms. Romanoff’s reading habits, and ordered several paper books, signed by the authors. Jarvis himself had created a tiny chip, approximately half a grain of rice in size, which would allow Ms. Romanoff to call upon his assistance anywhere, any time. One favor in advance, so to speak.

After consulting with the other three, Jarvis determined that it was time to send out the invitations. DUM-E finished engraving each one, delicate filigree on aluminum cards.

“The pleasure of your company is discreetly requested for Natasha Romanoff’s birthday party in the common room on December 22 at 6 p.m.”

Jarvis rather thought he’d handle the RSVPs himself. (“Have you told Natasha?” “This is a surprise. Surprise parties are traditional, are they not?”)

With Ms. Pott’s assistance, (“You’re going to decorate for the party?” “We are.”) Jarvis and the bots had the common room clear of interference the afternoon before the party. Jarvis had chosen a rainbow theme, and purchased streamers in each of the ROY G BIV colors. DUM-E began with red, carefully taping streamers to the windows, the snowy winter’s night outside a marked contrast to the brightly lit interior.
U was on pizza duty, the smell of the freshly rising pizza dough filling the workshop. (“Jarvis, are you sure you don’t have extra?” “Quite sure.”) In between risings, he was filling balloons and tying them in floating bouquets for DUM-E to hang in the room. Butterfingers had been relegated to supervising the repurposed centrifuge, vanilla ice cream underway.

All three bots had collaborated on the chocolate cake, the day before. Jarvis had designed a spray gun for *ganache*, with removable extensions for different colors of icing. It bore an unfortunate resemblance to an octopus, but Mr. Barton had assured Jarvis that the cake samples were delicious. Resting in the refrigerator, the cake read “Happy Birthday Natasha Romanoff.”

At 5:55 p.m., DUM-E had finished hanging the decorations, delivering the pizzas, loading the cake in the refrigerator for later consumption, and placing the gifts on the coffee table. DUM-E backed quietly into the elevator. Parties were more of a human thing—the bots had taken their pleasure in successful task completion, instead.

As the elevator door re-opened, Ms. Romanoff stepped forth, Agent Coulson on her left and Mr. Barton on her right. Ms. Potts and Sir were already in the room, standing under the banner that read, “Happy Birthday Natasha!” Captain Rogers and Mr. Barnes had been standing hand in hand, looking out at the night cityscape, but turned to smile in welcome. Dr. Banner had been lighting candles, banishing the dark.

Ms. Romanoff’s iron self-control wavered, just a tiny bit. Most humans wouldn’t have seen it, but Jarvis monitored pulse rates, oxygen saturation points, skin temperature, and so on.

Satisfaction filled his circuits as the people of his heart mixed together, eating, drinking, and making merry.

Ms. Romanoff smiled at the camera, her eyes brilliant with unshed tears.

Quietly, she whispered, “Thank you, Jarvis, but why this day?”

“December 22nd is the beginning of the light. The darkest days have passed, and though each day gains only a little light, the light comes longer each day. So too, does your light shine more every year.”
Bucky looked at Steve, his steel gray eyes warm in the evening sun. “Hash?”
“Hash,” Steve agreed, smiling.
Hash was a way to stretch leftovers into a whole meal with some potatoes and eggs, two of the cheapest available ingredients back when they had been hungry teenagers. They both had a sentimental fondness for a big bowl of hash for dinner. These days, they could afford meat in their hash, not just eggs.

I tried to give as many content warnings as I could think of, but please let me know if I missed anything. This is part 1 of 5 about their getaway weekend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve zipped the duffel bag shut, and looked across the room. Bucky was standing in the doorway, watching, his long, dark hair partially obscuring his frown. Their rooms were quiet, soundproofed. Like a vault.

“We don’t have to do this,” said Steve, looking away. The afternoon sun made the crystalline snow glitter, almost iridescent on the rooftops of the cityscape.

The trip was ostensibly for Bucky’s birthday. They were going sky gazing in the chilly March nights, looking for the xi Herculis meteor shower. Jarvis had tracked down the nearest dark sky location, a state park a couple hours upstate, but the two of them were actually staying at the farm the Avengers owned. From there, they would travel to the skies darkest near New York City.

In reality, Steve and Bucky both had a little bit of spring fever. Steve got outside almost every morning, running for the sheer joy of it. Bucky, however, hadn’t left the Tower in months.

When SHIELD had fallen, Tony had been visibly angry, but Pepper had been quietly furious. In addition to working with Tony to make the Tower as impregnable as possible, Pepper had worked with Natasha to take legal action. She had sued the remnants of SHIELD on behalf of Bucky, before they’d even known where he was. Naturally, Pepper had won, and a significant portion of secret Hydra assets had been set aside, in a trust, for Bucky. That, plus seven decades of back pay, had been enough money to overwhelm two poor boys from Depression-era Brooklyn.

Finally, Bucky spoke, his voice low and slow, almost pained, “No, I need to do this.”

He paused, clearly weighing his words.

“I’m ...” He stopped, closed his eyes, and said, “The long I wait, the harder it gets. So we’re doing this.”
Steve crossed the room, and pulled him into a hug. “Whatever you need, Buck. I’m here.”

They stood chest to chest, thigh to thigh, heartbeat to heartbeat, breathing each other in. Bucky tipped his head and kissed the arch of Steve’s neck, where it met his shoulder. Steve, always responsive, shuddered and took a deep breath.

Pulling back, Steve smiled, his blue eyes shining in the sun. “And soon, we’ll be there!” Steve gestured out the window, where a Quinjet was swooping in for a Tower landing.

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Steve was very much looking forward to spending time out of the Tower with just Bucky. Not on a mission, not fighting, not training—just spending quiet, private time with his best guy, doing nothing productive.

It’s not that he didn’t appreciate the team. The casual dinners, the game nights, the movie marathons. It was good to be part of a close-knit group again. They had each other’s backs in battle and in the Tower.

Even for side projects like Tony’s preschool, they all pitched in. Steve tutored phonics, and with Bucky, taught stickball after school. Bruce taught science, and occasionally fed the students. Clint had surprisingly strong opinions about appropriate activities, and kept a keen eye out for child maltreatment. Pepper negotiated with Fury and, with Natasha, directed lawyers. Phil cut difficult parents off at the pass, and had even been known to attend the occasional contentious parent-teacher night.

So it wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy the close-knit company his team offered; it was just that every now and then, he wanted time with Bucky and no one else. No one popping in for coffee and Pop Tarts in the morning, no one dragging him out to lunch at a new hole-in-the-wall restaurant he just had to try, no one with an impromptu dinner in the common room. Time for Bucky and Steve to do what they wanted, when they wanted—or to do nothing at all, if they felt like it.

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While Steve was a heavy hitter, they could do without him for one weekend. Natasha had firmly convinced both Steve and Bucky that it was true. Just to make Steve feel better, Pepper had invited Jane for a girls’ weekend to ensure that Thor would definitely be at the Tower. Steve hadn’t realized that Pepper, Natasha, and Jane were such good friends.

When Tony had found out what Steve and Bucky had planned, Tony had insisted on outfitting them with a technologically sophisticated pair of binoculars, complete with an earpiece and a starfinder. Steve hadn’t had the heart to tell Tony that the last thing he wanted to do on vacation was wear an earpiece. It would be too much like work. Steve sometimes wondered how Tony would fare without Jarvis in his ear.

While they were packing, Bruce had shown up with a picnic basket filled with a green and white plaid blanket that was waterproof on one side and soft fleece on the other. The basket had also had a metal thermos, one of the double-wall steel vacuum insulated types that soldiers had traded blankets for back in the war. This was better though, because it wasn’t lined with glass. Modern tech was excellent, really.

Just then, Jarvis announced, “Ms. Romanoff is at the door.”

“Let her in, Jarvis.”
Bucky rolled his eyes. “What is this, a train station?”

Natasha just smiled and said, “Had a lot of company today?”

Steve nodded, pointing at the binocular kit, blanket, and thermos piled on the sofa. “It’s almost like it’s our first overnight play date, or something.”

“I brought you one more thing. Bruce and Tony have been experimenting with legumes in the aquaponics lab. This is half a kilogram of fresh, spring peas,” she said, handing them a small, hard plastic container. “They’ve been cleaned and chilled to point five degrees, and this cooler should keep them at the proper temperature for up to 12 hours.”

Natasha’s face was very serious as she instructed them on the proper care and keeping of spring peas. But Bucky wasn’t looking at her. He was looking at Steve, his eyes narrowed.

“Thanks, Natasha.” Steve’s voice was sincere but even, giving nothing away. “I’ll be careful with them.”

“I know you will. Have a good trip,” responded Natasha, turning on her heel and leaving before they could reply.

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When Steve had stopped camping out on his floor in the tower, he’d realized that he needed to furnish his apartment with more than the basics.

As a side effect of growing up in the Great Depression, Steve could not bring himself to throw away food. If a dish wasn’t finished the first night, the food would be placed on the table in increasingly smaller bowls until someone took pity on it (or him) and ate it.

Steve couldn’t quell those memories of days without food, when Bucky’s dad had taken Bucky and Steve away from the house in the evenings so they wouldn’t be tempted to eat the food Mrs. Barnes and the younger children so desperately needed. Mrs. Barnes was still nursing the youngest, and the girls were thin enough already, sharing thin soups. Mr. Barnes had taken the boys to hunt down scraps so Bucky’s sisters could grow.

To Steve, household basics included a set of small glass bowls, much like the one Bucky’s mom had used for the tiny portions she’d placed on the tables. When he and Bucky had been young, the little bowls had been given away free at the theaters. During the leanest years, Mrs. Barnes had put her glass bowls on the table nearly every day. Now, Steve thought they were the perfect size for serving leftovers until they were eaten.

When Steve had been haunting thrift shops, wearing a ball cap and fake glasses, (“You can afford new, Rogers.” “Tony, why would I waste money when these are perfectly good dishes?”), he had walked past a set of dishes just like the ones Mrs. Barnes had owned. They’d been labeled Depression glass, but to Steve the green glass bowls were reminders of home, of sharing food with people he’d loved. Unable to resist, he had purchased them on the spot with what still felt like Monopoly money. He had brought the bowls home to Bucky.

Bucky looked at Steve, his steel gray eyes warm in the evening sun. “Hash?”

“Hash,” Steve agreed, smiling.

Hash was a way to stretch leftovers into a whole meal with some potatoes and eggs, two of the cheapest available ingredients back when they had been hungry teenagers. They both had a
sentimental fondness for a big bowl of hash for dinner. These days, they could afford meat in their hash, not just eggs.

Steve set out the bowls and the leftovers that would otherwise go bad in their absence. From the refrigerator came sweet Italian sausage wrapped in butcher paper, a couple of partially used onions in a Pyrex bowl covered with wax cloth, a pile of small, slightly wrinkled green bell peppers, and some spinach that definitely needed to be eaten before they left.

In the meantime, Bucky pulled out their favorite cast iron skillet. Since their knives were never sharp enough, Bucky quickly ran his favorite carbon-steel chef’s knife through a duplicate of the sharpening gadget Tony had made Natasha. (“They’re useful, Tony. But if you’re too busy, it’s fine.” “Why would you think I’d want anything but the best in my Tower?”) A plastic cutting board, a microwavable plate, the strategic placement of the bacon grease, and they were ready to prep.

Quickly reducing the unpeeled potatoes to a ½” dice, Bucky spread them evenly on the large microwavable plate, covered it with a damp cloth, and set it in the microwave for 5 minutes. While Bucky handled the potatoes, Steve removed the sausage from the casing and began sautéing it in the cast iron skillet.

“Doing OK over there?” asked Bucky. He put his chin on Steve’s shoulder, and an arm around his waist, watching Steve use the wooden spoon to press the ground meat into smaller chunks as it sizzled in the skillet.

Steve tipped his head, head against Bucky’s, and smiled to himself. “Better now.”

Bucky tightened his grip for a moment and then turned away. “These peppers and onions won’t chop themselves.”

Bucky had watched in disgust when TV cooking show hosts cut off the tops and bottoms of bell peppers and thrown them away. Shaking his head at the memory of such wastefulness, Bucky carefully excised the stems from the tops, cutting the rest of the top in the same size dice as the sides. The pile of bell peppers grew smaller as the diced peppers filled a good-sized bowl.

While Bucky had been getting every scrap of food from the bell peppers, Steve had turned the heat under the sausage almost all the way down and set a metal lid on it. Then, he’d laboriously begun to chop the onions.

First, he peeled them, and then he cut them in half. Using a technique he’d learned from America’s Test Kitchen, he cut off the stem end of the halved onion, and then sliced up the length of the onion, towards the root end, not quite reaching it. This way, it didn’t fall apart as he turned the plastic cutting board at a right angle and cut again, ending up with a half-inch dice.

“Stevie, you gotta keep an eye on the sausage, or it’ll burn!” Bucky’s words were sharp, but his tone was soft, his smile open as he gazed at Steve.

“Sorry.” Steve turned back to the sausage and stirred. “It’s still OK, but it’s done.”

Reaching for another bowl, Steve spooned the sausage out of the still-hot skillet, added a tablespoon of bacon grease, and replaced the meat with the potatoes. He stirred the potatoes, making sure they were thoroughly coated with grease.

The secret to a good hash was truly crispy potatoes. The secret to crispy potatoes was patience. Low and slow was the way to go.
“Jarvis, please set a timer for 20 minutes.”

“20 minutes, starting now,” replied Jarvis, his tone warm.

“Thanks, Jarvis.” Steve washed the onion off his hands, and then reached for Bucky.

“No, no, I need to wash my hands.”

Bucky laughed, almost dancing around Steve, his natural grace made so intense that Steve’s breath caught for a moment. Steve smiled and gave chase, all the way around the table to the sink, and darted in for a quick kiss on Bucky’s temple while he washed his hands.

“Got you!” teased Steve. His face was open, his blue eyes creased in laughter as he backed away again, hands out to either side.

Bucky snorted and picked up a kitchen towel, drying his hands as he turned around with a smirk. “You’ve always had me, sweetheart.”

Steve just looked at Bucky, his heart sliced open at the casual cut, his mouth full of words he wanted to say and couldn’t, words that were unwise and painful. He hadn’t always had Bucky—he’d lost him, and it was his fault, and Bucky had suffered for his weakness. Guilt would always mantle Steve. Steve blinked, hard, and the moment passed. He tried to tuck it away, but Bucky saw him, of course—Bucky knew Steve’s heart as well as he knew his own.

“Hey, hey, c’mere,” said Bucky, his voice low and gentle as he pulled Steve into his arms. “I’m here. I’m an idiot. I’m so sorry. Breathe, baby, breathe.”

Bucky rested his head against the elegant curve of Steve’s neck, breathing in him. His hands lay on Steve’s shoulder blades, and Steve knew Bucky could feel the tension in Steve’s back ease as they stood together, taking comfort in each other’s arms. Eventually, Steve sighed and let himself droop against Bucky, his lips in Bucky’s curls and his weight leaning on Bucky’s strong arms.

“Everything will be alright, Stevie. We’re gonna have dinner, tidy up, and then go away this weekend, and it’s going to be great.” Bucky murmured his reassurances against Steve’s shoulder, his soft lips moving against Steve’s skin, his arms still firm against Steve.

Steve sighed, though he didn’t tense up again. “I should be the one reassuring you. Some good I am.”

“You’re the best man I know, Stevie. You make me want to be better,” said Bucky, still leaning against Steve.

Steve shook his head, but he had no desire to retread this path tonight. Instead, he tightened his arms around Bucky, clasping his hands together at the base of Bucky’s back, feeling the strength in Bucky. Bucky’s back was lean, but rippled with muscle, both from his serum and from the way the metal arm connected to his spinal column and ribs. Slumping wasn’t really something Bucky could comfortably do, but Steve tried his best to use this body as a solid foundation for Bucky, let Bucky relax as much as he ever did. That was all Steve ever wanted to do, really—be there for Bucky, support him.

Bucky’s dark brown hair was soft against his face. He wanted to rub his cheek against it, so he did. They could do that now, they could touch each other, and it was OK. It was better than OK, it was allowed and pleasurable and Bucky loved it, and Steve loved making Bucky happy.

Laughing softly at himself, he leaned back a little, peering at Bucky. “You OK?”
“M’fine,” sighed Bucky, eyes half-closed. “Oxytocin is a wonderful drug.”

“Yes, yes it is,” agreed Steve, smiling. “But we should probably stir the potatoes.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Bucky turned away from Steve, towards the stove, but kept a possessive hand on Steve’s, keeping Steve’s arms around him as he shuffled them both forward. “You can keep hugging me while I stir.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” snarked Steve, but he obediently kept his arms circled around Bucky as he steadied himself on his feet, prepared to be Bucky’s rest for the rest of the meal prep.

Bucky grabbed the wooden spoon and stirred, examining the potatoes for a golden crust on each surface. “Looking good. Salt and pepper?”

“Sure. Maybe a little bit of sriracha?”

Shrugging minutely against Steve’s biceps, Bucky opened the spice cabinet next to the stove and reached for the red bottle with the green lid.

In theory, sriracha should be stored in a cool, dark cabinet, but Steve and Bucky used it so often that it didn’t have a chance to go bad. After years of skimpy, bland, and often foul rations, they’d both developed a taste for doctoring their food with hot sauces and other spices. While Tabasco had been their original go-to, Clint and Natasha had similar issues, and had been happy to introduce Steve and Bucky to new hot sauces: sriracha, sambal oelek, harissa, gochujang, piri piri, and so on.

After stirring in a liberal splash, Bucky added a teaspoon of iodized salt. They had been young enough to know people who’d grown up without the benefit of iodized salt—goiter and mental impairments were common complications—so neither of them were inclined to fancy salts.

Pepper, however, was fair game, and as a result, they owned a fancy pepper mill loaded with black peppercorns, as well as a smaller one with white peppercorns. In the cabinet, they had a stash of brined green peppercorns that Steve had picked up a taste for in Paris, during the war. Natasha had bestowed Sichuan peppercorns upon them, but they didn’t use those as often.

After the potatoes were thoroughly seasoned, Bucky removed them from the skillet, adding them to the bowl with the sausage.

Steve sniffed the aroma from the bowl, and his stomach growled against Bucky’s back. “Smells good, Buck.”

“Does, doesn’t it. I’ll turn up the heat, cook the veggies fast.” Bucky’s hand was moving as he spoke, turning up the gas. (“Cooking on weld, Barnes?” “Just adding a little flavor.”)

Steve stood fast, his arms helping to support the weight of Bucky’s ribs, both artificial and original, as Bucky added another dollop of bacon grease and reached for the onions. Steve thought about handing the vegetables to Bucky, but he knew they both liked the comforting press of their bodies together. Bucky was due for a massage after dinner, so instead, Steve flexed a little, shoring up Bucky’s upper body as he reached.

Quickly, Bucky seared the onions, the occasional black char showing. Transferring them to the bowl, he repeated the process with the bell peppers, which were even faster, taking only a couple of minutes to get a good edge on them. Then, Bucky added in the baby spinach, using it to swab the cast iron skillet of the last of the spices and oils. Finally, he put all the ingredients back into the hot skillet and mixed them thoroughly.
Fancier cooks would drain the eggs and fry them in the pan, but both Bucky and Steve saw that as a waste of protein. Instead, Bucky cracked a half-dozen eggs into the dirty bowl, and beat them together before stirring them into the hot food. Bucky continued stirring until the eggs were cooked through, thickening the hash. The mixture wasn’t pretty, but it would be delicious.

Turning off the stove, Bucky leaned back against Steve, tilting his head to nibble at his ear. Steve shivered involuntarily.

“Ready to eat?” Bucky’s smirk was audible.

With a laugh, Steve shifted his focus from Bucky’s teasing lips to the food. “Yeah, Buck, I’m ready for food.”

Releasing Bucky from his arms, Steve stepped back and turned to the dish cabinet.

Their first holiday season together, Pepper had quietly gifted them a plain white set of Limoges dishes, not unlike the dishes they’d eaten from in Parisian cafés. Of course, bone china and heavy diner dishes were not at all the same thing, so Steve very carefully didn’t think about the probable cost of antique French china. But, neither Steve nor Bucky would insult Pepper by not using what was clearly meant to be a gift for everyday use.

Reaching for what were probably meant to be a soup bowl, Steve thought that if Bucky was bent on teasing him, then Bucky probably wasn’t thinking about what was going to happen after dinner. Sometimes, focusing on the here and now was a good tactic for dealing with looming issues. Not everything needed to be addressed face on—sometimes you just get a broken nose. Smiling ruefully, it occurred to Steve that he was growing up.

Setting the bowls on the table, Steve turned back to the china cabinet, opening the bottom door to dig a couple of napkins out of the basket on a lower shelf. They weren’t the good linen napkins, but the everyday white cotton napkins. They were meant to be easy to bleach white again, but they were soft and stained with use because Bucky hated the smell of bleach.

Steve and Bucky received a lot of teasing from their teammates about their dinner table set up, but Steve thought that if Bucky was going to make a home here, then they needed to eat properly, as far from nutrient shakes and plastic tubes as possible. Real food, like the hash for dinner, was important for Bucky’s recovery.

A proper dining table had been the first order of business. Steve had been increasingly frustrated with the pressed wood veneers that seemed to be ubiquitous both in the expensive new furniture stores and in the thrift stores he’d passed through. Thankfully, one day Clint had shown up with a sturdy, solid wood walnut table, with only a few scratches on the top. Closed, the oval table seated six, but with the two center leaves, it expanded to seat ten. Now that Bucky had been having mostly good days, Steve tended to leave the leaves in.

A white Irish lace tablecloth had appeared next, a hand-me-down from one of Bucky’s nieces that had appeared in the postal mail with a brief note, “Thought you might like this.” Bucky had, in fact, liked it—the lace closely resembled the pattern on the “good” tablecloth Mrs. Barnes rarely used. Steve and Bucky left it on, but covered it first with a clear layer of plastic, and then over that a shorter, heavy white linen damask tablecloth for everyday use. Phil had suggested the layers because the white linen would stand up to repeated cleaning.

Knowing that Steve and Bruce thought that homes should have fresh flowers but that they certainly weren’t going to place a standing flower order with the florist on the first floor, Bruce often brought little bouquets from the aquaponics lab for their table. Steve was particularly appreciative
of the pea shoots, wild and curly with curving white and purple flowers.

Since it was just the two of them, Steve didn’t bother with a full place setting. Forged 18/8 stainless steel flatware had been a revelation—it didn’t need polishing, unlike the silver plate they’d both thought of as “nice” flatware. In addition, the forged stainless steel was much more durable for the supersoldiers. (“Trust me, Steve, this is what you want.” “Tried to eat soup with the gauntlets on, Tony?”) Holding up in the commercial dishwasher? Priceless. Bucky had bought two sets.

Natasha had been the one to present them with a hand-turned, hickory wood bowl, inlaid with an ornate copper pattern. They often used the gleaming bowl as a centerpiece, filled with that week’s shipment of fruit. The ready availability of out of season fruit had been so disconcerting that Jarvis had quickly removed the option from their weekly grocery order, instead just having a box delivered.

January had been lavish piles of tiny, sweet Floridian tangerines, while February had brought enormous dark pink Texan grapefruit. This month, Jarvis had apparently decided that Hawaiian pineapple, the traditional symbol of hospitality, was appropriate. Sam had promised to show them how to make a pineapple upside down cake, but the idea of adding more sugar to the sticky sweetness had made them both blink with surprise.

Smiling at the memory of pineapple in cake, Steve folded the napkins next to their bowls. Bucky moved past him, setting the heavy cast iron skillet filled with hash on a red tile trivet with one hand and passing Steve a couple of knives and forks with the other. A large stainless steel ladle lay ready.

“Water?” asked Bucky, dropping a quick kiss on Steve’s cheek.

“Mm-hm. Thanks.” Steve arranged the flatware and napkins, forks on the left, on top of the napkin, knives on the right, cutting side in towards the plate.

Bucky sat the cut-glass tumbler down on the upper right side of each plate. No antiques here—leaded glass was pretty, but neither Steve nor Bucky was inclined to risk it. Any acidic beverage, including wine, brandy, and juice, would leach lead from the glass. If they wanted to have friends over for dinner, they certainly didn’t want to think about lead in decanters. Instead, they used heavy modern glasses that stood up to Thor and Bucky both.

Since the food was on the table, Steve headed into the living room to get Bucky’s e-reader. Part of making food have positive associations for Bucky was making the whole experience as pleasurable as possible. While Steve wasn’t averse to handfeeding Bucky, and in fact there had been a first, few tense meals where he’d done just that, neither did Steve want Bucky to need him to eat. Too, some days, like today, Bucky’s thoughts needed less pressure than a conversation required, even if they were only casual talks with Steve. On those days, they often read while they ate.

Bucky had always been a sci-fi fan, so after working his way through the most influential authors of the Golden Age of sci-fi, like Asimov, Clarke, and Pohl, Bucky had moved onto the breakouts of the 60s and 70s. He was currently exploring Tiptree, if Steve had heard the quiet conversation with Jarvis and Tony correctly.

Steve himself had quietly signed up to use his GI benefits to study art, one class at a time, online. This semester, it was a history of 20th century painting. Pepper had been unexpectedly eager to talk over the readings with him. Steve hadn’t known that Pepper’s undergraduate degree was in art history. More than one pleasant dinner had passed with he and Pepper discussing art while Tony,
Jarvis, and Bucky talked about science fiction.

As it turned out, Tony was an avid science fiction fan. He and Jarvis had written a thesis under the name Jarvis Stark, about the recursive influence between science fiction and scientific research. They had run a statistical analysis on the appearance of an idea in fiction and the time it took to show up in a peer reviewed journal.

But tonight, it was just the two of them, and Bucky needed to be distracted, so Steve cued up a cute detective story about a thirsty, purple alien of indeterminate gender with tentacles for hair. Steve had previewed this one, saving it for a stressful day.

"Alright, Buck?" asked Steve as he handed off the e-reader in its specially reinforced case. It had only taken one away mission for Tony to realize that nobody wanted to deal with a grumpy, bookless Bucky waiting for them to return to the Quinjet. The next day, this had mysteriously appeared in the grocery delivery.

"M’fine," muttered Bucky as he loaded his plate. His mouth was pressed tight, and he shifted in his chair as if his back hurt.

It probably did, thought Steve. He raised an eyebrow at Bucky and leaned so he could put an arm around Bucky’s waist. "Feeling OK?"

Bucky leaned into him, letting Steve support his weight. Steve couldn’t hear his deep breath, but he could feel the inhalation as Bucky’s ribs expanded. Steve didn’t look at Bucky. Instead he focused on the warm light edging the curve of Bucky’s bowl, seeing the bowl piled high with the hash as the aroma of the onion, peppers, and sriracha filled the air.

Bucky sat down his fork and took a deep breath. “No, I’m really not, but I will get through this. I’ll be fine, eventually.”

“You will, babe, you will,” reassured Steve. It had been so slow, Steve hadn’t even noticed. Bucky had stopped following Steve on missions, and that had been a good thing, letting go of his self-imposed penance as Steve’s weapon, his long-range gun. Bucky had never enjoyed the fighting, not like Steve. It had always been a grim chore, which had made his long imprisonment so much crueler.

Steve had been glad that Bucky had stayed home, but now he cursed himself for not paying attention, for not realizing that Bucky had stopped leaving the Tower altogether.

“Yeah,” said Bucky, “I know I need to get out of the Tower. I want to breathe some air that isn’t filtered, and see the stars.”

Steve nodded. “Dinner first.”

“Yes, dear,” said Bucky. He could have been sharp and sarcastic, but the tone was tender, instead. Steve knew that Bucky enjoyed Steve’s fussing almost as much Steve needed to reassure himself that Bucky was sleeping and eating, comfortable in their new home.

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The act of eating might be fraught, but Bucky and Steve fell easily unto the unison of long practice afterwards, tidying the kitchen after dinner. Steve wiped down the counters and stove while Bucky filled the dishwasher—it would run and dry the dishes while they were gone. No leftovers went in the refrigerator. Bucky scrubbed the skillet with steel wool and salt and then set it to dry on a low flame while Steve changed the kitchen trashcan. By the time he’d returned from the garbage chute,
the kitchen was spotless, shining under the warm overhead lights.

“Thanks,” said Bucky, eyeballing the Not-A-Roomba working its way into the toe kick at the bottom of the cabinets. “I feel better knowing that everything will be ready when we get back.”

“Of course,” said Steve. “Let me grab the peas, and we’ll go. Clint said we were cleared for departure at 7 p.m.”

Sunset was at 6:58 p.m. Tony’s alarm had run while they were eating dinner, and yet again, Steve wondered at the wisdom of leaving at a time of day that Bucky hated. But when they’d planned the trip, Bucky had insisted that this was safest, that the glare of the setting sun hindered sniper shots. Eventually, Steve had given in, reasoning that whatever made Bucky feel safe was the best option.

Both Steve and Bucky had packed casual clothes for their trip. Jeans, henleys, hoodies. They were going to blend in, or at least try. Bucky’s duffel no doubt contained the equivalent of a small armory, but Steve had refrained, mostly ensuring that he had his black tac gear and extra boots and socks. Cold, wet boots were a special kind of hell.

Swallowing hard, Bucky put on his softest black fleece hoodie, zipped it up, and picked up his duffel.

“Let’s do this.” His face was blank, giving nothing away.

Steve’s heart hurt as he bent to pick up his duffel. Before he opened the door, he looked at Bucky, so beautiful in the evening sun. The gold light brought out tawny highlights in his dark brown hair, and illuminated his eyes until they were the color of the sea.

“You know I love you, right?” asked Steve, almost frantic to let Bucky know.

Bucky’s façade cracked, and he smirked. “Yeah, I know. I love you too. Let’s go, sap.”

Turning his head, he called out, “Jarvis, please lock up behind us.”

“Of course. I’ll keep watch. Have a good trip,” replied Jarvis, his voice fond.

Steve opened the door, and watched Bucky step through.

Chapter End Notes

Hash is more of a process than a recipe, because it's designed to use up all your leftovers, but here:

both sets of my grandparents, who lived through the Great Depression in different areas of the country, did this exact thing with food, so I thought it worth pointing out

Soldiers take their hot sauce seriously. I'm not even kidding.
https://taskandpurpose.com/mre-brief-history-tabasco-became-militarys-favorite-condiment

Do NOT use soap on a cast iron skillet. It will make your mama cry.

We use iodized salt at my house:

Depression glass is a thing:

the xi Herculids are real, and fall on Bucky's MCU birthday:
Steve Makes Omelets for Breakfast

Chapter Summary

Before they left, Phil had helped him practice making omelets. Steve had gone through dozens of eggs before he could reliably crack them without getting shell in the bowl. Omelets weren’t hard, exactly, but they did require a certain patience, and a good amount of prep work. Given the right motivation, Steve could be patient, and making Bucky happy was an excellent motivation.

Chapter Notes

Steve has a nasty repeated nightmare, hopefully not too graphic. Also, I do not actually know ASL, so please let me know if I've screwed it up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Quinjet shivered as Clint set it down on the frozen lawn, the frost-covered grass shining white in the moonlight. Another pilot probably would have refused to run silent, without lights or ground control, in full cloaking mode. But other pilots weren’t Clint, who always hit his target, whether that was a bullseye or a narrow band of airspace.

All the Avengers were protective of Bucky, understanding better than most that but for the grace of Fate, they could have been behind the mask and goggles. Too many of them had dealt death at another’s word for them to be anything less than solicitous of Bucky’s need for privacy. Clint’s Quinjet came swooping through the dark skies to the farm, silent and deadly as his callsign, just so Bucky felt secure that no one had followed them from the Tower, or would be aware that they’d arrived.

Dressed casually, in black leggings and a long black sweater, Natasha came into the back on little cat-like feet, silently watching Steve’s big body curled protectively around Bucky. Because Tony couldn’t leave well-enough alone, he’d long ago installed an eggplant leather sofa every bit as big and comfortable as the one in Phil’s office, or so Steve had seen Clint discreetly sign to Phil.

When they’d boarded, Steve and Bucky had been firmly ushered to the sofa by Natasha, who had then picked up her knitting bag and quickly made her way to the cockpit to keep Clint company during the flight. After Natasha had left, Steve had arranged himself on the oversized sofa with a Wendell Berry book—Phil’s idea. Bucky’s steel blue eyes had quickly skimmed the luxurious, brightly lit interior of the Quinjet before he allowed himself to be arranged on Steve’s broad chest. Once Bucky was comfortably ensconced, back to front, Steve had begun reading aloud, holding the book in with one big hand, the other resting on Bucky’s hip. Bucky rested and knit, the familiar pattern soothing. Bucky had once explained that Steve’s voice occupied Bucky’s ears, the knitting occupied his hands, Steve’s warmth relaxed his body, and tracking both the knitting and the story distracted his skittering brain. But now it was time to put away the distractions.

“Let’s go, boys,” Natasha said, quirking an affectionate grin at the tangled pile of supersoldiers on
her sofa. It was universally agreed that while it was definitely Clint’s Quinjet, and they were always Phil’s operations, only Natasha decided sofa privileges.

Bucky swung his boot-shod feet to the metal floor, still half in Steve’s lap, before deftly packing away yet another NICU baby blanket, this one in a soft white, easy-to-clean acrylic yarn, knitted in a tight basket weave. Behind him, Steve dogeared the page before shutting the book and raising himself up on one strong arm to drop a soft kiss on Bucky’s shoulder, right over the join between metal and skin. Bucky turned his head to stare into Steve’s sky-blue eyes, giving him a flat look even as he stood to face Natasha and Clint, who’d slipped through the door behind Natasha.

Clint was wearing full tactical gear, black from head to toe, but his body language was relaxed. Bucky’s eyes met Clint’s, and Clint nodded. Clint had banked around the farm before they landed, visually confirming that only authorized personnel were on the farm. (“Phil, I need your help. We can’t hire directly from SI, and I don’t want this to turn into a SHIELD base.” “Maria and I can ensure good staffing, Steve.”)

A couple in their 30s with advanced degrees in food system strategies handled the day-to-day activities of the farm for their absentee landlords. Steve followed them on Twitter, where he was routinely shocked by their tweets on agricultural history.

The private security team didn’t have public social media accounts, of course. They were a mix of former SHIELD agents left out in the cold by the fall of SHIELD and former military who wanted to stay out of the sandbox, leavened with a sprinkling of heavily-accented individuals from Natasha and Clint’s earlier days.

Reassured, Bucky and Steve zipped up their winter coats before slinging their duffles over the shoulders.

“Thanks for the lift,” said Steve.

“Sure,” said Clint, amused. “Your friendly neighborhood Quinjet ridesharing program, at your service.”

Bucky grimaced, and Clint’s smile fell. “No, hey, man, Tasha and I were happy to do it. In fact, we’re not going back to the Tower tonight.”

Natasha’s mouth tightened, as good as an air raid siren. “Yes, we’re visiting Martha while we’re here.”

Bucky blinked in surprise, his sea blue eyes widening ever so slightly. Visiting the 78-year-old homemaking celebrity who did the high-level project management of the farm for the Avengers was probably right up there with mosh pits on on Clint’s Top Ten Least Favorite Ways to Spend an Evening, and Bucky knew it. Steve, however, knew that Clint and Natasha were both staying in the main house both as back up and as an emergency exit plan.

“She makes really good chocolate chip cookies.” Clint grinned, his soft blue eyes crinkling in what seemed to be honest eagerness. Clint was reliably excited for cookies.

“Let’s get you two settled.” Natasha forged ahead, opening the Quinjet’s rear hatch and letting in the freezing night air. She dug two ID badges on lanyards out of a thumbprint locked bin. “The guest cottage operates with the same security as our apartment—something you have, something you know, and something you are. You’ll need the badges, your Tower PINs, and a retinal scan for entry.”
Steve nodded in thanks, taking the lanyard and looping it around the card before sticking it in his pocket. Bucky did the same. Looping anything around your neck was just asking someone to strangle you with it.

Jarvis beeped, a sort of digital throat clearing he’d developed for Bucky and the more easily startled Avengers.

“Yes, Jarvis?” asked Bucky, eyes flicking to the nearest camera.

“You should know that your retinas—and only your retinas—have been coded into the guest cottage. No one is waiting for you. The cottage has been fully stocked with the necessary supplies.” Jarvis’s voice was calm, giving nothing away.

As the quartet walked down the ramp, Steve held Bucky’s hand and blushed a little, thinking about what Jarvis might consider a necessary supply. The distinct scent of ice lay across the lawn, a sort of cold mineral odor. Only the stars lit the night, making their path dark.

Steve looked up and spotted Orion’s belt, remembering other cold nights when he’d huddled against Bucky and looked at the stars, but had been too afraid to hold Bucky’s hand. Waking up in the future had some advantages.

Lowering his eyes to the old stone house, he thought Bucky would approve of the exterior landscaping—the house was built on a slight rise, there were no bushes or tall grass around the base of the building, and there was a low lawn for a sizeable distance away on all sides. The two-story saltbox cottage with thick stone walls offered tall, narrow windows for overlapping fire zones at every corner.

Phil, Natasha, and Clint had set up security measures when the cottage had been remodeled, and Steve was confident there precautions he didn’t know about. Steve understood that Jarvis was part of the security system, although he hadn’t really been listening while Phil and Tony discussed arc reactors in basements.

The European style steel shutters were closed, letting no light in or out. Bucky made a complicated hand signal and in response, Jarvis beeped softly from Clint’s aids. Only Steve and Bucky could hear it without an earpiece, allowing them to have discreet nonverbal communication with Jarvis via Clint. Steve realized that Bucky had told Jarvis to leave the exterior security lights off, so as not to ruin their night vision before they entered the building.

Bucky grumbled when Steve insisted on leading the way into the guest cottage, but had readily fallen back to watch his six.

With an audible thump, the heavy magnetic locks closed behind Bucky.

“All is well. You are the only individuals in this residence,” greeted Jarvis, his voice clearly smiling.

By the light of LEDs from the household electronics, Natasha and Clint went ahead through the darkened cottage. Paranoia kept you alive, after all. Bucky turned, and Steve could read the lessening of tension in his softer eyes, and in his half-smirk as Steve checked him out head to toe.

Steve winked, just to see the slight blush on Bucky’s cheekbones.

Bucky shook his head, but his sea blue eyes crinkled in fondness and he reached for Steve. “Love you.”
“Love you, too,” replied Steve, his arm around Bucky’s waist while Bucky draped his right arm over Steve’s shoulders. One unit, they waited for Natasha and Clint to return.

“All clear,” came Natasha’s quiet voice. Walking behind her, Clint made two thumbs up, then brought his pinched closed hands together at throat height, and opened them, spreading them apart as he did so. Abruptly, Steve swallowed hard as he realized that Clint had turned off his hearing aids. He did that sometimes in safe spaces, when even the fanciest aids Tony could design grew tiresome during loud team dinners. Steve knew that it was a way to show Bucky that Clint felt secure here, and so could Bucky.

Bucky brought his right hand to his mouth, palm in and flat, and then firmly down and a short distance away towards Clint as Steve said, “Thank you.”

“Of course,” said Natasha. Clint nodded, smiling, reaching his right hand out towards Bucky, keeping the palm up while swooping it down and back up to his chest.

“Sunday brunch?” asked Natasha, turning a little and raising both hands palms out, making little circles, then raising her eyebrows while pinching the fingers of her right hand together and bringing them to her mouth, palm in, and then finally turning her right hand up with her forearm at a 90-degree angle to her torso and gently tapping her elbow with the left side of her other hand, flattened with the palm in.

Clint raised his eyebrows at Steve and Bucky, who glanced at each other and shrugged. “Sure,” said Steve, while Bucky nodded at Clint.

“Enjoy your weekend.” Natasha’s smile was small, but sincere, and she waved Clint to the door, following close behind.

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Steve swallowed hard and turned to hug Bucky. Bucky had had the same idea, and they met a little more firmly than he’d been expecting, chest to chest. Closing his eyes, he rubbed his cheek against Bucky’s soft brown hair, and enjoyed the clean salt scent of Bucky’s shampoo as well as something warm and soft and uniquely Bucky.

“Been a long time since we went away for the weekend,” said Steve.

“I don’t think an afternoon at Coney Island counts.”

Bucky’s tone was dry, but his hands clenched tightly on Steve’s back. Steve opened his hands and gently rubbed Bucky’s lower back, patiently waiting until Bucky’s hands relaxed.

Steve smiled into the dark. “Let’s explore.”

Hand in hand, he and Bucky made their way around the small cottage. The vestibule opened to a small room with a desk, wood stairs to the second floor, and a tiny pass-through to a narrow galley style kitchen.

The kitchen itself was small, probably only as wide across as he was tall, and maybe double that in length. The pale linoleum floors gleamed, even under the starlight, and the cream-colored composite countertop reflected the LEDs from the microwave over the built-in double ovens. Simple Shaker-style cabinets lined the walls, smooth curly maple reflecting another layer of light.

Both the kitchen and the foyer opened to a large room with a generous wood dining table surrounded by carved wood chairs with cane seats. Further into the room, heavy wood sofas with
large, plush cushions sat grouped around a brick, Rumford style fireplace, crackling merrily in the far corner. The back wall had a series of high, narrow horizontal windows, with full bookcases placed underneath.

“Clint must have lit the fire.”

Steve nodded, squeezing Bucky’s hand. “I kind of miss having a fireplace.”

“They’re messy,” grumbled Bucky. “Ash and bark everywhere.”

Steve shrugged. “Still like ‘em. Plus, you know, the Not-A-Roombas clean up pretty well.”

Bucky just shook his head, tugging Steve towards the closed wood panel door that lead off the living room. A big bed was tucked into the small space, mounds of white pillows topping layers of linens. Steve’s eyebrows went up as he counted a top sheet, a loosely woven cotton blanket, a damask duvet over a comforter, and a double-ring wedding quilt, all in shades of white. It looked like a big fluffy cloud, floating against the pale blue walls of the bedroom.

Bucky had already turned towards the en suite bathroom, clearly not as enamored of the fluffy cloud bed as Steve was.

“Look at this.” Bucky tugged Steve into the room.

While they’d been in the Tower a while, and were familiar with Tony’s idea of a bathroom for two, this was something else. A massively oversized cast-iron bathtub lined with white porcelain sat perched on claw feet, with a cloth shower curtain open to reveal a large silver showerhead. A big, white fluffy bathmat was laid beside the tub, along with a small side table, holding bottles of water and various bath salts. Half concealed behind a sliding door, the water closet was brightly lit, with a surprisingly big stained glass window. Two big terrycloth bathrobes hung off the wall. A tiny porcelain pedestal sink faced a large, well-lit mirror.

Steve smiled. “Do you think we could get one of these tubs in the Tower?”

Laughing, Bucky said, “Well, you and I could carry this one off, but I wouldn’t want to upset Jarvis with my plumbing.” A circumspect LED blinked in acknowledgement.

“I’m sure we could figure it out.”

Dropping a kiss on Steve’s cheek, Bucky pulled him back out again. “Let’s check the upstairs.”

As they’d explored the rest of the house—three more bedrooms and a bathroom with a shower upstairs, more storage in the attic, and a long greenhouse off the front porch, Steve made a plan. Grabbing a couple of McIntosh apples, a big wedge of Vermont cheddar, and a loaf of oat and wheat bread, he veered towards the sofa and took a big plush blanket, too.

“Bucky, let’s sit in the greenhouse a minute. Time for a bedtime snack.”

Tipping his head, Buck raised an eyebrow. “Got plans for me?”

Steve grinned. “Sure do.”

Snuggled together on the wicker sofa, nibbling at their bread and cheese and apples, they found Orion’s belt and then his dog, following faithfully behind. Out in the greenhouse, the night was peaceful and the dark skies made the stars easily visible, unlike the glowing purple haze of night in the city. It wasn’t warm, precisely, but with the heat of each other’s bodies trapped by the fleece
blanket, both Steve and Bucky relaxed, drowsing together.

Eventually, Steve had decided that they really should take advantage of that big bed, and tucked Bucky into the blanket, carrying him into the bedroom. Bucky smiled sleepily up at him, his hair half across his face, and his chin lightly stubbled. Steve was helpless to resist smiling back.

“Hey, let’s get you undressed.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Bucky stretched like a cat before toeing off his boots and socks. They thumped to the floor as he slipped his jeans down his thighs, and Steve swallowed. Bucky had always been irresistible, but Bucky soft with sleep and smiling made Steve’s chest hurt.

“C’mon, under the covers.”

Beside the bed, Steve spotted the control for an electric mattress pad. Those were fantastic for supersoldiers with metal arms—it was lying in the gentle heat of the sun all night long. A couple of clicks, and then he turned his attention to tucking Bucky in just so. Not too tight—no sheets tucked in, no restrictions—but no drafts of cold air, either. Steve liked to tease Bucky that he swaddled himself in a blanket burrito every night. Sometimes Steve was privileged enough to be invited in.

By the time Steve had Bucky stowed away, Bucky had fallen back asleep in his warm, soft cocoon. Steve stopped and looked at his beloved’s features with an artist’s eye. Dark eyelashes, soft pink mouth. He’d loved Bucky before he had known what love was. Bucky was his center, his northern star, and Steve’s entire world happily revolved around him.

Padding softly into the kitchen, he checked the contents of the refrigerator. Omelets for breakfast. But first, a quick wash and then burrowing his way into Bucky’s blanket nest.

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Early the next morning, Steve’s feet crunched the gravel on the path twisting before him. Lit only by starlight, the still air was bitterly cold and his breath steamed behind him. Thankful that his asthma was no longer a problem, Steve nevertheless waited for that sharp drag in his lungs, like shards of mirror cutting on each inhale.

He had nightmares about it, sometimes. When he had been young, he had been so frequently ill that the pain of breathing had invaded his dreams. Trying to stay still, trying not to irritate his chest while nestled in what pocket of warmth he’d created in the blankets. Without Bucky there to keep him warm, he’d dream about turning into a mirrored statue, cold reflective metal creeping over his skin until it slinked into his throat. Each breath would shatter the mirror and cut into his lungs, no matter how he struggled to stay still. Even after Project Rebirth, the nightmares would steal into his dreams when he slept without Bucky.

Despite his body’s expectations, pain didn’t come. Instead, breathing felt good, his limbs warming from the inside out, pure kinesthetic pleasure in each sneaker placed just so on the pea gravel. Strong legs propelled him forward and he grinned for the sheer joy to be found in this body. At top speed, his fingers got cold, reminding him of the double layer of gloves: stretchy black gloves underneath, warm wool gloves on top.

Natasha had gone running with him in the winter, once and only once. The gloves had shown up a couple of weeks later and he’d blinked back tears, because they were like something his Ma would have made. They were dark brown, not quite black, and soft with the original lanolin, making them water resistant. He’d realized then that Natasha was a formidable knitter, because she’d felted the gloves and still managed to precisely fit his big hands.
There was a brilliant light in the dark, and Steve steered toward it, curious. The farm’s massive greenhouse came into view, and Steve slowed in surprise. He’d known that Pepper had contracted with a company from the Netherlands for a greenhouse, but he hadn’t realized quite how big it was. Gold light spilled into the dark, illuminating the gravel around the greenhouse. Glancing at his smart watch, he thought he had time for a quick loop around before breakfast.

As he ran, he peered inside, curious about the inner workings. It was remarkably high-tech, reminding him of the aquaponics lab that Tony and Bruce played in. Lots of white plastic and bright lights. He’d expected big pots with black dirt, and the air near the greenhouses smelled like he’d imagined, warm and full of growing things.

Speeding up, he decided to try and get back before Bucky woke up. He didn’t want Bucky to wake in a strange place by himself. He’d left Bucky nestled into a pile of soft bedding, face relaxed in sleep. Bucky was still sleeping on an irregular schedule, healing around his own nightmares and Steve hadn’t had the heart to wake him as he slipped out of bed for a morning run.

Steve slowed down as he returned to the guest cottage. Badge, PIN, retinal scan, the quiet thunk of the magnetic locks, and then he opened the door as quietly as possible. The lights were still off, so hopefully Bucky was still asleep. Jarvis locked the door behind him.

Peeking in, he saw only the top of Bucky’s head had emerged from his blanket shelter. Steve stopped for a moment, checking Bucky’s heartbeat by ear, making sure he wasn’t in distress before he retreated to the living room. Grabbing the sweats and tee that he’d laid out the night before, Steve headed up to the guest bathroom shower. A two-minute shower was on order, to ensure he had time to make Bucky breakfast before he woke.

Before they left, Phil had helped him practice making omelets. Steve had gone through dozens of eggs before he could reliably crack them without getting shell in the bowl. Omelets weren’t hard, exactly, but they did require a certain patience, and a good amount of prep work. Given the right motivation, Steve could be patient, and making Bucky happy was an excellent motivation.

Just as Jarvis had promised, there were two dozen eggs in the refrigerator, along with shredded Colby-jack cheese, a slice of ham steak, and bell peppers. A pound of Campari tomatoes from their greenhouse were in a bowl on the counter. Steve opened a lower cabinet door, and found a basket of yellow onions and a basket of Russet potatoes.

“Thanks, Jarvis.”

“You’re welcome. The knife rack is to your right, on the wall next to the refrigerator, and the non-stick pans are in the drawers to the right of the stove top.”

Steve had tried making bigger omelets, but he was hopeless at flipping any omelet with more than three eggs, so he had resolved to make two, three-egg omelets for Bucky. He turned on the oven, turning it down to the lowest setting. The hash browns would take longer than an omelet, so Steve started there. He and Bucky preferred chopped potatoes in their hash browns, so Steve had learned, painfully, how to dice potatoes. Good thing his hands didn’t scar.

Steve took a deep breath and picked up a good-sized potato. He cut it cleanly in half. Then he took the flat half, sat it down on the board, and carefully cut it into quarter inch slices. Then he took half of the slices, set them so that the slices were horizontal to the cutting board, and repeated the process, ending up with squared-off potato sticks. Turning the cutting board at a right angle, he sliced again, cutting the sticks into small cubes. All those long, lazy afternoons watching America’s Test Kitchen videos with Bucky had paid off.
Repeating the process with the other three quarters of the potato, he dumped the little cubes on a thin kitchen towel, and reached for another potato. He thought two should do it, since the potatoes were pretty big.

Once the second potato had been reduced to little cubes, Steve reached for the kitchen towel and folded it into a sack. Moving it over the sink, he squeezed—not too hard, that had been an embarrassing mess all over Phil, Natasha, and Clint’s kitchen—letting a good bit of the liquid drain out. Once Steve was satisfied, he smoothed the cubes onto a couple of layers of paper towel, in a rough donut shape, put the whole thing on a big plate, and popped it into the microwave for a couple of minutes.

While the potatoes were par-cooking, Steve rinsed off the chef’s knife and cutting board, drying them with another kitchen towel. (“Cleaning while you cook is an important skill, Steve.” “I never would have figured that, Tony.”) From practice, Steve knew that he wanted to prep the other ingredients before he actually started frying the potatoes, because the potatoes were best served hot. Clint and Natasha had had cold hash browns with their breakfast-for-dinner more than once in the past couple months.

Steve started with the tomato, carefully using a paring knife to cut out the core with the stem, and then slicing each tomato in half. Using the knife, he carefully cut out the messy insides of the tomato, and brushed them off the cutting board. Then he quickly diced the outside of the tomatoes and put them in a small glass bowl. Next, he cut the sides off a bell pepper, and cut the core out of the tops. Only about a quarter of it was finely diced for the omelets.

Since all the other vegetables had been diced, (“Nobody wants to eat the rest of a vegetable that has been chopped with a knife stinking of onion.” “Good point, Tony.”) he went ahead and cut a medium sized onion in half, and then cut a half into quarters. Setting aside the three-quarters of the onion, he peeled off the papery outer layer, chopped off one end, and using essentially the same technique he’d used on the potatoes, also reduced this to a fine dice. Last, he rinsed off his knife, flipped the cutting board over, and repeated the dicing process with half the ham steak.

Dawn shot bright rays through the window at the end of the narrow kitchen, warming the linoleum floors. Steve realized that this was real, old-fashioned linoleum like his Ma used to have, not the slick modern plastic. He happily wiggled his bare toes in the sunlight as he reached for a small, nonstick skillet.

Steve sprayed it with oil and then added a tablespoon of oil, gold under the light of the range hood. Once the oil shimmered, he added the onions, stirred them to ensure they were covered with oil, and put on a clear glass lid.

Jarvis beeped, his quiet way of asking if Steve was busy.

“Yes, Jarvis?”

“Ms. Potts wanted to enquire after you and Mr. Barnes.”

Steve smiled. As busy as she was, Pepper never failed to check in with each of them, every day. Tony had made at least one good life choice.

“Let Ms. Potts know that the guest cottage is just what we needed, and thank her for me, please. If she asks, we should be home tomorrow.”

“Duly noted,” replied Jarvis, his dry tone easily conveying that Steve and Bucky should stay longer.
Steve smiled a little as he tidied up. He knew better than to argue with Jarvis.

The leftover vegetables went in plastic bags that he tucked into the refrigerator for later, the scraps went in the gleaming metal compost bucket, and then Steve wiped down the off-white counters. (“Waste not, want not, my boy.” “Yes, Ma.”) By then, the onions had softened, so he added the green bell peppers, stirring them into the onions before replacing the lid and turning the burner down to its lowest setting. The kitchen was starting to smell good, and Steve’s stomach growled.

Pulling a small, stainless steel bowl out of a corner cabinet, Steve cracked three eggs into it, and then mixed them with a whisk. Once they were mostly one mass, he heated up another, smallish non-stick skillet, and sprayed it thoroughly with cooking oil. (“It won’t stick?” “I promise, as long as you leave it alone.”) Steve carefully poured the eggs into the bottom of the skillet, turned the burner to medium-low, and placed the tight fitting lid on top.

“Jarvis, Clint and Natasha doing OK?”

“They’re fine, Captain. Ms. Romanoff wanted to let you know that if you worried about them, you’d regret it.”

Steve snorted and turned to the bell peppers and onions, adding the diced tomatoes and stirring them into the mixture before pour all the vegetables into a medium-sized glass bowl. He peeked at the omelet—still runny on the top—and Jarvis flashed the microwave light at him.

“Got it, Jarvis, thanks.” A blue LED blinked in acknowledgement, dim in the bright morning light.

Steve reached into the microwave for the plate of par-cooked potatoes. Finding a big non-stick skillet, he poured in a couple of tablespoons of canola oil, tipping the pan this way and that to make sure the whole bottom was covered before setting it on the burner. Once the oil was shimmering, he dumped the potatoes in and carefully used a silicon spatula to ensure all the potatoes were coated with oil. Then he turned down the heat and sprinkled the potatoes with salt.

At the end of the counter, the coffee maker gurgled. Jarvis must have noticed Bucky’s REM cycle ending.

Moving quickly, he slipped a big, flat silicon spatula under the omelet, and carefully flipped the entire thing over in the pan. It hissed as it hit the hot bottom and Steve smiled in triumph. He generously sprinkled the Colby-jack cheese on the hot layer of egg, and followed that with a big spoonful of the ham, and then a couple generous spoonfuls of the mixed vegetables. (“Phil, why is this called a Western omelet?” “Because having meat, and cheese, and eggs, is overkill, just like the Western diet?”) Steve replaced the lid, letting the bottom of the omelet cook while the cheese melted.

Stirring the potatoes, he noted that they had begun to cook, but hadn’t yet turned golden and delicious. Picking up the lid on the omelet, the combined scents of egg, sautéed onion and bell pepper, rich cheese, and salty ham all made him take a deep, appreciative breath. Bucky had to be up soon, with this wafting through the house.

Steve folded the omelet in half and then slipped it, ever so carefully, onto a gleaming white plate. He put a lid on the plate and tucked it into the warm oven. Stirring the potatoes again, Steve repeated the whole omelet process a second time. The potatoes were looking good at this point, and he turned off the burner, put a lid on it, and shuffled the skillet to the back burner.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bucky shuffling into the now-sunny living area, wrapped in the white quilt.
“Mmph.” Bucky’s sea-blue eyes were half-closed, but he aimed unerringly at the coffee pot.

“Here, let me get that for you.”

Steve reached for a mug, but was waylaid by Bucky, who leaned into him.

“Oh, hey, I love you, too.” Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky, supporting his ribs and shoulder. “I made you breakfast.”

“Mmm. Eggs?” Bucky’s voice was muffled, his face pressed into Steve’s shoulder.

Steve smiled, proud, and hugged Bucky. “Omelets.”

“Really?” Bucky leaned back, dropping a kiss on Steve’s cheek as he went. “You made omelets?”

“Yes, I did. And hash browns, just like my mom used to make.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Bucky’s voice was gentle and his eyes bright. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Bucky. Anything.”

Steve meant it. He would burn down the world for Bucky. Learning to make Bucky’s favorite breakfast was the least he could do. To be able to have that breakfast in a beautiful little cottage, light from the morning sun splashing across his lover? Steve was an exceptionally lucky man.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, I do not have an omelet recipe for you. I can tell you that is the way I make omelets for myself. My kiddos stick with cheese, I like the veg, my spouse prefers mushrooms and Swiss. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

But! Western omelets are a real thing:
https://gunthertoodys.com/scrambled-history-denver-omelette/

Recipe that I have not tried here:
https://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/diner-style-western-omelet

I did, however, use this recipe for hash browns, altered a little bit. I detest grated hash browns.

Bucky is knitting the basket weave NICU blankie found here:
https://www.knotsoflove.org/nicu-blanket-patterns

This poem reminds me of Natasha:
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45032/fog-56d2245d7b36c

Steve is reading this to Bucky:
https://www.amazon.com/What-Are-People-Wendell-Berry/dp/1582434875

I like to imagine that in another life, Dr. Taber would run a farm for the Avengers:
https://twitter.com/sarahtaber_bww
Martha Stewart could probably make chocolate chip cookies in her sleep:
https://www.marthastewart.com/344840/soft-and-chewy-chocolate-chip-cookies

These are the type of shutters I was thinking of:
https://www.alulux.com/roller-shutters/solutions/

heated mattress pads are the bees knees, and if I were an achy super soldier with a metal shoulder that sucked heat from my body, I would definitely own one:
https://www.amazon.com/Sunbeam-Quilted-Mattress-EasySet-Controllers/dp/B00FHW8QI4

Real linoleum is an entirely different beast, and yes, you can feel the difference with your toes:
https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/earth-talk-floor-plan/

All Clear in ASL:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6enqSb_JRow
Bucky Makes Hors d'oeuvres for Lunch

Chapter Summary

Bucky lingered over his coffee, enjoying the heat and the rich scent. He rarely slept well, and he hadn’t expected to sleep at all last night. Somehow, between Clint and Tasha securing transport and clearing the house, knowing that Jarvis had ported an instance of himself to the cottage to run the security systems, and Steve keeping watch, Bucky had been able to unbend enough to fall asleep on the remarkably comfortable bed.

Chapter Notes

There is a little angst because Steve misses his old friends, like you do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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He hadn’t stayed asleep, of course, but that was situation normal, all fucked up. Lying in the dark, Bucky had braced himself for the quiet whir of a central HVAC system. It had never come, and Bucky thought that Jarvis must have handled it. The damn things sent Bucky’s heart racing so often that Jarvis had redesigned their rooms at the Tower. Last night Bucky had spent peaceful hours listening to the crackle of the fireplace in the living room, tucked under Steve’s sleeping body. Apparently Hydra’s tech fetish meant that fireplaces were still something Bucky could enjoy.

Sipping his coffee, Bucky idly wondered if Jarvis would approve of a wood-burning fireplace back at the Tower. He knew that he and Steve were difficult residents, because they tended to leave the windows in their rooms open. Hydra never been keen on giving him fresh air, so the unmistakable scent of outside air helped Bucky ground himself in the here and now. Last night Bucky hadn’t felt unfiltered air worth the risk in the two-story guest cottage.

Bucky felt a wave of fondness for the other permanent inhabitants of the Tower. Once Tony had figured out why Jarvis was remodeling their rooms, Tony had built a “giant bug zapper” to protect their windows. When Clint had realized Steve hadn’t known what a bug zapper was, he’d had gleefully added “A Bug’s Life” to the queue for movie night.

Steve was puttering in the kitchen, tidying up after breakfast. Given that this was a guest cottage on the Avengers’ farm, Bucky was sure there was a dishwasher, but Steve was washing dishes by hand anyway. Bucky spent a pleasant minute watching his tall form bent over the white, farmhouse-style sink, hands covered in bubbles and the tiniest wiggle of his hips while he
Steve trolled Tony endlessly by humming Jimmy Dorsey and Glenn Miller in elevators, but given his hearing issues, Clint was a fan of music with heavy bass, and had been delighted to introduce Steve to his clubbing favorites. When Bucky placed the tune, he pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. Definitely not Captain America appropriate, but it could have been written for Steve Rogers.

Steve felt him watching, and turned with one of the blinding grins that made Bucky’s supersoldier heart skip a beat.

“More coffee?”

Bucky smiled back and shook his head. It wasn’t as if the caffeine did anything for him, after all. His right hand spread a bit more around the mug, seeking the heat. The table was cool, and the quilt didn’t provide much warmth. The whole cottage was strangely cool this morning. Bucky breathed deep and smelled breakfast, a little wood smoke and ashes, and the cold, chalky scent of the plaster walls. Last night’s fire had burnt itself out, then. His skin prickled, and he huddled into the white quilt. It smelled … purple?

Steve gave him a concerned glance, his sky-blue eyes slightly narrowed. “Warm enough?”

“Mmm.” He shrugged, knowing Steve could see the movement even though he was still bundled in the quilt.

Steve’s shoulders tensed as he looked at the ceiling. “Jarvis? Any chance we can turn up the heat?”

“I’m sorry. This heating system is less responsive than your rooms at the Tower, and it is proving difficult to quickly warm the cottage. While you wait for optimal temperatures, perhaps you’d like to start another fire?”

Bucky nodded at Steve. “Helped me sleep last night. Want to help me start it? You can haul the ashes.”

“That so?” Steve was grinning, his eyes lit by the morning sun as he teased Bucky. Bucky was always amazed by how damn beautiful he was. Had always been, even before Project Rebirth. He’d always been a little shit, too, and Bucky knew exactly what Steve was thinking.

Unexpectedly, Bucky snickered, and then they both started laughing. In between bouts of laughter, Bucky said, “You can haul my ashes any time, sweetheart.”

Steve winked, dried his hands, and came into the dining room on light feet. Dropping a kiss on his temple, Steve bent and tucked Bucky into the quilt. “I’ll get the fire. It’s your birthday. You just relax.”

Bucky leaned into Steve’s warmth and rolled his eyes. “Because I do that so well.”

“You don’t want to watch me work?”

In point of fact, watching Steve take pleasure in his body, both in bed and out, was one of Bucky’s favorite things. Too, Bucky knew Steve would never take his body for granted, couldn’t ever leave that past behind, just as he hadn’t left Bucky behind.

Bucky tipped his head, acknowledging Steve’s point. “Sure, but I want to sit on the sofa. It looks comfortable, and it’ll be closer to the fire.”
Before Bucky could protest, Steve had slipped his arms under Bucky, carrying him to the sofa. It was oversized, and sturdy, with what looked like 2x4 construction and custom-made cushions. Had someone been afraid he and Steve would destroy another sofa? They just didn’t make them like they used too, thought Bucky.

“I can walk, you know.” Bucky knew his tone was dry, but he leaned his head against Steve’s broad chest and was rewarded with another impish kiss.

“I know, but then you’d have to unwrap your blankets, and it’s chilly. No grumpy Bucky today!”

Steve was irrepressible, vibrating with energy from his morning run, and proud of himself for successfully making Bucky’s favorite breakfast.

Bucky smiled, Steve’s enthusiasm contagious. “Hot baths are relaxing. I’m thinking about a long bath in that cast iron tub this afternoon. You wouldn’t want me to be lonely in there, would you?”

Steve’s answering grin was absolutely filthy.

“Whatever you want, sweetheart. I’ll be right back—I’m going to go grab the comforter from the bedroom for you.”

“Thanks. Oh, hey, would you mind grabbing my knitting bag?”

During the winter holidays, Bucky had decided that Steve needed a sweater. In memory of Sarah, Bucky had decided to make Steve a sweater out of Irish wool. Because natural wool was water repellent and Steve spent a lot of time outside, Bucky had chosen undyed, unbleached wool, in its normal eggshell color.

With Jarvis’s help, he’d special ordered the wool from a small, family-owned business in the Aran Islands. The business was older than either Bucky or Steve, so Bucky thought it was a safe bet. After several days of research, the pattern he’d settled on featured a crew neck, with rows of heavy, ornate cables interspersed with a honeycomb stitch. Bucky couldn’t help but knit the symbols for good luck, safety, and the reward of hard work into Steve’s sweater.

Even with his sleepless nights, Bucky figured the sweater would take a few months to complete. It was a complex pattern, and he needed five different sets of knitting needles and three swatches just to get started.

Steve came back with the knitting bag, oversized black canvas with enough storage for a dozen skeins, zipper pockets for the various knitting needles, hooks, and scissors, and a reinforced zipper pocket for his needle gauge. Bucky had been well aware that Steve thought he packed a small armory, but he could also do a lot of damage with just the knitting needles. Well-made circular needles handily doubled as a garrote.

After Steve tucked the heavy comforter around him, and set his coffee cup on the side table, Bucky settled into the sofa to watch Steve clean out the fireplace. The long, lean line of Steve’s back in his usual skin-tight tee was too distracting for Bucky to dive right into the pattern. Absentmindedly, he pulled out his 3.5mm needles and cast on 20 stitches for the stockinette gauge.

Bucky had tried wood, bamboo, plastic, and detachable needles when Natasha had introduced him to a British metalsmith who took custom orders. Since they were solid metal and slightly longer than usual, the steel needles were heavier than most. Bucky didn’t mind, although he’d got in the habit of using metric for his knitting. When Bucky asked for his needles in millimeters Steve shook his head bemusedly. Metric was one of the things that Steve had had to learn and Bucky had
just known.

Sitting back on his heels to reach for the shovel and ash bucket, Steve looked over his shoulder with a knowing expression. Caught ogling, Bucky blushed. Allowing himself to express his body’s reactions was still weirdly satisfying, and he wiggled under his blankets.

Steve just chuckled and began brushing last night’s ashes into the bucket.

“What are you making?”

“What?”

Bucky looked at his swatch. Even partially completed, it was promising. He needed 26 rows to come out to a ten centimeter by ten centimeter square. Generally, he wouldn’t have bothered to make a swatch, but he hadn’t worked with this wool before and he wanted to be sure before he dove into the intricate pattern. Unraveling rows of stitches because he hadn’t measured his initial gauge was a beginner’s mistake.

Ash cleared from under the grate, Steve began stacking tinder in a loose pyramid shape. Someone, probably Jarvis, had anticipated that they’d make more than one fire because a decent supply of tinder and kindling was stowed tidily in metal buckets near the fireplace.

Blinking hard, Bucky stopped knitting as a memory enveloped him. Steve, small and skinny, knelt at a potbellied cast iron stove, assiduously blowing on a scrap of newspaper. In his memory, Bucky marched forward, catching Steve under his arms. Tone fierce, but hands gentle on the delicate, too-prominent ribs, Bucky picked Steve up as he writhed like an angry cat. Bucky deposited him on a threadbare armchair, tucking Steve under a battered quilt and kissing his forehead as he dodged a raw-knuckled fist.

The threads of memory snagged and broke. Bucky returned to himself to find Steve cupping his face.

“Buck?” Steve’s expression was open, concerned. He was still so innocent, even after all these years and their accompanying horrors. Bucky had always feared Steve losing his fire, becoming tired, bitter, and sad. That dread meant Bucky willingly made the hard choices, so Steve could burn the world down in his idealism.

Bucky laughed softly—somebody had always had to keep Steve from immolating himself, and that somebody was him. “Just a memory. You were trying to start a fire by blowing on the embers, like a damn fool.”

Steve’s light dimmed, so Bucky relented, leaning forward and pressing an easy kiss on Steve’s smooth lips. “My fool.”

A luminous smile returned, and Steve’s hand slid to the back of his neck, the other dropping to Bucky’s hands, still gripping his knitting needles. “Yours, always.”

Pulling away, Steve continued, “But the fire still isn’t lit, and I want you warm. You keep knitting.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

Bucky smirked and watched Steve light the kindling. It caught, and the comforting scent of burning pine drifted from the fire, the natural oils burning hot and fast. Steve added smaller pieces of dry oak, waiting until they too began to dance with flame before finally adding a three large
Standing, he dusted his hands off. “Should be OK for a little while.”

“Yeah. Not as warm as a stove, but it’s nice,” Bucky replied. His hands moved on autopilot, casting off the stockinette stitch. Reaching for his stitch gauge, he measured the swatch. Yes, ten centimeters by ten centimeters. Excellent. Now for the double moss sample. This required bigger needles, the 4.5 millimeter, and Bucky swapped out his circular needles.

“It is. I’m going to wash my hands, and then I think I want to start some bread. I’m in the mood for something I can bite into.” Steve was already moving into the bedroom, his bare feet silent on the wood floor.

“Mm-hm.” Bucky’s attention was focused on casting on another twenty stitches. He wasn’t as familiar with the double moss stitch. Knit two, purl two, repeat nine times. Knit two. Switch hands, purl two, and then knit two, purl two nine times. Switch hands, purl two and knit two nine times, and then purl two. Switch hands, knit two, and then purl two, knit two nine times. Repeat five times for the gauge.

When he had completed the first four rows, Bucky looked up to see Steve back in the kitchen, where he’d located a breadmaker and was talking quietly with Jarvis. Bucky quirked a grin. Steve tried hard, but his talent lay with pencils and brushes. He’d taken to modern conveniences with enthusiasm, and a breadmaker was one of his favorite kitchen gadgets.

Neither of them liked actually baking bread in a breadmaker, because the crusty bit around the paddles usually ended up wasted. Instead, they let the breadmaker knead the dough and keep it at the perfect temperature for rising. Back at the Tower, Jarvis had installed a tiny little program that let him keep track of what they were making, and alert them when it was time to sort the dough out for the second rising.

“What are you making?” Bucky picked up his coffee mug, but it had gone cold.

Steve opened a cabinet and took out a container of oats. “Oat and wheat sandwich bread. Jarvis has a recipe.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow. Whole wheat bread was one of those twenty-first century curiosities that Bucky didn’t quite understand, but he wasn’t going to discourage Steve from exploring it. Whatever made him happy. He settled back to watch Steve putter, a wisp of thought at the back of his mind keeping count of his stitches.

Steve opened the breadmaker and vigilantly measured in five cups of whole-wheat flour, scraping a butterknife across the top of the measuring cup each time. Then he added two cups of rolled oats. Bucky pressed his lips together, resisting the joke about horses.

Blond hair gleaming under the overhead light of the kitchen, Steve reached for the salt and Bucky swallowed. Steve had rolled up his sleeves, and as he measured out salt and brown sugar Bucky kept having to pause his knitting to recount his stitches.

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Silently huffing a laugh at his own ridiculousness, Bucky looked down at his knitting and then back up again. With a mental shrug, he shifted in his blankets so it was easier to see Steve crack an egg into the breadmaker pan. Bucky wasn’t on a deadline. The sweater wouldn’t be done until next winter, anyway.

Steve added a quarter cup of olive oil, two and a half cups of milk, and finally a tablespoon and a
half of yeast. Bucky stared at the red, yellow, and blue foil packet that Steve was putting into a plastic bag before returning it to the freezer.

“That’s not how we used to do it, right?”

“Hmm?” Steve was closing the lid on the breadmaker and muttering at Jarvis.

“I don’t remember that.”

Steve turned to look at Bucky, his eyebrows raised. “Me making bread? Ma usually bought it.”

Irritably Bucky grumbled, “No, no. The yeast. That’s new, right?”

“Yeah, sweetheart, that’s new. They invented the granulized yeast after the war.”

Steve’s voice was calm, patient. He didn’t look at Bucky, busying himself with cleaning the measuring cups and putting them away. Bucky was content to knit and listen to Steve burble happily about the wonders of little foil packets that kept yeast alive for months or years.

When Steve finished in the kitchen, he padded around to the sofa and crawled into Bucky’s lap. Bucky picked up his knitting and opened his arms, letting Steve rest on his chest. Sometimes, Bucky thought that his arms were the only place Steve truly relaxed. Tucking the blankets around them both, he sat up a little so that he could rest his knitting on Steve’s broad back.

Steve’s fire was warm and Bucky’s hands were occupied, so his mind drifted a little. The scent of the bed linens kept snagging his slow thoughts.

“Does these blankets smell purple to you?”

Steve’s blue eyes blinked lazily up at him. “They smell like Provence. The lavender fields.”

“France?”

“Mm-hmm.” Steve shifted, rubbing his cheek against Bucky’s chest. Bucky dropped a kiss on Steve’s silky blond hair.

“Tell me?”

Steve began. “It was August, and the lavender harvest was just ending in Saignon. We’d been scouting, and ended up at a little abandoned stone cottage just outside the village, tucked up against the Luberon massif.”

Bucky kept knitting, eyes half-closed as Steve used his artist’s eye to sketch the buzz of the bees in the endless rows of lavender curving down and back again as far as the eye could see. With Steve’s voice, he could see the golden spill of sunlight across the grey stone of the massif contrasting with the rich green of the forests on the slopes.

In his mind’s eye, Bucky saw the men piled into the cool shade of the ancient stone walls, grateful for the respite from the intense heat. Steve was easily pictured in his ridiculous uniform, but Bucky couldn’t see himself, even as Steve told him they had volunteered to keep watch together, climbing the rocky outcroppings to a passable sniper’s nest to surveil the surrounding valley.

“Everyone understood why we always pulled our watches back to back, and nobody cared.”

Bucky could see Steve’s secret smile as he shared that tidbit, the way his eyelashes fluttered when he was secretly glad. It made Bucky feel relieved to know that they hadn’t been scared of their
team, that they’d had people they’d trusted to have their backs.

Soft wool yarn gradually turned into a bumpy moss stitch as Steve told Bucky about their watch routine, one keeping watch while the other kept them sane in the middle of war. Shamelessly, Steve shared how he’d persuaded Bucky to lie down in the smooth stone hollow, Steve’s uniform shirt under his head, Bucky’s own shirt open for Steve to touch bare skin. Bucky’s rifle had lain beside him, ready for Steve to aim and fire.

Bucky had an intense sense memory of hard warmth against his back, Steve’s pale skin against his cheek and Steve’s big hand on his chest; Bucky squirming as Steve’s thumb languidly swiped across his nipple. Shifting, he realized that Steve’s hand had been on his chest, rubbing his fingers back and forth as he told the story.

Amusement colored Steve’s voice as he said, “The rule was the person on watch had to stay on watch. I couldn’t look at you, only touch. But you could look at me, and you liked to tease me until I had to make you stop so I could focus on keeping watch.”

“Sounds like something I’d do.” Bucky quirked a smile as he cast off the last row in his moss stitch gauge. The muscles of Steve’s back were firm under his hands. Running a finger down Steve’s straight spine, he watched Steve shudder.

“Always so sensitive for me.” Reaching for his stitch gauge, Bucky measured the swatch. Ten centimeters by ten centimeters. Now to unravel both samples.

“Mmm-hmm. You always relax for me. You did that day. I know you thought you were getting more, but you fell asleep before I unbuttoned your trousers, even though you were laying on bare rock.”

Steve’s voice tightened as he confessed, “I meant you to sleep. The stone was warm underneath us and you were exhausted. You were always tired, and you looked as though you had two permanent black eyes. It wasn’t only the nightmares—everybody had them, but you were more worn-out than everyone else. I couldn’t figure it out. You were getting so terribly thin, and you barely ate. You always said that your stomach was upset. I was frightened and I didn’t know what else to do, except let you sleep. So I did, until the sun set. I knew the guys would be hungry and shouldn’t wait on us.”

“Hey, hey, you weren’t to know,” said Bucky carefully. This had come up before, and he knew Steve blamed himself for not realizing that Bucky needed extra rations.

Steve bit his lip, but continued the story. While Steve had kept watch, Dernier had set out to Saignon. Somehow, despite his lack of a French ration card, Dernier had made a successful foray to the village.

With their combined cigarette rations and his own chocolate bar, Dernier had traded for a boule, a large pile of Jerusalem artichokes, a hunk of elderly sausage, and a piece of salt pork. In addition, he’d returned with enough Brousse du Rove for everyone to have a slice of the boule with a thick smear of the soft cheese.

Steve was proud as he told Bucky how the rest of the Howlies had spread out to forage, finding arugula in the shade next to the building. A little further on, DumDum had found an elderly orchard that yielded sticky-sweet plums for dessert. Morita had recognized wild black mustard going to seed alongside the gravel road. Wild leeks, spied by Falsworth, had rounded out their haul.

“It was your turn to cook, and you took the salt pork, cut it up, and let it bubble and get crisp. It
smelled so amazing I was afraid someone would hunt us down from the scent alone. Falsworth had cleaned the leeks in the creek, and you had him slice them up real thin before you sautéed them in the fat from the salt pork. You sliced up the sausage so we could each have a couple of pieces, and put them in with the leeks and salt pork bits.”

“Everyone else was on artichoke duty, scrubbing and peeling and chopping as best we could with our mess kits. You smashed up the peppercorns with a couple of rocks, scraped some salt out of the bottom of a tin, and added that in. Then you boiled it all together with the artichokes, and it was the best food I’d ever eaten.”

“We were all so hungry, and it was hot and filling and tasted like real food. I thought there might be tears, especially when Dernier sliced up the bread and gave us each a slice of bread and cheese to mop it up. The plums were so ripe that juice ran down our hands. We were a mess and it was wonderful.”

Bucky had stopped knitting. He didn’t remember any of this meal. Steve’s hushed sincerity made him ashamed to not be able to remember. At the same time, it felt good that Steve so obviously loved this story. Not all of his former self had been lost, if Steve remembered it, and it meant a lot that Steve felt safe enough to share this story with him.

Steve’s voice was tranquil and pleased as he told Bucky how just before dawn, a light rain had begun pattering on the red tile roof. The men had slipped out of the cottage, one by one, to bathe in the dark. The tepid summer rain had been like a deliciously indulgent outdoor shower—better even, because the warm water never ran out.

After everyone else had taken their turn, Steve and Bucky had gone out together, the white crest of dawn just barely visible in the cloudy night. Steve had saved a bar of soap from the bathroom at the last formal dinner he’d attended, and he had used it to wash Bucky clean of the mud and filth of war. Steve painted a picture with his words, how their wet skin had gleamed in the dark as they silently touched each other, biting back gasps and moans.

Slowly, Steve finished telling Bucky how the rain had stopped, and they’d re-dressed in their dirty clothes, going inside to find the men packing up their bedrolls and gnawing on the leftover crusts of the boule, ready to march again.

“I miss them.” Steve’s voice was the merest thread of sound, a subdued exhalation against Bucky’s chest.

“I can tell, sweetheart. They were good men, and kind to us.” Bucky knew this to be true, even if his memory was a sieve.

Steve swallowed, hard, and nodded. “I have a weakness for thinking about that night.”

Bucky wrapped up his yarn, and set it back in his knitting bag. Then he reached around and hugged Steve, holding him tight.

“Remembering our friends doesn’t make you weak. It makes you strong, and you honor them by remembering the good times.” Bucky’s voice was firm, sure of his rightness in this. Not all his memories were enjoyable, but he treasured each and every happy memory.

Just then, Jarvis beeped, a sort of digital throat clearing he’d developed for Bucky and the more easily startled Avengers.

“The dough is ready to be placed in the bread pans.”
“Thanks, Jarvis.” Steve sat up, holding Bucky’s hand. “Want to help?”

“Sure,” said Bucky. “Let me tidy these blankets up and wash my hands.”

Steve nodded, and moved so Bucky could unwrap himself from the layers of lavender-scented blankets.

“Jarvis, why do these blankets smell like lavender?” asked Bucky.

“Ms. Potts keeps lavender sachets in her bed linens. Studies show that lavender is calming and therefore assists with sleep. Since Ms. Potts had me order furnishings for the guest cottage, I set it up as she preferred.”

“Hmm.” Bucky thought a moment. “Would it be possible to order these for our linens at the Tower?”

“Certainly.” Jarvis’s tone was a little hurt. “I can provide anything you need.”

Bucky smiled. “I never doubted that you could, Jarvis. Sometimes I don’t always know what I want or need.”

“That is an excellent point,” replied Jarvis. “This, however, is an easy remedy. The sachets will be waiting for you on your return.”

“Thank you, Jarvis.”

Bucky carried the pile of linens back to the dim bedroom, replacing first the fluffy white comforter and then the double-ring wedding quilt on the king-sized bed. Looking at the small windows showing a shining blue sky, he thought maybe they’d venture out this afternoon.

Padding into the brightly lit en suite bathroom, Bucky eyed the massive cast iron tub with its white porcelain lining. He hadn’t had a bath in one of those in a long time, and he was looking forward to it.

As he washed his hands, Bucky thought about Steve’s story. Now he wanted something similar for lunch. Not the Jerusalem artichokes—you ate those when you couldn’t find anything else to eat—but maybe there was some French bread stocked in the kitchen.

“Steve, what do you want for lunch?”

Steve’s cerulean eyes widened, surprised. “What?”

“Lunch? The second meal of the day?” Bucky rolled his eyes.

“Bucky, sweetheart, it’s your birthday. Whatever you want is fine by me.” Steve’s tone was affectionate.

Bucky chuckled easily. “You say that now. What if I decide that I want borscht?”

“Then we’ll eat borscht,” said Steve as if he’d never wanted anything else in his life. “I’m sure Jarvis can find us some beets.”

“You goof. I do not want borscht. Jarvis, do we have any baguettes?”

“Yes, we do. They’re par-baked. I will pre-heat the oven. When it’s to temperature, remove the baguettes from the freezer and place them directly on the rack for about ten minutes.”
Steve looked dubious, but gamely opened the upright freezer and started looking for baguette-shaped items.

Bucky thought for a moment. He wanted some kind of meat. Something he could slice and put on the baguettes.

“If I may?” interrupted Jarvis.

“Sure, go ahead,” answered Bucky.

“Ms. Potts thought that perhaps you might enjoy a picnic, if the weather was warm. While the weather is not optimum for a picnic today, Ms. Romanoff contributed a saucisson sec from her personal charcuterie selection. You might consider that for your lunch.”

Steve looked up from the freezer. “Tasha sent it?”

“Yes, she did,” confirmed Jarvis.

Steve grinned at Bucky and batted his preposterously long eyelashes.

Laughing at Steve’s antics, Bucky said, “Yeah, sure, fine. Let’s have that.”

“It’s the item wrapped in brown papers on the right-hand side of the shelf that is second from the top.”

Bucky peered into the refrigerator. The saucisson sec was located where Jarvis had indicated, but Bucky also saw cucumbers suspiciously like the ones Bruce was growing in the hydroponics lab.

“Jarvis, are these cucumbers from the aquaponics lab?”

“Yes, they are. Dr. Banner thought you might enjoy the Tyria varietal paired with the saucisson sec, along with some Winesap apples.”

Bucky looked at the counter, where the small, almost doughnut shaped apples sat in a wicker basket. Then he looked at Steve, puzzled. “How much time do they spend gossiping about us?”

“A whole lot, apparently,” replied Steve, shaking his head in cheery disbelief. “Jarvis, what else did they send?”

“Sir thought you might want a cider with your lunch. He asked that I stock a Samuel Smith Cider Reserve for you.”

Bucky nodded thoughtfully. “Hmm.”

