“Aw, time travel, no.”

On Christmas Eve, Tony came unstuck in time.

Notes

As always, a huge thank you to Snapjack for her endless encouragement, insight and love. I simply could not do this without her.

Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night.

“One more time, Friday,” Tony said, pressing enter on his last line of code and spinning around in his chair to face the Speed Machine (okay, the name was still a work in progress, he was a mechanical engineer, not a marketer). “Light her up.”

“Sir, might I remind you that your guests will begin arriving in approximately 25 minutes?” Friday said.

Tony raised an eyebrow at the ceiling. “And?”
“You may want to change before the party begins,” Friday said, because despite being an entirely different AI, she had inherited JARVIS’s tendency to nag. “I don’t believe your current outfit really exemplifies the spirit of the season.”

Tony glanced down. “What about Black Sabbath isn’t appropriate for Christmas?”

“You may also want to consider taking a shower. And perhaps you could brush your teeth, something you haven’t done in 26.5 hours unless I’m - ”

“Okay, I get it,” Tony said. “You want me to make myself fit for human interaction.”

“Precisely.”

“I’m on it. Right after this last test.”

Friday didn’t sigh, because she was a computer program and therefore didn’t have any lungs, but Tony had a feeling she wanted to. “Very well, sir. Containment field ready.”

“Power charging up,” Tony said. “We recording this?”

“Naturally.”

“Okay, this is Speed Machine test 17, I’ve narrowed the containment field around the miniature antihelium generator in order to mitigate the risks of, you know, doubling the amount of antimatter I’m trying to create, but hey, if it works, I might get the suit to approach the speed of light,” Tony said, peering at the holographic readings projected over the desk. “Which would be one of the biggest scientific breakthroughs in history and also really fucking cool. Helium entering the core chamber in three, two, one - and we’re in, okay, containment field seems to be holding so far, readings are steady - ”

“Sir, we’re experiencing a four percent stress gradient in the primary containment chamber,” Friday said.

“Nothing to worry about,” Tony said. “Four percent is well within safe parameters - can I get a reading on how the titanium’s holding up? Okay, is that melting? It shouldn’t be melting, right?”

“Unclear, sir,” Friday said. “Eight percent stress gradient.”

Tony frowned, flicking several screens away and pulling up more. “Is secondary containment holding?”

“Secondary containment holding, but might I remind you that you are currently within the secondary containment field - ”

“So if it all goes boom, I get turned into pure energy,” Tony finished.

“In all likelihood,” Friday said. “I recommend we initiate shutdown procedure.”

“Damn it,” Tony said. “Give it another minute, we’re close this time, I can tell - come on, daddy wants faster acceleration from Santa this year - ”

“Stress gradient at twelve percent and increasing,” Friday said. “We will have containment breach at twenty percent.”

“Give me ten seconds,” Tony said as the containment field indicator started to flash. “You’re ruining Christmas, Friday.”
“My sincerest apologies, sir,” Friday said. “Sixteen percent.”

“Fuck,” Tony said, pushing himself back from the holo-displays and rubbing his eyes. “Shut it all down. Damn it, I was so close that time, if I can just get this containment issue figured out - ”

There was a crack, like lightning striking a power line, and then - nothing.

Tony glanced around. The lab was still intact. The miniature particle accelerator was still intact. *He* was still intact. “Friday? What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know,” Friday said. “Shutdown procedures complete. Running diagnostics now.”

“Send the results to my phone as soon as you’re done,” Tony said, patting Dummy’s arm as he walked toward the door.

“Red and green are traditional colors for holiday parties,” Friday reminded him.

“Are you giving me fashion advice?” Tony asked.

“I believe I am, sir,” Friday said.

The party was in full swing by the time Tony joined it. The annual Stark Industries Christmas party had been Pepper’s thing - still *was* Pepper’s thing, really - but Pepper was doing it in LA this year, and Tony was doing it in New York, so that was, you know, whatever. Nothing a drink couldn’t solve. Tony nodded to a gaggle of execs and greeted a few people from the Maria Stark Foundation as he made his way to the bar.

“Hey, no cuts, asshole,” somebody said, elbowing him in the ribs.

Tony whirled around to see Clint grinning at him. “Merry Christmas to you, Barton. One martini, please.”

“Don’t mind him,” Laura said. “He was up late shopping.”

“I spent six hours at a Toys ‘R Us,” Clint said. “Have you ever been to Toys ‘R Us the day before Christmas Eve? It’s a hellscape. You thought the Chitauri were bad, wait until you see parents who put off buying that Doc McStuffins toy until it was too late.”

“I don’t know any of the words you just said,” Tony said. “Are those cookies?”

“Fresh out of my mom’s oven,” Laura said, holding out the tin. “Thanks for sending the jet, by the way.”

Tony bit the head off a smiling gingerbread man. “No problem. Did you get my presents for the kids?”

“They really didn’t need new StarkPads,” Clint said. “Especially not priceless, irreplaceable prototype StarkPads.”

“Children are the future,” Tony said, taking a sip of his drink. “And also my most important beta testers.”

“Hey, I think that’s enough for you,” Clint said, snatching the martini glass out of Tony’s hand deftly. “You’re gonna want to be sober tonight, man.”
“Excuse me?” Tony said. “This is my first one, what are you -”

“Hey, the rest of the team’s here,” Clint said, setting the martini aside and waving at the elevator.

“Give me my drink, you son of a - hey, guys, happy holidays,” Tony said as Sam, Natasha, Wanda, Vision and Steve approached. “Grab a drink, and Wilson, I specifically said this was a nice party. A sweater with a picture of a reindeer with a bell for a nose is not nice.”

“This is a Goodwill original and I don’t care who knows it,” Sam said.

“Thanks for inviting us, Tony,” Wanda said, passing by on the way to the buffet with the Vision in tow. “It looks great in here. Very festive.”

“Well, anything’s a step up from when you first visited,” Tony said, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “If you’re ordering drinks, grab me an extra? Natasha, you look lovely. How many knives does that kind of thing hold?”

“Enough,” Natasha said, accepting a glass of champagne from a passing waiter.

“I’d put money on three,” Sam said.

“Are you kidding?” Clint said. “Five, minimum.”

“You’re both wrong,” Laura said, shaking her head. “It’s seven.”

“Hey, Cap,” Tony said, turning to Steve as the others continued their argument and made their way to the bar. “Long time no see.”

Steve chuckled. “I know - what’s it been, five, six hours?”

Tony blinked. “Huh?”

“Hold on,” Steve said, tilting his head. “Is this - is this a reggae version of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer? Please tell me this wasn’t ever a thing.”

“Sir Paul had some weird years,” Tony acknowledged. “What was that you were you saying about five hours?”

“Hey, your tie’s a little - c’mere,” Steve said, and before Tony could react, they were suddenly very close; Tony could see a little wrinkle between Steve’s eyebrows as he reached down to adjust Tony’s bow tie. “Better.” He rested his hands on Tony’s shoulders and smiled down at him warmly, and Tony backed up so fast he almost collided with a passing waiter.

“Uh, thanks,” Tony said. “Drink? I’m going to get a drink. You want one?”

“Oh,” Steve said, his smile fading. “No, I’m good.”

“Good,” Tony echoed, backing up further. “Sorry, gotta mingle, I’ll catch you later?”

“Sure,” Steve said as Tony spun on his heel and hightailed it out of there, because that had been weird, that had been really weird. The way Steve looked down at him had been - fond. Intimate, almost. Intimate in a way that he and Steve definitely weren’t. Cap was a good looking guy, sure, Tony wasn’t gonna pretend he’d never thought - well, at any rate, he was Cap. Tony usually didn’t want to punch him in the face anymore, but it was a close call, sometimes.

“Scotch, neat,” Tony said to the bartender.
Fuck Clint wanting him to be sober. It was his party, and he’d rather be drunk.

“I didn’t think I would ever call Vision cute,” Sam said as Vision and Wanda swayed to Silver Bells on the dance floor, “but that’s really the only word that applies right now.”

“I know,” Tony said. “It’s disgusting.”

Sam chuckled. “What’d you say to him?”

“What?” Tony said. “Me?”

“Yeah, you,” Sam said. “After you pulled him aside, that’s when he made his move.”

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t say anything to him,” Tony said as the song ended and the crowd dispersed.

Sam arched an eyebrow. “And I’m pretty sure you did.”

Tony frowned. “I genuinely have no idea what you’re - ”

“Has anybody seen Natasha?” Steve said, appearing at Tony’s side with an armful of wrapped gifts.

“Not for a while,” Clint said.

“Well, she’ll just have to get her present later,” Steve said, tossing Clint a small box and Sam a larger one. “Vision, here you go, and Wanda, this one’s yours.”

“Dude, thanks!” Clint exclaimed, tossing aside the wrapping paper. “How’d you know I needed a new Fitbit? Nate flushed mine down the toilet last week.”

“Lucky guess,” Steve said.

Sam pulled open his box and burst out laughing. “Steve. This is literally the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“You know, back in my day, we appreciated any sweater we could get our hands on, even if it was ugly,” Steve said, grinning. “Have I told you about how we couldn’t afford heat during the blizzard of ’31, and my ma - ”

“Made you a sweater out of a tablecloth, yeah, old man, we’ve heard that one,” Sam said, punching him in the arm. “I will treasure this forever.”

“A cookbook?” Wanda said, looking down at the glossy cover of the book in her hands.

“To go with Vision’s new slow cooker,” Steve said as Vision carefully unwrapped his own present.

“I did say recently that I was becoming interested in food beyond its nutritional value,” Vision said calmly. “Though I don’t understand the connection between the birth of a prophet and the need to show affection through purchases, I appreciate the gift, Captain.”

“Does that mean you didn’t get anything for me?” Wanda said, raising her eyebrows.

“I may not be human, but I’m not an idiot,” Vision said.

“Hey, guys, check it out,” Clint called from the window. “It’s snowing!”
“Snowing?” Tony said. “It wasn’t supposed to snow today.”

“First snow on Christmas Eve,” Sam said, grinning and pulling his new ugly Christmas sweater over his old ugly Christmas sweater as he followed Clint to the window. “It’s a Christmas miracle!”

“You were right,” said a voice in his ear, and Tony jumped and whirled around to see Steve standing right behind him.

“What?” Tony said.

“The snow,” Steve said, nodding as the rest of the team and most of the party crowded onto the balcony.

Tony was mystified. “Uh - ”

“Hey, can we talk for a second?” Steve said, taking him by the elbow. “Somewhere a little… quieter?”

“Sure,” Tony said slowly. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, leading him down the hall. The noise from the party faded as they ducked into an alcove behind a twinkling Christmas tree. “I just, uh - I just wanted to give you this.”

He held out a small box wrapped in red and green paper and grinned a little sheepishly.

“Oh,” Tony said. “I thought we said no presents?”

Steve snorted. “Sure. Just open it, Tony.”

“Okay,” Tony said, perplexedly sliding his finger under the tape to rip off the wrapping paper. He wadded it up, opened up the box inside, and pulled out - a scarf. It was grey plaid and a little frayed at the edges, with a thread coming loose on one end. “Uh. Thanks. This is - nice?”

“I just thought you might like to have it,” Steve said, and he was smiling that fond smile again, and he was standing a little closer than he’d been a second ago, Tony was sure of that.

“Oh,” Tony said, because Steve had given him a scarf that was quite obviously used, and Tony wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Maybe used presents had been a thing in the past? Tony would have to look it up. “Well, hey, sorry, I didn’t get you anything, but - ”

“Today was nice,” Steve said.

“Yeah, it’s a good party,” Tony said, shifting from one foot to the other. “I’m glad you guys made it - ”

“I meant earlier,” Steve said quietly, tilting his head and stepping even closer.

Tony swallowed hard and backed up slightly. Steve was definitely in his personal bubble now.

“Earlier?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “And I’ve been - well, I’ve been thinking. And I feel like, if there’s ever a good moment to stop thinking and actually, you know, do something, it’s gotta be Christmas, right?”

“Maybe?” Tony said.

Steve chuckled. “I shoulda figured you were gonna make this difficult,” he said, and then he was
leaning forward and wrapping one hand around Tony’s neck and kissing him.

Tony froze. It wasn’t that it was a bad kiss. It was that it was Steve, and the last time he’d seen
Steve was three months ago and they’d given each other a handshake and now they were apparently
on kissing terms. Tony had kissed some weird people in his life but he wasn’t even drunk tonight, as
far as he could tell, because Barton kept taking drinks right out of his hands, and Steve wasn’t drunk
because Steve couldn’t get drunk and oh god, Steve was still kissing him -

Tony put his hands on Steve’s shoulders and pushed, hard.

Steve let go of him immediately and wrenched back, the space between them suddenly empty. His
eyes widened in horror. “I’m - I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought - ”

“Hey, no worries,” Tony said. “Happens to the best of us, not that I’m not flattered, it’s just - ”

“I must have - misunderstood,” Steve said, backing up quickly, his face going hard. “Sorry. Won’t
happen again.”

“No big deal,” Tony said, which was a lie, because it was definitely a big deal.