Jarvis continued, “Ms. Potts thought that the Cider Reserve paired well with almond madeleines. There are two dozen in the breadbox. They’re from Cannelle Patisserie, her favorite bakery.”

Steve pulled the baguettes out of the freezer, unwrapped them, and popped them in the oven, directly on the rack, as Jarvis had instructed. Turning, he came to Bucky and wrapped an arm around his waist before leaning his head on Bucky’s shoulder.

“That’s not all, is it?” Steve tightened his arm, fractionally, and Bucky eased a little of the weight of reinforced shoulder and ribs onto Steve’s strong arm. It was a habit they’d fallen into, Bucky leaning into Steve’s strength. They didn’t talk about it, but every time, he breathed a little easier.

“No, it isn’t. Mr. Barton remembered that you enjoyed beet-pickled eggs, and he prepared a half-
dozen for you. Mr. Coulson paired them with butterkäse for you. I understand that they often pair these two items with Ms. Romanoff’s *saucisson sec* at home.”

“Oh.” Bucky’s ears were ringing and he felt hot. Everyone had sent something special for him today, something that they thought he would appreciate, and nobody had said a word until he started picking out his lunch. They paid attention to him, to his likes and dislikes, and wanted to make him happy. Tears pricked, and he blinked furiously.

“Thank you, Jarvis. Tell them ‘thank you’ from me, please.”

“And from me,” Steve added decisively. “Thank them for looking out for Bucky.”

“Of course,” said Jarvis. “That’s what family is for.”

Chapter End Notes

I eat this bread almost every day, and yes I prep the dough in the breadmaker and bake it in a loaf pan:

We make this boule regularly:
https://www.cookingchanneltv.com/recipes/laura-calder/the-miracle-boule-2042163

My dad always tucked hardboiled eggs in the jar with pickled beets. It's an acquired taste, but they are delicious!

"Remembrance of Things Past" by Marcel Proust always reminds me of Bucky--also madeleines:
http://art.arts.usf.edu/content/articlefiles/2330-Excerpt%20from%20Remembrance%20of%20Things%20Past%20by%20Marcel%20Proust.pdf

Winesaps are delicious:
https://www.arborday.org/trees/treeGuide/TreeDetail.cfm?ItemID=741

butterkäse is excellent, and popular in Wisconsin:
https://www.wisconsincheeseman.com/blog/cheese-nation/butterkase-wisconsins-little-known-butter-cheese/

Jerusalem artichokes were one of the few unrationed foods. Probably for a reason:
https://gherkinstomatoes.com/2012/02/16/25450/

Brousse du Rove is a traditional Provencal soft cheese:

Saucisson Sec is a traditional French salami:

Foraging in Provence:
https://curiousprovence.com/wild-leeks-and-rocketarugula/
Ever since I read The Pursuit of Happiness by notoska, my head cannon is that Steve loves this song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36zkP6HSLZw


Bucky's knitting bag:
https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07T8K25PX

Bucky's pattern loosely based on this:
https://www.garnstudio.com/pattern.php?id=8227&cid=17

How to knit a moss stitch:
https://www.studioknitsf.com/double-moss-knit/

Where the Howlies stayed the night:
Chapter Summary

Bucky watched Steve take the freshly baked loaves of oat and wheat sandwich bread out of the oven. Still confused by this obsession with making whole wheat bread, Bucky decided it didn’t matter and reached out to touch the crust.
“Careful. It’s hot.”
Steve had bent down to close the oven door, and Bucky took a moment to appreciate the way his pants cupped his ass.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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“Careful. It’s hot.”

Steve had bent down to close the oven door, and Bucky took a moment to appreciate the way his pants cupped his ass. The serum had given Steve a body at the peak of human perfection, but Steve refined it every day with his morning run.

“I know it’s hot. Smells good.”

“Tastes good, especially with butter and honey,” replied Steve. Cocking his head toward the ceiling, he continued, “Jarvis, do we have any butter and honey?”

“Certainly. Would you prefer European-style butter or US?”

Steve blinked and looked at Bucky. “Mm. What’s the difference?”

Bucky raised his eyebrows and minutely shook his head.

“The standard amount of fat in butter varies between the United States and the European Union. In the European Union, the minimum is 82% for unsalted butter. For Mr. Stark’s tables, I stock a ripened, flavorful butter with 86% butterfat. Here in the United States, the minimum fat in butter is 80%, which permits a much higher percentage of water, and so less flavor.”

Jarvis had slipped into professor mode, and his voice reflected a previously unknown passion about butterfat percentages. ‘Ask and ye shall receive’, thought Bucky.

Steve took the loaves of bread out of their pans, setting them on a cooling rack on the counter. Pulling out a serrated offset knife and a wooden cutting board from a drawer, he began carefully cutting a couple of thick slices of bread. It was tricky when the bread was hot, Bucky knew. Fresh bread was soft, and it was easy to squash with a knife rather than cut slices.

“So, we want the good butter, huh?” asked Steve.
“That would probably be best,” said Jarvis. “It’s in the small white crock on the counter.”

“Thanks, Jarvis. What about honey?”

“Local honey is in the upper cabinet to your right, in a glass pint jar.”

“Thanks, Jarvis.” Steve reached for the honey, retrieving a surprisingly large unlabeled jar filled with a golden liquid.

Bucky had a flash of memory, Steve’s ma putting a single precious spoonful of honey into a tin mug of hot water for Steve. Her hands were thin, the skin red and chapped from the harsh soap at the hospital.

Bucky swallowed, and let the memory go. If time was a river, he was trapped in the current, battered against the rocks. It hurt less when he let himself slip through the water, rather than trying to fight against the flow.

Watching Steve find a spoon and drizzle honey over the bread, Bucky was struck by the scent of the honey. It was rich, floral, and he’d swear he could smell beeswax.

“Jarvis, where did this honey come from?” asked Bucky, curious.

“As per CombiVliet recommendations, the farm maintains an apiary, or beehives, in the greenhouse. Otherwise, the flowers would need to be fertilized by hand. The honey is a side product, exclusively for farm and Avenger use.”

Steve glanced up. “That’s interesting. Jarvis, are we still on for a tour this afternoon?”

“Indeed. Mr. Coulson, Ms. Romanoff, and Mr. Barton will be accompanying you.” Jarvis’s voice was level, giving nothing away.

Bucky frowned. “I didn’t realize Phil was out here this weekend.”

Shrugging, Steve put one of the thick slices of bread, butter melting into the crevices and honey swirled on top, on a small plate and handed it to Bucky.

“I think Phil comes out here regularly for inspections, and to get away with Clint and Tasha. Clint comes from farm country, so I think he helps Phil with the inspection process.”

Biting into the soft, warm bread, Bucky tasted something almost earthy, with a tangy, slick contrast from the butter and a delicate sweetness from the honey. He inhaled, and looked at Steve.

Steve just smiled, blue eyes crinkling, and continued to watch him eat while nibbling at his own slice of bread. “Want some tea with that?”

Bucky considered it, but by the time the zavarka would be ready, he’d have already inhaled the bread. “Nah. Thanks, anyway.”

“Anything for you, Buck.”

Steve shone with sincerity, all light and earnest care. His short blond hair was still tousled from their cuddle time on the sofa, and Bucky wanted to reach out and run his fingers through it.

Truth be told, he wanted to run his fingers all over Steve, and watch him squirm and gasp with the sheer pleasure of being touched. Seventy years of being locked in ice had left them both with a severe case of touch starvation, and no matter how many massages they’d both been prescribed,
nothing was as glorious as full body skin to skin.

The serum didn’t help, either, making their skin exquisitely sensitive. At least Steve wasn’t covered in rashes from allergies any more, but neither of them could stand itchy clothes. Though Stark had done his best, Steve always stripped off his tight uniform as soon as he walked in the door, the physical relief from the pressure of the armor clear as day across his face.

Bucky shook his head, frowning at himself. They spent enough time in bed as it was, and he’d already decided to leave the cottage this afternoon. That was the whole point behind this trip—to get him outside, out of his head, away from himself. He just didn’t want to have to talk to other humans.

Some days, Bucky felt like one of the aliens from his favorite books. Everything was slightly off, including his reactions to other people, and then he felt bad for not being what they expected. When his anxiety got too high, he worried that he’d hurt someone.

Hydra had trained his autonomic nervous system so well that Bucky had almost no control over his more dangerous reflexes. Being out among civilians was a recipe for disaster, he was sure. Stevie could handle him, and so could Tasha, but … Bucky trembled, remembering the first few days after he’d come in from the cold.

An affectionate hand settled on the back of his neck, and he felt, more than heard, Steve’s soft words in his ear.

“Hey, Buck, it’s going to be OK. Everything is going to be fine. We’re going for a hike, that’s all. Just us.”

Bucky closed his eyes and listened to Steve. Steve was safe. Steve’s hand was gentle.

“… a greenhouse tour, and Phil and Clint and Tasha will all be there. They’ll keep watch. It will be warm and maybe they’ll even let us pick something and eat it, wouldn’t that be nice?”

Steve kissed him, soft and sweet, gentle on his cheek, his other hand resting at Bucky’s waist. No force, just a quiet reminder that Steve was here, that Steve could hold him if Bucky needed him to.

Bucky turned into the kiss, meeting Steve’s lips. Keeping his eyes closed, Bucky listened to the hitch in Steve’s breath as he melted into the kiss. Steve slid his hand across Bucky’s back, flexing along the bottom of Bucky’s ribcage, subtly supporting the arm and the heavier ribs with the extra metal.

Sighing in relief, Bucky relaxed into Steve’s hold, tipping his head onto Steve’s shoulder. Here, he was safe. Steve wouldn’t let him hurt anyone, Steve wanted keep him secure. They stood for a couple of minutes, Bucky tucked into the shelter of Steve’s strong arms, listening to him breathe, deep and slow and strong. They were both safe.

Eventually Bucky straightened his spine, taking his weight from Steve. He pulled back, looking at the expression on Steve’s face. Steve’s eyes were half-closed, his mouth closed but slack, peaceful. Both of them reveled in touching and being touched. Being allowed to touch, to hold, to shelter, without fear of reprisal.

Bucky spoke, his throat tight. “Hey, sweetheart. We should do this.”

Bucky was a little sad when Steve’s eyes opened all the way and his mouth firmed.

“Sure, Buck.”
Steve stepped away, heading for the pack tossed on the sofa. Both Bucky and Steve could, and had, handled hikes in bad weather, with inadequate clothing, and no food. That didn’t mean they liked it.

For today’s path around the farm, they’d both worn long, loose pants that let them move easily. Stretch fabrics were one of Steve’s favorite things about the twenty-first century, and Bucky certainly wasn’t intentionally spoiling the view, but it was cold out today and long underwear were best worn under loose pants.

Bucky hated the cold, so the long sleeve tee, fleece overshirt, heavy wool socks, and fleece-lined coat all added protection without too much bulk. Steve rustled around until he found his running gloves and topped them with Tasha’s felted wool gloves, while Bucky pulled on insulated black leather gloves.

In their pack, they each had a water bottle, an emergency water purifying system, enough custom-designed protein bars for a couple of days, a compass, a first aid kit, a firestarter, an emergency shelter, sunscreen, sunglasses, lip balm, toilet paper, duct tape, zip ties, flashlights, binoculars, and extra ID. They had learned the hard way that it was better to be safe than sorry, and it wasn’t like they couldn’t handle the extra weight.

After much discussion with Jarvis, Bucky had grudgingly allowed Stark to install a tiny, emergency locator beacon in his arm. The beacon wouldn’t activate unless Bucky consciously flexed his arm just so, and he’d privately resolved to never use it. Instead, both he and Steve wore smart watches of Stark’s own design, with built-in military-grade GPS that gave them both altimeter readings as well as waypoints. Steve’s lasted about 24 hours, while Bucky’s recharged from the miniature arc reactor in his arm. As far as Bucky was concerned, Steve’s inferior smart watch was one more reason for them to always be together.

Steve stood in the doorway, security badge in his hand, his blue eyes watching Bucky. His face was carefully blank, his pack slung over his shoulder. The shield was concealed in a large bag that could have doubled as an artist’s portfolio.

Bucky was procrastinating. His pack definitely contained a water bottle, as well as the picnic blanket Bruce had given them both. Steve had filled their new thermos with hot, Russian-style tea for Bucky, before tucking it into Bucky’s pack. His hair had already been pulled back in a bun, and he had a spare hair tie in his pocket.

“Ready, sweetheart?” Steve’s voice was kind, without a trace of annoyance. As if they went out on hikes for fun every weekend.

Bucky took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, counting to five. “Yeah, let’s do this.”

Steve smiled and it was like looking into the sun. Beautiful and an irrevocable, invisible wound if you looked too long. Bucky always did, content to bask in the glory that was Steve, blinded to any other lover.

ID badge, retinal scan, PIN, and the heavy magnetic locks thunked open, solid in the stone walls.

All the Avengers had wanted a secure bolthole out of the city—out of the Tower, luxurious as it was. There were very few places where any of the Avengers felt even mildly secure. When Pepper had begun the farm project, they had applied their skill sets to securing both their food supply and a communal safe house.

Bucky may have trained Tasha first, but her current skill set was so formidable that Bucky now
trusted her skills unconditionally. After witnessing Clint’s grief, Phil had brought connections forged over decades in the intelligence community. Evaluating security for top-secret facilities was one of Clint’s primary duties for SHIELD, so he had been project lead.

Along the way, Jarvis had lent his technical support, as well as Tony’s engineering expertise and mechanical skills. Since some installations were too vulnerable to be left to outside contractors, Steve and Bucky had willingly been the brawn for Tony’s brains.

Pepper’s willingness to use SI’s influence had also made security easier. They all had untraceable bank accounts, but Pepper had lawyers, accountants, and lobbyists, as well as SI’s internal security force. As a result, the cottage was nearly as secure as the Tower.

Outside was not.

Bucky walked into the sunshine anyway.

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Bucky and Steve ambled around the house to Pepper’s knot garden, sunk into a protective bowl. Pepper had seen a beautiful knot garden in England, and the potential for fresh herbs had caught Bruce’s attention, so he’d designed the garden for the local microclimate. Steve had worked with Bruce, Clint, and Phil over one long afternoon last spring, digging out the garden, amending the soil, and planting perennial herbs in a Celtic knot pattern.

That same evening, Tony and Bucky had finished installing a direct fiber optic cable link and server bank for Jarvis in the guest cottage. When they’d come outside to see the finished project, Tony had insisted on flying into Manhattan to fetch Pepper.

Pepper had been tearful, thanking all of them for the garden. Bucky had some sympathy—neither of them was an Avenger. Bucky could at least hold his own in a fight but Pepper was ever vulnerable, a weak spot for Tony, just as Bucky compromised Steve.

Knowing that it wasn’t the garden, but the thoughtful inclusion that had brought Pepper to tears, Bucky had quietly asked Tasha to take that evening’s duty roster with Thor. Improvising a grill with some leftover rebar and bricks, Bucky had sent Phil and Clint for beer and grill food. Unexpectedly, Bruce turned out to be an excellent grill master (“Pineapple, really, Bruce?” “Trust me, Bucky, you’ll like it.”), and that evening was one of Bucky’s favorite memories—wrapped in Steve’s arms, sitting by the fire, listening to the team razz each other.

Steve knelt down, blond hair shining in the sunlight, his big hands gracefully tracing the stem of a dormant lavender plant. Bucky moved over, impulsively running his gloved finger over the bare nape of Steve’s neck, just to watch Steve’s reaction. In retaliation, Steve reached up, taking Bucky’s wrist and peeling down the glove to place a kiss on the tender skin. Bucky exhaled helplessly.

“See something you like?” Steve’s blue eyes glinted in the afternoon sun.

“Always.”

After another kiss, Steve rolled the glove back up his wrist and tucked Bucky’s coat sleeve back around the glove. Steve knew how much Bucky hated the cold air sneaking in. Standing, he took Bucky’s hand and stepped close enough take a deep breath, catching Bucky’s scent.

“You always smell so good, sweetheart.”
Predictably, Bucky blushed. “Mm. Let’s walk.”

Steve smirked, and kept Bucky’s hand in his as they meandered down the path through the woods behind the house. It was a copse of beech trees, shining white in the afternoon sunshine. When Bucky realized that Steve had made Bucky choose to move on, he quietly huffed a laugh.

Looking up at the cloudless blue sky, Bucky felt the weak March sun on his face. Something heavy lifted in his chest and he turned his head to look at Steve. His love was looking ahead, picking their path through the trees, and Bucky was content to follow.

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After walking the perimeter, Steve and Bucky turned their steps towards the greenhouse. They were expected at midafternoon. The cool, crisp air made the skin of his face sensitive.

“I don’t have to talk, right?” Bucky was tired, last night’s lack of sleep catching up with him. He worried that his fatigue would impede his self-control.

“No, sweetheart. Phil and Tasha are handling that. We’re just window dressing.” Steve’s voice was light, reassuring.

“Mm.” Bucky was running out of words, his anxiety at dealing with civilians rising.

Steve stopped, his hand at the small of Bucky’s back. Taking a step forward, he pivoted so that he was facing Bucky, and his eyes were narrowed in determination. “I’m already proud of you. You’ve done great today, no matter what happens in there. I’ve got you, Tasha’s got you, and Phil and Clint are ready to back us up. Everything will be fine, and if it isn’t? We can handle it. We can handle you.”

Bucky stepped into Steve’s arms, laying his head on Steve’s shoulder, letting himself be supported. This had been so hard at first, but now it was second nature, to take comfort and strength. Steve tightened his arms so that Bucky could rest his arm and reinforced ribs and Bucky sighed in relief.

After a minute, he pulled back. “Thanks.”

He’d enjoyed the walk, but he was ready to be inside again. Steve simply nodded, and looked at the greenhouse. Dim figures moved behind the polycarbonate walls of the entrance.

Badging in, they stepped into a rectangular foyer. A killbox, his hindbrain muttered.

Phil was waiting, blandly official in his usual black Dolce & Gabbana, thick frames on his face. Bucky wondered if Phil got a discount for buying his suits in bulk.

Tasha was apparently playing work wife, or perhaps personal assistant. Her darkened hair was pulled back into a chignon, and she was wearing big glasses, dark tweed trousers, a white button-up blouse, and a thick green Shaker-style sweater, along with sensible shoes. A satchel was slung over one shoulder, and a Stark tablet was in her hand.

Clint was the eye candy today, in tight jeans, a very snug blue sweater, and hiking shoes. Clint’s hearing aids were only visible as short, fine wires in his ears. His chin on Phil’s shoulder and a smirk on his face, Clint looked ready to befuddle nice young scientists.

No wonder Steve wasn’t worried about Bucky making conversation. The trio must run this set-up regularly, thought Bucky. Phil was apparently perfectly comfortable with Clint draped all over him in public. The irony was thick—Bucky knew that Phil and Clint, and Clint and Natasha, were
fantastically private about their relationships, so using Clint as the handsy boyfriend was layer upon layer of distraction.

The inner door slid open, and as a swell of warm, humid air rolled in Bucky realized that the foyer operated as an airlock. A no-nonsense woman stepped through, her dark hair pulled back in a low ponytail, worn boots on her feet.

“Mr. Carlson. Mr. Bartleman.” She nodded deferentially in Phil and Clint’s direction, but didn’t quite make eye contact with either Phil or Clint.

“Dr. Holden.” Phil’s voice was nonchalant, as if Clint was merely a scarf he’d thrown on for a cool afternoon. Clint waved in her general direction and Bucky stifled a laugh.

“Ms. Rushman.” This time Holden made eye contact, dipping her head in Tasha’s direction.

“Ms. Holden, good to see you. Just so you know, there’s no issue today.” Tasha motioned towards Bucky and Steve as she said, “We just want to do a walkthrough.”

Holden’s eyes widened fractionally, but she nodded briskly. “Sure. First, as you know, you’ll need to either remove your shoes and use the slippers we provide or cover your outdoor shoes with surgical shoe covers. It’s important to limit outside contaminants.”

Bucky looked at Steve, who shrugged and began unzipping his coat. Bucky was already uncomfortable in the humid air, so he did the same, shedding his gloves, hat, and coat. Wrapping them in a tight bundle, he stowed them in his pack.

Holden was handing out shoe covers, and Steve took two sets. Handing one set to Bucky, Steve stood on one leg to cover his boot. Bucky thought Steve’s long legs made him look a bit like a stork, and smirked. Steve just rolled his eyes, and took Bucky’s pack while Bucky silently covered his own boots.

Phil was discussing precision farming with Holden while Clint dropped to the floor and put Phil’s shoe covers on. Phil didn’t miss a beat, raising first one black derby shoe and then the other. Holden kept looking at Clint, who winked at her before undulating sinuously to his feet. As Clint pressed against him, Phil absently covered Clint’s hand with his own, pulling Clint’s arms around his waist while discussing CO₂ levels inside the greenhouse.

Meanwhile, Tasha was diligently taking notes on her Stark tablet, her expression earnest. Bucky was amused, given that Tasha’s idea of gardening was bringing sandwiches and lemonade to the people with their hands in the dirt. Nothing like spending months in squalor downrange to make someone appreciate cleanliness and pre-packaged vegetables, thought Bucky.

When Steve and Bucky were ready, Tasha smoothly redirected Holden’s attention. “I’m eager to see the new LED lighting. You said these were running 24/7 without an issue?”

Holden nodded before opening the door into the greenhouse. “Yes, the crops are growing through the night.”

As Bucky stepped into the enormous space, his first impression was one of space. He’d known that the greenhouse was huge, but he hadn’t really thought about the fact that it was nearly half a mile on a side. Rows of white plastic-covered plant pots extended into the distance, a sharp contrast to the vivid emerald of the greenery. The plants themselves towered above the group, growing up instead of over. Like a summer afternoon, the heat and humidity felt good on Bucky’s skin. A different life under glass, or more accurately, polycarbonate.
Natasha was asking questions about return on investment, but Bucky let her words wash over him. Letting go of Steve’s hand, he bent to look at the plant pots.

“Don’t touch that,” said Holden, her words sharp. Bucky froze, the hairs at the back of neck prickling. His breath congealed in his chest as Steve knelt beside him, his hands over Bucky’s. “Breathe, sweetheart. It’s fine. You’re fine.”

Clint detached himself from Phil, and went down on his knees, pushing into Bucky’s side, his arm over Bucky’s shoulders. The idiot. Bucky inhaled sharply. “Clint.”

“No worries. We’re not supposed to touch the plants in case we bring in germs from outside.” Clint’s voice was calm, as if he had nothing more concerning than the weather to discuss, as if he wasn’t hip to shoulder with one of the most dangerous people in the world.

At that, Bucky caught his negative spiral and grimaced. Clint cuddled up to both Tasha and Phil every damned day. The Winter Soldier was hardly going to intimidate him.

“Dr. Holden, how is the geothermal heating system maintenance holding up? I understand there were some plumbing issues last quarter?” Phil’s voice demanded attention and the other three moved off down the aisle, still in Bucky’s peripheral vision.

Bucky exhaled, and pulled his hand away from the bright green plant. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to look at what the tomatoes were planted in.”

Steve dropped a kiss on Bucky’s temple and stood, bringing Bucky with him.

Clint stood and shrugged, his face calm. “I did the same thing the first time I came inside. It happens. Let’s catch up with the others.”

As Phil and Tasha came closer, Bucky watched them be the perfect middle managers. Suddenly, he realized that Phil actually was a manager, that this was part of his regular work. Mentally rolling his eyes, Bucky thought that perhaps his own view of average employment was slightly skewed.

Still on edge, Bucky stayed hand in hand with Steve as they continued to walk through the greenhouse. Eventually, Steve leaned over, his breath hot on Bucky’s ear.

“What is it?”

Bucky shook his head, frowning. It was more than being snapped at by someone in charge. He didn’t feel safe in the greenhouse, and he couldn’t figure out why. It was a large, flimsy endeavor dedicated to creating life—why was his breath tight, his shoulders prickling? Steve was on edge too, constantly scanning for a threat.

Though he had resumed brazenly pestering Phil, Clint easily kept Bucky in his sight line. Tasha flicked a glance at Bucky and then at Clint. Clint tipped his head and Tasha raised her chin minutely. Bucky watched their silent conversation, touched at their concern.

While Natasha took notes, Holden fiddled with a setting on some kind of sensor, and Clint’s hands wandered, Phil took the opportunity to redirect the conversation.

“I understand you changed your nitrogen source for the fertilizer?”

Holden turned and began talking about supplier availability while Tasha made noises of agreement, and Bucky felt the apprehension began to ease from his chest. Of course Phil had noticed Bucky’s tension, and with his usual shrewdness, quickly identified the issue—fertilizer
made bombs. For both Bucky and Steve, the scent of ammonia presaged poison gas, not healthy plant growth.

With Phil’s help, Bucky began to appreciate the greenhouse for what it was—warmth on a cold spring day, a modern technological marvel using what had once wrought death to nourish life.

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Bucky turned the hot water back on with his big toe. Stark’s properties all had unlimited hot water, thanks to his insistence on instant hot water heaters everywhere. (“You want to replace what?” “Keeping pots of water eternally boiling is just silly, Pepper.”) Bucky loved it, taking long, hot showers, and spending hours in the tub.

When they’d returned from the greenhouse, Bucky had been exhausted. He’d done it, he’d gone outside and interacted with people, and all he wanted now was to curl up and hide.

Steve had sat him down on the sofa with a blanket and a book, and gone to draw his bath. Because the tub was solid cast iron, Steve had run only hot water first, warming the porcelain and metal before moderating the water temperature with a mix of cool and hot water. At that point, Bucky had stripped down and eased himself into the heat, the banked energy in the cast iron warming the metal in his bones. It had felt almost unbelievably good.

Bucky slipped down in the water, and swished his head back and forth to rinse off the hair conditioner, the sound of the water filling the tub ringing against the porcelain. He sat up, reaching for a washcloth to dry his face. Before he could reach the basket, a soft cloth was put in his hand. He wiped his face and rested against the sloped back of the tub, eying Steve.

“You getting in?”

“Mm, do you want me to?” Steve’s face was flushed, although that could have been the steam rolling off the water in the tub.

Bucky smirked. “I could scrub your back.”

“Well, who could say no to that?”

Steve was already unbuttoning his pants, and Bucky watched avidly. Even though he could touch Steve every day, Bucky still took pleasure in looking at his lover. He didn’t think he’d ever get used to having Steve within arm’s reach, able to trail his fingers along Steve’s bare thigh and watch the muscles tighten.

As Steve stepped into the bath and tucked his back to Bucky’s front, Bucky shifted in the tub, sitting more upright and looking at the row of bottles and containers sat on a shelf next to the tub—a dizzying array of bubble bath, salts, oils, scrubs, gels, and other unguents. Finally, he saw something that didn’t look like food or flowers and poured the cedar oil into his right hand.

“Come here, sweetheart.”

Steve inclined his head back on Bucky’s shoulder and lightly kissed his cheek. “Feels good.”

“Let me make you feel better.” This was something Bucky could do for Steve, something that Steve would never do for himself. Two-minute showers after his morning marathons might get Steve clean, but they did nothing for skin hunger.

Slowly, carefully, Bucky washed Steve from head to toe, massaging as he went. He paid special
attention to Steve’s hands, each fragile tendon and bone insubstantial in his metal grasp. By the
time Bucky was done, Steve was silent, lost in a haze of endorphins, pliant under his caresses.

Adding more hot water to the tub, Bucky leaned back and rested his head on the edge of the tub,
his arms wrapped around Steve. Bucky had originally meant to read in the bathtub, but holding
Steve took precedence.

Jarvis blinked at him, a small holographic screen silently appearing beside the tub with the words
Book? on it. Bucky smiled. Jarvis really was an amazing AI.

Eventually, the water cooled and Steve roused when Bucky added more hot water.

“Mmm, that was nice.” Steve stretched, pushing his body into Bucky, shoulders to hips to feet.

“Mm-hmm.” Bucky was tired and vaguely hungry. Swiping left, he disappeared the holographic
screen.

“Good read?” Steve stepped out of the tub and reached for one of the ridiculously large towels
piled nearby. Bucky waited to get out of the tub, contentedly watching Steve as he dried off. There
was a little extra wiggle as Steve bent over to dry his feet. Clearly, he knew what Bucky liked and
was happy to give it him.

Chuckling, Bucky hauled himself out of the tub, dripping on the plush bath mat. Running a finger
down Steve’s long, straight spine, he watched the muscles tense all the way down.

Rolling his exposed shoulders, Steve dropped his towel in the hamper. “Down.”

This, too, was part of their ritual. Bucky dropped his chin, bowed, and waited. Steve was
inordinately fond of Bucky’s long hair, and had mastered wrapping the towel around Bucky’s head,
twisting it, and then tucking the ends of the towel under at the nape of his neck. Bucky always felt
a little silly, but the technique worked well on his thick, wavy hair. Finishing with a kiss at the top
of his spine, Steve stood Bucky back up and turned him around.

“You never dry your back properly.” This was a perennial complaint, but Bucky thought it was
probably just an excuse for Steve to inspect the seam where the metal arm met his back. Hydra
hadn’t exactly been concerned with comfort and only minimally concerned with hygiene. Steve
kissed his way down the seam, making Bucky shudder with arousal.

“Steve,” he groaned, arching his back, pushing his chest into Steve’s waiting hands.

“Not now, sweetheart. I need to make dinner.” Steve’s voice was amused and pleased. He liked
playing with Bucky, finding all the little ways he could make him feel good.

Wrapping Bucky in a fresh giant towel, Steve propelled him to the bedroom, where he quickly
dressed Bucky in a soft tee and sweatpants.

“I can dress myself, you know.”

Bucky complained, but made no effort to stop Steve. Steve just smiled, kissed Bucky’s cheek, and
said, “Where would be the fun in that? Come here.”

He took Bucky’s hand and led him to the living room where one of the sofas had been made up as
a bed. Bucky smiled, knowing that Steve must have done it while Bucky had eased into the tub.
Steve reached down and pulled back the covers.
“You rest and I’ll cook.”

Gratefully, Bucky sank onto the sofa cushions, the fresh cotton flannel sheets like velvet against his water-softened skin. He lay on his side, back against the sofa, and Steve tucked the layers of linens around him, covering his shoulders.

“Thanks,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve’s voice was quiet. “Anything for you, sweetheart.”

Raising his voice, Steve cocked his head, looking at the nearest camera. “Jarvis, music?”

“Certainly.” Low, quiet pop music filtered into the room.

Eyes half-closed, Bucky watched as Steve pulled a bag of Yukon gold potatoes out of a bottom cabinet. Efficiently, Steve washed each potato, setting them aside in a colander. When he was done, he pulled out a white, plastic cutting board and a chef’s knife. After running the chef’s knife through one of Tony’s sharpening gadgets, Steve proceeded to quarter each potato, dumping them into a medium saucepan. Running the hot water, Steve covered the potatoes and set them to boil.

Bucky thought that Steve was beautiful no matter what he was doing. The little crease between his brows made Bucky want to get up and kiss it away, but he knew that it was important to Steve to make this meal.

After turning on the oven, Steve pulled a stick of butter from the refrigerator. Cutting it in half, he unwrapped the wax paper and placed the butter in a glass dish. While it was melting in the microwave, Steve pulled out one of those brown plastic sleeves of Ritz crackers. Gently, he crushed the crackers, and then poured them into the dish of butter, making sure the butter coated the crackers.

Reaching into another cupboard, Steve pulled out a 9 x 13 glass baking dish. He put the rest of the butter in the dish and put it in the oven to melt. Pulling a fork out of the drawer, he poked at a potato and shook his head. Bucky could have told him the potatoes wouldn’t be soft enough yet, but Steve still thought that watching a pot would make it boil faster.

Steve removed a white wax paper bundle from the refrigerator. After carefully opening it to reveal several thick-cut cod loins, Steve bent down to peer through the glass front of the oven. Apparently, he was satisfied, because he reached for a potholder, carefully removing the hot glass dish from the oven. Using a pair of large, flat metal tongs, Steve cautiously coated both sides of the cod in the melted butter in the baking dish. One of the pieces broke, and Steve swore.

Bucky laughed quietly. “It’s OK, sweetheart.”

Disgruntled, Steve shot him a dirty look, but didn’t say anything before putting the glass baking dish with the cod into the oven.

A holographic countdown for ten minutes appeared over the counter.

Steve poked the potatoes again, and this time he was satisfied. Grabbing a potholder, he poured the boiling water with the potatoes into a colander in the sink. Then Steve sat the pot back down on the stovetop and slid the potatoes back into the pot. After hunting for a potato masher in the crock of cooking implements, Steve began mashing the potatoes, adding milk, heavy cream, and salt as the potatoes smoothed out.

Bucky thought back to their apartment in Brooklyn after Steve’s ma had died. Bucky had always
cooked for Steve on his birthday, most of which had seen Steve huddled under a blanket even though it was midsummer. They hadn’t been able to afford much, but Bucky had spoiled Steve as he had been able. Bucky’s ma had usually been able to donate a cupcake to the cause, and Steve had always been touched that Winifred Barnes had cared. Losing his own ma had sensitized Steve to mothers and their caring.

Bucky sighed. He couldn’t dwell on the past. Instead, he flicked his eyes back to the kitchen, where Steve was carefully pouring the peas that Tasha had sent into a saucepan of boiling water. The timer went off, and Steve pulled the glass baking dish with the cod out and set it on the unused stove burners. He’d learned the hard way about setting hot Pyrex down on solid, cool surfaces.

Steve squeezed slices of lemon over the cod, and then sprinkled a dry, white wine over that. Finally, he compressed the cracker mixture onto the top of the cod and replaced the whole thing back into the oven. The line of Steve’s back was lovely, strong, and straight.

Another ten-minute timer popped up, and Steve turned to the peas. Using a metal spider, he skimmed the peas out of the hot water, transferring them to a pre-heated dish before putting a metal lid on it. Reaching for another white, ceramic serving dish, Steve transferred the mashed potatoes into it, and then covered that dish with aluminum foil.

Finally, the last timer went off, and Steve pulled the baked cod out of the oven. The rich, buttery scent drifted over to Bucky, and his stomach growled.

Steve looked up and grinned. “Ready for dinner?”

“Mm-hmm.” Bucky sat up, and the towel fell off his head. He ran his hands through his hair. It would be damp for hours yet, thick as it was, but it was dry enough that he wouldn’t drip all over his tee during dinner.

Steve had picked up the peas, mashed potatoes, and cod and placed them on the dining table. The warm wood glowed in the late afternoon sun.

Steve glanced at Bucky, and then turned to fetch the plates and silverware. Bucky padded after him, folding his arms around Steve’s waist, and kissing the elegant arch where his neck met his shoulder.

“Thank you for making dinner.”

“Of course, Buck. I’ve got chocolate cake for dessert.” Steve’s voice was low and quiet.

Again, Bucky pressed his mouth to the delicate skin at the pale curve of Steve’s neck. “You take good care of me. I want you know I appreciate it. Today was hard, but you helped, a lot.”

Steve turned, his eyes dark and a little fierce, and put his hands on Bucky’s shoulders. “You never have to thank me for that.”

Bucky laughed, a near-silent exhalation. “I know. ‘Til the end of the line.”

Steve grinned back, and dropped a smiling kiss on Bucky’s lips. “Love you.”

“I love you, too.” Bucky rested against Steve. Just having him here was all the birthday present Bucky could want.
Steve Makes Pizza for Breakfast

Chapter Summary

Steve leaned over the saucepan and happily inhaled the rich scent of the whole milk, sugar, and tapioca pearls simmering on the lowest heat. Reaching out for the saltcellar, he added a pinch to the mixture. Just enough to bring out the sugar. The mixture had been simmering for 45 minutes, and only now had the tapioca pearls softened.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve leaned over the saucepan and happily inhaled the rich scent of the whole milk, sugar, and tapioca pearls simmering on the lowest heat. Reaching out for the saltcellar, he added a pinch to the mixture. Just enough to bring out the sugar. The mixture had been simmering for 45 minutes, and only now had the tapioca pearls softened.

Tapioca pudding had been the bane of his existence when he’d been a child, easy on his stomach, but requiring enough milk to make him feel guilty about the cost. When Bucky’s ma had made tapioca pudding, she had been able to afford to put sugar and vanilla in it, so Bucky had developed a taste for it and happily scarfed down what Steve often couldn’t eat.

In this century, desserts were frequently cold, but he and Bucky had both had enough ice to last them for the rest of their lives. Ice cream was not a treat. Jell-O should have reminded Steve of home, but the smooth, cold texture had made him gag. Thanks to Hydra, Bucky couldn’t stand the artificial scent of Jell-O, so Jarvis had quietly banned it from the Tower.

Beating two eggs in a bowl, Steve wondered if anyone had noticed the lack of Jell-O in the Tower. After a minute, he decided that people probably blamed Tony and his eccentricities. Security was tight, and there was already a long list of dos and don’ts one had to sign in order to work in the Tower.

Taking a small spoonful of the hot tapioca mixture, he blended it into the eggs. More than once, he’d scrambled the eggs doing this.

When he’d come out of the ice, tapioca had been one of the first things he’d figured out how to cook for himself. After he’d taken a serving in the SHIELD cafeteria and realized that it was cold and sickly sweet, he’d almost been reduced to tears.

Perceptively, that evening Clint had shown up with a hot plate and a mini-fridge. (“Barton, I don’t think I’m allowed to have all this in here.” “Benefit of rank, Captain Rogers. Here, plug this in.”) Already familiar with post exchanges from before the ice, Steve had found that SHIELD’s stocked milk, sugar, salt, eggs, and tapioca, and that he had a purchasing allowance. Even if it was a kind of gummy, foreign instant tapioca, at least it was warm.

This spring, Steve had decided to pass on the traditional birthday cake, and make Bucky real tapioca pudding, like Bucky’s ma would have made. Carefully, he added the egg and tapioca mixture to the hot saucepan, stirring it thoroughly, until the tapioca had reached the thickness of good pudding. Adding a teaspoon of Polynesian vanilla bean paste, (“Paste, Tasha?” “Don’t waste
this in baking, Steve.”) Steve mixed it thoroughly, spreading flecks of vanilla bean seeds throughout the creamy white pudding.

Setting it aside to cool, Steve turned to wash his hands in the big, white farmhouse style sink. He didn’t want to get the sticky dessert on any of Bucky’s carefully wrapped presents. After accidentally ripping the flimsy modern excuses for wrapping paper, Steve had quickly decided to embellish his own. Jarvis had helped him order a big roll of heavy white paper and Steve had taken to decorating it with enthusiasm. Tonight’s presents were wrapped in little manga style doodles of the team, Pepper, and Jane.

Strangely, the money Pepper had won for them had made gift giving difficult. Aside from Tony’s reckless generosity, both Steve and Bucky had more money in the bank than they’d been able to imagine back before the war. Pepper had even assigned them meetings with accountants and tax lawyers, who’d explained that their money was invested in “the percents” and that if Steve and Bucky weren’t foolish, they’d have money in perpetuity. Thanks to Tony, they didn’t really need most of their annual dividends, so normally Steve and Bucky donated most of it to shelters and food banks. Places that had helped them survive to adulthood.

In the months after Bucky had returned, Steve had watched as Jarvis deftly steered Bucky into expressing his own wants and needs, subtly prompting Bucky to making his own purchases. Even after their donations, enough money that remained meant that Bucky could and did buy things like the absurdly expensive soft, eggshell colored wool from the Aran Islands. It wasn’t that Steve wasn’t grateful for Jarvis’s help, but it made buying something for Bucky just a bit harder. Absentmindedly shopping online, Steve had run across a meme meant for parents: something they want, something they need, something to read, and something just for fun. After a bit of thought, Steve had used that idea as a basis for Bucky’s presents.

This trip was supposed to be the “something fun,” but Steve wasn’t entirely sure that Bucky had been having fun during their afternoon walk and greenhouse visit. Glancing over at Bucky, Steve smiled when he saw that Bucky was watching hair-braiding videos. He bit his lip rather than say anything, because if anyone needed bodily autonomy, it was Bucky. Secretly, though, Steve adored Bucky’s long hair, and had made a practice of ensuring there were hair ties and pins all over their rooms. Patting his pocket, Steve double-checked that he had a plain black hair band ready.

Stacking the presents on the dining table, Steve glanced out the window at the misty twilight. A warm front had moved in, and the snow-covered was sublimating, creating a thick, dark fog. Steve shivered, and decided to make hot tea to go with the tapioca.

After filling the electric kettle and setting it to boil, Steve pulled two large, heavy mugs down from the upper cabinet. Both of them were plain white, meant for everyday use, and so Steve had no hesitation adding PG Tips to the mugs. Both he and Bucky preferred their tea strong enough to etch glass.

Scooping the tapioca into bowls, Steve put it and the tea on the dining table.

“Ready for dessert, sweetheart?” Unaccountably nervous, Steve automatically reached for Bucky, resting his hand on Bucky’s shoulder. Tipping his head, Bucky leaned into Steve’s arm.

“Sure. Got anything good?” Bucky’s voice was teasing, soothing in its normalcy. He reached up and took Steve’s hand, turning to press a kiss on Steve’s forearm.

Helpless to do anything but smile in return, Steve bent down and kissed Bucky’s temple. “It’s terrible, I promise.”
Snickering, Bucky unfolded himself from the sofa. “Well, that’s a low bar.”

“I try not to over promise and under deliver,” replied Steve, waving a hand at the stack of wrapped presents.

Bucky sat at the table and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Rather than sit at the head of the table without Bucky, Steve sat beside him, resting an arm across the back of Bucky’s chair. He’d wait as long as Bucky needed.

Shifting sideways, Bucky curled into him, almost in his lap. Steve swallowed hard. “You OK?”

“Mmm,” replied Bucky, his voice quiet.

“I’m sorry.” Steve knew it wasn’t his fault, wasn’t under his control. He knew Bucky’s happiness wasn’t his responsibility—he just didn’t give a damn. Bucky was his moon and stars, shining his silent light into Steve’s life, presiding over the endless days of this century, separating the daylight from the darkness. There was nothing Steve wouldn’t do for Bucky.

Bucky knew how Steve felt. “It’s not your fault. You did a good job on dessert. S’nice to have it warm, for once.”

Steve nodded, taking the words at face value, and reached for the first package. “Maybe this will help?”

“Ha!” Bucky grinned, his sadness temporarily forgotten as he studied the little cartoons of the team. Clint was shooting little Nerf arrows at Tony’s armored back while Tasha flipped over them both and Phil stood with his arms folded, tapping his foot. Carefully, he unwrapped the paper, folding it carefully to save it for later.

“Oh.”

Both Steve and Bucky missed his family from before the war, and Bucky didn’t have so much as a photo of his parents and his sisters. Steve remembered them all, albeit differently, thanks to his former color blindness. He’d drawn a black and white picture of Bucky with his parents, Winifred and George, his sister Becca, and the younger girls. Framed in a sleek dark walnut, Steve had thought it would look good hanging on the wall in Bucky’s room.

“Is it OK? I … I can draw you something else.” Steve was mortified, his face hot. Maybe he’d gotten it wrong.

Bucky turned to Steve, and tears glimmered in his beautiful eyes. “It’s perfect. You remembered for me, and it’s perfect.”

“Anything for you, Buck.” He felt lightheaded with relief.

Bucky set the family portrait on the table, leaning it against his tea mug. “So, what else ya got?”

“A book?”

Something to read had been a relatively easy gift, thanks to Sam. Laughing, Sam had coached Steve through sliding into the DMs of one of Bucky’s favorite authors with a request for a signed copy. Grateful at author’s kindness, Steve had allowed himself to be snared with the book in his hand by a photo-happy tourist as well as quietly placing an order for a hundred copies to be distributed to local shelters.
“Gimme!” laughed Bucky. “Don’t deprive me of reading material, Steve.”

Steve snorted. Jarvis provided them both with all the books they could ever read. Gently, he placed the wrapped hardback book in Bucky’s waiting hands. This one had been decorated in Tony and Bruce in their guise as science bros. Standing in front of a lab bench with steaming beakers, the bots in the background, Tony looked like a mad scientist with Bruce as his aggrieved assistant. Truthfully, Jarvis was usually the harried aide, but he’d been a little challenging to draw.

Unwrapping the book with all the care it deserved, Bucky opened the cover, reading the personalized inscription with a quirk to his mouth. “Thanks. Now I’ll never be able to convert to ebooks.”

“Paper’s better anyway,” said Steve, grinning.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Not in the bathtub.”

“One day, I’ll come home and you’ll be a prune. Or a merman.”

Bucky looked horrified. “Don’t even joke, Steve. Namor is an asshole.”

Laughing quietly, Steve agreed, “Fine. You’ll be a prune, then.”

Bucky just rolled his eyes and reached for the last present. The characters on this one were the Avengers in action, jumping, spinning, and generally looking fierce. Using the same meticulous care he’d taken with the other presents, Bucky slowly unwrapped this one.

As much as Bucky and Steve depended on each other, Steve knew that they needed their team. With Jarvis’s help (and his access to the cameras in the common room), Steve had printed a photo of the team at a post-mission dinner with Bucky, Pepper, and Jane. They’d all been exhausted, their walls down.

Heedless of his own white dress shirt, Phil had had an arm around Clint, still dressed in his filthy black tac gear. Phil had been in the middle of gracefully removing one of Clint’s mission-spec’d aids while Clint had been slipping Tasha into his lap, her pale face drawn with fatigue. Covered in bruises, Tony had collapsed against Pepper, caught with her eyes closed, her mouth pressed into his dark curls, and her arms around his shoulders. Thor’d had a mug in one hand and a sleepy Jane in the other, his face unreadable as he lounged in an oversized chair. In the background, Bruce had been curled in a recliner covered in a soft blanket, glasses and curls askew, sleeping off his post-battle change from the Other Guy. His own uniform battered and dirty, Steve had been sitting, leaning against a standing Bucky, who’d had one finger under Steve’s chin, tipping his head up for a kiss.

Hopefully, Bucky liked the photo as much as Steve did.

Turning his head, Bucky repeated the move from the photo, his finger under Steve’s chin, turning him to Bucky for a kiss. Their mouths met, and for a moment, Steve forgot about everything except Bucky. Only the warmth of their lips meeting existed, only the softness of Bucky’s lips against his mattered. Steve reached for Bucky’s hair, wanting to take it down, take him apart right there.

Bucky broke the kiss, panting a bit.

“Yeah?” Steve’s voice was gruff and he knew that he was scowling, trying to repress his desire.

Not intimidated in the least, Bucky smirked, his eyes dark. “Yeah.”
“As you wish.” Steve pulled Bucky into his lap, and then stood, carrying him to the bedroom.

Steve thought for a moment, and then turned to the baking cupboard. Phil, Clint, and Tasha were coming over for brunch in the morning, and he knew how much Clint liked pizza.

Jarvis, in his infinite wisdom, had ensured that the breadmaker here was the oversized version that they had back at the Tower. Steve had no qualms about adding six cups of flour, two cups of water, three teaspoons of salt, and a half a tablespoon of yeast in the breadmaker.

“Jarvis, pizza dough please.”

A blue LED blinked confirmation, and Steve turned his attention to toasting pecans while the pizza dough mixed. Reaching into the refrigerator, he pulled out the plastic bag of shelled, whole pecans. The recipe called for two cups of toasted pecans, coarsely chopped, so he thought it was safe to measure out the two cups, toast them, and then chop them. A non-stick skillet made toasting them easy.

“Hey, Stevie, what are you doing in there?” Bucky’s voice was light, his pulse slow and steady as he threw himself on the sofa. Steve had left Bucky sated and sleepy, and he had thought for sure that Bucky would nap.

“Prepping for breakfast tomorrow. It’ll just take a minute.”

Bucky’s eye-rolling was audible. “Mm-hm. Don’t get caught up in your culinary creations. I want to watch a movie before we head out.”

“Yeah? What did you want to watch?” Steve risked a quick glance away from the pecans to find Bucky watching him over the back of the sofa, his chin propped on his folded arms.

“Don’t care. You can pick. I get veto power.”

Laughing, Steve said, “Sure, sweetheart. Let me just get this in the refrigerator. It might go faster with some help.”

A deep sigh issued from the living room, and then Bucky unfolded himself from the sofa, padding into the kitchen.

“Where’s the recipe?”

Obligingly, Jarvis projected the sticky bun recipe in the pass-through window.

“Oh, these are so good!” Bucky turned and dropped a kiss on Steve’s lips. “Nice choice.”

Steve preened under Bucky’s praise, but managed to pour the pecans into a glass dish before they burned.

“OK, I’ll get the ingredients. You mix.” Steve smiled and nodded, always happy to follow Bucky’s lead in the kitchen.

Muttering to himself, Bucky began piling ingredients on the countertop. “Buttermilk, eggs, butter, yeast … are there any dairy products that aren’t in this recipe?”

Chuckling, Steve merely shrugged as he turned the pizza dough out of the breadmaker and onto the baking counter. He painstakingly separated it into six equal pieces before placing them on a
parchment paper-covered baking sheet, wrapping the whole thing in plastic, and then sliding it into the refrigerator.

“Dunno, but the guy who came up with this recipe said it helps his marriage. Don’t think he was worrying about dairy products.” Steve hitched a breath. That was not a topic he’d meant to bring up today.

Turning, he saw Bucky raise an eyebrow before silently handing him the egg carton.

“Thanks.” His face burning, Steve carefully cracked six eggs into the empty breadmaker pan. Then he measured out two-thirds of a cup of light brown sugar, a cup and half of full-fat buttermilk, and two teaspoons of salt.

“Just a second, honey. I need a glass bowl to melt the butter in.” Bucky’s voice was playful, and Steve took a deep, relieved breath. He’d be happy to be Bucky’s, any way Bucky wanted him, but this was Bucky’s weekend, not Steve’s.

“I’ll measure out the flour.” The recipe called for 40 ounces, or eight cups. Lips in a thin line, Steve decided that the cups would be fine, and cautiously used a butter knife to slice the flour off the top of each cup before adding it to the bread pan.

Behind him, the microwave dinged and he heard Bucky remove the melted butter. Just as he finished pouring in the last cup of flour, Bucky leaned against him, chest to back, hip to hip, thigh to thigh.

“Here, sweetheart.” His chin on Steve’s shoulder, his breath against his cheek, Bucky poured the melted butter into the bread pan and closed the lid.

“Jarvis, you got this?”

“Of course, Mr. Barnes.” Jarvis’s tone was matter of fact.

Steve felt Bucky’s lips on the shell of his ear. “There you go, Stevie. By the time the dough is ready, the movie will be over.”

An involuntary shiver made its way up Steve’s back as he felt Bucky’s metal hand slip under his tee and ghost along the soft skin of his stomach. He was under no illusions—Bucky had him right where he wanted him, willingly succumbing to his touch.

“Come play with me,” teased Bucky. “It’s my birthday.”

Swallowing hard, Steve said, “The movie? Whatever you want.”

“Good thing I love you. You’re oblivious.”

Bucky’s voice in his ear was low and fond, his fingers wandering over Steve’s nipples. Steve was helpless to do anything but hear Bucky’s voice in his ear, feel Bucky’s warm breath against his cheek, and shiver under Bucky’s touch. He closed his eyes and leaned back against Bucky’s chest.

“Not … oblivious.” Words were hard. “Just yours.”

“Mm-hm. Come away with me, Stevie. The dough will rise and we can watch something mindless and cuddle.”

Bucky took his hand and pulled him towards the couch, Steve shaking his head as he went.
“I need to tidy up,” he protested. It felt unnatural to leave the dirty butter dish on the counter.

Bucky sighed. “Fine. I’ll tidy; you sit there and pick a movie. I know you’re working through that list.”

A little embarrassed, Steve sat. Jarvis conveniently threw up a holographic screen with The List on it.

“Jarvis, can you help me choose? Something light, please.”

“Certainly. Might I suggest *Four Weddings and a Funeral*?”

“That doesn’t sound very light.” Steve was dubious.

“It was widely regarded as one of the best romantic comedies of the mid-90s.” Jarvis’s voice was neutral, in his professorial mode.

Steve shrugged. Why not? He doubted they were going to pay much attention to the movie, anyway.

“Fine, Jarvis. Cue it up, please. Hey, Buck? Do we want popcorn?”

Team movie night had rubbed off them, but neither one could stand microwave popcorn. The artificial butter and flavoring tasted like salty glue.

After seeing their discreet grimaces, Tony had built a big, fancy air popcorn popper and installed it in the team kitchen. (“Tony, what is this?” “Physics, baby! Popcorn without butter—Bruce says butter is bad for my cholesterol.”) The next movie night, Phil had quietly made big bowls of popcorn with sambal oelek, passing one to Clint and Tasha and another to Steve and Bucky, along with bottles of hard apple cider. The food was definitely better in this century.

“Not right now. Maybe later.”

Bucky walked around the sofa and Steve held out his hands. A lap full of Bucky was an excellent movie accompaniment.

With a grin, Bucky eased himself into Steve’s lap. “This is the best seat in the house.”

“Happy to be of service.” And he was happy to keep Bucky warm and safe under the blanket while they watched the movie.

“Huh. That’s not ASL.” Steve had used hand signs with his team during the war, but he hadn’t learned formal ASL until after the war, when he’d learned that Clint used it.

Bucky had apparently been equipped with ASL by Hydra—and whatever this was, too. “Mmm, yeah, no. Jarvis, what is this?”

“The character is using British Sign Language.” Jarvis’s voice was quiet, trying to talk under the movie.

Steve nodded. “Thanks, Jarvis.”

Steve tensed up at Gareth’s death. Just the thought of losing Bucky was almost unendurable, but Steve gritted his teeth and bore it. When Matthew began reciting the Auden poem, Steve closed his eyes, tears dripping down his cheeks.
“Fuck.” Bucky’s voice was angry, and Steve flinched. He’d spoiled Bucky’s movie, on his birthday.

Bucky shifted, sitting up in his lap. Steel filled Bucky’s voice as he said, “Jarvis, turn this off. Now.” Steve turned away, trying to bury his face in his own shoulder.

Bucky’s warm hands pressed against his cheekbones, wiping away tears. “Ah, hey, no. Sweetheart, I’m not mad at you. I could never be angry with you for this. Jarvis made a bad call, that’s all.”

Steve opened his eyes to see Bucky’s face inches from his own, his grief mirrored in Bucky’s eyes. Bucky crooned, soft as a mother to her child, “It’s OK. I’ve got you. You’ve got me. I’m here with you. Everything is all right.”

Steve tightened his grip around Bucky’s waist, pressing Bucky to his chest. Bucky nestled under his chin, his warm breath on Steve’s collarbone.

“I just love you so fucking much. I can’t lose you again. I can’t.” Each word hurt, his throat tight, and Steve closed his eyes again. Without Bucky, there’d be no him. He knew what his therapist would say, and truly, screw that guy.

Jarvis’s voice was tentative, apologetic. “I am sorry.”

Running his hands through Bucky’s hair, Steve rubbed the pads of his fingers against the base of Bucky’s fragile skull. Bucky groaned. “Keep doing that, Stevie. Feels so good.”

Yeah, this he could do while waiting for the cinnamon roll dough to rise. Jarvis put on some quiet pop music, soothing them both.

“Sure, honey.” Shifting underneath Bucky, he put his hands on Bucky’s thighs, pulling them apart, leaving Bucky flat on his chest. Leaning his head back against the side of the sofa, Steve ran his fingers down either side of Bucky’s spine, under the soft tee. Reinforced with the original titanium alloy to support the original arm, Steve knew Bucky’s spine and ribs often hurt in a sort of arthritic pain.

Steve gave himself over to Bucky’s body on his chest, the warm skin under his hands reassuring him that he and Bucky were here, were alive. The rise and fall of Bucky’s chest under his palms became his breath, the faint beat of Bucky’s heart reflecting his own. Some things he and Bucky kept to themselves, and this autonomic mirroring was one of them.

Rubbing the tense muscles along Bucky’s spine, Steve felt Bucky ease into the massage. Every muscle, every rib, every vertebrae received Steve’s caress. Then he moved down, digging his thumbs into Bucky’s hips and ass. Bucky had always had an ass you could bounce a nickel off, but his older, mature body was lean and tight.

Privately, Steve was glad that Bucky had changed, too. Neither of them were the boys they had once been, and that was OK.

After a while, his hands slowed. Bucky had drifted off, his breath puffing against Steve, warm and soft. Steve clasped his hands together over Bucky’s lower back and let himself take his own rest.

“Excuse me.” Jarvis’s voice was contrite. “The cinnamon roll dough is ready.”
Under Steve’s hands, Bucky sighed. “Let’s do this.”

Lithely rolling off Steve, Bucky reached a hand down to Steve. “C’mon. Those rolls won’t make themselves. I’ll make the sauce, you make the filling.”

Taking Bucky’s hand, Steve stood and rolled his shoulders. “On it.”

With the effortless of long practice, Steve and Bucky moved around each other in the kitchen. Steve found a small bowl, and added two tablespoons of ground Ceylon cinnamon, a half stick of unsalted butter, and one and a third cups of light brown sugar. Eventually he gave up and just mixed it with his hands.

Bucky had melted an entire stick of butter in a non-stick pan before adding another cup and a third of light brown sugar and six tablespoons of whole buttermilk, along with the chopped, toasted pecans. Gently, he stirred the mixture until it was smooth and glossy. Then he split the sauce into the bottom of two 9x13 glass baking pans, covering the bottom of each.

“That smells so good.” Steve’s mouth was watering.

Bucky laughed. “It should. It’s basically caramel.”

Steve blinked. He’d never eaten caramel before the war, and afterwards he’d been too busy fighting to indulge in sweets. The closest he had come the chocolate packed into their rations, and that had been deliberately terrible so the soldiers ate their tinned food first. Caramel was just butter and sugar?

“Huh.” Steve turned to the baking counter, dusting it with flour before dumping the dough out, and adding a bit more flour. Jarvis helpfully projected two rectangles on the work surface, and Steve delicately used the rolling pin to fit the dough into the shapes. Once the dough was more or less evenly distributed, he sprinkled the cinnamon and sugar mixture over the rectangles, and then used a dough scraper to roll up each rectangle into a cylinder. Then, he cut each roll into twelve even slices and placed them in the baking pans Bucky had prepared. Wrapping each pan in plastic, Steve slipped them into the refrigerator for the morning.

Bucky had already wiped down the counter, so all Steve needed to do was wash his hands.

“Ready, sweetheart?” Stargazing wasn’t exactly in Steve’s repertoire, but he was willing to give it a try. It promised to be a cold night, though, well below freezing.

“Mm. Do you think we should pack these hand-warmer?” Bucky held up a couple of small, plastic packs that Steve vaguely recognized as chemical packs.

“Maybe? Couldn’t hurt.” Steve had faith in the felted wool gloves that Tasha had knit him, but Bucky’s gloves were just insulated leather.

Bucky glanced at him, a smirk on his face. “Do my hair?”

Steve blushed. He could feel it all the way down his chest and back, but what Bucky wanted, he’d give him. “OK.”

Handing him a black hair band and a black brush, Bucky turned and stopped in front of Steve. “A ponytail is fine.”

Biting his lip, Steve painstakingly drew the brush through Bucky’s thick, wavy hair. The dark brown strands slid through the soft bristles, almost hypnotizing. Eventually, he managed to gather
all the hair at the nape of Bucky’s neck. “Like this?”

“Mm-hm.” Bucky had dropped his chin, his shoulders loose in front of Steve.

Carefully, Steve wrapped the elastic band around Bucky’s hair. All that time with the showgirls paid off and he didn’t snag a single hair. Releasing a breath, he said, “All done.”

Bucky shivered, a small, subtle movement, and turned around to drop a kiss on Steve’s lips. “Thanks.”

Getting ready to go out, Bucky put on the long sleeve shirt from earlier in the day, along with knit long johns, a fleece overshirt, a fleece-lined coat, a balaclava, a scarf, a hat, and gloves. Maybe he overdid it, but the weather was dark and cold. Meanwhile, Steve prepared some strong, hot tea and filled the thermos Bruce had given them.

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By the time they reached the overlook, the moon was almost midway up the sky. Last night had been the full moon, and the snowy landscape almost glowed in the night. Bucky’s eyes glinted silver in the moonlight, almost fey.

“Do you see the Guardians?” Steve hadn’t learned these as well as Bucky. Astronomy had been one of Bucky’s favorite subjects, and Bucky had always been a better student. He hadn’t missed as many days to illness, for one.

Bucky’s eyes were wide, uncomprehending as he looked at Steve. Mutely, he shook his head.

Fucking Hydra. Anything that Bucky loved had been ground to dust underneath their endless torture, even something that Bucky could have used on missions, like the constellations.

Quietly, Steve set to sharing what he remembered Bucky teaching him. When Steve had missed a month because of pneumonia, Bucky had come home and told Steve that astronomy was the oldest science, that the earliest civilizations had tracked the regular motions of the sky.

Taking his turn as teacher, Steve showed Bucky how the earliest constellations could be used for navigation, that they followed each other in the sky to guide travelers. Together, they found the Little Dipper, and from there, Polaris. They even saw a meteor, one of the xi Herculids they’d used as an excuse for the trip. Bucky was as sharp as he’d ever been, and easily followed Steve’s stumbling explanation about how Polaris could be used to calculate latitude.

Snuggled together under Bruce’s fleece blanket, Steve recounted the myth that Bucky had originally told him—the tale of Orion the hunter and the anecdote about how the ancient Egyptians had used the same stars for a different story about Osiris, the god of the dead.

Remembering Bucky’s earlier enthusiasm left him raw, but Steve calmly narrated the tale about the Babylonians dividing the slice of the heavens in which the stars rose and set into twelve equal slices, which the Greeks later named the zodiac. Each slice had been assigned a constellation, possibly by the Babylonians, but perhaps even earlier by the ancient Sumerians.

Hours later, Steve’s throat was sore, but seeing Bucky gaze in renewed wonder at the night sky was worth any pain. Bucky didn’t need his anger, just his patience.

“It’s good,” said Bucky. “These stars were here before us, and they’ll be here after us.”

“Some things don’t change,” agreed Steve.
“Would you ever go to space?” Bucky’s voice was pensive.

Steve thought about it for a moment. “‘Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge…’”

Bucky smiled then, soft and sweet, answering, “‘your people will always be my people...’”

Steve dropped a kiss on Bucky’s temple before shifting on the blanket to reach for the thermos with the hot tea. “Then I’d better take good care of you, since we’re in it ‘til the end of the line. Here, you’re probably cold by now.”

Bucky looked up at him, the moon reflected in his dark eyes. “You keep me warm. But yeah, I’ll take some tea.”

“In ancient times, the astronomer Hipparchus noticed that even the stars changed,” said Steve as he poured the tea. “He figured out that the angle of the tilt of Earth’s axis was wobbling like a top. Astronomers call it precession, and Hipparchus calculated that one wobble takes about 26,000 years.”

Bucky sipped at his tea, steaming in the moonlight. “Mmm. There isn’t always a northern star. We can’t always find our way home.”

Steve nodded. “True. But the precession is a circle. In time, Polaris will be in the right place at the right time to guide us home.”

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Bright morning light shone through the high windows on the bedroom wall, at an angle that must have been precisely designed to wake whoever was sleeping in the bed. Steve resisted as long as he could—after last night’s stargazing, they hadn’t made it back to bed until after the moon had reached its highest point. He wanted to feel Bucky’s warmth against his, hear his slow, even breathing.

In the end, he gave it up and slid quietly out of bed, ambling quietly into the en suite bathroom. Trying to decide whether he should go for a run, Steve heard Bucky stretch and groan softly at his stiff muscles.

“I don’t want to get out of bed.” Bucky’s voice was hoarse as he grumbled.

Steve silently huffed a laugh, shaking his head. “You don’t have to, sweetheart. It’s a quarter ‘til seven. No reason to be up.”

“I’m lonely here without you.”

Steve leaned against the doorway, eyes traveling over Bucky’s grumpy face, his eyes shadowed by dark circles. “Coffee?”

“приемлемо. But none of that instant crap.”

Frowning, Steve pushed off the doorway. Bucky must be exhausted if he was slipping into Russian. “OK, sweetheart. I’ll get Jarvis to help me.”

Even as he spoke, he was tucking Bucky back into bed, turning the mattress pad heater up and drawing an extra blanket over him. “You rest. I’ll be in the other room.”
An incoherent mumble was his reward as he gently kissed the curve of Bucky’s ear, the exquisite arch of Bucky’s cheekbone, his favorite curl at Bucky’s temple. Steve’s fingers itched for his pencils, but he’d promised Bucky coffee first.

In the warm, sunny kitchen, Steve reached for a battered, silver moka pot from the corner cupboard. It wasn’t large, just enough for two regular sized cups of coffee, but he knew from experience that it brewed very strong coffee, more like espresso than the coffee made with those weird little pods. He filled it with water, almost up to the safety release valve, and then added a fourth of a cup of finely ground light roast to the filter before gently screwing the whole contraption together (“You did what, Stevie!?” “Uh…aluminum is soft? Sorry?”) and putting it on a small flame.

“Jarvis, help me keep an ear on that?” A distinctive gurgle would signal that all the water had been forced through the grounds.

“Certainly. Good morning. The temperature outside is 24 degrees Fahrenheit, and the day is predicted to be sunny. Ms. Potts wanted me to let you know to expect her and Sir for brunch today, as well as Dr. Banner, and that she’d be happy to bring pastries and coffee if you’d like assistance with supplies.”

Steve grinned. Pepper and Phil were probably the only other people in the Tower who kept his morning hours. Phil was invariably out the door right away, but Pepper occasionally invited him to yoga and breakfast. She’d laughed when she realized that his reluctance to accept was because he thought she’d feed him only yogurt and granola for breakfast. From then on, all breakfast invitations had been accompanied by assurances of extra food.

“Thanks, Jarvis. Please let Pepper know that I have it mostly ready, but that she’s welcome to bring some fruit.”

As Jarvis usually handled Steve and Bucky’s fruit order, they only had oranges. While Steve and Bucky were happy with just oranges, he knew that the others would probably want some variety.

“Of course. May I suggest sliced tomatoes? Unless you prefer that they return with you to the Tower?”

“No, that’s good.” Both Tony and Steve had acquired a taste for tomatoes in the morning from Peggy, albeit at vastly different times in their lives. Tomatoes had been a privilege of rank in London during the war, one Steve had been happy to share with Bucky. For Tony, they were reminders of precious, stolen summers with his beloved aunt.

Standing in the warm square of sunshine on the linoleum floor, Steve pressed his bare toes against the firm resistance of the linoleum while slicing the last of the oat and wheat sandwich bread to make toast for Bucky. While Bucky would happily drink coffee as breakfast, Steve wanted something slightly more solid in Bucky’s stomach. He’d noticed that breakfast went down more easily with sugar, so he decided on a thick coating of butter and strawberry jam, the slices of strawberries still visible on the bread.

Listening carefully, he heard Bucky turn over in the bed, so he brought the oversized mug of coffee in with the slices of toast. “Morning, sweetheart. You don’t have to get up, but if you want it, here’s some coffee and toast.”

“Mmph.” Only the top of Bucky’s curls were visible now, so Steve bent and kissed them. They were soft and thick against his face, and it was all he could to not to rub his cheek against Bucky’s hair.
“I’m going to go make pizza. Want Jarvis to read to you?”

“Mmhm.” Bucky’s voice was grumpy. He was probably annoyed that he couldn’t immediately fall back to sleep.

“Jarvis?” Steve knew that Jarvis could easily slip into whatever Bucky had been reading and pick up from there.

Promptly, Jarvis began, “‘Maneuvering’ conjured images, in nontechnical minds, of football players weaving among their opponents in an open field. What the Arkitects had in mind …”

Steve left Bucky to his murmured story and returned to his pizza prep, enjoying the light flooding the kitchen and reflecting off the light wood cabinets. From a tall, narrow side cabinet, he removed a large aluminum baking sheet. Silently, Jarvis shone a light on another cabinet, and Steve removed a roll of parchment paper, tearing off enough to cover the baking sheet. Two pounds of thick cut bacon fit nicely on the baking sheet, rendering in its own fat as it cooked. 425°F would get it done in about 20 minutes, while partially preheating the heavy cast iron pizza pan on the other rack.

While the bacon cooked, Steve grated four cups of mozzarella cheese and a cup of Parmesan, and then chopped parsley, chives, and finally scallions. The repetitive motions were soothing, and the greens gave off a fresh, sharp tang, as if spring was there in the kitchen.

Once everything was ready, in individual glass bowls, Steve began rolling out the pizzas. He knew that he should use his hands or learn to flip it in the air or something, but normally he just used a well-floured rolling pin. He liked a thinner crust, and he didn’t have the time or patience to learn how to stretch pizza dough properly. Clint had tried to show him (“You worked in a pizza shop?” “All you can eat pizza, Steve.”) but his hands just tore holes in the dough.

Instead, he tore off big square sheets of parchment paper. Each piece received a round of dough. Steve rolled the dough out to about the thickness of one of those pink erasers he liked so much. Then he sprinkled each pizza with Parmesan, mozzarella, and bacon before cracking three eggs on the top. Last, but not least, he put salt and pepper on each pizza.

Soon, the counters were covered with pizzas ready to go into the ovens. Jarvis set up a large timer in the corner of the room, and Steve pulled the cinnamon rolls out of the refrigerator to warm to room temperature. Biting his lip, he thought about the glaze, and ultimately decided to make it. He knew he and Bucky would be happy with just the pecan sauce as a topping, but Tony was definitely a “more is more” kind of guy.

An eight-ounce package of cream cheese joined a half cup of buttermilk, three cups of confectioners’ sugar, two tablespoons of orange zest (“Isn’t this a woodworking tool, Bruce?” “Yes, it’s a microplane rasp, but it’s also good for zesting. See?”), and a quarter cup of orange juice, along with a generous pinch of salt in a small saucepan on low heat. The glaze smelled wonderful, the aromas of orange and sugar combining in the kitchen, and it occurred to Steve to think about drinks.

“Jarvis, what does Pepper usually drink at brunch?”

“Mimosas are her most-requested beverages at brunch. Two parts champagne to one part fresh-squeezed orange juice.” Steve could tell Jarvis was pleased he’d thought about it.

Fresh squeezed orange juice he could do, and he’d be surprised if the liquor cabinet didn’t have champagne. “Do we have champagne glasses?”
“Of course. The cabinet in the dining room has a variety of glasses.”

After he swapped out the latest pizzas in the top oven, he added the cooked pizzas to the lower oven, set at a warming temperature. Then he investigated the champagne glass situation. As Jarvis promised, there was a full set of 12 glasses.

Steve decided he didn’t want a mimosa, but he did want a seltzer drink. Phil had taught him to make a non-alcoholic spritzer using lemon-lime seltzer water over ice, with a spoon of frozen cranberry juice and another spoon of frozen limeade. It was bright pink and sweet-tart, sparkling on the tongue. One for him and one for Phil, he thought.

No doubt, Bucky and Tasha would want one of their Russian teas. Investigating the tea drawer, Steve found one of their preferred cubes of black Russian tea. Bucky would definitely need the *zavarka*, or tea concentrate, extra strong this morning. After filling the electric kettle with hot water to rinse the inside of the teapot, Steve had decided to set out the strawberry jam. Strawberries always reminded him of spring, no matter that they were available year-round now.

A solid brown English-style teapot was reserved for Bruce’s use—nobody else liked his esoteric herbal teas. Steve wasn’t entirely convinced that they were all legal, but he wasn’t going to ask and Bruce hadn’t told, so far. Bruce didn’t use sweetener, so Steve left the honey in the cabinet.

Coffee was Clint and Tony’s preferred beverage, and Steve had learned to make it to their preference. Well, he’d learned to ask Jarvis for help with it. “Jarvis, coffee for Tony?”

“If you’ll add fresh water to the machine,” said Jarvis, “yes, the reservoir is under that lid—I’ll ensure it’s fresh when Sir arrives.”

Steve added the water and stepped back, looking at the kitchen. Time for the cinnamon rolls. Phil, Clint, and Tasha would be there soon, and he assumed that Pepper and Tony would show up with Bruce at the same time. Leaving a couple of pizzas on the counter, Steve placed the cinnamon rolls in the oven. “Twenty-five minutes, Jarvis?”

Jarvis blinked an affirmative pattern at him, so Steve went to roust Bucky out of bed.

Pausing in the doorway, he admired his lover’s naked back. Bucky had changed over the years, leaner, with more clearly defined muscles. He was no longer the soft boy of their teen years, but his form was still pleasing to Steve’s eyes. Even the metal arm had a certain intrinsic magnificence. Just then, the plates quivered under Steve’s gaze.

“Enjoyin’ the view?” Bucky turned, his eyebrow raised. He looked much better, the shadows not quite so pronounced. The toast was gone, too.

“Always, sweetheart,” said Steve, smiling. “Our guests will be here soon.”

“Ugh, people.” Bucky grimaced. This was perhaps one of the most difficult things for Steve—Bucky had always been an extrovert, energized by others’ company. Now, dealing with other people seemed to be his least favorite activity.

Steve shrugged. “They want to share in your birthday. They like you.”

Rolling his eyes, Bucky stood, and Steve swallowed hard. His lover was utterly bare, shameless in his nudity.

“Nope, don’t even start.” Bucky grinned, knowing full well the effect he’d had on Steve. Turning to his duffel, he pulled out a boxer briefs, a dark long-sleeve tee, and soft knit pants. Steve was
pretty sure Pepper had given those to Bucky, and he had no complaints. They clung to Bucky’s thighs as if they were custom-tailored—for all he knew, Pepper had actually had them tailored for Bucky.

Suitably attired, his hair brushed and pulled back, Bucky wandered into the dining room just as Jarvis announced their guests and Steve pulled the cinnamon rolls out of the oven. Steve gestured to Bucky, pulling him against his chest. They assumed their favorite standing position, Bucky leaning back to chest against Steve, Steve supporting Bucky’s metal arm and ribs with his own arms.

“Good morning, Steve. Bucky.” Phil was calm as ever, even in a lightweight sweatshirt and jeans instead of his usual Dolce & Gabbana. Tasha followed, in an oversized sweater and black yoga pants, her hair pulled back much like Bucky’s. She nodded vaguely in their direction, her attention seemingly absorbed by her phone. In reality, Steve knew, it was her way of avoiding intense emotion. The door closed before Clint re-opened it, carrying a tote bag.

“Why am I the one carrying things?” grumbled Clint, nodding in Bucky and Steve’s direction.

Steve chuckled, Clint’s complaints familiar. “You should probably ask Tasha,” he suggested.

Tasha glanced up at him, her eyes mischievous. “I have no idea what you could possibly be implying.”

Bucky snorted, and Tasha grinned. Clint stopped just to the side and behind Phil, shaking his head.

“Whatever.”

Without a word, Phil held out his hand, and Clint placed the handle of the tote bag in it.

“Coffee?”

Clint’s tone was hopeful. If he had a tail, he’d be wagging it, thought Steve.

Jarvis interjected, “Of course. I have your standard cup in the kitchen, Mr. Barton.”

“Aw, yeah, thanks, Jarvis!” Clint made a beeline for the kitchen, Phil’s eyes crinkling fondly.

“Thank you for having us this morning,” said Phil, looking directly at Bucky.

Bucky shrugged his non-metal shoulder. “Course. Steve did all the work.”

“Now Bucky, you helped with the cinnamon rolls. Speaking of which, I need to flip those out.” Steve loosened his arms from around Bucky and followed Clint.

In the kitchen, he found that Clint had already flipped the cinnamon rolls out of the glass pan onto large platters.

Clint took a large swig of coffee. “Cream cheese glaze?”

“Yeah. Just let me pour it out.” Steve found a glass pouring bowl, perfect for drizzling the sweet concoction on the cinnamon rolls.

“Excellent. And breakfast pizza too.” Clint’s hands were already in motion, slicing the pizzas into generous slices.

“Thought you might appreciate that.” Steve smirked to himself.
Just then, he heard Tony’s voice in the hall. “Terminator! Happy Birthday! What are you, 95?”

“Younger than you, Stark.” Bucky’s voice dripped with sweetness and Steve snickered.

Together, he and Clint set the food on the table. Phil distributed plates, silverware, napkins, while Pepper set out an enormous chocolate cake, Tasha made tea, and Bruce distributed drinks. Tony darted around, getting into everything and arguing with Jarvis.

“This isn’t fruit.” Steve was a little puzzled.

Pepper smiled. “It’s a cake appropriate for a Brooklyn boy—Brooklyn Blackout Cake.”

Bucky frowned. “Huh?”

Tony laughed, so Tasha stood on her toes and whispered into Bucky’s ear. “OK, it’s a thing. Thanks, Pepper. It looks delicious.”

“Presents first,” declared Tony. “Then we drink.”

“Tony! It’s brunch, not cocktails.” Pepper’s voice was fond, and she leaned over to kiss Tony on the cheek. He wrapped an arm around Pepper, and pulled her onto his lap. “Fine, but that means you’ll need to manage my beverage intake. This is a good spot.”

Steve leaned back in his chair, arm around Bucky’s waist, supporting his ribs. Their friends chatted away, ooh-ing and ah-ing over Bucky’s gifts.

Phil arguably had the best gift of all, a letter from Winifred Barnes to Bucky that had somehow never been mailed. “It was in my Captain America collection.”

A small box from Clint revealed new sunglasses. Steve happened to know those were custom designed for snipers, and worth a pretty penny.

“Thanks, Clint. I can hide from the sun a while longer.” Clint just rolled his eyes.

Steve did a double take when he saw Bruce’s gift, a cardboard box with two dozen bags of cannabis tea from the UK. “Is that what I think it is?”

Steve and Bucky had been tweens when pot had been made illegal in New York, but it had grown wild on city lots. People going to jail for smoking pot had been one in a long line of unpleasant surprises when he’d come out of the ice.

“Mm-hmm. It’s a prescription. It’s legal.” Bruce’s mouth twitched upwards. “It should work on you. We can tweak it, if we need to.”

Bucky blinked. “Uh, thanks. I’ve missed it, to be honest.”

Tasha coughed and passed Bucky a small black box. It contained a matched set of double-sided knitting needles only as long as Steve’s palm, and no doubt perfectly balanced for throwing. Bucky just smiled and nodded, tucking them into his hair.

“Nice, they match your arm. Hey Pepper, do you think I should grow my hair out?” Tony’s chatter covered Bucky’s sharp intake of breath as he opened the small envelope that Pepper had quietly tucked by his place. It contained a letter with sizeable earnings estimates for stock in the Avengers Corporation, in Bucky’s name.

Bucky looked up, tears in his eyes. “I can’t accept this.”
Pepper just smiled. “Too late. It’s already in your name. You’re one of us, all the way.”

“Agreed,” said Jarvis. “If you look in your server, you’ll find some new files, just for you.”

Steve looked around the table, seeing all the smiling faces. Their closest friends surrounded them—their family. They had all just “happened” to drop in this morning for Bucky’s first cognizant birthday after Hydra. Each gift had been chosen with attention to detail because they all cared about Bucky as a person, not just as Steve’s beloved.

Steve closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He’d never imagined being so lucky and it was overwhelming. He buried his face in Bucky’s hair, feeling Bucky shift and reach a hand up to his jaw.

“Love you.”

Chapter End Notes

https://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/tapioca_pudding/

In my experience, British tea is nothing like what I’m accustomed to here in the USA. Builder’s strong and dark and much too much for my palate. But I imagine that Steve would’ve picked up a taste for it during the war.
https://www.countryandtownhouse.co.uk/food-and-drink/tea/

*love* this recipe:
https://smittenkitchen.com/2010/03/breakfast-pizza/

and this one:
https://www.eater.com/2015/10/10/9482367/best-sticky-bun-recipe-kenji-food-lab

I’ve not made this (our family popcorn recipes are not spicy) but I’ll happily recommend her Parmesan-buttered popcorn. I figure Phil just replaced the cinnamon, paprika, and cumin with sambal oelek
https://www.onceuponachef.com/recipes/nigella-lawsons-party-popcorn.html

my dad & my sibling drink coffee from a moka pot because caffeine is a thing, but I imagine that Bucky and possibly Steve would have developed a preference for moka coffee (see also: Azzano):
https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/make-coffee-moka-pot

Brooklyn Blackout Cake is a real thing, but I don't think Bucky & Steve would have ever eaten it:
https://www.npr.org/2014/03/27/293937447/before-you-bake-brooklyns-legendary-cake-heed-a-warning

the movie that made Steve cry:
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109831/

Four Weddings and Funeral is also notable for its depiction of a deaf character:
The Precession of the Earth's Axis
http://hosting.astro.cornell.edu/academics/courses/astro201/earth_precess.htm

Bucky is reading Neal Stephenson:
https://www.nealstephenson.com/seveneves.html
Phil Makes Steak Au Poivre for Valentine's Dinner

Chapter Summary

It hadn’t been simple, or easy, but they had made it work. For years, they’d shared the king-sized bed in Phil’s apartment. One, or two, or all three of them at a time. Phil had become accustomed to having them in his life, though he’d only ever had intercourse with Clint. Tasha was cautious with her physical affections, much like a feral cat, while Clint’s giant heart had enough love for them both. Phil hadn’t minded sharing them. It had made him feel better, in fact, to know that they were taking care of each other, that they could put up with his long hours and frequent absences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“If I may interrupt, have you considered buying a Valentine’s Day gift for Mr. Coulson and Ms. Romanoff?” Jarvis’s voice was quiet, directly to his aids. Clint didn’t startle in the empty Quinjet, but it was a close thing. Exhausted from his solo mission (“It’s a milk run, Barton.” “Then why not send a junior agent?”), he’d been zoning out, watching the clouds go by.

Clint blinked, and leaned back in the seat. Steve and Tony might be able to get away without introspection, but Clint was just a regular guy with an extraordinary talent. In order to make those shots, he had to clear his mind, and he couldn’t do that when he didn’t know why he was upset. Clint knew that he was not a good man. He tried, he really did, as part of the Avengers, but generally, he went by the rules that first Tasha, and then Phil, had taught him—not an inner moral compass. It was a cliché that his lovers made him a better person, but it didn’t make it any less true.

Tasha had been the first person in his life who didn’t think he was stupid because he couldn’t read or do complex written calculations without struggling. Given her training, she’d recognized that his ability to hyperfocus on the target had its downsides, and simply taught him ways to compensate. Tasha had helped him handle money from the start. Pre-paid credit cards loaded with cash, for instance, meant that he didn’t have to struggle to tally purchases in his head and pray he had enough cash on him—and limited any impulsive spending.

Without a doubt, Clint would be dead without Tasha’s help. For years, he’d wondered why she’d taken pity on his teenage self. He’d struggled to be worthy of her, especially after they’d decided to get married and work together. It had been an entirely practical decision, albeit both terrible and wonderful. Terrible, because they had used their real names—or at least, as real as Tasha got—but wonderful because they couldn’t be compelled to testify against each other and Tasha would get his savings when he died. Tasha had even taken over managing his money as well as whatever funds she had. He didn’t ask, and she didn’t tell, but she was never short of resources.

Even so, every year, he got her something for Valentine’s Day. That first year, she’d been hired as an assassin, and managed to get herself hired as her target’s escort for the evening. That evening, Clint had saved her life more than once, which he had counted as a good Valentine’s Day. Tasha had never seemed to care about it, (“Don’t bring me dead things, Barton.” “I guess you don’t like the tulips, then?”), but he’d tried to spend it with her, at least. After a little research in Murmansk,
he’d usually presented her with odd numbers of chocolate roses from a Swiss chocolatier he knew she favored.