“I’m gonna - I’m gonna go,” Steve said. “Just - yeah. Merry Christmas, Tony.”

“You too,” Tony said, baffled. “Hey, look - ”

But Steve turned on his heel and barreled down the hall, toward the elevator, away from where the
wind was blowing in gusts of snowflakes through the open balcony door. Tony watched him go, his
lips still warm from Steve’s. He wanted to call out to him, but he didn’t know what to say; he felt
light-headed with confusion -

- no, he felt light-headed, period. “Friday? Scan me, I think there’s something - something - wrong
with me,” he said, reaching out to brace himself on the wall.

The world was spinning around him - no, he was spinning - no, he was fading, that’s what it felt like,
like he was fading away at the edges -

“Friday?” Tony said, holding out his hand and watching numbly as his fingertips faded away.
“Friday, get Steve, get - ”

And then everything went black.

- When Tony woke up, it wasn’t snowing.

Tony blinked himself awake, his senses showing up to the party one by one. He didn’t remember
falling asleep; he didn’t even remember leaving the party. All he remembered was Clint saying it
was snowing, and watching everybody go out on the balcony, and the look on Steve’s face, shocked
and hurt after he’d pushed him away after Steve had kissed him -

Fuck.

Steve had kissed him.

Tony sat up in bed. Yeah, that would have to wait until after coffee. “Friday, windows,” he said,
stretching as he climbed out of bed. He went to the window; he loved his view all year, but
especially after the first snow, when Central Park covered in fresh white powder, the sky grey and
heavy with clouds, the trees-
-the trees bursting with orange and gold leaves.

Tony frowned. “I said windows.”

“Sir,” Friday said, “I think you might want to check your personal tablet.”

“What the hell’s the matter with the glass,” Tony muttered, pressing on the holographic glass. All he wanted this morning was to look out and see New York City in the snow, and the screens were clearly malfunctioning, because they were were showing him New York in the fall, the trees still colorful, the grass green in Central Park, the sky a clear, crisp blue.

“These are the windows,” Friday said. “Sir, again, you have an important message.”

“I don’t care about my messages,” Tony grumbled. He stripped out of his slacks and button down and pulled on a t-shirt and sweats as he padded through the penthouse. Fuck, how drunk had he been last night? Clint had been taking away his drinks, he barely remembered drinking at all, much less passing out with his clothes still on -

He froze halfway into the lounge.

The Christmas tree was gone. The twinkling lights were gone. Every scrap of Stark family Christmas decoration the event planner had dug out of storage and draped around his house was gone.

“Friday,” Tony said slowly. “What happened to my house last night?”

“Nothing, sir,” Friday said.

“Nothing?” Tony said. “Last night this place looked like Rudolph threw up all over the place, and now it’s - Jesus, how much did I drink - what the hell, the windows in here too? Friday, windows -”

“Sir,” Friday said calmly, “the windows in the lounge are not equipped with holo-projectors. What you are seeing is the current weather.”

“Right,” Tony said. Okay, so the snow had all melted overnight, no big deal, weirder things had happened. Global warming, right? The snow had melted, but the streets would be empty anyway, because Christmas morning was one of the only days in Manhattan when you could make it through midtown without getting stuck in traffic - except this year, apparently, because the streets were clogged with cabs and buses and pedestrians, all on their way to - well, somewhere. Huh.

“New York can’t catch a break,” Tony said, swallowing hard and heading for the kitchen. “They keep saying it, traffic is out of control - hey, turn the TV on, will you?”

“Certainly, sir,” Friday said.

“- a high of 67 with clear skies on this beautiful autumn morning,” the newscaster read out. “In sports news, the Yankees won game three of the ALCS last night, bringing them back to New York to fight another day -”

“Okay, what the fuck,” Tony said. “Hey, Friday? Is this a dream? Am I having an incredibly boring dream right now?”

“Not as far as I’m aware,” Friday said. “Might I suggest you check your private messages?”
Tony nodded as he picked up his tablet, because that seemed as good an idea as anything else, because something was wrong, something was very wrong, and he had a feeling he knew what it was but that was impossible, that was -

You have one new message, the tablet informed him, and he opened it with a hand that wasn’t shaking in the slightest and watched as his own face appeared on the screen.

“Hey, Past Me. Or, I guess actually Future Me,” Tony said from his tablet. “Whatever. Okay, where did I start, where did I start - right! You’re not going crazy. You’re time traveling.”

Tony sat down on the sofa.

“I don’t really have that much to tell you because, to be honest, I’m still figuring it out myself. It has to be the Speed Machine, right? That’s the theory I’m working with. That antimatter explosion that wasn’t an explosion, it must have - I don’t know - it must have knocked me out of normal time, or something. I haven’t been able to find out anything else about it because hey, guess what, I haven’t invented it yet.” The Tony on the screen sighed heavily. “Okay, what else. Right. You can’t control that it’s happening, or where you end up, or when, for that matter. You’re gonna try, so I’m not going to bother to tell you not to, but you can’t, as far as I know. And presumably if I’d ever figured it out, I would have left messages for past me like this one, but I didn’t - well, at least not yet, it’s possible that I set them up so that I can’t access them until further along in the timeline so that they don’t conflict with this message - ”

Tony considered throwing the tablet across the room, and the Tony on the tablet cut himself off.

“And this is where I started to get pissed at myself. Look, just, here’s the thing - don’t go looking for the other you, the one that’s already lived through this part. It’s October 14th, so look up where you were on October 14th and then make sure you don’t go there, okay? Just, don’t. Think about it for a second and you'll figure out why. Are you thinking?”

"Because,” Tony said numbly, “if I'd done that, I would know and - "

"Exactly, if you'd done that you would know and since you don't, that means if you do it now and change things then - "

"Then it'll be some kind of paradox, and - "

"- it’ll be some kind of paradox, and paradoxes are a big no-no. You could literally end the world. Think about what a waste that would be, after all those times you worked so hard to save it. Or even worse, you could end up being your own dad. Just. Fuck. No. Don't do it. And don't tell people you're a time traveler because they're gonna think you're crazy, and then it's gonna be all over Twitter, and, hello, you do not need that kind of publicity.”

Tony blew out a breath, and the Tony on the tablet did too, and that was just weird.

“Look, it’s kind of inconvenient to be, you know, unstuck in time, but it’s not - it’s not all bad. I promise.” He shook his head and smiled, just a little bit, and then his eyes widened. “Shit, I’m fading, okay, remember what I said, and don’t forget to leave this message - you'll know when you're supposed to do it, I know you will because I'm you from the future, right? Wait, there was one last thing, what was - oh, fuck, right. You have to meet Steve. He’ll be waiting for you outside and you’re already late, so leave, now, and whatever you do, don’t tell him, don't tell him - "

And then the feed jolted, like the other Tony had dropped the tablet he was recording on, and the video went on but there was nothing there, just a tilted view of the bedroom and clear blue skies out
the windows in the distance.

"Um," Tony said.

"Indeed," Friday said, sympathetically.

"Is that it?" Tony said. "That’s all I left myself with? I’m a total asshole."

"It’s been said once or twice."

"I left that for myself, that means I’ll be going back further in time - Friday, how much do you know about - ”

"I’m afraid that I’ve been instructed not to inform you of anything that has been done by a version of you further along in your own timeline," Friday said.

"By who?"

"By you, sir," Friday said.

"Fuck me," Tony said. "Where else - I mean, when else have I - ”

"I suggest you take your own advice, sir, and leave the tower immediately," Friday said. "You’ll be returning home shortly, and you seem to be in a bad mood. I’m sure it won’t be improved by running into yourself in the lobby."

Tony looked down at the tablet, then out the window, then around the room. One thing was very, very clear: it wasn’t Christmas morning. Not that he’d been particularly looking forward to Christmas morning, but if he’d had the choice between waking up on Christmas morning and waking up in the past, he’d have taken Christmas, ten times out of ten.

"Sir," Friday said.

Tony jumped up. "Right, I know, I know. Paradoxes. Do you know what I should wear?"

"I’m not prone to giving fashion advice, sir, but I would suggest a leather jacket,” Friday said, and Tony burst out laughing, and he started to wonder if, just maybe, he was going a little bit crazy after all.

-

Steve was waiting for him outside the tower.

He was leaning against his motorcycle in a worn-in leather jacket and jeans, and Tony jogged up to him, trying to look like he wasn’t in the middle of an existential crisis. "Sorry I’m late."

"Oh, hey," Steve said, looking surprised. "I was starting to think you weren’t going to show."

"Well, I did. Apparently," Tony said. "What’s the plan?"

Steve pulled open the motorcycle’s case and pulled out a sleek black helmet, the twin of the one perched on the seat, and held it out. "Here you go."

"Oh," Tony said.

"You said you wouldn’t mind the backseat," Steve said, grinning.
“I guess I’ll survive,” Tony said, taking the proffered helmet. Steve pulled on his own helmet and slung a leg over the bike, and Tony eased on behind him and gripped the side of seat awkwardly.

Steve revved the engine, then glanced over his shoulder. “You can hang on to me, if you want. I mean - just, it might be more comfortable if - ”

“Oh,” Tony said. “Right.” He reached until he had his arms locked around Steve’s waist, his chest pressed against the firm line of Steve’s back, and focused on not thinking about the last time he was this close to Steve.

They weaved through Hell’s Kitchen and through the Lincoln Tunnel, then merged onto the I-95 in New Jersey. As far as Tony could tell, Steve never dipped below the speed limit - but then, who would ticket Captain America, right? - and Tony spent the next hour trying not to totally freak out.

After all, he was Tony Stark. He could handle time travel. He’d done a lot of weird shit in his life even before he became a superhero. He’d met aliens and gods, he’d fought sentient robots and crazy Russians and people who could literally breathe fire. He’d built the first Iron Man suit in a cave with a box of scraps. This wasn’t nearly as weird as that time he took a nuke to space.

Riding bitch on Steve Rogers’ bike, that was maybe weirder than the space thing.

But a future version of him had said he had to do it, which meant he’d already done it, and wow, it was way too early in the morning to think this much about causality and the nature of time, he hadn’t even had any coffee yet.

“Remind me again what the plan is?” Tony said as Steve pulled over and cut the engine.

“It’s just basic construction stuff,” Steve said, opening the bike’s case and stashing both helmets and his jacket inside. “Like I said, no speeches, no paparazzi, nothing like that, just a lot of local volunteers trying to get these homes done before the holidays.”

“Right,” Tony said as they crossed the street. “This looks familiar.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Well, yeah. Did you forget where we were going?”

Last time Tony had been here, it had been nighttime, and he’d been flying, and oh yeah, he’d been fighting a crazy ex-AIM scientist with the rest of the Avengers. It was late August and he’d been home sleeping off three straight all-nighters when Steve had called him up, said they were readying the quinjet but he could beat them to Trenton if he left now in the suit, and he’d jumped at the chance to see some action. He’d been first on the scene and he’d taken out half the scientist’s weird fleet of robotic cockroaches before the rest of the team arrived. He remembered a couple blocks being damaged, but they’d evacuated the residents in plenty of time, and he’d been back in the Tower with a martini in hand by midnight.

“What?” Tony said. “No, I just - I thought it would look - uh - I thought they’d have rebuilt more of it by now.”

“Like I said,” Steve said, running a hand through his hair. “They’re having trouble. That’s why we’re here.”

As they approached a contractor’s trailer, a man in a hard hat stepped out and grinned at them. “Captain Rogers, Mr. Stark,” he said, holding out his hand. “Thanks so much for coming. I’m Eugene, I’m the foreman, I’ll be keeping you safe out here on site today.”

“Nice to meet you,” Steve said, shaking his hand. “What can we do?”
“Plenty,” Eugene said. “We’re trying to get these people back home before the holidays, but we’re way behind schedule. It means a lot to have you here.”

“We’re just happy to be able to lend a hand,” Steve said. “Where do we start?”

“So, I’m not saying that you’re wrong, but - well, actually, yeah, I am saying you’re wrong,” Tony said. “I’ve been wiring things since I was five years old and I’m telling you, it’s a hell of a lot safer to fully rewire the main circuit breaker.”

“I see the benefits, Mr. Stark, but - ” the head electrician began.

“Please, I’m ripping apart your whole business model, call me Tony.”

“- but we just don’t have the budget to rewire all 16 houses on this block,” he finished.

“Huh,” Tony said. “Double wiring plus a little for good measure, 16 houses, that’s what, a quarter of a million dollars? Done.”

The electrician raised his eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“You have the budget now. Go ahead, the money will be there,” Tony said. The electrician raised his eyebrows even further. “Do I have to write a check in front of you? Look, if we’re trying to finish these houses by Christmas, you better get started.”

As the electrician left the trailer with his technicians in tow, Steve held the door open for them and then ducked inside. He’d stripped down to his white undershirt, and it was filthy, covered in dust and black tar, and Steve was nearly bursting out of it. Tony blinked a few times. It wasn’t that he’d never noticed Steve in, you know, that way - you’d have to be dead or a Nazi or probably both to not notice Steve in that way - but the small part of of his brain that wasn’t currently wiring the 16 houses on the block or attempting to come to terms with the fact that he was in the past was suddenly firing on all cylinders at the view of Steve’s biceps.