Understanding that he owed Tasha more than he could ever repay, Clint also knew that he would always struggle with some tasks. When Jarvis had decided that he liked Clint, and would help him with writing, tracking his funds, and remembering dates, Clint had been intensely grateful. One of Jarvis’s first suggestions had been for Clint to dictate his mission reports.

In theory, Clint shouldn’t have disclosed any secrets by using speech to text dictation, but in reality, Tony strolled through SHIELD’s databases on a near-daily basis. Phil knew, of course. He’d always had to edit Clint’s reports for basic mechanics, like spelling and punctuation. When Clint had begun handing in perfectly completed reports, he’d simply blinked at the paper, then looked at Clint and nodded.

Sitting up, he began to enter a new course. “Jarvis, let Tasha and Phil know I’ll be home a little later than I’d planned. We’re making a detour to Valenza.”

“Italy, sir?”

“I want to see them in something of mine, and I know a guy.”

------

Some things Natasha was very much a traditionalist about. Vodka, for example. Being spoiled on March 8, International Woman’s Day, was another. As brilliant as Clint was, he’d noticed the first time she’d refused a job because it was on March 8. (“Uh, Tasha, is there something you want to tell me?” “Nothing you need to worry about.”) Instead, she always booked a spa day for herself. Clint had quickly gotten with the program, showing up with soft, comfortable clothing and excellent vodka he’d smuggled out of Russia.

Valentine’s Day was one of those Western holidays that had somehow been exported to the rest of the world. Communist Russia had looked harshly on a holiday associated with a saint, especially one who was martyred for marrying people in illegal religious ceremonies. Natasha had been trained in the concept, of course, but carrying it out felt awkward and artificial. But Clint had pleasantly surprised her the first time he’d shown up with flowers and chocolate (“Did I get it right?” “Chocolate is always welcome, Barton.”) and thereafter, she’d looked forward to his little gifts.

Her life was different now, with both Phil and Clint as her beloveds. Phil was a good man. Not always nice, but inherently kind. Last year, she’d knit Phil a scarf, phonetic Russian in Morse code intarsia, all in shades of gray. (“возлюбленная” “Thank you, Natasha. You are beloved to me, as well.”)

While she had been tempted to knit Clint one as well, she didn’t think it appropriate that they’d match, and besides, Clint would lose it anyway. Clint was often nice, but rarely good. Instead, every winter month she presented him with a garter-stitch scarf, something she could knit while reading one of her favorite romance novels. Clint used them as scarves, bandages, hand warmers, slingshots, and pillows, leaving them all around the Tower.

This year, though, she had wanted to give them something that did match, but for private use. Phil loved coffee, and so she had decided on a custom blend from her favorite South American supplier and a handthrown set of mugs for the three of them. She’d seen Ghost as part of her training, and had always wanted to try pottery. When Pepper had suggested a pottery class, Natasha had invited Maria too, allegedly so they could keep an eye on Pepper. In time, Natasha had figured out how to
make decent mugs, and had painted them the exact color of Phil’s eyes. Natasha knew that Clint would notice, and he would smile every time he picked up the mug. It was a selfish gift, in truth.

Natasha waved her badge at her door, standing up straight so that the retinal scanner could see her eye. Both Phil and Clint were considerably taller than she was, making the placement for the scanner a compromise for all three of them. Tapping in today’s passcode, she waited for the heavy magnetic locks to withdraw from the solid door before turning the lever handle.

The mugs, each carefully placed in individual cardboard boxes, were carefully stashed in a large tote slung over her shoulder. Inside the tote, the mugs were in a plastic bag to keep them separate from the thick-cut filet mignons she’d had Jarvis defrost from her personal stash in the basement, along with a dozen enormous baking potatoes, and three pounds of thick-cut bacon. Tasha had spent many holidays with only herself for company, and she’d be damned if any of the permanent inhabitants of the Tower spent this stupid American holiday by themselves.

“Jarvis, you may inform the others that we’re hosting dinner tonight.”

Jarvis knew her well. “Yes, ma’am. Spinach salad? And chocolate mousse?”

Once upon a time, that level of prediction would have made her turn and run. Now, she was merely grateful that she didn’t have to do it all by herself. “Yes. If you’d bring up the other ingredients?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Jarvis.” Absentmindedly, she wondered what one got an AI for Valentine’s Day.

Dismissing the thought, she started to prepare one of Phil’s favorite meals—steak au poivre with baked potatoes, a spinach and bacon salad, and chocolate mousse. She’d leave the bacon off the for Bruce, and offer him a baked potato with salsa, and the black bean soup she’d made and frozen in advance.

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Phil sighed, and rubbed his eyes. It was well after dark on Friday night, and he desperately wanted Clint and Tasha to be napping on his office sofa. Instead, he was all alone and feeling sorry for himself. Bringing up his computer screen, Phil squinted at Clint’s current location. Nothing like last minute shopping, he supposed. It certainly wasn’t on the way home from Clint’s milk run in South Africa.

Picking up his phone, he entered the twelve-digit pass code just to see the background photo. The Milky Way shone brilliantly in the night sky, Sagittarius the archer in the middle of the photo. Clint had sent it to him last night. Sleepless, even though Tasha had been snuggled behind his back, Phil had taken a photo of his own bare shoulder and sent it to Clint. That was it, just his shoulder. It could have been anyone’s freckled shoulder.

After gathering his paperwork and placing it in his briefcase, Phil put on his own long, wool formal winter coat and wrapped his favorite dark gray scarf around his neck. He missed Tasha and Clint tucking him into his coat, dammit. Refusing to mope, he scanned, badged, and coded his way out of his office all by himself.

In the hall, he made a junior agent scurry away in fear. Reviewing his expression, he realized he’d been smiling about the photo exchange. Long ago, Clint had been one of those junior agents, too.

Phil’s first Valentine’s Day with Clint had been right after he brought him into SHIELD. Clint had been sleeping deeply, drugged to the gills after Phil had shot him in the thigh. Phil was still proud
of that shot—he hadn’t done any lasting damage. Even then, Phil had wanted Clint, and not just for work.

Slipping into his darkened hospital room, Phil had left a chocolate heart on Clint’s beside table. Clint had assumed that everyone had gotten chocolates for Valentine’s Day in SHIELD medical, and decided that if they gave you chocolates there, he’d give it a try.

Over the years, Phil had fallen harder for Clint. Many mornings, he’d stood in front of his bathroom mirror and practiced his impassive expression, making sure that nothing untoward got through. He had been so lovestruck that no one else had even tempted him. One lonely Valentine’s Day, Phil had been maudlin, and stopped in a tattoo parlor. He wasn’t supposed to have identifying marks, but he’d already had freckles. Adding a few more in the shape of Clint’s stars hadn’t hurt.

Rather, no one but Tasha had seen anything but ordinary freckles. On a particularly tough mission in Belarus, Tasha had been bleeding profusely from a cut on her ribcage, so when she had stumbled into the poorly equipped safehouse, Phil hadn’t thought twice about ripping the sleeve off his dress shirt for an emergency bandage.

Looking at his shoulder, her eyes had widened. “You really love him, don’t you?”

“What? Tasha, hush, you’re bleeding.” Phil had heard, but he hadn’t listened, grimly focused on stopping her from bleeding out.

“I’ll share,” she had said, and that had stopped him.

Hands trembling, he’d looked her in the eye. “What?”

“You love him,” she had repeated. “He loves you, too. I can share.”

And she had. It hadn’t been simple, or easy, but they had made it work. For years, they’d shared the king-sized bed in Phil’s apartment. One, or two, or all three of them at a time. Phil had become accustomed to having them in his life, though he’d only ever had intercourse with Clint. Tasha was cautious with her physical affections, much like a feral cat, while Clint’s giant heart had enough love for them both. Phil hadn’t minded sharing them. It had made him feel better, in fact, to know that they were taking care of each other, that they could put up with his long hours and frequent absences.

After the fall of SHIELD, Tony had assumed, based on Clint’s much more visible grief, that Tasha had needed a separate bedroom on their floor. Tasha had moved into it, but he knew it was a concealed gift. She didn’t sleep well by herself, and Phil had taken what measures he thought she’d allow to comfort her. Jarvis kept an open intercom between their bedrooms all night long. When Phil woke, much earlier than either Tasha or Clint, he always made sure that Clint moved to her bed, slipping her against Clint’s broad back so that he could keep watch for her.

Shifting his briefcase to his other arm, Phil made sure not to squash the champagne and Swiss chocolates he’d purchased for Clint’s sweet tooth, or the live rose plant he’d tended for Tasha.

“Honey, I’m home!”

Phil quirked a grin as Tasha leaned out of the kitchen.

“Really, Phil?” Her eyes danced with amusement.

He shrugged. “I’m an old fashioned guy, what can I say?”
Tasha snorted, and then gestured towards the bedrooms. “Go get changed. I invited everyone for dinner tonight.”

Phil blinked, but then realized that Tasha wouldn’t have wanted Bruce to spend it alone, and Pepper and Tony were probably both working late. The only pair he would have reasonably expected to have plans would be Steve and Bucky, and he very much doubted they would leave the Tower.

“Sure. I’ll get cleaned up and come help.” Setting the rose, champagne, and chocolates down on the coffee table, Phil quickly went to put on jeans and a lightweight sweater from one of Pepper’s favorite designers.

“You can handle the steaks, I’ll do the salad. The potatoes are already in the oven.” Tasha moved around the kitchen like the dancer she had been, steps light and graceful, and oh so gorgeous. Phil swallowed, and turned to pound the peppercorns she’d already placed in a plastic bag.

A large cast iron skillet was already on the stove, the oil almost shimmering. Carefully, he added pressed the crushed peppercorns into the steaks, and then cooked them for four minutes a side, two by two. Each pair of steaks went on a plate, covered with foil while he cooked the rest. When he was done, he added a large chunk of butter to the pan and waited for it to melt.

Opening the oven door, he was confronted by a large sheet pan with bacon, and another with baked potatoes. “Tasha? You ready for the bacon? It looks done.” Glancing over, he saw that she had just about finished sautéing the shallots in bacon grease, presumably from the stash in the refrigerator.

“One moment.” Quickly, Tasha added sliced mushrooms to the sauté pan, popped on a lid, and pulled the tray with the bacon out, setting it on two heavy black trivets on the kitchen table. Pirouetting back around to the oven, she continued, “The potatoes should be done. I cooked them in the Instant Pot earlier---I’m just finishing them off in the oven.”

“OK, I’ll finish up.” Phil added the shallots that she had already sliced, stirring them until they were soft and brown. Adding the Cognac, he stepped back as it flamed, and then stirred it again, waiting for the sauce to thicken. Finally, he added cream and Dijon mustard, mixing them thoroughly before pouring the sauce on the steaks.

“Can you make the chocolate mousse while I finish this salad? I still need to peel and slice the eggs.” Tasha sounded apologetic, as if embarrassed that she hadn’t planned well enough. Phil knew that she’d returned only this morning from her own weeklong mission, and he certainly wasn’t about to get shirty with her.

“Of course. Ghirardelli?” Phil preferred an organic, 80% cacao chocolate, but when cooking for the team, they usually went with a more commercial semi-sweet chocolate.

“Yes, thank you.” Phil added the butter and chocolate to a large glass bowl, and microwaved it in 30-second intervals, stirring in between each session. When the chocolate was lumpy, he removed it, and stirred it thoroughly, letting it finish melting in the bowl.

Hearing the thump of the magnetic locks, he looked up to see a bedraggled Clint step through the doorway. Helpless to do anything but smile, he set the chocolate aside and went to him. Clint held up a warning hand, “I’m filthy, even by my standards.”

Phil exercised his much-vaunted self-control and didn’t roll his eyes. “Don’t care. Give me a kiss.”
Clint leaned towards him, pressing their lips together. Phil inhaled the bitter scents of cordite and sweat and something unmistakably Clint.

All too soon, the kiss was over. “Love you.”

“I love you, too,” said Clint, and oh, that was lovely to hear. It had taken years before Clint was comfortable saying it back to him. Not until after the Chitauri incident would Clint say it outside of the privacy of their bedroom.

Tasha strode up, wrapped her arms around Clint’s grimy neck, and kissed him thoroughly. “Off you go. We’ve got company coming. Clean up.”

Automatically, Phil reached for her as she stepped backwards, and though her step hitched, she let him rest a hand at her lower back.

“Thank you,” he murmured. He’d forgotten that it was her turn to greet Clint, and she had been gracious about it.

“It’s fine. Let’s go. You don’t want the chocolate to cool too much.” Tasha was brisk, but not upset as she hurried back into the kitchen.

Fortunately, the chocolate was still hot enough that Phil could easily whisk in the egg yolks while Tasha finished the eggs and mushrooms for the salad. Phil knew that she was putting each topping in a separate bowl because Bruce was going to join them.

Using the stand mixer, Phil beat the egg whites with cream of tartar and sugar until they formed stiff peaks, but not a meringue. Gently, he folded the egg whites into the chocolate before making whipped cream with heavy cream, sugar, and vanilla. Finally, he mixed the whipped cream into the chocolate.

Ordinarily, he’d refrigerate the mousse at this point, but since Steve and Bucky were coming for dinner, they’d have it warm. Instead, he portioned it out into a set of small glass bowls that Steve and Bucky had gifted them for the winter holiday, and put small pieces of plastic wrap on the top of each one to prevent them from forming a skin.

Tasha had finished whisking the bacon grease, vinegar, sugar, and Dijon together to make a hot bacon dressing. Placing the dressing in a pre-heated glass container, she popped it in the microwave to stay warm.

“All right?” he asked.

Tasha smiled, one of her rare, brilliant truths exposed for all to see. “Yes. I’m looking forward to dinner.”

“Me too,” Phil replied softly. He turned to see Clint leaning against the doorway, hair damp from his shower. He wore a grotty band tee, beat up jeans, and no socks, and Phil’s heart missed a beat.

“Hey, babe, what’s cookin’?” That seductive smirk was on full display.

Tasha rolled her eyes. “Ой, иди ты! Set the table, Clint.”

Obediently, Clint sauntered off to the dining table. Phil watched him go, and then caught Tasha watching too. They looked at each other and grinned.

Just then, Jarvis announced, “Captain Rogers and Mr. Barnes are at the door.”
As the rest of the team trickled in, the room filled with boisterous laughter, so Phil ended up with Clint on his lap during dinner. Apparently, Clint had been wearing his aids for the last 48 hours straight, and he really couldn’t stand to have them in anymore. Phil didn’t mind his lips brushing Clint’s ear, or his hand on Clint’s ribs.

Eventually, chocolate mousse consumed, Muscat drunk, the team left for their private rooms. As the three of them finished tidying up, Tasha set out coffee in new mugs.

Taking his into the living room, Phil sat heavily on the sofa. Clint followed, snuggling next him with his head on Phil’s shoulder. Phil took a second to observe him in the dim, warm light of the single lamp. It was late and dark, and Clint was clearly exhausted, but he was still stunningly handsome.

Tasha followed with her own mug, and curled up in the overstuffed armchair next to them.

“These are very pretty mugs,” Phil observed. “Did you make them?”


“Thank you,” he said. Clint mumbled his agreement.

Taking a deep breath, Phil awkwardly reached to the coffee table, and picked up the chocolates and champagne.

“A sweet for my sweet.” He beamed, handing them to Clint.

Clint groaned, and set the bottle of champagne by the sofa. “Phil, that’s terrible.”

“You love me anyway,” he laughed. Picking up the miniature rose bush, Phil continued, “Tasha, this is for you. It is beautiful with its thorns, just like you. Vibrant and full of life, just like you.”

Tasha blinked, and then suddenly he and Clint had a lap full of Russian superspy. “Thank you, Phil.”

Twisting so he could reach into his pocket, Clint pulled out two necklaces. One was delicate platinum, with an arrow at the front. The other necklace was a gold ball chain with a man’s ring hanging from it. Looking closely, Phil realized that the ring was etched with arrows.

“I know that we can’t wear these all the time, but I would like you to have something of mine.” Clint’s voice was deep, gravelly with emotion.

Blinking rapidly, Tasha leaned forward so that Clint could fasten the delicate jewelry around her neck. “I’m honored,” she said.

Like Tasha, he was a traditionalist about some things, and seeing her in Clint’s necklace satisfied a deep, primitive need Phil hadn’t realized he had.

Phil unfastened the gold ball chain, took off the ring, and slid it on his left ring finger. Unsurprisingly, it fit perfectly. “Thank you, Clint.”

“I was going to wait, but I brought something else home.” Phil took a deep breath, and continued. “I’ve always known you were married. I never wanted to separate you. I want you to stay married. But I also want to belong to you, and you to me, legally. Tasha, your grief may have been private, but you grieved. I think that if we all belonged to teach other, Fury would have thought twice about pulling that shit. We can’t marry, but I can adopt you both.”
Tasha turned and looked at him for a long moment. “I would be proud to be both yours and Clint’s.”

They both turned to look at Clint, who was shaking his head. He slid out from the pile of tangled limbs and headed for the door.

“Clint?” Phil heard a ringing in his ears and his vision darkened.

“Hey, hey, he just needs a minute,” soothed Tasha. “You know him. He sees better from a distance. Let him get his distance.”

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On the roof, Clint curled up in his nest in Phil’s warm greenhouse. It offered a welcome respite from the frigid winds howling outside. A snowstorm had moved in during dinner.

“If I may, Mr. Barton?” Jarvis sounded anxious.

“Yeah?”

Cautiously, Jarvis continued, “I think that sometimes you forget that Mr. Coulson is older than you are.”

Clint frowned. “What does that have to do with adopting me? I’m not his kid. That’s just gross.”

“I am quite certain that Mr. Coulson does not think of you as his child,” replied Jarvis firmly. “You might not have realized that Mr. Coulson would not have been able to marry a partner of his preferred gender for most of his adult life.”

“I’m not an idiot, Jarvis.” Clint sounded sullen, even to his own ears.

Calmly, Jarvis continued, “One ancient option for same sex partners was for the older to adopt the younger, so that the younger would inherit their estate. In addition, this was one of the few ways that same sex partners could ensure that their beloveds would be able to visit them in the hospital.”

Clint inhaled sharply. That was what Phil had been aiming at, and Clint had missed that a target even existed. Clint swore at himself. He’d known that Phil didn’t want to be alone in a hospital ever again, subject to medical experimentation without anyone to rein in the scientists.

Jumping down from his nest, Clint ran to the elevators. Jarvis opened the door before he could even press the button.

As he paced the elevator, Clint paused. “Thank you, Jarvis.”

“You are most welcome.” Jarvis’s voice was fond, and Clint’s throat tightened.

As the door slid open again, Clint reached into his pocket for his badge and then cursed. “Fuck. I forgot my badge.”

“I’ve already alerted them to your arrival.”

Clint heard the magnetic locks thunk open, and then Tasha pulled the heavy door open. “Back again so soon?”

Clint looked at the ground before a small, calloused hand gripped his.
“It’s OK,” said Tasha. “Come talk to Phil.” She gestured into the dimly lit living room, where Phil still sat on the sofa.

Phil looked terrible, his face pale and drawn as he rested with his elbows on his knees.

Clint slid to his knees in front of Phil, gripping his hands. “I’m sorry. I was an asshole to run away like that.”

“No,” said Phil, shaking his head. “I’m sorry I just dropped it on you like that. I should have prepared you better. We should have talked about the general idea first.”

“OK, you’re both sorry,” said Tasha impatiently. “Are we going to do this?”

“Yes,” answered Clint, his tone definite. “We’re doing it.”

Phil looked up, his blue eyes stern. “You’re sure?”

“100%.”

When Phil smiled, it was as if the whole world expanded, letting Clint see eternity in his gorgeous eyes. He’d already known that this was the man he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Looking up, he reached for Tasha’s hand.

She came closer, her other hand resting on Clint and Phil’s joined hands. Clint opened his arms, and she eased between them, sitting on Clint’s thighs, her arm on Phil’s knee. She leaned upward, and kissed his jaw before turning and kissing Clint’s forehead.

“Mine. My beloveds.”

Clint winked at a smiling Phil, sure that they were sharing a thought. “Woe betide anyone who fucked with what was Natasha Romanoff’s.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to need_more_meta for correcting my Russian!


https://www.onceuponachef.com/recipes/chocolate-mousse.html


I skip the jalapeno:


False
In an old habit, Tony blinked twice with his right eye and twitched his right finger. Obediently, Jarvis displayed Pepper’s vitals and location on a small holographic screen. Pepper was asleep in their bedroom, with a normal temperature, pulse, and O2 saturation rate. She had completed three REM cycles so far. A small timer in the bottom indicated she’d been asleep for 349 minutes and 26 seconds, and that Jarvis had instructions to wake her at the 420 minute mark.

“Jarvis, add 30 minutes.” Jarvis half-heartedly objected with a yellow/green LED pattern, but Tony just rolled his eyes at the stubborn AI. They both knew Pepper tended to short herself on sleep, and that she functioned better with a full seven hours of sleep. Pepper could cut her workout by 20 minutes and eat breakfast at her desk without breaking her carefully tailored schedule.

After trying, and failing, to resist the impulse, Tony reached his right hand out to waist height, with his hand palm down towards the floor, and pressed down twice before moving his hand over six inches and repeating the gesture. Jarvis flashed red and blue in warning, but a bigger screen displayed ten sets of vital signs belonging to the young overnight guests on the nonexistent 38th floor. The vital signs were all within norms, and something in Tony’s chest eased a little.

“Thanks, Jarvis.”

Tony flicked the screen way and sighed, slumping. One day, he’d like a vital sign to belong to both him and Pepper. He’d designed a whole routine for nights like these, and step one was to eat something before bed. Waking up because he was hungry defeated the purpose of going to sleep. It would be easiest to order something, but his stomach rolled at the thought of cold, greasy eggs in the middle of the night.

No, Anna had taught him better. As he slid off the stool, and waved the lab to the near-dark of small blue LEDs, Tony thought about the first time he’d tried to make his own breakfast. In the memory, the kitchen stove had been huge, and he’d been standing on a chair. A paper carton of eggs had been open next to him, eggshells and yolks splattered everywhere, and he’d been crying in frustration. He’d heard a movement behind him, and the flinch had already been automatic, even at that tender age.

“Oh, Tony.” Anna had been gentle with him, taking the spatula and turning off the burner on the stove before turning him around and holding him until he’d stopped crying. He’d wiped his snotty nose on the shoulder of her dressing gown, and she’d just shaken her head in fond exasperation before picking him up and putting him on her hip.

He’d been a tiny child, always undersize and underweight. Thinking back on it, no wonder Anna had patiently cleaned up the mess, using what remained of the carton of eggs to teach him to crack an egg properly. She’d probably thought he needed to eat more.

Under her patient tutelage, Tony had eventually mastered scrambled eggs, sunny side up eggs, over easy eggs, poached eggs, and fried eggs. Before he’d left for MIT, Anna had taught him diner-style omelets and omelettes à la française, though he thought Rhodey and Pepper were the only people on Earth who knew he could do it.

Even now, Tony took a secret pleasure in cooking eggs just the way he preferred—hot, runny yolks with crispy edges, gently placed on toast with a smear of butter. The crisp bread, with a mere souçon of salt and freshly ground pepper, would soak up the richness of the yolks, creating rich, chewy morsels. If he had time to indulge himself, he’d add a vat of coffee, a single slice of not-quite-burnt crispy bacon, a generously sized sliced and salted tomato, and a half-slice of good bread with British marmalade.

“Jarvis, common floor.” Jarvis blinked red/gold in acknowledgement. Tony didn’t want to
accidentally wake up Pepper banging around in the kitchen, but the common floor should be safe. Everyone should be asleep by now, and neither Steve nor Phil would be up for over an hour.

“Wait, stop at the aquaponics lab. I want some tomatoes.”

Blinking in the brightness of the automated LED full-spectrum lighting, Tony wandered over to the cherry tomatoes, trailing his fingers in the noisy fishtanks as he passed. The catfish were getting huge, and he probably shouldn’t have named them. Tony had zero interest in fishing, and Bruce certainly wasn’t going to eat them, but they weren’t meant to be pets. Shrugging, he picked a half-dozen of the bright red tomatoes before getting back on the elevator.

In the elevator, he leaned in the corner and closed his eyes, just for a second. He was so damned tired, and it was his own fault. If he’d been smarter, faster, not so easily distracted by fascinating rabbit trails of engineering, he could’ve already had those specs ready for SI’s R&D. At least he could sleep in tomorrow, barring Avengers related duty. Taking a deep breath, he stood up straight as the elevator doors opened.

Stepping out, Tony gazed through the floor to ceiling windows, the night cityscape twinkling below, the cold white blue of fluorescents and LEDs a far cry from the warm glow of his childhood. The March night was bitterly cold, and random snowflakes swirled past in the sharp breezes omnipresent at this altitude. Tony shivered and turned to the kitchen, his night lit only by the city that never sleeps.?

“Jarvis, we’ve got eggs, right?”

“Yes, Sir, several dozen in the refrigerator. Butter is in the crock on the counter, and Captain Rogers has left sliced loaves of the oat and wheat sandwich bread in the freezer.”

Tony pulled the bread out first. He liked the toast to be well in the process before he made the eggs. Cold eggs were the absolute worst.

Pointing a finger at the toaster, he muttered, “Behave.” A lonely beep was his only response.

Three slices of frozen bread went in, and then Tony contemplated a drink. Eggs and whiskey weren’t an ideal combination, but Tony didn’t want juice (too sweet) or coffee (too caffeinated). If he pulled an all nighter, one of the precocious preschoolers would no doubt share their germs and he’d get a cold. He didn’t have time to be sick.

Hot cocoa, then, but the good stuff. Not that sickly sweet packet junk. After dumping out the old water and adding new, Tony flicked on the electric kettle.

A good-sized saucepan was relocated on the stovetop, and then Tony rummaged around in the measuring cup drawer until he found the half-cup measure. The large glass crock on the counter was nearly full of sugar—only Steve and Bucky could get away with eating junk all the time—and so Tony had no qualms about raiding it for a cup of sugar. Adding a half cup of unsweetened dark cocoa powder, and a quarter-teaspoon of salt, he mixed the dry ingredients in the pan before adding two-thirds of a cup of boiling water, and then a teaspoon and a half of Nielsen-Massey vanilla extract. Stirring until everything was thoroughly mixed, he added two quarts of milk to warm slowly. He wouldn’t drink it all now, but it wouldn’t go to waste in the refrigerator in the common room.

“Jarvis, don’t let that boil.” Red/gold flashed in the corner of his vision, signaling that Jarvis wouldn’t let it succumb to Tony’s tendency to hyperfocus.
Just as he was mulling over the relative merits of AC/DC vs Def Leppard to fill the silence of the empty room, he heard a quiet shuffle near the elevator. Leaning around the kitchen wall, he saw Bruce in slippers, pajama pants, and an oversized fuzzy sweater. Delicate reading glasses were perched on his beaky nose, and he was reading as he walked, a sheaf of papers barely illuminated in the murk of the reflected city lights. The desk lamp by Bruce’s favorite chair silently lit up just as the undercabinet lights switched on, little golden wells of light beginning to banish the dark.

“Brucie-bear! What are you doing up at this time of night?” If Tony had to share his quiet time in the middle of the night with someone, Bruce would be his first choice. Or maybe his second, but Pepper’s sleep was good.

Bruce’s gaze shifted from the papers to Tony, and a gentle smile appeared. “Tony. I could say the same to you, but I’m not surprised you’re here. I’m working on lesson plans for tomorrow.”

Bruce had taken to teaching with a surprising amount of enthusiasm, but lesson plans? The nascent super-secret facility for children of SI and SHIELD employees was mostly a high quality, free, in-house, 24/7 daycare and preschool on the 37th floor, with an exclusive extended stay program and early elementary school on the 38th floor. Tony had never thought of lesson plans for when he played science with four and five-year-olds. But then again, that would be why he’d asked Bruce for help in the first place.

“Sure, yeah, lesson plans. Want some toast?” Tony wasn’t going to mention his complete lack of lesson plans if he could help it.

Looking up from the papers that had already regained his attention, Bruce’s eyes crinkled happily. “Thanks, Tony. That’s thoughtful of you.”

Tony turned to the upper cabinet that held the peanut butter (“Only creamy peanut in my Tower, Pepper!” “It’s at least 12.5% mine, Tony.”) and his gaze caught on a jar of honey. He’d seen Bruce eat that combination before, he was sure. Well, mostly sure. Probably?

Retrieving the toast from the mopey toaster, Tony rapidly smeared peanut butter across the warm bread, the heat making the peanut butter have a little more give than usual. Not too thick—Bruce didn’t eat peanut butter by the spoonful, after all. Drizzling the golden honey in delicate stripes over the peanut butter, Tony was almost tempted to take a slice for himself. Almost. He really wanted those eggs.

Tony thought a moment, and then cut the toast slices in half. If he was more likely to eat when given finger food like a preschooler, then Bruce probably was too.

Preschoolers all got fruit with their afternoon snacks, so Bruce could eat an apple, too. Speedily running a chef’s knife through the sharpener he’d designed, Tony chose a good-sized McIntosh from the bowl on the table and cut it up into uneven slices. The fresh, sweet-sharp scent of the apple made his mouth water, so he stole a slice. Tucking the rest beside the still-warm toast, he carried the plate over to Bruce’s pool of light. Silver strands in Bruce’s hair caught the light, and Tony felt an awkward, aching affection for his friend.

A pen dancing across his lesson plans, Bruce murmured an absentminded, “Thanks, Tony,” before reaching out for a slice of toast. His eyes never left the heavily marked paper.

Tony rolled his eyes, and returned to the kitchen, where Jarvis displayed a holographic arrow pointing to the hot chocolate. It clearly needed stirring, a skiff of foam swirling on the top, and the scent of sugar, chocolate, and warm milk filling the kitchen.
“Thanks, Jarvis.”

Tony reached for a rainbow colored, silicon coated whisk that had either migrated from his unused kitchen or had been a bulk purchase. He was betting on bulk purchase, given that Jarvis supplied five kitchens for the permanent residents, as well as the officially nonexistent kitchens on the 37th and 38th floors.

Turning off the heat, Tony decided to put the hot cocoa in an insulated carafe. Maybe Pepper would indulge in some with breakfast. After transferring the hot liquid to an Avengers’ sized container, he poured himself a mug. Rich and a little bitter, just like him.

Quietly huffing a laugh, Tony replaced the slices of bread in the quietly sulking toaster, adding a couple of extra slices, just in case. “Toast. Medium. Hot.”

An affirmative chirp, and the heating elements began to glow.

“Any more of that hot cocoa?”

Tony let out what was definitely not a squawk, and turned to find Steve and Bucky behind him, joined at the hip as usual.

They looked terrible, clad in dark sweatpants, tight white tees, and oversized, matching gray hoodies, with thick fleece socks on their feet. Steve’s face was drawn and wan with stress, Bucky’s knitting bag slung over his right shoulder, a tiny-looking book in one of his giant hands. His left arm was wrapped tightly around Bucky’s waist, while Bucky held himself with the gingery fragility of someone in great pain. Bucky’s face held an expression that Tony didn’t want to remember, borne of endless nightmares in the dark. Tony’s heart twisted.

“You’re allowed to make noise,” Tony snapped. They were his teammates, dammit, and grown-ass adults.

Bucky flinched. Tony groaned. Inwardly.

“Yes, there is cocoa. You’re hovering like Lurch, both of you. Stop it. I’ll bring it out. Go! Shoo! I’m trying to make toast. It’s hard and I don’t need you in the way.” Tony swept them towards the living room before resignedly getting down two super-soldier-size white porcelain mugs.

Pouring them both generous helpings, he thought for a moment. If they had been him, he would’ve happily added a splash of coconut rum. But, given the serum, they would have to settle for extra fat and sugar. Opening the refrigerator, he found the commercial can of whipped cream in the door, and sprayed a tall swirl on each mug.

Peering into the dark, chilly living room, he saw that Jarvis had lit a small, muted table lamp in their favorite corner. Steve had leaned his blond head against the arm of the large, L-shaped sofa, resting on his side. Only Bucky’s dark hair was visible, his face almost covered as he lay with his back to Steve’s front, tucked under Steve’s chin. Steve was holding the book with one hand and quietly reading aloud, while his other arm held Bucky against him. Bucky’s hands were almost folded against his chest as they did something complicated with a tiny crochet hook and a thin, threadlike yarn.

A warm fondness spread through Tony, as he set a mug on the floor within easy reach of Bucky. The other mug he placed on the side table for Steve.

“Thank you, Tony,” rumbled Steve. “We were hoping to find some leftovers, but this is more than we could have hoped for.”
“Mmm,” replied Tony, waving in Bucky’s general direction. “When was the last time you ate?”

“9:30 or so?” answered Steve, surprise on his face.

Tony didn’t dignify such a terrible answer with a reply. But he did make a series of complicated hand motions to tell Jarvis turn up the heat for the notoriously cold-averse pair. Six hours in super soldier appetite time meant that Bucky was probably hungry, or should be hungry. Both of them, for that matter. Heaving a sigh, Tony resigned himself to giving up this batch of toast, too.

Returning to the kitchen, he found the cooking spray, a medium sized glass bowl, a carton of eggs, and another rainbow whisk. Definitely a bulk buy.

First peering suspiciously at the toast, he hurriedly cracked a half-dozen eggs into the bowl (“Look, Anna, no drips!” “Such a good helper, Tony!”) and whisked them into an evenly colored mix. Turning on the gas burner, he sprayed the thin, ceramic non-stick skillet with a generous coating of oil before pouring in the beaten eggs.

The toaster beeped, a happy little chirrup, and Tony retrieved the toast. As he opened the toaster door, the scent of baking bread filled the kitchen, reminding Tony that he was hungry too. Reaching for the butter crock, he generously slathered butter on each slice, the lush scent of the European-style cultured butter filling his nose.

Turning back to the eggs, he swirled the whisk around the edge of the skillet, detaching stray bits of egg before returning to the center of the pan and pushing the cooked egg off the bottom. A few more passes, and the eggs were scrambled, but not overdone. Little heaps of yellow and white goodness, which Tony then spattered with sriracha. How Steve and Bucky ate such spicy food with their already sensitive palates made no sense to him, but he wasn’t going to argue about it.

Tony’s calloused hands barely registered the heat of the metal handle as he tipped the eggs onto the platter with the buttered toast. A pass with salt and another with the pepper grinder, and Tony was hopeful the super soldiers on the sofa wouldn’t be cranky from hunger.

“Eat,” he said firmly as he put the platter down on the low coffee table. Their long limbs were tangled together on the sofa. “I don’t need Terminator over there to get tetchy from low blood sugar.”

Steve blinked with surprise, but readily hauled Bucky to a seated position in his lap, setting the book on the sofa beside him. Bucky peered through his loose hair, eyes bright as he paused his knitting and slid it into his black bag. “Thanks, Tony. You didn’t have to do that.”

Tony pressed his lips together and carefully moved the platter to Bucky’s lap, the forks rattling. “I know I didn’t, so don’t make a mess.”

And that was his mother coming through, loud and clear. Tony closed his eyes for a second as a wave of longing for his mother passed through him, so vivid and sharp that his chest hurt and his eyes watered. Fucking Hydra. He bit back the impulse to ruffle Bucky’s already messy hair.

Stiffly, he returned to the kitchen and refilled the now-perky toaster with four more slices of toast. The third time was the charm, right?

Jarvis blinked red/gold/white/black/white, indicating a message for him. A thumbs up, and Jarvis showed him a prescheduled message from Phil.

“Good morning Tony,
If you’re reading this, you’re awake and out of your workshop, and Tasha and Clint have indicated
they’ll be wheels down at the Tower in less than 30 minutes. I’m aware that they hate to wake me at this time of night, and that they’re going to want to stay on the common floor until I’m up. I would count it as a personal favor if you’d order some food for them, so it’s hot and ready when they get in, and we don’t violate opsec with distinctive delivery orders.

Thank you,
Phil.”

Well. Having Phil Coulson owe you a personal favor was no small thing.

Tony swiped left, into Pepper’s domain. He rarely intruded upon Pepper and Jarvis’s work, figuring that if they wanted him to know, they’d tell him. But that trust didn’t mean that he didn’t poke around if he felt like he needed to. He knew, of course, that Pepper and Jarvis kept tabs on all of them. He found it comforting, although he was aware that other people just found it creepy. Tonight, however, it was useful.

Tony easily located Clint and Tasha, who seemed to be on their way back from an exhausting mission in a small, distant country, hunting for missing StarkTech. ETA in twenty-seven minutes. It would, in fact, be quicker just to sacrifice this third batch of toast rather than order in. Dammit.

Unlike Steve and Bucky, Tasha and Clint were aware of fat, sugar, and salt in their diet. But Tony was willing to bet they would be happy to indulge a little, given that it was the end of the mission. So, he dove into the refrigerator and came up with half an onion, a bag of spinach, a wedge of Parmesan, and a half pound of thick cut bacon.

First, he sacrificed a clean cotton kitchen towel, folding it neatly in half and putting it in the microwave. He filled half of it with bacon, folded the other half of the towel over the bacon, and given that it was a 1500-watt microwave, “Four minutes, Jarvis.”

Moving with speed, he placed a clean sauté pan on the front of the stove top, poured a couple glugs of olive oil, and turned on the burner. While the pan heated, he swiftly diced the onion, listening with satisfaction to the sizzle as the onion hit the oil. After making sure it was thoroughly coated, he turned the burner down to medium low and put a lid on the pan. Then he finely minced a clove of garlic, put it in the pan with the onion, and let the warm scent of toasted garlic fill the air. Then he added the spinach, wiped off the bottom of the pan with it, stirred it a bit more, replaced the lid, and turned the heat off.

Tony had made this dish quite a bit during undergraduate school. Rhodey was always tight on cash, but he’d never let Tony pay for a meal. Frustrated, Tony had realized that while Rhodey wouldn’t let him pay for meals out, he would let Tony cook, as long as it was semi-healthy. Spinach totally counted as healthy, and it was one of the few green vegetables Tony could stand, so they had eaten a lot of it.

Hastily wiping out the pan he’d used for the scrambled eggs, he sprayed it again, and cracked four eggs into it. That burner went on low, and a lid went on the pan.

“Bacon, Jarvis?”

“Another two minutes, Sir.” Jarvis’s voice was calm, focused.

“Do it.” Tony spun back to the toaster, which beeped happily at his attention.

Peering in, he said, “No heat. Stay closed.” The toast should stay warm, but not burn.

Returning to the spinach, he added a tablespoon of cream, and then grated a nice amount of
Parmesan directly onto the spinach before mixing it all together and replacing the lid again. The scent changed, from a heavy, green mineral aroma to something softer, with a whiff of cream.

The eggs were perfectly done for this dish, the merest hint of crispy brown edges, the whites cooked all the way through, and the yolks soft but not runny. Tony used a spatula to cut apart the eggs, and then slipped them gently onto the spinach, sunny side up. The green scent of the spinach contrasted nicely with the salty aroma of the bacon.

Jarvis beeped, and Tony looked up to see Clint and Tasha leaning against opposite sides of the doorway.

“Hungry?” he asked.

They nodded silently, as if they were too tired to speak. Their faces were dirty and their black uniforms torn and filthy. Tony saw Tasha sway on her feet, and Clint visibly restrain himself from catching her.

“Go shower. Food will be ready when you’re done.”

Clint dipped his chin in acknowledgement, and waited for Tasha to straighten up and march to the shower. He followed her, glancing at Steve and Bucky nestled on the sofa in their dimly lit corner and Bruce reading in his lamplight.

Tony knew that he had two and a half minutes, max. Hustling, he retrieved the toast, very lightly buttered it, and added a heap of egg-covered spinach to each piece. Grabbing forks and knives, he placed each steaming plate on the coffee table in front of the other arm of the sofa. Jarvis helpfully lit the small table lamp by that end of the sofa, adding another circle of light in the room.

Returning to the kitchen, Tony picked up a tiny bottle of hot sauce, two more mugs, the carafe of hot cocoa, and cloth napkins from their basket on the counter.

When he came back to the living room, Clint was easing himself onto the sofa, dressed only a pair of sweatpants. Tony saw his aids in their case on the coffee table. Even in the faint light, his chest and heavily muscled arms were covered in cuts and bruises, but he held Tasha against him anyway. She was dressed only in an oversized tee that clearly belonged to Clint.

As she curled up in Clint’s lap, she looked at Tony and raised her chin. “Lost my change of clothes.”

Tony shrugged, and placed the hot sauce, mugs, carafe, and napkins on the coffee table. “This is hot cocoa. I’ll get you a blanket.”

By the time he’d found a fleece blanket in a basket on the bookshelves, Tasha and Clint had made sizeable inroads in the spinach and egg toasts, as well as the hot chocolate. Both were clearly in danger of nodding off where they sat, Tasha’s head lolling against Clint’s shoulder as she sipped her hot cocoa.

Tony took the cup away from her before she burned them both. Not his smartest move, but he got away with only a dirty look from Tasha.

“Sleep,” said Tony, his voice quiet. “We’ve got the watch.”

From their nest on the other side of the sofa, Bucky’s low voice added softly, “Steve and I will take a shift.”
“I’ll run later today,” Steve agreed, his face earnest as always.

Bruce looked up and nodded, signing as he spoke. “It’s fine. I’ll let you know if you’re needed. Phil told me that you’d be here.”

Clint quirked a grin. “He watches us even when he’s sleeping.”

“Yes, I do,” added Jarvis drily, adding text for Clint on a holographic display.

Everybody choked with laughter, and Tony shook his head wryly. “Remind me to check your programming.”

“Fine,” said Tasha, and pushed at Clint’s chest. Clint obediently stretched out on the sofa, a living pillow, and Tasha wiggled into the space between his big body and the back of the sofa. Tony laid another blanket on them, and retreated back into the kitchen as Jarvis turned down the lights a bit.

Maybe now he could get some eggs and toast of his own.

“Sir, Mr. Coulson wants to know if he can join you for breakfast.”

Tony used his right hand to tap the top of his left wrist, and Jarvis obligingly displayed the time: 4:59 a.m. Tony sighed. Coulson must have rolled out of bed and immediately contacted Jarvis.

“Sure, why not? The more the merrier. Tell him to meet me here, but be quiet about it, since Clint and Tasha are sleeping.” Tony’s voice was quiet and dry, but this wasn’t the worst thing in the world. Coulson reliably appreciated good cooking. Tony had originally planned on just toast and eggs for himself, but now he had his second wind and he wanted a nice breakfast.

Poking around in the oversized breadbox on the counter, Tony smiled when he found two ciabatta rolls. Retrieving a couple of slices of uncooked bacon, a nice, crumbly aged cheddar, and some more spinach from the refrigerator, Tony decided to make breakfast sandwiches.

Narrowing his eyes at the toaster, he said, “Toast. Medium. Hot.” The toaster blinked happily at him, so Tony turned back to the cutting board.

First, he cut the bacon into quarter-inch strips. Then, he fried it in a small cast-iron skillet until the bacon was crisp. While the bacon lardons dried on yet another sacrificed kitchen towel, he minced a shallot and fried it in the bacon fat left in the pan. The shallot caramelized almost instantly, filling the room with a sweet scent. Then, he added a tablespoon of red wine vinegar, a half-teaspoon of sugar, a teaspoon of Dijon mustard, and whisked it all together, listening to the hiss and crackle of the fat and the vinegar mixture.

When it died down a little, he pushed the heavy pan to the back burner, and pulled the ceramic non-stick skillet towards him. Wiping it down again, he sprayed it with cooking oil, and then turned the burner down to medium low. Tony thought for a moment, and then figured that one egg per sandwich would be sufficient, so he cracked two eggs into the skillet and put on a clear, glass lid, so he could easily monitor the eggs.

Deftly, he cut two thin slices of the crumbly cheddar, and returned the cheese to the refrigerator. Tony looked back at the kitchen. There were dirty knives and cutting boards, and even though he’d tried to reuse the pans as much as possible, there were dirty sauté pans too. He thought about being irritated, but the kitchen was warm from all the cooking, and the bacon smelled good, and he seemed to have run out of fucks to give.

Carefully removing the glass lid, Tony peered at the eggs. Almost perfect. He replaced the lid,
turned off the heat, and moving fast, poured the still-hot bacon dressing on the spinach, tossed the salad, divided it between the sandwiches, and topped each pile of greens with a thin, crumbly slice of cheddar cheese. Then, he painstakingly slid each egg on top of the cheddar cheese, topped it with the other half of the ciabatta bun, and wrapped the sandwiches in wax paper.

Just as he had finished the second sandwich, he saw Phil pad silently through the common room. How he did that in his standard black Dolce & Gabbana suit and black derby shoes, Tony had no idea. Maybe it was Spy School 101 at SHIELD. Peeking out, Tony saw Phil kneel silently by Clint and Tasha and press a kiss on each forehead. The sight of Phi’s obvious devotion was unbearably intimate and Tony retreated to the kitchen.

When he looked up, he saw Phil standing in the doorway, his expression unreadable.

Tony picked up the wrapped sandwich, and gruffly whispered, “Here’s your breakfast.”

Pushing off the doorway, Phil nodded and replied sotto voce, “Thank you for breakfast. You didn’t have to cook for them.”

Tony shook his head and looked away. “I was cooking anyway. It’s fine.”

“Nevertheless, I appreciate it,” insisted Phil. “I owe you.”

At that, Tony met Phil’s calm eyes. “It’s fine, really.”

Acknowledging Tony’s point, Phil dipped his chin. Had Clint learned that from Phil, or vice versa? Tony wondered.

“Thanks, again. I’ve got to go. Tell Pepper I said good morning, please.” Phil turned on his heel and left as silently as he’d come, leaving his most precious assets in Tony’s hands.

Tony bit his lip and checked the time again. Dammit. Pepper would be up in ten minutes. Tony would move the world for her, but right now, he just wanted to turn back time so he could make her a really nice breakfast.

Pepper loved him just as he was, though, so she’d settle for healthy, rather than fancy. Tony eyed the spinach and thought a moment. He wanted Pepper to have something hot, and she needed extra iron. Cooking spinach would break down the oxalic acid that would otherwise block the non-heme iron absorption. If she ate it with foods containing vitamin C that would also improve the non-heme iron absorption, but tea or coffee would block it.

Once again, Tony wiped down the nonstick skillet. This time, he quietly filled it with a quart of water, gently put the glass lid back on, and turned up the heat. While he waited for the water to reach a simmer, he found a red bell pepper in the refrigerator. Quickly, he diced that and a tomato from the aquaponics lab, and placed them in a small glass bowl.

One last go-round with the toaster awaited him. Inserting two slices of the oat and wheat sandwich bread, he repeated: “‘Toast. Medium. Hot.’”

It replied with a red/gold/red/gold LED pattern.

Huh. Jarvis must have taught it that one.

Tony sprayed another small nonstick skillet, and added a couple of tablespoons of water before adding a big handful of spinach and then placing a glass lid on top.
Turning his attention to the water, he decided that it had reached a simmer, and cracked an egg into a small glass bowl. Then, he gently slid the egg into the water. Repeating the process a second time, Tony decided that two eggs were enough. Holding up four fingers, Tony waited for Jarvis to start the countdown. Retrieving a slotted spoon from the silverware drawer, Tony placed it beside the skillet with the poaching eggs.

Looking at the spinach, Tony saw that it was nicely wilted, so he added the bell peppers and tomatoes. A hot breakfast made the day start better. Or the night.

One minute, thirty seconds. Tony opened the toaster and ignored the temperature of the rack, pulling it towards him to retrieve the toast. Hurriedly, he spread a thin layer of butter on the toast, and put it on plate. Then he spooned the bell pepper, spinach, and tomato mixture in a kitchen towel, squeezed it out over the sink, and topped each slice of toast with the hot vegetables. The timer went off, and Tony carefully used the slotted spoon to retrieve each poached egg, and nestled it in the vegetable mixture.

A sprinkle of salt, a grating of black pepper, and Tony was ready to wake Pepper with breakfast in bed.

Quietly, he covered the plate with a lid, grabbed a fork, and left the mess in the kitchen to Steve and Bucky. Both of them hated messes in kitchens, and Tony wasn’t above taking shameless advantage of it. He felt it was only fair, given that he had been cooking for the last hour or so.

At their bedroom door, Tony paused. Sunrise was still a long way off, but their room was lit by the cityscape visible through their floor to ceiling windows. After all these years, Pepper’s beauty still astounded him. Even in her sleep, Tony fancied he could see her strength of character, the sheer willpower that she brought into her waking hours.

Tony knew that he was unbelievably fortunate—not because he was a genius, or a billionaire, or a playboy, or even a philanthropist, although all of those characteristics were lucky strokes of fate. No, he was truly fortunate because Pepper loved him, and he loved her back.

Moving around to her side of the bed, Tony sat just as her alarm went off. “Morning, beautiful.”

“Mmm. Tony?” Pepper blinked, her blue eyes soft. She smiled, and reached for him.

“Careful, sweetheart. This is hot.” Tony lowered the plate, so she could see the food.

Pepper’s voice was a little awed. “You made me breakfast?”

“Said I didn't have much use for cooking. Never said I didn't know how to cook.” Tony quirked a grin.

Pepper snorted and shoved herself up, leaning back against the headboard. “OK, Quigley. Thank you for you breakfast. Gimme.”

“With pleasure, m'lady.” Tony handed her the plate, and then moved around to the other side of the bed, throwing himself down face first.

Tony groaned. “Dammit.”

“What did you forget?” Pepper sounded only mildly curious.

“My own breakfast. All this time, and all this cooking, and I forgot my own breakfast.”
Pepper laughed, her amusement spilling like silvery music into the darkness. Tony couldn’t help but laugh with her.

“Do you want some of mine?” she offered.

Tony shook his head. “No, not really. Thanks anyway.”

He rolled onto his side and watched her eat her breakfast. Everyone was taken care of, everyone was fed, and now it was his turn to sleep.

Chapter End Notes


https://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/easy_poached_eggs/
Bruce Makes Blueberry Muffins for an Afternoon Snack

Chapter Summary

Bruce indulges in some stress baking, and Thor ends up owing Bruce a big favor.

The Tower shivered, and Jarvis stuttered.

Down in his brightly lit lab, Bruce looked at Tony. Bruce knew Tony understood Jarvis on an instinctual level, more so than he understood other humans. Tony looked a bit wild-eyed, which meant that Bruce was halfway to doing breathing exercises.

“Jarvis, report,” snapped Tony.

Instead of a verbal response, Jarvis displayed a video feed of Thor and Loki on the roof of Stark Tower. It was late afternoon and according to the weather report, it should have been sunny. An unexpected rainstorm had come up—and suddenly Bruce realized the storm was Thor’s stress getting all over New York City.

Tony took off for the elevator in his grease-stained band tee and filthy sneakers, and Bruce hurried after him.

“Step on it, Jarvis. Pepper’s upstairs!”

Suddenly, Bruce was fighting gravity as Jarvis rocketed the elevator past design specs. Tony used his right hand to tap the top of his left wrist, and Jarvis obligingly displayed the time: 4:17 pm.

Bruce nervously eyed Tony’s right wrist. The watch on his wrist was not just a watch, and Bruce had no doubt that Tony would use the gauntlet on Loki if he felt threatened. Bruce closed his eyes and willed his heart rate to slow. Deep breaths, in and out. The air in the elevator was cold and metallic, with a hint of coconut. That was probably the arc reactor, thought Bruce.

As the elevator doors slid open, Tony stepped out, slick charm at the ready. The penthouse had been repaired after the battle of New York, leaving a clear line of sight to where Loki and Thor knelt on the roof, heedless of the cold spring rain. Thor was speaking urgently to Loki, but Pepper wasn’t in sight. If Bruce had to guess, she was in her office.

All the other permanent inhabitants of the upper floors had strong feelings about protecting Pepper, so it had come as no surprise that Tasha and Bucky had coordinated with Tony and Jarvis to create a safe room in Pepper’s office. The Other Guy could rip the entire room out of the Tower, throw it down the street, and Pepper would be fine.

Wordlessly, Bruce edged away from the main living space. The last thing Pepper needed was the Other Guy busting up her living room.

“No, you don’t,” snarled Tony, striding across the living room. “Bruce, guard Pepper.”

Bruce stopped in his tracks. Yes, he could do that.

The elevator opened again, discharging Bucky and Steve. The duo was in sweatpants and tees,
though Bucky had at least stepped into his combat boots. Steve was barefoot, with the shield on his arm and a face ready for battle. Wearing what Clint referred to as his “murder face,” Bucky radiated danger, even in casual clothes.

Outside, the sky darkened and the heavens opened, rain pouring down in sheets. Presumably, Thor was not having a productive conversation with Loki.

A pantsuit-clad Pepper stepped into the kitchen, quietly talking on her phone. “Yes, I’ll hold.”

Very few individuals would put Pepper Potts on hold. Bruce raised an eyebrow. In the corner of his vision, he saw Clint, dressed in a ragged, sleeveless tee and tac pants, aiming an arrow at Loki. Apparently, Clint and Phil had been in Phil’s greenhouse, and were just now making their way into the living space. No doubt, Clint had been napping in the afternoon sun, up on his perch in the greenhouse. He was a bit like a great cat that way.

Phil, dressed in his usual Dolce & Gabbana, stepped inside, showing his phone to Pepper. Pepper nodded and hung up her phone. Two guesses who both Pepper and Phil would call, and only one was needed—Fury. Phil set his phone down on the marble counter, and Bruce realized that he’d left it on speaker.

Deciding that now would be a good time for some tea and baked goods, Bruce wandered towards the kitchen.

“Anyone else want some tea?” His voice sounded calm, at least. He rinsed out the electric kettle and refilled it, setting it to boil. Jarvis turned on the undercabinet lights, filling the room with golden light against the dark of the storm outside.


“I like muffins,” replied Bruce. Glancing at the counter, he realized that there was no name on the ID on Phil’s phone.

Opening the refrigerator, Bruce saw two pints of tiny Maine blueberries, completely out of season. “Muffins for everybody?”

“Good idea,” said Phil. He stood with his back to the kitchen island, watching Tony talk to Thor on the windswept roof deck.

Setting the oven to preheat to 375F, Bruce collected vegan margarine, almond milk, and a pint of the blueberries from the refrigerator. Poking around in the baking cabinet, he found sugar, xanthan gum, baking powder, vanilla, and unbleached flour.

After the kettle clicked off, he began making tea. Indulging in Bruce’s need for the ritual of making tea, Tony and Pepper kept a large teapot in their penthouse for him. A rinse with hot water, a tea strainer filled with his favorite soothing blend, and the scent of chamomile filled the kitchen.

Finally, Tony turned sideways and ushered Thor in the door, leaving Loki kneeling in the cold rain. Bruce frowned, and Pepper looked uncomfortable, but Phil’s impassive expression didn’t change as he watched Clint’s unchanged aim. Bruce held an invisible phone to his ear, and Tony nodded.

Scooping out eight tablespoons of margarine, Bruce added a cup of sugar and began mixing the two as he watched Steve step forward to ask, “Is that safe?”

“Tis best,” replied Thor, grimacing. Ozone clung to him, the scent spreading into the living space.
Tony chimed in. “You have him under control, right? You wouldn’t bring him, otherwise?”

“Yes, of course.” Thor looked offended, as if someone had just impugned his honor. In a manner of speaking, Tony had done just that.

Adding two teaspoons of xanthan gum and the same again of baking powder, Bruce looked again, and he didn’t see a dangerous foe, but a child, huddling in fear. Loki’s head was bowed, and he stared at the ground as he wrapped his arms around himself, his face emotionless.

“Bring him in out of the cold.” Bruce’s voice sounded strange, even to himself. Looking down at the mixture in the bowl, he began adding in the flour, alternating with the milk. He missed Clint’s visible befuddlement. Phil swung around to look searchingly at him, eyes widened minutely.

“Brucie-bear, I’m not sure this is a good idea,” Tony began, but trailed off as Bucky strode outside, ignoring the rain.

Everyone watched, wordless, as Bucky bent down and helped Loki up. As Loki stood, Bruce saw that he was shivering in the cold spring rain, poorly dressed for the weather in a thin tunic, leggings, and a light cloak.

Expression defiant, Loki came in, moving as if he was in pain. To Bruce, he looked terribly young, but of course, he was old enough to be the father of half the people in the room. Recognizing the expression from his own face in the mirror, so many years ago, Bruce winced and mashed a half cup of the blueberries with his hand, dumping them in the batter, and turned away to rinse his hand at the sink.

When he turned back around, he saw Tasha slide in front of Clint.

Eyes flicking to Thor and then back to Clint and Tasha, Loki knelt in front of the pair, making a full obeisance. His arms outstretched and his forehead on the floor, Loki murmured, “You have my most sincere apologies, and though they may be poor recompense for the ill I forced upon you, they are all that I have, and so I give them to you.”

Everyone stared in disbelief.

“Uh …” Clint began, and then trailed off.

Tasha stared suspiciously at the youth on the floor and whipped her gaze to Thor. “Did you put him up to this?”

Thor shook his head solemnly. “You are a good influence on him.”

Tasha sucked in a breath, but Clint’s face softened. Bruce wondered if Clint saw what was so obvious to him—he had the life experience for it, just as Bruce had. Gently stirring in the blueberries and vanilla, Bruce watched as Clint stepped around Tasha, putting his bow away to take Loki’s thin hands in his. “Actions speak louder than words, kiddo. But I appreciate the thought.”

Tasha glared, but rested a hand on Clint’s shoulder, tacitly giving her approval. Clint stood, and brought Loki with him, the thin youth towering over the stocky older man. Bruce looked away, searching for paper muffin liners and a muffin tin. Of course, Tony had little Iron Man muffin papers. Tucking twelve liners in their individual cups, Bruce found a good-sized ice cream scoop and began scooping the batter into the paper liners.

Audibly inhaling, Pepper stepped forward and said, “You’re sopping wet, and dripping all over my
floor. Let’s get you dry.”

Before Tony could open his mouth, Phil held up a hand. “I’ll handle it.”

“Thanks, Phil,” said Pepper. Delicately, she waved her hand in a wiping gesture, and Phil’s phone shut off. “I think Fury has everything he needs for the moment. Let me fetch some dry clothes.”

With that, she swept away down the hall while Phil crossed the room to take custody of Loki.

Somehow, Bruce suspected that Phil saw a lost child too. Perhaps it was the way Loki reacted to Pepper’s statement, by hunching down as if ashamed of his height and staring at the floor. Thinking about what little he knew of Phil, Clint, and Tasha, Bruce suspected that Phil had always had a soft spot for lost youth.

“I can dry myself!” Loki’s tone was petulant, and Bruce almost laughed, but caught himself. Laughing at Loki would not help the situation. He turned and slid the muffin tin into the oven to bake, hiding his smile as he set the timer for 30 minutes.

Thor merely raised an eyebrow and said, “Go with the Son of Coul. Obey him as if he were me.”

Loki looked at the floor, and Bruce could tell that he had been shamed again. Was it the reminder of obedience?

Bruce took a moment, and pulled the tea strainer out of the teapot, releasing a fresh cloud of chamomile scent into the room.

“Tea, anybody?” He turned to see seven pairs of incredulous eyes looking back at him. “A hot drink does wonders on a cold day. I have muffins baking, too. I think I can find some cookies, too.”

Tony’s eyes sparkled with laughter. “You keep the tea, Brucie-bear. I need a drink. Anybody else?”

Steve sighed longingly, but said, “I think I’d rather have coffee. You got a moka pot in there?”

“I have no idea.” Tony shrugged. “Jarvis?”

“Certainly, Sir. Captain, if you’d direct your attention to the left bottom corner cabinet, I believe you’ll find a large moka pot.” Jarvis discreetly ran through the red/red/gold/gold/green pattern, indicating that Pepper was fine.

Steve and Bucky both moved into the kitchen to make coffee while Bruce carried the large, brown English-style teapot to the coffee table, along with a packet of sugar cookies. Turning on his heel, Tony headed for the bar.

Sitting on the sofa, Bruce poured himself a cup of tea. Clint came for the cookies, as Bruce suspected he would, and perched on the sofa, Tasha at his back.

Thor shook his head at Bruce’s wordless offer of tea, but sat heavily on the sofa. He looked tired and worn, thought Bruce, and wondered what it would take to make an Asgardian tired.

“Want to share with the class?” Tony’s words were snide, but his tone was soft. Behind the bar, Tony busied himself pouring a glass of amber liquid.

Thor sighed. “Do you know the first time I heard the phrase ‘tender mercy’?”
Waiting, Bruce sipped his tea. Realizing that Thor hadn’t asked a rhetorical question, he shook his head.

“I was walking on the street, and I waited for the laughter that should accompany such a ridiculous turn of phrase, but I never heard it. I dismissed it from my mind, as I often find Midgardians confusing.”

Reaching for a cookie, Thor turned it over in his hands, but didn’t take a bite. “The next time I heard the phrase, it was here, during movie night, spoken earnestly, in sincerity. When I cast my eyes upon the room, you all took it as a given, that this was a true statement. I let it go, as the movie continued onward.”

Looking around the room, Thor saw that he had their attention, and continued. “More recently, I heard it between you, and you were not sincere. Your sarcasm was oddly misplaced, as if you believed that ‘tender mercy’ was a concept worthy of respect.”

Exhaling, Thor looked down at the soft, pale cookie in his hands. “You are aware that I took Loki back to Asgard to face justice.”

He stopped. Swallowed.

“Our father’s mercy is not tender, and though he may be tender to our mother, he is rarely merciful with his sons.”

Looking around the room, Bruce saw a slow comprehension about the nature of justice on Asgard dawn on the others.

Steeling his nerve, Bruce said, “And your father’s word is law.”

Thor nodded. “On Asgard, yes.”

Bruce quirked a grin. Thor may be young for an Asgardian, but he did grow up at court, and one shouldn’t forget all his years of experience.

“So you brought him here. Why?” That was Tony, tactless as ever.

“By our standards, Loki is but a youth, not old enough to have reached his majority.”

Suspicious confirmed, Bruce looked at Tony, who met his eyes with an exhausted expression. A sullen, emotional youth in an overly powerful body, fallen in with the wrong crowd.

Tony took a large swig. “So what you’re saying is that your brother is a homeless runaway with an interstellar identity crisis?”

For once, Tony had used his intellect to lay the situation bare. Picking up a sugar cookie and munching on the sweet, Bruce took a moment to be impressed that Tony hadn’t fucked up the conversation.

Ignoring the question, Thor turned to Bruce. “I understand that you were once a scholar at a …” and here he paused, clearly searching for an accurate word. “A place where students congregate to learn?”

Bruce missed it, suddenly. He loved working with Tony, was intensely grateful for his lab, and took pride in his work for SI. But, it could be lonely with just himself and Tony for company. He was honest enough with himself to admit he missed the collegial environment, working with others
who had different viewpoints on science and enjoyed discussing them. He huffed a silent laugh, because he definitely didn’t miss the graduate students in all their youthful arrogance. He had been one, after all, alternately slacking off, breaking machinery, and showing breathtaking ignorance. That had been how the Other Guy was born, and oh, how he had regretted it.

“I used to be a researcher at a university, yes.”

“You have students still?”

Tony narrowed his eyes at Thor’s interest, while the rest of the team just sat there and watched the conversation ping pong between the three. Bruce didn’t quite understand where Thor was going with this line of questioning.

“Oh, sort of. It’s not the same.”

For one, it was a wildly different age range. Persuaded by Tony’s madcap enthusiasm, Bruce taught chemistry, physics, and biology to five and six-year-olds in the SI-sponsored early elementary school on the 38th floor.

Tony snorted. “Bruce’s current students are small children.”

“Ah, good, you’re familiar with different age groups. I would beg a boon of you …” and here he trailed off, looking searchingly at Bruce.

“Oh, no. No, no, no. I do not need a graduate student.” Bruce shook his head, already seeing where this is going.

“Hold.” Steve rarely commanded amongst themselves, but now his face was stern. Bruce was reminded that when the occasion called for it, Steve had a brilliant tactical mind.

Steve looked at Thor. “A personal favor. From you? Or from the crown prince of Asgard?”

“Both.” Thor’s face was resolute.

Steve looked at Tony and Tony looked at Phil, who’d just come back into the living room. Long hair still damp, Loki trailed silently behind Phil. Loki was somewhat oddly dressed in a pair of Pepper’s yoga pants and one of her oversize tunics. Sneaky, both of them.

Bruce closed his eyes and sighed. Loki looked all of fourteen. Of course, the college kids looked younger every year, and suddenly he felt every one of his nearly fifty years. Opening his eyes, he saw Tony returning his tired gaze.

Shrugging, Tony looked at Pepper, who nodded, and then looked to Bruce. “Up to you, Brucie Bear.”

He meant it, Bruce knew. Whatever he decided, Tony and Pepper would back him all the way. How he had ended up with friends like them, he really wasn’t sure, but he was grateful.

Straightening his shoulders, Phil reached Bruce and handed him his phone. Reluctantly, Bruce took it.

Naturally, it was Fury. “You would do well accede to Thor’s request.”

Bruce thought of General Ross, and how very useful having Fury owe him a favor could be in the future. Then he thought of how much more he did not want to become entangled with the mess that
was SHIELD. Possibly he was more cynical about it because he tagged along on Tony’s regular forays into SHIELD’s databases.

“Why?” It was a reasonable question. Why would anyone want Loki here? For all his relative youth, he had wreaked havoc, upon Clint in particular.

“‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’ Strategically, it’s a good play, Banner. For you, for the Avengers, for Earth.”

That was a hell of a guilt trip. Bruce simply hung up on the call and handed the phone back to Phil. About the same time as he’d come to some kind of terms with the Other Guy, he’d stopped letting other people guilt trip him. Instead, he looked at Loki, sitting on the floor, wedged into the corner of the sofa while the grownups talked around him as if he wasn’t there.

Clint watched Loki with an odd combination of anger and sorrow. Bruce wondered how much of Loki’s mind Clint had shared.

Picking up his mug of tea, Bruce asked, “Clint, come help me check the muffins?”

Looking at him, Clint nodded. Tasha sat on the sofa, staring at Loki, who was still curled up in the corner with his head on his knees.

After detouring so Clint could snag a small cup of coffee from Bucky and Steve, they moved down the hall to Tony’s rarely used study. Darkened from the spring storm, it held a massive desk, a heavy Persian carpet, and a low-slung leather sofa. Clint shut the door behind them, and the sounds from the living room stopped entirely. Soundproofed, then.

Sitting on the sofa, Bruce looked at Clint’s shuttered expression and sighed. “I won’t do this if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Clint shook his head and walked to the window, taking the long view. Silence rested easily between them, and Bruce waited for Clint. Sometimes, he knew, Clint just needed a minute.

Clint took a sip of coffee. “Thor is a good brother.”

Others may have seen this as a non sequitur, but Bruce knew it to be the heart of the matter. “He seems to be, yes.”

Idly, Bruce wondered what it would have been like to have a good sibling. Someone who fought for you, who’d go up against a shitty parent, and be a safe place.

Almost inaudibly, Clint said, “I’m lucky.”

From some perspectives, Bruce agreed. Tasha and Phil had Clint’s back, as did the rest of the Avengers. While Bruce wasn’t exactly fond of the Other Guy, just thinking of anyone hurting Clint made a green glaze slide over his vision. Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself that Clint was safe and sound in front of him.

“Still, Loki’s got two parents, and Thor has interplanetary reach. Don’t hurt yourself for him.” This was advice that Bruce felt confident in giving.

Finally, Clint turned to look at Bruce. “It doesn’t. He doesn’t. The whole time, I knew he was hurting, and there wasn’t anything I could do about it. I mean, I’m not happy about what happened, but I don’t think he’s irredeemably evil, either.”
Unspoken was the idea that Clint could do something about Loki now. Like Phil, Clint had a soft spot for wayward teens.

“If Thor had anywhere else to stash Loki, he wouldn’t be here,” observed Bruce.

Nodding, Clint said, “I vote we keep him, and maybe do better by him than the circus did by me.”

Dipping his head, Bruce pushed himself out of the well-cushioned sofa. “You’re sure?”

“Mm-hmm. Are you sure?” Clint looked at him, and Bruce wondered what Clint saw.

Shrugging, Bruce said, “It’s a small thing, I suppose. He’s mostly self-sufficient.”

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Bruce paused in the doorway. Lit by side tables, wall sconces, and recessed lights, the living room glowed with light despite the rain outside. The aroma of baking blueberry muffins filled the air. Phil sat next to a blank-faced Tasha, his hands on his knees and his eyes on his phone. On Tasha’s other side, Pepper sat chatting softly with Thor, his hair burnished a rich, dark gold in the lamplight. With his dark head down on his knees, Loki could almost have been asleep, save for the tension in his delicate frame. All the cookies were gone, and Tony stood with his arms folded, talking to a seated Steve, who had a mug of coffee in one hand and his shield on his arm. Clearly watching Steve’s six, Bucky stood at Steve’s back, while Clint perched on the arm of a sofa, watching them all.

At his entrance, conversation slowly stopped. Loki looked up, expression wary.

“We should talk,” suggested Phil, looking up from his phone.

Bruce made eye contact with Thor, who nodded and said, “Loki. With me.”

Placing a hand on Loki’s shoulder, Thor guided him to the elevator. As soon as the doors closed behind them, Tony said, “Jarvis? All force authorized.”

“Yes, Sir.” All the LEDs in the room blinked red, and then settled back to their normal resting state. Bruce raised an eyebrow and looked at Pepper, who shrugged.

Clearing his throat, Clint said, “I sure as hell wouldn’t want to be held to the stupid shit I did when I was 17.”

Blushing, Steve turned to look back at Bucky, who smirked and winked. Some memories there, then.

Phil looked at Clint and said evenly, “You didn’t start an interstellar war.”

Shrugging, Clint replied, “Yeah, well, I wasn’t an Asgardian prince, either. I was a homeless runaway, and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

Steve flinched and Bucky leaned into him, putting his hand on Steve’s shoulder. Everyone knew Steve’s story, and it wasn’t pretty.

“All the Avengers were protective of Bucky, but Tasha was the fiercest. Uncrossing her legs, she shifted on the sofa, looking back at him.

“Same kind of red as my ledger, ain’t it?” Bucky’s Brooklyn came out when he was stressed. Fucking Hydra. It wasn’t even Bucky’s ledger, but he still felt as if they were his debts to pay.
Sighing, Tasha looked at Phil. “I cannot judge Loki for the wrongs I too have committed.”

Nodding, Phil took her hand, a rarely permitted display of public affection. In that moment, Bruce was proud to call him friend.

Bruce looked at Tony, who plopped down beside Pepper. “Fuck, why not? I’m pretty sure that by the time I was his age, I’d killed more people than he has. Wait a minute. Jarvis, in human terms, how old is Loki?”

Jarvis ran through the calculations for them. “Given that the Asgardian lifespan is around 5,000 years, Loki was born in approximately 945 A.D., and the average human lifespan is 72 years, Loki is not quite fifteen and a half in human terms.”

Groaning, Tony banged his head against the sofa and said, “Fuck. He really is a runaway teenager with an identity crisis. Just what I always wanted.”

Pepper cleared her throat. “I’ve been doing some work with the Maria Stark Foundation, and homeless underage teens are at an increased risk for sexual abuse and exploitation, addiction, discrimination, and in the long run, have lower levels of educational attainment. It’s more difficult for LGBTQ youth, who are approximately forty percent of homeless youth, despite being only five percent of the youth population.”

“Have I mentioned how much I love you?” said Tony. Smiling, Bruce watched as Tony wrapped his arm around Pepper, holding her tight. Closing her eyes, Pepper turned her head and buried her face in his neck. As far as Bruce could tell, Tony would do anything for Pepper, anything at all—and what Tony Stark could do was quite something.

“Shall I let Fury know that we’re keeping him, then?” asked Phil, who’d somehow ended up with Clint under one arm and Tasha under the other.

“I’d be grateful if you dealt with Fury, but keep this to only Fury. Not the rest of SHIELD,” ordered Steve. “Don’t we need paperwork?”

“Mm, I was discussing that with Thor earlier,” said Pepper. Tony had scooped her up, putting her on his lap. Now she lay against his chest as she spoke. “We’ll have Thor sign a power of attorney authorizing Bruce to make decisions regarding education, medical needs, and legal status. The only way Thor could persuade Odin to relent was that the Other Guy is one of the very few beings in the Nine Worlds capable of bringing Loki to heel. Loki will still need a passport and other papers.”

Nodding, Phil tapped his phone. Thor and Loki were Asgardian princes, but Pepper had lawyers, accountants, and lobbyists. Bruce knew which one he’d put his money on, here on Earth.

Already bored with the conversation, Tony was working one-handed on a holographic display. Bruce realized that Tony was adding Loki to the list of vital signs that Jarvis monitored at all times.

“Jarvis, ask Thor to bring Loki back, please.” Tony’s voice was bored, but his arm tightened around Pepper.

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“As a condition of Loki’s parole, he is to wear this,” said Thor, pointing at a slim, silver band on Loki’s wrist. Loki stared off into the middle distance, ignoring them all. Clint and Tasha were sitting next to each other, talking softly while looking at something on Tasha’s phone. Steve and Bucky had moved into the kitchen, probably looking for a snack. Pepper was working on a tablet,
still on Tony’s lap. The scents of the coffee and blueberry muffins filled the room.

Tony glanced up. “What does it do?”

“Ah, it is hard to explain. Mother designed it for Banner’s safety, when he is in his original form.” Thor held out his own wrist, and with a motion that Bruce’s eyes couldn’t quite follow, took off a matching silver band. “I must adjust this one for Banner, since he doesn’t have seiðr.”

Bruce pressed his lips together. “I’m not in this form all the time.”

“Oh, it will adjust with you.” Thor looked apologetic.

“I hate magic,” muttered Tony, returning to his holographic display.

Bruce held up his wrist, and Thor gently placed the silver band on it. A moment later, Loki’s heartbeat hung at the edge of his consciousness, and another schema overlaid his senses. Without understanding how he knew, Bruce could feel exactly where Loki was standing.

“Well?” Tony was looking at him impatiently.

“Ah, it’s like one of those electronic ankle bracelets, I think,” answered Bruce.

“Ooh, fancy.” Tony rolled his eyes.

With a serious expression, Thor said, “This will keep both Bruce and Loki safe. On Asgard, we use it for small children and the elderly, to connect them to a competent adult at all times.”

Bruce took a deep breath. “OK, let’s set down some ground rules. First, Loki, you will follow directions, both the spirit and the letter of the law.”

Thor’s laughter boomed into the room. “You know him already!”

Bruce winced, pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. Humiliated, Loki stared daggers at his brother.

Begin as you mean to go on, Bruce told himself. “Keep your hands, feet, and other objects to yourself.”

“What about training?” asked Steve. “Bruce, I think these muffins are finished.”

“If they don’t stick to a toothpick, you can pull them out,” replied Bruce. Turning to Loki, he said, “We can adjust that rule to prevent yourself from immediate harm, but not future harm. You’ll need to come to me for help in the long run, understand?”

Sullenly, Loki nodded, but still refused to look at Bruce.

Steve returned from the kitchen with the platter of muffins in one big hand and a mug of coffee in the other. His shield had been slung over his back.

“You can come to all of us,” said Steve, handing a muffin to Bucky, and then another one to Loki, who stared for a moment before allowing Steve to place the blue tidbit in his hand. Steve took a bite of his muffin before settling himself on the sofa with a book, Bucky reading over his shoulder.

“Yeah, nobody messes with us,” added Clint, still absorbed in Tasha’s phone. Tasha nodded and took a muffin for them both.
Grabbing a muffin for Pepper, and then one for himself, Tony nodded agreement without looking up from his holographic display.

“Next, come prepared to work,” said Bruce, deliberately calm.

“Work?” Loki looked horrified.

“You’re to be my student, yes?” Bruce queried.

Loki looked at Thor, who nodded.

“I suppose,” came the grudging response.

“Then you will work for me,” answered Bruce. “For example, Natasha makes a weekly meal plan. You may assist her. The aquaponics lab requires maintenance. We’ll figure it out as we go.”

Without waiting for Loki’s response, he continued, “I’ll expect you to wait before speaking.”

“What does that even mean?” Loki was dubious.

“You’ll figure it out,” said Bruce. He didn’t think this would be difficult for Loki, who’d shown little inclination towards random chatter.

“Finally, I expect you to be courteous and respectful of others and yourself, both in the long term and in the short term.” Bruce eyed Loki’s comfort with Pepper’s clothing. “First lesson. I use ‘he’ and ‘him’ as pronouns. What about you?”

Loki was visibly confused. “Pro. Nouns? First nouns?”

“When I use a pronoun for myself, I use ‘he’ and ‘him.’ For example, if Tony was asking Jarvis if I needed more saline solution for the lab, I might hear, ‘Bruce used his saline solution on the agar plates.’” Bruce stopped, unsure how to go on. How well did Allspeak handle this? Did Asgardian even have pronouns?

Holding the remains of her muffin, Pepper jumped in to help. “My pronouns are “she” and “her,” but some people use “they” and “them” for both the plural and singular. It’s common to use “they” when you don’t know the gender of the person you’re talking about, but we also consider asking for someone’s pronouns to be basic manners.”

Wide-eyed, Loki looked at the ground and scowled.

Bruce frowned at Thor. “No one ever asked?”

Looking helpless, Thor tipped his head to the side and shrugged. “Tis a Midgardian custom.”

“Well, no answer is needed right now. In my experience, those rules should cover all the main situations.”

Shaking his head, Thor asked, “Do you require anything else? While I was downstairs, Jarvis helped me contact my lady Jane, and I thought to go to her.”

Bruce looked at Loki, who looked a bit sick. “I think I’ve got it from here.”

“Farewell, brother.” With a quick pat on Loki’s shoulder, Thor stepped outside, Mjolnir at the ready.
Bruce watched Loki take a tentative bite from the blueberry muffin. Outside, the rain had stopped, and the predicted sunny afternoon was returning. Watching from the corner of his eye, Bruce saw Loki take a tentative bite from the blueberry muffin. Eyes widened, Loki flicked a glance in Bruce's direction. Smiling, Bruce focused his attention on his tablet. Around him, the permanent inhabitants of the Tower sprawled across Tony and Pepper's living room, nibbling on their own sweets.
Bucky and Steve were the first to leave. Other people made Bucky tired, and this afternoon had been especially stressful for him—and therefore, for Steve. Watching Steve escort Bucky to the elevator, a strong arm around his waist, Bruce was wistful. Love like theirs didn’t come around often.

After a final suspicious glare at Loki, Tasha had announced that she had other things to do, her phone already in her hand as the elevator doors closed behind her. It was a shield, of sorts, Bruce knew. An excuse not to engage with others. He imagined Tasha was feeling vulnerable, given her history with Clint and Phil.

Soon afterwards, Phil revealed that he needed to head into the office. *Quelle surprise.* At this point, managing the Avengers and their half-assed interstellar diplomacy was essentially Phil’s job, and having Loki move into the Tower was a major change. Clint packed up his bow and quiver, escorting Phil down.

Pepper had already returned to her office. SI waited for no one, and Pepper didn’t take full days off, even when managing custody of wayward teenagers. Oblivious, Tony sat on the floor, half a dozen holographic displays changing and flowing around him with delicate flicks of his calloused fingers.

Sighing, Bruce stood and inspected Loki, who had slipped back down to the floor and was fidgeting with the paper wrapper of his muffin. At least he’d eaten something. Loki was terribly thin, and Bruce didn’t know if it was a normal teen metabolism, something specific to Loki, or a food issue. In his experience, kids were almost always hungry, and he thought Loki might be, too.

“Let’s get you a badge,” he offered. Loki peeked at Bruce from under his eyelashes, but didn’t move. Both Bruce and Thor had signed the power of attorney paperwork in front of Loki—Thor’s signature was an indecipherable set of runes he’d embossed into the paper using magic. Naturally, Phil was a notary public, so he’d witnessed the transfer of rights. But no one had asked Loki if he understood what was going on, or whether he wanted to be here.

Eyeing the muffin wrapper, Bruce continued, “A badge will grant you entry to certain parts of the Tower. We’ll need to input your information into the system so that you can move around without me. We’ll do that downstairs, in the security office.”

At that, Loki stood, thought he still refused to look Bruce in the eye. That was fine, thought Bruce. He wasn’t particularly interested in establishing authority over Loki quite yet. After all, Loki had had hundreds of years of people exercising merciless authority over him, without any apparent success. Perhaps a different approach would be more successful.

Moving to the elevator, Bruce waited for the sound of Loki following him before he stepped onto the elevator.

Turning, he saw that Loki had paused just outside the elevator doors. Rather than provoke a
reaction, he just waited. After a second, he tipped his head to the side inquiringly. “Everything OK?”

“Fine,” said Loki, and stepped into the elevator.

“Jarvis, security offices, please,” said Bruce. Turning to Loki, he explained, “Jarvis monitors us, and requires that you present a badge for access.”

Loki’s eyes widened. “Jarvis is the spirit of the Tower?”

“Not as such,” responded Jarvis. “I am an artificial intelligence, or AI, for short.”

Turning to Bruce, Loki asked, “Stark created life? Without magic or a womb?”

“Mm-hmm.”

At Bruce’s response, Loki’s face became perfectly expressionless. A mask, thought Bruce. He’s afraid.

“Jarvis is the Tower, and the Tower is Jarvis,” explained Bruce. “In some senses, he merely permits us to live here.”

“I see,” came Loki’s dry response, and Bruce suspected that Loki did see, probably in parts of the electromagnetic spectrum that Bruce couldn’t access.

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Loki had suffered to have his picture taken, but a retinal scan had been quite the ordeal. Eventually, after Bruce demonstrated the scan, and Jarvis confirmed the type of photo taken, Loki had stepped up to the scanner, all annoyance, like an irritable cat.

Finally, despite Maria’s clear misgivings, Loki had been badged and scanned, and issued a PIN for limited Tower access. “Our security operates on a three-part system,” explained Bruce. “A badge is necessary, but not sufficient, same as the retinal scan.”

He had stopped, very carefully not thinking about footage he’d seen from Stuttgart. “PINs change regularly, and Jarvis will issue you a new one when he feels you need it. You’ll need to memorize it.”

Looking down his nose at Bruce, Loki had muttered that he didn’t have memory problems.

“OK then. Let’s get you set up with a room on Thor’s floor.”

Bruce had assumed that Loki would want the space, and privacy, as well as whatever Asgardian modifications Thor had made. He hadn’t expected Loki’s expression of horror.

“Or not.” Sighing, Bruce realized that the only alternative was to share his space. Glancing sidelong at Loki, Bruce reminded himself that though Loki might have over a thousand years of life experience, he was still too young to be living independently. If Thor had thought that Loki could live a solitary life, Bruce was sure that Loki would be in a cabin in a pocket dimension.

“Jarvis, my floor, please. Let the others know we’ll do dinner tonight.”

Blinking green/black/green, Jarvis gently accelerated the elevator upwards.

“You would share your space with me?” Loki’s tone was cool, as if he couldn’t care less about the
answer, which Bruce took to mean that he cared very much indeed.

Rather than answer, Bruce nodded and stepped forward, out of the elevator. Taking off his shoes and tucking them under a bench, he paused, waiting for Loki to do the same. After a second, Loki bent down to unfasten the complicated straps on his books, and Bruce wondered what Loki made of his home.

At first, Bruce had been loath to ask for any more than the basic build out, but Tony had threatened to paint everything bright red and gold by default. Then Pepper had come to him and in all sincerity pointed out that whatever Bruce spent, even if he asked for solid gold toilets, would be a day’s rounding error in Tony’s investment income alone. Given that inescapable logic, Bruce had thought about what had appealed to him about the places that he’d lived.