“You okay, Tony?” Steve said.

Tony met his eyes. “What?”

“You were, uh - ”

“Thinking about electrical systems,” Tony said. “How’s the roofing coming along?”

“Finished,” Steve said. “They’re packing up for the night.”

“Already?”

“It’s after six,” Steve said. “Some people actually stop working and, you know, go home at the end of the night. Normal people.”

“I’m not familiar with the concept,” Tony said vaguely, scribbling one more note onto the electrician’s plans and then tossing the pen down. “Ready to go?”

“I was thinking we could grab some dinner,” Steve said.

Perfect, Tony thought, having even more opportunities to accidentally talk about something that hasn’t happened yet sounds great. “Sure. What do you want?”
“I saw a pizza place a couple of blocks away,” Steve said, heading for the door.


“Come on, I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Steve said.

- 

“It’s… fine,” Steve said.

“No, it’s not,” Tony said.

“No, it’s not,” Steve echoed, pulling a face.

“It’s terrible,” Tony said, swallowing with effort. “I’ve had congressional hearings better than this pizza.”

Steve shrugged. “I’m still gonna eat it.”


“What do they say about pizza?” Steve said innocently. Tony opened his mouth, but Steve elbowed him. “Fuck you, of course I know that one.”

“I didn’t know Captain America knew about that kind of thing,” Tony said, tossing his crust down on the plate.

“I think you’d be surprised.” Steve said. When Tony glanced at him he was smirking, and if Tony hadn’t known better, he would’ve sworn Steve was flirting with him. “You gonna eat that?”

“My crust? All yours, big guy.”

“Thanks,” Steve said, snatching it off Tony’s plate. “You know, I was surprised when you said you’d come along today.

“I surprise even myself sometimes,” Tony said wryly.

“I mean, I know you give plenty of money to this stuff. But you don’t usually come and get your hands dirty.”

“No, I usually don’t,” Tony said. “I guess it’s your good influence.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve said. He nudged his shoulder against Tony’s. “Well, I’m glad you did.”

“Yeah, me too,” Tony said honestly. “Even though this pizza was shit.”

Steve laughed. “I’m not gonna argue that. Wanna get going? Traffic should be cleared up by now.”

“Worrying about traffic? You really have joined the 21st century,” Tony said, following Steve out of the pizza place.

They were quiet on the ride back, and Tony had plenty of time to wonder what he was going to do when Steve dropped him off at the Tower. In all likelihood, his past self was there, blissfully unaware of the fact that he was currently pressed up against Cap’s back, enjoying the way the warmth radiating from Steve’s core mitigated the sharp bite of the October air rushing by. He could
check into a hotel - thank God he’d time traveled with his wallet on him - but at some point he was going to have to figure out how to get back to the present, to *his* present, and hiding out at the W wasn’t going to help with that.

“Well, thanks for the ride,” Tony said as he clambered off the back of the bike.

“You sure you don’t want me to drop you off in the garage?” Steve said, propping the bike against the curb in Stark Tower’s private driveway.

“Nah, I’m good,” Tony said.

“Thanks for coming today,” Steve said.

“Happy to do it,” Tony said. He glanced up at the brightly lit Tower, then back at Steve, who was leaning against the bike and watching him with the look of someone who desperately wanted to seem casual but wasn’t doing a very good job, and -

*Oh, shit.*

Steve had cut the engine, had offered a ride into the garage. It was obvious: Steve wanted Tony to ask him up. Steve didn’t want the night to end.

And Tony really, really did.

“Well, you’d better get going,” Tony said quickly. “I’ll talk to you soon?”

Steve’s face froze, but a moment later he was smiling warmly. “Sure thing,” he said, quickly swinging his leg back over the bike. “See you later, Tony.”

“See you,” Tony said, watching as Steve disappeared into the evening crush of cars in Midtown. He stuck his hands in his pockets and headed toward Columbus Circle, running his Speed Machine equations in his head over and over in an attempt to figure out how he’d accidentally bent time.

Man, it would be *so* useful to talk to someone with experience with antimatter -

He was halfway to the W when his fingers started to tingle. He stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Watch it,” somebody muttered as they slammed into him from behind, but Tony ignored them, because the tingling was spreading up his arms, and he was dizzy, light-headed, he was fading, he was fading *again* -

-

When Tony opened his eyes, he was in Central Park.

“Well, fuck,” he said.

It definitely wasn’t October anymore. For one thing, it was hot as hell. The playground across the path was full of kids, running around with the boundless energy that indicated the beginning of summer, back when three months seemed like forever.

Tony peeled off his leather jacket and sighed. Okay, so the time travel thing apparently wasn’t going to be a one-shot deal, which he’d sort of assumed based on that whole message-from-his-future-self thing, but hey, a guy could dream. He reached automatically for his phone before remembering that he hadn’t had it with him when he’d left the present, and he hadn’t had it back in October, and wow,
if he ever gave anybody advice about traveling through time, the first thing he’d say was ‘make sure you have your phone’.

Not that it really mattered what advice he wanted to give: his future self had been very clear about not telling anybody what was going on. He’d fumbled through almost an entire day without telling Cap; it had been tough, sure, but it was over now, and maybe if he just stayed in the park and waited it out he’d eventually end up somewhere - or somewhen - else, what were the odds that he’d have more plans with somebody, there was no fucking way -

“Tony?”

That’d teach Tony to be confident. “Hey, Steve.”

Steve walked up the path toward him, looking stiff in a dark shirt and black slacks, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses. “What are you doing here?”

Well, at least he didn’t have plans that he didn’t know anything about. “Just enjoying the sun. What about you?”

“I just came into the city for the day,” Steve said. “I had a - a thing.”

“Ah,” Tony said. “Sure. Well, good to see you.”

“You too,” Steve said, but he didn’t walk away. He was watching the kids at the playground, his lips pressed together, the corner of his eyes downturned.

The smart thing to do would be to watch Steve walk away and not do anything that might disrupt the fabric of reality but Steve - Steve looked sad. When had Tony become somebody who was willing to potentially destroy the space-time continuum because Steve Rogers looked sad?

“Hey,” Tony blurted out, “do you want to get lunch?”

“Yes,” Steve said.

Well, fuck.

“I thought you said we weren’t going somewhere expensive,” Steve said, picking up his menu and looking around suspiciously.

“I lied,” Tony said. He’d chosen the small upper West Side restaurant because he hadn’t been there in years, and figured that, whenever he was, he was pretty unlikely to run into himself. “So how are things going?”

“Fine,” Steve said. “Did you get my update last week?”

“You too,” Steve said, but he didn’t walk away. He was watching the kids at the playground, his lips pressed together, the corner of his eyes downturned.

The smart thing to do would be to watch Steve walk away and not do anything that might disrupt the fabric of reality but Steve - Steve looked sad. When had Tony become somebody who was willing to potentially destroy the space-time continuum because Steve Rogers looked sad?

“I lied,” Tony said. He’d chosen the small upper West Side restaurant because he hadn’t been there in years, and figured that, whenever he was, he was pretty unlikely to run into himself. “So how are things going?”

“Fine,” Steve said. “Did you get my update last week?”

“Uh,” Tony said. “Yes? Remind me.”

“The latest tests on Sam’s new suit went well. He hit 100 miles per hour with no damage to the wings. Next time you have a chance, he’d like to talk about some ideas he has for a mask with more HUD options, but it’s not urgent. Other than that, things are good on base.”

“Good, good,” Tony said, swallowing a sigh of relief. He remembered the report Steve was talking about; it was from early June. It was four months earlier than it had been an hour ago. Okay. No big deal. He could handle this. “Can you maybe send me another email? Just to remind me. Not
that I’m planning to forget.”

“Sure,” Steve said easily. He picked up a piece of bread from the basket and shredded it into crumbs. “How have things been with you?”

“Oh, you know,” Tony said. “I’m all over the place.”

“Right,” Steve said.

Tony looked at his watch which read, unhelpfully, 11:59 pm. He’d have to look into that.

“So - ” he said, just as Steve said, “Well - ”

“You go ahead,” Tony said quickly.

“Well, between the fact that I’m wandering aimlessly through time and the fact that you kissed me last night, it just sorta seemed like the thing to do wasn’t an answer Tony was prepared to give.

“Honestly?” Tony said. “It was because you, uh - you looked a little lost. In the park.”

“Really?” Steve said, looking surprised.

“We might not be ‘let’s get lunch’ friends, but I can tell when you’re upset,” Tony said. He tried to reconcile the Steve sitting across from him with the one who, a few hours ago, was stealing pizza crust off his plate. “What’s going on?”

Steve adjusted in his seat. “I was at a funeral.”

“Oh,” Tony said. “Uh - who - ”

“A private from the Commandos,” Steve said. “He was one of the youngest guys under my command. I saw him once before, a couple of years ago, but he had Alzheimer’s, so he was pretty - well, anyway. His daughter invited me to the funeral. I wanted to pay my respects.”

“I’m sure his family appreciated it,” Tony said.

“I sat in the back,” Steve said. "Didn’t want to cause a scene. Anyway, I - I was feeling kind of lost.”

“I know the feeling,” Tony said.

Steve shook his head a little bit, like he was clearing the cobwebs. “So, if we’re lunch friends now, what were you doing sitting in the middle of Central Park in the middle of the day?”

“Things have been a little… weird lately,” Tony said casually. “I needed a break.”

“ Weird?” Steve said, smirking. “We haven’t had any alien invasions or hostile robot takeovers in months. What could be weird?”

“You’d be surprised,” Tony said, waving the waiter over.

“I’ll get it,” Steve said, reaching for the bill as soon as the waiter set it down.
“Don’t even think about it,” Tony said, batting his hand away. “Money is fungible and I pay your salary. So, any good gossip back on base?”

“Sam thinks Vision has a crush,” Steve said.

“Who’s the lucky life form?”

“Wanda. We’ve been trying to get him to make a move, but he’s a little inexperienced.”

Tony bit back a snort. Vision and Wanda had been an item for months. “Yeah, you could say that,” Tony said. “Well, I’m sure it’ll work out.”

“You think?” Steve said, raising his eyebrows. “We don’t think she’s even noticed. And they’re both - unique.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Tony said, signing the bill. *Like you kissing me on Christmas Eve.*

“I guess so,” Steve said as they left the restaurant. “Thanks for lunch. Next one’s on me.”

“Next one?” Tony said.

Steve shrugged. “You know. I just meant - well, it was kind of nice to talk, actually. When you’re not being an asshole. Which is admittedly rare.”

“If only the people of America knew what you were really like,” Tony said, shaking his head.

“They’d never believe you.” Steve held out his hand. “We should do this again sometime.”

“You know, I think we just might,” Tony said, shaking it.

Steve smiled at him, just a flicker, and turned down Columbus. “See you around, Tony,” he called over his shoulder as the post-lunch crowds closed in around him.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “See you.”

Just as Steve turned the corner, Tony felt his fingers start to fade away.

“God fucking da - “

- 

“ - mn it,” Tony said, blinking his way back to consciousness.

He sat up. He was lying on the ground in a dusty barn, and late-afternoon sun was streaming in through the dirty windows near the ceiling. There was a creaky, old-looking tractor mixed in with a lot of equipment that looked partly functional at best.

He knew this barn. This was Barton’s barn.

Okay, so, he was in the middle of Iowa, something like fifteen miles from the nearest town, with no reasonable explanation for how or why he was there, no idea what date it was, and strict instructions from his future self not to tell anyone about what was going on.

Great.
Tony brushed some hay off his slacks and considered his options. He could hide out here and hope that nobody found him, or he could march up to Barton’s front door and hope he came up with a good story before he got there.

He sneezed, sending dust motes swirling through the air. It was as good a sign as any.

As Tony approached the house, he saw that the dirt driveway was more crowded than the last time he’d been here - no way the Bartons had ever had that many cars - and just as he was about to start worrying that he’d made a longer-than-normal jump through time and Clint didn’t even live here yet - or anymore - the screen door slammed open and Clint jogged out, calling over his shoulder, “I know, I know, I’ll grab ‘em - Tony?”

“Hey,” Tony said. “So, kind of a weird story, but - ”

“I thought you said you couldn’t make it!” Clint said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Tony blinked. “Did I?”

“Well, isn’t this a surprise!” Laura called from the kitchen, where she was mopping up a spill. “I’m glad you could make it.”

“Hey, how could I miss Nate’s first birthday?” Tony said weakly, thinking of the past version of himself, the one who’d had Friday send an email saying he couldn’t make it alongside some kind of expensive present he couldn’t even remember.

“Tony, this is my family,” Laura said, gesturing to the other guests, who were all trying valiantly to pretend that it was totally normal that Tony Stark had just walked in. “The rest of the team is out back, if you want to see them.”

“Sounds good,” Tony said, nodding politely to an older couple who were clearly Laura’s parents and pushing open the screen door.

“Dog or burger?” Sam called from the grill.

“Both,” Tony said as Wanda handed him a beer.