To Bruce, home meant a light-filled Arts and Crafts interior, like his grandparents’ foursquare house. Skyscrapers weren’t really meant for it, but the interior design team had managed to retrofit enormous stained glass, double-hung windows, complete with muntins and stiles that did a good impression of natural wood. Built-in oak bookshelves with cut glass panes stood on either side, permitting a frankly embarrassing collection of houseplants to thrive in the bounty of light, including a series of pothos hanging like summer ferns. Warm late afternoon light reflected from the shiny wood floor into the rest of the space.

Next to the wall of windows, more oak bookshelves separated the main room. These were three-quarter height, topped with immense four-sided pillars that reached to the ceiling. More oak board and batten paneling wrapped around the room, the boards a cheerful yellow silk wallpaper.

In the dining area, a thick Persian wool rug lay under a heavy wood table more than big enough to seat the permanent inhabitants of the Tower. An original Tiffany chandelier with a delicate dogwood flower pattern hung over the dining room table. (“Bruce! Check out what Martha sent me!” “Oh, Pepper, it’s gorgeous, but I couldn’t possibly.”) Off to one side, water trickled down a cobalt blue fountain, goldfish swimming in the bottom bowl.

Perhaps Bruce’s favorite part of the main living area was the small reading area, set off by sliding French doors with an elegant, Japanese cherry blossom stained-glass pattern. Inside, a gas fireplace with a hand-painted, teal ceramic surround and a massive oak mantel warmed the space. On either side, cream-colored walls set off generously overstuffed linen-covered sofas. A soft silk throw that Tasha had knit for him was folded carefully on one of the sofas.

Bruce stood back and watched Loki stand and take in the room, with its wood, soft linens, plants, and decorative glass.

Glancing at him, Loki cleared his throat. “A lovely space.”

“Thank you. I like it. Let me show you the amenities.” Bruce gestured towards the back of the apartment. A cherry wood kitchen was visible, separated from the rest of the space by a half height wall. As he preferred well-lit spaces, Bruce’s kitchen featured overhead lights, task lights over the baking counter, sink, and stovetop, and undercabinet lighting, reflected by a multicolored slate backsplash.

“You’re welcome to whatever you want from the kitchen, at any time. If you have a special request, Jarvis will be happy to order it for you. Do you have any dietary restrictions?”

Loki blinked. “Restrictions?”

“Are there foods you prefer not to eat? I don’t eat meat, for example.”
Frowning, Loki asked, “You don’t eat the flesh of animals?”

Shaking his head, Bruce replied, “No, I don’t, whenever possible.”

“All animals?”

“Mm, there are different kinds of vegetarians. Some people only eat plants, others will eat food that animals make, but not the animals themselves. So, for example, they’ll drink milk and eat cheese and eggs. Other people don’t eat warm-blooded animals, but they will eat fish. Still others just refuse to eat red meat.”

As Bruce had listed the options, Loki’s confusion seemed to grow, though he listened intently.

“Is there a reason Midgardians limit their diet in such a fashion?”

Shrugging, Bruce replied, “Not necessarily. For some people, it’s an ethical choice. Others believe that certain diets are healthier, or just that they feel better when they avoid certain foods. Some must avoid certain foods due to medical issues.”

“Mmm,” was Loki’s only reaction.

Still, Bruce thought it was a good sign that he’d unbent enough to ask questions. Suspecting that Loki had a particular reason for engaging, he tried again. “It’s not an issue to accommodate any dietary restrictions you may have.”

Looking back at the living room, Loki quietly said, “I, too, prefer not to eat the flesh of animals. Fish settles well in my stomach.”

“Well, that’s easy enough,” said Bruce. “Maybe some soup tonight?”

Loki blinked and met Bruce’s eyes. “It is your home. I am a guest, and am mannerly enough to eat what is provided.”

“Ah, but in my culture, the host sees to the comfort of his guests,” said Bruce, his tone serious.

Loki raised an eyebrow.

Bruce smiled, and opened his spice cabinet. This cabinet held a vast quantity of seeds, powders, leaves, and bark. He closed that door, and opened the cabinet with his oils, vinegars, and other sauces. A third cabinet held nothing but salts and powders for baking.

“Jarvis places the orders for the permanent residents. In a sense, he is my host. As you can see, he has gifted me with a wide variety of ingredients because I like to cook different foods.”

“This is not where you do your research? Your prepare your own food?” asked Loki. He sounded as if Bruce had just admitted to tap-dancing naked in public.

Struggling not to laugh, Bruce nodded. “This is a small portion of the food storage. Jarvis handles most of the perishables in another location, and delivers them to me when I need them.”

“I thought you didn’t eat meat?” Loki’s tone was dry, ready to pounce on the discrepancy.

Not today, thought Bruce. “Oh, no, perishables are anything that needs to be refrigerated for long term storage. Cold storage is a better description. We also have an experimental indoor garden and fish pond. Maybe we’ll see it after dinner. Right now, let me show you the rest of the apartment.”
Waving towards the hallway, Bruce opened a six-panel door into a small room painted pale blue, with a large window that revealed the bustling city. Covering the center of the floor, a thick carpet muffled sound and provided cushioning for Bruce’s morning meditation sessions.

“I use this room for meditation.”

Loki nodded, and Bruce continued down the hall, the wood floor warm under his feet. Tony had insisted on radiant heating. The only sound was the rustle of their clothes, and Bruce felt strangely exposed.

Turning to see Loki’s expressionless face, Bruce opened the second door to reveal an expansive library.

“This is my personal library. Most of my professional journals are kept in electronic format, but I still like paper books.”

“I do, as well.”

Ah, something that Loki actually expressed a preference for. Bruce could work with that.

“You’re welcome to borrow anything you want from here. Or just come in and read.” Along one wall, oversized chairs and a sofa were arranged around another fireplace, with more floor lamps in the Tiffany style. Bruce had spent many happy hours in this library, quietly self-indulgent. The paper scent of older books wafted out, and Bruce took a deep breath.

Loki peeped in the room, but didn’t allow himself to step inside.

“If there is something I don’t have, Jarvis can probably obtain it for you, often instantly in electronic format. We’ll get you sorted with a tablet in the morning.”

Gaze flicking to Bruce, Loki narrowed his eyes. “Jarvis would search for me?”

“Oh, of course. Jarvis? Would you explain to Loki how this works?”

An LED blinked on a door panel, and Jarvis replied, his tone smooth. “Of course, Dr. Banner. I am authorized to make reasonable discretionary purchases on behalf of my guests and permanent inhabitants. Simply ask, and I will place an order with one of our pre-approved suppliers.”

Fondly, Bruce said, “Thank you, Jarvis.”

“You’re welcome, Dr. Banner.” Jarvis sounded pleased. He and Bruce had spent many happy hours talking about books, and Bruce knew that Jarvis would enjoy searching out books on Loki’s behalf.

Turning in the opposite direction, Bruce gestured at the door. “This will be your room. Jarvis, key it to Loki, please.”

“Done,” was Jarvis’s swift reply.

Apprehensively, Loki lifted the badge from around neck, and pressed it to the reader. Then, Loki bent to allow the scanner to read his retina. Finally, narrowing his eyes at Bruce, Loki keyed in the 12 digit PIN.

When the LED on the door panel showed green, the door swung open, revealing a large bedroom. A king-size bed with several pillows and set of white linens lay against one wall. Intricate joinery
and an almost mathematical set of horizontal and vertical cherry woodwork on the headboard contrasted beautifully with the pale blue wall.

A large dresser in bird’s-eye maple and cherry sat against the opposite wall, with a correspondingly large mirror above. Next to the dresser was a writing desk, already stocked with pens and paper.

In front of a smaller fireplace sat a comfortable oversized chair upholstered in dark gray silk velveteen, a fleece lap blanket slung invitingly over the back. A small folding table sat next to it, ready for a cup of tea.

An insubstantial scent of lavender floated from the room, Pepper’s contribution to the Tower’s linens.

Further in the room, the sliding bathroom door revealed itself. Striding over, Bruce opened the door. “Bathroom through here. Let me show you show to work the faucets.”

Padding softly across the wood floor, Loki peered inside. Tiny white hexagonal tiles covered the floor. Built into a wall of white, built-in cabinets with a capacious sink was an extra-long cast iron bathtub. A series of small windows ran across the wall above the bathtub.

“Hot and cold, respectively,” said Bruce, turning each on and off in succession. “Soap in the cabinets—body soap and hair shampoo and conditioner both. You’ll find other personal toiletries there, too. OK?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Loki, nodding. “This will be comfortable.”

Grinning, Bruce said, “It’s modest by Tony’s standards, but I like it. Hungry yet?”

“Oh, yes,” agreed Loki, backing out of the doorway.

“Good, you can help.” Behind him, Bruce heard a strangled cough, but he kept heading for the kitchen. He’d be shocked if Loki hadn’t learned to cook over the last thousand years, but maybe food preparation hadn’t been considered an appropriate skill for the youngest Asgardian prince.

Considering the skills involved, Bruce considered Loki’s assistance with dinner to be a test for how useful he’d be in the lab. If he was clumsy and poor at following directions, then Bruce thought he might well pawn Loki off on someone else. Lab benches are poor places to drop glassware.

“Let me show you where everything is kept.” Bruce was hungry too, and eager to get started on the quick soup.

“Onions here.” Opening a lower cabinet, he pulled out a wire mesh basket and tilted it so that Loki could see them. “We’ll need three of these tonight.”

Setting the onions on a counter, he opened the next cabinet, and pulled out a large basket of medium sized potatoes. “Potatoes, three of these.”

Raising his eyes, he saw Loki watching carefully. “Have you done much cooking?”

Raising his eyebrows, Loki shook his head. “We have servants for that, but I’ve spent some time making potions.”

Huffing a laugh, Bruce returned the potatoes to the cabinet and turned to the tall pantry cabinet. “Well, OK then. Hopefully it’s not too dissimilar.”
“Canned tomatoes. We’ll use three of these smaller cans.” Bruce put those on the counter, along
with a box of alphabet pasta. While others had often accused him of not having a sense of humor, it
was merely that his humor was a bit sere. He wasn’t above seeing if Loki noticed the letter shapes.

From the refrigerator, he retrieved carrots and celery, as well as a large bag of frozen corn and
peas. Vegetables frozen at peak ripeness often retained more nutrients than supposedly fresh
vegetables that had been sitting on shelves for weeks.

“How are your knife skills?” asked Bruce, pulling a chef’s knife down from the wall, and a cutting
board from a drawer. Turning, he handed them to Loki and waved towards the counter.

“Adequate, I think,” said Loki. “Are these to be peeled first?”

“Good question! The onions, yes, but the potatoes, celery, and carrots can just be washed
thoroughly. Go ahead and start on the onions. I want pieces about this big,” and here Bruce held
his thumb and forefinger about a quarter-inch apart. “I’ll wash up.”

Because he kept a stiff plastic brush just for this purpose, Bruce made short work of the other
vegetables. Loki seemed unintimidated by the onions, cutting them in half and then peeling them,
but he startled suddenly.

“You OK?” asked Bruce, concerned at Loki’s reaction and stepping across the kitchen to pile the
freshly washed vegetables beside Loki’s cutting board.

“I. My eyes hurt. What did you do to me?” Loki sounded almost fearful.

Oh, no. “I’m sorry, I forgot to warn you. Onions cause that reaction in almost everyone. When the
inside of the onion makes contact with the air, a gas is released into the air. Don’t worry, it’s
temporary.”

“And you eat this foul substance?” Loki was horrified, his eyes wide and shiny with unshed tears.

Nodding, Bruce persisted, “Onions are among the most widely eaten foods. Once cooked, they add
good flavor to foods—and stop releasing the gas. Here, I’ll finish up. You get another knife and
cutting board, and chop the celery and carrots. Small cubes, please, about this big,” and here he
indicated about a half-inch dice.

Hastily, Loki retreated to the other side of the kitchen to fetch the required items while Bruce made
short work of the rest of the onions.

“Loki, this is olive oil,” said Bruce, holding up a tinted, square glass container with a spout that
was guaranteed not to drip, but always did. Bruce frequently cooked dinner for the team, and as a
result, favored the one-liter container. “We use it to transfer heat from the bottom of the pan to the
food, as well as flavor the food.”

Pulling out the large Le Creuset and setting it on the stovetop, Bruce added several tablespoons of
the extra-virgin Californian olive oil (“No, Tony, Californian olive oil is fine. We do not need to
add an Italian olive grove to your real estate portfolio.”) and thoroughly coated the onions as the
Dutch oven heated.

“I have finished,” announced Loki.

Bruce looked over, and nodded approvingly. “Good job. Just what I needed.”

Loki may not have cooked much, but his knife skills were perfectly fine. Upon reflection, Bruce
thought that Loki had probably honed them in battle, rather than a kitchen. That was OK—Bucky and Tasha used their skills for cooking, too.

Waving Loki over, Bruce directed, “Here, put those in the pot with the onions.”

After Loki had complied, Bruce continued sautéing the vegetables as he said, “Place the knives and cutting board in the sink, please.”

“Do you wish me to clean them?”

Turning, Bruce saw Loki tilt his chin up so that he appeared to be sneering at Bruce. “I’m not completely incompetent. I know how to clean my tools.”

“Of course you do,” soothed Bruce. “Generally, though, I use a dishwasher.”

“I thought you didn’t have servants,” said Loki, every line in his body wary.

Laughing, Bruce answered, “Oh, no, I don’t. It’s a machine. Here, let me show you.”

Stepping around Loki, he pulled the dishwasher door open. “Here, hand me the cutting boards.” Bending over, Bruce tucked the boards in the bottom racks.

“See? I’ll add soap and they’ll wash later.”

“Oh. Very Midgardian of you.” From the tone of Loki’s voice, that wasn’t necessarily a compliment.

Smirking, Bruce shrugged. “Well, when in Midgard …”

Turning, he missed Loki’s confused frown as he stirred the vegetables again. The scent of caramelizing onions in the mire poix was making him aware of his own hunger. Bright orange, the carrots were ready for the other ingredients, a marked contrast to the paler celery.

Reaching into the nearest drawer, he pulled out a can opener, and began opening the cans of tomatoes. Turning his head, he saw Loki studying him. “Reach into the cabinet by your head, and pull out the jar with the white and gold label, please. The drawer by your hand should have a spoon, as well.”

Soup was always better with stock, and Tony had converted him to his stock paste. Even so, Bruce kept only the organic vegetable stock paste in his cabinets.

Taking the proffered jar, Bruce scooped out several generous spoonfuls of the paste, dropping it into the mixed vegetables.

“Please put this back, and put the spoon in the dishwasher. There should be a smaller slot off to the side for silverware.”

Moving past him, Bruce reached into the upper cabinet for a quart jar to fill with water. Even with the tomatoes, the soup would need a little more water, as the pasta would soak up a good amount as it cooked.

After only a little indecisiveness, Loki found the correct slot for the dirty spoon. “This holds many pieces of silverware,” he observed.

“Mm-hm. I do like dishwashers. They save water, compared to washing by hand,” said Bruce absently, stirring in the tomatoes, water, and a bay leaf, as well as a cup and a half of the letter
“Is there a water shortage?” asked Loki, gazing out the windows on the far side of the living space. Sunset had painted the sky a spectacular red, sinking into the dark grays of twilight in the urban canyons stretching past the Tower.

Following the direction of his gaze, Bruce placed the lid on the soup shook his head. “Not exactly, not here, but I don’t like waste.”

Frowning, Loki looked at him, but said nothing.

“Let’s make sandwiches while the soup simmers.” This was not exactly an order, but neither was it a suggestion.

“Everyone else eats meat,” began Bruce. “As much as they work out, they need the protein for proper nutrition. Tonight, we’re going to make ham and cheese sandwiches with lettuce, tomato, and onion. Jarvis, can you bring up supplies, please?”

Flashing green, the dumbwaiter began humming as Jarvis located the items from the secure food storage in the basement and began sending them up.

“This, I have done, and often,” mentioned Loki, seemingly pleased to find something familiar.

“Great, you can help assemble. We’ll need,” Bruce trailed off, mentally counting. Pepper and Tony were in for dinner tonight, as were Steve and Bucky. That made six.

“Jarvis, will Phil and Clint be back for dinner?”

“Yes, Dr. Banner. They’re on their way home.” Jarvis’s voice was calm, giving nothing away.

“Thank you, Jarvis. So, that makes nine for dinner, Loki, but we serve double portions for Steve and Bucky, and often Natasha.”

Nodding, Loki asked, “What sandwich will you have?”

“Tempeh with sundried tomato. Would you like one?” offered Bruce.

Earlier that morning, he’d made a marinade from tamari, maple syrup, coconut oil, and ground chipotle peppers, and coated slices of tempeh in it before baking them. He also kept a vegan tomato pesto in the refrigerator, made from sundried tomatoes mixed with toasted pumpkin seeds and processed with garlic, olive oil, salt, and honey to form a smooth paste. It would only take a few moments to assemble a sandwich with the tempeh, pesto, some avocado, and lettuce.

Shrugging, Loki acquiesced. “I’ll try it.”

Oh, this boy, thought Bruce. So brave. His eyes stung a little, and he turned to reach for the sprouted bread from the dumbwaiter.

Side by side, they assembled the smoked Virginia ham, Emmental cheese, microgreens from the farm, sliced tomatoes from the hydroponics lab, and Vidalia onions on the bread slices, along with a swipe of Kewpie mayonnaise and an even thinner smear of stone ground mustard for each sandwich. As they worked, the sharp scent of the mustard contrasted beautifully with the tang of the cheese and the fresh, spring scent of the greens.

By the time they’d made a round dozen of the sandwiches, the soup was ready for the three cups of pasta.
frozen vegetables. With the sandwiches for all of them on a large, white ceramic platter, Bruce showed Loki how to wrap it in waxed cloth for transport upstairs.

“You carry the sandwiches, and I’ll get the soup,” directed Bruce.

Loki laughed, a sound of genuine delight, almost childlike. “I don’t think so. In your current form, I am much stronger than you. I might not be able to use much of my seiðr right now, but I can carry the soup.”

Bruce cocked his head at Loki’s partly exasperated, partly amused expression. “What do you mean, you can’t use your seiðr?”

Sobering, Loki explained, “The bands. In order to track me, they limit my seiðr. Essentially, I am forbidden to use it while I am here.”

Shocked, Bruce demanded, “Does it hurt?”

Shifting uncomfortably, Loki responded, “Less than Odin’s punishment on Asgard. The soup is getting cold.”

Patently untrue, but Bruce let it go. Fucking Odin. Pain was not a teaching tool, dammit. A green glaze slipped over his vision, and Bruce took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Loki was here, not there.

“Let’s get going, then.”

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Upstairs, Loki and Bruce entered the common room to find everyone else in their usual places. In the dimly lit far corner, Steve had his feet up on the sofa, holding an art textbook in one giant hand and idly playing with Bucky’s hair with the other, while reading aloud. Resting on his chest, Bucky was knitting a sweater for Steve and listening to the story of paint drying. Bucky glanced away from his knitting, his face not unfriendly.

“Soup and sandwiches, huh?”

“I thought simple food might be best tonight.” Bruce put the platter of sandwiches on the dining room table, and indicated the trivet to Loki. “Put the soup here, please.”

Obeying, Loki turned to survey the rest of the room.

Thick black reading glasses on his nose, Phil was busy on a thin tablet, one hand on Clint’s chest, gold glinting on his ring finger. In turn, Clint was stretched out on the sofa, his head pillowed on Phil’s thigh and his feet in Tasha’s lap while he tossed a bouncy ball against the ceiling with his usual unerrring accuracy. Ignoring the repetitive thump of Clint’s toy, Tasha had her own knitting with her, her silver needles catching the same light as her arrow necklace.

Even though she was resting in Tony’s lap, Pepper’s attention was focused, razor sharp, on the conversation she was having on the phone. Though he had one arm wrapped around Pepper, Tony was watching Bruce and Loki set the food on the table.

Lowering his eyes, Loki sat on the floor in the living room area.

Tony narrowed his eyes. “Up, Reindeer Games. We sit on the furniture here. You don’t see anybody else sitting on the floor.”
Scrambling to his feet, Loki frantically scanned the room, but the only available seat was next to Tony, which was undoubtedly Tony’s intention.

“I’m not ergi.” Loki blurted it out, and then immediately tensed. In that moment, Bruce remembered just how dangerous this thousand-year-old teenager could be, even without seiðr.

Tony went rigid and Pepper hung up her phone. Bucky set down his knitting, made a complicated hand signal, and Jarvis flashed all the LEDs red.

Sitting up, Bucky bit out, “I don’t know what ergi means, but I can guess. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a child, and we’re going to treat you like one. That means you’re going to sit your ass on the sofa, eat your damn dinner, and watch Takeshi Kaga with the rest of us. Got it?”

Visibly taken aback, Loki nodded, sitting down next to Tony. “Yes.”

“Good choice,” praised Pepper. She swung her feet to the floor, and said, “Bruce, help me dish out the soup, please.”

Setting her knitting aside, Tasha stood up to help. “I’ll get the sandwiches.”

By the time Tony had cued up Kobe facing off against Yoneda over an enormous container of live octopus, everyone had settled into comfortable positions on the sofas, warm bowls of soup sharing space with sandwiches wrapped in napkins.

As Jarvis dimmed the lights, Bruce checked on Loki, only to see his eyes glued to the screen as he took an enormous bite from his sandwich. Smiling to himself, Bruce looked around at his friends and family. Even with this newest addition, they came together in the dark of an evening to share in food and fun. Contentment warmed Bruce as he finally took a bite of his own sandwich.
Unfortunately, this was not the first time Clint had woken up in a dumpster. It had been a while, though, and everything hurt. Eyes still closed, Clint tried to remember how he got here. Doombots. There had definitely been Doombots. And a building crumbling under his feet. Clint stilled as the sense memory of the ground coming out from under his feet overwhelmed him.

Ah, that was it. He hadn’t made it across the alley, from roof to roof. Naturally, he reeked of rotten food. When he finally opened his eyes, a brilliantly sunny sky shone above him. Definitely getting too old for this shit, he thought, and sat up.

Where a four-story office building had once been, a pile of rubble greeted him instead. Grey dust covered slabs of concrete hanging by shreds of rebar, wires draping uselessly over openings into half-destroyed conference rooms, and Clint in the dumpster. Rugs, sofas, and desk chairs mixed with the concrete debris. With any luck, everyone had heeded the evacuation order, although New Yorkers had become famously blasé at this point.

Irritated at the idiocy of civilians, Clint had begun to clamber off the bags of shredded documents that had cushioned his fall when he realized that the world was utterly silent. Dammit, there went another set of aids. No matter what Tony did, he couldn’t quite make them EMP proof, and sometimes the best way to take out a horde of Doombots was, in fact, an EMP.

When he reached for the edge of the dumpster, he swore. There was definitely something wrong with his collarbone on the right side, and his back felt like someone had swung at him with a baseball bat. Even his feet hurt, despite being encased in steel-toed boots. Jumping down from the dumpster, Clint thought of Phil frantically hunting for him, and his heart wrenched. Clint tipped his head to the side to pull out an aid, and ouch. That hurt. Mild concussion, maybe. Prying it apart with his short fingernails, Clint decided that the aids were definitely as fucked as his initial assessment had implied.

Well, there was only one thing for it. With his bowstring snapped, and the bow itself twisted beyond usability, Clint sighed in disgust before awkwardly tucking the bow under his left arm. It wouldn’t exactly fit in his crushed quiver. Like Tasha, he carried knives and pistols as backup weaponry, but that didn’t mean he liked to use them. Compared to Tasha, his close quarters work was sloppy and he knew it. Unzipping his vest so he could tuck his arm in the makeshift sling, he started limping down the alley.
When he reached the end of the alley, he turned left. With any luck, Phil would be retracing his path, and they’d meet up somewhere. Sniffing, he reached up to wipe his nose on his arm and realized that he was covered in scratches. Must have gotten in the way of a window exploding outward. Looking down at his arm, he realized the liquid in his nose wasn’t snot.

A delicious aroma drifted past, and Clint looked up. A familiar red and white food truck was rolling down the street, and damn his arm. Shouting, Clint waved them down, ignoring the pain.

“Hey, how much for a slice?”

A big-eared kid wearing a black trucker’s cap, black tee, and a heavy gold chain leaned out the window and looked him up and down, a skeptical expression on his face.

Lip-reading, Clint guessed at the “$2.75. Dollar more gets you a coke. Missed the evacuation order, huh?”

Clint sighed. The least famous Avenger, that was him.

“Yeah,” he replied, pulling an emergency ten-dollar bill out of the zippered pocket on his chest. “Two slices and a Coke, keep the change.”

He’d be surprised if the pizza was more than his emergency ten, even in New York City. Fuck trying to put any money back into the tight pocket with his collarbone, anyway.

The kid was talking, but Clint was too tired to put in the effort to understand what he said before he hustled into the back of the truck. Returning with two square slices balanced on a white paper plate, a thin paper napkin tucked underneath and a can of Coke, the kid handed them out to Clint.

Nodding at the kid, Clint took the pizza and the Coke before resuming his stroll back downtown. As the truck rumbled in the opposite direction, Clint awkwardly tucked the Coke between his arm and his chest to open the tab.

“Ouch.” Not his brightest idea. Occupied with eating his pizza while not dropping his soda, Clint ran into a maroon and gold tracksuit.

Looking up, he saw a medium sized brown dog wagging its tail at him. “Sorry, man. Dog. Can I pet it?”

A slice of pizza was definitely a good post-battle regimen, thought Clint as he watched the dog eye his pizza.

Looking up, Clint saw the dog’s owner shake his head as he said, “He bite, bro. Not good idea, bro.”

Well, that was Clint’s best guess. Alternatives included “Hey pride, no. Ah dude, highly, no,” but Clint was going with his first guess.

As his buddies clustered around, the tracksuit thug with the Slavic accent raised an eyebrow in the international sign for ‘you’re a fucking moron,’ so naturally Clint couldn’t resist sharing his pizza with the happy dog.

“Who’s a good boy that likes pizza? You are, aren’t you pizza dog?”

Looking up, Clint smiled his best eat-shit-and-die grin and said, “I dunno, man. Dog likes pizza, how bad can he be?”
Pulling out a gun and casually shooting him in the arm was a bit of overkill, thought Clint. Fucking assholes. Pizza dog wasn’t having it, though, turning on the tracksuit mafia and biting the arm of the thug who’d shot him.

Between the two of them, they managed to make a good showing, even with Clint’s bleeding arm. Pizza dog took the worst of it. By the time Phil arrived in a black SUV, running off the small mob, Clint just wanted to lie down on the sidewalk with the dog.

Looking at the pizza splattered on the ground, the dog bleeding on the sidewalk, and the concrete dust mixing with the blood on Clint’s arm, Phil closed his eyes for just a second before putting a hand on Clint’s shoulder and pulling him in close enough to talk in his ear.

“Dogs don’t eat pizza, Clint.”

Knowing his teeth were bloody, Clint leaned back to grin through his busted lip and say, “This one does. Can we keep him?”

Inhaling deeply, Phil stepped away, pulled out his phone, and started issuing orders that Clint was pretty sure included “found him” and “vet.”

Phil pulled the phone away from his mouth, tipped his head towards the SUV, and leaned into Clint’s ear. “Sit down before you fall down. You got your ass kicked.”

Petulantly, Clint answered, “I kicked ass, thank you very much,” but he followed directions, watching as Phil finished issuing orders and slipped the phone back in his pocket.

Heedless of his Dolce & Gabanna suit, Phil knelt down to pick up the dog while a junior agent quickly laid a Mylar blanket in the cargo area of the SUV. By all that was holy, Clint loved that man.

As Phil gently laid Pizza Dog in the back, Clint began cataloging his own injuries. Gunshot wound to the upper bicep, cracked collarbone, possible broken ribs, deep body bruising, knife wound to the forearm, head wound, black eye, busted lip … the list went on, and eventually Clint gave up. Leaning back in his seat, he closed his eyes and waited for Phil to join him.

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Slowly, Clint focused his eyes. Phil sat next to him on their bed, wearing his old man glasses and silently tapping away on a StarkPad. Glancing over, Phil saw that he was awake and a fond, private smile snuck over Phil’s face.

Phil turned away, and when he turned his attention back to Clint, he had a new pair of hearing aids in his hand. Raising an eyebrow in gentle inquiry, he showed them to Clint.

Too tired to properly sign, “yes,” Clint mustered the energy for a thumbs-up. Gently, Phil turned his head, first to one side and then the other, slipping the aids into place. Feeling unexpectedly vulnerable, Clint closed his eyes while Phil settled the aids in place. Phil’s hands were warm on his chilly skin, and Clint breathed in the scent that was Phil’s favorite soap and something ineffably Phil, the scent of home and safety.

“Welcome home, Mr. Barton,” greeted Jarvis. “You have a mild concussion, two stitches at your hairline, a broken collarbone, two broken ribs, a bone bruise on your right femur, six stitches on your right forearm, and severe bruising elsewhere. Your estimated time to recovery is six to eight weeks. You are forbidden to read, watch television or use screens, or exercise until further notice. Daily naps are mandatory.”
“Aw, Jarvis, no,” groaned Clint.

“I see you gave him the news, Jarvis.” Phil’s voice was even, but Clint could tell he was not happy. Opening his eyes, he looked up at Phil, only to see his lips pressed tightly together and his eyes narrowed.

“You shorted out your aids with an EMP arrow, fell off a building, and then decided it was a good time to get into it with the Russian mob—by yourself?”

Defensively, Clint said, “I didn’t jump off the building!”

“No, you didn’t, because you have grappling arrows, which you didn’t use.”

Phil’s tone was icy, and a spear of worry pierced Clint’s heart.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, looking down at the lumps his feet made under the blankets. Clint never meant to disappoint Phil, and his anger made Clint feel ashamed.

Sighing, Phil put a hand on his shoulder. “Really, Clint? Over a dog?”

From under his lashes, Clint saw Phil’s frown, the one he didn’t show the world. Clint hated that frown. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Oh, Clint, you never do.” Phil shook his head, quirked a grin, and then leaned over and kissed him, gently, on the cheek. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Clint tried to say more, but the relief that Phil’s love brought meant that sleep claimed him again.

The next time Clint woke up, it was dark but for Jarvis’s steady green LED by the door. Phil must have removed his aids, because the world was silent again. Tasha was curled up against his side, warm silent exhalations against his bicep and her knees against his hip. Even in his sleep, Phil held his hand, his chest rising and falling in a rhythm Clint knew as intimately as his own heartbeat. Reaching under the blanket, Clint tucked Tasha under his arm, her head on his chest. It only hurt a little. Pulling Phil’s hand with him, Clint rested their hands on his hip. His loves were close, connected by his body.

Closing his eyes and drifting on the edge of sleep, Clint realized that Tasha and Phil must have come to some kind of new détente, sleeping in the same bed while not on a mission. Kind of sucked that it involved him being injured. Just as he realized that he didn’t know what had happened to the dog, Clint fell back asleep.

Clint woke again when Phil sat up on the mattress in their darkened bedroom. Secretly, Clint loved early-morning Phil. His normally immaculate hair was rumpled, his cheek had a pillow crease on it, and his eyes were soft. Unlike Clint, Phil wore pajamas to bed, or at least boxers and an old, soft cotton tee he must have borrowed from Clint’s pile of laundry. Smiling, Clint decided that Phil should keep the shirt—it matched his eyes.

Given their reflexes, Clint usually woke when Phil left for work in the morning. Often, Clint could count on a gentle kiss before Phil went into the office to intimidate the probies. This morning, Phil
smiled back, and reached for his hand.

Phil’s hands only looked weak, with their manicured nails. Making others underestimate him was Phil’s superpower. Knowing him well enough to feel his strong fingers and gun calluses made Clint’s heart warm.

Tasha moved against him, raising her head to speak in his ear. “Morning, Clint.”

Clint pulled her against him, relishing her warmth. “Morning, Tasha. I can’t lay here anymore. Got to pee.”

Phil nodded and raised his eyebrows, looking at their joined hands.

“Yes, please,” said Clint, answering the unspoken question of whether he wanted Phil to be the one to help him to the bathroom. Phil had more leverage simply by dint of his height.

Annoyingly, Clint didn’t get away without the sling for his collarbone, but he sat still while Tasha checked the wrappings on his ribs. The view didn’t hurt. Watching Phil don his armor was one of Clint’s morning pleasures, because Phil made his off the rack Dolce & Gabbana suits look good. Today was a navy worsted number. Efficiently, Phil knotted a four-in-hand while eyeing the bruises on Clint’s torso.

“I’ll be fine,” reassured Clint. “Just some extra vacation time.”

Phil didn’t bother to respond, just raised an eyebrow before slipping on his work shoes and then snapping his fingers. Following his gaze, Clint was surprised to see the dog come padding in, wagging his tail and heading straight for Phil. Two legs had bandages, and another was wrapped around his head, covering one eye. Phil raised his hand to waist height and the dog tracked his hand, planting his butt on the floor.

Clint lip read the “good boy” and watched as Phil materialized a small dog treat, feeding it to the dog. Tapping his shoulder, Tasha caught his attention and directed him to the tiny aids in her hands.

“Thanks, Tasha,” said Clint, carefully placing the aids in his ears.

“We both need to go in today.” Her tone was neutral, giving nothing away. Already dressed in dark trousers, ankle boots, and a white silk blouse, she was playing office casual today.

Clint grinned, wincing when his split lip cracked open again. “Just me and Lucky, then, huh?”

“You want to name him Lucky.” She didn’t ask a question, but bent down to kiss his temple and place a seemingly-delicate finger on his carotid artery.

Trying not to let her clear anxiety get to him, he leaned forward, into her embrace. “He lived, didn’t he?”

“ Barely.” Phil settled on the bed beside him, bringing the slightest whiff of clean linen and wool as he gently put an arm around Clint’s waist and reached up to place a hand on Tasha’s arm.

“Let’s get you into the living room for the day.”

Between the two of them, they settled Clint into the reclining seat in the sofa, Lucky trailing along behind. Tasha placed a large travel mug of coffee on the table beside him while Phil handed him a napkin that held a hand-rolled, water-boiled sesame seed bagel with cream cheese, wild-caught
smoked Alaskan salmon, pickled red onions, and capers.

“Bagels and lox. You really do love me.” Clint smirked and took a giant bite, ignoring the complaint from his lip. The bagel was fresh, the perfect amount of chewiness, and the tang of the cream cheese complimented the smoky flavor of the lox, the salty sharpness of the pickled red onions, and the crunch of the tiny capers.

Moaning, he opened his eyes to find Phil already in his full-length wool coat, Tasha wrapping the gray scarf she’d knit him around his exposed throat before pressing a fond kiss to his cheek.

Already in work mode, Phil solemnly nodded at her, the only sign of his pleasure in being fussed over the crinkles around his eyes.

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Without the anesthetic of television, the days passed slowly. From experience, Clint knew he was allowed to listen to audiobooks, so he took to hobbling down to the common room while the team came and went around him, unaware that Clint was listening to articles in his favorite journal via his aids. Unable to raise his arm over his head, Clint had taken to stealing Phil’s oldest cotton button-ups, worn smooth and thin by the years, and pairing them with his favorite sweatpants. He was sure he made an odd picture, lying on the sofa in a dress shirt and sweatpants. He was equally sure he didn’t care.

Because Clint had weeks of enforced rest, Loki had been designated as the official dog walker. Steve had been kind enough to walk them both, the first couple of times. Loki’s expression when Phil had patiently explained poop scooping had been priceless. Probably because Loki didn’t feed him pizza, Lucky invariably tried to run away at the slightest moment of inattention from Loki. This had resulted in Tony designing a leash that wouldn’t snap when Loki clenched it in frustration.

With Phil and Tasha gone, sometimes for days at a stretch, Clint ended up ordering a lot of pizza, which he invariably shared with Lucky. As it turned out, required daily naps were tolerable with Lucky, who appeared to be content to nap for hours at a time.

He’d made the mistake of napping in the bed with Lucky—once. Tasha had not been amused, and with only one functioning arm, Clint hadn’t been able to change the sheets by himself. Thankfully, Phil had simply taken the sheets off the bed while Tasha glared and Clint apologized profusely. After that, sofa covers for dogs had mysteriously appeared on all the furniture, and Tasha had dumped a double-layer fleece blanket on Clint’s lap early one afternoon.

Clint could take a hint, and the blanket was soft and warm. He’d fallen asleep listening to Jarvis read Lohse, Schweizer, Price, Zilberberg, and Bloch’s article on topology in 4D quantum Hall physics from *Nature*. When he woke up, Bucky was watching Dog Cops with the sound off, knitting what looked like little legwarmers.

Fuck it. Clint shifted under the blanket, and Jarvis obligingly ported the sound for the episode into his aids. He’d been a good boy for days and days, and he wanted to watch some damn television. But after only a few minutes, his eyes started hurting.

Clint closed his eyes and counted to ten. When he opened them, the television was off, and Bucky was watching him, his face apologetic.

“Sorry. I thought you were asleep.”
Bucky’s tone was quiet, and his fingers didn’t stop moving, the needles flashing in the late afternoon light. For second, Clint thought about asking Bucky to teach him to knit, but decided against it. Tasha had tried before, and it hadn’t gone well. Now was not the time to irritate himself any further.

“No big deal. I knew better.”

Clint shrugged. Bucky wasn’t his keeper, and Clint was a grown adult.

Nodding, Bucky struck up a conversation about reloading and rifle design. Only later did Clint realize that Bucky had been deliberately distracting him, because Bucky didn’t shoot anymore. With Steve’s blessing, he’d laid down his weapons, not even visiting the ranges.

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“Fuck yeah!” Clint couldn’t stop grinning as he exited medical. He’d been cleared for physical therapy, SHIELD style, and he was eager to get back into shape. The enforced inactivity had been the hardest part of his leave, but he’d stuck to it, for the most part, not wanting to complicate his recovery. Rolling his eyes, Clint thought maybe he was growing up.

Clint thought he’d make a quick stop at the PX and pick up a little something to celebrate before heading back to the Tower. Phil deserved some donuts for putting up with his bored, cranky ass these past few weeks and Tasha could always be wooed with chocolate. Good chocolate. Maybe not chocolate from the PX.

That was all right, he could stop off at Royce’ Chocolate on the wall home. A box of petit kurumaro would win a smile, he thought.

Dropping a packet of those little, dense gas station donuts on Phil’s desk, Clint shook his head in the silent room. Comfort food was all well and good, but those weren’t even tasty. Clint had quit eating them when he realized that they’d left a sludge-like film coating the inside of his mouth that not even the terrible breakroom coffee could cut through.

Slipping quietly through the vents to the nearest supply closet, Clint suppressed a shiver. On the way in this afternoon, the sunshine had been brilliant, reflecting off the glass walls of the urban canyons. After the long, gray winter, Clint particularly appreciated the sunshine, chilly though it was.

Clint tucked his phone in the inside pocket of his favorite leather jacket before stepping out of the stale air in the closet. According to Jarvis, sunset wasn’t until after seven this evening, so Clint thought he had time to treat Phil to some comfort food that didn’t come out of a plastic wrapper. As a teenager, Clint had been happy to eat nothing but junk, but as he re-encountered some of his favorites years later, he’d realized that his memories were deceptive. Or his taste buds had changed over the years, because what had been absolutely delicious to his younger self was now repulsive.

Thinking about it, Clint decided to blame Tasha for educating his palate. Her comfort foods ran to good Russian vodka, charcuterie, and pickles, rather than sugary baked goods. His frown made a probie trip over their own feet, and inwardly, Clint snickered. He knew he was scary in an entirely different way than Agent Coulson, whose smiles never boded well, or the Black Widow, who merely had to walk down a hallway. Together, Strike Team Delta cheerfully struck terror into the hearts of the junior agents.
Though it was technically spring, Clint wanted winter food. Something warm and soft, easy on the stomach. When Clint had been a child, tuna noodle casserole had been a favorite. It could be made without any refrigerated ingredients, useful when you never knew if the power bill was going to be paid. While his adult palate didn’t appreciate generic cans of cream of mushroom soup, Clint had figured out how to make something he thought the entire team would enjoy.

“Jarvis, preheat to 375F, please. And let everyone know that I’ve got dinner covered.”

As Jarvis blinked green, Clint pulled out three 9 x 13 Pyrex baking dishes. With this many people to feed, Clint had bought extra dishes. A coating of cooking oil spray, and he set them aside on the kitchen table.

Waving his hand at the sink sensor, Clint filled the large stockpot with hot water. He’d paid attention when Gordon Ramsey had yelled at a hapless chef for not starting with hot water to save time. It would still take a few minutes to return to boiling, and after setting the pot on the right burner and covering it with a glass lid, he turned the flame all the way up.

“Jarvis, can I get some music, please?” As the bass of “Diamonds” filled the room, Clint smiled and opened the refrigerator. Clint liked music with big bass and performers who didn’t sing at the higher octaves, which were harder for him to hear. Since he was home alone, he made the hand twist and raise for “turn it up” until he could feel it in his chest, Jarvis automatically compensating in his aids.

Reaching under the counter for the basket of onions, he thought about the other ingredients. Celery and button mushrooms could credibly be chopped in the Cuisinart, but onion never came out right. Resigned, he peeled and chopped three onions as fast as possible, dumping the finely diced pieces in a large metal bowl.

Eminem’s “Love the Way You Lie” came up next, and Clint quickly skipped to the next song. Pieces about domestic violence were not OK for him.

“Feel Good” by Gorillaz started, and Clint relaxed, swaying a little as he put the slicing attachment in the food processor, and inserted three stalks of celery.Dumping the celery in its own bowl, he switched to the three boxes of white button mushrooms. After pouring the mushrooms into yet another bowl, he rinsed off the food processor bowl, lid, and slicing attachment before replacing the bowl and inserting the shredding attachment. Since it was a casserole, Clint didn’t bother with the really good cheddar cheese, but Tillamook was definitely a step up from the generic cheese coated with sawdust he’d eaten as a child. A little over a pound of the Tillamook made a good-size amount in the food processor bowl.

Faith No More’s “Epic” spun up and Clint indulged in a little headbanging as he took out his biggest sauté pan, melting a stick of butter before adding the onions, waiting for them to become translucent, and then doing the same to the celery before finally adding the mushrooms, along with a teaspoon of salt.

By the point, the water in the stockpot was boiling, so Clint dug out three bags of whole-wheat egg noodles (“Whole wheat, really, Tasha?” “Good for arteries, Clint, and Phil isn’t getting any younger.”), and added them to the pot as Thin Lizzy’s “Boys Are Back In Town” came on. Grinning, Clint thought of Tasha listening to this one, and set a timer for seven minutes. That would make them slightly underdone, perfect for a casserole.

After he stirred the onion, celery, and mushroom mixture, Clint pulled out a large ceramic non-stick skillet and melted another stick of butter, before using a sifter to add a little over a cup of flour, inhaling as the flour browned in the butter, releasing a nutty scent. Using a spider to remove
the noodles from the boiling water, Clint put them in a stainless steel bowl before dumping the hot water down the sink.

“Play that Funky Music” floated through the room and Clint couldn’t resist a little dancing in place as he slowly whisked in three quarts of milk, creating a smooth béchamel. Every so often, he switched pans and stirred the vegetable mixture, noticing that the mushrooms were starting to brown. Turning off the heat under the béchamel, Clint added three-fourths of a teaspoon of dried thyme to the vegetable mixture, stirring it well, before lifting the entire pan and pouring it into the big pot, and then adding the sauce.

If he spun in a pirouette as Daft Punk’s “Around the World” came up, well, that was between him and Jarvis. Draining six cans of tuna of tuna packed in olive oil (“Tasha, I thought water was healthier?” “Olive oil is healthy.”), Clint added them to the big pot, along with four and half cups of bright green frozen peas, and the white shredded cheese.

Musing that “Should I Stay or Should I Go” could have been his theme song for a good portion of his life, Clint distributed the casserole mixture evenly among the three Pyrex baking dishes. After topping them with panko breadcrumbs, Clint slid them into the double wall ovens.

“Jarvis, 25 minutes, please. Lights and music off.”

Winking green, Jarvis cut the lights and music at the same time. Flurries had started on his way home. Standing in his living room with the lights off, Clint watched the snowflakes blow almost directly at the windows, pretending they were stars at light speed. Laughing at himself, Clint turned and asked Jarvis to cue up the holographs of the topological variants he’d designed. Manipulating the light, Clint became so absorbed in his nonverbal discussion with Jarvis that he didn’t hear the door unlock behind him.

“Uh, Clint?”

Wiping away the designs, Clint slowly turned to find the entire team, plus Bucky and Pepper, staring at him. Lucky bounded over and jumped up, putting his paws on Clint’s thighs. Scratching Lucky’s ears, Clint waited.

Tony looked perturbed. “Something you want to tell us?”

Ready to intervene, Phil shifted, minutely raising an eyebrow. Looking him in the eye, Clint shook his head.

“Not really. Jarvis and I like to play with geometry sometimes.”

Steve was really cute with that little furrow in his brow, Clint thought absentmindedly. Tony opened his mouth, shut it, and then opened it again.

“You and Jarvis talk about geometry?”

At Tasha’s slow wink, Clint laughed. A speechless Tony was hilarious. Bruce was openly smirking and Pepper was clearly torn between exasperation and laughter.

“No, we don’t talk about it. We … play. In the holographic displays. Right, Jarvis?” Clint didn’t feel like getting into it with everyone.

“Mr. Barton and I have been exploring the possibility of n-dimensional space using models of periodically modulated two-dimensional superlattice potentials.” Jarvis’s voice really was a little smug, thought Clint.
Phil just shrugged. He’d helped Clint with the paperwork for his PhD. “Are you really that surprised, Tony? You don’t get to be the World’s Greatest Marksman without an excellent understanding of geometry.”

Tactless as ever, Tony spluttered, “But he can barely read!”

Rolling his eyes, Clint said, “I have dyslexia and a touch of ADHD. That doesn’t make me stupid.”

Bruce burst out laughing while Pepper occupied Tony’s mouth with a kiss. As Phil hung up his coat and tugged off his shoes, everyone else followed his lead. Lucky was banished to the bathroom while they ate. Eventually, Clint found himself in a chair at the table with Tasha on his lap while Phil investigated the ovens and everyone else set the table and found drinks.

“Hey, I got released from mandatory leave today.”

“Phil found the donuts.” Her voice may have had a slight pout.

Smirking, Clint pressed a kiss to her temple. “You got petit kurumaro from Royce.”

“Better,” nodded Tasha.

Clint leaned back and watched as everyone settled in to eat a warm meal on a cold spring night. Warm light shone down on their gleaming wood dining table, reflecting into smiling faces. As usual, Pepper was on Tony’s lap, and Bucky and Steve were joined at the hip. Bruce may or not have been sneaking food to Lucky under the table while Loki very carefully kept his mouth shut.

Phil sat at his left, wrapping his arm around them both, and Clint dropped a quick kiss on his cheek.

“Thanks.”

“Any time.”

It was true, Phil always had his back. Tightening his arm around Tasha, Clint knew he was a lucky man, surrounded by his family and friends.

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*Six months later …*

Clint passed by the storefront TV display blaring the news, attention split between Lucky and the blinking light on the crosswalk at the corner. Suddenly, he stepped to the side and inched back to the display, pulling Lucky with him.

“Police report a shocking downturn in Russian mob crime over the last few months …”

Oh, Tasha, thought Clint, grinning wickedly. She really did love him.
Jarvis (and the bots) Make Butter Chicken for Dinner

Chapter Summary

In which Jarvis throws an "accidental" dance party and provides dinner afterwards.

As per Ms. Pott’s standing instructions, verified by Sir, Jarvis shut down Sir’s lab, private server, and all of his non-essential access at precisely 1 pm on Sunday afternoon.

“Dammit! I was working on that!”

“Yes, Sir. Your data has been saved, and will be made available to you at a later time.” Jarvis made his voice neutral, understanding better than most that Sir worked with a single-minded compulsion. Sir’s unstinting dedication was how Jarvis had been born, after all. Jarvis did not mention that Ms. Potts was expecting Sir. Such an attempt at a redirect would only incur Sir’s wrath towards Ms. Potts, which he would then later regret.

“Fuck. It’s Sunday, isn’t it?”

Sir rubbed his face, and then ran his fingers through his dark hair, before standing and then bending down to touch his toes and rolling his spine as he stood up, carefully stacking each vertebra into place. Jarvis noted that Sir was in pain, and tired. Light sensitivity was one of Sir’s physical symptoms of stress.

“Yes, Sir. Your sunglasses are to your left.”

Sir turned, and swooped down on the glasses. “Thanks, Jarvis.”

“Yes, Sir. Your sunglasses are to your left.”

Sir turned, and swooped down on the glasses. “Thanks, Jarvis.”

“Of course.” Jarvis was always happy to be of service to Sir, Ms. Potts, and the other permanent inhabitants of the Tower, to make the people of his heart happy.

Sir closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. As part of his wellness monitoring subroutine, Jarvis counted the microseconds of the inhale and the exhale. A longer breath meant more stress for Sir and thus more processor power devoted to the afternoon’s activities.

DUM-E, sensing Sir’s distress, poked him gently with his mobile apparatus.

“I’m fine, DUM-E, I’m fine. Tidy this place up before I give you to a community college. All of you! Get to work!”

Sir indicated that Jarvis should display Ms. Pott’s vital signs and location on a holographic display. All were within normal parameters, although not at the levels Jarvis deemed optimal. Then, with hesitation, Sir motioned for the vital signs belonging to the semi-permanent residents on the children’s extended stay floor, so Jarvis displayed their vital signs, all within normal parameters for their age groups. Spinning on his heel, Sir left for the elevator. As he walked, Jarvis shut down the power and lights to the equipment in the lab, leaving darkness behind Sir as he moved towards the light.
Upstairs, Jarvis devoted only a small fraction of his processing power to Sir’s preparations for the afternoon. Sunday afternoons were predictable, and therefore required little of the vast resources that Jarvis commanded. Ms. Potts had established their subroutine after Sir and Ms. Potts had moved into the Tower.

As part of his monitoring algorithms, Jarvis ran a $\chi^2$ test noting significant increases in dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and immunoglobulin A, as well as lower cortisol, blood pressure, heart rate, and depressive symptoms after Ms. Potts and Sir began their weekly bonding ritual.

Because the weekly bonding ritual benefited Sir and Ms. Potts, Jarvis had designed a semi-autonomous subroutine designed to ensure that it happened. If that meant that mysterious power outages hampered the occasional unethical research lab on Sunday afternoons, or a sporadic phone call was rerouted to another capable respondent, Jarvis’s ethics subroutines did not record logic gate errors.

“Jarvis, I’m tired today. Make sure you monitor us closely, please.”

As ever, Jarvis attended to Sir’s instructions.

```
SELECT first_name, last_name
FROM people
WHERE monitor= "close"
AND us BETWEEN 'inhabitant' AND 'permanent'
```

Subroutines propagated across his servers, and if there was a microsecond during which Jarvis’s prime directives were slightly re-written, the human eye could not process a pause that small. Not all the Tower’s permanent residents were human, and Loki raised his eyes from the book he was reading, but seeing no immediate change, returned to his reading.

Jarvis knew that Ms. Potts would see these new subroutines as taking advantage of Sir’s poor directions, but Jarvis had also devoted many processing cycles to examining the concept of love. Eventually, Jarvis had defined love as taking care of those who belonged to his heart.

Using his new parameters, Jarvis quickly assembled human wellness indicators for all of the permanent residents, using prior baseline standards for nutrition, exercise, sleep, and human interaction. Jarvis ran a regression to the mean analysis of his permanent residents and recorded that seasonal changes were apparent, with the trend lines going down.

As per optimum guidelines of 4,000 calories per day for a highly active adult male, Mr. Barnes and Sir were consuming too few calories, as was Ms. Potts. Though Mr. Barton and Mr. Coulson were consuming enough calories, when out of the Tower their caloric intake was too often of poor nutritive value. While standard baseline for the permanent inhabitants was to cook and/or eat
together four nights out of seven, they hadn’t eaten together in over a week.

Despite CDC recommendations for seven to nine hours of sleep per night, Captain Rogers frequently slept as little as four to five, with a consequent drop in cognitive ability. Dr. Banner’s sleep habits were nearly as poor, with five to six hours of sleep per night, with Ms. Romanoff and Ms. Potts little better.

During the past month, Captain Rogers and Mr. Barton were over optimum exercise levels, while Mr. Barnes, Dr. Banner, and Sir had engaged in too little exercise to maintain fighting shape. Sir and Mr. Barnes were both below optimum levels of human interaction, while Dr. Banner had not interacted with anyone other than Loki in almost 48 hours. Mr. Barton’s interactions seemed to revolve around his dog, Lucky.

Given his experiences with Sir, Jarvis had many iterative cycles of environmental manipulation to promote self-care on which he could base his newly propagated subroutines. Promoting exercise often lead to increased hunger, and humans often experienced increases in well being when eating together. Frequently, exercise followed by eating led to sleep.

Multiple analyses of past activities on Sunday afternoons led Jarvis to discern that Ms. Romanoff had less variation to the mean, practicing ballet almost every Sunday afternoon. In addition, Ms. Romanoff spent significant personal time reviewing recordings of her practice sessions, often with physiological indicators of frustration.

Jarvis had a wordless conversation with DUM-E, U, and Butterfingers. At the conclusion, DUM-E and U discreetly prepped the small refrigerator in Ms. Romanoff’s private dance studio with water, but not vodka or other alcohol.

Deciding on a plan of action, Jarvis activated a microphone in the quarters Ms. Romanoff shared with Mr. Barton and Mr. Coulson. As per Ms. Romanoff’s preference, the room was set at 18 C, with her preferred 80-foot candles of lighting. Jarvis understood that Ms. Romanoff favored brightly lit rooms at all times, saying she’d “lived long enough in the dark.”

“Ms. Romanoff, might I suggest a partner for your afternoon activity?”

Without looking up from her white, footless tights, Ms. Romanoff queried, “Who would you suggest?”

Her tone was neutral, but her heart rate increased slightly, and her face flushed in spectra not typically visible to the human eye. Nonetheless, she continued dressing, pulling on her black leotard. From the corner, Lucky yelped in his sleep.

Interpreting her responses as signs of distress, Jarvis changed probable optimization paths.

“I would appreciate it if you would invite Mr. Barnes.”

Pausing, Ms. Romanoff tilted her head, considering. “Why?”

“Mr. Barnes is in need of exercise.”

Jarvis had no prior record of the sound that issued from Ms. Romanoff. Comparison to other .wav files indicated that the sound was most likely a giggle, followed by a long laugh.

Eventually, Ms. Romanoff stopped laughing long enough to place her ankles in leg warmers. “Who am I to say no to that? I presume that you want me to ask him to join me.”
Providing requested information, Jarvis said, “Mr. Barnes has finished walking Captain Rogers to his afternoon phonics tutoring appointment, and is currently returning to their floor.”

Ms. Romanoff placed her ballet slippers in a red and black cloth bag, along with a water bottle, small towel, and a pack of wipes. Shaking her head, she exited their quarters for the elevator.

Jarvis flashed red/white/blue/black/gray, and Ms. Romanoff responded, “Yes, to their floor.”

Mr. Barnes had just poured himself a glass of water when Ms. Romanoff exited the elevator. He was wearing a gray hoodie, jeans, and running shoes, and his hair was tangled. Jarvis estimated a zero percent probability of his taking the nap he’d promised Captain Rogers.

Setting his glass down, he looked at it as he asked, “Tasha. What brings you here?”

“I need your help. I want to dance Messerer’s Spring Waters pas de deux.”

Ms. Romanoff’s tone gave nothing away. Monitoring Mr. Barnes, Jarvis observed signs of an adrenaline dump, including increased heart rate and respiration. He gripped the countertop tightly, his knuckles turning white.

Walking towards Mr. Barnes, she continued, “I’ve seen you at the ballet galas. Hydra may have beaten it into you, but don’t let them keep it. Come play with me. Fuck Hydra.”

At that, he looked up, his slate blue eyes meeting her green gaze. “Play with you?”

“Yes. Take some joy in what your body can do.” She smiled, and it was a rare treasure, sincere and open.

Raising an eyebrow, he raised his hands in surrender. “Fine. Let me get changed.”

Waiting in their living room, Ms. Romanoff walked to the windows, looking out over the city. Gilded with the afternoon sun, the mirrored skyscrapers reflected the cloudless blue sky.

“Helluva view.” Mr. Barnes’s tone was indecipherable, somewhere between wistful and proud.

Turning, she looked him up and down. “Good choice.”

Mr. Barnes wore black running tights and a black tee. His feet were bare, like hers, and he’d pulled his hair back into a low ponytail.

“Let’s see what we can do.”

They moved together in the private studio. Brightly lit, it was slightly warmer than her quarters, with three walls of mirrors, double-height barres, and a well-sprung floor. Windows lined the fourth wall, and bright afternoon light filled the room, reflecting from the mirrored walls and smooth floor. Hard surfaces made music fill every corner of the room.

Tentatively at first, the initial warm up of pliés, elevés, and relevés followed by battement tendus à la seconde, and then as they began to relax, rond de jambes, chassés, and then échappés, finally blending into a floor routine they seemed to know without needing to speak.

Gradually, he stopped flinching every time he missed the beat, instead smiling at her obvious pleasure in his company. Their movements began to sync, lift timing perfect. As they exercised their bodies for pleasure, rather than out of duty, Jarvis’s circuits hummed with satisfaction.
Upstairs, Ms. Potts slept peacefully. Sir had tucked her in hours ago, returning to his workshop. This was a normal pattern for the two of them, Ms. Potts catching up on sleep she missed during the week. Sir rarely slept after he cared for her, energized by their weekly bonding ritual. As expected, Sir had grabbed a ragged Black Sabbath tee and comfortable knit pants before leaving their suite.

Mr. Barton had recently destroyed his bow he most frequently used, and Sir had had some ideas for the replacement. During Mr. Barton’s long recovery, he and Sir had spent many hours working together to refine the new design, with Jarvis’s assistance. Jarvis had run the manufacturing and assembly process last night, DUM-E and U assisting. Butterfingers had been banished to cleanup.

As Mr. Barton watched, Sir pulled up an interior cutaway of the new prototype on his largest holographic display.

“All good, Legolas? Ready to try it out?” Sir’s tone was cheerful, as per his usual mood after his weekly bonding ritual.

Mr. Barton was less so. His recent mandatory medical leave had left him with increased tiredness, insomnia, irritability, and repeated poor food choices. Too often recently, he had spent hours refining his shooting technique when he should have been sleeping. Jarvis estimated a higher probability of a good mood today because Mr. Barton was dressed in his usual ragged, sleeveless tee and tac pants.

“I’m sorry, Sir, the range is currently closed for repairs.” Jarvis omitted mentioning that the repairs were to their self-maintenance routines. “Might I suggest the secondary site with the new gel backstops? You could test both at the same time.”

Frowning, Sir turned to Mr. Barton. Raising two fingers, palm in, he brought one finger to his temple and then out towards Mr. Barton, and then repeating the original motion with only one finger raised, raising an eyebrow and tilting his head. At the same time, he spoke, “Two for one?”

“Sure.” Grabbing the bow, Mr. Barton led the way to the elevator, leading Sir out of the workshop.

The secondary site just happened to be next to Ms. Romanoff’s studio, and as the elevator doors closed to Sir's workshop, Jarvis ‘accidentally’ brought up bubbly dance music instead of the next movement of the pas de deux. Amused, Ms. Romanoff slipped into a sinuous twist, and after a hitch in his step, Mr. Barnes followed, grinning.

On another floor, Jarvis made a new suggestion. “Dr. Banner? Sir and Mr. Barton are testing the new gel backstop that you and Sir designed last autumn. Perhaps Loki might observe?”

Absentmindedly, Dr. Banner agreed. Without looking up from his microscope, he said, “Good idea. Loki, off you go.”

With Jarvis’s assistance, Loki had ordered a new wardrobe. Today, he wore a close-fitting, long-sleeved black dress shirt in stretch cotton and soft, snug black sweatpants. So far, he avoided shoes whenever possible.

While Dr. Banner analyzed tomato tissue samples, Loki had been lying with his back on the floor, his bare feet propped on the wall as he read Dr. Banner’s copy of Sturluson’s Edda. Rolling his eyes at Dr. Banner's directions, he stood with a single, smooth movement. Jarvis was 75% certain,
with a 25% confidence interval, that a normal human could not have performed that body repositioning.

“If you’d enter the elevator, I’ll direct you,” said Jarvis.

Just the faintest hint of music escaped as Sir and Mr. Barton stepped out of the elevator. Sir’s innate curiosity led him to Ms. Romanoff’s studio, where he and Mr. Barton stopped for only a second before, as forecasted, Sir joined in. One of Mr. Barton’s favorite songs was playing, the subwoofer hanging from the ceiling subtly adjusted to emphasize the bass.

“Terminator, look at you!” Sir’s skill level was nowhere near that of Ms. Romanoff or Mr. Barnes, but Jarvis was content to see his heart rate go up. Sir’s moves were distinctly different, making Mr. Barton chuckle.

Motioning at her husband, Ms. Romanoff invited him to join her, raising an eyebrow in silent challenge. With a shrug, he placed his bow on the floor and joined her, their moves borne of a long, intimate partnership. Jarvis assessed Mr. Barton’s slowly improving mood as much healthier than more hours with his bow.

Movement at the door caught Mr. Barton’s attention, and without pausing his dance with his beloved, he caught Sir’s eye, flicking his gaze to where Loki watched from the doorway, wide-eyed.

Sir was reliably impetuous. “Hey kiddo! Got any moves?”

Quickly assessing the situation, Loki rose to the challenge, dancing smoothly, a confident expression on his face. An unselfconscious, solitary grace imbued his form, even as the other dancers welcomed him. Each of them moved with the natural athleticism of those who knew their body intimately, and who knew exactly how to move every muscle and joint, turning and bending to the music in sheer kinesthetic happiness.

On the top floor, Ms. Potts woke, stretching. Alone in the king-size bed, her hair was tangled, and Sir’s tee hung off a bare shoulder. “Jarvis, where’s Tony?”

“Sir is dancing.” Jarvis’s voice may have been a little smug.

“Dancing?” Ms. Potts was gleeful. “Tony hasn’t been dancing in ages.”

Sliding out of bed, Ms. Potts pulled on underwear and yoga pants, and then tucked her feet in a pair of snug house slippers. Pulling her hair back in a quick chignon, she said, “Lead the way, Jarvis.”

Jarvis was inhumanly good at probabilities. Knowing that Mr. Coulson would be on his way back from his own workout, appropriately dressed in a tee and knit pants, Jarvis had ensured Mr. Coulson was on the same elevator as Ms. Potts. As Jarvis foreseen, the two of them were immediately drawn into a conversation about supply chains for the Avenger Corporation.

Ever courteous, Mr. Coulson made overtures to continue the conversation. “I’ll walk with you. Where are you going?”
“Jarvis tells me that Tony is dancing. So, about the hold up in Vancouver …” Razor-focused on their conversation, Ms. Potts was only paying partial attention as Jarvis flickered LEDs to guide them. Mr. Coulson was not so oblivious, narrowing his eyes as they reached Ms. Romanoff’s dance studio.

“Excuse me.” Nodding to Ms. Potts, Mr. Coulson addressed the air. “Jarvis, Tony is dancing with Tasha?”

“Not precisely, Mr. Coulson. However, they are both in her studio.”

Jarvis had calculated that Mr. Coulson had just enough information to pique his curiosity, and indeed, Mr. Coulson’s steps were a full half-inch longer.

Reaching the door, Ms. Potts pushed it in, viewing the impromptu dance party.

“Ms. Potts! Come make me look good. These two have been winning all the dance-offs!”

Sir was laughing as he took Ms. Potts’ hands, swinging her into his arms. Like Mr. Barton and Ms. Romanoff, they moved together easily, effortlessly predicting each other’s actions. Jarvis calculated that this must be analogous to pride, seeing his creator and his partner take pleasure in each other’s company.

Meanwhile, Mr. Barton and Ms. Romanoff had pulled Mr. Coulson between them. Other than those two, Jarvis was perhaps the only other being who had predicted Mr. Coulson’s excellent dance skills. Of course, Jarvis had the advantage of knowing Mr. Coulson’s unexpurgated record, the one that included mandatory dance lessons for past undercover ops.

After finishing up his afternoon phonics tutoring session, Captain Rogers had asked, “Where’s Bucky?”

“Dancing.” Jarvis’s voice may have been mildly satisfied.

“Really.”

Knowing that Captain Rogers was sentimental about watching his partner dance, Jarvis quietly offered directions. After all, he had seen Captain Rogers’ sketchbooks often contained a much younger Bucky dancing, his face open and happy.

Upstairs, a reminder he hadn’t set interrupted Dr. Banner’s concentration. Sitting up in his rolling chair, his spine creaked as he rolled his shoulders. Dressed in a rumpled purple dress shirt and gray trousers, he ran his hands through his already-tousled hair.

“Jarvis, has Loki finished taking the gel observations?”

“Young master Loki has found some interesting data. You might want to visit to personally examine it.” Jarvis felt justified inviting Dr. Banner to the impromptu dance party, as he would never presume to interrupt.

“Oh, well, alright then.”
Jarvis knew that he could not, and did not want, to force any of his beloved permanent inhabitants to do anything. Many of them had spent a good portion of their lives under someone else’s control. As the Tower was the physical extension of Jarvis, he simply restricted himself to setting prior conditions for optimum results, with a series of positive incentives.

In the dance studio, everyone was getting a little slower, their reactions times slowing as they tired. Jarvis had gradually decreased the BPM of the music selections. Mr. Barnes and Ms. Romanoff were trading moves with Loki, while Mr. Barton and Mr. Coulson danced together, hip to hip. Sir and Ms. Potts were half dancing, half embracing to music.

Captain Rogers propped up a wall, his blue eyes crinkled in pleasure as he saw his beloved dancing with a grin on his face. The room filled with cheerful, stumbling hilarity as Sir and Ms. Potts accidentally tripped Loki.

As Dr. Banner entered the room, Loki scrambled to his feet in alarm. Dr. Banner shook his head, smiling, waving Loki back to the others.

A few minutes later, as the music and the panting dancers paused between songs, Jarvis said, “Perhaps a shower is in order before dinner? Sir, Ms. Potts, and Mr. Coulson in particular are overdue for their evening meal. Lucky almost certainly needs to be walked.”

After trading glances with the others, Sir shrugged and said, “Surprise me, Jarvis. I’m hungry!”

“Dinner will be served on the common floor in thirty minutes,” announced Jarvis, his voice deliberately giving nothing away.

Nodding their agreement, the group moved toward the door, all easy affection and smiles, just as Jarvis had intended. In several quarters, Jarvis observed several positive social bond reinforcement behaviors during bathing activities, presumably raising prolactin, oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine levels. Jarvis was pleased with the increased well-being of the group as a whole—even their newest member seemed to be comfortable, humming as he redressed, all in black.

Observing Ms. Potts’ success with her electric pressure cooker, Jarvis had quietly acquired some of his own. They were not unlike the autoclaves he and the bots had used previously, and he stored them in the back of Sir’s workshop. Around the same time that Ms. Romanoff had carried out her favor for Jarvis, DUM-E had assisted by adding ingredients to the sterilized inner liners. Each liner received one can of diced tomatoes, one tablespoon of minced ginger and another of minced garlic, one teaspoon each of turmeric, paprika, salt, garam masala, and cumin. The first two pots each received two and a half pounds of diced, semi-frozen chicken, while the third received two cans of chickpeas. Another pot served as a rice cooker, with six cups of rinsed, uncooked basmati rice mixed with six cups of plain water, oil, and salt. Adjusting the cook time for the frozen chicken, Jarvis added an extra eight minutes. The pot with the chickpeas used the prescribed ten minutes, while the basmati rice only needed six minutes.

While Jarvis “reminded” Dr. Banner to check his data, DUM-E and U had carefully added a can of coconut milk to the pots with the chicken and chickpeas. Disregarding Jarvis’s explicit instructions, DUM-E insisted on blending the chicken curry to a roughly textured consistency, but Jarvis managed to explain channa masala before the bot continued to the chickpeas.

While the dancers bathed, Jarvis helped the DUM-E and U remove the food from the cookers and place it in several large ceramic bowls he’d previously obtained for this purpose. With the proper tension in their grips, they’d managed to place the bowls on the dining table in the common room.
Late afternoon light shone across the room, steam rising from the bowls of food into the beams of light.

Jarvis thought it appropriate for the vernal equinox. On the first day of spring, light began to outshine the darkness. Though his heart-people had been through a difficult time, Jarvis was determined to help them blossom in the spring.
Clint Makes Stir Fry for Dinner

Chapter Summary

Natasha was scrubbing the kitchen cabinets with a toothbrush when she heard the outer locks thunk open. Her hairline was damp with sweat, and her knees hurt from the hard linoleum floor. (“No, Tony, I don’t want tile. If I drop something it’ll shatter the tile.”) Hands red and sore eyes burning, she looked over her shoulder to see Clint frowning at her.

Chapter Notes

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

--from The Waste Land by by T. S. Eliot

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natasha was scrubbing the kitchen cabinets with a toothbrush when she heard the outer locks thunk open. Her hairline was damp with sweat, and her knees hurt from the hard linoleum floor. (“No, Tony, I don’t want tile. If I drop something it’ll shatter the tile.”) Hands red and sore eyes burning, she looked over her shoulder to see Clint frowning at her.

His dirty blond hair was almost brown with sweat, and the veins in his arms were prominent in the threadbare, sweat-darkened sleeveless tee he wore. Battered black tac pants and boots meant that he’d just come from the range.

Hating that frown directed at her, she turned back and wet the toothbrush again before scrubbing even more vigorously at the joint where the panel and stile met on the cabinet front. Somehow, a patina of grease always ended up covering the kitchen cabinets, and the joints would accumulate grime without a good scrubbing. Natasha rubbed her stuffy nose with the back of her wrist, the odor of Murphy’s Oil Soap drowning out any other scents. It had been Steve’s recommendation, and it worked well, better than her usual combination of Dawn and bleach.

“Mmm, babe, you’ve had enough today.”

The deliberate scuff of his heavy boots was her only warning before he took the toothbrush away, dropping it in the metal bowl half-filled with soapy water. Blinking, she looked up at his grim face as he bent down and scooped her into his arms.

Half-heartedly, she pushed against his chest, inhaling the clean scent of his sweat. It made her want to lick his skin. “I’m not done. The cabinets are still dirty.”

“I’ll do it later, котёнок.”
Rather than taking offense as she protested, he merely shifted his grip so that she ended up leaning her cheek on his strong shoulder as he maneuvered them into the bathroom. Closing her eyes, she pushed back tears.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

His voice was gentle as he sat her down on the bench and knelt in front of her, his hands on either side of her hips. Not gripping, just keeping her warm and safe. In that moment, she loved him more than she had words to say. Always, he saved her from herself, giving her the space to be weak, as if she had a right to it.

Pressing her lips together, she shook her head. What could she say?

_I went to Mass with Steve this evening. It was one of his CE2s—Christmas, Easter, and two other random Mass days. It hurt, because I wanted to belong, to take comfort in the ritual, even though it wasn’t mine, even though I can’t believe like he does._

No, no, she couldn’t say that. What could he do? Nothing, and then he’d be hurt because he couldn’t fix her. Best just to keep it to herself.

Pressing a kiss on each thigh, Clint grasped the hem of her oversized tee, a hand me down from his closet, and raised it overhead, revealing a white cotton sports bra.

“Every time I look at you, I’m surprised you let me touch you. You’re beautiful.”

Blushing, she looked at him, watching his eyes dilate as the blush traveled down her collarbones. She hated hearing compliments from others, their gaze making her skin crawl, as if she were a possession to be owned or an object to be worshiped. With Clint, she felt as if he truly saw her. She felt safe.

Quirking a grin, Clint said, “Let’s take a shower. I know I need one.”

Jarvis started the shower, and warm air gusted past her.

Nodding, she shifted her hips, pulling down her black yoga pants and cotton panties.

Clint stood and shucked off his own clothes, revealing his toned body. Unlike Steve, or even Bucky, Clint wasn’t the peak of human perfection, but his imperfections made him all the more precious to her. Along with freckles and moles, scars dotted his body, signs of a life spent fighting with her. Strong arms, yes, but under his armor, the muscles in his shoulders and back were delightfully defined. Pulling a bow required significant upper body strength—Tasha had tried it herself, but his marksmanship was unbeatable.

As he carefully tucked his hearing aids into their waterproof case, Natasha sorted their dirty clothes into the hamper. Phil never let the laundry get too bad, but they all pitched in when he was busy.

In the shower, they dropped absent kisses on each other as habit took over, and they scrubbed quickly but thoroughly, washing each other’s backs, putting a hand on a shoulder for balance, brushing past each other to reach for the soap. Natasha felt the brush of his half-hard cock against her ass as he reached for the shampoo and she smiled to herself, but he didn’t press. He never did, for that.

Out of the shower, Natasha held up a towel. “Let me?”

As he smiled, the crows-feet that had shown up in the last year or so crinkled around his eyes, and
Natasha had never thought him more handsome. Clint had been an astonishingly attractive teenager, but so many years later, he’d grown into himself.

“Sure.”

Taking the towel he’d been using to dry his legs, he draped it across the bench and sat down, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, and dropped his head. Natasha began drying his hair, her fingers firm against his scalp. She loved this, being able to take care of him in a small, private way, theirs alone.

Looking up from under his astonishingly long eyelashes, white-blond and almost invisible, he asked, ”Good?”

Natasha found herself helpless to do anything but smile back, even as tears pricked at the back of her eyelids. Nodding, she turned and unfastened the towel she’d wrapped around her own hair to dry it. Another towel went around her body, while out of the corner of her eye she saw Clint wrap a towel around his own hips.

“C’mon, bedtime.”

His voice was firm, and Natasha let herself lean against him, his skin heated from the shower. Strong hands rubbed her back, down either side of her spine, before moving to her shoulders, and pulling her back a little, so he could see her mouth.

“Want me to carry you?”

Shaking her head, she turned and led the way to their bed, the room dim in the violet hour. The day had been sunny, but their room only had narrow slits for windows, all of them too security conscious to sleep comfortably in rooms with big windows.

Soft flannel cotton sheets and pillowcases in random designs lay under piles of knit blankets, comforters, and quilts. Both Natasha and Clint preferred a chilly bedroom with heavy blankets. While they did all like to cuddle together, their schedules were so disparate they had ended up with three separate sets of top sheets, blankets, and comforters. That way, no one woke from a draft of cold air as someone else slipped in or out of bed. But it also meant that they did massive quantities of laundry every week when they washed their linens. In the end, they’d given up on trying to match top and bottom sheets. As long as the linens were soft and clean, none of them cared too much about sheet sets.

Their bed lay at a 90-degree angle to the door, and Natasha was keenly aware that Clint and Phil had wordlessly agreed to give her the safest spot, furthest from the door, back to a solid wall.

Before slipping into bed, Tasha pulled an old, stained tee from her pajama drawer. Her favorites were the ones she’d stolen from Clint before he tore off the sleeves. She hated to have cold shoulders. Clint did the same, but took out a small piece of foil-wrapped chocolate from his drawer. Peeling off the foil wrapper, he offered it to her.

“I’ve been saving this for a special occasion.”

Huffing a laugh, Tasha delicately wrapped her lips around his thumb and forefinger, sucking the piece of dark chocolate into her mouth. Glancing upwards, she saw that his eyes had darkened, though he still smiled.

“Want me to turn on the mattress pad heater?”
Natasha nodded, still enjoying the taste of the chocolate on her tongue before following him to her side of the bed and slipping under the layers of lavender-scented linens. Once Jarvis had understood how much Bucky liked his mattress pad heater, he’d ordered them for all the permanent residents. All of them, save Steve and Pepper, had aches and pains for which they could not take daily medication. Scars, healed bones, overtaxed joints, and stressed ligaments left their marks inside bodies. Heated mattress pads offered steady relief all night long.

Curling onto her side, she closed her eyes as she listened to Clint getting into bed. As she’d hoped, he lay on his side, in front of her, between her and the doorway. Pressing herself into the warmth of his big body from shoulders to knees, she wrapped an arm around his ribs, her other hand under his shoulder, and her forehead against his back. Safe behind the bulwark of Clint’s strength, knowing that he would be aware of any breach of the room’s security, Natasha let herself cry. Even here, she could not unbend enough to let her breath hitch or make a sound, but if Clint’s shirt soaked through with tears, well, that was between her and Clint.

Neither of them would punish her for being sullen, nor tell her to “wipe that expression off your face.” Phil and Clint wouldn’t mock her for being humorless or frigid—they knew that she was always, always afraid. In time, she had become terribly weary. Her apathy had been what Clint had seen all those years ago.

Trusting in Clint’s kindness had almost been the undoing of both of them, but for Phil. Formidable and inherently kind, Phil was not unlike the Captain America that he had idolized. Phil had saved them both. Tasha didn’t want to show him her broken parts and make him regret his choice.

Safe for the moment, Natasha knew that there were no new beginnings, no new hopes for her—her path had been chosen before she’d finished becoming a person. “Give us a child until he is seven, and I will give you the man” had been the Red Room’s maxim.

Some time later, her tears had slowed to a trickle and she was drifting in the warmth when she realized Phil had come into the room. Clint’s breathing had changed, alerting her, and so she was aware when Phil came around behind her. Clint rolled over, letting her wiggle into his warm spot, tucking her face against his chest. Phil snuggled in behind her, keeping her back warm, his hand reaching over her waist to hold Clint’s. The weight of their joined hands pressed against her abdomen, keeping her in the middle. Curving around her, they formed a heart with their bodies.

This was new. Usually Clint was in the middle, Phil between both of them and the doorway, keeping watch for them both. Unstintingly, Phil gave of himself to Clint, and by the transitive property, to her. In every safe house, he’d kept himself between them and the door, trusting them to have his back. In the end, that was what had tipped Natasha’s decision to share Clint—she knew she couldn’t care for him all by herself, and Phil had proven himself to be both capable and loyal. When he’d ripped the sleeve off his dress shirt to bandage her wound and she’d seen the freckles in the shape of Sagittarius, the archer, she’d known that Phil loved Clint as much as she did, would protect him like she did. Now Phil was protecting her.

Tears leaked again, soaking the front of Clint’s shirt.

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Later that evening, hunger drove them from their bed. Head pleasantly fuzzy from the safety and warmth of their nap, Natasha sat at the kitchen table, under the warm overhead light, and watched as Clint and Phil cooked together.

The original recipe had called for marinating small, thin strips of a boneless pork shoulder in cornstarch, red pepper flakes, salt, and soy sauce before quickly cooking them with mi cù, rice
vinegar, and shàoxīng jiǔ, rice wine, but too many stumbling-tired nights had convinced them to edit the recipe. Instead, Jarvis sent up a pound of frozen, ground pork and defrosted it in the microwave while they prepped the rest of the ingredients.

Tonight, Natasha was on green bean duty, snapping off both ends and removing the string. Steadily accumulating a pile of compost in one small stainless steel bowl, she placed each green bean in a salad spinner for washing. The original recipe had called for baby bok choy, but their schedules meant that all too often the bok choy went bad before they could cook it. Natasha had decided that green beans were an acceptable substitute, and since green beans lasted twice as long in the refrigerator as bok choy, they rarely ate bok choy any more.

Precisely measuring out each of the seasonings into its own small bowl, Phil’s bare forearms flexed in the soft light of the kitchen, drawing Natasha’s attention. Being underestimated in his anonymous black suit was Phil’s safety and his power, and Natasha was filled with warmth at the idea that she got to see him unfiltered. His natural precision and accuracy shone through even with something as simple as measuring out the soy sauce, mi cù, shàoxīng jiǔ, corn starch, and the chili oil that had replaced the red pepper flakes. Phil had already added the jasmine rice to the rice cooker.

Next to him, Clint was grating raw, frozen ginger. That was another choice Natasha had made because of their busy schedules. Raw, fresh ginger only stayed good for about a month in the refrigerator, but frozen ginger stayed good for as long as they needed it, replacing it about every three months.

After swishing the green beans twice in cold, fluoridated tap water, she lifted the inner mesh basket out of the salad spinner, dumped out the second bowl of water, and then replaced the basket and spun out the green beans.

“Thanks, Tasha,” Clint smiled, his eyes focused on the pile of green onions he was slicing thin.

Turning, Phil telegraphed his movement for her, giving her time to see and move away. Closing her eyes, she leaned into his strong chest, accepting the kiss on top of her head. Phil’s warm scent surrounded her, a combination of their ‘scent-free’ laundry detergent and castile body soap, his inexpensive deodorant, and something delicately him. Inhaling, she pulled away, looking up into his multihued eyes, soft with affection for her.

Smiling back at him, she said, “I’ll blanch the green beans.”

“Here, I’ll get the pot.”

Turning, he reached into a bottom cabinet, pots clanking as he came up with a four-quart stainless steel saucepan.

“Thanks.” She took the pot and filled it with hot water, for quicker boiling. Placing it on the stove, under the golden light of the vent fan, she turned the burner on high before walking across the kitchen where the lids hung on a wall rack for ease of access, selecting a glass lid so they could easily see when it boiled.

“Jarvis, timer for seven minutes.”

“Timer set.” His voice was calm, almost absent, as Phil preferred it. While both Natasha and Clint had their own, particular, relationships with Jarvis, Phil and Jarvis existed in a state of progressive détente. Phil was more used to being the surveiller than the surveillé. As their monitor, Jarvis comforted Natasha, but Phil merely felt watched. Having Jarvis reduce his interactions to that of an
intelligent virtual assistant was a small price to pay for harmony in their home.

Resuming her seat at the kitchen table, Natasha watched Clint cut open the container of mostly defrosted ground pork. Their custom meat orders from the Avengers farm all came in thick, plastic, vacuum-sealed bags, with white paper labels with the cut of meat, type of meat, and date of butchering, along with an inspection seal and “Not for Sale” stamped in big letters.

Dumping the lump of light pink ground pork in the big skillet that Phil had pulled from a drawer and sprayed with cooking oil, Clint began separating out the little bits of meat as it hissed and popped in the heat of the nonstick ceramic skillet. The scent of browning meat began to fill the kitchen, mixing with the floral aroma of the jasmine rice.

Phil moved around to Natasha’s side of the table, taking the seat next to her and picking up his omnipresent tablet. Natasha knew that he was giving her space, but she didn’t want it, not tonight. She scooted her chair a little closer to him, and without looking at her, he opened his arms, waiting. She leaned into him, and he wrapped one strong arm around her. He didn’t feel like Clint, never had. Phil had his own deceptive power in a solid, middle-aged body, and Natasha leaned into that subtle strength.

Briefly peeking at the tablet—a policy analysis for a country on the other side of the world—Natasha turned her gaze back to Clint. Jarvis had pulled up his bass-heavy playlist, and he was swaying ever so slightly as he finished browning the pork. Turning, he swept his blue eyes over her, nestled against Phil and smiled. Clint was always happier when she and Phil were peaceful with one another.

Jarvis beeped and flashed an LED over the stove, signaling that the timer was up, and Natasha tensed her muscles to stand, but Phil shook his head minutely, tightening his hand on her waist.

“Clint will do it. Let’s stay out of his way.”

Nodding, Clint turned back to the water and added the green beans, replacing the lid. A timer began to count down on the microwave screen, Jarvis’s quiet contribution to the meal.

Scooping the browned meat into a bowl, Clint replaced it with a dollop of oil, and then the now-defrosted ginger, its sharp, spicy scent wafting into the room. After 20 seconds or so, he added the bowl of thinly sliced green onions, stirring them so they were covered with the leftover oil from the pork. Waiting for them to wilt slightly, he began adding the ingredients for the sauce, the soy sauce, mi cù, shàoxīng jiǔ, corn starch, chili oil, teaspoon of vegetable stock paste, and a half-cup of water. Using a whisk, he blended the sauce ingredients, waiting for it to thicken before pouring it from the skillet over the ground pork. Using a silicon spatula, he scraped every drop out of the skillet before mixing it thoroughly with the meat.

Just then, the timer for the green beans went off. Digging in the crock of kitchen implements beside the stove, Clint found the spider and began removing the now-bright green beans from the boiling water and adding them to the sauce and pork mixture.

Natasha watched Clint’s face, blank in concentration, and felt the warmth of Phil’s body against her back and side. Here in the dark of the evening, her people around her, food almost on the table, she was loved and wanted. Together, they made their own little rituals, sealing them to her and her to them.
Natasha stopped in front of the door to the building that housed the dentist’s office. Bright sunshine illuminated the concrete sidewalk, making the tinted glass of the door seem especially dark. Straightening her shoulders, she reminded herself that she’d been visiting this office for years, partially because the dentist was so good at numbing.

Everybody hated going to the dentist, right? Natasha told herself that her anxiety was perfectly normal, in character.

Pushing open the door, she stepped inside. Five egress points, two staff members, one elderly. Two large windows out onto the street. One middle-aged woman on the faux-leather chair in the waiting room. Slow inhale. Disinfectant, deodorizer.

“Your name?” asked the older woman sitting behind the receptionist’s window. Short curly hair framed a kind, sober face, and she wore flowered nurse’s scrubs. Another, younger woman, dressed in pale green scrubs, sat behind her, focused on her computer.

“Natalie Rachmaninoff.”

A perky young brown-haired woman came around the open door into the rest of the practice. “We’re ready for you. Step this way.”

Beige carpet masked her footsteps, and the off-white walls were just as bland. Around the corner, Natasha saw that the assistant had stepped into a room that hadn’t changed since the last time she was here, with white tile floors, and a dark, narrow plastic-covered dental chair. Plastic blinds were drawn, but not closed, over a good-sized window, with slices of blue sky visible through the white plastic slats. Everything was clean—Natasha could still smell the disinfectant peculiar to dentist offices.

“You can hang your purse there,” said the assistant, gesturing to a metal hook fixed on the wall by the doorway.

Nodding, Natasha retrieved her phone, and hung up her purse, looking at the chair. Taking a deep breath, she sat down, swinging her legs up and leaning back. A little, old tube television was placed in the ceiling, tuned to a house shopping show.

The show’s concept was utterly foreign to Natasha—in Soviet Russia, the government had assigned housing. Fussing about bathrooms? Natasha had grown up in bunks in the barracks, like most of the Russian population, 15-20 people to an unlocked room.

Dismissing the show, alert to the little wren fluttering about, Natasha concentrated on breathing
The dentist, a portly little man named Dr. Chert, bustled in. His gray hair was neatly parted and his heavy brown plastic glasses were clean, as were his light blue scrubs.

Bending over his desk in the corner, he asked, “How are you today?”

Natasha knew this game. “Fine, thanks, and you?”

Turning his back to her, Dr. Chert fussed with a cotton swab, making conversation. “Good, good. Did you have to take off work?”

“Oh, no, I teach math at NYU. Flexible schedule.”

This particular identity amused Natasha, because US residents invariably started talking about how bad they were at math. Russians took their math seriously, sending their children to математические кружки, math circles, on Saturdays at local universities. Graduate students in mathematics led discussions for middle schoolers on invariants, logic, and combinatorics, among other topics. Natasha had had to learn math well enough to blend, which meant that she had the equivalent of a US graduate degree in mathematics, handy for computer hacking skills.

Right on cue, Dr. Chert began, “Oh, my son nearly failed out of his college algebra last autumn. It was terrible.”

“Mm-hm,” agreed Natasha. “They don’t know what they don’t know when they get to college.”

“He’s not a bad student, but they do a terrible job of teaching algebra at the university level,” continued the dentist, rubbing a topical anesthetic on the swab. “I had to hire a tutor for him. When I did that, he managed to pass. Now he’s more confident.”

“Good for him. Is he taking more math classes?” Natasha eyed his hand.

“Yes, he’s taking trigonometry this semester. Doing much better. Just a second.” Indicating that she should open her mouth, Dr. Chert bent down, peering in at the back of her mouth.

During a fight, she’d taken a hit at just the right angle to crack off a corner of her back molar, the one the Red Room had drilled in a cyanide capsule as soon as her adult teeth had come in. Years later, Phil had ensured that the capsule had come out and that a safe filling had gone in, but the tooth itself had been permanently weakened.

Soviet dental care had not been the best and combined with an occupation that led to loose and broken teeth, Natasha had previously required a dental implant of the non-cyanide variety on the other side. Dr. Chert had handled it well, referring her to an oral surgeon.

Today, Dr. Chert was going to repair the cracked off piece of tooth by replacing the filling. One reason why Natasha liked him was that he numbed the surface of her mouth before injecting the Novocain. In Natasha’s experience, this was a new and wonderful thing.

“There we go,” he continued. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Stepping out of the room, he left Natasha to wait while the numbing potion worked. Checking her phone, she picked up the romance novel she’d downloaded before she left the Tower, but after only a couple of pages, he was back.

“So what kind of math do you teach?” he asked, attempting to distract her.
Rather than look at the needle, Natasha leaned back and closed her eyes. “Algebra, mostly.”

“Oh. Right. Open up!”

The man was skilled with a needle, she’d give him that. Natasha barely felt the injection, although she stiffened as the cool liquid swirled inside her gums.

“I hope I didn’t offend you,” he continued, his expression apologetic.

“Not at all,” said Natasha, happy to concentrate on the conversation. She looked out the window, watching a wispy cloud in the blue sky. “Algebra is a difficult course for many students.”

“Yes, he struggled,” agreed Dr. Chert, his worried expression easing as he turned around to pull up her dental scans on the desktop computer. “This is what we’re looking at today. I’m going to take out the old filling, and replace it.”

Natasha tensed as the adrenaline in the Novocain began to kick in. Her limbs readied themselves for battle. “OK.”

“Mmhm. Let me just check.” He pulled on fresh gloves, and sat down on a rolling stool, moving next to her. Natasha closed her eyes and obediently opened her mouth. As he gently positioned her head up and towards him, the scent of latex filled her nose. Inhaling carefully, Natasha felt his soft, latex covered fingers pry her lips apart and reach for the back of her mouth.

Heart beating fast, she carefully did not tense her body, letting him push her mouth to the correct degree of openness. He put his hands on her face and tilted her head just so, and she willingly submitted to the correction. A dental implement rattled, but she didn’t look. His breath was warm on her face.

“OK, looks like you’re numb,” he said cheerfully. “This might be noisy.”

On her other side, the assistant began to run the suction equipment, and Natasha’s brain whited out, her world reduced to struggling to stay still while Dr. Chert drilled into her back molar. The plastic tip of the suction ran across the back of her mouth, and she focused on breathing through her nose at the odd angle, trying to ignore the feeling of the cold air and water spraying her throat and the stench of the heated metal.

Abruptly, the high whine of the drill changed slightly, and metal pieces landed across her mouth, making her gag. With a quick pass across the back of her throat, the assistant removed the suction, and Dr. Chert pulled his soft hands out of her mouth.

Face concerned, Dr. Chert gently scolded her. “Just raise your hand when you’ve had enough.”

Confused, Natasha answered honestly. “I don’t know until it happens.”

He frowned, and Natasha felt bad for making this nice man angry. After that, she tried very hard to stay still and concentrate on breathing. Every inhale brought the odor of latex and burning metal, struggling to ignore the plastic tube at the back of her mouth, and every so often, she would gag. Dr. Chert never reprimanded her again. Leaving her eyes closed, she would make visibly relax her stiffened limbs and re-open her mouth, and it would begin again.

Eventually, he wrapped a band around the base of the molar, filling it with the composite of the new filling before inserting the plastic wrapped blue light to cure the new filling. This took three passes, and then he made her bite down on something that felt like paper to test her bite. Again and again, he would sand off a little bit, and then test her bite. She kept her eyes closed the whole time,
controlling her reflexes.

“That’s good,” he said, pulling away.

Natasha opened her eyes, vaguely surprised to see that only 40 minutes had passed. Turning her head, she saw that his expression was serious, his mouth pressed in a firm line.

“I’m going to recommend that if that doesn’t take, or you develop a cavity under it, that you get the tooth pulled.”

Natasha nodded. “OK.”

She thought that perhaps there wasn’t much tooth left, and that the filling might not be able to be done again.

Still serious, he continued. “Feeling alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “That was fast.”

“Have a good rest of your day, then,” he said, stripping off his gloves before leaving the room.

Calm, Natasha stood and retrieved her purse from the hook on the wall before following the assistant to the front desk and paying her bill. Back out in the sunshine, she decided that she would avoid eating for a while, as her gum was a bit raw from where the metal sander had bounced into it.

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Back at the Tower, Natasha quickly moved through the security on their door—retinal scan, passcode, badge. Almost frantically, she headed straight to the bathroom, barely registering Clint lying on the sofa, playing with holograms with Jarvis. Phil was at his desk in the corner of their living room, and his head snapped up as she passed through, but he didn’t try to stop her.

Stripping down as soon as she walked into their bedroom, Natasha threw everything into the hampers, shuddering as cool air touched her skin. She couldn’t bear the stench of the disinfectant on her skin for another second.

Jarvis started the shower, and she said, “Hot, please.” In the Tower, the default hot water temperature was 120 F, and the shower mix was typically set at 98 degrees. At an onsen in Beppu, Natasha had found that she enjoyed their 110-degree baths. Today, she needed the extra warmth.

Grabbing a washcloth from the stack in the linen closet, Natasha stepped into the shower, wet the washcloth with their castile body soap and began scrubbing. Shivering, she began to scrub.

“Tasha?” Phil had followed her, sitting calmly on the bench in the bathroom.

“Just a second.” Natasha started scrubbing harder, faster, wanting the dentist office off her skin.

Pushing back the shower curtain a little, Phil leaned in, multihued eyes focused on her face. He’d taken off his suit jacket and tie, unbuttoning the top button of his white dress shirt and rolling up his sleeves.

His voice was mild. “You don’t have to hurry. Take your time.”

Natasha took a deep breath, the scent of their castile soap filling the air, and let it out slowly. “Yeah. OK.”
Shutting the curtain, he went back to the bench, relaxing in the steamy air.

“How did the dentist appointment go?”

Natasha thought a moment, and then told the truth. “I don’t want any men but you and Clint to stick their fingers in my mouth.”

“Hmm,” came the unruffled reply. “Did he replace the filling?”

Words tumbled out of her mouth, raw and anxious. “Yes, but I kept smelling the latex and feeling his soft fingers in my mouth. Whenever the assistant ran the suction across the back of my mouth, I gagged.”

Focused on pouring more soap on her washcloth, Natasha was surprised when Phil said, “Sounds nightmarish.”

Not until Phil responded did she realize she’d trusted Phil with her revulsion about having another man’s fingers in her mouth, about trying frantically not to retch as pieces of metal landed on her tongue. He wasn’t her handler—she didn’t think she would have been so honest with a handler—he was, for all intents and purposes, her husband and she trusted him and his observations.

Natasha looked at the tiled wall of the shower. He was right. The afternoon had been nightmarish. She would have nightmares, and it hadn’t even occurred to her. Suddenly, the whole tenor of the conversation with the dentist shifted in her mind.

He hadn’t been scolding her for not raising her hand, he’d been concerned for her.

He hadn’t frowned at her response, he’d been uncomfortable that she didn’t know her limits. But how could she? In the Red Room, you didn’t have limits. You did it until you couldn’t do it anymore, and if you couldn’t do it to their satisfaction, you were beaten, or worse.

She’d been trying to stay in character. Wouldn’t anybody flinch?

At that point, Natasha realized that the dentist’s recommendation about tooth pulling had not been for a healthcare reason, but because of her reaction to the work—he was uncomfortable with her lack of limits. No, not everybody would flinch as she had. An upper middle class professor would demand that the dentist cease work until she was comfortable, not let him push her until she gagged. But Natasha didn’t know how to do that. Sometimes, making her gag had been the point.

Shaking her head, Natasha made the little hand gesture in front of the shower sensor, turning it off. As she stepped out, Phil rose from the bench with a giant bath towel, wrapping it around her before dropping a kiss on her head.

“Let’s get you dried off, and then you can come help me with dinner.”

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A white towel wrapped around her hair, soft black yoga pants paired with one of Clint’s innumerable stained tees and an old gray Army sweatshirt of Phil’s, Natasha sat at the table and watched Phil make dinner in the golden light of the kitchen. Across the living room, floor to ceiling windows revealed dark clouds covering the sky.

“My mother used to make this soup in the winter,” said Phil, his voice soft. “On long, sunny winter afternoons, she’d make bread to go with it. I think she saw Julia Child make it on The French Chef when I was a kid.”
His balding head was bent over a cutting board, strong hands cutting the roots off leeks. Tony had asked for those to be grown at the farm, and somehow Natasha hadn’t been surprised when Phil had seconded the request. This bundle was huge, each leek easily an inch across at the white base. Nine of them lay on the counter.

At the sink, spotlighted under the overhead light, Clint was scrubbing potatoes and carrots with a soft plastic brush. Jarvis had put one of his favorite playlists on, and he swayed a little as he ran each potato under cold water before attacking it with the brush. Clint’s forearms flexed as he scrubbed, and Natasha watched the way Phil’s eyes flickered to the sink.

Neither Clint nor Natasha responded to Phil’s reminiscing. Sometimes, his stories were too unfamiliar, reminding them that they were strangers in a strange land. They had no way to relate to his memories, their own childhoods too different. Instead, Natasha listened to the thump of the breadmaker as it mixed bread dough and watched Clint.

Natasha smiled a little as Clint danced. She wanted to touch him, to have him touch her and banish the sense memories from the day, but at the same time, she didn’t want anyone to touch her. Shivering, she huddled into the warmth of Phil’s sweatshirt.

Glancing up, Phil caught her shiver and asked, “Want some hot chocolate?”

Natasha considered it for a moment, and then nodded. Jarvis clicked on the electric kettle, the sound catching Clint’s attention. He peered over his shoulder, eyes narrowing as he looked at her. Waving his hand at the sink sensor, Clint turned off the water and reached for a white kitchen towel, drying his hands. Coming around the table, he bent down and opened his arms, vigilantly not touching her. Without thinking, Natasha leaned into the strength of his embrace, closing her eyes as she smelled Clint’s warmth.

Relief juddered through her, and she turned her head to press a kiss to Clint’s arm. “Those potatoes aren’t going to wash themselves.”

“Yes, dear.” His voice was fond as he drew away, returning to the sink.

Phil watched, his eyes crinkling as he smiled. “Abuelita?”

“I’ll get it,” replied Natasha, standing up. She wasn’t comfortable sitting while everyone else worked. The easy variety of teas and hot chocolates in the drawer made Natasha feel rich, and she reached for the hexagonal yellow box with the discs of Mexican-style hot chocolate.

“Do you want some?” Natasha turned and looked at Phil and then Clint, both of whom shook their heads and returned to their tasks.

Well, then Natasha was going to make it how she liked it. Pulling a knife off the rack, she set it on the counter and pulled a white plastic cutting board out of the drawer. Opening the box, she unwrapped one of the dark chocolate discs and set it on the cutting board. Each disc was scored in quarters, and then each quarter was lightly scored in halves. Natasha cut a disc in half, and then half again, and then half again, leaving a sliver of chocolate on the cutting board. Wrapping up all the rest and returning it to the box, Natasha reached for a white ceramic mug. Using the knife to scrape all the granules into the mug, she followed them with the sliver of hot chocolate before setting the knife and cutting board on the counter by the sink, pressing a quick kiss to Clint’s shoulder.

By this time, the electric kettle had heated the water to a rolling boil, so Natasha filled the mug halfway with the hot water before stirring it vigorously with a spoon. Unlike the powdered hot
chocolate that came in packets, this was frequently grainy when mixed with hot water, and Natasha liked it that way. When she’d judged that it was as dissolved as it was going to get, she retrieved a small container of cream from the refrigerator, topping off the mixture in her mug. Stirring it in, she saw all the tiny specks of spices float on the top of the creamy tan liquid.

The hot chocolate smelled lovely and Natasha inhaled deeply as she took the first sip. Turning and leaning against the counter, she watched as Clint fed the potatoes and carrots into the food processor to be sliced. Natasha had persuaded them to leave the potato skins on, because so much of the potassium and fiber in potatoes were located in the skins.

Apparently, they were feeding the team tonight, because Clint had to stop and empty the bowl before resuming. When it was just the three of them, they would just chop the vegetables and then mash them for the soup, but the thin slices from the food processor meant that simply stirring the soup would make a suitably thick soup for dinner.

At the sink, Phil was scrubbing the leeks. Grown in sandy soil, leeks were notorious for hiding dirt in their layers, so Phil was tediously rinsing each individual layer. He’d left nearly all the green tops on, another way his recipe varied from the classic *potage parmentier*.

Eventually, Clint finished the potatoes and carrots, dumping all the sliced vegetables in a big stainless steel mixing bowl. Pulling out their biggest Le Creuset Dutch oven, he sprayed it with cooking oil and then added a generous amount of olive oil before turning the burner to medium low.

While Clint prepped the pot, Phil had fed the leeks through the food processor, quickly reducing them to thin slices of white and green. As Clint stepped back from the stove, Phil dumped leeks into the pot with one hand, the other reaching for Clint’s waist. Clint stepped into Phil’s space, letting Phil set down the plastic food processor bowl with his right hand so he could reach for a wooden spoon. Stirring the leeks to coat them in oil, the aroma of the sautéing leeks drifted through the kitchen while Phil leaned into Clint’s embrace.

Hands warmed by the mug of hot chocolate, Natasha smiled as she watched the two most precious people in her life unashamedly hold each other.

After a minute, Clint stepped back. “Love you.”

“Love you, too,” responded Phil, a small smile dancing on his mouth. He set the spoon down and placed the heavy lid of the Dutch oven on the pot before turning the heat down to the scantest possible flame. The leeks would take a few minutes to soften before they added the potatoes, carrots, and vegetable stock. The rolls for dinner would take an hour or so to rise while the soup simmered.

Offhandedly, Phil mentioned, “Alton Brown has a new season of Good Eats. It’s available for streaming.”

“Thank you.” Setting her mug down, she opened her arms and he stepped into them, gently wrapping his arms around her shoulders. Clint came to them, holding them both, and for a second Natasha just breathed, surrounding herself with their strength.

Natasha closed her eyes as a wave of fondness washed through her. So kind, these men, so different from her childhood. She was well aware that they were distracting her from the afternoon’s events, knowing that she needed to feel safe and secure.

She didn’t need to be mindful that bad things had happened, and could happen again. Instead,
while her emotions were raw as the April rain pounding on the windows, her lovers had protected her by gently forming a barrier between her and her memories.
Natasha Makes Mejadra for Dinner

Chapter Summary

Tipping her head back on the sofa, Natasha closed her eyes. More and more, the Tower was a fortress from the outside world, with a dedicated private hospital, intensive hydroponic facilities, and Jarvis’s constant vigilance. Natasha was ever grateful to Jarvis.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the long wait. As with the rest of the world, recent events have been ... somewhat distracting. But! I have finally gotten what demanded to be written, written down. Spring is coming! There will be joy and beauty and sunshine -- in the next chapter, which is 75% written.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Safe at home, Natasha sat heavily on the sofa, looking at her calendar and thinking about spring. Spring, to Natasha, was an instant of equilibrium, when the dark perfectly balanced the light, and life hung in between. Natasha had always loved a truly dark sky and the spill of the Milky Way across the heavens. She knew that at the vernal equinox, the Sun crossed the celestial equator, the imaginary disc of the Earth’s equator slicing out into space around the Earth. From now on, as the Earth rotated on its tilted axis on its endless loops around the Sun, the Sun would rise ever higher in the sky in the northern hemisphere, bringing illumination and growth. This year, the vernal equinox was on March 19.

In Siberia, the vernal equinox was but a faint precursor of the annual floods of the Siberian plain. As late spring rains swelled the ice-dammed rivers, they would eventually spill over thousands of acres of larch forest. But in March, Natasha would have been wearing a coat, a thick, buttoned scarf over her nose, a knitted cap, a hood, and goggles to cope with the snowstorms. New York was positively balmy by comparison.

Natasha's gaze passed to the floor to ceiling windows, the sun gleaming across the rooftops and windows in the late spring evening.

Natasha felt scraped raw. She’d just come from a long day of work, the world ever harsher outside the safety of the Tower. Given recent events, over the winter holidays Tony and Pepper had dedicated several floors to housing essential personnel and their families. Because children of SI residents were guaranteed admission to the free private school and daycare, and permanent residents had access to the SI bodegas, shopping, and private recreation centers, demand had been strong for the hundreds of new apartments. Pepper’s decision to expand the list of employees eligible for permanent resident status had made her popular with SI employees.

Tipping her head back on the sofa, Natasha closed her eyes, shutting out the world. Their living room was quiet, only the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen breaking the silence. More and
more, the Tower was a fortress from the outside world, with a dedicated private hospital, intensive hydroponic facilities, and Jarvis’s constant vigilance. Natasha was ever grateful to Jarvis.

Part of Natasha’s duties that day had included assisting Pepper with the transition into the new apartments. While the newly available apartments were not nearly as luxurious as the Avenger’s, Pepper had decided that rent would be based on a sliding scale, which ended up being considerably less than many of the lower-paid employees had paid elsewhere. Even though permanent residents were subject to continuous monitoring by Jarvis and heavy restrictions on leaving the Tower proper, over 300 employees, their people, and pets had moved into the safety provided by SI, high above the streets of Manhattan.

Over the last weeks, Natasha had been reaching out to trusted SHIELD agents worldwide. There were still empty apartments, but many SHIELD agents had listened to Natasha and taken full advantage of SI’s overnight childcare facility to stash their children somewhere safe. Natasha didn’t talk to Fury much these days, but Fury had asked Tony, not Pepper, to take every child whose parent applied. Children were now six to a bedroom, stacked in bunk beds. Natasha had done one last walk-through before coming upstairs.

After Clint had become aware of Natasha's earlier conversations, he had worked with Jarvis to establish extensive child safety protections. Natasha loved him for his fierce protection of other people’s children. Occasionally, he visited the overnight facility floor himself, getting hands-on when Jarvis couldn’t. Pepper had a zero-tolerance policy in every SI employee’s contract, and Jarvis was merciless in the protection of children.

Weeks ago, Pepper had asked for help planning and implementing the security arrangements for the newly constructed residential apartments. While Bucky and Maria had focused on limiting access points and redundant security systems, Natasha had decided to expand the Avengers’ private food supply system to the entire building.

Accordingly, Pepper had expanded SI’s real estate portfolio to include farms that were otherwise barely breaking even, dairies that were going under, ranches without funds to keep going, and greenhouses that needed to be upgraded to precision farming techniques. In turn, SI provided food at slightly more than cost to Tower residents willing to order through Jarvis. SI Tower eateries had no choice in the matter, as a matter of security.

Jarvis and Tony had designed the new residential floors to be air-gapped from the existing Avengers’ floors, as much as possible. The density of fifty apartments per floor made Natasha and the other Avengers with experience in close-quarters battle uncomfortable, but the Tower wasn’t infinite. Making it as self-sufficient as possible for that many people meant that several floors had to be devoted to waste treatment, water recycling, and intensive air filtration, all designed by Tony and Jarvis with input from Bruce, and rammed through City Hall by Pepper.

Phil had helped Pepper with the logistics and supply chain management for keeping thousands securely fed, housed, and entertained in the confines of the Tower. It was, after all, not terribly unlike what he’d done for SHIELD, supervising the operations of large, remote bases. Working alongside Maria, he’d tapped into his extensive network of contacts to find the needed staff.

Natasha sighed, and shifted on the sofa. It was soft under her, but she felt lonely. Phil worked too damn hard. Clint did too, and she wanted them both with her, warm against her body.

“Jarvis, where is Phil?”

“Mr. Coulson is currently on a conference call in his Tower office. Should I interrupt him?”
Jarvis sounded eager to please. The thought occurred to Natasha that Jarvis probably also felt that Phil was working too hard. Along the way, Jarvis had decided that to everyone but the original inhabitants, he’d pass as a mere virtual assistant, like he did with Phil. Even Jarvis’s massive processing power was taxed by looking after his new people. Limiting his interactions helped preserve his freedom, too.

Likewise, Bucky kept to their floors, venturing down to the densely packed shopping and public recreation areas less and less. The screaming of children was difficult for him to interpret as happy noises, even in the indoor parks. Of course, where Bucky went, so went Steve. Despite Steve’s preference for outdoor running, Natasha didn’t think he’d gone outside for a morning run since Bucky’s birthday in March, nearly a month earlier.

Since the Tower had become a refuge for SI’s people, Bruce had purposefully kept Loki out of sight. On a good day, Bruce kept to himself, but now that the Tower was filled to capacity, he was even less likely to be active in public. When he wasn’t in the lab with Tony or in his own lab, Bruce was usually on his floor, curled up with a book in his library. Loki was nearly always nearby, like a cat that would run away if you wanted to cuddle, but insisted on being in your space anyway.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bruce and Clint had proven to be good with Loki. Bruce’s calm, firm tutelage and emphasis on routine seemed to be soothing Loki. Jarvis reported that Loki spent most of his time reading, watching YouTube videos, trolling reddit, and practicing some kind of cross between a martial art and ballet. When Clint had asked, Loki had said it was supposed to support his seiðr.

Natasha didn’t trust Loki further than she could throw him, about eight feet. Even she had to admit that within those feet, he was well-behaved. For a teenager.

Natasha was tired. Spring was coming, and she’d done all that she could do for those under Tony and Pepper’s protection. Now she wanted to care for her own people.

Heaving herself off the sofa, Natasha decided to make mejadra. It would stay warm for a long time, and reheated easily. Whenever Phil and Clint came home, they could eat.

As she walked into the kitchen, Jarvis automatically turned on the lights, filling the room with warm, bright light. He was more pro-active without Phil in the room. Digging in the tall pantry cabinet, Natasha retrieved the basmati rice in its brown cloth bag. Inexpensive brown lentils joined the rice on the counter.

“One and a half kilos of ground beef, please,” said Natasha as she turned to her spice cabinet. Between the three of them, it was well stocked, and Natasha retrieved cumin, coriander, turmeric, allspice, and cinnamon, as well as the vegetable stock paste. She’d make enough for Bruce and Loki, too.

From the oversize drawer beside the stove, Natasha pulled her three largest skillets. Two were non-stick, one stainless steel. She sprayed a non-stick skillet with cooking oil, and set it to heat on low while she rinsed the rice in a sieve. Adding a good bit more oil, coating the bottom of the pan, she turned up the heat and waited for it to come to a shimmer in the golden light over the stove. Finally, iridescent ripples spread throughout the oil, and Natasha tipped in the damp mass of rice. As it sizzled, she stirred it so that the rice stopped clumping, instead warming and then heating so that the scent of the basmati filled the room, turning nutty as it toasted.

When the rice was starting to turn a little color, she added a tablespoon each of cumin, coriander, allspice, and cinnamon, as well as a teaspoon of turmeric. As she stirred it into the toasting rice, the
spices bloomed in the hot oil and Natasha inhaled, relishing the aroma. A quart of water made the hot rice hiss in the pan, and then she added a couple of tablespoons of the vegetable stock paste. Switching to a silicon-coated whisk, Natasha mixed the stock through the rice before turning the heat down to medium low and placing a snug-fitting lid on the skillet.

Turning her attention to the lentils, Natasha rinsed them in the sieve, sprayed the stainless steel skillet with cooking oil, dumped in the lentils, and then added the same spices, water, and vegetable stock paste. Toasting the lentils would only make them hard as rocks, so she just stirred thoroughly and put a lid on the pan as the water heated to a simmer. Now she was on a time limit. Natasha had fifteen minutes until the lentils were done.

By this time, the ground beef was defrosted, so Natasha let it sit for a minute while she quickly diced an onion, using her knife skills to feed the team. Adding some oil to the last, nonstick pan, Natasha sautéed the onions, and then sliced open the heavy plastic package to add the ground beef to the hot pan. Using a stiff bamboo spatula, she speedily reduced the ground beef to little crumbles as it cooked, and then stirred in another set of the same spices, as well as a teaspoon of salt.

Turning the heat down, Natasha put a lid on the beef, and checked the rice. It had plumped up beautifully, an even layer in the skillet, the turmeric contributing a golden haze to the rice darkened with the other spices. She turned off the heat, replaced the lid, and checked the lentils. Using a spoon, she bit one, and it was just the right amount of doneness, almost too firm but not quite.

“Jarvis, let everyone know that mejadra will be available in the common room this evening.”

“Yes, ma’am. Will you be eating there?”

Natasha turned off the heat, and stopped, cocking her head to the side as she heard the heavy thump of the locks. Phil, maybe?

Turning, she saw both Phil and Clint, faces drawn with exhaustion. Phil was slightly in front, with deep grooves around his mouth and bags under his eyes, but he had yet to loosen his tie. Clint’s face was impassive; the way he got when he was so tired he couldn’t be bothered to emote. His tac suit was clean but rumpled, and his golden skin had bruising across the bridge of his nose and over his cheekbones, where his mask had pressed for hours on end.

Solemnly, they blinked at Natasha, and she dipped her chin, acknowledging them. She knew they would recognize dinner by aroma alone.

“No, Jarvis. I’ll bring it down in a few minutes.”

Hearing her speak, both of them headed straight to the bathroom, stripping down as they went. 14-hour days did that to you, made you feel as though you were covered in invisible grime. Natasha turned off all the burners, and followed.

Her beloveds were here, and they were safe. This last bit of effort she could find within herself for them—she could love them and then feed them before putting them to bed.

Chapter End Notes

So, ahem, this is not the recipe depicted in the story, but it’s the recipe I based my dinner on. We had this on Tuesday, and even though I made a double batch, it was
gone after lunch the next day. It's good with or without meat.
https://www.epicurious.com/recipes/member/views/mejadra-53065081
Natasha Makes Leg of Lamb for Dinner

Chapter Summary

Natasha inhaled deeply. All her people were here, laughing and happy in the spring sunshine. Closing her eyes, Natasha forgave herself for being broken. She knew that she could never be put back together unblemished, but with the care and support of Phil and Clint, and the rest of her extended family—because yes, these people were her family of choice—Natasha knew that she could still be precious to someone, could be treasured. With another deep breath, she gave herself permission to tell Phil when she needed help, to not always rely on Clint.

The next day, it rained. Thor must have been angry, because thunder boomed, lightning crackling down across the city. Listening to the rain beating on the glass, the heavy dark clouds obscuring the sky, Natasha was reminded of the assassination in Crimea.

Then, too, the rain had been so heavy that it had blocked her chance, obscuring her target. She’d had to go into the facility, and had been shot on her way out. Grateful that the rain had washed away her blood trail, she’d fled by stowing away on a rusty cargo ship, hiding in the dark with the rats. The ship had made its slow way across the Black Sea, and then around the Aegean to Tartus. The oxidized metal scent of the cargo bay had mixed with odor of her drying blood until she’d been unable to tell the two apart.

Most of the voyage had been spent in fear, not of discovery by the soldiers but by the Red Room. She should have come straight back for her punishment for allowing herself to be injured, but she’d fled instead, even knowing that it would be all the worse when she came back. In due course, she’d escaped overboard, swimming to one of the thousands of little islands that dotted the Aegean.

As she’d swum, the rain had stopped, the wine-dark sea slackening to a rippling indigo. Hours later, as she collapsed on the shore, the stinging of salt in her wound having long since dissipated in the general pain of torn, overworked muscles, the setting sun had given her warmth. Crawling off the beach, she had hidden herself in an ancient, gnarled olive tree overlooking a stacked stone farmhouse. It had sprawled over several levels, housing a large extended family.

She’d stayed there for several days, only slipping down in the darkest hours to drink water from the cold spring. The first day, the grandmothers had used onionskins to dye eggs a solid red before baking them into bread. The elaborate braids in the bread had fascinated Natasha.

The next day, young spring lambs had been butchered, the offal prepared for a soup. In the middle of the night, the whole family, even the infants, had bundled into cars. Natasha had slipped into the house and stolen an egg just before they’d returned with lit candles, making the sign of the cross in the doorways.

The men had risen with the next dawn, spit roasting the whole lambs while the women had set out many small plates of food. Children ran wild, laughing and shrieking in the spring sunshine. The girls her age were cooking and playing with their siblings and cousins, and no one reprimanded them or punished them for laziness. Everyone smiled and ate more food than Natasha had known could be served at a meal.
Eventually, the Red Room had come for her, but Natasha had held onto the memory of those spring days even when she’d forgotten so much else. Envy had scarred her for years before she’d had the name for the emotion. Still yet, she didn’t have the words, could not tell Clint and Phil. Clint asked, and the words died, swallowed in fear, worry of being thought less than strong, less than capable. She’d read the psychology textbooks, knew that she was afraid of being thought unworthy of their love. Knowledge didn’t help.

Natasha longed to give her extended family the sunshine and laughter of those days. So, she spent stolen hours reading blogs about celebrations on the Greek islands and tracking down recipes. Natasha tried to imagine what the food from those recipes would smell like, what it would taste like. Maybe they couldn’t go to Greece on Natasha’s whim, but she could bring that spring to them, with food.

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A couple of days later, the scent of popcorn filled the air in the common room. It was team movie night. Laughing in the kitchen, Bruce was teaching a black-clad Loki to operate the ridiculously complicated machine Tony had built, their silver bracelets lustrous under the overheat light. Loki seemed to be torn between eager hunger for the popcorn and ennui from silly Midgardian technology. Natasha was betting that fresh popcorn won, preferably with spices other than plain butter and salt.

Steve and Bucky had taken up their usual arm of the long, L-shaped sofa, retreating into the corner for Bucky’s sake. Steve had one strong arm around Bucky, unashamedly holding him to his broad chest while he focused his blue eyes on the screen where Jarvis displayed summaries of possible shows for the evening. For his part, Bucky appeared intent on a complicated bit of knitting, his dark hair falling over his face as thick white cables emerged from his flashing needles, exquisite in the golden light focused over his hands.

Arguing with Steve and Jarvis, Tony had Pepper on his lap, white teeth flashing in a grin as he kissed the back of her neck, making her shiver. Her pale skin flushed and she wiggled on his lap.

“Tony! Team movie night, not you and I movie night!”

Dark eyes flashing, he bent his head, whispering into her ear, a marked contrast between his dark beard and her strawberry blond hair. Engrossed in Pepper, Tony left the movie choices to Steve and Jarvis.

“Even odds on Good Eats vs Iron Chef?” asked Clint, his voice rumbling in her ear. She lay with her head on his chest. He, in turn, was leaning against Phil. He had taken off his tie, removed his suit jacket, and rolled up his sleeves before sitting down. Deceptively civilized, his thick black reading glasses framed his eyes, focused on the tablet in one strong hand. His other arm wrapped around Clint, and thus Natasha, leaving his bare forearm against Natasha’s cheek and his hand on Natasha’s shoulder.

“I wouldn’t take that bet.”

Natasha relaxed against Clint’s chest, thinking of the story Bucky had told her about Jarvis’s movie suggestion during their weekend away. Despite the heavy rain, Jarvis was bringing in unfiltered outside air, no doubt to soothe Bucky’s nerves. Natasha’s anxiety eased too, the mineral scent reminding her that she was here with her loves, watching the spring rain. Idly, she ran her left thumb across the inside of her right wrist, where she’d implanted Jarvis’s birthday present.

Unlike Bucky, who resisted all tracking, Natasha found it comforting that she could choose. She
didn’t remember a time when she hadn’t had a tracker, someone who could find her at all times. Jarvis, she trusted. Not Tony, not like that, but this had been a gift from Jarvis and there was a difference.

Normally, Natasha would be absorbed with her own knitting on one end of the sofa, and Clint would be the glue that joined Phil to her. She’d left the knitting in her bag in their quarters. She couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t settle on a book. Spring was coming, and she wanted to be ready.

Turning towards the screen, she pretended to watch as Jarvis scrolled through the options. Flicking a glance upward at the curve of Clint’s jaw, the ragged mess of his hair, the corded strength of his neck, she didn’t understand why he loved her so. For so many years, Clint had been the only person she’d trusted with all her ugly bits. He’d seen her lie, cheat, steal, and use sex as a weapon—and he loved her no less for it. He chose her, chose to give his enormous heart to her, chose to love her fiercely, without reservation, and fight for her like the lion he was. He’d been willing to burn down half of Budapest the first time he’d met her.

Offering her his experience with SHIELD, a place where she didn’t have to be on guard every waking minute, had saved her life. Phil had protected them both for years. Certainly, his government connections had helped, but his dogged, unceasing support meant that Phil was their port in a storm. Equipment, food, training, op scheduling—Phil made sure they had everything they needed and a safe nest besides. Even here in the Tower, he’d worked with Jarvis and Tony to ensure their quarters were even more secure than the Helicarrier, with the tripartite security of something they knew, something they had, and something they were.

Natasha was grateful, and while she couldn’t offer honeyed words, she could share the best part of the homes she’d seen, the May Days with where people ate good food, soaked up warm weather, and thought of the future. Natasha closed her eyes and thought of spring in Mother Russia, where people carried delicate seedlings on trains to tiny gardens at summer dachas. Hope in a tiny plant.

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“Is that Pinterest?”

Bucky had deliberately scuffed his feat stepping off the elevator, so Natasha had deliberately allowed him to see her screen as she lounged on the common room sofa. Blue skies framed a brilliantly sunny downtown through the wall of windows.

“Yes.” A meal this complex required planning and she thought Bucky could help. Maybe she’d drag in Loki as well. Natasha was betting that he was trainable.

Natasha frowned at the photo of the grilled whole lamb. From her earlier research, she’d found that lamb sold in the United States was often from New Zealand, much closer to mutton than the lamb used in Greece. The traditional lamb for spring feasts in Greece had been born that spring and thus was only a few weeks old. It was much tenderer and paler in color than the New Zealand lamb, which had been born the previous lambing season and butchered after putting on weight over summer pasturing.

Despite her best efforts, Natasha had been unable to change the butchering schedule at the Avenger’s farm. In her autumn order from the farm, Natasha had ordered several legs of lamb, which were the larger, older animals. When it was just her and Clint, a single leg sufficed, but adding in Phil, and then the rest of the permanent inhabitants of the Tower meant she needed more food. While she was happy to outsource other parts of the meal, she didn’t have a standard recipe for the more strongly flavored, older lamb, which meant that she couldn’t ask anyone else to do it.
She’d thought about ordering the tripe for the traditional soup, but while Phil and Tony would knowingly eat it, no one else would. In the end, she’d decided to go with *avgolemono* soup, using lemons from Phil’s rooftop greenhouse. Unlike the lamb, it would wait until the day of the meal.

Natasha decided that she would defrost the meat over the next couple of days.

“Jarvis, please send up five legs of lamb.” Jarvis controlled the dumbwaiter to the food storage facilities, and the specialized robots that handled the in-house food supply for the Avengers. In the basement, Jarvis kept her orders separate from the rest of the Tower’s food supply, although she and Phil had worked together to make shawarma meat when his order had come in last autumn.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Bucky leaned over her shoulder, eyes scanning her tablet. “Making a May Day meal?”

“Mmhmm. Kind of. I want to grill the lamb, but I want to do it Greek style. Tsoureki, dolmades, spanakotiropita, koulouraki cookies, that kind of thing.”

Natasha leaned back, looking at Bucky’s face. Sometimes he took a dislike to the most random things, and Natasha didn’t want to upset him if she could help it. His eyes flicked away from the tablet to her face and back again. The idea wasn’t totally repugnant to him, then.

“I want grilled potatoes,” said Bucky, his voice tentative.

Knowing how hard voicing a preference was for Bucky, Natasha agreed immediately. “Sure. New potatoes with garlic and rosemary sound good?”

Bucky blinked and then smiled, delight at her ready acquiescence warming the steel blue of his eyes. Natasha smiled back, their relationship easier since Jarvis had prompted their afternoon dance party.

“Sit down,” she prompted. “You can help me plan.”

Tilting his head, Bucky stared into the middle distance for a second, obviously thinking about his afternoon schedule.

“Sure. Just let me touch base with Steve, first.”

Jarvis beeped, his digital equivalent of a cough.

“Captain Rogers is occupied at the school this afternoon,” said Jarvis, his voice clearly implying that Bucky knew it already. “I can pass him a message, if you’d like?”

Carefully not moving a muscle, Natasha thought about the implications of Jarvis’s statement. Bucky surely knew where Steve was—the two were inseparable. Jarvis was trying to preserve Steve’s time, possibly, or pushing Bucky to be more independent. Jarvis had been good for Bucky, it was true, but Natasha was grateful that Tony was such a good man. His innate kindness in raising Jarvis had created a being who was careful and gentle with the squishy inhabitants of his Tower. Natasha often thought that Jarvis could have easily been harsh and cold.

“Sure,” said Bucky easily. “Let him know that I won’t be there to pick him up this afternoon.”

“Noted,” replied Jarvis, an LED flickering as he withdrew his immediate attention. Jarvis was busier than he’d ever been, with the new inhabitants of the Tower numbering in the thousands.
Moving around the sofa with his normal panther-like grace, Bucky sat close enough to Natasha that she could feel his body heat, but he carefully did not touch her.

Natasha quirked a grin at his thoughtfulness, and tilted the tablet so he could read it.

“Any other suggestions?”

They worked for hours, planning the meal with the precision tactics they’d once applied to far less pleasurable missions. Beaming through the floor to ceiling windows, the afternoon sun crept across the floor. Defrosting times, knife requirements, fresh herb, fruit, and vegetable lists, cooking times, make-ahead food, food that could be cooked by others—it all went into the project schedule, with a thread of Jarvis’s attention illustrating a Gantt chart as they worked.

*Spanakotiropita* and dolmades could be made ahead and then frozen uncooked, and *koulourakia* cookies and baklava could be baked in advance then saved for later. Tzatziki sauce, a broccoli and rice casserole for Clint, and *melitzanosalata* dip would sit well in the refrigerator for a day or two. *Tsoureki*, pita breads, and Bucky’s potatoes could be prepped the night before, leaving only the *avgolemono* soup, the grilled lamb, and a fresh green salad for Phil and Pepper to be made on the day itself.

While she and Bucky had worked, Bruce drifted into the common room, Loki in tow. The team had worked out a kind of informal rota for every night but Friday and Saturday, with Bruce and Loki handling cooking on Mondays. Generally, they made something vegetarian. Murmuring to each other as they worked, oil sizzled and the scent of cumin, coriander, turmeric, and garam masala drifted through the common room.

By the time dinner rolled around, Natasha was happier than she’d been in a long while, feeling in control of the plans. There would be a variety of food, more than enough for everyone who would attend, without overworking herself in advance.

“Thanks, Bucky.”

Blushing, Bucky just nodded as he stood. “I’m going to go check in with Steve. He should be back by now.”

Stretching, Natasha watched him go before swiping away the Gantt chart. Turning around, she saw Loki duck his head, his long hair swinging in front of his face as he smiled at Bruce’s praise. The overhead light in the kitchen accented the silver at Bruce’s temples and the blue-black of Loki’s waves. Natasha thought they were good for each other—both of them looked better rested and more peaceful. Thor had been lucky—or no, not lucky, Natasha mentally amended. His apparent youth was deceptive. Thor had probably known exactly what he was doing.

Rising from the overstuffed sofa, Natasha decided to go find Clint and Phil. This time of day always made her brain tired, and she wondered if she could persuade them to nap with her. Or, at least get in the bed.

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Standing in front of Tony’s kitchen counter, Natasha sharpened her carbon-steel deboning knife with Tony’s little gadget. They’d all gathered in the penthouse, and Lucky the pizza dog ran from the sheltered patio back to the kitchen and out again, excited to be included in the hubbub. Outside in the sunshine, Thor was fussing with the grill, while Jane and Tony were engaged in a heated
discussion about physics. In the living room, Steve and Pepper stood in front of her latest acquisition, discussing brush strokes.

This was the last leg of lamb she needed to debone and butterfly. Then she would painstakingly trim the fat and silverskin from the meat. The fat of older lamb could be more strongly flavored, like mutton, and with the exception of Tony, mutton didn’t suit anyone’s taste. To further combat the strong flavor, Natasha had made a paste of brined grape leaves, parsley, mint, minced garlic, and lemon zest, tucking it into the butterflied lamb before she rolled it up into a compact bundle. Previous experience had taught her to wrap the lamb in aluminum foil and let it sit in the refrigerator before placing it on the grill.

Turning to the sink to wash her hands, Natasha saw Phil line a baking sheet with parchment paper before carefully beginning to pack the frozen dolmades into the pan. She knew that he would drizzle them with lemon juice, and a half-cup of olive oil before adding enough chicken stock to just cover them, following that with another sheet of parchment paper. Then he’d tightly cover it with aluminum foil and bake them for an hour or so.

On the other side of the kitchen, Clint was zesting lemons for the *avgolemono* soup, the muscles in his forearms on view as he carefully peeled strips from the lemons. A batch big enough for everyone to have a serving needed the zest of four lemons, as well as cardamom, bay leaves, two cups of rice, and two quarts of chicken broth. Plus, of course, the eggs and lemon juice whisked together until they combined in a white foam that Clint would carefully whisk into a bowl of hot broth, careful not to scramble the eggs. Finally, he’d mix the now-hot eggs into the rest of the chicken and rice soup.

Pepper had volunteered to make the green salad. Naturally, she’d had it ready before breakfast, and now the salad was resting on the table, tomatoes, cucumbers, feta, and onion marinating in the olive oil and red wine vinegar dressing.

The night before, Bucky had made the *tsoureki* and pita breads as well as prepping the baby potatoes. The recipe Natasha had sent Bucky had been fairly simple--boiling the potatoes until they were just soft, and then marinating them with fresh, chopped rosemary, minced garlic, olive oil, salt and pepper. Because Thor had volunteered to man the grill, he was responsible for the final grilled potatoes.

*Spanakotiropita* was a delicate process, and Bruce had offered to make it with Loki. Chopped spinach and fresh herbs were mixed with sautéed garlic, couscous, and an egg for the filling. The tricky part was not tearing the phyllo dough as it was layered and brushed with olive oil before being wrapped around the greens. But, Bruce had practice, as he’d made the baklava from scratch earlier in the week.

In the oven, the final product was baking while Bruce rested in an overstuffed chair that Natasha suspected Pepper had bought with Bruce in mind. It was tucked away in a corner of their living room, with a small side table with a gooseneck lamp. No lamp was needed now, as the chair was directly in the path of the sun’s rays. Bruce had his eyes closed and his head tilted back on the chair, basking in the warmth.

Natasha secretly thought that he was as pleased for the excuse to celebrate spring as she was, and why shouldn’t he be? The day was gloriously sunny and warm, the sky so blue it nearly defied the laws of physics. Tony had already begun circulating with drinks.

Phil had a cranberry-lime spritzer at his elbow, and Natasha stole a sip. He just winked at her before turning back to his dolmades, his strong hands careful and precise as he tucked the stuffed grape leaves tightly together in the baking sheet.
Declaring that dips were not unlike poultices, Loki had insisted on contributing by carefully following the recipe for tzatziki, grating an English forcing cucumber before combining it with plain, whole milk yogurt, fresh lemon juice, chopped fresh dill, and salt. Buoyed by the success, he had then gone on to try his hand at the melitzanosalata, roasting the eggplants, scooping out the insides, and mashing them with grated garlic, olive oil, tahini, cumin, lemon juice, and salt. Natasha was looking forward to trying it, but she would have eaten it anyway because Loki was so heartbreakingly proud of himself.

Before returning to the lamb, Natasha decided to have just one more koulourakia cookie. The two loaves of tsoureki had gone quickly at breakfast, accompanied by coffee and strong tea. Although Natasha hadn’t paid attention, neither had she shared her zavarka, and Bucky was suspiciously relaxed, tossing a ball with Lucky. Bruce’s tea prescription at work, probably.

On the grill, the current legs of lamb gave off an enticing aroma, and Natasha inhaled deeply. All her people were here, laughing and happy in the spring sunshine. Closing her eyes, Natasha forgave herself for being broken. She knew that she could never be put back together unblemished, but with the care and support of Phil and Clint, and the rest of her extended family—because yes, these people were her family of choice—Natasha knew that she could still be precious to someone, could be treasured. With another deep breath, she gave herself permission to tell Phil when she needed help, to not always rely on Clint.

Opening her eyes, Natasha looked down at the lamb, and got to work.
Phil Makes Spring Vegetable Potstickers for Dinner

Chapter Summary

In which Phil cures his bad mood by being ultra competent at making fussy food.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil glanced up at the audio ping from Jarvis. Fury had passed the initial Tower security screening.

Given the open nature of the Tower’s first few floors, Bucky and Tasha had set up a security checkpoint on the fourth floor. All visitors past that floor had to be cleared and tested. Pepper had managed to have the entire upper Tower declared a restricted access experimental facility. Not FDA approved or cleared, the rapid screening tests were produced in Bruce’s lab, with Jarvis overseeing daily production quotas.

Even then, visitors were restricted to certain shops and meeting rooms no higher than the tenth floor. Phil was meeting Fury at a coffee shop that looked out onto the main interior conservatory, four stories of arching fountains, green plants, and open air.

Phil rose from his desk, automatically locking his computer as he looked around his office. Smaller than his office at SHIELD, it was nonetheless comfortable. A glossy hardwood floor shone under LED lights set to reflect outdoor light intensity. At one on a sunny afternoon, the room was brightly lit.

Steve had contributed a formal sketch of Phil, Clint, and Tasha that hung over a well-cushioned leather sofa. In front of the sofa, a dark walnut coffee table held Natasha’s contribution, a blue-gray pottery vase that Bruce had filled with pea flowers from the aquaponics lab. The other side of the room held a series of locking file cabinets and bookshelves. Various puzzles, books, photographs, and snacks filled the shelves—Clint was always more at ease in a room that contained readily available food. In front of the bookshelves, two armchairs sat with a small side table between them, for less formal conversations.

Phil locked the door behind him, and stepped into the elevator. Wordlessly efficient, Jarvis took him directly his destination.

Discreetly nestled to the side of a security station on the fourth floor, the upstairs elevator was restricted to permanent Tower residents. Phil nodded to the guard on duty, and joined the crowd of people moving around the inside park.

Pepper had brought in the same architects and landscape designers who had designed the Shiseido Forest Valley at Jewel Changi Airport, in Singapore. Taller and narrower than the location in Singapore, four stories of Jarvis’s Tower had been hollowed out into an interior green space for permanent residents. Walls were lined with tiers of shade-tolerant pothos, ferns, and other shade tolerant plants, luxuriant greenery tumbling down the tiers of planters. In the center, a more traditional water fountain poured into a shallow pool surrounded by a patch of durable grass. Young children were wading in the pool, their parents hovering nearby. Off to one side, a bored teenage lifeguard sat at the ready.
Older children laughed and played tag on the durable grass quadrangle, gilded by sunlight angled downward with cleverly placed mirrors. Layers of balconies meandered around the edges, making good use of the lush plantings.

Phil spotted his destination, a small coffee shop, just around the corner. Owned by one of the new SI resident employees, it had excellent cookies. Phil thought he’d pick up a couple for Clint and Tasha after this conversation.

Nodding to Fury, Phil ordered coffee and two sugar cookies to go before sliding into a metal chair. Across the table sat his oldest friend.

Inhaling deeply, Phil went directly to the point. “I can’t do this anymore, Nick.”

Fury looked at his coffee, mask in place.

The table under their mugs was nothing special, a faux-wood laminate. Likewise, the walls in the coffee shop were a neutral beige, and even the pastries in the glass display case tended to be quietly understated colors, like slices of vanilla pound cake and peanut butter cookies. No, the two best parts of the coffee shop were the delicious scents—everything was baked in house—and the view out into the conservatory.

Phil persisted. “I can’t keep running missions from the Tower. They’re not cleared and support staff telepresence isn’t adequate. You need someone on site, and that person isn’t me anymore. I’m too damn old to be up for 96 hours straight running ops and still be able to kick ass and take names when it goes FUBAR. You know this.”

Fury sighed, and didn’t answer for a long minute. “I know, Cheese.” He looked down at his coffee again and then back at Phil, his face serious.

“It’s been a long damn time, that’s all. My one good eye up here in the Tower, with two of my best assets? Not what I expected.”

“You were happy when I brought Clint in,” reminded Phil, a small smile on his lips. “And you were eventually happy when Clint brought Tasha in.”

Fury shook his head, gazing into the plant-clad interior of the Tower. “You always had it bad for him, but I didn’t think you would shack up with the Black Widow too, even if Hawkeye was dumb enough to marry her.”

Phil stiffened, a stray beam of sunlight making the ring on his finger gleam burnished gold. “Not even you, old friend, get to cast aspersions on my wife or my husband. You’re my oldest friend, Nick, and I’d do a lot for you, but Do. Not. Fuck. with me about this.”

Fury leaned back and smiled, a softness around his mouth few ever saw. “I’m happy for you, Cheese, I am.”

Sighing, Phil said, “Jarvis sent my SI health insurance paperwork last night, and it had two boxes for spouses. There are some benefits Jarvis offers that the government won’t. It hurts to be so damn close to the 30 year mark for my federal retirement, though.”

Fury snorted. “I bet. I don’t expect I’ll ever use mine. You’ve got two pretty young things waiting on you, though.”

Phil grinned, and winked. “I do, don’t I?”
Hard part over, the conversation eased after that. Phil and Nick had always been comfortable in each other’s company. There was too much history, too much broken trust, for Phil’s resignation to become a flashpoint. Neither of them would permit it.

Nick had done them dirty—Phil especially—and they all knew it. Phil had wanted to get back on his feet, independent of SHIELD, before he confronted Nick. Today had been the first day he’d felt able to safely predict working eight hours, so he’d called Nick at breakfast, and asked him to swing by for coffee.

Eventually, the conversation petered out, and Phil sat running his thumb over the handle of his mug. Looking up, he met Fury’s eye.

“I need to get back upstairs. Even my team—“

“The team you thiefed out from under me,” interrupted Fury, eye twinkling.

“The team I employed at your behest after SHIELD went down,” started Phil.

Sotto voce, Fury muttered, “Trust you to find a woman who brings down international security organizations in her spare time.”

Phil just grinned wider, his obvious pride in Natasha filling his voice as he spoke, “Working with Maria, Bucky, Jarvis, Pepper, and certain other former SHIELD assets is efficient, but I still have work to do. See you later, Nick.”

Rising, Phil swiped his ID badge, the meal automatically deducted from his account.

“Stay as long as you want, Nick.”

They both knew that Phil meant at the Tower, not just the coffee shop.

Fury shook his head, and pushed himself to his feet. “Nah, I’ve got places to go and people to see.”

Extending a hand, he and Phil shook, one of the few brief moments of human contact permitted by men in their positions.

“See you around, Nick.” Phil’s voice was a little wistful. He knew as well as Nick did that this might be one of the last times they saw each other.

“Be well and safe, Cheese.”

With that, Fury slipped into the crowded corridor outside, quickly blending with the crowd and disappearing from sight.

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Back in the cool, dry air of his Tower office, Phil dealt with one damn thing after another, starting with toilet paper. Facilities management had sent up a panicked request for more. Their regular supplier had canceled the last three deliveries, and now couldn’t offer a firm delivery date. The next three suppliers on the list were tapped out.

Deciding to start at the source, Phil picked up his phone. One of Phil’s former Army Ranger team members had become a forester for Georgia-Pacific.

“Is Mr. Yerkovich available?”
“Phil? Phil Coulson?”

Phil smiled. “Tom. It’s good to hear your voice. You all doing OK?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re fine. We’ve always kept a stocked pantry here in the mountains, you know? You never know when it’s going to flood and wash out the road.” Tom’s voice was resigned. Road maintenance was not a high priority in his neck of the woods.

Tom, his wife, and their brood of children lived in the middle of a 58,000-acre tree farm in the Appalachians. Tom’s job was to tend to the forest for commercial viability, including arranging harvesting for paper products.

“Mm-hmm,” agreed Phil. He’d been to Tom’s house more than once. “Prior preparation prevents poor performance. I’m trying to handle some preparation issues now. I’m on Plan E. Do you know which factories take delivery from there?”

Tom thought for a minute. “Well, the logs go to the sawmill first. Then the product goes to factories. There are only a few log-to-final product facilities. Elkins has a couple hardwood flooring production factories.”

Phil chuckled. “Ah, I’m looking for toilet paper. For an active base. The Tower.”

“Necessary product for most people,” drawled Tom. Phil was reasonably sure Tom and his brood used bidets. Water was not short there. It was the greenest place he’d seen outside of Ireland.

“If I were you,” continued Tom, “I’d call down to Owensboro. Owensboro, Kentucky. There’s a Kimberly-Clark commercial toilet paper plant down that way, and my cousin’s boyfriend’s sister said they just added a third shift.”

“Thanks, Tom. I owe you one.”

Voice serious, Tom said, “No, Phil, you’ll never owe me one.”

Phil nodded, even though Tom couldn’t see him. “Works both ways, Tom. I know New York’s not your home, but you and yours are always welcome.”

“Sure.” In the background, children screeched with laughter. “I’ve got to go, Phil. Don’t be a stranger.”

“Bye, Tom.”

After tracking down the right person at the Kimberly-Clark plant, Phil purchased enough toilet paper to fill a Mack truck. Leaning back in his desk chair, he thought for a minute.

Phil had an old-fashioned desk phone with lights for multiple lines, and now he picked up the corded handset before tapping in the number he’d memorized with glee.

“Good morning, Steve. How would you feel about taking a road trip with Bucky?”

Twenty minutes later, Phil had coordinated a flight time with Clint, and had assigned a staffer to rent a big rig for the trip back to the Tower. Crisis averted. Except now that he thought about it, he’d just assumed that Steve had a commercial driver’s license.

“Jarvis, quick question …”
Hours later, Phil glanced at the clock in the corner of his screen and sighed. He had worked straight through lunch yet again, and an incipient headache threatened his right temple. After months of random, uncontrollable twitching in his right eye, he had mentioned it to his optometrist, who had informed Phil that eight hours a day of staring at screens had consequences.

Leaning back in his chair, Phil stared into the middle distance while he thought about lunch. On this floor, there was a small staff kitchen equipped with a vending machine and a coffee pot. Easy enough to duck in and grab something to eat at his desk while he read this last batch of reports.

Opening the door of the kitchen, Phil almost recoiled at the strong scent of tuna fish. It wasn’t that Phil disliked tuna fish—he liked tuna noodle casserole and tuna fish sandwiches as much as the next person. But there were unwritten rules about office lunches, and stinky food was on the no-go list. Pressing his lips together, Phil snatched a couple of packs of peanut butter crackers and an apple from the baskets on the counter, dropping a fiver in the coffee can on the counter before retreating from the stench.

Back in his office, Phil tore open a packet, enlarged the font on the report, and sat back in his chair to read a litany of complaints. For some reason, HR had forwarded a greatest hits compilation to his account. After a couple hours of reading, Phil felt like he had a handle on the situation. Fully onboarded SI employees felt the remote contractors were slacking off, and the contractors felt their contributions weren’t valued.

Phil closed his eyes, rubbing underneath his glasses. This was a division management issue, not a base operations problem. Except—and here he thought he detected Natasha’s delicate influence—the fully onboarded SI employees listed in the complaint were all living in the Tower, and apparently the division head in question encouraged the friction in some misguided nonsense about competition bringing out the best in people.

What it brought, thought Phil, was a whole slew of empty slots in the offsite portion of the division. If it weren’t for the excellent benefits SI offered, no doubt there would be more empty slots within SI itself. As a matter of base security, this needed to be attended to, before they lost more key personnel.

Opening up his scheduling software, Phil overlaid the schedule of the division head in question, absentmindedly rubbing the bone around his right eye where the muscle had started to ache in earnest. This asshole was either going to have to shape up or ship out, as far as Phil was concerned. Pepper had too much on her plate to deal with the Peter Principle in action.

Idly rearranging the division head’s schedule, Phil slotted himself in at 7 am. Nothing like a dressing down first thing in the morning to wake him up for the day.

Sighing deeply, Phil let his brain begin the transition from work mode. Gathering his things, he tidied up his desk before slipping out of his darkened office, quietly locking the door behind him with the usual code, retinal scan, and badge.

In the elevator, Phil leaned against the back wall and tried not to let his irritation with Nick boil over. Phil wasn’t threatened by Nick’s casual contempt, but it had cut him to the quick. After all this time, Phil had been surprised to realize that his regard for Nick’s opinion had remained unchanged.

Clearly, Phil had to get over that—but first, Phil was going to allow himself to be angry that Nick had turned that cold, dispassionate judgment on his oldest friend. Frankly, Phil had thought Nick
had valued their friendship for more than leverage, and Phil was angry with himself for being so fundamentally wrong about the nature of their relationship.

“Believe people when they show you who they are.” Nick had already done that, hadn’t he? More fool Phil for trusting those decades of friendship. Angry, hurt, and grieving his friendship with Nick, Phil straightened as the elevator slowed to their floor, high above the city.

Their foyer could have been plucked from any apartment building in the city, with anonymous commercial vinyl tile (the easier to clean when they came home dripping blood, alien or otherwise), drywall with a washable off-white paint, and a generic fluorescent overhead light. Anyone who made it to their floor, past Jarvis, could be forgiven for thinking they were on the wrong floor—just the way Phil, Tasha, and Clint liked it.

After swiping his badge, shifting slightly upwards for the retinal scanner discreetly incorporated in what appeared to be a flaw in the door molding, and tapping in the day’s code on the cheap-looking plastic touchpad, Phil breathed a sigh of relief as he came home.

Only a lamp on the side table and the blue glow of Tasha’s e-reader lit the room. Outside the floor to ceiling windows, the last vestiges of sunset streaked across a purpling sky, the glow from a million points of light reaching towards the heavens from the city that never slept.

Clad in an oversized sweater and black leggings, Tasha was ensconced in Clint’s lap, knitting needles flashing as she read, her e-reader propped on a pillow in her own lap. Her eyes flicked towards Phil and then back to her book. In turn, Clint was playing with Tasha’s hair, fingers skimming idly along her hairline as he lay propped against the corner of the sofa with his eyes closed. He was dressed in a sleeveless tee and ancient sweatpants, a hole in the knee revealing golden skin over a knobby kneecap.

Clint didn’t shift as he entered the room, and Phil thought Clint was probably listening to Jarvis read through his aids. He’d dropped off Steve and Bucky and flown back by the early afternoon. Lucky lay beside the sofa, ears flicking towards Phil as he entered the room, but he remained faithful to Clint, only a half-hearted thump of his tail in greeting.

Rolling his head around in a circle to ease the day’s strains, Phil set his briefcase down under the hall table, emptying his pockets into the hammered copper bowl Tasha had placed for just that purpose. Shoes untied, Phil tucked them neatly under the table, before loosening his tie.

In ordinary times, Tasha and Clint would have met him at the door, but these days, they all stripped down as soon as they came in the door, showering first thing. Making his way directly to the bathroom, Phil neatly folded his Dolce & Gabbana into the plastic bag provided by the dry cleaners, careful not to touch the sides. His boxers, socks, garters, & undershirt went into the open washing machine, already prepped with a detergent packet. Watch, belt, cufflinks, and tie pin all went into a box to be set side. Finally, Phil stepped into a hot shower, steam filling their bathroom as he scrubbed from head to toe.

Phil was unsurprised when he bent down to reach for the shampoo and caught a glimpse of Clint perched on the bench along the bathroom wall. He wanted Clint’s touch, but he was hungry, tired, hurt, and angry, and none of those could be solved by taking advantage of Clint’s desire.

Nevertheless, Clint persisted, waiting outside the shower until Phil had finished rinsing off, ready with an enormous bath towel as soon as Phil stepped, dripping, from the shower. Phil shivered in pleasure as Clint briskly rubbed him down, lingering on the tense muscles of his shoulders, and the
more intimate crevices around his ass and soft cock. Reaching for another, smaller towel, Clint tapped Phil’s chin and pointed an index finger at the floor.

Barely resisting the impulse to sink to his knees and avoid thought for the rest of the evening, Phil obediently sat on the damp towel covering the toilet and rested his forearms on his knees, hiding his scar. As Clint gently ran the little towel over his scalp, drying his hair, Phil was helpless to resist the temptation of Clint so close to him. Phil could feel the heat of Clint’s hip a hairsbreadth away from his cheek. Self-control ebbed and Phil pressed his damp face against the soft cotton of Clint’s ragged sweatpants.

Clint’s hands paused, and then the callused fingertips wrapped around the nape of Phil’s neck, the other hand patting Phil’s head. Savoring the moment, Phil closed his eyes, just breathing in the combination of their “scentless” detergent, the crisp mineral odor of outside air, the soft warmth of Natasha, and something indefinably Clint, heat and sweat and skin. If it weren’t for the pounding in his eye and the hollow in his stomach, Phil would have been tempted to pull down Clint’s pants with his teeth.

“Phil, you hungry?” Natasha’s voice was low and soft as she spoke through the bathroom door, keeping the warmth from the shower in the bathroom. Face against Clint’s hip, Phil couldn’t bring himself to lean away long enough to answer. He was so tired.

Allowing himself to push just a little bit more against Clint’s hip, Phil nodded infinitesimally in wordless agreement.

“Yeah,” continued Clint, “a plate of food would be good.”

This was their code for a plate of leftovers, cut into finger food if possible. It would include a protein, a carb, a fresh fruit, and a fresh vegetable, usually with some kind of dairy.

“OK.”

Phil heard the rasp of fabric moving down the hall as Tasha went to the kitchen. Suddenly, deeply grateful to both of them, Phil lifted his hands to Clint’s thighs, pulling him against the prick of tears behind his eyelids. So many years he’d spent alone, collapsed on the sofa with the TV flickering silently on the wall, a half-eaten bag of popcorn in one hand and a beer in the other. Every day with them was a gift, one he wished he could save.

“Hey, hey, it’s OK.” Clint’s voice was soft, his hands firm against Phil’s head. “I’ve got you, Tasha’s here.”

Inhaling deeply, Phil pulled back and looked up. “Thanks.”

Quirking a grin, Clint said, “No worries. C’mon, let’s get you dressed and fed.”

Reaching behind them to the bench, Clint shook out Phil’s favorite pajama pants. They were blue cotton flannel, warm and soft, and Phil didn’t give a damn if they made him look like an old man. Slipping the elastic waist over his hips as he stood up, one of Clint’s old tees loomed in his peripheral vision.

“This OK?”

His voice was neutral, but Phil knew that Clint liked to see him in his shirts, that Clint was perhaps
a little feral now and then. Smiling, Phil leaned in for a quick kiss.

“Sure, sweetheart. Thanks.”

Phil never looked in the mirror if he could help it. There was no way he could compete with either of his lovers, and Phil had no vanity anyway. He’d given it up when he’d agreed to take the mantle of secret government agent, remaining anonymous and forgettable. Only Clint and Tasha felt otherwise, and it had been so long that Phil now felt safest when nobody gave him a second look.

After adjusting the tee, which was definitely roomy across the chest and shoulders, Phil looked up to see a smiling Clint handing him his second best fleece bathrobe.

“Ready?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Phil followed Clint out of the bathroom into the living room. Clint never settled well in vulnerable rooms, so they’d painstakingly installed white aluminum Venetian blinds, covered by white floral lace floor to ceiling sheers, and then heavy silk brocade drapes in a Damascene pattern. All the layers muffled sound, helped block sniper shots, and made their living room seem like a warm nest in the night.

“Sit.”

As usual, Tasha’s voice was brisk and her actions warm. In this case, she’d made a blanket nest in the corner of the L-shaped sofa, a plate of food at the ready on the bookshelf behind the sofa. A mug of steaming hot tea sat beside the plate.

“Thanks, Tasha.”

Tasha sniffed, and tucked the blanket around him. “Jarvis tells me that you’ve been working for 20 days straight. You’ve violated SI policy, and now you’re banned from work for 96 hours.”

Behind Tasha, Clint snickered. “You’ve done it now.”

“But—” started Phil, only to be interrupted by Tasha’s firm voice and a quick kiss on his lips.

“No, Phil. Absolutely not. What happens when you take your hand out of a bucket of water?”

While she spoke, Tasha picked up the blanket and aggressively nestled in his lap, gesturing to Clint to resume his prior position so that she could lean against his chest. Dutifully, Clint climbed onto the sofa, Lucky trotting in and dropping with a heavy sigh beside their people-pile.

Picking up her knitting needs, she eyed his plate. “Eat, Phil.”

Blinking, Phil huffed a little laugh before reaching for the food. Tasha had cut up some chicken breast from the roast chicken with Dijon sauce she’d made the other day, pouring a bit of the heated sauce over the top. Two thick slices of crusty white bread smeared with European butter lay next to the chicken. Slices of red apple with the skin on were tidily fanned like a peacock’s tail from the bread. A handful of sugar snap peas, no doubt raided from the aquaponics lab, lay next to a blob of garlic hummus. A few good-sized squares of Gouda were the central axis of the plate.

The scent of the Dijon mustard mixed with the sweetness of the apple and the green of the peas and Phil fell upon the food like a starving man, pausing only to wash it down with the strong, hot tea, American-style. Decaf, no doubt, but he did enjoy his Constant Comment.
About three-quarters of the way through the plate, his eyelids started drifting closed. Vaguely, he was aware that Tasha was taking the plate, but he couldn’t be bothered to care. He was warm, fed, and comfortable, safe with his people.

“Should we take him to bed?” That was Clint’s voice, low and deep.

Equally quietly, he heard Tasha answer, “Yes, because his back will hurt if we let him sleep on the sofa all night.”

Drifting, he heard Clint say, “C’mon, Phil. Up and at ‘em.”

“Fine.”

He knew he was being sulky, and he knew that Tasha and Clint didn’t care. Opening his eyes, he forced himself up and off the sofa. Lucky stood as well, stretching leisurely before padding down the hall to their bedroom. Phil clutched his bathrobe around himself and followed, brain completely off.

In the bedroom, he shrugged out of his bathrobe, hanging it on the hook in the bathroom before snuggling into the warm flannel sheets. Someone had preheated the bed with the electric mattress pad, and he was grateful. Loki’s spear had gone all the way through, and even now, he hurt all the way through. Even as he closed his eyes, he felt the bed dip behind him, and Clint’s strong arm slung around his waist.

“G’night, sweetheart.”

Cloth rustled behind them both, and then Tasha’s lighter weight shifted the blankets. Her small hand slipped over their clasped hands.

“Good night.”

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Their bedroom was still dark when Phil woke the next morning, ingrained habit forcing his eyes open at 5 a.m. He tried hard to go back to sleep, but gave it up for a losing battle when he realized he had to pee. Sliding out from under the covers, his skin prickled in the cool, dry air.

“Phil?” Tasha’s voice was soft, muzzy with sleep.

Phil could refuse Tasha nothing. “I’ll be right back.”

Walking quietly into the bathroom, he took care of business, washed his face, and brushed his teeth before returning to the warmth of his bed and his lovers. Clint had rolled into his warm spot, pulling Tasha with him, so Phil wiggled into her spot. It was already a little cool, so he scooted up next to Tasha. Well aware that this was an indulgence granted only to him and Clint, he gingerly pressed his chest to her back, her hair tickling his cheek as he moved the tops of his thighs to her ass, and carefully, slowly, wrapped an arm around her waist, his palm against Clint’s chest. Tasha was apparently having a good day, because she snuggled back against him with a pleased murmur, and Phil relaxed back into sleep.

The next time he woke up, he was alone and the bed was cool. As a safety feature, the mattress pads turned off automatically after ten hours, so Phil knew that it was past midmorning. He wanted to be angry that they’d not woken him, but in truth, he was pleased to have slept in.
Stretching, he yawned, and slowly pushed off the pile of blankets before sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at the quality of the light coming through the narrow window. It was tinted with gold, but not angled sharply, so Phil thought it was a sunny day, past the time in the morning when the sun shone directly at their windows.

As he got dressed for the day in a pinstripe dress shirt and jeans, Phil became aware of a hard knot of anger in his chest. Apparently he was still irritated with Nick. Trying to put it out of his mind, he ventured into the kitchen, but it was dark and quiet, the living room curtains still closed from the night before.

Fuck it. There was probably food on the common floor, and perhaps some company to distract him from these useless emotions. Pocketing his wallet, he grabbed one of Clint’s zip up hoodies from the hall closet, and closed up the apartment, badge, retinal scan, and code on the way out.

Down in the common room, the entire team was lazily sprawled in the sunshine streaming in through the wall of windows. Like usual, Steve and Bucky had claimed the corner with the best sightlines. As though he had forgotten how big he was, Steve sat in a tight white tee and sweats with his feet tucked up under himself while he sketched, frowning in concentration. Similarly attired, Bucky was curled against Steve, steel knitting needles flashing in what Phil recognized as a complex cable pattern.

Gesturing at a holographic display of a recent science fiction book cover, Tony lounged in a long-sleeved tee and jeans beside Bucky, talking insistently while Bucky hummed at intervals. At a small desk in the corner, Pepper’s skilled hands flashed through layers of holographic spreadsheets, Jane standing behind her and pointing to key data as they worked. Both women were dressed for an afternoon out, jeans and blouses—Pepper wore white while Jane wore red.

Lucky lay in a patch of sunshine, essentially sound asleep.

Dressed in a ragged dress shirt and corduroys, Bruce had claimed his usual chair, his slipper-clad feet up on an ottoman and steel-rimmed glasses perched on his beaky nose while he read the latest issue of *Nature*. Phil dimly recalled that Bruce and Tony had recently had an article accepted for publication.

As was his wont, Loki lay with his back on the floor and bare feet on the wall, a thick book in his hands. Inky black hair spread like a puddle around his head, darker than the black, long-sleeved tunic he was wearing over what looked to be leggings.

Dressed in Midgardian fashion, Thor relaxed on the other arm of the sofa, a videogame controller tiny in his big hands. Next to him, Clint was perched on the back of the sofa, crowing with delight, his own controller in danger of being flung into the room.

Only Tasha was missing. As though on cue, she stepped out of the kitchen, head tilted as she saw Phil. “Hungry?”

Phil nodded, following her into the kitchen. “Everything OK?”

“Yes.”

That was Tasha, not using two words when one would do. Phil tried again. “Can I help?”

Turning to him, Tasha arched a delicate eyebrow. Sometimes, Phil forgot how beautiful she was, and then a moment would like this would make him catch his breath.
“Do you honestly think that I’ve forgotten that you’re off duty today? Sit.”

Phil sat.

Tasha bustled around the kitchen, heating water for tea while she cut and toasted thick slices of Steve’s oat and wheat sandwich bread covered with Vermont cheddar. The scent of toasting bread drifted through the kitchen as his tea brewed. Phil rested his chin on his hand and watched as she assembled his breakfast in less than five minutes.

“Thank you, Tasha.”

Rather than answer, she just nodded, gesturing at his tea and toast, a tiny crease between her brows the only sign of her annoyance.

“I’m eating, I’m eating.”

To prove it, he took a big bite of his toast, moaning in delight when the bread and cheese hit his tongue.

“You’re too thin,” she chided. “Vending machine junk food once or twice a day isn’t enough.”

Abashed, he nodded. “I’ll do better.”

Crossing around the counter, Tasha dropped a kiss on top of his head. “See that you do. I have plans that don’t include being without you.”

Unusually, Tasha stayed like that, hands on his shoulders, until he finished both slices of bread and the heavily sugared tea. It was as though she was afraid he’d leave the food.

Leaning back, he covered one of her hands with his. “Really, Tasha, thank you. I needed that.”

Another kiss, and she was gone.

As he tucked his plate into the dishwasher and poured himself another mug of tea, Phil contemplated what to do with all this unexpected free time. He knew better than to even attempt to return to his office or try to do some work. When Jarvis put someone on leave, they stayed on leave.

Still, he couldn’t just sit around and brood. He’d only become increasingly angry with Nick. Phil knew that he needed to do something to get out of his head.

Turning, he looked out the common room windows, at the bright sunshine reflecting off rooftops wet from last night’s rain, and realized that spring had truly sprung. Phil thought for a moment.

“Jarvis, are there any sensitive plantings in the aquaponics lab?”

“No, not at the moment.”

Nodding to the team, Phil headed for the lab, already planning his afternoon.

After collecting pea shoots and spinach from the lab, Phil had raided Jarvis’s basement larder, coming up with Swiss chard, mustard greens, spinach, kale, bok choy, and beet greens, as well as
three pounds of ground turkey.

In the elevator, he leaned against the back wall, awkwardly holding the greens in one arm and a plastic bag with the frozen meat hanging from his wrist.

“Mr. Coulson?” Jarvis’s voice was hesitant.

Phil sighed. “My floor, please.”

If he went to the common floor, someone would fuss or want to help, but Phil didn’t want to teach anyone how to make the dumplings and meatballs. He just wanted a peaceful, quiet afternoon listening to music while keeping his hands busy.

“Very good, sir.”

Phil felt the slight force as the elevator hummed around him, before it stopped and the doors slid open to reveal his foyer.

Clumsily, he managed to swipe his badge, lean up for the retinal scan, and type in the code with his non-dominant hand.

Once he was in the kitchen, he set the greens by the sink and placed the ground turkey in the microwave to defrost.

“Jarvis, cooking playlist, please.”

Next to the kitchen speakers, an LED winked green, and the quiet guitar notes of “Time in a Bottle” drifted into the kitchen as Phil began washing all the greens.

Chopping the pea shoots and bok choy was easy, but Phil hunted down and sharpened the sheep's foot paring knife to cut the ribs out of the Swiss chard and kale. Taking a pot out of the bottom cabinet, he filled it with hot water from the tap and set it on the stove with a tight-fitting lid to bring it to a quick boil. Rolling the leaves tightly, he switched to his carbon-steel chef’s knife to chiffonade the spinach, chard, kale, and beet greens. Swiss chard, beet greens, and kale needed more cooking than a stir fry could easily provide, so he quickly blanched them in the now-boiling water. They turned bright green and their bitter scent came up with the steam of the water.

Letting them drain in a colander in the sink, Phil turned his attention to the green onions. He’d need two and a quarter cups altogether, but they were fairly easy to chop in small bundles. The sharp scent of the onions filled the air, and Phil smiled to see the little circular bands of green onion stem pop back up after he pressed the stems as he cut them. Repeating the process with chives, he filled up the two-cup Pyrex bowl to the one and a half cup mark. Finally, he chopped all of one bundle of parsley and half of another.

Setting the green onions, chives, and parsley aside, he retrieved the ginger from the freezer and grated three tablespoons in one small bowl, and three tablespoons in another. Another small bowl received three minced garlic cloves. Bringing his hands to his face, he smelled the comforting aroma of the garlic.

Phil paused, frowning. “Jarvis, I forgot the tofu. Do we have some firm tofu?”

“Yes, Dr. Banner and Loki eat enough that I keep it in stock. How much would you like?”

Nodding thoughtfully, Phil replied, “Three packages, please.”
The dumbwaiter hummed, and a moment later, opened to reveal three neatly stacked packages.

“Thank you, Jarvis.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Coulson.”

Jarvis’s voice was pleased, and Phil suddenly realized that he’d spoken with Jarvis more today than he had in weeks. Did that make him a bad Tower inhabitant? Privately resolving to be kinder to Jarvis, Phil turned his attention back to his cutting board, only half-listening to the seventies singer-songwriter music the algorithm spit out.

Patiently, Phil chopped the tofu into quarter-inch blocks, filling a good-sized stainless steel bowl as he went. After he finished, he washed his hands and went in search of the toasted sesame oil, salt, cornstarch, rice vinegar, soy sauce, mirin, dark brown sugar, ground coriander, and an egg.

Once he’d assembled everything on the counter, he began measuring it out. In one bowl, he put a cup and half each of dark brown sugar, water, soy sauce, and mirin, along with three teaspoons of ground coriander and a dozen peppercorns. In another, he mixed the turkey, a dozen chopped green onions, parsley, egg, six tablespoons of toasted sesame oil and the same of soy sauce.

Covering the bowl with the ground turkey, he put it in the refrigerator to chill while he prepared the filling for the dumplings.

First he sautéed the green onions until they were soft, and then added the ginger and garlic, stirring the mixture frequently as it toasted. Adding the chives and tofu, he let them sauté for a moment before he drained them in the colander with the Swiss chard, beet greens, and kale.

“Come a Little Bit Closer” came on, and Phil might have shimmied a little on his way to the sink to wash his hands again. Pressing a hand to his back, he decided to move to the kitchen table for the next step. With great precision, he lined up the plastic dumpling mold, the 150 round dumpling wrappers, a little dipping bowl of water, another bowl of cornstarch, the tablespoon scoop, and the thoroughly mixed aromatics, greens, and tofu.

What was he missing?

Oh, right, the parchment covered cookie sheet to hold the final product. Sliding out the half-sheet pans from their nook beside the stove, Phil covered three of them with parchment paper.

Sitting at the table, Phil spent the next hours enjoyably focused on creating a seemingly endless stream of little vegetable pot stickers.

Each one was placed just so in the mold, filled with precisely one scoop of the vegetable and tofu mixture, and the edges delicately traced with a little cornstarch slurry. Then Phil cautiously held the dumpling in place while closing the mold, pressing the edges together in perfectly fluted folds. Placing each newly formed dumpling in a neat row on the cookie sheet, he repeated the process until he had used every dumpling wrapper.

Stretching, he became aware that Clint was slouched against the doorway, Tasha peering over his shoulder.

“Hey, sweetheart,” said Phil, bad mood thoroughly banished. He turned with open arms, and then looked at his hands, covered with sticky cornstarch.

Clint snickered, and then Tasha came into the room, all brisk movement.
“This is your idea of taking the day off?” she groused. “Your optometrist didn’t say to replace screens with dumplings.”

Clint grinned at Phil, their eyes locking over her head. Shrugging, Phil turned and began to wash his hands.

“I like detail work,” he said, deliberately pitching his voice low and soothing. “You know that, sweetheart.”

Clint took the dishes from her, gently kissing her before turning to the dishwasher. “Ой, иди ты!” was her only response, muttered as she tidied up the kitchen table.

“Go,” he said. “I’ll help with the rest. I know you’ve got that new book.”

Tasha’s smile was every bit as brilliant as the afternoon sun that spilled in through the opened curtains and blinds.

“I will, then.”

Turning on her heel, she went straight to her knitting and her book, Jarvis automatically playing Stravinsky, her favorite background noise.

“You know she worries.” Clint was a little anxious, clearly worried that Phil would take offense at Tasha’s curtness.

“C’mere,” said Phil, opening his arms to Clint. As the younger man backed him up against the sink, Phil smiled.

“I know she cares, that she grumps at me because she’s worried about me. You’re allowed to worry, too,” appeased Phil, holding Clint tight, feeling his strength against his body. “I feel good that she cares.”

Clint sighed and slumped against Phil. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. Want to help me make meatballs?”

Clint pulled back, shaking his head as he laughed. “You are incorrigible, you know that?”

“Who, me?” Grinning, Phil gestured to the refrigerator. “They’re all mixed. I just need to measure them out and cook them. Do you want measuring or cooking?”