“Did you come in the suit?” Steve asked. “I didn’t see you fly in.”

“Stealth mode,” Tony said. “Didn’t want to disturb Barton’s neighbors.”
“Pretty sure he hasn’t got any for ten miles in any direction,” Sam said. “Seriously, how does he live like this?”

“Quietly,” Natasha said.

“I don’t know, it could be kinda nice,” Steve said, taking a swig of lemonade and looking around. “The peace and quiet, the scent of wildflowers, the privacy - ”

“You got bored that time we went camping for a weekend,” Sam cut in. “A couple weeks ago you went into the city just to buy a soft pretzel. You wouldn’t last a hot second working a farm. Tony, you want cheese?”

“Huh?” Tony said, wrenching his mind away from his calculation of how fast he could make it to the barn if he started to fade. “Oh, yeah. Cheese me.”

“I could totally work a farm,” Steve said. “I could milk cows, and - and move hay, or whatever.”

“Move hay,” Vision repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Is that an integral part of maintaining a farm?”

“It’s not as fun as it sounds,” Clint said, the screen door slamming shut behind him. “I would know. I ran away and joined the circus.”

“You didn’t,” Wanda said, horrified.

“He did,” Natasha said. “How do you think he ended up like this?”

“Ended up like what? A world famous superhero?” Clint said.

“I hope they arm wrestle,” Steve said as Tony settled into a lawn chair next to him. “I always love it when they arm wrestle. Aren’t you glad you showed up?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I think I kind of am.”

“And this last one’s from Uncle Tony,” Laura said, pulling an oversized box out from behind the couch.

“Don’t call me that, it makes me sound old,” Tony said.

“You’re older than me,” Clint said, ripping off the wrapping paper. “Maybe we should change it to Grandpa Tony?”

“Uncle it is,” Tony said.

“A fire truck!” Laura said, lifting Nate up so he could see inside. “Tony, this is great, he loves fire trucks.”

“I bet it needs a million batteries,” Clint said.

“Anything to torture you, Barton,” Tony said.

“Say thank you to everybody, Nate,” Clint said. “Thank you! Thank you! Okay, thank you isn’t gonna be his first word, which is cool because I want it to be Hawkeye. Who wants cake?”

“Me!” Cooper yelled.
“I’ll get it!” Lila said, darting off into the kitchen.

“Walk carefully!”

“I can handle it, Mommy,” Lila called from the kitchen.

“I can’t say that I understand the tradition of cake at children’s birthday parties,” Vision said. “It seems counterintuitive to serve such large doses of sugar to already excited young - ”

There was a crash, a yelp, and an unfortunate squelch from the kitchen.

Laura winced. “Oh, no.”

“Mommy,” Lila said, her voice wavering as she walked out into the living room empty-handed. “I dropped the cake.”

“That’s okay,” Laura said. “Accidents happen, sweetheart.” She turned to Clint. “There’s some ice cream in the freezer in the basement, right?”

Clint was staring at Tony, his eyes wide.

“Honey?” Laura said.

“Right,” Clint said, his eyes still on Tony as he headed for the door. “Got it.”

“Babies don’t even like cake,” Natasha said, putting her arm around Lila.

“And we all ate plenty.” Sam said, scooping up a hunk of smushed cake and dropping it into the trash. “If I ate any more, I’d probably explode.”

“You wouldn’t want to see him explode,” Steve said. “It’s gross.”

“Hawkeye to the rescue,” Clint said, kicking open the basement door and walking out with - a cake.

“Daddy!” Lila said, jumping up. “You have another cake?”

“Of course I have another cake,” Clint said with a grin. “Who doesn’t buy a back-up cake?”

“Everybody,” Sam said. “Everybody doesn’t buy a back-up cake.”

“Did you accidentally order two cakes?” Laura said, frowning down at the second cake, which also said Happy 1st Birthday Nate on it.

“Yup, that makes the most sense,” Clint said. “Who has the candles? Everybody ready to sing?”

“Sing?” Vision said, frowning.

“It is so great to have someone around who understands things even less than I do,” Steve said, grinning. “Happy birthday to - ”

"Steeeee-rike three, you’re out!” Sam yelled.

“Aw, man,” Clint said, dropping the bat. “Wanda shouldn’t get to pitch anymore, it’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair,” Wanda smirked as the ball drifted back to her.
“Beer?” Tony said, holding one out to Vision, who was perched on the steps.

“No, thank you,” Vision said, barely looking at Tony as he sat down.

“Yeah, probably better not to drink and fly,” Tony said.

“Ow,” Clint said as Wanda made the ball bounce off the top of his head. “Dude, not funny!”

“It’s kind of funny,” Natasha said as Clint tried to snatch the ball out of the air. Lila and Cooper shrieked as Wanda floated it just out of his reach, and as Tony watched, Vision’s eyes tracked the ball - no, Vision’s eyes tracked *Wanda*, her hair falling in her face, her eyes bright with laughter. All at once something Sam had said earlier - no, something Sam had said months from now - fell into place.

“You like her,” Tony said.

“Pardon?” Vision said, in his voice that was so like and so unlike JARVIS’s.

Tony gestured at the yard, where Clint was chasing Wanda with Lila on his back, darting through the trees in pursuit of the baseball. “It’s okay, you know. It’s normal to have feelings for friends.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do,” Tony said. “And I also think you should tell her.”

Vision glanced at him and arched an eyebrow. “And why would I do that?”

“Because I think she has feelings for you too.”

“I’m sure if Ms. Maximoff had any interest in me beyond friendship, she would feel comfortable telling me that herself,” Vision said.

“Maybe,” Tony said. “But humans have a lot of bad habits. One of them is not being able to see what’s right in front of them.”

“And you know from experience?” Vision said.

“You could say that,” Tony said. “Just think about it. You never know what the future holds. Sometimes you don’t even know what the past holds.”

Vision frowned. “Don’t you?”

“Figure of speech,” Tony said.

“If you say so,” Vision said, standing up. He started down the steps, and then paused and looked back. “Thank you, Mr. Stark. I appreciate the advice.”

“Anytime,” Tony said, watching as he walked right up to Wanda and said something quietly in her ear. She smiled at him, the baseball dropping to the ground at her feet.

“You meddling motherfucker,” Tony muttered. “If time police exist, I am going to be *so* - ”

“Want more cake?”

“I’m good,” Tony said, glancing up as Steve sat down next to him on the steps. “Isn’t that your third piece?”
“Nate had four,” Steve said, digging into the bright blue frosting with a plastic fork.

“Nate is a baby. And he threw at least two of them on the ground.”

“Such a waste,” Steve said sadly.

“You gonna play?” Tony asked, nodding toward where Sam had picked up the bat and was goading Cooper onto the plate.

“Nah,” Steve said. “I don’t want anybody to have to go hunting for the ball in the next county over.”

“So modest.”

“Anyway, you know I like to watch,” Steve said.

“You like to - ”

“Yeah, I just heard it too,” Steve said. “And here I was trying to say thanks.”

“Thanks?”

“For the game,” Steve said. “It was nice to do something normal on my birthday for once.”

“Right,” Tony said slowly. Well, that was just what he needed: a conversation about yet another thing that had happened in the past that he hadn’t experienced yet.

In the distance, Lila shrieked as Sam picked her up and sprinted around the bases. “I didn’t even like birthdays when I was a kid - who cares about some fella’s birthday when it’s the 4th of July, right?” Steve said. “And now here I am having these birthdays that should’ve happened a long time ago and it - it just never felt like something to celebrate. But this year was - well, it was great.”

“Glad to hear it,” Tony said, deciding that if he ever ran into his future self, he was going to punch him in the face.

The pick-up game appeared to be winding down: Natasha and Cooper were flat on their backs, staring at the pink-purple glow of the sunset; Clint and Sam were tossing the ball above Lila’s head, always just out of reach, and she was laughing and trying to catch it; Vision and Wanda had disappeared.

Steve was leaning against the steps, his shoulders loose and his face relaxed, and Tony didn’t realize he was staring until Steve said, “What?”

“Nothing,” Tony said. It wasn’t nothing, but it was the simplest thing Tony had felt in years.

“Look,” Steve said quietly, a smile spreading across his face. “Fireflies.”

All at once, like flashes of lightning out of the corner of your eye, fireflies appeared in the backyard, pinpricks of soft light swimming drunkenly through the dusk.

“I bet I could catch one,” Steve said.

“You catch a lot of fireflies as a kid in Brooklyn?” Tony teased.

“Not too many,” Steve said. He crept toward the nearest fading in and out glow, his hands cupped in front of him. “But how hard can it be?”
“It’s not as easy as it looks,” Tony said. “Sometimes you think you have it, and then it slips right through your fingertips.”

“Not this one,” Steve said, closing his palms. He turned back to Tony, grinning, and held out his hands. “Wanna see?”

Tony leaned forward. “On three? One, two - ”

Steve opened his hands, and a firefly fluttered out, blinking in and out of existence before Tony’s eyes.

“Whaddya know,” Tony said. “Captain America’s good with his hands. Yeah, I heard what I said.”

“As long as you heard it,” Steve said, watching the firefly dance away. Tony felt warm, like he was floating, almost, like he was drunk, like he was -

- fading.

“I have to go,” he said, lurching to his feet. “Stuff to do back at - at the Tower - don’t look for me, I’ll be in stealth mode again - ”

“Oh,” Steve said. “Okay, well - ”

“Tell the Bartons thanks for the cake,” Tony threw over his shoulder, bolting toward the barn as his fingertips went transparent.

“Good to see you,” Steve called.

“You too,” Tony choked, rounding the corner and falling to his knees. “Fuck, I - ”

- will never get used to that,” Tony said, opening his eyes.

He was home.

He got to his feet a little unsteadily and looked around. He was in his office in the penthouse, the one he used for conference calls. Now all he had to do was figure out where the hell in time he was, and -

He froze.

There was music playing on the other side of the heavy steel door. Weird music. Terrible music. Was that -

Was that a reggae version of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer?

“Fuck,” Tony breathed, pushing open the door.

He was back.

Tony leaned weakly against the wall and laughed. He was back at the Tower, he was back at Christmas Eve, he was back in the right time. There were party-goers spilling out into the hallway, and twinkling lights from the oversized Christmas tree, and the murmur of a bunch of people he didn’t even like getting drunk on his dime.
“What’s so funny?”

Tony looked up to see Natasha stalking toward him. “Oh - just - hey, is something wrong?”

Natasha narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know. I’m not the one who makes promises I can’t keep.”

Tony blinked. “Sorry, what?”

“What exactly were you getting out of it?” Natasha’s gaze was cold and furious, but try as he might, he couldn’t think of anything he’d done to make her angry. He had hardly seen her at the party - the party that was still in full swing, the party where, he realized with a sinking feeling, Paul McCartney’s awful Reggae Rudolph had played hours before he’d faded the first time.

Which meant he was still in the past, and that meant - that meant there was another version of him around here somewhere.

“Look, whatever it was, I promise I’ll make it up to you,” Tony said.

Natasha reeled back. “Whatever it was? Fuck you.”

“I’m sure I deserve that,” Tony said. “It’s been a really weird couple of days and I have to deal with something, but I promise you can yell at me later - ”

“Go to hell, Stark,” Natasha said, her voice shaking so slightly that someone who didn’t know her wouldn’t have been able to tell. She turned away and disappeared down the hall.

“Yeah, already covered,” Tony said. He glanced around, then headed for the private elevator around the corner. He needed to get down to the Speed Machine and he couldn’t afford to run into anybody else.

He punched the button and looked over his shoulder. “Friday, pick up the pace, I need to get out of here.”

“Sir - you should be aware that - ”

The elevator doors slid open.

“Uh, hey,” somebody said.

Tony turned around slowly. “Bruce?”

“Hi,” Bruce said, lifting one hand.

Tony launched himself at Bruce, wrapping the other man in a potentially dangerous hug. “What are you doing here?”

Bruce blinked. “What? You called me.”

“No, I didn’t,” Tony said blankly.

“Yes, you did,” Bruce said.

“I definitely did not call you,” Tony said. “I’m pretty sure I would remember something like that, there’s no way - ”

From inside the elevator, Clint burst out laughing.
Tony and Bruce both turned to look at him.

“Oh my god,” Clint wheezed. “I can’t believe I didn’t realize - and you didn’t say - you’re not from right now, are you?”

“What?” Tony said. “You know about this?”

“Yup.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Tony said.

“Because you told me not to!”

“Is somebody going to explain to me what’s going on, or are we going to stand in the elevator all night?” Bruce said.

“Friday, take us down to my lab,” Tony said, and the doors shut firmly behind him. “Barton, start talking.”

“I don’t know how much I’m supposed to tell you,” Clint said. “When are you from?”

“Tonight, but that was also a couple days ago,” Tony said. “I didn’t know you knew.”

“Yeah, you told me at some point in your future, I guess,” Clint said. “Probably because of right now. Aw, time travel, no.”

“Yeah, it happens,” Tony said. “Do you know how I make it stop?”

Clint shrugged. “You never said.”

“Uh, did you just say time travel?” Bruce said.