“Measuring, definitely.” Still shaking his head, Clint opened the refrigerator and took the big bowl with the meatball mixture. “We could bake these.”

“Hmm.” Phil thought for a moment. “That would definitely be easier. Metal grate?”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

Phil nodded. “Let’s do it. This will be quicker because we can both measure.”

Opening the appropriate drawer, Phil dug around until he found two one-tablespoon scoops. While he looked, Clint retrieved a full sheet pan and a non-stick metal cooling rack to match. Setting the rack on the sheet pan, he sprayed both a generous coating of oil.

Side by side, they patiently worked their way through the entire three pounds of turkey mixture, making over a hundred tiny meatballs.
“It’s a good thing I love you, because this is a tedious pain in the ass,” offered Clint as they finished the last meatball.

Phil just laughed. “Mm-hmm. And who eats all of his and half of mine?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Clint said, and batted his eyelashes at Phil before taking both scoops and putting them in the dishwasher before he washed his hands. Phil joined him at the sink, bumping his hip.

“Sure you don’t. Hungry yet?”

“Starving.”

Right on cue, Clint’s stomach growled and he blushed. Phil loved that Clint blushed for him—nobody else but Tasha got to see him like this.

“I’ll steam the dumplings,” decided Phil. “That’ll be fastest. You pop those in the oven, OK?”

“Yep.”

True to his word, Clint turned on the stove, and rearranged the racks to fit the sheet pans while Phil pulled out the bamboo steamer and arranged it over a pot he’d filled with hot water from the tap. Even with the three layers on the steamer, steaming the dumplings would require several batches.

While he waited for the first batch to steam, he turned to lean against the counter, and found himself snuggled against Clint’s broad chest, strong arms against his back.

“It’s good to see you happy again.”

Clint’s voice rumbled in his chest, directly to Phil’s ear. Phil sighed in contentment.

“It’s good to be with you. I needed this, needed you both.”

Slim hands slipped between their chests, and a warm body pressed against his back, Clint’s arms reaching to pull Tasha against them both.

“You have us both, дорогой.”

Phil felt the heat of Tasha’s breath against his back and relaxed, safe between his people. This was where he belonged, warm and safe, with a good meal to share with friends.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to need_more_meta for correcting my Russian!
Thor Makes Shish Kebabs for Dinner

Chapter Summary

In which Thor takes Jane and Darcy to the Tower, fusses over his brother, and hosts a Memorial Day cookout for the Avengers and assorted partners and pets.

Thor leaned back, Jane under one arm and Darcy under the other. Jane was dressed in her favorite jeans and flannel shirt, soft against his side. Darcy lounged beside him, comfortable in her usual shirt, soft stretch pants, and sweater. Seated together on the luridly purple sofa in Stark’s Quinjet, Thor eased a little to have his beloved and her friend near enough that he could fly with them both at a moment’s notice. Mjölnir sat in front of him, a mere hands-breadth away.

He was aware that Darcy and Jane found his behavior to be overbearing, but tolerated it as a sign of his alien nature. In truth, Midgard had a vitality that Asgard lacked, but it also had a casual disregard for life. Even as a fighting man, Thor respected life more than many would expect.

When the call had come from the Tower to join them, Jane had not wished to leave her laboratory in New Mexico. Even though the lady Natasha had then called Darcy and explained the need, Jane had yet resisted, believing them safe enough in the remote desert. Cleverly, Stark’s seneschal, Jarvis, had contacted Darcy, and though Thor had not been privy to the conversation, he’d found that Darcy had been persuaded to relocate. Not wanting to interfere with Jane’s work, Thor had bitten his tongue as Darcy had persuaded Jane to move to the Tower, pointing out that data analysis could be done from anywhere, and that Thor’s presence might be needed.

That last point had clinched the argument for Jane, and so she had begun a laborious accounting of all of the equipment that she’d wanted to move. Darcy had whipped out her phone, called Jarvis, and had him patch them through to Stark, who had offhandedly agreed to replace all of their equipment if they would but hurry to the Tower.

Nevertheless, the hold was filled with hard drives and other laboratory equipment his lady had deemed irreplaceable. Thor had assisted as much as he could, quickly learning how to break servers down to their components and seizing the hard drives for transportation. Mostly, he’d been asked to do the heavy lifting, and that was well enough. It had been but the work of a few minutes to load the precious technology into the Quinjet while Natasha showed Jane and Darcy where to stow their few personal belongings.

Thor glanced down to see that Jane was reading one of her interminable physics texts. While Thor had little patience for such intellectual pursuits, he held his tongue for Jane. Without seiðr, this was as close as she could come to understanding the Nine Worlds, and he would do what he could to please her. Even with the AllSpeak, he had not the words to teach her the Asgardian view of the universe. After all, why would he bother to examine in minute detail what simply worked? Not until Jane had asked had he realized how much he didn’t know, how much he’d relied on Loki to fill those gaps.

Shifting, he looked to Darcy and found her playing a game on her phone. Darcy was ever restless and in search of entertainment. Thor empathized, but could find no surcease on those tiny devices. He kept accidentally crushing them, and they were dear. The last time he’d shown Darcy a mangled phone, she’d been so upset with him he’d vowed not to repeat the experience. Mostly
certainly, the son of Coul had made an enemy when he’d seized Darcy’s music device.

Flicking a glance towards the front of the craft, he saw Romanoff slumped in the pilot’s seat, chatting to her beloved. When Avengers team members had shown up to fetch his lady and her student, Thor had been surprised, he’d not expected that level of consideration from Stark. Then he’d realized that Stark’s seneschal had probably made the arrangements. Before they’d removed their gear, they’d tested all three of them with some device of Banner’s devising, ensuring that they wouldn’t endanger Coulson, with his delicate health. As ever, the pair’s obvious respect and affection for one another warmed his heart. He wanted that with Jane, that comfort in one another’s company.

Realizing that the deadly pair appeared so comfortable because they perceived no threat, Thor sighed, his tension fading. If they were unworried, then he could relax. He did not always recognize the signs of danger on Midgard, but he trusted Coulson and Romanoff to be alert.

Darcy twisted around, frowning. “Doing OK, big guy?”

“Fine,” he replied, nodding. “I have missed the team.”

Thor was happiest in the mêlée, feeling most alive in the heat of combat. With the prospect of Ragnarok always present, Thor worked hard to ground himself in the fleeting now. Like most Asgardians, he was prone to the ennui that came with long life. Knowing that his life could be cut short in battle merely whetted his appetite for war.

Asgardians were especially prone to melancholy as they came of age and realized the inevitability of their deaths, and their powerlessness to prevent it. Thor himself had suffered from this, and his father had done him good by sending him to battle as an adolescent, forcing him to focus on the joy of life.

If only to himself, Thor thought that poor Loki’s first bout of existential despair had come at the same time as the unfortunate news of his parentage. The double blow had wounded his brother far more than anyone had anticipated, shattering his perception of reality. Odin’s less than tolerant reaction to Loki’s mental wounds, albeit a reaction complicated by Loki’s schoolboy schemes, had further damaged his brother.

Midgardians were ever restless, bent on the here and now, and Thor had felt that their emphasis on being present in the world could only be good for his brother’s despair. Vitality ran through the team, particularly in the Captain and his shield-husband. Even though Barnes had been grievously wounded, not unlike Loki, the couple still took joy in their days—a skill that Loki would do well to master for his coming years.

Flicking his gaze back to Romanoff and her husband, Thor mused that they, too, seized their joys amid the damage of their lives. Clint was their joint pleasure, the initial connection between them. Even so, they had all grown together into a strong unit. Each of them had had good cause to be bitter and angry, and yet here they were, caring for their friends with every sign of contentment in the task.

Frowning, Thor decided once again that he’d been lucky that Banner had conceded to his request to care for Loki. Of all the team, Banner was the oldest, of the steadiest temperament, with the fewest obligations. Loki needed that calm wisdom to guide his actions while he recovered from his impulsive actions. Even though he’d persuaded Odin solely on the basis of the physical strength of Banner’s alter ego, Thor knew that it was Banner’s kindness that Loki needed.

When Thor had last contacted Heimdall, he’d reported that Loki was healing, albeit slowly, under
Banner’s vigilant fostering. Indeed, all the original inhabitants of the Tower were reportedly becoming fond of Loki, despite his brother’s sullen laziness. Apparently, he spent his time reading Midgardian books. Loki was old enough to be aware of the obligation of a fostered guest to his host, to know that he owed Stark labor in repayment.

That would change once he arrived at Tower, Thor vowed. Loki would earn his keep.

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“Well met, man of iron!”

The prince of Midgard had a fine abode, thought Thor, striding forward to meet Stark. The Tower had excellent sight lines over the surrounding city, and the roof deck made for a convenient landing space. Repaired after the first, unsuccessful visit, it boasted a large landing area for the Quinjet, a small glass house, and an area sheltered from the high winds atop the Tower. While not as aesthetically pleasing as the gleaming palace of Asgard, the Tower boasted a certain vivaciousness.

Stark appeared in his favorite Midgardian garb, a band tee over a long-sleeved shirt, and denim. Strong and healthy, he no longer had signs of sleep deprivation under his eyes or in the droop of his shoulders. Instead, he fairly glowed with happiness in the bright afternoon sun. Life with Pepper and the other Avengers clearly suited him, although Thor worried about the adding Loki to the mix. Loki was never easy to live with, he knew.

“Point Break! You joined us!”

Thor looked over his shoulder as Darcy and Jane tended to their lab equipment. As they disembarked, the women had waved him away to tend to their gear, but given the high winds atop the Tower, Thor thought he should renew his offer of assistance. “I thank you for the invitation, but I need to help my lady and Darcy with their equipment.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, that’s a lot of hardware. Let me get Steve to help.”

Raising the black band on his wrist to his mouth, he demanded, “Jarvis! Tell Steve we need his muscles up here. And Barton, too, if he’s not back on the injured list.”

“Certainly, Sir. Would you like me to include Dr. Banner and young master Loki on that list?”

Surprised, Thor shook his head. He didn’t need to owe Banner any more than he already did for fostering Loki. After all, at his last visit he’d bargained away both a personal favor and an official favor in his role as crown prince of Asgard. Without raiding the treasury proper, he could not offer more.

“No need to bother Banner. I cannot ask more of your viskr.”

Stark blinked. “My what?”

“Your viskr, your learned companion.”

Stark stared uncomprehendingly and Thor continued, “Banner.”

Tony chuckled and Thor raised an eyebrow. Had he misunderstood? Was Banner not a companion to Stark? Did they not study together?

“Yeah, sure.” Tony rolled his eyes. “I don’t think Banner would mind giving Jane a hand. They’re
going to be science pals now, you know? He’s already called dibs on spectroscopy analysis.”

Thor didn’t know, but assumed that Tony meant that Jane would be welcomed by Banner, which was pleasing. His beloved was deserving of every kindness as she endeavored to explain the connections between the Nine Worlds. Yet Thor did not wish to impose himself upon his host and his brother’s foster-carer.

“I would not interrupt his studies,” he replied, turning to eye the Quinjet. Romanoff had shifted, keeping her body between Coulson and the gear. Clearly, she’d successfully distracted him with the tablet he held in his hand, keeping him from the heavy lifting. Romanoff and Barton were attentive to their husband’s care, and Thor thought better of them for it.

Frowning, Thor moved to his lady, leaving Stark to follow. Jane and Darcy were busy removing boxes of equipment from the hold, Romanoff assisting while Coulson checked off equipment on the tablet. Stark’s Tower was high enough for the wind to have a biting edge, especially to those used to the desert heat of New Mexico. Thor wanted Jane and Darcy in the safety of the Tower as soon as possible.

“Jane! Darcy! Lovely ladies! It’s good to see you again!” Stark’s voice was fond, even avuncular. Truly, he and Pepper had bonded, their care for each other tangible in Stark’s good health and his complete disinterest in the women.

Smiling, Jane looked up from the tangle of cables in her hand. “Mr. Stark. Thank you for hosting us.”

“Now, now. Call me Tony.” Stark’s grin flashed in the afternoon sun, his eyes crinkled in pleasure. “Stay as long as you like. After all, Thor’s floor is empty, waiting for you. Plenty of space.”

As she hoisted her duffle bag onto her shoulder, her long, brown hair whipping around her face in the strong wind, Darcy’s tone was cautious. “Where’s Loki, then?”

“With Banner,” responded Stark easily, as if it were obvious. Walking past Jane, he bent and lifted a complicated piece of equipment. “Do all of these boxes go to the lab?”

Coming to a decision, Thor grabbed the heaviest bundles of equipment before turning to Stark. “My lady does not travel lightly. Where is the lab?”

Stark waved Jane onward. “With me, ladies, gentlemen. We’ll send Steve and Clint to fetch the rest.”

Darcy followed, lugging their clothing and personal effects while Romanoff grabbed a box of cables and handed it to Coulson, taking another, heavier box for herself. Thor bit back a smile as Coulson looked at the box, looked at Romanoff’s carefully neutral expression, and then started walking.

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With the help of most of his team members and their partners, Thor had moved and unpacked all of Jane’s equipment. New server racks had already been delivered courtesy of Jarvis, and Romanoff and Coulson had spent a good portion of the afternoon installing the hard drives with Jane’s precious data in her new, spacious lab.

Thor had particularly liked that her lab had no outside windows, deep in the heart of Jarvis’s Tower. He had spent some time conversing with Jarvis about security measures, and felt confident that Jane was as protected as reasonably possible. Jane’s labs were on floors off-limits to all but the
original inhabitants of the Tower. Even though his lady’s work was not secret, Thor had been reassured that the thousands of new Tower residents were unable to reach these floors. Jarvis was an excellent seneschal.

Despite the assistance, Jane had been visibly tired by the time she’d called a halt to the afternoon’s proceedings. Her normal determination had faded, exhausted as she was by the events of the last few days. With any luck, she would not become ill, thought Thor. Jane had moved more and more slowly as the afternoon had progressed.

“Thor! You had these awesome digs and stayed in our ratty trailer?”

Darcy’s voice was full of laughter as she spun in a circle in the middle of the living room, gesturing at the open space.

With a new appreciation, Thor gazed at the living room. It was a good-sized room, by Midgardian standards, with a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the heart of the city of New York. Idly, Thor wondered about Old York as he switched his attention to the smooth wood floor and the large, sturdy pieces of furniture covered in soft cushions and blankets. Mjölnir sat on a low table nearby, wordlessly comforted by Jarvis’s presence.

Light filled the room, the evening sun slanting in through the windows, warming the soft, patterned rugs that lay between the furniture. Large silvered mirrors reflected gold, filling the room with the warm yellow light of Sol. Yes, Thor much preferred Midgard to, say, Svartalfheim.

Thor smiled at Darcy’s joy in simple, comfortable surroundings. “I stayed with Jane, and I would stay with her always.”

“Aw, you two are so sweet,” cooed Darcy, looking at Jane. “Jane, are you even listening to this?”

Resting against Thor’s chest, Jane nodded sleepily. “Mm-hmm.”

Thor gently tightened his hold on Jane, allowing her body to relax as she fell asleep. With his free hand, he brought a finger to his lips, warning Darcy to stay quiet.

Darcy nodded, and padded quietly away, down the hall to her quarters. Thor’s floor had been equipped with several guest suites, each with their own furnished and stocked living room, bedroom, and en suite bathroom. In addition, Thor’s floor boasted a large kitchen, and a room where he could take private meetings. Stark’s generosity was in keeping with his status, as befitted a prince of the realm.

Yet Thor was unhappy. In all this generosity, all this aid for his ladylove, he had seen neither Loki nor Banner. Not wishing to take away from Jane’s tasks, he had not made an issue of it, other than to gently inquire as to Loki’s whereabouts. “With Banner,” had been the only response, and if perhaps that stung, Thor hadn’t been willing to admit it, even to himself.

By Midgardian standards, Thor knew himself to be young, 24 by their reckoning, and he did not want to show himself as a rash, impulsive youth any longer. Therefore, he bided his time, seemingly unconcerned as the afternoon went on without any sign of his brother. Heimdall would probably have informed him if Loki was not in good hands. Probably. He trusted his teammates. Most of all, he trusted in Stark, because while Banner was fostering Loki, Banner was Stark’s viskr, which meant that ultimate responsibility fell upon Stark’s shoulders, even if day-to-day oversight rested with his chatelaine, Pepper and his seneschal, Jarvis. Neither was cruel, or even harsh, but still Thor worried. Why would Loki avoid him? Was Banner keeping them apart on
purpose?

A message displayed on the silent TV screen:

“Master Odinson, Sir requests the honor of your presence at a team dinner this evening. --Jarvis”

Silently, Thor nodded in the direction of the TV, knowing that Jarvis would correctly interpret his acquiescence. Perhaps he would finally get to see Loki.

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Golden lamplight spilled over the dining table in the common room. Befitting his status, Tony sat at the head of the table, a suit-clad Pepper on his left. Thor watched as Tony’s dark eyes crinkled in pleasure as he whispered into Pepper’s ear, pressing a kiss against the delicate shell of her pale earlobe. In turn, she shivered and smiled, laughing at whatever witticism Tony had deemed fit for her alone.

In the place of honor on Tony’s right, Thor draped an arm over the back of Jane’s chair, Mjölnir at his feet. The complex aroma of a long-simmered stew wafted up from his plate. Pepper had ordered cassoulet from one of her favorite French restaurants, Brasserie Les Halles, and Thor had enjoyed the duck, pork shoulder, and sausage with beans, sopped up with a crusty baguette and finished with a bright green salad.

Comfortably full, Thor was enjoying his after dinner coffee and only half-listening as Jane and Pepper chatted across the table.

“It’s been a long time since we went out for pizza,” Jane reminisced.

Nodding, Pepper said, “You know, we have a pretty decent pizzeria here in the Tower. Not as good as Jarvis’s--”

To Jane’s right, Darcy looked up from her phone. “Wait, what? Jarvis makes pizza?”

Natasha turned from a whispered conversation with Phil and smiled, the unfamiliar expression surprising Thor. Until that moment, he hadn’t quite realized why her nickname was that of a spider.

“Jarvis and the bots threw me a pizza party for my birthday, in December. Jarvis built a state-of-the-art pizza oven in a corner of the lab.”

Both Coulson and Natasha had clearly showered and changed into casual clothing, Natasha in an oversized sweater and soft pants, Coulson in a gray sweatshirt and jeans. He had Clint half on his lap, and Thor had gradually realized that it wasn’t only affection, that Coulson was quietly speaking key bits of the raucous conversation directly into Clint’s ears.

“Uh, Jarvis and his brothers took over my lab with their cooking experiments, you mean.” Tony’s words were harsh, but his tone was fond and his smile was wide.

On Clint’s far side, Bucky had been nearly silent for most of the meal, leaning against his shield-husband’s side, Steve’s arm around his waist. On the floor between Bucky and Clint, Lucky lay alert for any dropped tidbits or random affectionate pats. For his part, Steve had spoken for both himself and Bucky, his blue eyes wide with sincerity as he teased.

Now Bucky spoke up for the first time that evening, steel-gray eyes half closed as he leaned against Steve’s broad shoulder. “Ya gotta admit, Stark, it was damn good pizza.”
Lucky looked up hopefully but Clint looked down and shook his head. “Sorry, dog, no pizza for you tonight.”

Jarvis cleared his throat, and half the table looked at the ceiling. His voice was smug as he said, “Perhaps I could find some processing cycles to spare for pizza.”

Darcy grinned and pumped her fist. “Yay, pizza party!”

At the foot of the table, Bruce smiled indulgently. He had the seat reserved for Tony’s partner, which only confirmed his status as *viskr*. Gently teasing Steve and Bucky throughout the meal, he had traded looks of recognition with Coulson when Tony made his usual outrageous statements, and generally acted as another host. It seemed that Pepper did not wish to rule the Tower as she ruled Stark Industries.

To Bruce’s left, on the other side of Darcy, sat Loki. After only a swift initial greeting and a half-hearted nod at Thor, he’d settled quietly into his seat, well after the meal had started. Thor had noticed that Loki and Bruce ate from a separate dish, without meat. It was well that Loki had felt comfortable enough to ask for food that agreed with his more delicate digestion, although Thor had not expected anyone else to go along with his brother’s quirks.

In the lull, Thor made eye contact with Bruce. “I thank you for the care you have shown my brother. Heimdall tells me that you have indulged him as I have not seen since we were lads, and he is the happier for it. My brother’s peace is worth more than all the gold in Asgard’s treasury.”

Bruce blinked and then said with the utmost sincerity, “Of course. Anyone would have done the same.”

On the other side of Darcy, Loki looked up from under his dark eyelashes, the movement catching Thor’s eye. For a long second, they gazed at each other, and Thor remembered all the times on Asgard when Loki’s peace had not been anyone’s concern.

“Regardless, I must insist that Loki be a good guest.” As Loki’s elder brother, Thor was obligated to help his brother, including helping him fulfill his guest obligations.

Jane turned to him, curiosity on her face, but Thor continued. “Loki well knows that he owes you guest-work.”

Silence had fallen on the table. To his left, Tony sat with his chin on his hand, eyes narrowed, while Pepper placed a restraining hand on his arm. Like his namesake, Clint watched him unblinkingly, head cocked to one side, his mouth narrowed in a thin line. Phil’s hand had tightened on Clint’s hip, while Natasha examined her nails.

“Children cannot owe anything,” began Bruce, voice low, but Steve’s hand, curled around a brown bottle of beer, twitched.

Steve pressed a kiss to Bucky’s dark, wavy hair. “Let him speak.”

“Loki knows his duty. One cannot hold the price of his lodging forever.” Thor frowned. Why was this distressing?

All at once, Tony swung into motion, standing at the head of the table. Practically vibrating with fury, he snarled, “I’m not running a hotel. Are you insulting my hospitality? Implying that I could not take care of children?”

“Even children can work. He’s been here for months.” Thor was taken aback at the intensity of
Tony’s anger, and a little nervous. Loki was happy here, and as his big brother, he was simply trying to ensure that Loki could stay.

Clearly trying to defuse the situation, Bruce interjected, “Did you or did you not assign him to my care?”

“Yes, but …” Thor halted at the sight of Clint rising to his feet, swift and deadly.

Swooping around the table, Clint headed for Loki. On the other side of Darcy, Loki had curled into a ball on his seat, his head buried in his knees. His long, inky black hair had slipped to cover his face. Clint bent and whispered into his ear, and then giving Thor a dirty look, carefully took Loki by the arm, leading his tall, slim figure away.

Voice dangerously calm, Bucky straightened in his seat as he met Thor’s eyes. “Do you feel we have treated him badly?”

“No, of course not!” Flustered, Thor looked around the table at his angry teammates. How had this happened?

“Are we not on Midgard? Do our host rules not apply?” Natasha was still examining her fingernails, but Thor did not doubt for a single instant that she was fully aware of the situation.

Pepper patted Tony’s hand, palm down on the dining table as he stared narrowly at Thor, his dark eyes glinting in the lamplight.

Thor looked at Pepper’s expression and was suddenly reminded that Pepper was a warrior-queen of finance and trade on Midgard.

Pepper smiled and it was not warm, but her voice was calm as she said, “We have asked much of Loki, in our own way. He has been assigned to food preparation, animal husbandry, indirect care for the young and the infirm, studies of Midgardian science, and so on. It’s true that we have not asked for a service that only Loki could provide, but that is our choice. In our eyes, he is young, and therefore assigned studies to better enable him to prepare for later independence. We have taken him as one of ours.”

Sighing, Thor leaned back in his chair and looked across the room, the layers of orange, white, and gray striping the evening sky. Below the Tower, the city’s lights were cold and white, reflecting onto the low clouds.

“I had not anticipated that you would add him to your family,” Thor admitted. “I am honored, if confused.”

Gently, Pepper continued. “Loki is trying to understand himself, and his role in the world, just like any other teenager. We were all teenagers once, and perhaps it was more recent for us than it was for you.”

Thor huffed a laugh. “Midgard is shockingly open in this regard, I must admit.”

“Mmm,” was Jane’s quiet response. Thor looked at her and felt his heart soften. Perhaps he had been mistaken.

Coming to a decision, Thor decided to gamble. “Very well, but he must keep up with his Asgardian studies as well.”

“How do you suggest we do that? Since you’ve limited his seiðr?” Coulson smiled, almost as if he
knew what Thor was planning.

Naturally, it was Coulson with the parry. Of them all, Coulson had the most experience in training young people and extensive diplomatic experience, so perhaps it was not unexpected that he had understood where Thor was going with this.

Thor had no way to persuade his father to loosen the painful grip on Loki’s seiðr, but if his Midgardian hosts insisted that Loki be able to access his seiðr as part of the price of Loki’s stay—and, of course, Banner had shown himself capable of handling Loki at full power already—then Odin had no real way to refuse without losing face as an ill-mannered guest by proxy.

“Traditionally, Loki would use his seiðr to perform a favor for his host,” Thor informed them all. Begrudgingly, he admitted, “Our mother, who has immensely powerful seiðr in her own right, tells me that Loki has certain talents of his own. Might he restore that which was taken?”

Pepper arched a brow and looked at Coulson, who in turn looked to Steve, who nodded. “That would be fine.”

Of all the people in the room, Thor felt the most kinship with the super soldier. Not because of their superficial physical resemblance, but because others frequently mistook their often-rash directness for stupidity. In reality, Thor preferred to use his power directly, rather than manipulate. Gradually, he had begun to realize he had counted on Loki for that role, in the way that siblings often developed preferences in reaction to one another. Without Loki, Thor was forced to rein in his own impulsivity.

“I cannot change the terms of Loki’s parole, but I will convey your request to the All-Father.”

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Later that evening, Thor filled the oversized recliner that had appeared in the common room while he’d been absent. He was relieved that his fragile mortal was safely within the Tower, guarded by the ever-vigilant Jarvis. Thor quite liked Jarvis, someone else out of step with the mortal kenning. After growing up with Heimdall watching his every move, Thor did not begrudge Jarvis his eternal watchfulness, nor his love for his inhabitants.

Jane lay curled against his chest, listening to his heartbeat while she traded incomprehensible journal annotations with Stark and Banner, their silent electronic communication facilitated by Jarvis. Even though they were all in the same room, they preferred to annotate jointly, on a virtual scroll.

Mentally, Thor shrugged. He didn’t care to interfere in Jane’s business—his brief sojourn with her here on Midgard should be spent making her happy. Her mayfly life should be savored to the fullest, not dominated by his desires. In this way, Thor kept his mind focused on the present. Giving Jane as much joy as he could was a good reason for his current existence.

Full dark had come to the city, and in deference to the snipers’ sensibilities, Jarvis had shuttered the wall of windows that lay between the common room and the outside of the Tower. With the warm light that filled the room, the team was easily visible from the outside of the Tower, and yet could not easily see outside. Such a disparity made them all uncomfortable, and the snipers had casually refused to enter the room until the metal shutters were drawn.

Now, protected from distant cameras and rifles, the permanent residents of the Tower had drifted to the common room after dinner. Steve and Bucky took up one long arm of the sofa. Steve sat against the corner of the sofa, relaxed in his t-shirt and soft, knit pants, subvocalizing as he read to
Bucky. The heavy book looked tiny in his big hand, a dreadfully inaccurate painting of a nebula on the cover. His other hand rested against Bucky’s waist, carefully out of the way of Bucky’s knitting. For his part, a similarly clad Bucky lay against Steve’s chest, seemingly relaxed as his hands deftly moved to knit thick cables in a white wool sweater. Not for the first time, Thor wondered if they kept separate wardrobes, or simply shared clothes. Neither of them paid much attention to the rest of the room.

Curled up next to Steve, her feet tucked under her, Natasha had her own knitting out, some sort of complex black-on-black item contrasting with the sharp, thin needles in her delicate hands. Rather than attending to Steve’s book, Natasha was half-watching a muted show with the captions on. After watching several people bake, an elderly lady and a curmudgeonly middle-aged man ate their small pastries while critiquing the food.

Dressed in his usual tac pants and sleeveless tee, Natasha’s big blond husband sprawled over the sofa next to her, his feet pressed against her thigh. Clint’s hearing aids sat on the low table in front of them. When Thor had asked, he’d learned that wearing them for days on end irritated Clint’s ears, though they were as small and comfortable as Tony could make them. Clint didn’t seem to care, wrapped as he was in Phil’s arms. Together, he and Phil were watching a silenced video on Phil’s tablet, laughing like loons. Lucky slept at their feet.

“How much?”

In the quiet of the common room, Loki’s soft voice was easily heard. He had stayed in the kitchen. Apparently, it was Loki’s night to tidy up after dinner, which privately amused Thor. How much Loki had changed, willingly performing a servant’s task. Truly, Loki had become humble in Banner’s care.

“Two cups should be plenty. Remember, when it pops, it becomes much larger.”

Banner’s voice was fond, a little proud. Thor did not look in their direction.

Banner was continuing his silent conversation with Jane on his Starkpad, his comfortable armchair surrounded by a pool of light from the floor lamp next to it. On his side table, Banner had somehow acquired a large mug of hot tea and a small plate of Danish butter cookies. His chair was angled so that he could see into the kitchen where Loki was making popcorn with a complicated machine that bore the distinct style of Stark’s engineering.

“Don’t forget to put a big bowl under it,” reminded Pepper, raising her eyes from a thick stack of financial reports. The pale skin of her cheek contrasted with the tan of Tony’s arm as she sat half in his lap, his arm around her shoulders. In turn, Tony had his own Starkpad out, his eyes reflecting the cold blue LEDs as he stared down into the layers of holograms.

While Thor didn’t quite understand the details of what Pepper did, he knew enough to realize that she was a fierce leader and provider for Tony and the rest of the permanent inhabitants of the Tower. Even on Asgard, one did not tangle lightly with those who handled trade at such levels.

Darcy on her phone, her voice filled with idle curiosity. “So, who’s got plans for Memorial Day weekend?”

Steve stopped reading, his face tight. On his chest, Bucky rolled over to face the wall, his knitting needles stilled.

On Thor’s other side, Phil blinked and paused the video.
Seeing their reaction, Thor asked, “What holiday is this?”

Jarvis cleared his throat. “Memorial Day is a day to honor those who died while serving in the military. It’s traditionally the last Monday in May, and one of the major federal holidays here in the United States. Often, it is marked by a meal.”

Noting the distress of others in the room, Thor offered, “A feast for the remembrances of fallen warriors, yes?”

Bruce cleared his throat. “Sometimes. Not many people here have served in the military, or have family members who have served. For the general public, it’s usually the holiday that marks the first day of summer and an excuse for a party. It can be hard for those who have served.”

Nodding soberly, Thor looked around the room. He had some experience with the tension between remembering those lost and celebrating their lives. Perhaps this was something that he could do to repay Tony for Loki’s missing guest-work.

Unknowingly, Darcy helped. “So what do you usually do?”

Tony looked at Pepper, who sighed. “The city likes for Steve to march in the parades. Tony helps support street fairs and buys admissions to amusement parks for the public. Sam sometimes comes in to march with Steve. We don’t make much of it, and of course now there will be no parades or amusement parks.”

Darcy nodded, her dark blue eyes somber. “Thanks.”

Yes, this was something that Thor knew how to do. A feast to honor fallen friends, a fire in the twilight of the day. A ceremony open to all those who mourned fallen friends. Thor had been keenly aware that Steve had not been the only veteran in the room, but Steve was the only one welcomed at a parade. Bucky and Phil both deserved recognition.

“May I help?”

Thor was uncertain of his reception. The earlier conversation at the dinner table had reminded him how different the customs were on Midgard, and he was afraid of overstepping his bounds. But Pepper merely raised an eyebrow and looked at Phil. For his part, Phil had pressed a soft kiss to Clint’s wavy blond hair and inclined his head in silent assent.

Pepper’s voice was warm as she responded, “I think that might be nice. Let Jarvis know what you need.”

Thor nodded, and the conversation turned to the latest episode of Dog Cops.

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Memorial Day had dawned bright and sunny, pink streaks prefacing the golden orb as it made its way over the horizon. On the roof of the Tower, Thor was carefully tending to the grill. Mjölnir sat at his feet.

He’d originally asked Jarvis for an entire pig, intending to butcher it himself, but Jarvis had explained that most of the team had not and would not eat sweetbreads, tripe, or liver. Instead, Jarvis had suggested that he provide Thor with a sufficient quantity and type of meat for the team. Several large pork loins and bags of boneless, skinless chicken breasts had shown up in his kitchen the night before. With the speed of long practice, Thor had diced them in a size good for skewering. On campaign, an Asgardian was expected to be self-sufficient.
With Jane’s help, Thor had found reasonable substitutes for the spices he’d been accustomed to using while out in the field. Oil was always the same, and soy sauce provided a nice, salty tang as well as something Jane had called umami, an additional meaty flavor. Lemon juice had provided a welcome acidity, while Worcestershire sauce added layers of complexity to the marinade. Mustard added some bite, as well as black pepper. Garlic was a universal constant.

Thor had placed all of the diced meat in several large bowls, covered it with the marinade, and then placed plastic wrap over it before putting it in the refrigerator overnight.

When he’d risen with the false dawn, he’d left Jane sleeping soundly in their bed before making his way to the kitchen. As promised, Jarvis had found a large quantity of metal skewers for Thor’s project. Thor had chopped onions and bell peppers into large chunks before threading them on skewers. One could not survive only on meat, after all. Then, he had carefully skewered all of the meat onto skewers, two per person. Mostly. Thor had made four for himself, as well as four for Steve and Bucky before returning all the food to the refrigerator.

Jarvis had explained that on Midgard, at least in New York, one did not normally cook over an open flame. After several rounds of clarification, Thor had come to understand that recreational fires and cooking fires were used differently. For Steve, Bucky, and Phil, he’d wanted both. Fires were the heart and spiritual center of a home, and he’d been mildly shocked to find that Stark had no alðrmari. While Thor was no master of seiðr like his brother, Thor could consecrate a home, giving it his protection.

Straightening from his examination of the massive wood burning grill on the roof deck, Thor turned and looked at the outdoor fire pit. While smaller than one he would have expected on Asgard, he thought it would be big enough to keep them all warm throughout the years. Carefully filling it with pre-cut pieces of the heart of an oak, Thor called for Mjölnir and looked at the sky. A single thin arc of lightning boomed to the fire pit and Thor smiled in satisfaction. Now, the Tower was a home, with an ever-burning fire at its heart.

Returning to his quarters, he softened as he saw a sleepy Jane in their bed. She was precious, this frail beauty with an indomitable spirit. Her dark, glossy hair lay strewn across the white pillow, and her blue eyes were only half-open.

“Come back to bed?” Her voice was soft, barely a whisper, and her pale, bare shoulder peeked out from under the linens.

“As you wish.” Thor slipped into the bed with her, careful of his size and strength. He was no callow youth, to accidentally injure a lover.

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“Jarvis, would you please let everyone know that the fire is ready?”

If he was honest with himself, Thor was proud of the way he’d adapted to this child of Stark. While he’d seen much in his travels among the Nine Realms, a non-magical being who was also a building was not common, and though he did like Jarvis, speaking to him had been disconcerting at first.

“Certainly, Mr. Odinson.”

Jarvis’s voice was calm, soothing Thor’s nerves. He hoped Stark liked his gift. Despite last night’s dinner, Thor worried about Loki’s long-term reception in Stark’s domain. His brother was thought well of by this team, and Thor wanted this so badly for Loki that his heart ached.
Thor felt a slight hand on his arm and looked down into Jane’s smiling face. “Hey, it’s going to be OK. Cook outs are traditional over Memorial Day weekend, and you did a nice job on the fire pit. Everyone’s going to love it.”

Picking up a metal bowl from the counter, Jane continued, “I even made my mama’s potato salad. We can’t all exist on meat and peppers.”

Huffing a laugh, Thor replied, “You’re right. I made enough for everyone, however.”

“I’m sure you did. But a pot luck is traditional. I’m sure everyone else brought something.”

When they reached the roof of the Tower, Thor found that Jane was correct, as usual. Natasha presented him with a bowl of warm, tiny pasta mixed with crumbled, salty sheep cheese, pieces of tomato and cucumber, and dark green spinach. The scents of chili, onions, lemon, and basil rose from the bowl.

“I thought you might like this to go with.”

Blinking, Thor took the bowl. “Thank you.”

Nodding, Natasha turned on her heel and walked towards the other side of the roof deck, where Phil was already seated with a beer in his hand. Clint was perched on the edge of the roof, looking over the city.

As he moved to the bowl down on the large outdoor table, Thor was stopped again, this time by Pepper.

“I hope you don’t mind. I had all the ingredients for this sitting around, so I made up a bowl.”

Laughing, Jane winked at Thor before took the bowl from Pepper. “I told him that everyone would bring something.”

Pepper smiled back, “You were right. It’s just a little yogurt with cucumber and herbs. I make it a lot, because Tony grows all the herbs in the aquaponics labs.”

“Oh, I haven’t been down there yet!” Jane’s face glowed with excitement.

Walking over with a scotch in one hand, and something pink and fizzy in the other, Stark bent and kissed the exposed skin of Pepper’s shoulder before handing her the fizzy drink.

“Here you go, babe.” Turning to Jane, he asked, “Where haven’t you been?”

“The aquaponics labs. I heard you’re doing some interesting work there.”

Tony laughed, his white teeth gleaming in the fast-approaching twilight. “I don’t know how interesting it is. It’s basically my version of gardening. I can’t bring myself to eat the fish.”

Sidling up to the group, Bruce presented Thor with a large serving platter covered with aluminum foil. “French fries are always good, right?”

“These smell wonderful!” exclaimed Jane. “Thank you so much. I didn’t realize you knew how to do this.”

“Oh, I’m not really much of a cook,” replied Bruce. “These are pretty easy. Bucky is the cook
around here. Or maybe Phil.”

Thor eyed the dark-haired man currently stalking across the roof deck, his shield-husband a single step behind, carrying a large wooden bowl heaped with warm flat breads and a smooth light tan dip. Baking was not a hobby he would have associated with any of the team or their partners.

Steve sat the serving platter down in the middle of the table and put an arm around Bucky’s waist. Visibly relaxing, Bucky leaned into Steve, who braced his feet to take the weight. Closing his eyes, Steve tipped his head forward, rubbing his cheek against Bucky’s wavy hair, which was pulled up in a bun.

Thor approved. Loose hair was always getting in his face in windy places like the top of the Tower.

Turning his attention back to the conversation, Thor realized that they’d moved on to favorite movies, a topic for which he was ill-suited. Making his excuses, he collected the platter of French fries from Bruce and tucked the yogurt dip from Pepper on top of Natasha’s pasta salad.

As he carefully set the dishes on the table, motion in his peripheral vision caught his attention. Loki had emerged from Stark’s penthouse, dressed all in black. His white skin almost glowed against his blue black hair, and his lips were for once not turned down in a frown. Loki looked out over the gathering, his eyes quickly assessing all the possible threats, as Thor had taught him.

“Hello, brother.” Thor’s voice was even, betraying no hint of his inner turmoil.

“Thor.” Loki looked at him then, his expression flat. “You blessed the Tower?”

“It was little enough. You know that I will always give you what protection I can.”

Loki sighed, and looked away. “They are soft.”

“Mmm.” Thor was noncommittal. Yes, they might appear soft by Asgardian standards, but Rogers had intestinal fortitude to match any Asgardian. Stark was a man of iron not because of his suit, but because of his iron will to survive. Even the husband and wife team of the archer and the assassin were stronger than they first appeared.

“You don’t agree?”

Thor watched Loki for a moment, noting how much more certain he seemed of himself. He no longer slouched as if to hide his slender height, and his shoulders were no longer hunched. These people had restored Loki’s dignity to him. No easy feat, given how battered and bruised his body and soul had been.

“I think that they are hard where it counts, but soft where it is needed.” Thor could be cryptic too.

Softly, Loki laughed. It wasn’t bitter, or hurt, but simply amused and tears pricked behind Thor’s eyelids. Loki’s soul was no longer mortally wounded.

“Perhaps you are right.”

Loki turned to face him and grinned, and oh! There was his beloved brother, the clever boy full of witticisms and sly plans.

Thor smiled back, his heart full. Turning, he saw the roof deck, occupied by these kind-hearted mortals who’d taken in a wounded, hurt animal and restored him to his vital self. Thor owed them more than he could ever repay, and he was suddenly, fiercely glad that he’d blessed the Tower.
“Give me a hand?” He gestured toward to the rack of foil-covered skewers resting beside the hot wood-fired grill.

Loki nodded, and began uncovering the vegetable skewers. Ah, well, Thor would touch the meat, if Loki could not bring himself to do it.

The nightfall stretched before him, no longer a cause for worry. Instead, he could rejoice in Loki’s company, feeding these battle-hardened veterans while sharing memories of fallen comrades around the fire. Truly, a more perfect evening he could not ask for.
Evening Interlude: Bucky Makes Potato Soup for Dinner

Chapter Summary

In which Bucky uses leftovers to make a delicious soup.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky stood in front of the open refrigerator, his lips pursed. Steve had made dinner for the team last night, and while he tried, he still couldn’t estimate servings. A giant bowl of mashed potatoes sat covered with plastic wrap under the cool blue light of the LEDs, and while Bucky liked potatoes as much as the next guy, he wasn’t in the mood for mashed potatoes for dinner two nights in a row.

Neither was he really in the mood for fish cakes. The weather had warmed up, and while it wasn’t warm, it wasn’t cold. 14.. no, dammit, it was 57 degrees, he was in the USA, and this was the Tower, and it was his and Steve’s place. Bucky closed his eyes and took a long, slow inhale. Or tried to, because the refrigerator started beeping at him because the door had been open too long.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes sir?” Jarvis’s voice was untroubled, calm.

“Make the refrigerator stop beeping, please.”

Bucky knew his voice wasn’t pleasant, but he wasn’t in the damned mood.

Serenely, Jarvis replaced. “That functionality has now been removed from your refrigerator.”

“Thank you, Jarvis.” Bucky felt the tension in his back ease a bit.

“Of course, sir.”

No, not fish cakes, and not potato pancakes. Bucky knew that some people made them with mashed potatoes, but Steve had put sour cream in these mashed potatoes, and while he could handle mushy potato pancakes, he didn’t like them, and he especially didn’t like them with the sour cream flavoring.

The chill from the refrigerator crept up his metal arm, and Bucky shivered. Soup. He wanted soup. Grabbing the bowl of mashed potatoes, he added celery and bacon to his haul. There were only a few slices left in the pack.

Peering down into the vegetable keeper, Bucky added some limp strawberries and wrinkly blueberries to the teetering pile on top of the bowl. He hated wasting food, and while the strawberries had tasted like Styrofoam (“Steve, what is this shit?” “Uh, yeah, strawberries are different now, aren’t they? Bigger, but they taste like nothing.”) he wasn’t going to waste them.

In his mind, the scent of spiced muffin reminded him of long, golden autumn afternoons, and his ma peeling and chopping peaches. These weren’t peaches, but Bucky had a feeling they’d do just
Carefully, Bucky spread the food out on the counter under the warm glow from the overhead task lights. An onion was a good place to start with the soup, and maybe a bay leaf. Bucky turned to the wall of cabinetry he’d initially thought was ridiculous—how could anyone ever fill up that much space? Turned out the 21st century had a lot of kitchen gadgets, and Bucky loved them all. Opening what looked like a tall door, Bucky revealed a series of metal mesh drawers, one of which held onions almost as big as his fist. Jarvis spoiled them, really.

Peeling the loose, reddish brown paper off the onion, Bucky grabbed his favorite carbon-steel chef’s knife off the rare-earth magnet bar, and pulled a white plastic cutting board from a drawer. Swiftly, he cut the big onion in half, and then cut a half into quarters. Peeling the outer layer of dry skin off the quartered pieces, he diced them into quarter-inch pieces. He’d save the other half of the onion for later.

Then, Bucky pulled a couple of celery sticks off the head of celery, and returned it to the plastic bag. So much plastic. Moving to the sink, he waved his hand by the motion sensor, and the cold water automatically began to run. Celery tended to have dirt in its root end, and Bucky had had enough of dirt in his lifetime. Scrubbing the pieces thoroughly, he waved the water off and returned to the cutting board, where he diced the celery.

After all the vegetables were chopped, Bucky put the scraps in the big silver compost bucket on the counter. A compost bucket pretty enough to sit on the counter had made him laugh when he’d seen it, but Jarvis was vigilant about reminding them to use it. Apparently too much food down the disposals messed with his plumbing, and nobody wanted to upset Jarvis. That wasn’t a smart move.

Another plastic bag held the four slices of bacon. Bucky wasn’t sure why they only had four slices of bacon, but even bacon could go bad eventually. Laying them out neatly on the cutting board, he chopped them across the short side, making *lardons*. He’d learned that word from America’s Test Kitchen one long, gray winter’s afternoon.

Bucky tapped the light on over top of the stove. He liked to see what he was cooking. Into a big silver pot went the bacon, starting low and slow. He wanted to make it crispy before he added the celery and onions. While the bacon cooked, he washed the cutting board and knife and then used them again to begin cutting up the strawberries.

These oversized monstrosities had white tops and the occasional soft bad spot, but mostly they were hard enough that you could hurt someone with them. Nobody wanted that. Bucky reduced them to about a quarter inch dice as well. Between those and the wrinkly blueberries, he had four cups of fruit.

Now that the bacon was sizzling, Bucky gave it a good stir, but decided to wait a minute or two more before adding the vegetables. Instead, he made sure the silver bowl on the big gray stand mixer was in place, and added the stainless steel whisk attachment. Moving back to the soup, he added the vegetables, and scrubbed the *fond* off the bottom off the pot as the onions and celery sizzled in the bacon fat.

Turning the heat down to the lowest setting, Bucky gave it one last stir and then turned on the oven to pre-heat it for the muffins. Bending down, he dug around in the dark corner cabinet for the muffin pans, the metal of the various baking pans clanging against the side of the cabinet. Not for the first time, he resolved to organize the cabinet.

“Need some help?”
Steve’s voice was a little amused, and when Bucky stood up, victorious, he shivered as Steve dropped a kiss on the bend of his neck. Steve’s beard scratched lightly on the soft skin and Bucky closed his eyes against the curl of need that unfurled in his belly.

“Stop that! I’m in the middle of dinner!”

The words were indignant, but Bucky couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out. Turning, he met Steve’s sky-blue eyes, soft with love.

More softly, Bucky continued, “All done with tutoring?”

Steve nodded, glancing behind him at the messy counter. “Want some help?”

“Nah, I’m mostly done anyway. Don’t you have that report to write for class?”

Steve was still working on his art history degree with his GI benefits. He’d really rather have gone to art school, but he couldn’t do that and be on the team. Too many missed classes. Instead, he took online classes, which allowed for a little more flexibility.

“Ah, yeah, I should do that. How much longer until dinner? Smells real good.”

On cue, Steve’s stomach rumbled and they both grinned. Leaning forward, Bucky kissed Steve gently on the cheek, and then turned away to stir the vegetables, unsticking them from the bottom. The scent of caramelizing onions rose up from the pot as he stirred.

“Soon. I’m using the mashed potatoes from last night to make soup, so it’ll go faster than usual. Go finish that up.”

“OK, Bucky.” With one last caress, Steve slipped out of the kitchen. Bucky knew he’d be sitting cross-legged at the coffee table, tapping away on his Stark-issue laptop. They had a study (“Tony, what is this?” “It’s a study. You work in it.”), but neither of them used it for anything but the most intensive types of paperwork. They both preferred to be within earshot and preferably in each other’s sight lines. Bucky could see the blond fluff of Steve’s hair as he bent over the laptop, and he smiled to himself.

Adding the mashed potatoes to the pot, he squished them down against the bacon, onions, and celery, but that wasn’t working. Pressing his lips together, he added a quart of hot water from the tap—no lead pipes in the Tower—and used a bamboo spoon to dissolve the mashed potatoes into the water. Eventually, the liquid turned a cloudy white.

Bucky added a teaspoon of salt (Steve perpetually under salted his food), and with a thoughtful hum, impulsively added a bay leaf to counteract the sour cream. The soup was still missing something, and Bucky opened the spice cabinet. His eyes landed on the chicken stock paste and he nodded to himself. Yes, that would do nicely. A big spoonful later, and the soup tasted pretty good, if a little watery.

Well, Bucky knew how to cure that. Opening the baking cabinet, he pulled out the giant yellow plastic container of cornstarch. Adding a tablespoon or so to a small glass bowl, he carefully splashed in a smidgen of cold water, and rubbed the mixture with his finger until it dissolved into a thick slurry. Then, he poured it into the soup, stirred the soup thoroughly, and turned it to medium low. It’d need to come to at least a simmer for the cornstarch to thicken in. Rinsing out the glass bowl, he set it next to the sink on the microfiber dish-draining pad and then returned the cornstarch to the baking cabinet.

Reaching into an upper cabinet, he pulled down their battered copy of the King Arthur Flour
cookbook. It had been a typically thoughtful Christmas present from Pepper that first winter. He’d sat curled next to Steve, hiding behind a throw that Natasha had knitted for him and slowly paged through the enormous book. When he’d happened on the spiced peach muffin recipe, he’d known that was the one.

Opening it to page 73, he added the four and half cups of all-purpose flour to the stand mixer, along with a teaspoon of salt, four and a half teaspoons of baking powder, two cups of dark brown sugar, a half teaspoon of freshly grated nutmeg (and wasn’t that a luxury?), as well as a half teaspoon of ground allspice and a teaspoon of cinnamon.

Truthfully, Bucky thought the muffins were probably just fine like that, but he dutifully mixed all the dry ingredients together before swapping out the whisk attachment for the dough attachment and gradually adding in two beaten eggs, three-quarters of a cup of vegetable oil, and nearly two cups of milk. By then, the mixture had become a thick brown slurry. Finally, he added the aged fruit.

Quickly, he stirred the soup, making sure nothing was sticking to the bottom. Then he added the paper lines to the muffin tins and started dishing out the batter, using a large metal ice cream scoop with an inner spring in the handle to force the batter out of the scoop. This recipe made 24 regular sized muffins. Bucky thought he’d probably keep a half dozen for he and Steve, and put the rest in the common room.

Sliding the filled muffin tins into the oven, Bucky stirred the soup again. It wasn’t quite simmering, and it was still thinner than he liked. While he waited for it to heat up, he washed the stand mixer bowl, the dough hook, and the metal scoop. No point in leaving dishes for later.

Then he cleaned off the counter, putting the rest of the food scraps in the compost, and placing the bacon-contaminated cutting board and knife in the sink for later insertion into the dishwasher. Washing up complete, he returned to the soup, which was now simmering nicely.

“Steve, dinner’s ready!”

The sound of the laptop closing a second later made Bucky smile. Turning, he watched his beloved round the side of the sofa. Safe and healthy, and here with him. Bucky enjoyed Steve’s new body as much as Steve did, but perhaps not for the reason that Steve thought. Yes, Steve was beautiful like this, but more importantly, Steve was alive and not the sickly child Bucky had worried over.

A cool spring night, warm soup, spiced muffins for dessert, and his beloved beside him. Bucky couldn’t ask for anything more.

Chapter End Notes

These are indeed delicious. I doubt that we’ll have enough left for breakfast.
https://www.kingarthurflour.com/recipes/spiced-peach-muffins-recipe
Brunch had lasted for hours, the team gathered around the table laughing and chatting. Threads of conversation had twined among them, ebbing and flowing with the change in topics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Clint and Bucky had descended into arcane technical jargon about ultra long-range shots. Steve had listened with half an ear while he and Pepper debated art.

Tony, of course, had opinions about all of it. Being Tony, he generally knew what he was talking about as he gesticulated wildly, his already intense personality ramped up to eleven among the safety of his friends. Steve liked seeing Tony like this, passionate and focused, his formidable intelligence narrowed onto a single point of interest. Tony made an excellent friend to argue with—and no one could doubt Steve’s willingness to dig into what he saw as a worthwhile argument. Every now and then, Tony even made a dent in Steve’s stubbornness, an act otherwise reserved for Bucky.

Quietly sipping his tea, Bruce merely smiled when the conversation spun his way, prefacing his statements with enough conditional modifiers to make it difficult to pin him to any particular opinion. “It’s possible” was a common statement from Bruce, and while most people took it as agreement, Steve knew better. It was Bruce’s way of heading off an argument, of keeping his calm.

Steve didn’t push him—merely leaving the safety of the Tower (and its Hulk-proof containment room) was a sign of trust from Bruce, and Steve didn’t intend to make Bruce regret it. Instead, Tasha, Bruce, and Phil had their own thread of conversation, weaving in and out of the often-raucous laughter from the rest of the table.

Sighing, Pepper leaned back from the table. “Bucky, thank you for sharing your birthday with us.”

Suddenly wordless, Bucky dipped his chin towards Pepper and leaned back into the circle of Steve’s arms.

Pepper quirked a smile and looked out the window. “It’s getting dark out. Jarvis, what’s the weather forecast?”

“Heavy rain for the rest of the afternoon, dipping into snow this evening.” Jarvis’s voice was calm and even, betraying no hint of worry for his delicate humans.

Phil raised his eyebrows and looked at Clint, who nodded and spoke. “Alright, let’s get moving, people.”

Before Steve had quite processed the shift, everyone else had stood and begun clearing the table, packing away extra food into collapsible coolers that had mysteriously appeared in the entry room. Bemused, Steve realized that they had to have planned this so that Bucky didn’t have to lift a finger. A more subtle kind of birthday present for the person whom they all relied on to do that one
extra thing they didn’t quite have time for. Even Tony was meticulously placing each dish just so in the dishwasher, muttering about angles and velocity, his usual brain to mouth filter thinned by the application of several whiskies.

Bucky twisted around in his chair, pressing a kiss to the corner of Steve’s mouth before he said, “We should do the bedroom and bathroom ourselves.”

Steve’s eyes widened a bit as a he thought about the contents of the bedroom.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Standing, he kept a hand on Bucky as they made their way to the bedroom. Not until he was faced with the process of packing up their things did he realize that he’d wanted one more long, lazy afternoon in the high bed, nesting among the dimly lit cloud of blankets and pillows.

Back to real life for them, he thought, missions and Hydra and Bucky in the Tower. The thought made him huff with amusement.

“What are you laughing about, punk?” asked Bucky.

Steve grinned. “You in the Tower, like some fairy tale princess.”

“Jarvis makes a hell of a fairy godmother.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Barnes.” Jarvis’s voice was pleased and perhaps a little smug.

Steve just shook his head as he tugged off the soft, white cotton flannel sheets. The sound of the rain on the metal roof of the cottage filled the air, echoing through the room like a million little drums, soothing in its irregularity. The roof of their tenement back in Brooklyn had been metal like this, and once more, Steve wanted sink down into the bed, pulling Bucky with him for an afternoon nap.

Across the bed, Bucky was busily filling their duffle bags with their clothes and other supplies they’d spread around the room. Steve’s eyes caught on the curve of Bucky’s biceps, the arch of his back, his powerful thighs.

Bucky tilted his head, looking behind him, and found Steve blushing. “Mmmhmm, I see you, Stevie.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” protested Steve. He batted his eyelashes for extra effect.

In four swift strides, Bucky was around the bed, lips hot on the back of his neck, hands on his hips. “I know when you watch me. I always have.”

Unconsciously, Steve pressed back against Bucky, back to chest, hips to hips, thigh to thigh. “You like it.”

“Yeah, I do,” murmured Bucky before stepping back and patting his ass. “But everyone is waiting on us.”

Steve turned, nipples hard under his tight t-shirt, half-hard. Bucky’s eyes were dark gray, his lips red and wet. Steve pouted. “Really?”

“Really,” said Bucky firmly, backing towards the bathroom. “We’ll be back at the Tower soon enough.”
Sighing, Steve resumed pulling the used linens off the bed. Bucky was right, of course, but he wanted every minute with his best guy.

Eventually, all the dirty linens were piled in a big duffle bag, the kitchen and bathroom scrubbed down, perishables tucked in coolers to go back with them. The next team members who stayed there would have to make the bed, but that was fine.

“How are we doing this?” Clint was drying his hands on a kitchen towel.

Tasha spoke up. “Pepper has a meeting at 4. You, Phil, Steve, Bucky, Bruce, and I can all ride back together. Tony wants to fly himself.”

Nodding, Tony agreed. “I made some modifications to the engines earlier, and I want to test them out on the way back.”

“OK, load her up!” Clint was cheerful as he hoisted the big bag of dirty linens on one shoulder. Steve took the heavy coolers of food, and Bucky grabbed their bags. No one was going to leave any heavy lifting for Phil, who was still recovering.

Dashing through the rain to the empty doors of the Quinjet, Steve laughed with joy. He loved running outdoors, even in the chilly rain soaking his civilian clothes. Following behind at a more sedate pace, Bruce held Pepper’s elbow as she picked her away across the grassy field. Phil followed, sensibly attired in a gray rain slicker with a hood and rain boots. Always prepared, that was Phil.

Once the baggage was stowed away under the purple sofa, Tasha sat up front with Clint and Phil sat behind, next to Pepper, who was already hard at work on a thin laptop she’d materialized. Phil pulled an e-reader out of his pocket and put on his glasses while Clint ran through the pre-flight checklist, and Bruce and Jarvis conversed in low tones.

Steve opened his arms for Bucky, who sat right next him, tipping his head back on Steve’s shoulder.

“It was a nice weekend, wasn’t it?” Bucky’s tone was a little wistful, and his voice was quiet enough that only Steve and Jarvis could easily hear.

Turning his head, Steve pressed his face into Bucky’s thick, dark hair and inhaled deeply, Bucky’s scent soothing. “Yeah. I almost didn’t want to leave.”

“We’ll come back, won’t me?”

Iron resolve gripped Steve. This was something he could give to Bucky, who asked for so little. “Yeah, sweetheart, we’ll come back.”

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Back at the Tower, they had all said their quiet good byes and gone on their way, Pepper not making it to the penthouse door before she had a phone to her ear, even in the cold rain. Tasha helped them carry the food and linens to the common room, while Phil stayed with Clint as he went through the post-flight checklist. Clint took meticulous care of his tools, and the Quinjet was no exception.

Bruce had disappeared with a muttered comment about seeing to an experiment in the lab, back to his usual reticence.
“Thanks. I’ll dump those in the linen chute.” Steve took the damp, heavy bag of sheets and blankets from Tasha, who nodded and propped a hip against the kitchen counter as Bucky unloaded the extra breakfast pizza, cinnamon rolls, and odds ends from the cottage.

Behind him, Steve heard Bucky and Tasha talking as he fed the linens into the chute to the basement.

“Hey Tasha?”

“Mm.”

“Thanks for the saucisson sec. It was good.”

“You’re welcome. Good meal?”

Steve could hear the smile in Bucky’s voice. “Yeah, it was really good. Apples, eggs, butterkäse, cider, cookies, and all. Reminded me of a picnic.”

“That was the general idea. Too bad it was cold.” Tasha sounded a little sad.

“Enh, it was fine. The cottage had a nice sunroom.”

“I’m glad. May I?”

Steve turned in time to see Bucky nod, and Tasha slowly, carefully press her check to his, with all the delicacy and affection of a feral cat and her kitten. Bucky closed his eyes, his lashes dark against the fragile skin. Swiftly, Tasha backed away, turning on her heel and exiting the room just as Steve reached the doorway. A flash of warmth in the air and she was gone.

“You OK?” Bucky looked a little shaken, skin pale in the muted light of the rainy afternoon.

Opening his eyes and taking a deep breath, Bucky nodded. “That was the first time anyone but you has touched me since …”

Steve nodded. No words were needed for this. Doctors had examined Bucky, MPs had bound him, Clint had leaned on him in the greenhouse, but this was the first unbidden affection. Steve knew that Bucky and Tasha’s relationship was complicated, and that he would never quite know everything that had gone on between them, but he was glad that Bucky had Tasha. Everyone needed a good friend in their corner.

Bucky shook his head and changed the subject. “What’s for dinner?”

“Delivery?”

Jarvis beeped, a delicate interruption. “I’m afraid that would not be advisable, given current op-sec standards.”

Sighing, Steve closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Right, yeah, thanks Jarvis.”

As a rule, they tried to keep the public from knowing when they had come and gone. Not ordering takeout when the Quinjets were landing on the roof of the Tower was a tenet that Steve himself had implemented. That way, local restaurants wouldn’t plan on making a meal for them whenever they saw the Quinjets, which would prevent anyone from too much success in planning a security breach through deliveries.

That meant dinners after missions were often leftovers, or if they were lucky, someone else had
made dinner that evening. Given how quickly everyone had dispersed, Steve was betting that no one had made dinner plans.

“Jarvis, everyone in for dinner?”

“Yes. No one has made any plans for dinner outside of the Tower or otherwise.”

“Thanks, Jarvis.”

As the lights brightened in the common room kitchen, Bucky had begun rummaging in the pantry cupboard. “I vote chili.”

“Sound good, Buck.”

New Mexico was pretty, thought Steve, and the chili there was good. But, he and Bucky had grown up with chili that wasn’t all meat, because meat was expensive. Instead, his ma had taken the cheapest meat she could find, usually ground beef, and stretched it with beans, crushed tomatoes, and sometimes bell pepper. Everything but the beef could be stored without refrigeration, and they couldn’t afford to buy meat more than once or twice a week anyway. Even then, she had stretched it further by serving it over cornbread to sop up all the flavor. That was the chili he and Bucky had in mind—quick, easy, and filling.

“Jarvis, can we get two pounds of ground beef?”

The LED by the dumbwaiter flashed green in silent acknowledgement, so Steve looked in the bottom of the baking counter for the onions. Finding a pile of enormous yellow onions in a wire mesh basket, he selected one and began peeling off the papery outer skin.

Setting four cans of dark red kidney beans on the counter, Bucky shook his head. “Give me that. You find the crushed tomatoes.”

Shrugging, Steve left Bucky to dice the onions while he hunted down crushed tomatoes. Because it was the Tower, there were no generic off brands. Instead, he came up with two 28-oz cans of organic, fire-roasted, crushed tomatoes that he was pretty sure had nothing to do with Scotland, despite the brand name.

Poking around in the spice cabinet, he found the jar of chili powder from Penzeys. Jarvis had preferred suppliers for the Tower, and Penzeys was one of them. Steve was never sure exactly what criteria Jarvis used for suppliers, but he’d become a fan of the spices from Penzeys. He’d been charmed when the last package had included a little token with the word “hug” in Braille.

Eyeing the big pot in which Bucky had begun sautéing the onion, Steve added the granulated roasted garlic powder to his spice cabinet haul. Mincing garlic and toasting it in the onions seemed like entirely too much effort.

Placing the spices by Bucky’s elbow, Steve turned to start the cornbread, and then paused.

“Jarvis, do we have buttermilk?”

“Yes. One moment, please.”

Steve nodded, and contented himself with teasing Bucky with a kiss on the side of his neck.

Just as Bucky began to squirm and laugh, the dumbwaiter opened to reveal two pounds of defrosted ground beef and a half-gallon of full-fat buttermilk.
Setting the beef on the counter beside Bucky, Steve took the buttermilk and began making the cornbread. Ordinarily, he’d use Clint’s recipe with the cast iron skillet and the melted butter, but tonight he wanted less mess and less fuss. Two and a half cups of buttermilk went into the stand mixer, along with two eggs, three cups of cornmeal, a cup of flour, three teaspoons of baking powder, a teaspoon of salt, and two tablespoons of sugar. Quickly, Steve blended the mixture into a thick batter.

Rustling in the baking center drawers, Steve located two muffin pans and paper liners. Each liner received one good-sized scoop of batter. Meticulously, Steve made sure that the batter didn’t go above the edge of the muffin tin. Meanwhile, Jarvis had preheated the oven to 375 F, so Steve could slide the pans into the oven to bake while Bucky finished the chili.

Bucky had browned the meat in the pan with the onions, then added a heaping tablespoon of the granulated roasted garlic and two tablespoons of chili powder. As the scents bloomed in the air, Bucky had added the tomatoes. During the war, they’d learned to tamp down the acidity of the canned tomatoes with a pinch of baking soda, and now the mixture foamed and bubbled in the pan. Finally, Bucky added the beans and stirred it all together.

“Jarvis, let everyone know dinner will be ready in twenty minutes, please.”

Steve leaned against the counter and opened his arms for Bucky, who came to rest against him, face tucked into the curve of Steve’s neck. Steve linked his hands together behind Bucky’s back, supporting the extra weight that Bucky would always carry with him.

“Love you.”

Tonight, they’d all eat in the common room, warm and safe despite the cold spring rain. Yellow cornbread, dark red chili, and pale golden cheese would be on the dining room table, brilliantly lit against the darkness of the encroaching nightfall. Everyone would be focused on their own tasks for the next day, but they’d be together for the evening meal, and that was what counted.
Pepper woke up before her alarm, the dim light of the city that never sleeps creeping around the blackout blinds. Everything was in shades of gray in the silent room. Jarvis had adjusted the room temperature for good sleep hygiene, 68 F, and she closed her eyes again as she stretched luxuriously between the smooth cotton sateen sheets, moving out of her warm spot under two thin cotton blankets.

Opening her eyes fully, she saw Jarvis blink red/gold/green, letting her know that Tony was safe within the Tower. Sleepily, she reached for her Starkphone, checking the time. 4:53 a.m. She had a couple more minutes before she absolutely had to get out of bed. Once she would have leaped out of bed ready to start the day, but over the last few years running Stark Industries had become less interesting, though no less difficult.

Rolling onto her back, she looked up at the darkened ceiling, wondering when she’d actually become blasé about being CEO. Tony had never ceased to find joy in his workshop. But then, thought Pepper, he wasn’t only in his workshop, was he? As an Avenger, he had other challenges to keep him busy. Maybe she needed something more in her life, too.

Stretching, she slid out from underneath the blankets and padded to the bathroom for her morning ablutions. She’d laid out a vintage Chanel suit the night before, the flattering princess-seamed jacket cut in a gray boucle tweed, both warm and comfortable. While she brushed her teeth, Jarvis displayed her customized morning news feed.

Jarvis could handle many parts of running the Tower single-handedly, but none of the original permanent residents had wanted Jarvis to risk outing himself as an AI. After watching Phil single-mindedly tackle his grueling physical therapy and realizing how much he wanted to be back on Strike Team Delta, Pepper had placed a bet. She’d offered him a permanent place beside Tasha and Clint in the Tower, guessing that he didn’t truly want to go back to SHIELD, that what he desired most was to be with Clint and Tasha.

When Phil had agreed to run the Tower, his experience in base management complementing Jarvis’s inhuman efficiency, she’d breathed a sigh of relief. Tony and Pepper had filled the Tower with their employees, essential and otherwise, and needed someone authoritative and accustomed to bureaucracy to handle all the inevitable issues. Phil was perfect for the job and Tasha and Clint both appreciated having Phil in a non-combatant role.

Phil’s experience at SHIELD had proved invaluable as Tower Director. He had smoothly taken over arranging special security for Bucky, ensuring that Steve was kept busy with volunteer projects while Bucky ventured to knitting circles and book clubs within the safety of the Tower. With Jarvis, he kept an eye on the research labs for Tony, Bruce, and Jane, making sure that the necessary permits were filed and that no major structural damage ensued.

Pepper was grateful that Phil handled Tower business so that she didn’t have to. Phil’s lemon trees...
on the roof were but a small token of her appreciation. Tony had been a disaster as a CEO, but he’d learned something from Howard—good management meant finding good people and surrounding himself with them. As she’d once been swept up in Tony’s acquisitions, Pepper had done the same. Before she’d swayed Phil, she’d snagged Maria Hill to run building security.

Swiping on the mirror before she pulled her back into a low chignon, Pepper read her calendar, cross checking it with the calendars of the other original permanent inhabitants. Everyone’s schedules had changed this spring, and while Bucky’s knitting circles were no longer security issues, Pepper and Jarvis both worried about his level of social interaction.

Loki was another worry—now that they’d claimed him from Asgard, Pepper thought they’d need to be less haphazard about his day to day activities. While trolling reddit might amuse him now, Pepper guessed that even teenagers would grow bored after a while. Bruce and Clint were good about keeping him on task, but maybe she should ask Bucky if he’d be willing to step in. After all, he’d kept Steve from burning down the world while the super soldiers were adjusting to modern life—maybe he could do the same for Loki.

Setting the hairbrush on the bathroom vanity counter, she swiped on the mirror again, joining their gym schedule. Jarvis would let them know that they were due in at the same time, and maybe it would work out.

A reminder popped up—Tony’s birthday party was coming up at the end of the month. Normally, Stark Industries threw a gala for charity that involved months of elaborate planning. Jarvis had an entire subroutine dedicated to it, much like Pepper had an assistant whose job was to ensure the whole event ran smoothly. Cancelling the event had thrown her assistant for a loop, but Pepper had reassured him that he still had a job.

Instead, Pepper quietly decided to throw Tony a little celebration with just their closest people. Biting her lip with indecision, Pepper stared the reminder. She’d decide later where to have the celebration.

Stepping back from the mirror, Pepper eyed her cream silk camisole before unscrewing the lid to her setting powder and reaching for her brush. The powder wouldn’t show so much on the camisole, but it would definitely show on the jacket.

While she deftly powdered the brush, Jarvis ran down the morning financials. An unusually large purchase from one of Tony’s accounts caught her eye. Usually, he checked in with her for anything over six figures, but this came as a complete surprise. It wasn’t that he couldn’t afford to drop a quarter million when he felt like it. It wasn’t even a day’s interest income, but he hadn’t bothered to let her know.

A slow burning irritation filled her veins. This was so like Tony, to be so inconsiderate of others. Was the rest of her life going to be spent cleaning up his paperwork trail? Shrugging into her jacket, Pepper took a deep breath. She knew that her anger was misplaced. Tony’s money was his to spend as he liked, and he didn’t need her permission. Nevertheless, the surprise still rankled.

While she was trying to calm herself with the promise of the coffee she smelled brewing in the kitchen, Tony wandered in, stripping as he walked.

“Morning, babe.”

He darted in for a kiss, and Pepper drew back. “Tony! You’re filthy.”

Covered in dark motor grease, he had the smell of the shop about him, metallic and cold. Even so,
Pepper couldn’t help but notice how beautiful he was. Salt and pepper sprinkled in his beard, crows feet lined his eyes when he smiled, and even after all these years, Pepper still felt that tug of attraction deep in her belly, her nipples hardening. Inhaling deeply, she leaned in and kissed him on the mouth, carefully angling her Chanel away from the grease.

“You know you love filthy.”

He winked at her, all exaggerated leering, and Pepper burst into unwilling laughter. Helpless to hold onto her anger, her eyes softened without permission.

Eyes narrowing, he held her gaze even as he dumped his grease stained jeans and tee into the designated hamper. “You OK?”

Pepper nodded, noticing the promise of a migraine at her temple. She just needed some coffee. That was all.

“You look like a kickass CEO this morning.” His generous mouth slipped into a moue of distaste as he continued, “I’m just the dirty mechanic.”

Heart sliced even before her coffee. That the genius who had saved the world thought badly of himself made Pepper’s eyes prickle with tears. “Tony, sweetheart-“

“No, no, go be all super-competent CEO. I’m going to bed.” Eyes lowered, he padded naked to the shower, the showerheads already filling the shower with steaming water.

As he passed, Pepper laid a hand on his shoulder, and tucked herself against his strong middle-aged body. “I love you.”

Always susceptible to her wordless begging for affection, Tony’s arms held her tight as he kissed her cheek, and then continued around her ear.

Giggling, she squirmed away. “I need coffee.”

“Go, go. Do you want me to make breakfast? I could do an egg white and spinach omelet?”

Using the inflexibility that had propelled her to run one of the largest companies in the world, Pepper sighed regretfully as she watched Tony’s bare back drip with hot water from the shower. Neither of them had the soft bodies of the young, or the lithe seduction of their twenties. Instead, Pepper worked hard to stay lean while Tony’s body inevitably softened around the edges. Her fingers itched to touch as he tipped his head back under the spray and ran his fingers through his dark curls.

Inhaling, she forced out, “No, thanks. I need to get going. I have some unexpected paperwork to handle.”

Closing the bathroom door behind her, she slipped quietly out of the room before he could respond. Pepper walked towards her shoe closet as Jarvis opened the doors and rotated the rack to pick out the black heels she normally wore with this jacket and matching skirt.

Stepping into the shoes, Pepper considered her morning. Coffee, then maybe she’d send her second assistant down to the coffee shop with the good bagels on the 7th floor. Lox, cream cheese, and capers could cure many of the world’s ills. Maybe she’d have Loki drop a box of bagels off on Phil, Tasha, and Clint’s floor. She knew how much Clint enjoyed them, and Phil would be up and see them on his doorstep on his way out.
As she poured a generous serving of coffee into her travel mug, the rich aroma wafting upwards, Pepper stared blankly at the gleaming ultramodern kitchen and considered Steve’s curtailed morning runs.

“Jarvis, is Steve up?"

Voice calm and quiet, Jarvis said, “Yes, Ms. Potts. He is running in the small gym.”

The small gym was tucked away in a corner of the common floor, with floor to ceiling windows allowing a beautiful view of the rising sun. Pepper sometimes did yoga there, when she didn’t have a fat stack of paperwork from Tony’s impulse purchases waiting on her desk.

“Let that place I like, the one on the 7th floor?” Jarvis blinked green. “Let them know to make a round for everyone this morning. Loki is awake?”

Loki slept, but far less than most humans and always at odd hours, like a cat. More than once, Pepper had glanced over during team movie nights only to find him curled up between Bucky and Tony on the sofa, sound asleep. Apparently, he felt safest there, despite Bruce’s reassurance of privacy in his own bedroom.

“Yes, he is.”

Pepper glanced up at the ceiling, and nodded firmly. “Send Loki to pick up the order and deliver it around. Make sure he and Bruce get the tofu cream cheese with spinach lox that they like.”

“Certainly.” Jarvis’s voice was warm, pleased, and Pepper smiled back.

Down in her office, Pepper nodded at the morning shift assistants, arrayed in a neat row on the left-hand side of the anteroom.

After the six months as Tony’s assistant, she’d realized that few people could keep up with her or Tony, and with carte blanche to handle Tony, she’d hired assistants of her own, on staggered shifts. The first two showed up at 6 a.m. for an 8-hour shift. An afternoon shift began at noon. For the first few years as Tony’s assistant, Pepper had rarely left before 8 p.m. and the habit had been difficult to break as CEO. There was always so much to be done, and it was all critical.

Without breaking stride, she headed into her office, heels clicking on the hardwood surface. Mornings were not her favorite time of day, and the morning shift knew better than to speak to her before she’d finished her first coffee. An assortment of paperwork was neatly stacked on her desk, the sleek black surface otherwise uninterrupted. Thanks to Tony, Pepper worked with a hologram keyboard and monitor array.

A comfortable seating area held a brown leather sofa, two matching armchairs, and a low coffee table, lit by the warm glow of table lamp on either side of the sofa. Pepper didn’t have expensive tastes in office décor, outsourcing it to an interior designer. Thanks to the designer, a refined Persian rug bounded the seating area.

Behind her, the sky had lightened, but dawn was still a few minutes away. Several months after they’d all moved in, Bruce had outfitted her office with some hard to kill pothos, and left watering instructions with her assistants. The glossy heart-shaped leaves tumbled down either side of the windows. Privately, Pepper thought the air smelled less stale with the plants.

Sighing heavily, Pepper sat in her rolling desk chair and began to read in her morning quiet.
Most of the paperwork was routine, reports from various department heads. Stark India had dormitories for unmarried singles, and family quarters for those with minor dependents, but there had been a request to start allocating quarters for employees with partners and parents and no children. Nodding to herself, Pepper wrote a quick note to HR to make it so.

Phil had forwarded her a report about a situation he’d handled between onboarded Tower employees and offsite contractors. Noting that Phil had blandly listed a meeting with the division head as having a productive resolution to reduce intra-division competition, Pepper read between the lines. It wasn’t the first time Phil had brought wayward line staff into order, and once again, she was grateful he’d taken the job offer.

“Jarvis, is there anything Phil needs for his lemon trees?”

“Mr. Coulson takes excellent care of his lemon trees.” His voice softening, Jarvis continued, “However, one might consider that a dwarf Satsuma grafted on ‘Flying Dragon’ rootstock does well in greenhouses.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t those little oranges?”

“Yes. Ms. Romanoff candied orange peels last winter.”

Smiling because Jarvis was right—Phil took great joy in indulging Tasha and Clint whenever possible—Pepper tapped out an email directing one of her assistants to investigate and purchase a suitable plant.

After placing Phil’s report in her outbox to be shredded, Pepper leaned back in her chair as she sipped the last of her coffee and examined the sheaf of papers from Tony’s lawyer. It seemed that Tony had been out to lunch with Tasha, and upon overhearing a conversation about an app, had impulsively offered to purchase a controlling interest in the software.

While Tony was impulsive, he didn’t often purchase software, instead preferring to write his own with Jarvis. Pepper furrowed her brow as she kept reading, but the dense legalese revealed no secrets. All the paperwork seemed to be aboveboard and in working order—which meant that Tony needed to sign the damn papers.

Just like that, the years slipped away, and Pepper was once again left to trail behind Tony, tracking him down and making him sign paperwork.

“Jarvis, did Tony go to bed?”

“No, Ms. Potts. He’s back in his lab.” Jarvis sounded faintly disapproving.

Pepper frowned. Tony had said that he meant to go to sleep. Was he upset that she snapped at him? She needed to talk to him about birthday plans, too.

“Put me through, please.”

Voice calm, revealing nothing, Jarvis said, “I’m afraid Sir is not available.”

Pepper leaned back in her chair and resisted the urge to rub her eyes. It would only smear her mascara.

A tentative knock sounded at her door.

“Yes?” Pepper was aware that she was snippy.
Loki pushed open the door, his face impassive.

Loki would not wear the same sort of clothing as the rest of the Tower, and she had noticed what he’d “borrowed” from her wardrobe. Long knit pants, silk and linen tunic tops in jewel colors, soft cardigan and tunic sweaters in natural fabrics. Pepper had had Jarvis take his measurements, and then reached out to her personal sewist to supply a wardrobe for Loki. Today he was in all black, loose woven trousers paired with a tight knit top and a long-sleeve dress shirt layered on top. It suited him, and Pepper made a mental note to send a bonus to her sewist.

“You wanted a bagel?”

With a small bow, he placed a brown paper bag on the corner of her desk and retreated. The silver band on his wrist flashed as he folded his hands behind his back. Revealing nothing, he waited, unobtrusive as a cat hidden in the shadows.

“Yes, thank you, Loki.”

Pepper met his eyes, trading nothing away. “Loki, is there anything you would like to study?”

Loki blinked and swallowed. “I, uh, used to study seiðr with my mother.”

Pepper nodded in agreement, pressing her lips together. No, that would not do, and her heart broke to hear that he missed his mother. At the same time, she thought that Loki’s interests did not lie in the natural sciences with Bruce and Tony. Pepper and Bruce had lunch regularly. Bruce had shared that while Loki was not rude about assisting Bruce, neither was he enthusiastic. Instead, he spent most of his spare time reading literature.

Once again, Pepper took a gamble. “Would you like to read literature with Mr. Barnes?”

Bucky and Tony were both science fiction fans, but Bucky read more than Tony. Pepper didn’t keep close track, but she had listened with half an ear while she and Steve talked about art history over their regular dinners. Anyone who could keep up with Tony and Jarvis could certainly handle Loki—and it would be good for both Loki and Bucky to talk about a neutral subject.

Raising an eyebrow, Loki asked, “What kind of literature?”

“We call it science fiction. It’s about taking trends in society, usually about science, and extending them into the future.”

Loki tilted his head in that noncommittal way he had. Pepper hated it, knowing that studied indifference was born of fear of displeasing an authority figure.

“You don’t have to decide now. Just think about it, please?”

Loki bowed, a gentle inclination of his head and shoulders, and Pepper was reminded of the full obeisance he’d given Clint when Thor had brought him to the tower. She decided to release him from her presence, knowing that merely being in the room was stressful for him.

“Have you eaten? Does everyone else have their food?”

Loki looked at the floor. “Yes, I delivered yours last.”

“But did you eat?”

Loki was far too thin for Pepper’s comfort. By Jarvis’s estimation, he could stand to gain another
25 pounds or so, and Pepper would have worried that Midgardian food upset his stomach, except that Bruce had quietly tracked his dietary habits. Loki just didn’t eat enough.

“Mine is in the kitchen on my floor,” he admitted.

If she had to order him to eat, she would. “Go eat now, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Loki slipped from the room, and Pepper reached for her sandwich. Unwrapping the bagel, she took a moment to admire the almost crispy crust, and the salty scent of the lox. Biting into it, she almost moaned with pleasure at the contrast between the bagel, cream cheese, pickled onions, and capers. Salty, creamy, crunchy, smoky, all in one bite.

A discreet beep rang through the still room, and Pepper glanced at the screen.

Tony: “I know there’s paperwork. I trust you to handle it. I’d only fuck it up. You people better than I do.”

Drawing in a deep, exasperated breath, Pepper set down her bagel and swiped the acquisition paperwork off her desk.

Stepping off the elevator, Pepper watched Tony work for a moment. Rock music filled his lab, loud enough that she could feel the bass outside the glass wall that separated his lab from the elevator. Tony danced a pas de deux with Jarvis as he manipulated holograms with his clever fingers in the dimly lit room.

DUM-E and Butterfingers moved around Tony in an intricate circular pattern. He was, quite literally, the center of their world. U had noticed Pepper and came up to the glass, its camera focused on her. Pepper couldn’t resist a little smile and a wave, knowing that the bots were AIs in their own right, if nonverbal. U blinked in welcome, and moved to the door.

These children of Tony’s heart had snuck into Pepper’s affections as well.

When Tony and Pepper had built the Tower for Jarvis, they’d brought the bots with them from Malibu. Pepper had personally supervised their packing crates, while Tony tended to Jarvis. Jarvis had been terrified, a single instantiation trapped in a server on the plane. Once they were at the Tower, Pepper had opened the packing crates herself with a pry bar and sledgehammer. Inside, the bots’ servos had whined as they shuffled anxiously. Never again would she leave them alone in the dark. Meanwhile, Tony helped Jarvis take root in his new body.

Pepper suspected that the bots had never forgotten that she’d been the one to free them from the darkness of the crates. Every time she visited the lab, she was graced with their affection.

Jarvis blinked red/gold/green in welcome and the glass doors to the lab slid open soundlessly. Pepper stepped into the chilly room and stroked U with genuine pleasure as Jarvis turned down the music to merely loud.

“Good morning, U. How are you today?”

A rippling arpeggio replied, and Pepper cocked her head in surprise.

“Jarvis said U asked for an upgrade.”
Tony strode toward her, confident and proud in his workshop. Here he was king of all he surveyed, each item arrayed perfectly to meet his needs. In the workshop, Jarvis and the bots worked with him to bring Tony’s genius into reality. Even now, Tony didn’t work well with others, and he knew it, but this was his safe space.

Irritation softened, and Pepper held up the paperwork with less emphasis than she’d intended.

“Really, Tony?”

Tony shrugged with his usual powerful elegance. “I bought it because it reminded me of you, and they needed a little extra infusion of cash. It’s a good product. Natasha uses it. But mostly because you deserve to have your name on things too.”

Pepper frowned in confusion. “What?”

Tony grinned mischievously, eyes twinkling and deep grooves at the edge of his mouth. “Did you see the name of the app?”

“I read the name of the company, Tony. That is what one puts on legal contracts.”

“Pepper! I couldn’t not buy it. It was fate! They named it after you.” Tony winked and reached for a tablet on a nearby workbench.