“Unfortunately he did,” Tony said as they emerged into his lab. “When did I call you?”

“About a month ago,” Bruce said. “I thought I was off the radar, how did you find me in Jakarta?”


Bruce raised his eyebrows. “Okay, let me get this straight. You’re telling me you’re time traveling.”

“Yes,” Tony said.

“And you’re going to continue time traveling back to a month ago.”

“Right.”

“At which point you’re going to call me,” Bruce said.

“Bingo.”

Bruce looked from Tony to Clint. “You believe him?”

Clint shrugged. “Not even the weirdest thing this year, dude.”

“Fair,” Bruce said. “So how did this happen? And how are you controlling it?”

“I’m not,” Tony said, pulling up the Speed Machine’s schematics. “That’s the problem. As far as I
can tell, I’m traveling randomly through time. It started a few hours after a small antimatter explosion - ”

“A small antimatter explosion,” Bruce echoed.

“It was contained. Obviously. Since New York is still here,” Tony rummaged through the nearest desk drawer and pulled out a prototype phone with an extended battery life that he was pretty sure worked. “Friday, set up this phone with my next automatically generated phone number. You guys would not even believe how hard it is to live in the past without a cell phone, this is seriously a game-changer for me.”

“How far back in time have you gone?” Bruce said.

Tony slipped the phone in his pocket. “Only as far as June of this year. Do you know of any instances of antimatter experimentation leading to time travel?”

“Oh, no,” Bruce said. “What exactly were you building here?”

“I call it the Speed Machine,” Tony said. “The name’s not my best work, but we’re looking at Mach 6 if I get it right - ”

“But you didn’t get it right,” Bruce said.

“Not quite,” Tony said. “I need you to find what went wrong and figure out how to reverse it.”

“Me?” Bruce said.

“Do you see any other antimatter experts around here?” Tony said. “I don’t know how long I have until I fade - ”

“Fade?”

“That’s what he calls it when he time travels,” Clint contributed.

“- and if I don’t figure it out in time, I’m gonna need you to make sure this thing gets shut down, no matter what,” Tony said. “But first, you need to give me your phone number.”

“I’m not giving you my phone number,” Bruce said.

“It’s too late,” Tony said. “It hath already happened, and so it must happeneth again.”

“Did you come from the near future, or the time of Shakespeare?” Clint said, rolling his eyes.

“You seriously do have to give me your phone number,” Tony said. “I think it’s that kind of time travel.”

“What do you mean, that kind of time travel? Time travel isn’t even supposed to be possible.”

“I mean that, like, it’s clearly already happened, so if you try to change the past, there could be some kind of singularity - ”

“It would be a paradox, not a singularity.”

“I thought you said this isn’t even supposed to be possible?”

Bruce sighed. “Do you have a pen?”
Clint pulled one out of his pocket. “Do we even use pens in the future?”

“I come from, like, twenty minutes in the future,” Tony said as Bruce scribbled down a number. “How’d I convince you to come back, anyhow?”

“You didn’t,” Bruce said, handing him the number. “Natasha did.”

“Natasha?” Tony said. “Wait, but you said - oh, god damn it, already?”

“Is it just me,” Bruce said, “or is he going kind of… transparent?”

“So that’s why you call it fading,” Clint said.

“No, no, it’s too soon, I have so many questions,” Tony said.

“You have questions?” Bruce snapped as Tony felt his fingers fade away. “We’re watching you dissolve!”

“It’s fine, it doesn’t hurt, it feels a little like college,” Tony said. “Just, don’t tell anybody about this. Oh, and shut the thing down no matter what, okay?”

“What if we shut it down, but you don’t come back?” Clint said.

“Like I said,” Tony said as his vision blurred. “No matter what.”

When Tony woke up, he was flat on his back in the middle of the living room.

“Sir?” Friday said.

“Ugh,” Tony said, sitting up. “Hey.”

And then the loudest alarm he’d ever heard went off.

“Intruder alert,” Friday’s voice said. “Intruder alert. There is an intruder in the penthouse. Intruder alert. Intruder - ”

“Friday, Jesus, it’s me!” Tony yelled.

“You’re an imposter,” Friday said. “Intruder alert.”

“Oh, shit, you haven’t had me show up yet,” Tony said. “Friday, listen to me, cut the alarm, security code delta omega 649810, it’s me - ”

“You’re an imposter,” Friday repeated.

“Scan me, Friday, my retinas, my blood, whatever you want.”

The alarm continued to wail. “Mr. Stark is not in New York. You’re a clone.”

“I’m not a - look, would a clone know that the first sixteen lines of your code are just the words to Bohemian Rhapsody?”

The alarm cut off. “Possibly.”

“Would a clone know that you reprogrammed yourself to automatically hassle me when I’ve gone
more than three days without going outside, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t figure out how to undo it?”

Friday paused. “It’s unlikely.”

“Would a clone remember that we rebooted you once, when you were young, because you accidentally overloaded your servers with that weird porn from those Russian servers I hacked into after they stole intel from the CIA?”

“That does seem like classified and rather personal information,” Friday said.

“It’s me,” Tony said. “I’m time traveling.”

“Time traveling,” Friday repeated flatly.

“Yeah, time traveling,” Tony said, pushing open the door to his bedroom and searching for the tablet he’d seen himself recorded on back in October. “Come on, I invented you, it can’t be that hard to believe. So I’m out of town?”

“Indeed, sir,” Friday said. “When are you from?”

“Christmas Eve,” Tony said. “And assorted. What’s today’s date?”

“July 4th, 2016.”

“July - July 4th?” Tony said, freezing. “Oh, shit. Hey, you don’t happen to know about any plans I have for today, do you?”

“All of the plans that I’m aware of take place in Miami, which is where you currently are, in my timeline,” Friday said, and man, was Tony glad he’d built an adaptive AI.

“I was afraid of that,” Tony said. “It’s Steve’s birthday, isn’t it.”

“Captain Rogers was indeed born on Independence Day.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Tony said, pulling out his phone. “Hey, download my current address book onto this phone, will you? Don’t worry, it’s from the future but it’s compatible with my systems - awesome, thanks.” He scrolled through the names until he got to the right one.

“Yello?”

“Clint, it’s Tony,” Tony said.

“Oh, hey,” Clint said. “New phone number?”

“Temporary,” Tony said. “Listen, do you know if I have any plans today?”

“Uh, no? Shouldn’t you know about your plans better than me?”

“I’m not from right now,” Tony said. “I just came from Christmas Eve and saw you, and you told me you knew about this, so I was hoping you could help me out.”

“Um,” Clint said. “What?”

Tony winced. “You don’t know what I’m talking about.”
“Nope,” Clint said. “Didn’t you stop using cocaine like fifteen years ago?”

“Those were only rumors,” Tony said. “I mean, sometimes rumors are true, but - anyway, not the point, look, this is going to sound crazy, I mean really crazy, but - I’m time traveling. I’m from about six months in the future.”

“Uh huh,” Clint said slowly. “You know, I’m not really equipped to deal with psychotic breaks. I think Sam is, you want his number?”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Dude, what do you want me to say? I’m trying to make lunch for my kids and you just told me you’re from the future. Part of me wants to believe you, but the other part of me is wishing I was recording this conversation to play for you when you’re sober.”

“Of all the people I could have told, why did it have to be you?” Tony said. “Look, I can prove it to you.”

“I don’t want lottery numbers.”

“Good, because I haven’t bothered looking any up,” Tony said. “But I’m sure there’s something - I was just with you, I was just - oh.” He grinned as it dawned on him. “The cake.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Nate’s cake,” Tony said. “For his birthday next month. Buy a second one, okay?”

“Why?” Clint said. “It’s not poisoned or anything, is it?”

“What, no,” Tony said. “Jesus, spies. There’s nothing wrong with the cake, just - you’re gonna need two. Of the same cake. Trust me.”

“Trust you,” Clint repeated dubiously. “You know I usually do, Tony, but this is - are you sure you’re okay?”

“I promise,” Tony said. “This is all gonna make sense eventually.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Clint said.

“Just buy the cake,” Tony said. “I gotta go, talk to you - at some point, I don’t know. Oh, and if you see me, don’t mention this to me unless I mention it first, okay?”

“Whatever ‘this’ is, I can absolutely promise you that I will never bring it up again,” Clint said. “Sleep it off, dude.”

“Yeah, fuck you,” Tony said.

“Love you too, Tony,” Clint said, and hung up.

Tony dropped his head onto the back of the couch. “Friday?”

“Yes, sir?”

“What do people like to do on their 98th birthdays?”

“I assume you’re not referring to a typical 98 year old,” Friday said.
“I don’t know, his taste in sweaters is pretty elderly,” Tony said. “Damn it, why didn’t I ask what he was talking about when he brought up his birthday? Oh, right, because that would have been weird. Friday, do a search for anything about his birthday, news articles, Twitter mentions, I don’t know -”

“I believe I have something, sir,” Friday said. “According to an unofficial biography from 1949, his birthday did not play into his selection as Captain America, though it was, quote, ‘a hell of a coincidence.’”

Tony dropped his face into his hands. “I’m going to ruin his birthday. And also possibly the space-time continuum.”

“That is unlikely,” Friday said calmly.

“He said it was nice to do something normal. What do normal people do on their birthdays?”

“Normal people are not exactly my specialty,” Friday said.

“Yeah, me neither,” Tony said. “But I’m guessing it means no fireworks, no marching bands in Central Park, none of that other romantic stuff -”

“Romantic, sir?” Friday said.

“Forget I said that,” Tony said quickly. “Seriously, erase it from your memory banks, delete the video, it never happened.”

“Of course. Based on data from media and current events, normal birthday outings include casual dinners with friends, gatherings with friends and family at home, trips to music and sporting events -”

“Baseball,” Tony said, sitting up straight. “He brought it up when they were playing baseball.”

“Baseball, sir?”

“What year did the Dodgers leave Brooklyn, Friday?”

“1957.”

“So I should buy them and bring them back to New York.”

“That’s one option,” Friday said. “The Dodgers are playing the Yankees today in New York. Is it possible that you will be attending the game with him?”

“That makes more sense,” Tony said. “Man, I am really bad at this.”

“I’ll contact the stadium right away to purchase tickets, sir. Would you like to sit right behind home plate, or would you prefer a reserved box?”

“Neither,” Tony said. “Bleacher seats.”

“Bleacher seats?”

“Way in the outfield,” Tony said. “As high up as you can get.”

“Those are not premium seats, sir,” Friday said.

“Exactly,” Tony said, pulling out his phone. He jiggled his foot impatiently as it rang once, twice,
“Hello?”

“Hey, Steve,” Tony said. “Weird question. Are you busy today? I was supposed to take a client to the Yankees game today, and he bailed last minute, so I was wondering if you wanted to come instead, if you were free. I think they’re playing, uh, let’s see, the Dodgers?”

Tony saw Steve first - he wasn’t hard to miss even in the crowd of Yankees fans milling around outside the gates - and Tony waved him over.

“Hey, Tony,” Steve said. “Good to see you.”

“Glad you could make it,” Tony said. “I hate to see a perfectly good pair of tickets go to waste.”

“Me too,” Steve said, accepting his ticket and joining the line. “And it’s real lucky they’re playing the Dodgers. I probably shouldn’t say this too loud, but I can’t stand the Yankees.”

“Really,” Tony said, digging into the plastic bag in his hand and pulling out a blue ballcap with an old-fashioned B on it. “Good thing I brought this for you, then.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “There was never a client, was there.”

“Nope,” Tony said, shoving the hat on Steve’s head. “Happy birthday, Gramps.”

Steve straightened out the hat and tilted his head at Tony. “How’d you know it was my birthday?”

“Um,” Tony said. “Wikipedia?”

“Right,” Steve said as they entered the stadium and joined the throng of people heading for their section. “So, where are the TV cameras? Am I going to have to sing the national anthem before the first pitch? Because I’m a terrible singer, the serum didn’t do anything for my vocal cords - “

“What?” Tony said. “We’re just catching a game, Cap.”

“This isn’t a PR thing?” Steve said, and Tony felt his fists clench involuntarily.

“Jesus, no,” Tony said. “There’s no press, no interviews, nothing. Just me and you. I just - I thought you might want to do something fun for your birthday, and I didn’t think the team had anything planned, so - but if you don’t want to be here, I - ”

“No, no, I do want to be here,” Steve said. “I guess I just - in the 40s, they used my birthday as kind of a publicity stunt, and - this is just a game?”

“Just a game,” Tony said.

“For my birthday.”

“For your birthday,” Tony confirmed.

Steve still looked wary. “What if I’d been busy?”

Tony shrugged. “Then I’d have had two tickets to sell on StubHub. Where’s the rest of the team, anyway?”
“Sam’s visiting family in DC, Nat’s doing something secretive that probably involves tracking Bruce, and Wanda and Vision are taking a cooking class.”

“A cooking class?”

“I know, right?” Steve said, following Tony up the stairs. “Wanda’s been talking about it for days. Apparently she loves to cook.”

“Sounds like a date.”