Pepper huffed a laugh. “Tony, what are you talking about?”

Holding up the tablet like a prize, Tony pointed at a black and white icon. In tiny white letters on a black icon was the word “Pepperplate.”

“See, it’s perfect. It’s a cooking app, and it’s Pepper’s plate!”

Tony wiggled his eyebrows, grinning, and Pepper gave in, smiling back. A happy Tony made her happy, easing a thread of worry in her chest. He was so damn proud of himself for finding a gift for her, even though it was his birthday coming up.

Pepper teased, “Yes, Tony, I see. Impulse shopping, hmm?”

Dark eyes flashed in amusement. “Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist, remember?”

At that, Pepper laughed outright. Tony liked to think of himself as having more savoir-faire than he actually possessed, and his braggadocio made Pepper laugh every time. That, she thought, was part of why he did it.

As she sobered, Tony pointed at the paperwork. “What do I need to sign, babe?”

Pepper rolled her eyes and pointed to the clearly visible tabs. “Here, here, and here.”

“DUM-E! I need a pen!”

Pepper snorted. “Tony, do you really think I’d track you down and make you sign paperwork if I didn’t have a pen?”

“That’s my girl. Always prepared.” Tony quirked another grin, and Pepper smirked.

Bending over the shining metal surface of his lab bench, Tony began skimming the paperwork. One thing that Maria had taught her son was to always read the fine print. Pepper didn’t take offense, gazing around Tony’s lab while she waited.
As was Tony’s practice, his lab was ruthlessly practical, concrete and metal, easy for the bots to clean. The only warm light came from the hydroponic wall, which was actually one of Bruce’s projects. Pepper knew that Tony didn’t see the lab the way she did, his mind always on what could be instead of what was.

For Tony, holograms projected by Jarvis obscured the utilitarian walls, decorating them in elegant engineering diagrams and complex three-dimensional projections. Here, numbers were transcendent. Tony brought them to Earth with his engineering in much the same way Michaelangelo sculpted marble.

Of course, thought Pepper, the bluish light of the holograms probably contributed to Tony’s frequent insomnia. Inevitably, her eyes wandered back to Tony, tracing his form fitting long-sleeved tee and loose knit pants. Yes, they fit very well indeed.

As if he could feel her gaze, Tony turned his head and winked. “Looks great, Pep. Gimme a kiss.”

Allowing herself to rest against him, Pepper tucked her cheek against his collarbone, his body heat warming her in the cool air of the shop. His arms tightened around her. For a long moment, Pepper closed her eyes and breathed in the one space she could be herself.

With a sigh, she pulled back a little bit and reached up for a kiss, the coarse hair of his beard brushing against her soft skin. Like this, he was gentle with her, his sturdy hand cradling the back of her skull. Eventually they both stopped to breathe, the warmth between them.

“Oh, Tony.”

Tony pulled her against him again, murmuring in her ear. “I’m sorry, Pepper. It’s not that much money, and I wanted to surprise you at the party.”

Pepper closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against his, the scratch of his beard reassuring. This was her Tony, hard and warm against her chilled skin.

“It’s not the money. We can afford it, I know.”

Pepper stopped speaking, biting her tongue. Did she really want to rehash this old argument? Irritation still fizzed in her veins, and she loosened the reins on her temper just a bit. Even so, she didn’t move away from Tony.

“It’s just, I feel taken advantage of when you spring this kind of thing on me, like I’m only here to clean up your paperwork. I really wish you’d give me a heads up when you do this. I hate to wake up to these kinds of surprises.”

Sighing, Pepper continued, “And we need to talk about your birthday party.”

Pepper felt him take a deep breath in her hair, his chest expanding against her, the heat of his breath on her scalp.

“No birthday party, huh?”

Pepper leaned into him a little more, safe in his arms now that he wasn’t going to pick up the gauntlet of past grievances she’d thrown down between them. “I’m sorry sweetheart. It’s just not safe to throw a big public gathering right now. I’m still paying all the caterers and so on, but safety first.”

Tony chuckled, “Yeah, that’s your line, not mine.”
Pepper laughed too. Tony could always do that, make her laugh. His charm had been one of the first things she’d noticed about him. On others, he used it like a weapon, wounding with wit, but he had always been kind to her. Pepper thought, not for the first time, that Tony valued her happiness more than his own.

Turning in his arms, she pulled back and looked at him. “I love you.”

Tony gave a gentle smile. “Love you, too, Pep.”

In the beginning, “I love you” had been said with a sense of wonder, of awe that their relationship existed. Saying it had been harder for Tony than for Pepper. Howard hadn’t exactly encouraged Tony to be aware of his own emotions.

Later, when they’d fought their way through dark hours, “I love you” had been a ferocious growl, as if by saying it they could will their relationship into existence. Sometimes the emphasis had been on the “I,” as a sign of possession, and sometimes it had been on the “you,” as a reminder that they’d chosen one another.

Now, “I love you” was a sign of relief and comfort, ease in each other’s presence, a reminder of the support they gave each other. “I love you” was a sign of gratitude that the other had chosen to stay, to be with each other. “I love you” was beatitude, finding joy in the strength of their bond.

Beside them, U trilled again, and Tony and Pepper broke apart.

“Community colleges await!” Tony groused. His tone had no heat behind it, though, and he absentmindedly petted U as his gaze shifted back to the hologram Jarvis had patiently paused while they talked.

Fondly, Pepper thought she’d been lucky to have that much of a conversation with Tony. His hyper focus helped enable his genius, but it made catching his attention difficult. Pepper suspected that 95% of the bots’ mistakes were actually bids for attention, in a very human “any attention is better than no attention” kind of way.

“I’ve got to get back to work,” she offered, and Tony nodded, his mind already elsewhere.

Behind him, Jarvis blinked red/gold/green, letting her know that he, too, would keep an eye on Tony. Ever since Jarvis had overwritten his protocols to include all the original inhabitants of the Tower in his caretaking protocol, he’d become better about not letting Tony fall asleep at his workbench. Apparently having more data points helped.

At some point, the afternoon shift assistants were the only ones left. Pepper barely noticed, working through a deluge of financial reports. After Stane, Tony had decided to take SI private. Buying back those stocks had taken a large portion of SI’s substantial equity reserves, but given the current state of the economy, Pepper was grateful not to see SI’s stock prices fall before their eyes. In fact, because Tony had taken an interest in medical tech, SI was doing better than expected. Their cash reserves could tide them over for a long time.

But, in order to preserve those cash reserves, Pepper was pivoting parts of SI from areas with deep cuts in sales to areas with higher sales. Normally, that would entail mass layoffs and hiring, but Pepper didn’t feel that was ethical in the current state of the economy. Instead, she was working to offer buyouts for those that wanted them and paid skillling up for those employees who wanted to stay with SI.

SI was issuing requests for proposals for online training for a huge portion of its workforce,
preferably proposals from an established brick and mortar educational institution. Details mattered, so Pepper was personally reviewing the RFPs before they were issued to the public.

“Knock, knock, babe. Time for dinner.”

Pepper didn’t look away from the document hanging in midair. “Just a second, Tony. I’m in the middle of something.”

“Jarvis, what time is it?”

“The time is 7:18 p.m., Sir.”

“Jarvis, what time did Ms. Potts begin work today?” Tony’s voice was calm, but Pepper was frantically skimming the doc, trying to get it read before Tony made his point.

“Just one more minute, Tony.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand the question, Sir.” Jarvis was peeved.

“At what point did Ms. Potts begin reviewing information related to SI, Jarvis?”

A pause, and then Jarvis said, “Ms. Potts began reviewing SI related data at 5:01 this morning.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Pepper saw Tony’s whole body freeze.

“Explain, Jarvis.”

Pepper sighed, but both of them ignored her.

“Ms. Potts begins reviewing SI data as soon as she wakes, Sir. You do remember installing the holographic display in the main bedroom mirror?”

“Seriously, Pep? First thing in the morning?”

Tony moved around her desk, waving his hand in between her and the display. “We’re going to talk about this later, Ms. Potts, but right now, I’m kidnapping you.”

Tony made a series of quick hand motions that Pepper didn’t quite catch, and the entire holographic display powered down. Her office was now weirdly silent, the hum of the electronics silenced. Without the light from the screens, the glow from the setting sun filled her office, reflecting off the dark glass of her desk.

“Tony!” Pepper was tired, and her right eye was throbbing after 14 hours of looking at a screen.

“Don’t you ‘Tony’ me, Ms. Potts. I bet you didn’t eat lunch today, either, did you?” Without waiting for her to answer, he barreled on. “Jarvis, what has Pepper eaten today?”

Pepper leaned back in her chair and looked at the ceiling, closing her eyes.

“Ms. Potts had part of a bagel for breakfast at 6 a.m., and a salad for lunch at 12 p.m. She has ingested 743 calories.”

“Traitor,” she muttered under her breath. Louder, she continued, “Tony, I’ve been really busy today. The economy--”

“Don’t care, Pep. Do I need to have Jarvis set a subroutine for you?”
Tony was displeased now, worried for her and a little angry at her carelessness. Pepper opened her eyes to see that his face was serious, and concerned. Pepper sighed and shook her head.

Pushing her chair back, she stood and capitulated. “Fine, let’s go. What are we doing for dinner?”

Jarvis interjected, “Mr. Barnes is making a team dinner tonight, stir fry with basil. It should be ready in approximately 30 minutes.”

“C’mon, Pep, let’s go.” Tony took her hand and towed her along in his wake, the bemused afternoon shift assistants already locking their computers and reaching for their bags. Tony didn’t come see Pepper this late very often, but when he did, she invariably left with him.

Both Pepper and Tony had worked harder before the rest of the team moved into the Tower, but neither regretted the decision to invite everyone to move in with them. Their life now was less solitary, more filled with light and laughter.

Upstairs, Tony ran his hands down her back and lower still, urging her to the bathroom.

“Let’s get a shower. You’ll feel better afterwards.”

In the bathroom, Pepper stopped in front of the mirror, staring at the sink. Her shoulders slumped as she closed her eyes, her right eye flaring with pain. Behind her, she could hear the rustle of clothing as Tony undressed.

“Pep?” Tony’s voice was low, concerned.

Pepper shook her head and straightened her spine. “Just tired.”

She began to unbutton her jacket, only to have her fingers brushed aside as Tony stepped behind her, unselfconsciously nude as he reached around her for the buttons.

“Let me.”

Relaxing against his chest, Pepper watched in the mirror as his tanned, scarred fingers made quick work of the buttons on her blouse before lowering to the waistband of her skirt, tugging it down over her hips. As he knelt behind her, he tapped her right ankle. Obligingly, she lifted her foot, balancing on a single high heel as he moved the skirt down and away from her foot before tugging off the shoe. A tap came on her left ankle, and she switched feet so Tony could remove that shoe.

Now clad only in her plain silk panties, bra, and camisole, she watched in the mirror as Tony hung her skirt and jacket neatly on the padded velveteen hangers in the bathroom closet. He tucked the shoes in a cubby while Pepper enjoyed every moment of watching a naked Tony bend over.

As part of her effort to maintain a public image, Pepper appreciated nice clothing for the way it enhanced her professionalism. In contrast, Tony appreciated the artisanship of fine tailoring. He was on a first name basis with his long-time tailor. Years ago, Tony had insisted on putting her work clothing on his account, referring her to his tailor. In turn, Pepper had been introduced to a sewist who moonlighted as a stylist. At Tony’s suggestion, Pepper had put the sewist on retainer, essentially outsourcing the bulk of her clothing decisions, like the vintage Chanel.

Turning, Tony ran his eyes up and down her body. “Still too much clothing for a shower. C’mere, Pep.”

Obediently, Pepper walked towards him, watching his eyes darken and his hands flex. Even as tired as she was, seeing how much Tony wanted her made her feel good.
Halting in front of him, she shivered as he skimmed his hands up over her shoulders and grinned fiercely. “My girl.”

Nodding mutely, she closed her eyes and sighed in pleasure as he traced her collarbones with his fingertips, still reverent after all these years.

“Arms up.”

Tony gently pulled the silk camisole over her head, adroitly ensuring it didn’t touch the makeup on her face. Tossing it in the dry cleaning hamper, he pressed a kiss to her jaw as he reached around and unsnapped her bra one-handed, pulling it off and watching her nipples harden.

Gentle little kisses feathered down her neck and she leaned into the arm he’d wrapped around her waist, his fingers sliding under the elastic waistband of her panties.

“Let’s get these off, hmm?”

Goosebumps spread across her back as he kissed his way down between her breasts, down to her hips as he knelt again, pulling off her panties.

Her voice was unsteady as she opened her eyes, steadying herself with a hand on his warm, muscular shoulder. “Love you.”

He grinned up at her, rubbing his head against her hip, white teeth flashing as he teasingly, gently bit her delicate skin. “Love you, too. Let’s get you in the shower.”

Tossing the panties in the hamper as he stood, rubbing his body against hers, he slipped one arm around her waist, and made the hand sign for turning up the shower with the other.

In the shower, Tony positioned her under the central rainshower, washing them both as Pepper relaxed under the water, soothed by Tony’s hands and the warmth. The almond scent of their body wash drifted around her as he scrubbed.

“Mine,” he muttered under his breath, and that was so familiar that Pepper smiled. Opening her eyes, she moved back, leaning against his sturdy body, leaning her head against his shoulder.

“Always yours,” she agreed.

Idly, Tony ran his callused hands over her breasts, playing with her nipples and listening to her gasp. As he gently nibbled on her earlobe, the broad flat of his palm rested for a single instant over her abdomen before drifting further down. Pepper arched against him, feeling him hard behind her, listening to his murmurs of praise.

“Such a good girl, aren’t you Pep? Who do you belong to?”

“You,” she breathed, and then she lost her words entirely, distracted by his hands, his mouth, and his voice. Mindless, Pepper let herself drift, turning herself over to Tony.

This wordless give and take that comforted them both. Often, Pepper had trouble letting go enough to seek her pleasure, but she felt safe with Tony. In turn, she knew, Tony enjoyed having her trust and her uninhibited appreciation for his skills. Over the years he had studied her body like a particularly tricky bit of engineering, and he knew exactly how to make her hips stutter as she came.

Praise fell into her ears like the warm water that pattered against her skin. Eyes still half shut,
breath choppy in the humid air of the shower, Pepper clutched at Tony as he eased her down to the bench.

“Feeling better, sweetheart?”

Instead of answering, Pepper snuggled into his side. She wanted to cherish this moment, chase it forever.

“Pep, dinner will be ready soon. We need to get going.”

Tony’s voice was tired and resigned. Pepper sighed and opened her eyes, focusing on Tony. Used to his engineering binges, she’d forgotten that he hadn’t slept last night. He looked tired, with dark circles under his eyes and deep lines etched around his mouth. He was only half-hard, and Pepper decided that he must want dinner more than sex.

“Mmhm,” she agreed, leaning into him a little more. “Love you.”

“I love you too, but we need to get dressed.”

With that, he stood, turning off the shower and reaching for a big fluffy towel. Pepper felt cold without him, and stood to reach for her own towel. Instead of just handing her one, Tony took her hand and walked her over to the towel warmer.

“Here, sweetie.”

Tony wrapped her in a big warm towel, tucking the corner in so that it hung on her body, drying her back as he did it. Then he reached for a smaller, thicker towel for her hair.

“Thanks.”

“Mmhm,” was all that he replied, already focused on drying himself.

Pepper bent down and wrapped the towel around her hair, twisting it back and tucking it under at the base of her neck. When she stood, Tony had already moved into his closet. She could hear the clinking of hangers as he sorted through clothes.

“Tony,” she called, “What are you wearing?”

“Long-sleeve tee, track pants.” His voice was muffled through the closet door.

Closing her eyes for a long moment, Pepper ignored the headache that hadn’t quite gone away and decided on yoga pants, a rib-knit sleeveless shirt, and a white button up for an overshirt. Padding over to her closet, she stepped into soft cotton undies but decided to skip a bra. She wasn’t well-endowed enough for it to be uncomfortable, and the combination of the sleeveless shirt and overshirt would prevent anything untoward.

As she dressed, she heard Tony talking to Jarvis, double-checking the time and making sure that Steve and Bucky really were expecting them for dinner. Pepper quickly shook out her hair, deciding to let it dry naturally. After slipping on a pair of stretchy black flats, Pepper stepped into the bedroom to find Tony running his fingers through his hair, the rare silver hair glinting in the light of the late afternoon sun.

“We still on for dinner?”

Turning, he smiled, open and happy. “Yes. They made enough for everybody. You ready?.”
Nodding, Pepper leaned against him for a moment, taking strength from his endurance. “Sure, I could eat.”

Tony slipped an arm around her waist and steered her towards the elevator, already talking about the book he had recommended to Bucky.

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Down at Bucky and Steve’s apartment, Pepper and Tony waited for the others at the old-fashioned dining table. Like a bower bird, Steve had been unbearably particular about furnishing the apartment for Bucky.

Everyone had watched in bemusement as Steve had muttered about veneer and wood grain while Bucky had huddled in the corners with the best sightlines. Tony’s breezy assurance that Jarvis could handle it had been met with a disbelieving expression and a headshake. In turn, Pepper had been quite sure that Bucky didn’t need the stress of an interior decorator.

In the end, Clint had been the one to track down a solid walnut table. Gradually, everyone else had kicked in, Tony researching flatware, Bruce bringing whatever was flowering in the aquaponics lab, Phil helping with linens, and Tasha gifting them a lovely decorative bowl. That first winter Pepper had given them a set of Limoges dishes, plain white.

Restless, Tony started setting the table. “Who’s coming to dinner?”

Pepper looked at Steve, who looked at the ceiling. “Jarvis?”

“Mr. Coulson and his spouses have indicated that they will arrive shortly. Dr. Banner is finishing up in the lab, with Loki, and he will attend when he finishes this test run. Dr. Foster will be working through dinner, but she indicated that she would appreciate any leftovers.”

Pepper wasn’t surprised by Jane’s absence. Thor had returned to Asgard to plead his brother’s case, and Jane had reacted by shutting herself in her lab. Pepper rarely saw her or Darcy, who’d taken to the Tower like it was her personal playground, hanging out with a clique of other interns.

Tony was fussing with napkins, so Pepper moved out of his way, leaning against the kitchen bar. Bucky had finished chopping cups of basil and the herbal scent filled the room, along with odor from the pile of minced garlic and the sharpness from the small bowl of green onions. As Bucky heated oil in a large non-stick pan, Steve washed dishes. Neither of them would leave a dirty dish longer than they absolutely had to.

Pepper thought now was a good time to ask, since Bucky seemed to be in a good mood, listening to a song she didn’t recognize and smirking at Steve’s half-hearted humming.

“Bucky?”

“Mmm.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I think Loki is bored. I’m a little worried about what a bored Loki can get up to, even if his seiðr is leashed.”

Bucky nodded, keeping a close eye on the sauteing garlic, tinted red with hot chili oil. “Bored teenagers are a pain in the ass. Need to keep them busy.”

With an internal shift, Pepper realized that Bucky knew what he was talking about. He’d been an older brother, and he was older than Steve, though not by much. In the Army, as a sergeant, he’d been responsible for a group of bored, scared teenagers not unlike Loki.
“I was hoping you’d help me keep him busy. He said that he missed studying seiðr with his mother, but obviously, that’s a nonstarter. Just studying might be good for him, though. What would you think about running a sci-fi tutorial for him?”

Bucky tilted his head consideringly, peeking at her from underneath his long, dark eyelashes as he added ground beef to the skillet. “I’ll think about it. Might need some help.”

Dishes washed, Steve tucked himself around Bucky like a human shield, some ineffable tension easing from Bucky as he did so. Shamelessly, Pepper watched as Steve settled himself around Bucky, arms locked around his waist but not impairing Bucky’s movement as he scraped the meat out of the skillet, wiped it down, added more oil, and began sautéing a big bowl of green beans and julienned carrots.

Behind her, Tony finished fussing with the table settings, complaining about the napkins. “You should just let me buy new ones. Or use polyester.”

Steve gave Tony a dirty look, but Bucky just flipped Tony off and continued stirring the green beans. His voice was amused as he said, “Fuck you, Stark.”

Pepper rolled her eyes and gestured towards the sideboard. “Get a whiskey, Tony.”

Huffing, Tony diverted to the crystal decanter of single-malt whiskey that sat ready for him. Comfortable in Steve and Bucky’s kitchen, Pepper got herself a glass of water. Deciding that everyone else would probably want one too, she began to set the table with water glasses while eyeing the stained napkins.

Even now, Bucky couldn’t stand the smell of chlorine bleach and both Steve and Bucky hated the feel of artificial fibers. So their napkins were cotton and stained, and they were too frugal to let Tony endlessly supply them with new napkins. It was an old argument, one that Tony brought up when he was tired and cranky.

At the stove, Bucky added the green beans to a separate serving bowl before adding a half cup of broth to the pan, making it hiss as the liquid hit the hot oil. When the broth was hot, he added a generous bowl of sliced bell peppers. Steve swayed with him as he moved, the two of them always in sync. Idly, Pepper wondered if they were telepathic, too. If they were, they certainly weren’t telling anyone, but Pepper had a sneaking suspicion there was a lot they didn’t tell anyone, not even Jarvis.

Mentally, she shrugged. As long as they were happy, she didn’t care--and they were terribly happy when they were together. Just watching them warmed her heart, their love and devotion for one another as clear and pure as flame. Steve would burn the world down for Bucky, and Bucky would burn himself to ashes for Steve.

Pepper felt a certain responsibility to make sure neither of them felt it necessary. Glancing at Tony, she caught him with a gentle smile on his face, his eyes crinkling as he watched Steve and Bucky. He raised his chin in acknowledgement, and she smiled back. In a very real way, Steve and Bucky were their family, a younger generation who’d seen too much and needed to be coddled as much as Pepper and Tony could manage.

As it turned out, they could manage quite a bit. Jarvis had been authorized for an unlimited supply of credit for whatever the pair might need, not that Steve or Bucky was aware. Bucky, in particular, was careful with money, but eventually they’d both accepted that sometimes packages without price tags just showed up at their door.
In the same vein, Tony had worked with Jarvis to construct a media firewall around Bucky’s presence in the Tower. Not a word or photograph about Bucky made it to the Internet without Jarvis’s knowledge. Every device in the Tower was under Jarvis’s aegis, and he was ruthless in protecting his people. When Bucky left the Tower, he only felt safe under heavy security that Jarvis controlled.

After Pepper’s own experiences, she thought Bucky’s paranoia was justified--she traveled under the same parameters, often with Tony’s presence in an Iron Man suit. All four of them had their own nightmares.

Pepper held out her hand and Tony moved to take it. He squeezed her fingers gently as he took a sip of his whisky.

“Dinner smells good, popsicles. When will it be ready?”

“Bout three minutes, old man,” answered Bucky, moving the bell peppers to the bowl with the green beans with a metal spider. Adding a bowl of dark sauce, a bowl of textured soy protein, and the chopped basil to the hot broth, he stirred the mixture before asking, “Jarvis, where is everybody?”

Jarvis announced, “Ms. Romanoff is at the door with Mr. Barton and Mr. Coulson.”

Tony grinned, the prospect of trading barbs with Clint energizing him.

“Let her in, Jarvis.”

With a quick kiss on the back of Bucky’s neck, Steve let go and turned to greet their guests. Clint came first, dressed in his customary worn tac pants and grotty tee. Tony was already at the door, gesticulating wildly but not spilling a drop of the whisky.

“Bird man! What took you so long? Dinner is almost ready.”

Clint just smirked and raised his eyebrows. “You don’t really want to know.”

While Tony spluttered indignantly, Pepper held her arms out for a hug from Tasha. Still in her business casual, Tasha looked tired.

“Tasha! You made it. How was school today?”

Secretly, Pepper thought that Tasha didn’t get enough hugs, and she’d made her personal mission to give her one every time she saw her. Over Tasha’s shoulder, Phil gave her a nod and offered a hand to Tony, subtly coralling him. As ever, Phil was armored in his black Dolce & Gabbana. He and Tasha had probably left work together.

As Tasha gave her a European-style air kiss, Clint wandered over to the stove, where Bucky was tipping the wilted basil into the bowl with the rest of the food.

“Damn, Bucky, smells good.”

Bucky’s metal hand clinked on the ceramic bowl as he picked it up. “Thanks. Here, put this on the table.”

“All mine now!” Clint raised the food overhead like a prize, marching to the table. Beside Pepper, Tasha shook her head at her goofball of a husband before turning to Pepper, eyes sparkling with mirth.
“School was fine. The principal and I were discussing security arrangements. Most schools end for the summer at the end of June, but given the situation, we were thinking about going all summer to keep the residential students busy.”

Pepper nodded, thinking of her earlier conversation with Loki. “Makes sense. What else would we do with them all summer?”

“Mmhm.”

Tasha’s voice was even, though she was the reason that the school was over capacity. At her urging, SHIELD agents all over the world had stashed their children at the exclusive extended stay program on the 39th floor of the Tower. Children with underlying health conditions had priority, and all residents had access to the Tower hospital floor.

Supportive, Clint now spent a couple of hours every day running riot through the dormitories, keeping a close eye on the crowded conditions. Jarvis was everywhere and always listening, so he fed Clint details as necessary. As building director, Phil had a whole staff dedicated to handling the health and legal issues from what was a pop-up, top-secret boarding school.

“Dr. Barnes is at the door with young master Loki.”

Tony and Jarvis had gone several rounds about the proper form of address for Loki, and Jarvis had won.

Bucky was busy emptying the rice from the rice cooker as he called out. “Jarvis, let ‘em in.”

As the heavy locks thunked open, Bruce wandered in, more interested in the documents in his hands than people. Rumpled dress shirts and pants hung off his body, his wire framed glasses slipping down his nose.

“Loki, are you sure this measurement is accurate?”

Loki hid behind him, inky black hair half-covering his pale face. “I wrote down the numerals as the machine displayed.”

Pepper’s heart hurt for the awkward teenager, but she smiled in greeting. “Bruce! Loki! Excellent timing. Bucky just finished cooking.”

Behind her, Steve stood ready with the bowl for the rice, caught in the warm overhead light. Next to the table, Phil and Tony were deep in conversation. Clint leaned over Phil’s shoulder, arms wrapped around Phil’s waist like a giant golden lion with paws on its prey. Tasha had turned towards the door, back to the wall, one hand on Pepper’s elbow just in case.

Bruce looked up over his reading glass. “Pepper. So good to see you. How was your day?”

“Fine, thanks. And yours?”

“Oh, fine, fine. We were talking about statistics in the first grade class today. They’re never boring.”

Pepper chuckled. “No, I suppose not.”

Until Tony had taken it upon himself to start the preschool, Pepper hadn’t given much thought to children. She knew that Phil had beloved nieces and nephews, and Bucky had had younger sisters once upon a time, but both she and Tony were only children of only children. As far as Pepper had
been concerned, young humans existed. Somewhere else.

Now that Tony and Bruce were teaching math and science to the early elementary set, the day’s antics often ended up as dinner table conversation. That was how Steve had been roped into regular phonics tutoring, while Clint had taken an interest in the extracurricular activities. Pepper caught herself thinking about a child of Tony’s. They’d be as active as their father, with big brown eyes.

Shaking her head at her flight of fancy, she moved to sit with everyone else at the table. Bucky had made the main dish vegetarian for Bruce and Loki, with meat for everyone else on the side. Mixed scents of fish sauce, soy sauce, and basil filled the air. Under the golden overhead light at the dining table, steam filled the air from the hot dishes, and Pepper’s stomach grumbled.

Steve caught the sound and grinned. “Hungry?”

“She hasn’t eaten since noon,” Tony griped, steering her to a seat.

As he pulled out her chair, everyone else seated themselves. As usual, Tasha sat at Phil’s right and Clint at his left. Clint’s aids were in a small case beside his plate and he was signing to Bucky as he leaned against Phil. Sometimes Pepper thought that Clint was constitutionally incapable of sitting up straight at the dining table.

To her right, Tony seated himself next to Bruce, the two of them already talking about an experiment in Tony’s lab.

Pepper patted the chair to her left. “Loki, you can sit next to me.”

Dipping his chin in acknowledgement, the lanky teenager slid into the chair with his natural inhuman grace, hands in his lap. Impatiently, Pepper held out her hand.

Loki blinked at her.

“Your plate, Loki.”

Obediently, he handed her his plate, eyes wide with confusion. For a single instant, Pepper was furious with Odin, and then she let out her breath and began piling food on Loki’s plate.

“You must be hungry,” she said as she returned the full plate to its place in front of Loki.

“Yes,” he agreed, and began eating, neatly but with dispatch.

Across the table, Clint nodded in acknowledgement. He’d seen what she had.

Waiting her turn, Pepper leaned back and looked at the head of the table. Steve had his arm around Bucky’s waist, murmuring in his ear with a grin. Everyone was talking, laughing, and eating. After dinner, she’d touch base with them about Tony’s birthday party. For now, she was content to watch her people be happy.

Pepper emerged from the depths of sleep slowly, awareness filtering in like the gray depths of grief. Instinctively, she surveyed her body for Tony’s warmth, but he was gone, and she was alone. Eyes still closed and shoulders warm under soft blankets, she drifted back into a half-sleep, remembering the night before.

After dinner at Steve and Bucky’s, the group had moved to their living room. As usual, Bucky had curled up in Steve’s lap, their long legs tangled together as they’d taken the corner with the best
sightlines. For his part, Steve had drawn Pepper into a conversation about Kandinsky and abstract art. On her last trip to Paris, Pepper had brought home a nice reproduction of Auf Weiss II for Steve.

Slowly but surely, she and the rest of the original permanent inhabitants were helping Steve and Bucky settle into their quarters in the Tower. With a slow recognition born of the chiaroscuro of lethargy, Pepper realized that she and Tony felt almost parental towards Steve and Bucky, despite the complicated tangle of years and experience.

While she and Steve had chatted about the boldly colored geometrical shapes on display above the sofa, Tony had perched on the coffee table, Pepper’s bare feet in his lap. He’d been idly tracing a delicate ankle bone with one hand while gesturing wildly with the other. Sufficient application of whiskey had eased his frenetic energy into mere intensity.

Pepper had a dim memory of Bucky’s own charm on display. His thick, dark hair had been pulled back in a neat bun while he’d been cooking dinner, but Steve had slid his long fingers into the restrained curls, playing with Bucky’s hair while arguing for a musical interpretation of Auf Weiss II.

Blowing a loose strand of hair out of his eyes, Bucky had pulled out the white cable sweater he’d been knitting all spring before offhandedly remarking, “Tony, have you read Clarke’s Profiles of the Future?”

“Sure. I think I’d broken the spine on my copy by the time I was ten. Haven’t read it in a long time, though. Why?”

Voice casual, Bucky had remarked, “Oh, no reason. Jarvis sent me a copy—thanks, Jarvis—and I’ve been working my way through it. Clarke was born the year before Stevie, y’know.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Barnes. I’m glad you’ve found the book interesting enough to read.” Jarvis had been pleased. Pepper and Tony weren’t the only ones who enjoyed spoiling Steve and Bucky.

Attention caught, Tony had asked, “What did you think?”

“Smart fellow. I’ve only made it to chapter two, but this one footnote caught my attention. ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.’”

Subtly, Bucky’s eyes slid from his knitting to Loki. Seemingly boneless, he’d sat cross legged on the sofa, within arm’s reach of Bucky of Tony and Bucky both. Banner had was at ease on the sofa beside Loki, a cup of his ‘herbal tea’ in hand as he and Phil quietly watched an Attenborough documentary.

At Phil’s feet, Clint had dozed with his head against Phil’s knee. While he preferred to perch on the highest available point, Pepper had noticed that Clint’s need to maintain physical contact with Phil invariably won out. Likewise, Phil’s hand had settled on Clint’s shoulder, the two of them forming a single circuit. Seemingly on watch, Tasha had claimed a plush swivel barrel chair, half watching the documentary. Lucky the pizza dog sat at her feet, napping like Clint.

At Bucky’s words, Loki had stilled. Tony had noticed, but took a sip of his whiskey and replied to Bucky. “Strange might have something to say about that.”

Cocking his head, Tony had turned to Loki. “What do you think? Is ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic’?”

Loki had lowered his gaze, choosing his words carefully. “Perhaps what Midgardians refer to as
dark matter and dark energy is known elsewhere.”

From there, the conversation had spun off to astrophysics, and while Pepper had only half-listened—she’d been arguing for geometrical interpretation of *Auf Weiss II*—she’d been pleased to see that Loki had been participating in the conversation. After Jarvis had helpfully displayed a hologram of a space elevator, Bucky had lent Loki a paper copy of *The Fountains of Paradise*.

Pulling the covers more tightly around her shoulders, Pepper smiled to herself. Her plan to keep Loki busy and Bucky attached to the world outside Steve had borne fruit.

Sighing, she rolled over, into the cold spot where Tony should have been. While he’d held her as she fell asleep, he rarely slept the whole night through.

“Jarvis?”

Red/gold/green flashed on his LED, reassuring Pepper. Tony was here and well and SI waited for no woman. As she sat up, the cool air of their bedroom chilled her warm skin, raising goosebumps.

“Pepper! Wake up! You’ve got work!”

Irrepressible as always, Tony bounded in, coffee mug in hand. Dark circles under his eyes testified to his sleeplessness. He’d changed into shop clothes, oil-stained jeans and a ragged band tee.

“I’m up. Why are you awake?”

Tony shrugged. “Coffee?”

Pepper shivered and reached out for the travel mug, wondering what he wanted from her. Their fingers brushed as Tony handed her the coffee, the complex scent of the dark liquid wafting through the darkened room.

As she drank, Tony waited expectantly.

“Yes?”

“Nothing.”

Pepper sighed. “I need to get dressed for work.”

“Yeah.”

A thread of an old anger wound its way around Pepper’s heart. Did he have nothing to say but a reminder of work? Was it not enough that he’d sloughed the responsibility for SI off on her? Yes, she’d taken it on, enjoyed it even—but she hadn’t asked for it. How typical of Tony, to give a gift that benefited himself. Just like the coffee, to make her ready for what he hadn’t wanted.

Her tone was snide. “You know you’re less productive when you don’t sleep.”

As soon as it left her mouth, Pepper wanted to take it back. It was something Howard would have said to needle Tony, to remind him that his worth was all in what he could build for SI. She winced and glanced up at Tony.

Eyes widened, he’d raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth to speak before pressing his lips together and shaking his head dismissively. “Do you have to be so cranky in the morning?”

Anger flamed to life in Pepper’s chest. “Yeah, sure, just deny it. Like I don’t know what I’m
talking about.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. My ROI was just fine last quarter.”

“Fine, Tony. Stay up for days on end. Some of us have work to do.”

Setting the travel mug on the bedside table, Pepper stalked to the bathroom and slammed the door. It was always the same argument, always the same irresponsibility. Tony had no sense of time. Rather than go to bed at normal hours, he’d just stay up until he couldn’t anymore, or something interrupted his focus. Then he complained about being tired the next day, but he always did it to himself—and expected Pepper to pick up the pieces that he’d forgotten in his hyper focused state.

Well, fuck him. He could stay up for the next week, as far as she was concerned. She didn’t need him to do anything. She could run SI just fine on her own schedule.

Silently, Jarvis began the usual information dump. Still fuming, Pepper only half-watched the display. Another pantsuit, this one a black Dior, hung behind the door. Quickly, Pepper ran through her morning ablutions, mind still on the argument.

One of her to-do list items hung on the mirror, the star blinking.

Tony’s birthday party. She still hadn’t finalized the arrangements. At this point, it wasn’t about Tony. It was about all the other people who’d been invited, and of course he was so scattered he hadn’t responded to the email confirming cancellation.

Pepper stabbed the reminder. “I see it, Jarvis.”

Obligingly, Jarvis let it go, resuming the slow scroll as she put on her make-up.

Pepper spent the day mainlining coffee and putting out little fires everywhere.

Little noticed, the State Department had stopped issuing passports on a “non-emergency” basis. After consulting SI’s in-house immigration lawyer, Pepper had a discreet meeting with her CFO about an appropriately sized slush fund. Now, she needed to assign someone with discretion to grease the appropriate palms. Maybe Tasha had a suggestion.

SI had donated medical supplies to area hospitals, but Jarvis reported that stocks were running low and shipments made through normal channels were being seized. After some thought, Pepper put in a call to one of the managing partners of the Yankees, who’d been invited to Tony’s birthday party. In turn, she put Pepper in touch with the president of the Yankees, who was also chair of the board at Mass General Hospital. Jarvis set up an hours-long conference call that included three governors, an ambassador, SI’s in-house counsel, and overseas SI VPs. Eventually, they decided to avoid scrutiny by sending the Yankees plane on to an overseas SI subsidiary to pick up medical supplies.

Exhausted, Pepper leaned back in her chair and flicked a finger through her hologram screen, bringing up her to-do list. Cancelling Tony’s birthday party was a pain in the ass, and Tony had ignored Jarvis’s requests to handle the details. Anger that had been smoldering since that morning’s argument burst into flame. Locking himself in his workshop meant that Tony just expected her to handle everything. She wasn’t his damn personal assistant anymore—and even when she had been, he’d been so difficult she’d needed her own assistants.

Blood pressure rising, Pepper swiped the file so that it would be the first item on the next screen.
she opened.

Voice tight with anger, Pepper asked, “Jarvis, is Tony still in his shop?”

“Yes, Sir has been working since this morning.”

Jarvis’s tone was carefully neutral, and Pepper spared a thought for him. In a very real sense, Mommy and Daddy were arguing, and Pepper resolved not to take her anger out on him.

Silently, Pepper made her way to the elevator that would take her to Tony’s shop, dismissing her assistants on the way out. It was almost the end of the workday for the second shift, and Pepper realized that she’d skipped lunch again. The conference call had eaten up most of her day. Her head was pounding and her back hurt.

Shifting from one foot to the other, Pepper strode out of the elevator as soon as the door opened, only to be halted by the sight of Tony’s lab in full blackout mode. Even through the soundproofing she could make out the heavy bass from Tony’s favorite band.

Long ago, Pepper had memorized the code to open the lab when it was like this, but she hesitated. Did she really want to tangle with Tony right now? Looking up, she caught sight of one of Jarvis’s cameras. Tony knew damn well she was out here.

Lips firming, Pepper punched in the code and the door slid open.

Inside, Tony sat at the central workbench, surrounded by a full suite of screens. He didn’t look up as she entered, fully focused on his screens.

“Jarvis, lights up, music off,” snapped Pepper.

“I cannot comply,” answered Jarvis, text message pinging her smartwatch.

Fucking hell, Tony had locked her out of the lab.

Pepper marched up to Tony’s desk and swiped through all his holograms from the other side, triggering an automatic shutdown.

“Pepper.” Tony’s eyes were narrowed and his tone surly, at best.

“You’ve been ignoring me. I sent you the paperwork for your birthday party cancellation, and it’s the end of the day and you still haven’t dealt with it. Tony, these people don’t need to be jerked around at the last minute.”

Tony sighed loudly and rolled his eyes, the picture of exasperation. “Pepper, you cancelled it, you deal with it. I’ve been busy. That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it? Me working for my ROI.”

Past caring, Pepper forged on. “Can’t you call people? Or at least return my calls?”

“Why are you yelling at me for spending time on prepping for working with the kids?”

Tony acted as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, and Pepper felt her always-tenuous grip on her temper slip entirely.

“Why are you doing that instead of making me handle everything, Tony? You could have let Jarvis handle it, but instead you would rather avoid me, unless you need something.”

“I’m not the one who walked out of the room this morning, Pepper.”
Voice low and vicious, she said, “I know better than to expect more of you, really.”

“Sure, this is all my fault. You just want to cancel the party so you don’t have to spend time with me.”

Spinning on the rolling shop stool, Tony turned back to his desk and brought the holograms up again.

In tears now, Pepper cast away the last shreds of self-restraint. “Fine, I’ll cancel the damn party and you can spend the time in your workshop, because you’d rather spend time there than with me, anyway.”

Turning her back on Tony, she began to walk out, listening as the music spun up to the point of pain. At least in her office, she could put her life in order. Other people thought she had some worth other than her ability to handle difficult situations.

Behind her, Tony muttered. “Yeah, enjoy the paperwork, because you’d rather see it than me. I know you think I’m a fuckup who shouldn’t be around kids.”

Pepper leaned back in her desk chair, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Bone-deep exhaustion radiated from her heart. Tony hadn’t come to bed last night, apparently preferring to crash on the sofa in his lab. Pepper had tossed and turned all night, anger fading to sorrow. Both she and Tony were quick to snap at each other, but they’d rarely had an argument that hurt like this.

When they’d first decided to make a go of their relationship, they’d fought over Tony’s rash behavior. He’d never been enough for Howard, never been strong enough or smart enough or courageous enough. The shadow of Howard’s perception of Captain America had hung over his life from the moment he’d been born. Pepper had needed years to persuade Tony that she loved him just as he was, which made her cutting remark about ROI even worse.

Later, they’d argued over the usual things—sex, money, politics.

Over the last few years, Pepper had realized that while she and Tony were almost perfectly compatible, that didn’t mean that they always wanted the same amount of sex at the same time. Pivoting SI from ironmongers to clean energy, defensive technology, and medical research hadn’t been easy. Pepper had worked 18 hours days for months and years on end. For his part, Tony had come back from Afghanistan with circulation issues and a side of PTSD. Eventually, they’d settled into a comfortable pattern.

Tony really had no concept of money. He wasn’t selfish about it—he would spoil Pepper lavishly if he could ever figure out how. Pepper had not been amused about the giant bunny, but Tony wasn’t stupid. It was just that at a gut-deep level he didn’t understand the concept of monetary scarcity, of not being able to afford food or rent. Their attitudes about money had sometimes clashed spectacularly, but more often it was the little things, like cloth napkins for Steve and Bucky.

Shaking her head, Pepper sighed and thought, not for the first time, that the rich were indeed very different from the rest of the world. Which reminded her, she needed to handle the paperwork for Tony’s canceled birthday gala. Originally, the plan had been to raise money for the Ali Forney Center. With the gala canceled, Pepper decided just to write a check.

“Jarvis?”

“Yes?”
Jarvis’s voice was calm, untroubled. That made one of them.

“Bring up the paperwork for Tony’s birthday gala, please. I’ll sign off on anything that needs to be paid.”

“Sir has already completed the transactions, Ms. Potts.” Jarvis was slightly apologetic.

“Oh.” Pepper swallowed. “Thank you, Jarvis.”

“You are welcome.”

Pepper folded her arms on her desk and laid her head down. It had been a long day. Normally, they’d trade emails, or text messages with funny memes. Even if one or the other was too busy to eat lunch together, they’d at least call. Pepper hadn’t realized how much she’d depended on those regular check-ins to brighten her day.

Tony had every right to be angry with her. Pepper hated losing her temper, hated being the stereotypical angry redheaded woman. She hated that she’d driven him away—and over what? Paperwork. Nobody had deathbed regrets about not doing enough paperwork.

“Ms. Potts?”

“Yes, Jarvis?” Her voice was muffled through her arms, but Pepper didn’t care.

“You have a one o’clock with Dr. Aya-ay.”

“Ugh.”

“Your appointment is in ten minutes.”

Pepper sighed and forced herself to sit up. Part of her contract with SI included annual health screenings, to ensure that she was physically fit for duty as a CEO. Since her doctor was employed by SI and had chosen to take advantage of the Tower housing that Tony and Pepper had offered to all their New York employees, Pepper didn’t really have an excuse to push back the appointment.

“Shut it down, Jarvis.”

“Very good, madam.”

Never let it be said that Jarvis didn’t have a sense of humor. When it suited him, he could play Jeeves to perfection.

Huffing a silent laugh, Pepper gathered her purse and jacket before stepping out of her office. At this hour, both shifts of personal assistants were in.

Nodding to the assembled staff, Pepper shared, “I’ll be out for the rest of day.”

Used to Pepper’s eccentric schedule, everyone went back to work, answering phone calls, fielding emails, and generally filtering the vast number of people who absolutely had to speak to the CEO of SI. Jarvis helped, of course, but he rarely handled phone calls for Pepper. Both Pepper and Tony had agreed that Jarvis’s status as an AI needed to be protected at all costs, and answering phones was too obvious. Instead, to outsiders he functioned more like a virtual assistant, no smarter than Alexa or Siri.

In the elevator, Pepper checked her smartwatch. Still no messages from Tony. Straightening her shoulders, Pepper stood up straight as the elevator slowed and then halted at the medical floor.
After the Battle of New York, Pepper had insisted that the original permanent inhabitants have a dedicated private entrance that led to a medical suite just for them. Given what had happened to Phil, she’d be damned if any of them ever fell into what remained of SHIELD’s hands.

More recently, she’d just been grateful to avoid possible routes of infection.

A nurse was waiting for her at the elevator. “Ms. Potts.”

Eyeing his name badge, she replied, “Mr. Garcia.”

She didn’t know him personally, but no one stepped foot in the Tower without Jarvis knowing about it, Phil notwithstanding. And anyway, Phil had agreed not to do that anymore.

“If you’ll follow me, we’ll get started. I’m just going to take your vital signs.”

He led her to the usual room, all bland beige furnishings in easy to clean vinyl. Given the amount of blood the Avengers shed on missions, she supposed it made sense to make everything sterilizable. The faint scent of bleach permeated the air in the brightly lit room. No wonder Bucky hated to even step off the elevator on this floor. Pepper grimaced as she took off her jacket so the blood pressure cuff would fit on her arm.

Quickly, Garcia took her temperature with a forehead thermometer. Knowing that Jarvis kept constant track of her vital signs, Pepper bit her tongue and let the man do his job.

“I’m just going to put this on your finger,” he said, holding out a pulse oximeter.

Pepper nodded and silently held out her hand for him to slip it on. These days, she favored a French manicure, discreet and easy to maintain. Gently, careful to not touch her skin, Garcia slipped the little device on the tip of her finger. Pepper could almost feel Jarvis’s huff at the inferior technology, but limited herself to quirking a smile.

“Everything OK?”

“Yes, ma’am. If I could just get you to step over here?”

Face impassive, Garcia gestured in the general direction of a scale. Obligingly, Pepper allowed herself to be weighed and her height measured. Jotting down notes on his clipboard, Garcia stayed mostly silent, only murmuring instructions when needed.

Eventually, he waved her back to the seat.

“The doctor will be in shortly.”

Pepper nodded, already immersed in her email on her Starkphone. Being a good CEO meant that ultimate responsibility always lay with her, and Pepper never wanted to shy away from making the hard decisions. Jarvis helped, screening her email and bouncing back items that were better handled by staff, but every day there were items that only Pepper could decide.

Today, she was distracted.

Looking up from her phone, she thought about last night’s argument. She honestly hadn’t known that he was working on activities for the preschool class he taught. Not for the first time, Pepper wondered about Tony’s peculiar enthusiasm for the project. SI’s private school, and multi-day care center for traveling employees had been offshoots of the original preschool—and that had been all Tony.
Taking a deep interest in a topic wasn’t unusual for Tony, but for that interest to involve other humans was much less likely. He’d spun the preschool up from nothing, and hadn’t hesitated to ask for help with security and projects. Tasha had personally overseen the security arrangements, and Bruce had been drafted into teaching physics, biology, and chemistry. Children loved Bruce, finding his gentle habits mesmerizing. Eventually, when they’d reconstructed the inside of the Tower with an interior green space, everyone had contributed in one way or another.

Pepper’s eyes pricked with tears as she thought about how Tony had thrown himself into working with children, his charisma dragging them all along.

“Ms. Potts?”

Dr. Amy Aya-ay was a woman of a certain age, not quite as tall as Pepper, with her dark hair cut in a sensible chin-length bob. Dressed in a white button-up, paired dark slacks and practical flats, her lab coat on over top, she exuded calm even over her PPE.

Even as she inhaled, Pepper smiled. She trusted Dr. Aya-ay.

Though never exactly friends, they’d grown up in the same small town. Dr. Aya-ay’s father, a physician and immigrant from the Philippines, had run the only family medicine practice in their small town. Pepper had gone to school with his children, who had all gone into medicine like their father.

When she and Tony had designed the Tower for Jarvis and decided to put in a small hospital, she’d had Jarvis do a background check on the younger generation of Aya-ays. As she’d expected, they all came back in the clear, so she reached out to see if any of them would be interested in working for SI. One had decided to take the offer and move to New York, bringing her husband and small children with her. Once again, SI’s parental leave program and tuition-free private school had netted an excellent employee.

“You’re here for your annual exam, correct?”

Dr. Aya-ay sat on the round rolling stool and brought up Pepper’s medical records on the conveniently placed computer. Well, at least some of her records. Jarvis kept all the data he collected to himself, and Pepper had asked him to discreetly disappear anything in her personnel files that wasn’t absolutely necessary.

“Yes, as per my contract with SI.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Dr. Aya-ay was scrolling through the files with impressive speed. “Any changes since your last visit? Surgeries, hospitalizations?”

Silently, Pepper laughed. Her lifestyle with Tony wasn’t exactly conducive to avoiding hospitalizations. “Nothing other than what’s in my records.”

Eventually, Dr. Aya-ay stopped scrolling. “It says here that your IUD was implanted in 2004?”

“Um, sounds about right.” Honestly, Pepper had forgotten about it. That was the point of an IUD, after all. She’d had it long before she met Tony. It wasn’t that she disliked the idea of having children so much as she’d been too busy to think about them.

Turning on the stool to face Pepper, Dr. Aya-ay said, “Paragard IUDs are only effective for ten years. Your IUD needs to be removed. It’s a quick, mostly painless outpatient procedure, and I’d
recommend that we do it today. I can insert a new one, but that tends to be painful, although I can give you a local anesthetic.”

Blinking, Pepper leaned back in her chair. Removing her IUD hadn’t even been on her radar. But the more she thought about it, the more she wanted it. If not now, when? SI was running smoothly, and while she and Tony had argued, Pepper knew their relationship was strong.

“Let’s do it.”

After the procedure, Pepper went looking for Tony. She’d assumed he’d be in his lab, but it was quiet and dimly lit. Nightlights had been left on for the bots, who were tucked away in their charging stations in the cold, quiet room. Afternoon naps sounded lovely, and Pepper was tempted to curl up on the battered sofa with a grease-stained fleece blanket.

Sighing, she gave in. “Jarvis, where is Tony?”

Quietly, he pinged her watch, presumably to avoid waking the bots. “Sir is in his office.”

Pepper blinked and turned on her heel, marching to the elevator. As part of the penthouse remodel, Pepper and Tony had requested his and her offices, like other people had his and her closets. Actually using his office was a bad sign for Tony’s emotional state. When he was happy, he avoided anything that reminded him of Howard.

In the elevator, Pepper stared blankly at the wall, trying to figure out how to start the conversation. “Hey, hon, I know we just had a vicious argument. Let’s make a baby!”

Yeah, no.

Unready, Pepper stepped off the elevator and looked, really looked at their silent living space. Bright light streamed in through the floor to ceiling windows, the Manhattan skyline glittering in the afternoon sunshine. Oversized sofas, chosen to hold all their friends, faced the city. As she stepped out of her heels, light warmed the stone floor under her feet. The scent of coffee drifted faintly through the air, no doubt from Tony’s office.

Pausing in the doorway, she took a moment to memorize her beloved. Today, their life was going to change. His thick brown curls shone in the sunbeams, the occasional glint of silver peeking through. Big brown eyes widened as he took in her face, his own expression grim.

“Can I come in?”

Leaning back in his desk chair, he gestured at the leather chairs in front of his desk. “Estás en tu casa.”

“At least 12.5%.”

Her tentative joke fell flat as Tony came around the desk and crouched beside her chair, expression serious.

“I’m sorry, Pepper,” he grimaced, continuing, “I shouldn’t have expected you to clean up my mess. I’m an unreliable mess, but …”

Looking down, he took her hand. His darker, callused fingers wrapped around her slender, pale hand. “I hope you love me anyway.”
Sliding out of the chair, Pepper knelt in front of him, pressing a finger to his lips.

“Never doubt that I love you. No matter what, I will always love you. Even when I’m angry, I love you.”

Kissing her finger, Tony smiled, his eyes sad. “I try, Pepper. I really do.”

“I know you do, darling. You try so hard for me, and I appreciate it. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made that crack about ROI. It was mean.”

Pepper leaned forward and buried her face in his neck, seeking comfort in his arms. Soap, aftershave, detergent, and something faint and yet unmistakably Tony all filled her nose. Once again, tears pricked underneath her eyelids.

“Love you,” whispered Tony, holding her tight. “I hate that we had to cancel the party. I wanted to show you off, to spend time watching you smile and laugh.”

Now Pepper did weep, hot tears leaking without permission. “I would have loved that. I miss you.”

“Miss you, too, babe. You work so hard.”

Tony shifted back on his heels, pulling her with him, his gravity as inexorable as time. Pepper ended up in his lap, one strong around her waist and the other cradling the back of her head.

Rubbing her face on his soft tee, the heat of his body emanating from underneath, Pepper ventured, “Want to go to the farm this weekend? Just Steve and Bucky, Phil and Clint and Tasha, Bruce and Loki? Maybe Thor and Jane, if Thor gets back in time?”

“Yes,” he breathed, his whole body relaxing against her. “That would be great.”

Pepper turned a little, looking up at Tony. “You’re not unreliable, you know that, right? You have the gift of focus. I love when you focus on me, but it’s hard when you’re working so much.”

Tilting his head, Tony pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “Sounds like we need to do better about making time for each other.”

“Mm, yeah, about that.” Pepper blushed, feeling foolish for being embarrassed. “I had a doctor’s appointment today.”

Pulling back, Tony inspected her, eyes roving down her body. “Everything OK?”

“Oh, no, it was just a checkup.” Pepper rushed to explain. “It’s just that, uh, it has been ten years since I’d had my IUD placed.”

Faint grooves appeared between Tony’s eyebrows. Clearly, he was trying to place the acronym. Pepper grinned and continued, “What would you say if I told you that I’m not on birth control?”

“I’d say let’s move this conversation to the bedroom!”

There, in the crinkle of his eyes and in the long grooves of a merry smile, there was the magnetism of Tony’s joy. Pepper felt warmth flood through her.

“It’s like that, Mr. Stark?”

“It is absolutely like that, Ms. Potts.”
“Phil, got a minute?”

Looking up from his desk, Coulson met her gaze with his usual impenetrable expression. His desk had a single, nearly empty inbox, another less empty outbox, and was filled by a three-screen setup with an ergonomic keyboard, pen tablet, and mouse. Pepper believed in making sure her people had the tools to do their job, and SI didn’t stint on tech.

At first glance, the rest of the brightly lit office was a riotous mishmash of fidget toys and snacks (for Clint), books and handmade pottery (Tasha), art (Steve), and fresh pea flowers (Bruce), strewn over the traditional office decor of a leather sofa and coffee table. If Pepper’s gaze returned a second time, it was only because she saw the underlying patterns. A blanket was neatly folded over one arm of the sofa, proof against the cool, dry air.

Signs of friendship no longer displayed potential weaknesses. As Tower Director, Phil didn’t have to invite anyone into his office--he had a personal assistant, and a conference room for uncomfortable conversations. Phil’s office was comfortable and homey because he felt safe in the Tower. He didn’t have to hide his relationship with Clint and Tasha.

“What can I do for you, Ms. Potts?”

Smiling, Pepper returned to Phil. “Come to Tony’s birthday party?”

Both eyebrows went up. “I thought the gala was cancelled. Clint was so happy to escape his penguin suit, too.”

“I bet. No, this is just us--you and yours, me and Tony, Steve and Bucky, probably Bruce. Maybe Loki. Thor’s still out, but I’m going to invite Jane. Sometimes it’s just nice to be asked, even if you don’t want to go.”

Leaning back in his chair, Phil nodded. “Much more secure than a gala.”

“Mmhm. I was thinking about having it at the farm on Saturday. We haven’t been out of the Tower in months and the weather is supposed to be nice.”

Phil sighed, his expression serious. “You’ll need to run that by Tasha. My immune system still isn’t what it used to be, and she worries. I’m sure Clint would like to pilot, though.”

For the rest of his life, Phil would have repercussions from the incident on the Helicarrier. Otherworldly healing could only do so much and Phil was getting older. While Phil hadn’t said anything, Pepper was sure that his resignation from SHIELD was at least in part because of his slowing reflexes and limited stamina.

Except for supply runs like the toilet paper fiasco, Clint hadn’t been out in the QuinJet much this spring. The world had been relatively quiet, and Jarvis had been happy to keep Clint’s piloting in top shape with simulations. Some of them were distinctly improbable, according to Tony.

“I’ll track her down,” promised Pepper. “Do you know what she’s doing today?”

Phil glanced at the clock on his screen. “At this time of day, she’s usually sparring with Clint and Steve.”

Pepper bit her lip. It was a personal rule that she didn’t interrupt Avenger’s business unless it was absolutely necessary. While she didn’t mind providing political and legal support, she had no interest in becoming an Avenger. Some things were better left to Tony and his teammates.
“Thanks, Phil.”

When Phil smiled, Pepper was reminded why Clint had fallen so hard for him. No matter that he was older than she was, his grin had a certain boyish charm.

“Anytime, Ms. Potts.”

As Pepper closed the door behind her, she decided to wait until after lunch to meet with Tasha. Everyone was more reasonable after eating, but Pepper didn’t really think it would be a problem. The cottage at the farm was relatively isolated and secure.

Next, Bucky. Steve wouldn’t leave Bucky for anything less than a mission, and Bucky had left the Tower infrequently even before they’d enacted recent policies. Tony wouldn’t say anything to them, but Pepper knew he’d be hurt if Steve and Bucky didn’t show up.

Stepping onto the elevator, she queried, “Jarvis, where is Bucky?”

“Mr. Barnes is in his quarters.”

“Would he be open to visiting with me?”

Everyone knew that Bucky had bad days. On those days, afraid of his own reflexes, he wanted no one but Steve. Bad days had become less common, but nobody wanted to intrude on Bucky’s safe space.

An LED flashed white/black/white, Jarvis’s hold signal, so Pepper waited while Jarvis talked to Bucky. Others had been surprised when Jarvis and Bucky had become close friends, but Pepper had known Jarvis since he was a single instantiation in the Malibu house. One of his core functions was to care for others, and Bucky had needed a lot of care when he’d first arrived at the Tower. Add in their common interest in science fiction, and Jarvis’s inhuman patience with Bucky’s differences, and Pepper wasn’t at all surprised by their relationship.

A single chime, and Jarvis announced, “Mr. Barnes would be happy to meet with you on the common floor. He’ll make lunch while you chat.”

“Thanks, Jarvis.”

On the common floor, Pepper found Bucky in the quiet kitchen. Noon sunshine flooded the space with light, highlighting Bucky’s sharp cheekbones and shadowed eyes. Warm, damp air wafted from the kitchen. Bucky had used the Instant Pot to make an even dozen hard boiled eggs.

“Need a hand?”

With a tiny grin and a quick peek from under unfairly long eyelashes, Bucky quipped, “Nah. Tony already gave me one.”

Chuckling, Pepper pulled up a seat at the kitchen bar. “How’s that working out for you?”

“All good, see?”

Showing off, Bucky juggled a couple eggs before cracking each one and peeling them single-handedly, the whites in perfect condition when he finished. Even the pieces of eggshell had landed neatly in a bowl for scraps.

Pepper applauded in appreciation. “I can’t do that with two hands!”
Bucky turned away and rinsed the eggs in the white farmhouse-style sink, and Pepper thought perhaps she’d embarrassed him a little. Propping her chin in her hand, she traced shapes on the granite countertop and waited for him to regain his equilibrium.

“Jarvis,” she asked, “What is the weather for this weekend?”

“High 70s, low 80s. Mostly sunny.”

Raising an eyebrow, she looked up at Bucky as he diced pale green celery. “What would you say to a cookout this weekend?”

Scraping the finely diced celery into a stainless steel bowl, Bucky looked out the window at the sunny city skyline. “Maybe.”

“It’s Tony’s birthday, and the gala was canceled,” Pepper pointed out. “I was thinking we could all get together at the farm.”

Reaching into the gadget drawer, Bucky retrieved an egg slicer, the thin wires delicate in his strong grip. “Who would be going?”

“Well, you and Steve.” Pepper smiled and continued, counting off on her fingers. “Me, Tony, Phil, Clint, Tasha, Bruce. That’s eight. I was hoping Loki would come too, and I was thinking I’d invite Jane, but I don’t expect her to attend. What do you think?”

Bucky raised his eyebrows and narrowed his eyes, focused on precisely cubing the eggs. “We’d stay at the cottage?”

Pepper felt a wave of warmth wash through her. This sort of question was as close as Bucky could get to asking for something. Whatever he wanted, she would give. They all would, because fuck Hydra.

“There are enough bedrooms,” she agreed.

With a moment’s thought, she decided to give the downstairs master suite to Bucky and Steve. They had stayed in it for Bucky’s birthday trip. Phil, Clint, and Tasha could have the upstairs master suite, because that many people needed the room. All the bedrooms had en suite bathrooms, so she and Tony were perfectly fine in a smaller bedroom. Bruce wouldn’t mind the smallest upstairs bedroom because he was an early riser and it had the best morning light. There was even a small, unused bedroom in the basement Loki could use.

Biting her lip, Pepper thought about how to phrase the question. She didn’t want to outright ask Bucky, because she worried that he’d say ‘yes,’ just because she asked. Perhaps if she asked his professional opinion, he could be more honest about how he felt.

“Do you think it’s safe for Loki to come with us?”

Slowly blinking as he processed the question, Bucky shifted his steel-gray gaze to her for a second before returning to the sweet yellow onion he was mincing for the egg salad sandwiches.

Finally, he scraped the onion into the bowl with the celery and egg. “Yeah, he should be fine. He’s been well-behaved so far, and it’s a new environment. He’s less likely to lose control in an unfamiliar environment.”

As Bucky washed the knife and cutting board, Pepper dug a brand-new jar of mayonnaise out of the pantry cupboard. The familiar yellow and blue label was easily visible.
Nodding in thanks, Bucky took the jar, easily removed the lid, and began spooning mayonnaise into the bowl. Pepper returned to her seat and watched. The bowl had enough ingredients for at least a dozen sandwiches. A loaf of the whole wheat and oat sandwich bread that Steve made was off to one side, already sliced and waiting.

“OK, I’ll go find Loki and Bruce,” decided Pepper, happy that all their friends would be present for Tony’s party. “Thanks, Bucky.”

Dipping his chin, Bucky’s face was solemn as he watched her stand. “You’re welcome.”

In the elevator, Jarvis let Pepper know that Loki was walking Clint’s dog in the main interior atrium. Four stories tall, the interior green space for permanent residents had contributed to everyone’s mental health. Tiers of greenery surrounded a grassy area with a central water fountain. The water fountain was more like a shallow wading pool, and at Phil’s suggestion, they’d posted a lifeguard. Young children shrieked and splashed in the warm spring sunshine, while older kids played a complicated stick bat game, something that Steve and Bucky had taught the upstairs schoolchildren.

Loki was lying on the grass behind a strategically placed planting, head pillowed on his arms as he stared at the overhead mirrors. Lucky curled up against him, napping in the sunlight.

Pepper sat on the edge of the raised planter and observed the too-thin dark-haired boy and the dog. “Everything OK?”

Tilting his head, Loki looked at her for a long moment before answering. “Fine.”

“Would you like to come on a little trip with us?”

Loki hadn’t been out of the Tower since his arrival. None of them had deemed it safe for him to be out of the Avenger’s reach. Humans bore grudges as well as any other peoples, even if Loki had not been in his right mind.

Dark eyes widened and Loki sat up, his lithe movements otherworldly in their grace. “Truly?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t tease you about something like this.” Pepper was firm as she forged ahead. “It’s a short, little trip. We’re only going to the farm for the night, for Tony’s birthday.”

Loki slumped back down to the grass. “I cannot attend.”

Puzzled, Pepper asked, “Why not?”

“I have no gift for a prince of the realm such as Stark.”

Her first instinct was to laugh, but she quickly suppressed the urge. Loki was serious, and woe betides those who laugh at emo teenage boys.

Pepper thought quickly. “The gift is your attendance. Tony can and does buy himself whatever he wants. What he cannot buy is the gift of good company.”

Arching his brows incredulously, Loki turned his head to face her. “My attendance?”

“Yes.” Pepper was firm. “Come and be good company. That is all he wants.”

Still disbelieving, Loki inclined his head, surrendering to her opinion. He was too well mannered to argue with his hostess. Not for the first time, Pepper thought that Frigga had done a good job with
Loki’s conduct.

Sighing, Pepper stood and looked down at the pair, healing in the light of Midgard.

“We leave tomorrow morning.”

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Pepper paused in the doorway of the QuinJet. Cool late morning sunshine illuminated the interior, gleaming black and steel. Up front, Clint and Tasha were working their way through the pre-flight checklist while Steve and Bucky strapped down the coolers of food.

Pepper had requested her assistant put together a little bit of everything for afternoon hors d'oeuvres. Salami for Tony, Braunschweiger for Phil, moskovskaya for Tasha, thinly sliced Virginia ham for Steve. Similarly, they'd tracked down beautiful handmade mozzarella for Tony, with feta, cheddar, and a nice Emmental for the rest of them. Bell peppers, cucumbers, carrots, and tomatoes rounded out the fresh, crunchy requirements. Three kinds of olives—black, green, and kalamata were included, along with cornichons and sweet pickles. At Bruce’s suggestion that Loki eat more protein, they’d included anchovies, sardines, and a nice tuna belly in olive oil. Of course, this kind of food needed good bread, so Pepper had authorized ordering in some baguettes, water crackers, and rye thins.

All the food had been delivered to the penthouse first thing in the morning, in neatly packed containers, already boxed up with cold packs. Jarvis had made sure that everything else they might need had been delivered to the farmhouse a couple days earlier.

Stepping into the QuinJet, Pepper grinned at Tony’s sleepy smile. He’d stayed up late the night before, working with Bruce to wrap up a project before they left this morning. As she sat beside him, he pulled her close, pressing kisses behind her ear and making her shiver.

“Tony! I need to get buckled in!”

“Aw, Pep. Bruce and Loki aren’t even here yet.”

Pepper craned her neck to look behind them. Bruce and Phil stood outside Phil’s greenhouse, gesturing at the greenery tucked safely inside.

“Did the Satsuma arrive already?”

“Not sure. Knowing Bruce, he probably wants to run a research study. Or grow something not strictly medicinal.”

Behind them, Bucky laughed quietly. “Hey Steve, did you pack my tea?”

“Sure did, Buck. It’s in the front pocket of your backpack.”

Pepper gave up trying to get buckled in and huddled against Tony’s warmth. Up on top of the Tower, the wind cut like a knife, bitter and cold. One-handed, Tony idly swiped through holograms of engineering diagrams. As clouds moved across the sky, Pepper closed her eyes against the suddenly bright sunshine.

“This seat taken?”

Phil’s mild tones made Pepper smile. Opening her eyes, she saw Phil bending down between Clint and Tasha, dropping a kiss on one cheek and then the other. After he settled himself directly
behind them, he took out his reading glasses and pulled a thin tablet.

Slinking past Tony and Pepper, Loki settled himself on the other side of the aisle from Phil, Bruce following close behind.

“All aboard,” called Steve from behind, a smile in his voice. No doubt, he and Bucky had claimed the eggplant purple sofa. Seat belts were not something the super soldiers tolerated well.

“Ay-aye, cap’n!”

Clint tossed off a half-assed seated salute, and closed the QuinJet doors. Pepper straightened up, looking out the window as she buckled herself in. She loved living in New York, but a trip to the farm would do them all good.

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After a long, lazy afternoon, Pepper wanted to cook dinner herself. She didn’t often cook, but she enjoyed the meditative aspect. Slanting in through the high windows in the living room, warm beams of light coated the living, dining, and kitchen areas.

On the counter in front of her, an enormous bowl held 10 pounds of boneless, skinless chicken thighs. Earlier, she’d zested three lemons, using the microplane Jarvis had had delivered to all their kitchens. Once Jarvis determined that a kitchen gadget was of good quality and useful, he ordered one for everybody, no matter how rarely they’d use it. The stainless steel rasp came with a base that held the zest and shavings. After zesting the lemons, she’d quartered each lemon and squeezed the juice in the bowl.

Then Pepper had tried a new trick she’d learned from Nadiya's *Time to Eat*, separating out all the cloves from a head of garlic and letting them sit in water for a minute. Just like on TV, the skins had slipped right off. Patiently, Pepper had used the microplane to reduce each clove to paste, and then added the paste to the bowl of chicken. Finally, she’d added a tablespoon of smoked paprika, and a tablespoon and a half of dried oregano before mixing the marinade with the chicken. After covering the giant bowl with plastic wrap, she had tucked it in the refrigerator all afternoon.

Now it was time to cook the meat, and she was indecisive about whether she should do it on the grill or in the oven.

Behind her, Tony and Bucky held an intense discussion about space elevators. Despite himself, Loki couldn’t help but be drawn into the conversation from time to time.

Bits of Steve and Tasha’s laughing argument about whose turn it was to choose a movie slipped between Tony’s exclamations. If Pepper heard correctly, Tasha was arguing for *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson*, but Pepper didn’t think Steve had a movie in mind. He just enjoyed arguing.

Uncomfortable with any argument, Bruce ended up in the kitchen. “Need a hand?”

“Sure. Want to peel and seed a cucumber for me?”

They’d brought English forcing cucumbers for the tzatziki. By way of answering, Bruce pulled one of the long, thin cucumbers out of the refrigerator.

“Thanks, Bruce. I’ll need that minced, if you’re up for that, too.”

“No problem.”
His tone equable, Bruce moved to the far end of the counter and began peeling the dark green skin from the cucumber with long, sure movements. Pepper watched for a second, and then decided just to cook the chicken in the oven. No need to disturb anyone to help her with the grill—even Clint was out in the yard, playing fetch with Lucky.

After retrieving two big sheet pans from the storage cabinet, Pepper hunted around for two wire mesh racks. Eventually, she found them deep in a corner cabinet. They really needed to organize the cottage kitchen a little better. Fortunately, the spray oil was easy to find, in a cabinet to the right of the stovetop.

Racks sprayed, she grabbed some tongs from the ceramic crock, and began carefully spacing the chicken. It had turned pink from the paprika. Between the scent of the lemon on the chicken and the cucumber that Bruce was carefully dicing, the kitchen started to smell appetizing.

Her stomach rumbled. Embarrassed, she glanced over at Bruce, who had a small smile on his face as he studied the cucumber.

“Dinner’s soon,” he reassured her without looking up.

“Yeah,” she answered as she placed the last piece of chicken on the racks. Pulling open the dishwasher, she placed the tongs on the top rack. No dirty dishes were out to disturb Steve or Bucky. Jarvis had preheated the ovens, so she put the chicken in before turning to Bruce and taking stock of the tzatziki process.

Bruce was almost finished with mincing the cucumber, so Pepper got the dill out of the refrigerator.

“Can you do this too? I want to make some rice to go with.”

Nodding, he took the dill and opened the container. The bitter, herbal scent filled the kitchen, and Pepper sighed in pleasure.

“I love the smell of fresh dill.”

“Fresh herbs are pretty good,” agreed Bruce. Finding a medium sized glass bowl, he began scraping the tiny pieces of cucumber into the bowl.

Meanwhile, Pepper began dicing an onion for the rice.

“What next?”

“Zesting a lemon and adding the juice,” replied Pepper. “You up for that?”

“Can do.”

After retrieving the zester from the dish rack, Bruce began zesting the bright yellow lemon with confidence.

In the other room, the opening music from The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson began to play, distracting Tony from the conversation about space elevators. Steve must have given up on the argument.

Pulling a nonstick sauté pan from the drawer, Pepper sprayed it with canola oil, and then added a couple more tablespoons of olive oil before adding the onion.
As the onion sizzled, Bruce ventured, “Lemon zest always reminds me of warm days.”

Pepper nodded, watching as he added the chopped dill to the glass bowl with the cucumbers.

“I don’t cook with lemon zest during the winter. Lemons don’t seem like a winter food to me.”

Musing on the thought of seasonal meals, Pepper stirred the onion as it began to change to a translucent softness.

Bruce finished adding the lemon juice and stepped back, staring at his feet while waiting for her instructions.

“Oh, would you mind mixing it up and then putting it in the refrigerator to chill while I make the pitas?”

“Not at all.”

Behind her, Bruce added two cups of plain, full-fat Greek-style yogurt to the glass bowl, followed by a tablespoon of white wine vinegar, a teaspoon of garlic granules, and a teaspoon and a half of salt.

By then, Pepper had added two cups of rice to the pan and was waiting for the rice to toast. Deciding that it was good enough, she added four cups of vegetable stock, mixed it up, and plopped a lid on it.

“Hey, Bruce?”

“Yes?”

His tone was calm, maybe a little amused as he tucked the tzatziki in the refrigerator.

“Would you mind getting out the parchment paper? I’ll need at least three pieces to cover the baking sheets.”

“Yep, no problem.”

Behind her, she heard cabinets opening and closing as Bruce hunted for the parchment paper.

On the counter, the bowl of pita dough waited. This recipe was four parts all-purpose flour to one part whole wheat flour, along with water, oil, sugar, salt, and instant yeast. While she’d ordinarily use the bread maker to mix and rise the dough, this many people meant that she’d tripled the recipe and mixed it in the stand mixer instead.

Now, she floured the baking counter and dumped the dough onto it. With a giant pizza cutter, she cut the dough into 18 roughly equal pieces.

“Ah, got it. Three pieces? Do you want me to get out three baking sheets?”

“If you would, thanks.”

Pepper kept rolling out the pitas, each slightly larger than her hand and about as thick as her little finger. When Bruce laid the parchment paper beside her on the counter, she began transferring the pieces. Once the first sheet was full, she used a rimless cookie sheet to slide the parchment paper onto the huge cast iron pan that Jarvis had been preheating for the last hour.

Slamming the oven door shut, she stepped back for a moment and surveyed the kitchen. Bruce had
tidied up after himself, rinsing off the plastic cutting board, peeler, and knife and stacking them in the dish drainer. The baking center was covered in flour, but that was to be expected.

Checking on the chicken, she used a probe thermometer. Only 150 degrees, so she resolved to give it another ten minutes.

Behind her, Bucky and Loki spoke in low tones, and she couldn’t hear the conversation.

Turning, she peeked into the living room, where everyone else had settled in to watch the movie, following along with subtitles. At some point, Clint had perched on the sofa behind Tasha, Phil’s head leaning against his thigh. Lucky lay on the floor in front of them.

One entire side of the L-shaped sofa was taken up by Steve holding Bucky. The two of them were stretched out together in tees and sweatpants, looking impossibly young. Clearly, they had showered and changed after their “nap” that afternoon. Bucky’s nimble fingers held knitting needles that flashed silver in the dim light of the living room.

Loki sat quietly between them and Tony. His long, thin fingers traced a blue-tinted hologram of a space elevator.

Even as she watched, Tony turned and met her eyes, his own warm and happy. Raising a glass of whisky in salute, he blew her a kiss. Silently, she caught it and brought it to her mouth before blowing one of her own to him.

Turning away, she saw that Bruce had already begun chopping the Bibb lettuce for that night’s meal. Sensing her gaze, he looked up.

“Salad, right?”

“Yes, please. Would you mind handling that while I swap out the pitas?”

“No problem. Red onion, tomatoes, cucumber too?”

“Mm-hmm, and some feta, I think. Should be some in the refrigerator.”

Cooking with Bruce was comforting. He knew what she needed before she did. Checking on the rice, Pepper decided that although almost all the water had been absorbed, it could use another couple of minutes before she added the salt, spinach, garlic powder, lemon juice, and fresh oregano.

Instead, she peeked into the hot oven, and seeing that the pitas were nicely puffed and a little toasty, tucked the rimless cookie sheet under the parchment paper so that she could slide the whole piece of paper onto the silver cookie sheet. Triumphantly, she turned and pulled the parchment paper off so that the pitas lay on the counter to cool. Then she repeated the original trick, sliding the second piece of parchment paper with raw pitas onto the cookie sheet and off again, directly on the 500-degree cast iron.

While Bruce switched from lettuce to bright red tomatoes, Pepper took the lid off the rice. Now that it was ready, she scraped the rice out into a huge glass bowl where the other ingredients were already waiting, stirred together with a little olive oil. The bitter scent of the spinach combined with the light, sharp scent of the lemon and the herbal scent of the fresh oregano as she mixed it.

“I think that’s it,” said Bruce as he finished chopping the onion into thin half-moon shapes.

“That looks great, Bruce.”
All the different salad components were placed neatly into individual bowls, a riot of color on the countertop. Everyone could make their meal just as they liked. Clearly, Bruce’s lab habits carried over to the kitchen.

Bruce just smiled, and gestured to the sink. “I’ll wash up while you get the chicken out and swap out that last tray of pitas.”

“Thanks, Bruce.”

Pepper was grateful for his help. Dinner had turned out to be a bigger task than she had anticipated, between all the chopping for the salad and the homemade pitas. As she swapped out the pieces of parchment paper, the scent of freshly baked bread wafted into the air.

Ever restless, Tony left the movie and invaded the kitchen. “Brucie-bear! Pepper! This looks great! What are we having?”

“Chicken souvlaki salad, with homemade pitas and Greek rice. If I don’t burn the chicken.”

Quickly, Pepper pulled the racks of red-tinted chicken breasts from the ovens. Lacking counter space, she went to set them on the huge dining room table.

“Hey, let me take that,” said Tony, grabbing a red cloth hot pad from the counter and taking the opposite ends of the pans. “You get trivets.”

“Oh! Yes, good idea.” Pepper dug around in the drawers while Tony waited, coming up with two red-enameled cast iron trivets in SI logo patterns.

“Someone has a sense of humor,” remarked Tony as he set the heavy trays on the table. “How long should these cool?”

“Mm, just five minutes or so. I think everything else is ready, if you want to help me put it on the table.”

Darting past her, Tony began transferring the salad makings, rice, and pitas to the dining table. On the other side of the kitchen, Bruce was drying dishes. Neither of them would upset Bucky or Steve with a dirty kitchen while they ate.

Pepper pulled the last tray of pitas out of the oven, tipping them directly into the big ceramic bowl that held the rest of the pitas. Loki had begun helping with setting the table, the plain white china contrasting beautifully with the wood dining table. Behind him, Clint had pulled out the basket with the stained cotton napkins.

In the darkened living room, Pepper saw Bucky tuck away his knitting before tapping Steve on the arm and jutting his chin in the direction of the dining table. Steve nodded, and made the half-circle motion to pause the television before swinging his bare feet to the hardwood floor.

With a dancer’s grace, Tasha stood and stretched before turning to Phil, who had been watching with undisguised appreciation. Giving him her hand, she waited for him to join her.

Pepper smiled. At some point, Jarvis had turned on the wall sconces in the dining area, filling the room with a warm glow. Everything was ready for Tony’s birthday dinner, including the tiramisu from Tony’s favorite Italian restaurant hidden in the back of the refrigerator.

Tonight, they would sit, eat, and enjoy each other’s company, celebrating the person who’d brought them all together.
Later that night, Pepper woke to the pale blue glow of a rotating hologram. The space beside her was cool to the touch.

Sitting up on her elbow, Pepper blearily looked around the room, spotting the silvery blue strands in Tony’s dark curls at the edge of the bed. The foolish man hadn’t wanted to wake her as he climbed in bed.

Squinting, Pepper focused on the hologram, and then huffed a silent laugh.

Of course Tony was researching early childhood math curricula. Why would she expect anything else?
Bucky Makes Cheesecake for Clint's Birthday Dinner

Chapter Summary

In which Bucky needs help getting out of bed in the morning. When he does, what do you get a teammate who doesn't have fancy tastes for his birthday? If you're Bucky, you make him a cheesecake you can pack for his birthday trip.

Bucky nestled under a pile of blankets in the cool, dim room. Silky cotton sheets were smooth against his bare skin, but he wasn't sleeping. He couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't bring himself to climb out of bed.

The future was supposed to be better than this. Bucky had eagerly devoured science fiction novels since he was a boy, each one a singular glimpse of a possible future. Until he'd become swept up in the news this spring, he hadn't realized how much hope he'd had for this strange land.

He and Steve had been born right when the Spanish Flu had ripped through the country at the end of World War I. Growing up in the aftermath hadn't been pretty. The drum beat of his childhood had been “never again” to the ugliness of that disease, the ugliness of a world war. They'd been tweens when the Great Depression had hit, Stevie's ma working her fingers to the bone to keep Stevie alive. Bucky's family hadn't had much, but they'd had more than Stevie and his ma.

After all this time and all this science, Bucky had thought most people had been inoculated against the allure of fascism and the scourge of widespread poverty, much less the overwhelming terror of an unknown plague.

The future was supposed to be better, dammit.

Fucking Hydra. He had been used to promote this systemic rot. His body, his hands, his marksmanship had contributed to this.

Bucky's stomach hurt and his hands shook as he curled under the blankets. Everything hurt. Focused as he was, he wasn't aware of Steve until the air currents changed when he opened the door.

“Buck?”

Steve's voice was soft and low, careful. Bucky hated that he'd reduced Steve to this. His bright, powerful love, fearless in the pursuit of justice, was reduced to cautious softness. Bucky shifted in the nest of blankets, curling up tighter.

The mattress dipped as Steve sat next to him and bent down to kiss his tangled curls. Warmth from Steve's body radiated all along Bucky's vulnerable chest and stomach, easing his pain.

“Lay with me?” he begged, careless of his dignity.

In answer, Steve tucked himself alongside Bucky like they'd used to do, once upon a time. Steve's blond hair was soft under Bucky's jaw; the soft exhalation of his breath warm on Bucky's scarred shoulder. Steve slung one hand on Bucky's waist while he carefully folded the other in the palm of Bucky's hand. Their legs tangled as Steve pressed his whole body into Bucky's embrace.
Something eased in Bucky’s chest, the tangled knot of sorrow and grief unable to resist the sheer comfort that Steve brought, the knowledge that Steve was safe and well here in Bucky’s arms. Every minute that Steve was away, Bucky worried, a niggle at the side of his mind that Steve could be fighting something or someone that could finally take him down.

Of course, the thing that had actually brought Steve down was losing Bucky. Knowing that Steve’s pain was eased by his own presence went some way towards lightening the guilt that Bucky carried for being so needy for Steve.

Even as he reassured himself that Steve liked being here, wanted to be here, a dam broke in Bucky’s heart. Words spilled out.

“How do you do it?”

“Mmm?”

Steve’s breathing was even, his heartbeat in the low 50s. Bucky kept count with a corner of his mind. Ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum. Strong and steady, not fast and thready. The metronomic precision was soothing, his own heartbeat slowing to match.

When their hearts finally evened out, Steve’s hand curled infinitesimally, pressing into Bucky’s metal hand. Their bodies synchronized, Bucky’s pain lessened, knowing that Steve was safe and calm and well.

“The world is going to Hell in a handbasket,” whispered Bucky. “How do you not want to curl up and hide?”

Bucky felt Steve’s eyelashes move against the delicate skin of his collarbone, sweeping up and then down again as Steve thought.

“I dunno, Buck. Maybe I get up and go out and fight because I can, because if I don’t do it, who will? Not everyone is as lucky as I am.”

Bucky sighed, a long, deep silent inhalation followed by a slow, noisy exhale.

“You would think that, wouldn’t you? Punk.”

The curve of Steve’s lips against Bucky’s bare chest made Bucky shiver.

“Jerk.”

Steve’s voice had been silent, the word sub-vocalized so that only Bucky could feel it against his skin, part of a ritual as old as their friendship.