“It’s definitely not,” Steve said. “I’m pretty sure neither of them wants to make the first move. It’s a big risk, trying to make a friend into something more.”

“I’ve heard,” Tony murmured, a wall of sound hitting him as he and Steve emerged from the tunnel into their section.

“Where the hell are we sitting?” Steve said, squinting out at the field.

“Bleachers. I figured we could just do it, you know, the normal way.” Tony cringed; it almost felt like cheating.

“Oh,” Steve said.

“Unless you’d rather get a box, I’m sure I can - ”

“No, no, no, this is good,” Steve said. “This is great, actually.”

“Good,” Tony said, squeezing past a large man holding an even larger hot dog. “Because you owe me one for this. You know you have to go buy your own beer from these seats? They won’t even bring it to you.”

“Life is hard,” Steve said, patting Tony on the shoulder.

-  

“Peanuts! Get your peanuts!”

“Right here!” Steve yelled, waving down the vendor. “Tony, do you want peanuts?”

“No, I - ”

“Two bags!” Steve called, pulling out his wallet. “I’ll eat the rest of yours.”

“You’ll eat all of mine.”

“Fourteen dollars,” the vendor called down the row.

“Fourteen bucks?” Steve said, handing over the cash. “Are you kiddin’ me?”

“Is this going to cause another one of your inflation rants?”

“I don’t have an inflation rant.”

“You definitely have an inflation rant,” Tony said.

“I mean, seven bucks a pop!” Steve said, clearly unable to help himself. “You know, it used to be you could get a paper bag full of peanuts at a ballgame for fifteen cents.”
“Yup, that’s the beginning of the inflation rant.”

“And that’s not even getting started on the hot dogs and a cold beer - how’s a family supposed to have a day at the game at prices like that?” Steve continued, spitting a peanut shell onto the floor.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Did I just see Captain America litter?”

“It’s a ballpark!” Steve said. “It doesn’t count.”

“It definitely counts,” Tony said. “Oh, oh, check out the jumbotron!”

“Oh no,” Steve said. “What did you do?”

“Why do people always say that? I don’t understand why people always say that, just watch.”

“Happy Anniversary Mike and Tanya?”

“Yes,” Tony said. “Yes, exactly. That’s the message I was talking about. No, it’s - there it is.”

*Happy 98th Birthday Steve*, the jumbotron read in blocky, flashing lights.

“From me to you, buddy,” Tony said, clapping Steve on the back.

“You’re a dick, Tony.”

“Do you see that, folks?” the announcer said. “98 years old and still a Yankees fan. Thanks, Steve!”

“What?” Steve yelped. “No way, I’m not a - the Yankees suck.”

The guy in front of Steve stood up and slowly turned around. He was wearing a Yankees jersey and a Yankees hat and had at least three different Yankees tattoos on his massive arms, which he flexed as he turned a glare on Steve.

“You know, asshole, I’ve been puttin’ up with you cheering for the Dodgers all day,” the man said, “but that’s too fuckin’ far. You wanna take this outside, or you wanna stay here so your boyfriend can watch?”

Steve blinked up at him from under the bill of his cap, and then stood up. He had five inches and 60 pounds on the guy.

“I didn’t know it was a crime to cheer for the visiting team,” Steve said, pulling off his cap. The Yankees fan’s eyes went wide.

“Guess this answers the question of whether or not we were recognized,” Tony muttered.

“It’s - uh - not,” the guy said, clearly trying to find a way to back out of a fight with Captain America. He pulled down on his jersey and sat down. “Just - you might wanna keep it down, okay? You’re in Yankee territory.”

“Eighty years ago you woulda been rooting for the Dodgers,” Steve said, crossing his arms over his chest as he sat back down next to Tony. “I don’t usually like to do that.”

“What, use the Captain America thing to freak people out?”

“Yeah, that,” Steve said with a grin. “But that? That was pretty awesome.”
“You heard it here first, America,” Tony said. “Fuck the Yankees.”

“Language,” Steve said, elbowing Tony in the ribs.

“I’m just sayin’, there’s no reason to pay twenty bucks for a hot dog in the stadium when you can get an even better one out here for a couple bucks,” Steve said, stuffing the rest of his third dirty water dog into his mouth.

“Look, I have no problem with street meat,” Tony said. “But it’s your birthday. We could’ve gone anywhere, and you chose hot dogs. From a cart.”

“What can I say?” Steve said, licking a dollop of mustard off his finger. “I love hot dogs.”

“You are truly a man of the people.”

At the end of the block, there was a crackle and several shrieks as somebody lit off a bottle rocket.

“Do you think we can see the fireworks from here?” Steve said, craning his neck to look up at the sky.

“I know a guy with front row seats,” Tony said, gesturing in the direction of Midtown. “We could go back to my place, have a drink.”

“Oh,” Steve said, looking surprised. “Well, my bike’s here, and I should probably be getting back to base.”

“Right,” Tony said, his stomach sinking. “Of course. You should definitely head home.”

Suddenly, he could see it all laid out in front of him: Steve, three months from now, hoping for the same invitation and not getting it. Man. Doing this kind of thing in the wrong order was really messing up his game.

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “But this was - I mean, I really - ”

“Yeah, hey, it was no problem,” Tony said. “I don’t make it to games very often, so I appreciate the excuse.”

“So I guess I’ll see you around?”

“Definitely,” Tony said, and before he knew what he was doing he’d pulled Steve down and thrown his arms around Steve’s shoulders.

“We’re hugging friends now?” Steve teased, hugging him back.

“Guess so,” Tony said. “Happy birthday, old man.”

“Thanks, asshole,” Steve said, pushing him away with a grin. Tony watched him weave through the 4th of July revelers toward the stadium and wished he could just fade away.

No suck luck, he thought sourly as he hailed a cab.

Tony flopped down on his bed as soon as he got home. “At least I have somewhere to sleep tonight. Friday, can you start scanning Twitter for any mentions of me at the game and make sure they don’t make it through to the other me? Not that he’d notice, he’s probably passed out at the Ritz in South
Beach by now.”

“Of course, sir. Are there any other instructions you’d like to leave for me should this happen again?” Friday said.

“Oh, it happens again,” Tony said. “It’s already happened again. Let’s see, in October, I’m gonna be in denial, so just work with me, I have to meet Steve and I really don’t want to fuck that one up. My tablet! Direct me to my tablet.”

“Your tablet, sir?”

Tony reached into his bedside table and pulled out the tablet. “Keep the following message encrypted on my private server until October 15th, and do not let anybody - even me - see it.”

“Understood.”


The tablet had barely slipped from Tony’s hands when he was opening his eyes again.

“Huh,” he said, blinking.

“What the fuck,” Clint Barton said, slamming on the brakes of his car and sending Tony lurching toward the dashboard.

“Ow,” Tony said as Clint’s hand caught him and pushed him back into the seat.

“Jesus, put your seatbelt on!” Clint screeched. “Did you just teleport?”

“Kind of,” Tony said, rubbing his chest and pulling on his seatbelt. “Do you know about how I can time travel?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know it looked like that!” Clint said. “All of a sudden you were just, like, there. You could warn a guy!”

“I can’t control it,” Tony said. “When are we?”

“When are - I don’t know, it’s Tuesday.”

“What month?”

“September - so you really can’t control it? How did it start? Where have you been? Have you met any famous dead people?”

“I really can’t control it, it started because I did something dumb, I’ve been basically to wherever Cap is at any given moment, don’t ask, and that’s your fourth question? Have I met any dead people?”

“It’s a valid question,” Clint said. “So that’s how you knew about the cake? You’d already been there?”

“Oh, the cake thing worked?” Tony said.
“Well, kind of, but even if it hadn’t, you just teleported into my car,” Clint said. “Turns out seeing is believing.”

“Where are we, by the way?” Tony said, glancing out the window at the trees rushing by.

“Headed to base,” Clint said. “Debrief from that mad scientist robot thing from last week. Oh, shit, are you going to be there? Another you, I mean?”

“No,” Tony said, relieved. “I didn’t show up. Guess that explains why there was no angry voicemail from Captain Follows The Rules.”

“Speaking of,” Clint said, pulling onto the dirt road that led to the base, “you’ve been time traveling just to hang out with Steve?”

“No,” Tony said. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Ah,” Clint said. “That clears it up. So, hey, do I go bald?”

“Clint Barton, a man who really cares about the important questions.”

“It’s a serious concern! I have baldness on both sides of my family.”

“As much as I’d love to tell you that you go bald, I’m only from a few months in the future, and you’re not bald by Christmas.”

“Thank God,” Clint said, pulling into the garage.

“And hey, don’t mention the time travel thing, okay?” Tony said as they got in the elevator. “You’re the only person who knows.”

“Me?” Clint said. “Why’d you pick me?”

“I have no idea,” Tony said. “Oh, and if I fade, cover for me, okay?”

“Fade?”

“Time travel without notice,” Tony said under his breath, nodding to the security guards as they passed into the command center. “You’ll know it when you see it.”

“This is weird,” Clint said. “I feel like I’m a spy or something.”

“You are a spy,” Tony hissed.

“Nice of you two to join us,” Natasha drawled as the door swung shut behind them.

“I had to pick up Stark,” Clint said easily, flopping down into the chair next to her. “His car broke down.”

“All of them?” Sam said, raising an eyebrow.

“Guess so,” Tony said. “How much do I owe you for gas?”

Clint grinned. “How about some new exploding arrows?”

“Your wish is my command.”

“If we could get started?” Steve said, but he didn’t sound annoyed; as Tony swiveled around, he
caught the same smile on Steve’s face that he’d seen there on Christmas Eve, the same fond look, like Steve looked at Tony and saw something that made him happy.

Tony swallowed. “Yes, sir,” he said.

This, he thought, is totally my fault.

- 

“Are you staying for dinner?” Steve asked as the team filed out of the conference room, still arguing over whether or not Clint’s four-story plummet during the robot battle had counted as a “balls as hell jump” or a “fall”.

A surprise hangout with Steve, Tony thought. This is getting a little cliche, universe.

“Yes,” he said. “What’re we having?”

“Pancakes,” Sam called over his shoulder. “And I still maintain that anything over fifteen feet is definitely a fall.”

“But I did it on purpose,” Clint argued. “It’s by definition a jump if I did it on purpose.”

“If Sam hadn’t caught you, you would have broken both your legs,” Wanda pointed out. “Most people don’t jump if they can’t land without a trip to the hospital.”

“Pancakes for dinner?” Tony said.

Steve shrugged. “Sam loves breakfast.”

“The concept of breakfast versus dinner food is purely a human construct,” Vision pointed out.

“An important human construct.”

“You’re welcome to go home if you don’t want breakfast for dinner,” Natasha said.

“You’ll have to ask Clint for a ride,” Steve reminded him.

“Pancakes it is,” Clint crowed.

Dinner was loud as the argument about Clint’s jump - “It was a jump and that’s final, but also please don’t tell Laura.” - slid into a debate about who could fly faster, Vision or Thor, which seemed a little unfair considering Thor wasn’t there to defend himself; by the time they passed around ice cream, Clint and Sam were bickering about the upcoming major league baseball playoffs that Tony was doing his best not to spoil, Vision and Wanda were doing dishes and sending each other disgustedly longing looks, and Natasha and Steve were arguing, quietly but fiercely, about something Tony couldn’t quite overhear.

“ - no need to go looking again,” Steve said. “You’ve already - ”

“It’s recon,” Natasha said. “I’m only requisitioning the quinjet for nine days, and - ”

“It’s not about the jet,” Steve said. “It’s about you going on another wild goose chase.”

“I’m not asking for your help,” Natasha said. “Or your permission.”

“Is this about Bruce?” Tony said.
Steve and Natasha both whirled on him.

“Don’t worry about - ”

“That’s none of your - ”

“Because if it is,” Tony interrupted, “I have some ideas.”

“I don’t need any ideas,” Natasha said, standing up abruptly and taking her plate into the kitchen.

Tony followed her. “Natasha, I think I know where he is.”

Natasha turned toward him so fast that Tony almost dropped his plate. “What.”

“I mean - not exactly, but I think I can contact him. I know I can contact him. And I think I can get him to come home, maybe even by Christmas.”

Natasha didn’t react. “How?”

“It’s complicated,” Tony said. “But I’m not sure he’ll come back even if I do talk to him.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Just a feeling,” Tony lied. “I think he’d react better to hearing from you.”

“So tell me how to get in touch with him.”

Tony winced. “I can’t do that. It’s - ”

“Complicated?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, if you talk to him,” Natasha said, narrowing her eyes, “tell him that the only thing that makes someone a monster is acting like one.”

“Will do,” Tony said as Natasha disappeared down the hall.

“What’d you say to her?” Steve said at Tony’s shoulder.

“Nothing,” Tony said.

“You know, next time I see Banner, I’m going to punch him.”

“Not that I don’t understand the sentiment, but that could end very poorly for you,” Tony said. “So, what else are you guys up to tonight? Movies? Board games? Is it just a big sleepover here every night?”

“Oh, yeah,” Steve said. “Superheroes by day, teenage girls by night. Speaking of being superheroes, I’m going down to Trenton - you know, where we fought the guy with the robot cockroaches?”