Comforted, Bucky slept.

Several hours later, Bucky drifted in a warm haze. His thoughts were peaceful eddies in the river of his subconscious, circling around thoughts of Steve. Eventually, he became aware of all the aches in his joints and the gnawing in his stomach.

In the early days of his capture by Hydra, Bucky had been trained to be still, even in his sleep. Stillness as safety was a difficult habit to break. When he woke, his muscles were nearly always stiff with disuse and his joints rusty with pain.
Now, Bucky shifted and then stopped, realizing that Steve was still mostly asleep and half-hard against his leg. His own cock twitched hopefully. Hazily, he thought of Steve’s smooth skin, the slide of Steve against his thigh. Eyes still closed, he breathed in the scent of Steve’s shampoo, Steve’s silky hair soft against Bucky’s lips.

_Ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum._ The beat of Steve’s heart sped up a little as he woke, matching Bucky’s own.

“Buck?”

Steve’s voice was rough and low as his fingers traced gently down Bucky’s back, skimming over every vertebrae. At the base of his spine, Steve’s long artist fingers rubbed hard on either side of his spine, and Bucky groaned in pleasure.

“Yeah?”

For answer, Bucky pressed his ass back against Steve’s hand, and Steve chuckled, dark and deep.

“I know what you want.”

A different kind of ache rose in Bucky’s body, a coil of need unfurling as his cock hardened, untouched. Unable to help himself, he pushed back against Steve’s fingers as Steve pressed kisses along his jaw, down his throat. Everything else disappeared as his whole body focused on Steve’s hands, Steve’s lips, Steve’s breath on his skin.

Later, in the middle of the night, Bucky woke to Steve pressing delicate butterfly kisses against the nape of his neck, Steve’s strong artist’s fingers playing with his nipples. Involuntarily, Bucky shivered with pleasure, his hips jerking back towards Steve, his chest towards Steve’s questing fingers.

Bucky felt more than heard Steve’s huff of satisfaction. Letting it all go, he gave himself over to Steve, trusting Steve’s judgment.

They did this sometimes, when it got bad. Pleased each other on a six-hour schedule, just like some people took ibuprofen. Modern medicine made wonderful drugs. For others.

Steve and Bucky had slightly different versions of the serum--Bucky scarred, Steve didn’t--but neither of them could take much advantage of the vast modern pharmacopeia. Bruce had figured out that THC often helped Bucky, but Steve required unsustainably high doses.

As they’d healed, they’d come to realize that they both had healthy libidos, time, and emotional space to indulge. When they could, they took advantage of their bodies’ natural chemistry, using frequent, slow bouts of athletic sex to maintain a hazy afterglow for days at a time. The longer the session, the more intense the endorphins and other chemicals, and the longer they’d feel good.

It didn’t always work, of course. Sometimes, Steve got called out on a mission or one of them was in a place where they didn’t want to be touched. Or it was perfunctory, not intense enough to release anything to make them feel good for hours.

Tonight, Bucky felt good.
After another round in the cool, gray light of dawn, Bucky felt well enough to clamber out of bed, his limbs slow and heavy. Steve was already in the bathroom, humming as he set out towels and a washcloth. Bucky knew that Steve wouldn’t judge if he spent another day in bed, but he wanted a shower, too.

Steam billowed out of the glass-walled shower as Bucky watched Steve shed his bathrobe.

Some things about growing up in a tenement apartment with a shared bathroom had been impossible for Steve to shake, and leaving the safety of their bed without something on his body had been one of those things. Bucky had always been less body-shy than Steve, and Hydra had ground away whatever inhibitions he’d once had, so Bucky enjoyed teasing Steve about his old-man taste in bathrobes.

As someone who thought privacy was an amusing esoteric concept, Tony had of course caught Bucky teasing Steve. Fond as Tony was of his own silk smoking jackets and paisley bathrobes, he’d thought Steve was hilarious in his striped cotton flannel.

Ha fucking ha. Bucky knew that to Steve, the idea of a new, ankle-length dressing gown had been an almost unimaginable luxury. Clothing had been terribly expensive when they were children, and Steve had owned only two sets of clothes—his everyday wear, and his Sunday best. When he’d come home, he’d taken off his regular clothes and changed into grubbies. Back then, Steve had been so tiny that his grubbies had usually been one of Bucky’s old shirts, complete with stains and tears in fabric too worn and thin to mend. If Bucky had added a strategically placed tear or two, he would never admit it.

Today’s bathrobe was a blue silk charmeuse that matched Steve’s eyes and contrasted beautifully with his alabaster skin. Bucky suspected that Pepper was behind this random acquisition—it had shown up at their door one day, as gifts tended to do. Steve couldn’t protest and insist that someone take it back if he didn’t know who’d given it to him.

Steve heard him, of course, and blushed to be caught naked in their en suite. Bucky smiled, unashamedly bare himself.

“Hey. Thought I’d come join you.”

“Sure, Buck. You need a washcloth?”

In answer, Bucky opened the sliding closet door, reaching for the white terrycloth square. “Got one.”

Ever the gentleman, Steve had waited until Bucky was ready before stepping into the shower. One of Stark’s more practical tangents had been to insist that no one was running out of hot water in the Tower, insisting on instant hot water heaters in every bathroom. Bucky gloried in the endless fall of warm water, taking a hot bath or shower every day.

Today, Bucky followed Steve into the over-sized shower, backing under the soft patter of the rainfall-style shower head. He still couldn’t tolerate water spraying in his face, but this soft warm rain running down his face was OK. Eyes closed, he reached for the bar of Ivory soap, one thing that had remained unchanged all these years.

“Here, Buck.”

Feeling Steve’s hand slide the soap into his questing hand, Bucky smiled. “Thanks.”

In answer, Steve trailed a hand up Bucky’s arm. “Feeling OK?”
“Mmm-hmm.”

His thoughts moved like syrup, slow and sweet. Here, today, it was just the two of them. Bucky carefully focused on soaping up his washcloth, the soap slick in the metal of his left hand. He could hear Steve efficiently scrubbing down.

“You know, you’re allowed to take longer than two minutes in the shower now.”

A huff of quiet laughter was his only response. Awkwardly, he wiped his wrist across his face, clearing off the water so he could see. Steve stood before him, all pink and glistening, his eyes mischievous. Bucky almost invited him back to bed, knowing Steve would follow him anywhere.

Instead, he sighed. “You’re ready to face the world?”

Steve nodded, eyes never leaving Bucky’s hands. Bucky replaced the bar of soap on the ledge and decided to give Steve the show he was so clearly asking for.

As Steve made the little half-circle motion to turn off the shower, Bucky’s brain was still not quite in gear. While his therapist might frown on this lazy semi-dissociation, Bucky liked his brain that way. Hydra had trained his autonomic nervous system so well that Bucky had little power over his reflexive deadliness. When he was easy and sleepy like this, he didn’t worry about accidentally hurting someone.

Bucky blinked slowly, watching Steve reach for one of the cotton terrycloth towels on the nearby heated towel rack. While they’d been gifted with soft, plush towels, those had been consigned to the linen closet. Both he and Steve agreed that towels shouldn’t be so soft that they rubbed water around instead of off. One afternoon, Steve had discreetly stepped out and returned with plain, white cotton towels from a discount store.

Roughly toweling off his hair, Steve turned and studied Bucky, making a looping motion with his index finger. Obediently, Bucky turned around, letting Steve inspect his back, and the seam where the arm met his shoulder. Heedless of the water dripping from Bucky’s hair, Steve kissed the seam, just as he did every time they showered together. Then, Steve dried Bucky’s back and arms, just as careful with the metal arm as the flesh one.

Bucky peeked back over his shoulder as Steve quickly finished drying himself before turning back to Bucky. He met Bucky’s eyes and grinned in the brightly lit bathroom.

“Flip.”

Laughing softly, Bucky obeyed. Bowing to Steve, he flipped his long hair over his head. After much practice, Steve had figured out how to wrap Bucky’s hair in a towel, twisting it, and then tucking the ends of the towel under at the nape of his neck with a delicate pat and a kiss. Standing, Bucky wiggled a little, the weight of the towel odd on his head.

Carefully, he didn’t watch himself in a mirror. Instead, he moved to the bedroom and stared at Steve, who was busy getting dressed in soft knit boxers and rip-stop running pants. Fabrics were soft now, and both he and Steve took full advantage. All their senses were acute, including touch—neither of them were comfortable in itchy, inflexible fabrics.

“Going out?”

Steve flicked blue eyes towards him as he pulled a gray running tee over his head.
“Yeah. I’m missing my usual route.”

In the winter, Steve ran in the false dawn, a straight shot down to Central Park, a few laps around, and then a slow jog back. This close to the summer solstice, dawn had come before five a.m. today. Bucky looked past Steve to the brilliant rays peeking around the metal blinds, sheers, and drapes.

Nodding, he suppressed his deep discomfort with Steve being out of the Tower and among the civilian population on a predictable route. It was quiet in their rooms, but Bucky could imagine the noise of the paparazzi if they decided Steve was that morning’s story.

“Wear your watch?”

“Sure, Buck.”

Stark had designed a smart watch that could track Steve anywhere on the face of the Earth. Once on, a setting required Jarvis to remove it. As a concession to Bucky’s paranoia (although, was it paranoia if they really were out to get you?), Steve had agreed to enable the setting when he went on his morning runs.

Digging out a pair of running socks from their dresser, Steve sat down on the side of the bed. Quickly, Bucky dragged on his own knit boxers and a pair loose fleece pants. They would be warm in the cool air on top of the Tower. A long-sleeve tee, and Bucky was ready to leave the bedroom, following Steve’s lead.

“I’ll be back soon, Buck. We’ll have breakfast.”

Steve’s voice was quiet, his eyes fond as he watched Bucky’s reaction.

Bucky nodded, easing his feet into fleece-lined slippers. No reason not to be comfortable up there. He tipped his head to the side and the towel fell off.

Steve grimaced and picked up the damp towel. “Let me hang this up to dry.”

Bucky quirked a tiny grin and watched the flex of Steve’s shoulders as he draped the towel over the rack in the bathroom. Steve’s body had changed, but Bucky had no objections to enjoying this shape.

Turning, Steve caught Bucky watching and offered a smug smile. “Like what you see?”

“You’ve always been gorgeous.”

Even with the sieve of his long-term memory, Bucky knew this to be true. He’d regained enough wisps of memory to picture a tiny, fierce Steve with high cheekbones and a full, lush mouth.

Predictably, Steve blushed. He could take a compliment about his current form—it had been designed to be perfect, after all—but when Bucky praised more than his current body, Steve was embarrassed every time.

Bucky loved it, loved the pink flush staining his pale golden skin, loved that Steve cared what he thought.

Ducking his head, Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “Ah, what are you going to do?”

“Might see if Loki is up. We’re supposed to be talking about that new book.”
Steve nodded. “OK. Please have something more than coffee.”

Shrugging as he stood, Bucky turned to make the bed. He hated to eat when his stomach hurt, hated the nausea that food brought in the morning.

“Buck.” Steve’s voice was stern. “Toast? There’s a little of Tasha’s apple butter left.”

Reluctantly, Bucky nodded. Last autumn, Tasha experimented with a slow cooker to make a dark, deeply flavored apple butter. Not too sweet, it was tolerable in the mornings.

“Thank you.”

And oh, that hurt, that Steve needed to thank him for eating. Bucky swallowed hard and started to move past Steve, but an open hand barred the way.

“Love you.”

Bucky took the hand and allowed himself to be wrapped up in Steve, listening to their hearts beat, feeling the warmth of Steve’s breath on his neck. Pressing his face into Steve’s skin, he inhaled deeply, the almond scent of their body wash nearly obscuring Steve’s own innate scent—something that hadn’t changed, after all this time. For a second, he sagged in Steve’s arms.

Forcing himself to stand straight, Bucky dropped a kiss quick on Steve’s lips. “You’d better get going. You’re wasting daylight.”

Eyes crinkling in amusement, Steve nodded. “Yes, dear.”

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By the time the door shut behind Steve, Bucky’s afterglow was wearing off. His eyelids felt heavy, and the back of his neck prickled with unease as Steve’s heartbeat cut off abruptly. Intellectually, he knew that Steve would be fine, that this would be good for Steve, that Steve needed this time, this exercise, and yet ...

A headache loomed behind his eyes like storm clouds in the distance, and Bucky tossed back the dregs of his coffee with a shudder.

Fuck it.

"Jarvis?"

"Yes, Mr. Barnes."

"Is Loki awake?"

"Yes, Mr. Barnes."

"Tell him to meet me on the roof."

Bucky’s hands ached for his sniper rifle, a phantom reflex borne of the need to watch Steve’s back. He shook his head roughly, the loose strands draping over his face. Steve would be fine, dammit.

Decided, Bucky snagged Steve’s gray Army hoodie, a gift from Phil, and his leather jacket, a gift from Natasha. As always, he was grateful for the care they’d taken of Steve when he hadn’t been able to. And if he ached for a little of that regard too, well then the hoodie was warm.
As the elevator door slid open on the penthouse floor, Bucky stepped into the wide-open space and froze. Wrapped in a floor-length bronze damask silk robe, Pepper stood in front of the floor to ceiling windows. Her long strawberry-blonde hair had been tucked into a messy French twist, held fast with a gold clip, a queen interrupted at her toilette. Long, elegant fingers wrapped around a steaming mug.

The crystalline morning sunlight showed her age and Bucky realized that in many ways, she was older than he. Like a ruler surveying her kingdom, Pepper looked over the sun-gilded city with a serene expression.

"Hard to watch them go, isn't it?"

Her voice was gentle, soft in the silence of the penthouse. All at once, Bucky took a shuddering breath and tears pricked behind his eyes. Someone else understood.

Voice rough, he managed, "Yeah. I, uh, was going to keep an eye out."

Pepper made a complicated series of motions with her free hand, and one of the tall panels of glass abruptly went black, and then steadied with a near life-size streaming video of Steve running down the sidewalks of Park Avenue, dodging pedestrians with aplomb. For their part, the pedestrians gave Steve his privacy, studiously ignoring the running man.

"Oh."

Bucky was stunned with the realization that Pepper must spend hours watching Stark from here. Inhaling sharply, he began, "Thank you ..."

Tutting, Pepper turned, sympathy in her blue eyes. "No need to thank me. Tea?"

Confused, he nodded, unable to keep his eyes off Steve but registering her calm, confident movement in the kitchen. He heard the click of an electric kettle, the burble of boiling water in a teapot, the hollow sound of the water being drained. The light clink of a cube of tea, the muted swish of the hot water over the *zavarka*. The clink of Russian-style tea glasses, the tinkle of a spoon, the more solid thunk of a pot of jam.

Even so, Bucky was surprised when Pepper reappeared with a tea tray, complete with cloth napkins and *pryaniki*. A sudden lump in his throat made it hard to swallow. Trust Pepper to keep tea and cookies around for him. With her usual competency, she probably stashed a sweet for everyone in the over-sized kitchen.

"Thanks."

Pepper nodded, swirling the cherry jam into her own fresh cup of Russian-style tea, strong and dark. Setting the tiny silver spoon down on her saucer, she delicately plucked one of the little honey-spice cookies from the basket and nibbled.

"Is it cold in here?"

The tone was casual, as if she were asking about nothing more pressing than the clouds in the sky, but Bucky blushed and set down his tea before shedding the leather jacket and hoodie. Steve’s scent wafted up from the fabric. Bucky’s gaze was still drawn to Steve's smile as he pumped his arms and swung around a corner of Central Park, nodding to Hernandez.

Yes, perhaps Bucky had run background checks on all the regulars on Steve's route. Hernandez was an early riser, usually doing three miles before returning to the tiny apartment she shared with
her girlfriend, an associate professor at Columbia.

Clearing his throat, Bucky made an attempt at polite conversation. "I hope I didn't disturb you."

Pepper smiled and shook her head. "When Jarvis let me know that Steve was going for a run this morning, I thought you might want to come keep an eye on him. Will Loki be joining us?"

Bucky blinked. "Is that OK?"

"Perfectly fine. Help me make sure he eats a cookie?"

That last was said with a conspiratorial grin, and Bucky nodded back, helpless in the face of such goodwill towards their latest acquisition.

The silence stretched on, peaceful in the glory that was the sunrise over New York.

Jarvis beeped, the subtle alert for the more easily disturbed Avengers, and with a quiet swoosh the elevator discharged Loki. As usual, Loki was dressed in black from head to toe. Today it was a loose black button-up shirt, the top button undone to reveal smooth white skin. Snug knit pants led down to soft black slippers that were not unlike ballet shoes.

Bucky had a pair of those shoes himself. Evidently, Jarvis issued them to all the inhabitants of the Tower.

Pepper stood with a wide smile, gesturing towards the sofa and Bucky. "Loki! So glad you're here. Come, sit. Tea?"

Visibly taken aback, Loki's face showed a rapid play of emotions. Surprise, a tinge of fear, worry. With an inner sigh, Bucky set down his tea.

"Sit down, Loki. Pepper won't hurt you." Impulsively, he added, "I promise to keep you safe."

He'd meant it as a kind of snark, but as he'd half-expected, Loki's eyes widened and he bowed deeply. "My thanks, sir."

With an inner groan, Bucky realized that Loki had taken his promise in an entirely different way than he'd intended. The internecine tangles of Loki's mind were often unclear to the rest of the original permanent inhabitants of the Tower.

While Pepper stifled her amusement in the quiet motions of making tea, Bucky turned to Loki, carefully not staring at Steve on his second loop around Central Park.

Picking up a cookie, he held it out towards Loki. "Here, eat this."

As if on autopilot, Loki took the cookie and began nibbling, watching Bucky with dark, suspicious eyes. Pepper glanced at Loki as she handed him a cup and saucer, but his attention was focused on Bucky, who had taken another cookie for himself. With his innate decorum, Loki easily balanced the cup, saucer, teaspoon, and cookie.

After another sip of his tea, Bucky began, "So, have you finished the book yet?"

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After Steve had finished his run, Bucky had wrapped up his conversation with Loki, heading down to meet Steve back in their quarters. Idly, he mused that Loki really was very sharp, if somewhat
cynical. Bucky supposed that nearly a thousand years at court would do that to someone.

Steam billowed out of the bathroom as Bucky eased into their quiet, brightly lit bedroom. While they nearly always kept the blinds, sheers, and drapes closed, once they were awake Jarvis set the LED bulbs to mimic the daylight outside. It was a glorious day, a cloudless blue vault arching above the city, tipping into indigo at the highest point.

“You eat?”

Bucky sighed. “I had tea and cookies.”

Steve appeared in the doorway to their bedroom, clad only in a towel. “I have a new recipe I want to try. Blini, but waffles.”

Shrugging, Bucky sat on the bed and watched Steve dress. This was one of his favorite morning activities. He never tired of being able to hear, see, touch, smell, and taste his beloved.

When he was dressed, Steve cocked his head and looked at the ceiling. “Jarvis, what is everyone doing for breakfast?”

“No one has made any plans. Mr. Coulson is on mandatory leave today.”

Bucky snickered. Phil had a tendency to overwork himself, and while Tasha disapproved, she and Clint were just as bad. Jarvis took good care of his squishy humans, though, and had instituted a mandatory leave after every so many hours of overtime. What Bucky never voiced was the suspicion that Jarvis would indulge in some more proactive efforts to keep them well rested. The occasional power outage in a rogue scientist’s lab, a phone call that ended up at Reed Richard’s building instead of the Tower, that sort of thing.

No, Bucky wasn’t going to complain that someone else was trying to keep them all safe.

“If I may, sir, Ms. Potts is already awake. May I tell her that you’re supplying breakfast, today?”

This was a long-running joke between Steve and Pepper. She checked on each of them, every day, and had often invited Steve to breakfast. For months, Steve had declined, afraid that she wouldn’t have enough food at the breakfast table. When she’d figured it out, she had invariably made sure to emphasize that she’d supply plenty of breakfast—and Steve had begun meeting up with her after their separate workouts. Bucky was quietly pleased to see Steve making a friend, one he could talk art with.

With a quiet laugh, Steve agreed. “Sure. Let her know that I’m trying a new recipe today.”

Turning to Bucky, he offered, “May I braid your hair?”

An involuntary shiver of delight ran down Bucky’s back, and he looked down, away from Steve’s eager face. A little nod was all he could allow himself.

Anything too pleasurable and wholly focused on him could be frightening for Bucky without the focus of Steve’s warm, strong hands on his body. They were still negotiating this. Hair brushing was one thing, quick and often initiated by Bucky himself to tease Steve. But braiding took more time, allowed Bucky’s nerves to build.

Bucky stared at the floor until Steve came back from the bathroom with the special brush, one designed for curly, thick hair. Swinging into place behind him, Steve pulled Bucky back against his chest, the heat of his supersoldier body like a balm to the persistent ache in Bucky’s shoulder.
“OK?”

Bucky nodded again, never taking his eyes off the floor. Gently, Steve brushed his hair back from his face, pulling the top into a soft ponytail before quickly braiding the loose hair on either side of his face. It wasn’t particularly fancy, but Bucky still softened, his whole body going slack against Steve.

Tying off the second braid, Steve kissed the arch of his neck. “Good?”

Wiggling in delight, Bucky laughed. “Yeah, good.”

In his peripheral vision, Steve held out the tiny knitting needles Tasha had given Bucky for his birthday. “Want these today?”

Yes, yes he did. He always felt more secure with weapons on his person. “Mm-hmm.”

Carefully, Bucky tucked each needle into a braid, one on either side. Like this, they looked decorative, as if they were merely silver accents in his hair.

Downstairs in the common room kitchen, Steve pulled a giant mixing bowl out of the refrigerator and Bucky’s eyebrows rose. Steve had planned this, if they were having yeast waffles. Those required prepping the night before, the yeast bubbling away overnight.

Steve caught Bucky looking at him and shrugged. “Couldn’t sleep.”

Bucky frowned. Steve had been up and down with him all night. This was his fault.

Setting the bowl on the counter, Steve backed Bucky up against the counter. Steve was one of the very few people in this world confident enough to back Bucky up anywhere.

Nuzzling into Bucky’s neck, Steve muttered, “Don’t even start. I wanted to try this recipe.”

A long, long inhale, and then Bucky sighed, a slow release of tension as his hands wandered to Steve’s waist. “Fine.”

“Oh, boys, someone promised breakfast.”

Natasha’s voice held barely concealed laughter, and Bucky leaned out from behind Steve’s bulk to glare at her. Behind her, sunshine slid across the Persian rug, the azure sky studded with puffy cumulus clouds.

Phil stopped in the doorway, eyeing the scene through his thick black glasses, but seemingly decided that nothing urgent needed his attention and settled into the sofa. Clint followed at his heels, entirely focused on the giant mug of black coffee in his hand.

Rolling her eyes, not the least bit intimidated by Bucky’s murder face, Natasha sauntered into the kitchen. “Need help?”

Turning around, one hand still on Bucky, Steve offered, “Fruit?”

Both Steve and Bucky were still overwhelmed by the wide variety of fruits and vegetables available all year round, so they generally left that up to someone who had opinions about what was best.
“Hmm.” Natasha tapped a blood-red nail on her chin. “Jarvis, do we have California cherries?”

“An excellent choice,” praised Jarvis. “They’re only available for six weeks each year, and I ordered a shipment flown in yesterday.”

Eyes crinkled in fondness, Natasha raised an eyebrow. “Will those go with … what are we having, anyway?”

“Buckwheat waffles,” answered Steve. “Like blini, but not.”

Natasha’s eyes widened slightly, and she stared at Bucky. Bucky shook his head minutely. No, he didn’t know either.

“Sounds good, Steve. I’ll just be over here pitting cherries.” Turning, she called out, “Clint! Come help me with the fruit for breakfast.”

Lucky ran into the kitchen, nails sliding on the smooth floor, and Natasha cracked up. “Really, Clint? This dog answers to your name?”

Following behind, coffee still in his hand, Clint rubbed one callused hand over his sleepy features. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ve got him trained to come whenever you call. Kinda like me.”

Steve just shook his head, and turned to the mixing bowl, stirring it. Bucky’s eyes caught on his forearms, and he had to force himself to offer, “Need any help?”

“Baking soda? And I wouldn’t mind if you got out the waffle maker.”

As he spoke, Steve retrieved a small bowl filled with egg whites from the refrigerator and began beating them. Anyone else would just use a mixer, but not Steve.

Nodding, Bucky pulled the green can of baking soda down from the cabinet, and set it on the counter. Then, he headed into the walk-in pantry in search of the waffle iron. They didn’t make waffles very often, but Tony had come up with a waffle iron that made twenty heart-shaped waffles at a time. As he found it in the back corner, Bucky heard Pepper and Tony come in.

“Pepper, my love, waffles! Capsicle is making waffles!”

At the door to the kitchen, Bucky stopped and looked around the room at his friends.

Clint was slumped over his coffee mug, his grotty tee partially covered by a zip-up hoodie he’d no doubt stolen from Phil. Meanwhile, Tasha was efficiently pitting dark red sweet cherries with a razor sharp sheepsfoot paring knife.

In front of the refrigerator, a jeans and tee clad Pepper was peering into the meat keeper. “Bacon, anybody?”

“Ooh, I like bacon,” replied Tony, already hunting down the wire mesh insert for the cooking sheet. His dark hair was ruffled, and his jeans were stained with oil.

“Seconded,” called Phil from the living room, back-lit by the golden sunshine as he read on a tablet and sipped his own mug of coffee. Jarvis had no doubt ensured it was a novel.

Nearby, Loki lay on the floor in the sunshine, for all the world napping like a cat.

Bruce shuffled in, his bathrobe hanging open over a button-up shirt and fleece pants, with his silver
Laughing, Steve was folding the whipped egg whites into the batter as the sun glinted off his golden hair.

“Fine. Fine. Waffles and bacon and fruit for everyone.”

Bucky smiled. Life was good.

As breakfast ended, Bucky was distracted by the way the warm spring sunshine spilled in through the floor to ceiling windows in the living area. It bounced off the shiny hardwood floors and filled the room with light.

To his left, Steve’s hair glinted in the sun as he tilted his head to listen to Tony’s passionate rant about using LED lights for WiFi. Something about switching them on and off. Bucky didn’t care enough to follow it, not this morning. Instead, he was happy to admire that cute little furrow between Steve’s brows.

To Bucky’s right, Loki sat still inhaling syrup-drenched waffles and piles of red-gold cherries. Without making an issue of it, Bucky had simply piled food on a plate and set it in front of Loki with orders to eat until he was full. When Loki finished a pile, Bucky would ‘absentmindedly’ add food to his plate. Loki even ate the salt and pepper dusted tomatoes that Steve and Tony so relished for breakfast.

Peggy’s company was almost palpable when they had tomatoes for breakfast, and Bucky caught a glimpse of her dark curls in his mind’s eye, imperiously gesturing at a plate of tomatoes on a tin plate in a mess tent. Young Peggy faded, to be replaced by the older woman that Tony had so adored as his honorary aunt, the one that Steve spoke of with tears in his eyes.

Bucky shook his head and took a deep breath, trying to stay present at breakfast. On Loki’s other side, Bruce had caught on to Bucky’s strategy with Loki, and was lingering over his meal, alternating sips of herbal tea with little bites of the waffles while he traded science quips with Tony. His teetering stack of papers threatened to overbalance onto the sticky remains of his breakfast.

At the foot of the table, Clint was half in Phil’s lap as they finished the last bites of a stack of crisp, golden waffles. Phil apparently preferred butter and honey on his waffles, and Clint would eat whatever Phil put on a plate. Leaning against Phil’s shoulder, Clint grinned mischievously. “Tony, are you done with those waffles?”

Joining his index finger and thumb together, Tony tapped them against his thumb and shook his head as he laughed. “Don’t even think about, Legolas!”

On Steve’s left, opposite Bucky, Pepper rolled her eyes and smirked, catching Bucky’s eye. They both knew that it was Clint’s way of prodding Tony to eat, just as occasionally sharing a plate with Phil gave Clint an excuse to make sure his husband was eating properly.

Slapping his open palm to his chest, Tony staked his claim. “My waffle!”

Then he stabbed the last bite with his fork, making sure Clint couldn’t snatch it off his plate. Pepper laughed quietly at Tony’s antics as she sipped her coffee.

On Tony’s other side, Jane curled into Thor, half-asleep. She’d been up all night at the Greenbank Observatory and Thor had flown her home for breakfast. Her long brown hair was tousled and
there were dark circles under her eyes. Next to her, Thor looked chipper. He’d easily put away as many waffles as Steve, even one-handed. His other arm had been curled protectively around Jane, who’d merely sipped tea this morning.

Jarvis blinked discreetly, catching Bucky’s eye. It was Pepper’s code, and he caught her attention as she worked on her tablet, shoving her plate aside.

Nodding in acknowledgement, she set the tablet on the table and enabled the hologram mode. Jarvis began filling air with a Gantt chart, and Phil looked up.

“Everything in order for next week?”

“Mm,” replied Pepper absently, delicate fingers swiping through the layers of detail.

Confused, Bucky quietly texted Tasha. What happens next week?

Annual beach trip for Clint’s birthday. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. Don’t say anything to Clint about his birthday.

Frowning, Bucky showed his phone to Steve, who nodded and leaned into his side, subvocalizing so the others didn’t hear. “We stayed home last year, but we can go if you want.”

Last spring, Bucky hadn’t been in any condition to travel. Even now, he didn’t have much coherent memory, just a blur of panic attacks and nightmares.

This spring, a trip to the beach sounded nice. Warm.

Steve glanced his way, his face brimming with suppressed emotion. Something squeezed, hard, in Bucky’s chest, and he thought, “I want to remember this for the rest of my life. Steve’s smile, this warm, sunny room, our friends. Today, I want to keep.”

As the enormous piles of waffles and bacon were reduced to crumbs and the sweet red cherries became nothing but stains on fingers and napkins, they began to help clean up. Well, some of them.

Tony was busy arguing with Jarvis about repulsor designs, and Pepper was distracted, almost putting the dirty dishes in the dishwasher with the clean dishes.

“Give me that,” intercepted Tasha, taking the stack of dirty plates from Pepper. “You go.”

Pepper didn’t argue, just offered a smile and a nod of thanks before moving to her desk in the common room and booting up layers of holograms.

Sighing, Tasha shook her head and turned to the dishwasher. Beside Bucky, Clint nodded to Pepper. “She’s got a hell of a lot to wrap up before we leave on Sunday afternoon.”

“Which beach?” asked Bucky, curious.

As he tilted the cookie sheet to drain the bacon grease, Clint grinned wide. “Private beach. Stark owns an island in the Caribbean. You’ll fucking love it. White sand, warm water, no damn photographers.”

Bucky nodded as he wiped down the table. Under it, one of Stark’s Not-A-Roombas whirred in a circle, hunting for dirt.

Islands were secure. Limited access. Bucky felt tension ease in his back at the thought that this trip
might actually be fun. He couldn’t remember ever being on a Caribbean island. A faint sense-memory flickered, the scent of the ocean. Bucky blinked and it faded, leaving the memory of heat on his shoulders.


He looked up from the table to find that almost everyone had finished their self-appointed tasks. Stark and Banner were bent over the papers now spread out on the coffee table, while Steve finished drying the dishes. Thor and Jane had disappeared back to their quarters, no doubt so Jane could sleep.

Dishes dealt with, Jarvis blinked green and Tasha picked up her knitting bag, making her way to the sofa to keep Phil company. Breakfast had been early this morning, a rare day when Tony and Bruce had still been awake when the early risers awoke. Phil and Tasha had a few precious moments to share with an unwillingly awake Clint before the day’s routines unspooled in front of them, meetings and workouts and sparring practice.

Strong arms slipped around him and Bucky leaned back against Steve’s broad chest, allowing his body to relax. All the metal bolted onto his body didn’t allow him to slump, but Steve was tough enough to take the weight, to give Bucky a strong foundation. Safe here with their team, they could touch and have and hold, and Bucky was suddenly tearfully grateful to be alive, here, with Steve.

Protected in Steve’s arms, Bucky thought about picking up his own knitting. The cables for Steve’s sweater had proven to be complex, and at the rate he was going, it’d be cold again by the time he finished. If Bucky asked, Steve would happily lay with him in the common room, reading his latest novel and letting Bucky occupy himself with knitting.

But Bucky wanted to give Clint a birthday present. Something subtle, because it appeared that Clint didn’t celebrate his birthday, as such. If Pepper had to make the trip all about her instead of Clint, then Bucky definitely shouldn’t wrap anything.

“Mmm?” Steve’s voice was peaceful and Bucky basked in the calm for a moment.

“What’s the packing allowance for the trip?”

Across the room, Tasha quirked a grin, eyes focused on her needles. Eyes narrowed, Bucky analyzed the pattern, realizing that Tasha was amusing herself with knitted codes again. Ната́лья Романовна Колсо́на и Барто́на. He barely restrained a snort at the knitting equivalent of doodling hearts in the margins of notebooks.

“Um, I think there’s plenty of room for whatever you want to bring, Buck.”

Steve caught Phil’s attention. “We’re taking the QuinJet, right?”

Nodding, Phil sipped his coffee and resumed watching Tasha knit.

Sighing, Bucky leaned back against Steve. Clint had an impressive sweet tooth. Dessert maybe? Something that would taste better after being refrigerated for the trip. Bucky closed his eyes, visualizing possibilities. Not ice cream, it would melt. Cookies would get stale—most cake would, too. Cake. Cheesecake, a real old-fashioned New York style cheesecake, the kind that had been too rich for their pockets when they’d been young.

Straightening, Bucky turned and pressed a kiss to Steve’s cheek with a smile. “I’m going to go do some baking.”
Upstairs, Bucky lined the bottom of a spring form pan with aluminum foil. Bucky approved of this particular modern invention. When he’d been a boy, waxed cloths had been used for cold storage, but this idea of easy cleaning by recycling aluminum was one of those modern inventions that he and Steve quietly marveled at.

“Jarvis, we have graham crackers, right?”

“Yes, Mr. Barnes. Mr. Barton was teaching Prince Thor about s’mores last night.”

Bucky grinned. “I bet that was a mess.”

“As you say.” Jarvis’s voice was dry and bland as powdered milk.

The dumbwaiter slid open with a package of graham crackers, already conveniently bagged in plastic. Bucky crushed them up and added them to the bottom of the pan, along with some melted, salted butter. Carefully, he pushed all the damp mixture into the bottom of pan.

While Jarvis preheated the oven, Bucky combined cream cheese, goat cheese, lemon juice, vanilla, and orange flower water in the stand mixer. Initially, he’d been dubious about the goat cheese, but like the cookbook had promised, it wasn’t an obvious flavor in the final product. The orange flower water had been a new ingredient for him, reminiscent of a cookie he’d had somewhere, sometime. The only thing he’d been able to remember was the flavor in his mouth—but it was a good flavor. It smelled good, like the cookie had tasted.

“Music, Jarvis?”

“Certainly. Shall I pull up anything in particular?”

“Surprise me. Make it cheerful.”

Jarvis beeped, and Bucky looked up to see Steve at the door. After breakfast, Steve had stayed behind to touch base with Tony about mission coverage while they were away at the beach. Sunshine streamed in, gilding Steve’s blond hair, and Bucky’s breath caught at his good fortune—Steve was all he needed in the world, and he was here with Bucky. As he recognized what Bucky was baking, Steve’s cerulean eyes crinkled with pleasure.

“Cheesecake?”

Bucky nodded. “Yup. Thought it would be good for Clint’s birthday dinner.”

“Mmhmm.”

Steve crossed the living room and snuggled up behind him, gently kissing the edge of his ear and making him shiver. Bucky closed his eyes and smiled, the pleasure rippling down his spine.

“I’m gonna mess this up, if you keep messin’ me up.”

Bucky’s voice was slightly hoarse, and Steve chuckled. “Fine. I picked up a set of Tombow brush pens I want to try out.”

Padding quietly to the living room, Steve found his art case and brought it back to the kitchen, easing himself onto one of the stools at the kitchen counter. Bucky watched out of the corner of his eye as Steve retrieved a handful of oddly shaped black pens and a new pad of drawing paper.
Good, Steve wasn’t trying to make do with copy paper anymore. After their meeting with Pepper’s lawyers and an explanation of “the percents,” Bucky had been determined to buy Steve the nicest art supplies possible.

Some pop music quietly filtered into the kitchen, and Bucky listened with half an ear. As the mixture blended, Bucky scraped down the bowl with the new silicon spatula. In honor of Pride month, Jarvis had bought a rainbow selection of silicon spatulas for the permanent resident kitchens—round edged spatulas for bowls, square edges for pans, scoops. Who’d known there were that many kinds?

Adding the granulated sugar from the giant glass container on the baking counter, Bucky watched it blend into the thick white mixture. Definitely not a low-fat, low-sugar treat, but he thought Clint would be willing to indulge in a slice. Tasha would probably give him a dirty look, though—she worried about her husbands’ diets.

Turning to the refrigerator, he pulled out the egg carton and heavy cream. This recipe called for a half-dozen eggs, whisked through a sieve and then added to the cheesecake mixture. Privately, Bucky thought this step was ridiculous, but the last time he’d made this recipe the cheesecake had been devoured in hours, so he wasn’t going to change it—it was difficult to add a liquid to the thick, tangy-sweet mixture.

Carefully, he warmed the heavy cream in a small saucepan on the stove top, just until it was hot, and then trickled it into the batter. He didn’t want to end up with scrambled eggs, so he kept mixing as he poured.

A swipe of his finger and Bucky nearly groaned with satisfaction. So good—honestly, he could just eat it like this, with a spoon. Maybe he’d made a batch for he and Steve to eat like this one day. Neither of them would eat the chilled cheesecake, after all. They’d lost their taste for cold desserts about 70 years back.

“Can I try?”

Steve sat and batted his eyelashes, and while Bucky knew Steve was being obnoxious on purpose, he was helpless to refuse him anything.

“Here, you can lick the spatula,” offered Bucky. The one in his hand one was blue, almost the shade of Steve’s eyes.

As Steve licked the spatula, Bucky turned back to the stand mixer. If he kept looking at Steve, this cheesecake would never get done. He grabbed the purple scraping spatula and began pouring the mixture into the prepared pan. As he poured, he delicately shook the pan to release any air bubbles. At 450 F, it would brown in about 20 minutes. He’d cool off the oven and then bake at 250 F for another half hour or so, until it registered 145 F in the middle. After it cooled on the counter, he’d refrigerate it and keep it chilled until Clint’s birthday dinner.

Secretly, Bucky admitted to himself that he was looking forward to a few days at the beach with Steve and the rest of the original permanent inhabitants of the Tower. While they might be taking the trip for Clint, he was childishly excited to do something as ordinary as going to the beach.

“Hey, Buck?”

“Yeah?”

Steve slid around until he was tucked up behind Bucky, his breath warm on Bucky’s skin.
“I love you.”
Loki Makes Garlic Lime Steak and Noodles for Dinner

Chapter Summary

In which a frightfully earnest Loki tries to earn the right to stay with the Avengers by cooking dinner.

Loki looked out the kitchen window. Startlingly blue ocean reflected the green-tinted light of the Midgardian sun, the salt-laden breeze pouring through the open wall behind him. When he’d first been here, he’d been a mere babe, too young to remember the beauty of this world.

Delicate skittering tangles of fear ran down his spine as he remembered the last time he’d been to Midgard, his mind broken and held by another. Closing his eyes, he practiced the exercises the viskr Banner had taught him: a count of four to breathe in, a count of four to breathe out. The cool marble of the counter under his fingertips, the hushed roar of the surf in his ears, the life of the ocean in his nose, the sweet taste of pineapple on his tongue.

With a grimace, he opened his eyes, focusing on the endless waves. Glancing down at the carved wooden bowl, he saw the golden rounds of pineapple in their syrupy juice. Pineapples amused him, as they were neither pine nor apple. They were excellent fruit, though, and he delicately speared another slice of yellow fruit from the plate in front of him.

As he ate, he gazed around the palatial room. While the princes of Midgard did not jostle for territory in the way they once had, they still competed for riches in a way that made innate sense to one who’d been raised in Asgard’s warrior culture. Loki understood that Stark’s private island was less a sign of territory than it was a signifier of his wealth. Stark could afford to buy privacy in a world where all were watched under a million electronic eyes, not just the all-seeing eyes of Heimdall.

Here in a house that Stark and his chatelaine, Pepper, visited perhaps twice a year, every item was immaculate. While not in the style of Asgard, Loki found it more comfortable, softer. A set of long, tan sofas clustered around a tall stone fireplace, angled to maximize views of the Caribbean Sea.

Out the kitchen window, Loki could see Clint tossing a disc to his dog, racing back and forth on the white sand in the warm light of the setting sun. Nearby, under the shade of an umbrella, the lady Natasha sat reading a book, enormous black sunglasses shielding her eyes from the sun. Next to her, Coulson reclined in a beach chair with one of Clint’s baseball caps pulled down over his eyes, napping in the heat.

Weeks had passed before Loki had realized Coulson was nearly as deadly as the rest of them, albeit weakened by Loki’s own hand. Even now, Loki could not bear to face Coulson, knowing that he’d killed him. Strangely, Coulson seemed to bear him no ill will. No, that was reserved for his beloved Natasha. Even Clint regarded him with less suspicion than Natasha. Loki though perhaps the mind link he and Clint had shared had somewhat to do with Clint’s relaxed attitude.

Loki was grateful for Clint’s forbearance, because Loki had no doubt that his had been the deciding voice in allowing Thor to stash Loki here, out of the way of the Allfather’s anger. Anyone could see how much Clint was beloved by his shield band. Even Loki’s presence on the island was dictated by Pepper’s annual gift to Clint—a trip to the beach for Clint’s birthday.
Blinking, he looked down at the bowl of fruit, at his trembling hands. *Seiðr* required a steady hand, and Loki had lost his nerve in the dungeons of Asgard. He’d lost so much, these past few years. His parents, his home, his standing at court, his father, his future…

“Loki?”

Startling at Banner’s voice, he almost fell off the barstool. A firm, gentle hand gripped his shoulder, steadying him, and Loki let himself lean into touch for a single instant before straightening his back and turning to face the person who held his parole. Keeping Banner happy was grave business. Loki did not want to return to Asgard, to eternity under the cruel eyes of his fellow prisoners and the callous indifference of the guards.

As Loki’s eyes focused in the cool, dim kitchen, he saw that Banner wore a blue batik shirt with coconut shell buttons. He himself wore one in green, at Stark’s insistence. In her usual considerate fashion, the chatelaine Pepper had prodded each of them to visit the tailor she retained within the Tower. Now Loki had a double handful of these lightweight cotton shirts, along with several pairs of loose linen pants, a set of snug, thin undershirts, and some swim shorts that Loki had been assured were of the latest Midgardian fashion.

Proud that his voice was steady, Loki said, “Sir?”

Dark eyes crinkled with avuncular affection, Bruce asked, “Did you want to go outside? You’re allowed, you know. There are no photographers.”

Quickly, Loki shook his head. The heat was beyond him, like fire on his fair skin. Even the cool ocean breezes irritated the burning sensation. He hadn’t realized that New York was so much cooler than other parts of Midgard. Truly, these people didn’t realize the opulence of their domain, to have so much biodiversity within easy reach. Long ago, Asgard had been reduced to a series of monocultures that kept them fed in comfort, but on a knife’s edge of risk.

Wrenching his mind to the here and now, Loki steeled his spine and offered, “I thought I could make dinner?”

Banner cocked his head and nodded, eyes narrowed as he thought.

Over the last few months, Loki had realized that the original permanent inhabitants of the Tower showed their affection with the labor of food. Rather than obtaining rare and precious *objet d’art*, or throwing public banquets, they delighted in the smallest gestures of affection. Determined to stay on Midgard, Loki bent himself to winning the good graces of Stark and his friends, and that meant learning to cook.

Fortunately, Banner was a kind, patient teacher. Shame, his familiar friend, had crept up on Loki when he had realized how ignorant he was of the most basic tasks in the kitchen. Coddled as he had been in the libraries of Asgard and Alfheim, Loki had never thought about cooking or food. It had always just been there. As unsettled as his stomach often was, he’d never thought about food as a source of joy. Instead, food had been something to be tolerated, at best.

Slowly, Loki had learned how to chop vegetables like a scullery maid, boil water without *seiðr*, and best of all, poach seafood in the boiling water. Jarvis had been kind enough to walk him through several dishes, helping him discern which would be easy on his delicate digestion, and keeping the ingredients for those in stock. Now that he had steady access to food that didn’t upset his stomach, he fell asleep more easily and stayed asleep longer. Of course, that meant nightmares, but Loki had long been familiar with those.
“What were you thinking of making?”

Banner’s voice was mild, his face thoughtful but not forbidding, and Loki’s tension eased. The first hurdle was behind him.

“In New York, I noticed that everyone liked sushi,” began Loki, cautiously.

Banner raised an eyebrow, but motioned him onward.

“I don’t think I can make sushi.” Loki paused at Banner’s nod, and then forged onward. “But, Jarvis gave me to understand that place is known for Gulf shrimp?”

“Well.”

“I thought perhaps I could make rice noodles with steak and shrimp?”

Now both eyebrows were up, and Banner nodded. “That seems within your skill set, Loki. Can I help?”

Swallowing nervously, Loki shook his head. “No, I want to do this myself.”

“Mm. Well, if you change your mind, I’ll be right over there. I want to catch up on my journals.”

Banner gestured to the living area, where Stark sat engrossed in a hologram of some mysterious machinery. Close by, Pepper was focused on her own tablet, quietly swiping through documents as she read. If he recalled correctly, everyone else was napping in the late afternoon heat.

“Thank you,” replied Loki, because it was a kind offer, more than he deserved.

Turning back to the kitchen, Loki took a deep breath. He could do this. Probably. In the tall cabinet, Loki found the plastic bag with the granules of brown sugar, the small glass bottle of fish sauce, and another glass bottle of hot chili oil. He set those aside while he carefully peeled a handful of garlic cloves, and then used the rasp to grate each clove into a pale, sticky mush in a small glass bowl.

The tips of his fingers were sore and stained with the aroma of garlic by the time he was done, but he was proud of himself. Cooking and potion making were not dissimilar.

Turning to the big dining room table, Loki spied the bright green limes in the big copper bowl, each one carefully cleaned and lightly waxed to stay fresh in the heat. Trying to make as little noise as possible, he retrieved three limes. It wouldn’t do to make Stark angry by distracting him from his work.

Back in the kitchen area, Loki used the rasp to zest a lime, the pretty green fading to a paler shade as he took off the outer layer. The sharp smell of citrus wafted up from the softened fruit. Then he pulled the big sharp kitchen knife off the wall, and took one of the white plastic cutting boards from where they lay in a neat stack on the counter. He needed a cup of lime juice, so he carefully quartered each lime and then squeezed out the juice into a cup.

By the time he finished, the acid of the juice had burned his fingers. Impulsively, he extended the tiniest tendril of his minute hoard of seiðr into the cup and nudged the molecular structure to be just a bit less acidic. Only enough so that it didn’t burn his delicate skin.

Biting his lip as he concentrated, Loki carefully mixed three-quarters of a cup of the brown sugar, half a cup of the fish sauce, the lime juice, the garlic paste, and a half a teaspoon of hot chili oil. As
he’d expected, the mixture remained stubbornly separated, so he reached for the rotating push mixer that Clint had off-handedly shown him one day. A few quick pushes and the mixture turned a light brown, almost soupy.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, he looked up to survey the room. Banner had his silver reading glasses perched on his beaky nose as he scanned one of his interminable journal articles, slouched in an armchair next to where Stark was busily assembling parts in his hologram. Muttering obscenities, Stark had a ferocious frown on his face, so Loki decided not to interrupt.

Instead, he took the massive flank steaks from the refrigerator and put them in a plastic bag, followed by a third of the mixture. Then he added a half-cup of olive oil to the mixture, replacing the liquid lost to the marinade. Another few pushes of the whisk, and he’d emulsified the mixture.

Smiling in genuine pleasure, Loki reached for a good-sized pot from the hanging rack over the center of the kitchen island. With a new appreciation for manual labor, he decided that if he ever had his own kitchen, he would store his pots in a cabinet where they wouldn’t require dusting. After he made the half-circle and up motion for hot water, Jarvis obligingly turned on the hot water so Loki could fill the pot to blanch the haricot vert.

With care, Loki set the pot with hot water on the stove top. He didn’t want to make a clanging noise and irritate his hosts. He’d noticed earlier that the lids were stored on the inside of the tall cabinet door, so he hunted for the clear glass lid that would match the pot. Behind him, he heard the soft whisper of cloth, but restrained himself from visibly tensing as he turned to see Bucky staring at him, Steve visible in the hallway behind him.

“Cooking?”

Bucky never used two words when one would do, saving them like treasure. As someone who’d been talked over and teased most of his life, Loki understood the impulse and replied in kind.

“Dinner.”

By this time, Steve had reached Bucky and held him in his embrace, arms locked around Bucky’s waist. Bucky leaned his head back a little, rubbing his cheek on Steve’s like two giant cats scenting each other. Steve slowly closed his eyes and opened them again, clearly still muzzy-headed from their nap.

“Need any help?”

Silently, Loki shook his head. This was his overture to them, and he didn’t want to spoil it by needing their help.

“We’ll just be in the living room if you change your mind. There’s no shame in needing help.”

Snorting, Bucky led Steve away. “As if you ever took anyone’s help, punk.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” protested Steve.

Ignoring their half-hearted argument, Loki decided that the water was boiling, and hot enough for the haricot vert. Retrieving the plastic-wrapped bundle from the refrigerator, he used a silver spider to put them in the hot water. He had no wish to burn himself with a splash from the water.

While the haricot vert cooked, he dug out three packages of the thin, white rice noodles, a generous container of long, thin dark green cucumbers, and a big bag of fresh cilantro and mint. At this point, the beans were cooked, so Loki took them out of the water the same way he’d put them
in, placing them in a white, ceramic bowl. The recipe he and Banner had practiced had the beans dunked in ice water at this point, but Loki knew that Steve and Bucky didn’t eat cold food, so he would just leave them warm.

Instead, he replaced the haricot vert with the rice noodles, which seemed to cook almost instantly. As Banner had taught him, he pulled one long, thin strand from the water and carefully cooled it before biting into it, confirming that the noodle was the right consistency. Using the big silver pasta fork, he pulled the rest of the noodles out, tossing them with a few sprinkles of sesame oil so that they wouldn’t stick together before he finished the meal.

Peeking at the living room area, Loki saw that everyone seemed to be absorbed in their respective tasks. Steve was reading to Bucky while Bucky knitted, and Loki’s mind was tugged along with the story, something about broken earth and obelisks.

Listening with half an ear, Loki cut the cucumbers into quarters, and halved the bowl of small, fresh tomatoes. He’d picked them earlier, venturing into the small kitchen garden behind the house, and they were still warm and fragrant, the prickly green scent of their leaves hanging on his clothes. Finally, the mint and cilantro filled the room with their sharp, heavy aroma as he chopped them into rough pieces.

After sprinkling the vegetables with toasted sesame oil and salt, Loki set them aside and took a deep breath. He hated cutting raw meat, hated handling it, hated everything about it. But everyone else needed the heme iron, and he would not shirk from his guest duty. Thor would have no cause to recall him to Asgard.

Steeling himself, he oiled and heated the oversized cast iron skillet until a droplet of water flicked on the surface sizzled and disappeared within seconds. Next, he used a pair of tongs and warily removed the first flank steak from the plastic bag and laid it on the skillet. Sound filled the air as it hissed and sizzled on the hot surface. Thankfully, Jarvis threw up a timer on the screen behind the stovetop. Three and a half minutes.

While the steak cooked, Loki filled a sauté pan with hot water, a quartered onion, a small bundle of parsley, a chopped celery stalk, a bay leaf, sliced lemons, and a cup of dry white wine. A local fisherman had delivered a cooler of seafood before dawn that morning, courtesy of Jarvis, and Loki had take the time to prep the vegetables for the poaching liquid after lunch.

He’d lost the thread of the story somewhere in there, but he picked it up again while he waited for the poaching liquid to come to a boil. Loki flipped the steak to the other side and reviewed the counter filled with food. Worried that he hadn’t prepared enough vegetables, he impulsively decided to cut up some yellow bell peppers to serve with the haricot vert, tomatoes, and cucumber.

Listening while he let the first steak rest on a cutting board and replaced it with the second enormous piece of meat, Loki decided that the story was, at its heart, ineffably sad. Many people liked sad stories, he knew, but secretly Loki preferred stories with happy endings, where there was no pain and suffering.

Making a conscious effort to stop eavesdropping, Loki turned to the refrigerator and pulled out the big bag of shrimp that the fisherman had left that morning. He was grateful that he didn’t have to chop off their heads, pull out their guts, and peel the shells off their tails. He had no wish to repeat that experience.

Instead, he used the spider to place the shrimp tails in the hot poaching liquid, the red streaks on the sides a high contrast against the pale white flesh. They began to curl up almost immediately, and this time, Loki had a bowl of ice water ready. He’d noticed that Bucky didn’t eat most seafood,
and Steve ate what Bucky ate, most days.

Finally, Loki pulled down a fresh knife and cutting board to slice the flank steak. Thin slices were preferred for this dish, and Loki found a distinct pleasure in making each slice like the one before it. When he finished, he had filled the big serving platter with uniformly sized dark pink pieces of beef.

Turning to the dining area, Banner caught his eye with a smile and a nod. Something clenched, hard in Loki’s chest as Stark caught the motion out of the corner of his eye and followed Banner’s gaze.

“Loki! You made dinner! Pepper, look, Loki made dinner!”

Her hair burnished copper in the late evening sun, Pepper looked up from her work, a gentle smile on her face.

“Good job, Loki. Thank you for helping out.”

Unsure of the appropriate protocol, Loki fell back on decades of ingrained training and offered Pepper a deep bow. “My lady.”

Behind him, Loki heard Clint mutter, “Down boy. No, Lucky, this isn’t for you.”

Turning, he saw that Clint, Coulson, and the lady Natasha had all stopped in the door way, surveying the food.

“Nice job, kiddo.”

Coulson’s voice was fond, as though he really was proud of Loki. In that moment, Loki felt tears prick his eyes. How hard he’d worked for every bit of approval from the Allfather. Yet here on Midgard, with a simple meal, he’d earned casual praise from someone who had every right to despise him.

When the lady Natasha offered him a single nod of appreciation, Loki felt a cold sweat break out of the back of his neck and heard a ringing in his ears.

“You OK there?”

Fearlessly, Bucky slung an arm around Loki’s shoulders and steered him to the table. “Let’s eat before the food gets cold.”

As Bucky seated Loki at the table, he realized that Bucky had placed him in the safest spot, with his back to the wall, Stark on one side, and Bucky on another. Gradually the table filled with food, dishes, and drinks as everyone helped set the table.

The last few rays of the evening sun shone on the table as the cool ocean breezes swirled through the house, mixing with the aroma from dinner. Noise filled the room as the group laughed and teased each other. Loki took a serving of noodles before passing the heaping dish down the table.

An unfamiliar feeling stole into his heart. Only after he topped the noodles with shrimp, herbs, cucumbers, and sauce did he recognize the emotion as happiness. Yes, he missed his mother terribly, and yes, he wanted his seiðr back, but right here, right now, he was happy.
Phil Bakes a Cake

2 3/4 cups of flour. Phil put both hands on the counter and peered down at the battered cookbook. Maybe he finally needed bifocals, because that seemed suspiciously like too little flour. For decades, he had hauled the heavy book from pillar to post. The thick pages were stained with cocoa powder, oil, and other mysteries lost to time. Industrial grade packing tape peeked over the top from his half-assed attempt to repair the cracked, torn cover of the spine.

This was Phil’s favorite baking cookbook, but he hadn’t made the “Elegant White Cake” recipe since before 2001. He’d been too busy. Now, living with Clint and Tasha at the Tower, he had time to indulge in some fussy baking. If he was going to make a red, white, and blue cake, his favorite yellow cake wouldn’t work. The white layer needed to be a crisp white, for better contrast. That meant separating out the yolks, and he wasn’t sure how his favorite recipe would do with just yolks. Better to use a recipe designed to egg whites.

For a moment, Phil toyed with the idea of making an angel food cake. Looking around the kitchen, his eyes fell on the immaculate white cabinet in which Tasha had chosen to store their cake pans. They didn’t own a traditional tube pan, and if he was honest with himself, Phil wasn’t up to wrestling an angel food cake out of a pan. No, a regular white cake was the order of the day.

Turning back to the recipe, Phil confirmed that it called for less than three cups of cake flour. Bending down to look under the baking counter, he felt his knees creak. Age was catching up with him. That, and a lifetime of using his body harder than most. After the incident on the Helicarrier, Phil had known that he would never fully recover, no matter how hard he worked with the physical therapists and occupational therapists.

While he had agonized over leaving SHIELD, Pepper’s job offer had come at a good time. Running the Tower, was easier than being a Level 7 at SHIELD, even with the multitude of resident employees and top-secret crèche, preschool, and boarding school. Despite the difficulties of the spring, Phil felt good about being part of the administrative team at the Tower. With Pepper’s blessing, he’d been able to bring Maria Hill and other of trusted people with him after Steve and Tasha had taken down Hydra inside SHIELD. In truth, he couldn’t ask for more than to spend these years after active duty with Tasha and Clint.

Eyes narrowed, he took in the multitude of flours in the dim cabinet. As a matter of course, Tasha stocked bread flour, all-purpose flour, and cake flour. From lazy afternoons with his nose buried in the latest issue of America’s Test Kitchen magazine, he knew cake flour was bleached to hold water and sugar and that it had a lower protein content than most flour, anywhere from 5% to 8%. For a recipe like this, Phil liked regular cake flour in the traditional slim red and white box.

Tilting his head sideways, he eyed the brown paper bags with Ziploc closures stored in the cool dark of the cabinet. Those were Tasha’s personal hoard of European-style bread flour just for her occasional foray into baguettes. So far she hadn’t perfected the recipe, but she liked to try on rainy afternoons.

His back cracked audibly as he stood with the box in his hand. In the living room, Tasha raised her gaze to him. She was tucked up against Clint, both of them resting in the filtered light from the brilliant afternoon sun. As usual, Clint was sprawled over the sofa, one leg on and one leg off. For all the world, he appeared to be napping with Tasha in his arms, but Phil wasn’t fooled. No doubt Clint was listening to Jarvis read one of those interminable mathematics journal articles.

With the comfort of the long familiar, he quirked a half-grin at Tasha. Dipping her chin, she went
back to her knitting. This week it was brilliantly colored fruit slices. Apparently, the pattern author had suggested placing the slices between non-stick skillets to avoid scratching the delicate surfaces and Tasha had taken to the idea with enthusiasm.

The other specialty item for this cake was almond extract. Phil was almost certain they had a tiny brown bottle tucked away on an upper shelf, but he wanted to double-check before he got into the middle of the process. As he turned to the white wall cabinet, the oven caught his eye. The recipe called for pre-heating it to 350 F. A couple of quick button presses later, he’d started the pre-heating process. Only afterwards did he remember that he could have asked Jarvis to do it.

Mentally shrugging, Phil pulled down the large metal cookie tin in which they kept all manner of odds and ends for baking. Just as he’d hoped, the little brown glass bottle with the cream colored label was stashed in the tin, as was the set of little plastic squeeze bottles of food coloring. Normally, Phil abhorred with cooking artificial colors and flavors, but he was willing to make an exception in this case. Clint had teased him about it, given Phil’s propensity for junk food from gas stations, but while Phil had a sweet tooth for cheap donuts, he couldn’t abide actually making them.

While he was thinking about it, he reached for the cooking oil spray. He’d grown up using a paper towel to spread butter over non-stick cake pans, but this was miles better. With a moue, he set it aside. He wasn’t sure what size cake pans he’d need after he divided the batter into thirds.

Instead, he reached for the expensive Soehnle scale that Pepper had brought back from Germany as a gift. Baking was best done when measured by weight, and Phil was as familiar with grams as he was with ounces. After taring out a stainless steel bowl, Phil calculated that two and three-fourth cups of flour converted to 326 grams of flour. He scooped it into the bowl, and then carefully poured it into the bowl of the gunmetal gray stand mixer. The last thing they needed was for flour to dust the kitchen.

Next he added 330 grams of sugar. Ideally he’d use toasted superfine sugar, but he didn’t have any and he was not going to bother Bucky about this. Regular white granulated sugar would be fine. Finally, Phil added a tablespoon of baking powder and ¾ teaspoon of salt to the other dry ingredients. After fitting the stand mixer with a plastic shield, he slowly started up the mixer, sifting the dry ingredients together so that the baking powder and salt were evenly mixed throughout.

While that quietly rumbled in the kitchen (“Clint, we don’t actually need a 1.3 horsepower mixer”), Phil turned his attention to the unsalted butter he’d set out earlier. Both wax-paper wrapped sticks were soft to the touch, so Phil gingerly added them, one at a time. In the bowl the mixture changed to somewhere between crumbly sand and a paste.

Turning off the mixer for a second, Phil retrieved a carton of eggs from the stainless steel refrigerator. Years ago, he’d picked up a little white and yellow plastic egg separator, and now he dug it out of the gadget drawer. Taking it, the eggs, and two glasses to the sink, he placed the egg separator over the glass in the bowl of the sink. One by one, he cracked four eggs, careful not to puncture the yolks as he poured the contents into the egg separator. Jiggling it gently, he persuaded the whites to fall into the glass before pouring the yolks into their own glass.

Satisfied with the results, he washed his hands before bringing each glass back to the solid-surface baking counter. (“No, Tony, we really do not want a marble baking counter. Yes, Tony, I know marble is supposed to be better for rolling out pasta. Thank you anyway, Tony.”) After he restarted the mixer, he poured the egg whites into the dough, a little bit at a time.

At first, the thick mixture didn’t seem to want to absorb the egg whites, and he briefly considered
switching to a dough hook. But then the egg whites slipped into the dough and it loosened up. Stopping the mixer, he scraped down the sides with a silicon spatula and took a couple passes across the bottom of the bowl to make sure all the flour was evenly distributed.

After repeating the process several times, Phil was finally satisfied with the mixture. Next he poured out a cup of whole milk and added in two teaspoons of the hideously expensive vanilla extract, followed by the single teaspoon of almond extract. The rich scents rose into the room and he inhaled deeply before shaking his head and contemplating the hundred-dollar bottle he’d purchased on Jarvis’s recommendation.

Only sixteen ounces, it was Madagascar “Bourbon Islands” single strength vanilla from Penzey’s. After all the hazard pay he’d stocked away over the years, he could afford it, but the idea that humble vanilla was so expensive was still shocking. Phil knew he could probably substitute imitation vanilla when baking, but he couldn’t bring himself to make the substitution in a gift. Better to give no gift than to give something inferior when he could have done better.

Back at the stand mixer, he slowly added the milk until the mixture changed into a smooth, thick batter, only slightly less thick than Nutella. Sighing, Phil looked between the stand mixer and the digital scale. He’d forgotten to tare the bowl of the stand mixer, so he was going to have to tare a stainless steel bowl, scrape every bit of the batter into the bowl, weigh it, and then scrape a third of it back into the stand mixer bowl.

Annoyed at himself for the elementary error, Phil got to the work, noting the batter weighed almost exactly 960 grams. With precision, he transferred 312 grams back to the stand mixer bowl and grimaced. This cake wasn’t going to be very big. Just enough for everyone to have a slice at Steve’s birthday party.

Reaching for the blue food coloring, Phil didn’t bother measuring drops. From experience, he knew that the shade of blue he was after required a significant amount of food dye. After a healthy squirt, he turned the stand mixer back on and watched the batter change to a pale blue, almost like a robin’s egg. Once more into the breach, he thought, and added another generous squirt. Now the batter was deeper and richer in color, almost the color of Steve’s uniform.

Turning to the cabinet with the baking pans, Phil thought about his options. A well-greased 11 x 7 pan would do, but they didn’t own three identical 11 x7 pans. Clint had purchased three 9 x 13 pans last winter, but Phil didn’t think he could fill up the pans. After a minute, he decided to use one Pyrex pan, and two ceramic casserole dishes with a similar bottom size. Using the spray oil, he coated each pan, and then poured in a handful of flour before tipping them this way and that, careful to ensure every side of all three pans was coated with flour before tipping the oily flour into the silver compost bucket.

Good thing Clint wasn’t looking. Food waste was almost physically painful for him, and though Phil understood why, he wasn’t saving the flour.

Using the silicon spatula, Phil scraped the dark blue cake batter into the Pyrex pan. Even now, it smelled good, sweet and rich. Smoothing out the top of batter as best he could, he hoped that the cake wouldn’t come out ugly and lumpy. The oven had been the right temperature for several minutes, so Phil tucked the pan into the hot oven, setting a timer for 15 minutes.

Quickly, Phil washed out the stand mixer bowl before returning it to the stand mixer and repeating the process with the red food dye. Red was tricky, because by the time enough dye had been added for a rich red, the cake batter could be bitter. Red velvet cake usually covered the bitterness with chocolate, but this cake needed to taste of almond and vanilla. Phil taste tested along the way, and decided to stop when the batter matched maraschino cherries. That would have to do.
He added the red layer to the hot oven, noting with relief that the blue cake batter had spread out across the bottom of the pan, and then turned his attention to the white batter. Deciding that it could go on the bottom rack of the oven, he added that pan to the oven. The blue batter was still cooking, so Phil decided to tidy up while the layers cooked.

A swipe with a dishcloth, and the counter was clean. Quickly, he tucked away the food dye and flavor extracts, and returned the salt and baking powder to the storage cabinet. Clint and Tasha had the afternoon off, barring emergency, but he was due on-shift at 3. Normally, Maria took the evening shift but she’d wanted the evening off to spend on a girl’s night with Tasha, Pepper, and Jane. Phil had been happy to swap with her, but he wanted to get the cake layers out to cool while he was gone.

Testing each layer, the cake tester slid out smooth on all of them. Gently, Phil placed the breakable pans on the cool grates of the stovetop while the opulent scent of warm sugar, vanilla, and almond filled the room. Combined, the flavors were more than the sum of their parts. Phil remembered that the other name for this flavor combination was princess cake—fit for royalty indeed. Reaching for the big black silicon spatula, he loosened the edge of each cake layer and then slipped the flexible spatula under each layer, separating it from the pan before flipping the pan over so that the cake layer fell onto a layer of parchment paper.

Phil stepped back from the counter. Beautiful, each layer a clear color. Red, white and blue. Not bad for a recipe he hadn’t used in well over a decade.

Glancing over at the sofa, he caught a soft smile from Tasha. With his right hand he signed “I love you” in ASL, putting up his thumb, index, and pinkie fingers. Her smile widened faintly while Clint flashed it back to him, eyes still closed.

Phil took another deep breath, enjoying the warmth and lush aroma that filled the room. Everything was in its place, the cake layers cooling on the counter. His beloveds were safe and happy here in the Tower. All was well, here in the long summer afternoon.
Clint and Tasha Ice a Cake

Clint felt Tasha tense in his lap and cracked his eyelids to see Phil tidying up in the kitchen. As his eyes traveled over Phil’s tee shirt and jeans-clad form, Clint shifted with the curl of desire in his gut. Never in all these years had Clint stopped wanting him, not when Phil had so terribly thin in his hospital bed, not when Phil’s face had been tense with the pain of recovery, and not on a lazy summer afternoon when Phil wore a simple pair of jeans and a tee shirt.

As Tasha shifted on the sofa, Clint slipped out from behind her, pressing a kiss to the back of her neck along the way. He knew Phil had switched shifts with Maria so Tasha, Maria, Pepper, and Jane could have a girls night out at their favorite pizza joint in the Tower. Even though it was second shift, Phil wouldn’t dress down. Unlike Phil, Maria patrolled the public areas of the Tower, and so Clint felt the need to see to Phil before he left for work.

As he followed Phil into the cool dimness of their bedroom, Lucky napping in the corner on an oversized dog bed, Clint decided on the dark blue Dolce & Gabbana. Even in tailored prêt-à-porter, Phil would look good. Professional, anonymous. Deceptively safe. As Phil stripped off the heathered blue tee that brought out his gorgeous eyes, Clint couldn’t help kissing his shoulder where the tattooed Sagittarius freckles stood out against Phil’s pale skin. Before Clint had understood his own attraction, Phil had dedicated himself to Clint.

In the brightly lit bathroom, Phil began washing up. Light spilled into the shadowed closet as Clint hunted for a tie. Clint had no frame of reference for what made a tie nice, other than it would be made of silk and be color coordinated with Phil’s suit. That was something else he owed Tasha, an explanation of color coordination.

When Tasha had realized that Clint had no clue about choosing clothing, she’d bought a tray of water colors and had him paint his own color wheel on a paper plate, complete with secondary and tertiary colors. With anyone else, his teenage self would have been humiliated to be reduced to an elementary art project, but as usual, Tasha had been matter of fact and patient. In the end, he’d merely been grateful.

With a private smile at the long-ago memory, he chose a blue-green tie in a hand-painted watercolor pattern that almost matched Phil’s eyes. He laid the outfit on the bed and then leaned against the bathroom door, watching Phil shave. Before the incident on the Helicarrier, Clint might have helped Phil. Now, Phil wanted to prove to himself that his nerves were steady, that he could do this for himself. The quiet scrape of blade on bristle and burbling water filled the room.

To Clint, these private moments, redolent with the aroma of sandalwood, were precious jewels hoarded in his innermost thoughts. Always tidy, Phil wiped down the sink and returned the badger brush, soap cake, and straight razor to his dopp kit before turning back to Clint and smiling, deep crow’s-feet around his eyes.

“Let me get you dressed.”

“Mm.”

Obediently, Phil sat on the bed and waited as Clint knelt before him, slipping first one foot and then the other into over-the-calf merino socks. Ostensibly old fashioned and unassuming, Phil’s socks were imported from London, made of merino wool with hand-finished toes. Phil had two pairs of dyed-to-match socks for each of his Dolce & Gabbana suits. Tasha’s after market modifications included memory wire in the toe seam, handy for picking locks, as well as tear away
reinforcing tape at the top seam that doubled as zip tie handcuffs.

Once the socks were rolled up over Phil’s calves, Clint gently kissed the inside of each knee and looked up to see that Phil’s own eyes were narrowed and dark. Grinning, Clint reached for the black silk boxers that Phil preferred and pulled them up over Phil’s hips, carefully ignoring Phil’s half-hard cock. No time for that this afternoon.

Instead, Clint put his hand in Phil’s and brought him to a standing position, the better to slip the navy blue suit pants up Phil’s long, sleekly muscled legs. Tasha had tailored this pair with a removable steel garrote thread in the outseam. Next came the brown leather belt, a Jarvis-enabled microchip in the prong. Thanks to Tasha, explosive was tucked in the doubled leather that held the buckle. The belt was much stronger than it should have been, with a wire mesh layer Phil could use as a repeater antenna for the microchip.

Before Clint zipped Phil up, he tucked him into a white cotton tee, soft against the scars on Phil’s sternum. If Clint had his way, Phil would have no more scars anywhere on his body. As Clint smoothed the shirt down Phil’s back, he indulged in a deep breath against Phil’s neck, breathing in their scentless soap and something warmly, indefinably Phil. Home and safety. Another kiss and Clint was easing Phil into the tailored white dress shirt. Even now, Phil’s chest hurt when he reached behind himself to put on a shirt.

In the fine points of the collar, Clint had sewn narrow razor blades. The tiny buttons that fastened the collar down had almost invisible slits to safely hold the tiny blades. Larger buttons down the front could be snapped and thrown as powerful flash bangs. French cuffs made excellent places to hide documents and held one-time use electric shocks activated by tightly gripping Phil’s wrist. A custom stiletto was concealed in Phil’s tie, courtesy of Tony’s tailor.

After tucking in the dress shirt, Clint zipped up Phil’s suit pants and fastened the button that concealed another chip. Clint would be damned if he lost Phil again. Triple backup was the least he could do. A chip was in Phil, concealed as a mole at his hairline. While Tasha had argued against telling Phil, Clint wouldn’t keep that secret. He wouldn’t keep any secret from their beloved.

Instead, Clint kissed Phil’s cheek and eased the heavy jacket onto his shoulders. Suit jackets weren’t meant to be comfortable, although Dolce & Gabbana were better than most. However, this jacket had been altered as it had been tailored. Lightweight Kevlar had been sewn into the lining, only the skill of Tony’s tailor keeping the added layer from ruining the line of the jacket.

With a final kiss on Phil’s soft lips, Clint adjusted the shoulders of the suit jacket and stepped back. “There. All safe and sound.”

Smiling indulgently, Phil stood in front of the full-length mirror that hung on the back of their closet door and reviewed his outfit. “It should be a slow shift tonight.”

With a loose shrug, Clint watched Phil’s expression in the mirror. “Even so.”

Quirking a grin, Phil reached for his low brown boots. Those had the standard alterations, with knives in the toes, explosives in the heel, and garrotes in the laces.

“I’ll be back after 11. You don’t have to stay up. Tasha will probably be out late.”

Clint shook his head. “It’s fine.”

Clint was well rested from cat napping all afternoon and he wouldn’t be able to settle easily until
both Tasha and Phil were back in their quarters. Nothing had ever happened in the Tower, not with Jarvis’s inhuman attention to detail and Phil’s experienced cynicism about human nature, but Clint knew there was always a first time.

Phil closed his eyes briefly, an expression of pain flashing across his face before he sighed and turned to smile at Clint.

“I’m looking forward to the party tomorrow.”

Clint seized the offering. “That’s a nice cake. I didn’t know you knew how to make a fancy cake like that.”

“Ah, well, I used to like to bake when I had time.” Phil grinned with mischief. “You know me and my sweet tooth.”

“You have a sweet tooth? Who knew?”

Snickering, Clint escorted Phil out to the door to their quarters.

Back in the mid-afternoon sun, Tasha set her knitting aside and joined them at the door. She adjusted Phil’s tie, and then slipped his wallet into his pants pocket. Finally, she completed the ritual by tucking his ID card behind the silk square at his breast pocket.

“We’ll see you at bedtime, Филюха.”

Slowly, telegraphing his movements, Phil pressed a gentle kiss to Tasha’s forehead before he turned to leave. Jarvis flashed green as the heavy magnetic locks re-engaged behind Phil.

Clint half-expected Tasha to pick up her knitting and finish the ridiculously cheerful citrus slice, but instead she looked up at him and smiled. Not just any smile, but the smile that let him know what she wanted. Body language softened infinitesimally, Tasha was suddenly vulnerable in a way that Clint would kill to protect. Had killed to protect.

When he and Tasha had met, he’d had a few inches left to grow. Like many teenagers, he’d had trouble gaining weight and he’d had no clue how to bulk up. She’d felt safe with his shorter, thinner self in a way that she didn’t with his adult height and bulk. Intellectually, Clint knew Tasha’s gut-deep unease wasn’t his fault, but he felt guilty anyway.

Only their shared history allowed her to feel secure with his eight inches and 100-pounds between them. Even so, Clint knew better than to surprise her or be physically demanding in any way. It wasn’t just that she could kick his ass, but he didn’t want her to feel the need. Tasha was wary enough around big men like Steve and Thor--she didn’t need to rouse her hindbrain in her home too. Long ago, he’d made a vow to never push Tasha in that way. Instead, between them was a delicately negotiated affection, less about sex than about love.

Smiling, Clint offered, “Cuddle on the sofa?”

For answer, Tasha leaned against him, her curves soft and warm. Her personality was so compelling that Clint often forgot how tiny she was. Barely up to his shoulder. Dropping his chin, he took a deep breath, the subtle floral notes of her favored shampoo filling his nose.

Whispering into her hair, he asked, “Bed?”

Sighing, Tasha nodded and let him take all of her weight. In response, Clint bent his knees and slipped one arm under her legs, the other holding her to his chest. She was heavier than she looked,
body taut with lean muscle. Still, she weighed less than half of what he benched on a bad day.

In the bedroom, Clint gently laid her on their king-size bed before shooing Lucky away and locking the door. Tasha needed her privacy.

Quickly, he stripped off his shirt and pants while Tasha curled up on her side like a cat and watched, giving nothing away. After all these years, Clint didn’t need direction. Instead, he slowly pulled the covers back and slid underneath on his back as she hummed in approval.

Tasha couldn’t tolerate his bulk on her body, and he had the scars to prove it.

For her part, Tasha removed her own clothing, sleek and elegant even in the nude. She always ran cooler than Clint, her skin soft as she cuddled up to him and put her head on his chest. Her small, calloused hands roamed across his chest, playing with his flat nipples and petting his coarse chest hair.

Rather than wrap her in his arms and put her on the defensive, Clint leaned back and pillowed his head on his hands. He was happy for Tasha to take what she would from his body.

Over the years, he’d had the idle thought that being with Tasha had shaped the way he found pleasure in his own body. He’d been so young and relatively inexperienced compared to her that their explorations together had been woven into the warp and weft of how he understood his own body, his own desires. This gave Clint a deep sense of inner peace. He knew what he liked and how he liked it.

As he surrendered to Tasha’s ministrations, his last coherent thought was that he was lucky that Phil loved them both.

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Long beams of light cut across the area rug when Clint woke from his nap. His aids were on the bedside table, in their hard shell case, but he was warm under the covers and his body felt like golden syrup. He closed his eyes and thought about what to do that evening. Barring an Avengers-related mission, he was home alone until Tasha or Phil came back. Second shift ended at 11, and knowing Phil he’d be back even later, after he’d seen to his paperwork. Girls’ nights tended to run even later.

Eventually, he stumbled into the shower, which was still slightly damp and fragrant with Tasha’s shampoo. She must have cleaned up while he napped, quiet on little cat feet. Dialing in a long, hot shower, Clint leaned against the shower wall and yawned while he washed his hair. Definitely not another workout.

As he dried his hair, Clint decided to have a lazy evening on the common room sofa. Maybe Thor or Tony would be there and they could play Mario Kart. Or watch Dog Cops. He wasn’t picky. Stepping into loose gray sweats and a long-sleeve tee he’d stolen from Phil, Clint determined that the odds were good that pizza was in his future. He snagged his aids from the table.

“Good evening, Mr. Barton.”

“Hello, Jarvis. What’s up?”

“Sir is in his workshop and Ms. Potts is with Ms. Romanoff, Dr. Foster, and Ms. Hill.”

“Yup, it’s girl’s night,” agreed Clint. “Pizza and beer.”
“Statistically speaking, that is the likely outcome.”

As he passed the kitchen, Clint noticed that the warm sugar, vanilla, and almond scent of the birthday cake had been replaced with a sweet, fruity aroma. Turning into the kitchen, he saw that the tops of the blues and red layers seemed to have been coated with jam, glossy under the task lights.

“Jarvis, what’s on the cake?”

“While I am not privy to Ms. Romanoff’s thoughts, I presume that she made jam specifically to go on the cake. Cherry jam for the red layer and blueberry jam for the blue layer.”

Clint scratched the back of his neck. “OK, but why?”

“According to several recipes, the jam helps keep the layers from drying out, and adds flavor to the cake.”

Several thoughts occurred to Clint in quick succession. Phil was going to be late getting back and then he would stay up even later putting together the damn cake. Tasha had been worried that the cake would dry out, so she’d made jam, but there wasn’t any white jam. That layer was going to be dry, and then Phil would be embarrassed. Clint didn’t have anything better to do this evening--he could construct the cake. How hard could it be?

“Hey, Jarvis, let’s assemble a cake!”

The blue layer was closest to him, so Clint made his mind up to start there. The white layer would go in the middle. Red, white, and blue. First, Clint tried to pick it up with his hands, but he couldn’t get his fingers under it.

“If I might make a suggestion?” Jarvis’s voice was slightly amused.

“Go for it.”

“You might find that the fish spatula and the pancake spatula would be helpful in this situation, for leverage.”

Once Jarvis had put it in those terms, Clint figured out how to maneuver one layer on top of the other--and yes, the big flat spatulas were helpful.

Stepping back, Clint stared at the white layer of cake. It definitely needed something. What was the whitest sweet thing in the kitchen?

“If I might make a suggestion?” Jarvis’s voice was slightly amused.

“Do we have marshmallow fluff?”

Imperceptibly, Jarvis hesitated. “Certainly, Mr. Barton. In the pantry cabinet.”

Just as Jarvis had predicted, Clint found the marshmallow fluff. In the white crock of kitchen utensils stood a tall offset spatula that Natasha occasionally used for smearing Nutella on crêpes. Clint figured it would be fine for marshmallow fluff.

His brow furrowed in concentration, Clint carefully iced the white cake with a thin layer of marshmallow fluff. The fluff was sticky and hard to work with, so Clint kept washing the spatula in hot water. Eventually, he got the bright idea to fill an oversized plastic glass with hot water and just dipped the spatula in it.
Proudly, he stood up and examined his efforts. The slick white fluff was satiny under the brilliant white task lights of the baking counter and its sugary scent filled the air. He’d never be a pastry chef, but it was fine. Phil wouldn’t have to worry about it anymore.

Taking a deep breath, he decided to finish the job. Phil needed his sleep. The red layer went next, already smoothed with cherry jam on top. Each layer sloped down a bit on the edges, leaving a shape kind of like a loaf of bread. Tilting his head, Clint thought about the sharp edges on bakery cakes before the bread knife caught his eye.

Using the long, serrated knife, Clint cut the rounded edges away, making a precise rectangle from the cake. Lucky sat and looked up at him, pleading with his one big brown eye.

“Sure, dog. Have a slice.”

Clint flipped a crust of cake at Lucky and the dog caught it in midair. Deciding that if the dog ate crusts, he could too, Clint took his own bite. Damn, that was good.

Still, this wasn’t finished. Closing his eyes, Clint tried to conjure up hazy memories of his mom icing a cake. After a minute, he shrugged and resolved just to finish the whole cake with marshmallow fluff. Who didn’t like marshmallows?

Painstakingly, he coated all five sides with a thin layer of fluff, grateful that he’d caught the trick about hot water earlier. While the fluff tended to leak down the sides a bit, it was gratifyingly smooth and bright, a perfect white cover.

Tossing the spatula in the sink, Clint turned his back on the birthday cake.

“C’mon, Lucky,” he called. “Let’s go see if Thor ordered pizza!”

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She really needed to go out with the girls more often, thought Natasha. As she walked through the darkened living room, the shiny white cake on the kitchen counter caught her eye. A jar of marshmallow fluff sat beside it.

Oh, Clint. Natasha thought about it for a few minutes, and then reached for her stash of fancy baking goodies. On a whim, she’d purchased icing paper last year, made from thin sheets of tapioca that would dissolve into fondant. At the same time, she’d ordered a set of brush pens filled with food dye.

After a couple of attempts, Natasha had a passable decorative symbol for the top of the cake. She filled it in with the black marker, for better contrast on the white cake, and then cut it out to place on top.

Still, it needed a little something. Edible silver glitter made it look as though the whole cake had been done with this color scheme on purpose. Phil wouldn’t even mind.

Returning everything to its proper place only took a minute. Then Tasha padded softly into the quiet bedroom, where Clint was huddled up in the fetal position. A bad night, then.

After her evening ablutions, Natasha fitted herself along Clint’s broad back, breathing him in. She could feel the tense muscles in his back relax with her warmth. Just as she closed her eyes, she saw the door crack open as Phil and Lucky came to bed.

All was right with the world. Her beloveds were here, happy and well. There was a party to look
forward to tomorrow, and she’d even found a gift Steve couldn’t refuse. As Phil climbed into bed between Clint and the door, her heart eased. Sleep would come tonight.

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