“How could I forget,” Tony said. “So many legs.”

“Well, they finished the cleanup and there’s this organization working to rebuild some houses, you know, the ones that got destroyed, for people whose insurance won’t cover it. Although now that Thor’s not around, it’s harder for the insurance companies to claim act of god. Anyway, I’m going
to help with the building, you know, not a publicity thing, just volunteering. I know you probably have other stuff to do, but if you wanted to come, that would be - ”

“I’d love to,” Tony said.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Really. Want to pick me up?”

“I was planning to take my bike,” Steve said.

Yeah, Tony wouldn’t be forgetting that any time soon. “I don’t mind the backseat.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “If you say so. I’ll pick you up around 10 on the 14th?”

“Looking forward to it,” Tony said.

“Me too,” Steve said, his eyes crinkling at the edges, and Tony felt a swoop in his stomach.

And a tingling in his fingertips.

“But hey, I should go,” he said abruptly.

Steve frowned. “I thought Clint was your ride?”

“I can probably borrow a car,” Tony said, backing away and hoping Steve wouldn’t notice he was going kind of clear. “Or steal one. Whatever. Catch you later!”

The last thing Tony saw before he ducked into a storage room to fade away was Steve, waving goodbye, a faint smile on his face.

Well, Tony thought to himself. I’m completely fucked.

- 

When Tony opened his eyes, he was back in his workshop.

“Fuck,” he said. “Friday?”

“Welcome, sir,” Friday said. “The current date is December 24th, 2016. The current time is 11:39 am.”

“It’s Christmas Eve again?” Tony said. “I don’t even like Christmas. Where’s the other me?”

“In your bedroom, sleeping.”

“Not for long,” Tony said, pulling up the latest batch of Speed Machine calculations. “I’m going to be turning this thing on in a few hours. Keep an eye on the elevator and let me know if I’m coming.”

“Of course, sir. Shall I share your calculations now?”

Tony paused. “My what?”

“The calculations you requested in November,” Friday said. “Or perhaps, the calculations you will request.”
“Stark, you son of a bitch. Yeah, bring them up.”

“I’ve been running scenarios using only background processing space since November 29th in order to determine any possible flaws in the Speed Machine. Adjusting for your ongoing experimentation, I believe I have isolated the most likely cause of the explosion you mentioned.”

Friday zoomed in on the schematics, and Tony frowned.

“Huh. The energy isn’t dispersing equally and the sixteenth capacitor is overloaded.”

“Precisely, sir. And if, as you say, you proceed with multiple trial runs today, the energy buildup could cause a minor explosion. Not enough to destroy the tower, but enough to potentially cause a disruption in the chrono-spatial field much like the one you’ve been experiencing. An adjustment to the second coupling could help the energy disperse equally amongst the capacitors.”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Tony said, peering at the diagram.

“You could fix it, sir. I’m still calculating the probabilities, but the most likely scenario I’ve run is that you’ll reappear on Christmas Eve at the very moment you disappeared, and none of this will have happened.”

Tony froze. “None of it?”

“No, sir. It’s hard to say whether or not you’ll remember what happened in this timeline, due to the lack of precedent for this specific scenario, but it seems unlikely based on the calculations. There is also a .0002% chance that the universe will have ended in the meantime due to the vacuum created by the space left in the world at all the moments you would have been there, but - ”

“And what if I don’t undo it?”

“Sir?”

Tony swallowed hard. “What if I don’t fix it? What if I… let it happen?”

“Then everything will happen exactly how it has,” Friday said. “But I must remind you, sir, that your time travel is random and, as of yet, uncontrollable. The effects of this experiment are far-reaching and potentially catastrophic.”

Tony’s phone buzzed in his pocket.

**Message from Steve Rogers.**

“Hold that thought,” Tony murmured, opening the message.

*SOS! Need help with presents!*

So, that was weird.

*I’m probably the last person in the world who can help you with that,* Tony texted back.

*Desperate times call for desperate measures.*

Okay, it was Christmas Eve, and Steve, like every other man in America, had put off shopping for presents until the last possible moment. Fine. But that didn’t explain why he was asking *Tony* for help.
I’m at the Macy’s in Herald Square, Steve wrote. Please send reinforcements.

Of course, Tony also couldn’t explain why he’d taken Steve to a Dodgers game for his birthday, or why his stomach had flipped over when Steve had smiled at him in the firefly-lit August evening, or why Tony had started wondering, just a little, whether or not he actually could control his hops through time and had done all of it on purpose...

“Sir?” Friday said. “Shall we proceed with the repairs?”

“No,” Tony said, the word spilling out of his mouth before he could decide whether or not he meant it.

“No? Might I remind you that - ”

“But start running the numbers, figure out if we can limit its effects without disrupting the entire timeline,” Tony said, reaching under the sofa to pull out a jacket he remembered throwing there a week earlier. “Bruce will be here later - ”

“Dr. Banner will be here?”

“- and he’ll be working on it, so just - look, he’ll figure it out, right?”

“If you say so, sir,” Friday said, her voice neutral as ever.

“But if he doesn’t,” Tony said. “If something - if something goes wrong, and I don’t make it back, or - or whatever, tell Steve - tell him I’d do it all over again, okay? He won’t know what it means, but - tell him anyway. Do that for me, Friday?”

“Of course sir,” Friday said.

“Good,” Tony said, picking up his phone

- 

“I think I’ve made a mistake,” Steve said in lieu of greeting. “Probably a couple of mistakes.”

“Your first one was going to Herald Square,” Tony said. “This is hell.”

“If I don’t make it out of here,” Steve said miserably, “tell Sam he can have my shield. Why did I put off Christmas shopping until Christmas Eve?”

“Because you’re still new to 21st century consumerism?” Tony suggested as they pushed through the crowd. “Anyway, didn’t we all agree not to get each other presents?”

“Oh, come on,” Steve said. “Like anyone’s going to follow that.”

“I am!”

“Well, you’re you,” Steve said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” Steve said, grinning. “Look, chestnuts! Hold on, I gotta get some.”

“Are you ever not hungry?”
“Nope,” Steve said, getting in line behind. “I missed 70 years of dinners.”

“I don’t think it works that way. Jeez, it’s freezing out here. It’s gonna snow tonight, you know.”

“Really?” Steve said. “The weather report said it wasn’t supposed to snow until later this week.”

Of all the things to accidentally reveal about the future. “Maybe my weather report was more recent than yours.”

“No, they were making a big deal out of it,” Steve said. “No white Christmas. Global warming and all.”

“Huh,” Tony said, rubbing his hands together. “Well, it’s certainly cold enough. I think my fingertips are about to get frostbite. Well, hey, better than my -”

“Tony,” Steve said, nodding his head toward the little boy staring up at them with wide eyes.

“- my feet,” Tony finished. “That’s what I was going to say.”

“It’s your own fault for leaving the house like that. Here,” Steve said, unraveling his scarf. “Wear this.”

“What - no, I’m fine,” Tony argued as Steve wrapped the scarf around his neck. “Steve.”

“ Shut up,” Steve said, tucking it in. When he was done, he rested his hands on Tony’s shoulders and looked down at him, his eyes crinkling at the edges, and Tony had a swooping sense of deja vu.

“Scarf,” he said stupidly, catching a glimpse of the worn grey plaid with the thread coming undone at one end and wishing, not for the first or second or millionth time, that he could punch his stupid past self in the face.

“It looks good on you,” Steve said, his hands heavy on Tony’s shoulders.

“Nuts?” the vendor said, effectively ending the moment.

“Yeah,” Steve said, taking his paper bag of Christmas carols come to life and diving back into the crowd.

“So who’s on your list?” Tony said, following him down the sidewalk toward the jam-packed front door to Macy’s.

“Sam, Natasha, Clint - I already sent stuff for the kids, did you know Amazon doesn’t even make you pick anything anymore? They just figure it out for you, the future is amazing - Wanda, and Vision. Oh, and you. Any ideas?”

Tony pressed his lips together. He did have a few ideas, but if he only had them because he’d seen them given in the future, where had the ideas come from in the first place?

Fuck it. Unraveling the mysteries of temporal physics would have to wait. Christmas shopping sucked.

“Well,” Tony said, “I heard Clint’s kid threw his Fitbit in the toilet…”

“... so that just leaves Natasha,” Steve said, shoving the ugliest sweater they’d been able to find into
his bag.

“Are you sure she even likes presents?” Tony said. “She might view them as a sign of weakness.”

Steve elbowed him. “She’s been quiet lately. Quieter than usual, I mean. I want to get her something she’ll like.”


“I don’t think she’d find that funny.”

“She might by tomorrow,” Tony muttered.

“What?”


“I’m not getting her socks.”

“Do they make purses that hold hand grenades?”

“I mean, I think most purses could hold a hand grenade,” Steve said thoughtfully. “Maybe not hand grenades plural, but one hand grenade? Sure. Oh! Wait. Chocolate!”

“How did hand grenades make you think of chocolate?”

“She loves this place in the East Village,” Steve mused. “I wonder if it’s still open?”

Tony pushed open the door and they spilled onto the sidewalk, a wall of cold air slamming into the heat blowing from above the door. “It’s almost 2 on Christmas Eve. The line’s probably a mile long.”

“That’ll leave me just enough time to wrap everything before your party,” Steve said. “Are you looking forward to it?”

“To hand grenades? Oh, the party?” Tony thought about the crushed look on Steve’s face after he pushed him away and tried not to visibly wince. “I guess.”

“Tony Stark, a paragon of holiday cheer,” Steve said, elbowing him as they approached the nearest subway station. “Well, I’ll see you in a little bit, then?”

“Probably,” Tony said. “Wait!” He pulled the well-worn scarf from his neck and wrapped it around Steve’s, trying to avoid Steve’s eyes. “Thanks. This - it helped.”

“Hey, it was the least I could do,” Steve said. “I dragged you out on Christmas Eve.” He grinned, and as Tony tucked the scarf into his collar, Steve reached up and caught both of Tony’s hands in his.

“What are friends for,” Tony said, swallowing hard as Steve slowly rubbed his thumbs along Tony’s hands, warmth seeping from his frame. And suddenly, Tony wanted to kiss him, wanted to kiss him so badly, right here on West 34th, like some kind of cliche Christmas miracle, and the worst part was that Tony could see all over Steve’s face that he wanted to kiss him right back -

- but in a few hours he’d be pushing Steve away, watching that hopeful look slide right off his face,
and for all he knew he’d never make it back to Christmas Eve to fix it.

He squeezed Steve’s hands and pulled away. “I should get going,” he said, the words passing quietly between them on the busy street.

“You do have a party to host,” Steve said with a smile. “Anyway, I still need to get a present for you.”

“You really don’t need to,” Tony said uselessly.

“Oh, yes I do,” Steve said, turning and bounding down the stairs. “See you later!”

“Yeah,” Tony said to his retreating back. “See you later.”

He let himself be buffeted by the hustling shoppers, his warm breath fading to nothingness in front of him. He pulled out his phone.

“What’s the word, Friday?”

“The antimatter explosion has occurred, and the timeline is intact,” Friday said. “Is there anything else you’d like me to report to Dr. Banner when he arrives?”

“Just what you already know,” Tony said. “If he can get the energy level back to normal at all capacitors, he might be able to restart the machine and bring me back to the present. Keep running scenarios, and make sure we’re not creating some kind of black hole in the middle of New York, that would be so inconvenient on Christmas.”

-

Tony was halfway back to the Tower and barely had time to duck into an alley before he faded and opened his eyes - in the middle of his living room.

“Friday?”

“It’s 2:15 pm on November 27th, 2016, and the other you is in London supervising the installation of the arc reactor at Stark Industries’ newest office building,” Friday said.

“What would I do without you,” Tony said. “Hey, have I told you yet to start running the numbers on the Speed Machine to see what could cause a small antimatter explosion in about a month?

“No, sir,” Friday said.

“Great,” Tony said, flopping down on the couch. “Start now, background processing space only, run every possible scenario involving energy dispersal. I could just tell you what happens, but I think we’d both prefer to science it out. Do you think I could maybe just hang out, catch up on some TV, not screw around with the space-time continuum for a couple hours?”

“It’s unlikely, sir,” Friday said.

“I mean, I could try,” Tony said, staring up at the ceiling. “November 27th, you said?”

“Correct.”

“I feel like I had something to do in November. What did I have to do in - oh, shit,” Tony said. He dug in his pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. “Shut down surveillance and bar the doors, Friday. I have to make a call.”
By the time he’d dodged about a thousand variations of “How did you find me?” and “How did you get this number?” and “But you’re sure Natasha’s okay?” and extracted a promise that he’d catch the nearest Jeep out of the jungle from one very confused Bruce Banner, Tony was slumped over on the sofa and contemplating opening a bottle of very expensive whiskey.

“Do you think if I get drunk I’ll still be drunk when I time traveled?” he wondered.

“Considering you arrived in the present with a phone, I see no reason that the alcohol content of your blood would change due to a chrono-spatial jump,” Friday said. “But I cannot advise an experiment.”

“You spoil all my fun,” Tony said, tossing his phone between his hands.

“My sincerest apologies.”

Tony looked down at his phone, then out the window, then back at his phone. “I think I’m going to text Steve.”

“Is that wise, sir? Your current location in space-time isn’t exactly permanent.”

“He had my number in December, which means I give it to him now. Probably.”

“That’s very deterministic of you.”

“You’ll cover for me if I fade at a bad moment, right?”

“I imagine I’ll find a way,” Friday said.

Tony tapped the screen of his phone of his phone, rapid-fire, and hit “send” before he could change his mind.

Watcha up to?

Oh god, what was he, a teenager?

This is Tony, by the way.

Fuck. Was that clear? Maybe Steve knew a lot of Tonys.

Tony Stark.

It had been, like, at least thirty seconds. Was Steve ignoring him? This text had been a terrible idea. Abort, abort, abort -

I figured, Steve texted back. Just got back from a run. Everything okay?

Yes, Tony texted, way too fast to even pretend he was being normal. Totally okay. Just saying hi. So, hi.

Hi :)

Tony blinked. “Emojis are definitely flirting, right?”

“I’ll assume that was a rhetorical question,” Friday said unhelpfully.
Are you busy tonight?

Not really. Do you need something? Steve wrote back.

Just wondering if you wanted to have dinner. Here. At my place. Talk about the team, catch up on any budget stuff I might have been ignoring lately, you know, whatever.

“I’m terrible at this,” Tony said, dropping his head into his hands. “You’d think I’d literally never asked someone out before. Not that I’m asking him out. Erase that, Friday.”

“As you wish, sir,” Friday said.

After what was undoubtedly the longest wait of Tony’s entire life, including that time he was staring into the abyss of space with a nuke in his hands, Steve texted back, Sure! I’ll head into the city soon.

“What will you be serving for dinner, sir?” Friday asked. “Currently the refrigerator contains three frozen burritos, two empty ketchup bottles and an expired carton of yogurt.”

“This,” Tony said, “was probably a mistake.”

-  

“So I said to Contreras in Requisitions, I think there’s been a mistake,” Steve said, his feet kicked up on the sofa. “We don’t even have a landscaping budget, and we definitely don’t have a garden budget, and she says well, there’s 50 pounds of fertilizer and 38 varietals of flowers sitting in front of me, so I don’t know what to tell you. So I pull up the requisition forms, and who do you think approved the order?”

“I literally don’t even have a guess,” Tony said.

“It was Vision,” Steve said. “Apparently he wanted to try to start a garden because Wanda mentioned one time that she likes orchids.”

“Talk about commitment.”

“It’s both endearing and baffling,” Steve agreed. “So I told him, even I know you can’t start a garden in New York in mid-November. And then he says, don’t worry, I also ordered a greenhouse!”

“Am I funding a secret superhero base or a commune?”

“Considering Sam is probably watering his hothouse tomatoes as we speak and I definitely caught Natasha pruning some roses last week, I’m gonna have to say both,” Steve said.

“Dinner has arrived,” Friday announced.

“What’re we having?” Steve said, trailing Tony into the kitchen.

Tony pulled the first box of out of the bag one of the SI assistants had just dropped off. “Something to make up for last month’s mistake.”

“Pizza,” Steve said as Tony lifted the lid. “I should have known.”

“Are you calling me predictable?”
“I would never call you predictable,” Steve said, grabbing a slice. “Every time I think I have a read on you, you do something that surprises me.”

That got serious fast. Tony grabbed a piece of pizza and took a too-large bite. “So waz da nex oovie ‘n ur atch-up ist?” he said around half a pound of pepperoni and black olives.

“If I interpreted that correctly,” Steve said, “you’re asking about the next movie on my catch-up list?”

Tony nodded.

“Let’s see,” Steve said, pulling out his phone and scrolling through it. “Oh, yeah! I’ve heard of this one - Back To The Future?”

Tony stopped chewing. You’ve got to be kidding me.

Steve misunderstood his silence. “So it’s a good one? Want to watch it?”

Tony swallowed. “Sure,” Tony said. “Why the hell not. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“This just doesn’t seem very realistic,” Steve said doubtfully.

“What, the automobile-based time travel?” Tony said, because this was, somehow, his life.

“Well, yeah, that,” Steve said. “But mostly this stuff with his mom! I mean, she tried to kiss him.”

“So the time travel you’re okay with, but the overtones of incest are a bridge too far?” Tony said. “Just making sure I understand your complaints.”

Steve elbowed him. “Can I have your crust?”

“Of course you can,” Tony said. “Just assume you have carte blanche to eat my crust or any other rejected foodstuffs in the future, okay?”

“Well, yeah, that,” Steve said. “But mostly this stuff with his mom! I mean, she tried to kiss him.”

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“Of course you can,” Tony said. “Just assume you have carte blanche to eat my crust or any other rejected foodstuffs in the future, okay?”

“Will do,” Steve said, grabbing the crust and settling back on the couch, his arm pressed up against Tony’s.

Tony was suddenly very aware of his pinky finger and the heat it was sharing with Steve’s on the couch cushion. He glanced down at it, then back at the screen, then down at it again. As he watched, Steve’s hand shifted, just a little, until his finger was resting lightly on top of Tony’s.

Tony looked back at the TV, where Marty was making his way into the dance. Okay. He wasn’t in high school, he wasn’t going to analyze what Steve’s hands were doing, he wouldn’t have even done that when he was in high school - though to be fair he’d barely finished puberty by the end of high school - but the point was, this was not a big deal, they were grown men and co-workers and superheroes, for Christ’s sake, he was not going to freak out about Steve Rogers maybe trying to hold his hand.

Tony took a deep breath and stared at the screen. Yup. Definitely no freaking out here.

Five minutes later there was a quiet snore next to him.

“Are you sleeping?” Tony said incredulously.

Steve blinked guiltily up at Tony from where he was slumped back against the sofa. “‘M not
“sleeping.”

“I thought you could go, like, three weeks without sleep.”

“Doesn’t mean I like to,” Steve said, wriggling a little closer to Tony. Tony instinctively clamped down on his hand, and Steve squeezed back and smiled sleepily at him, totally ignoring Marty McFly inventing rock ’n’ roll. And Tony realized, all at once, that he could kiss Steve right now, just lean in and press his lips against that smile and tangle his hands in Steve’s hair and take his hand and lead him to bed and -

- and then push him away on Christmas Eve and watch his smile slide and his face shutter closed. No matter what, he would hurt him - had hurt him already - would always hurt him.

And wasn’t that just perfect? Because really, even without all the out-of-order fate bullshit, a part of him had known, always, that he would only ever hurt the people who tried to care about him. He’d known with everyone he’d ever brought home and he’d known with Pepper and he knew, now, with Steve - it had never been a question, because he was Tony Stark and even when he wasn’t time traveling he was unreliable. This time he just knew exactly when and where he would let somebody down.

But there was something in Steve’s smile that Tony wanted to capture, wanted to keep safe, and maybe if he ever got back to the present he could find a way.

Maybe.

“This is the best part,” Tony said, nodding toward the TV.

“If you say so,” Steve said, squeezing Tony’s hand again.

When the movie ended, Steve stood up and stretched. “Okay, that one was pretty good,” he said, gathering up his jacket with a yawn.

“The second one’s good too,” Tony said, following him to the elevators. “It’s about what people in the 80s thought last year would look like.”

Steve grinned. “How wrong were they?”

“So wrong,” Tony said. “Well, hey, get home safe.”

“Yeah, I will,” Steve said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and holding Tony’s gaze.

“Sir,” Friday said suddenly. “You have an important message.”

“Do I?” Tony said vaguely.

“Extremely urgent,” Friday said, and that’s when Tony noticed that his fingers were disappearing.

“I’ll take it in my office,” Tony said, clasping his fading hands together and backing away. “Sorry, Cap, gotta run.”

“Have a good night,” Steve said. “I’ll talk to you later, maybe we can - ”

“Yeah, sure, later,” Tony said, starting to lose the ground under his feet as he stumbled toward his office.

“Bye, Tony,” Steve called.
“Get him out of here, Friday,” Tony gasped, slamming the door behind him.

“Of course, sir,” Friday said, and that’s when Tony vanished.

- 

When Tony opened his eyes, Bruce was staring down at him.

“You’re back,” Bruce said.

Tony sat up. “I’m back?”

“I reversed the polarity of the sixteenth capacitor and hardened the vacuum created by the antimatter collision,” Bruce said. “And then you just kind of… appeared.”

“The energy in the Speed Machine is stable, sir,” Friday said. “Welcome back.”

Bruce offered Tony a hand and pulled him to his feet. “Friday’s data helped me pin down the problem right away, and after that it was just a matter of fixing it. Why didn’t you tell me she’s been running scenarios since November?”

“Because I didn’t know. Time travel, right?” Tony clapped Bruce on the shoulder. “I owe you one, buddy. But right now, I need to find Steve.”

“Steve?” Bruce said. “Why?”

“Because I think I’ve been dating him for six months,” Tony said.

“That was not the answer I was expecting,” Bruce said, following Tony to the elevator.

Before Tony could call for the elevator, the doors slid open, and Natasha stepped out.

“Oh, hey,” Tony said. “So, funny story.”

“I look forward to hearing it,” Natasha said, looking right past him.

“I’m gonna leave you two to… whatever is about to happen,” Tony said, glancing between Natasha’s blank face and Bruce’s chagrined one. “Talk to you later? Yeah. Okay. Good luck. Both of you. Don’t have sex in my shop!”

Tony rapped his fingers on his watch as the elevator propelled him up to the penthouse, then glanced at it. It read 12:01 am.

“Did I really only lose one minute?”

“It appears that way,” Friday said.

“And Bruce doesn’t think I’m about to come unstuck in time again?”

“The future is unknowable, sir.”

“Sure it is,” Tony muttered, stepping out of the elevator and back into the party. Half of the guests were out on the balcony, drinks still in hand, trying to catch the first snowflakes of the season and singing along to *Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!*, which the DJ had wisely queued up, and the other half were clustered around the bar, trying to stay away from the snow gusting in through the open door.
Tony edged through the crowd, scanning the room for any sign of Steve; he couldn’t have gone far, just minutes ago - *days* ago - he’d been kissing Tony in the hallway behind a twinkling Christmas tree, he *had* to be here.

Tony grabbed Clint’s elbow as he darted in from the balcony. “Have you seen Steve?”

“He just told me he was going for a walk,” Clint said. “Wait, are you *you*? Like, present day you?”

“It depends on what you mean by that,” Tony said. “But yeah, I think so. Did you send Natasha down to my shop?”

“I may have hinted,” Clint said. “What do you need Steve for?”

“It’s a long story,” Tony said, heading for the hall.

“It always is with you,” Clint called after him.

Tony ignored him, nodding and smiling at the people who tried to flag him down and pushing his way to the door. As he broke free of the crowd, he spotted Steve’s head disappearing behind a closing door.

“Steve!” he called. “Steve, wait!”

The door swung back open, slowly. Steve turned around, his jacket clenched in his hands and his face guarded as Tony jogged up to him.

“Tony, listen,” Steve said. “I think I’m just going to get going, you don’t have to - ”

“I was stupid,” Tony said. “Stupid and scared and confused and stupid again, if I didn’t already say that one - ”

“You did.”

“ - and I know it was only a few minutes ago but, and this is going to be hard to believe, *so* much has happened since then and I just wanted to make sure you knew that I should have kissed you a long time ago, but I couldn’t because I knew I *hadn’t*. ”

“What?” Steve said.

“Nevermind,” Tony said. “The thing is that for most of it I thought it was all random, or some kind of accident, and even if it was, it doesn’t matter anymore because you were there, every time, and I know it was more than metaphysics, more than gravity. And the thing is that I don’t know how it ends, I don’t know if you walk out the door right now but even if you do, I just wanted to tell you that right here, in this moment, is where I think I’m actually supposed to be.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Steve said.

“I’m kind of doing this in the wrong order,” Tony said. “Not that that’s anything new. It’s just that no matter what I did, I knew I was going to hurt you, and - ”

“You were worried about hurting me?” Steve said. “There’s always a chance we’re going to hurt each other, Tony. In our case, I would say there’s a really *good* chance. But if we walked around not doing anything because we might hurt someone, or because we might get hurt, well, that’d be a pretty boring life, wouldn’t it?”

Tony blinked. “But I didn’t even get you a Christmas present.”
“I think I can find a way to forgive you,” Steve said, his eyes crinkling at the edges.

And Tony wanted to say a million more things, but instead he grabbed Steve by the back of the neck, yanked him down, and kissed him. Tony just held on, thinking about Central Park in June and baseball on the 4th of July and Steve’s fingertips against his, and when Steve pulled away, he was smiling again, and Tony felt the breath whoosh out of him.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that for,” Steve murmured, resting his forehead against Tony’s.

“I think I kind of do,” Tony said.

“What was that you were saying about metaphysics?” Steve said.

“I’ll explain later,” Tony said, pulling him in again.

Epilogue

When Tony woke up, it was still dark.

“Ugh,” he groaned, rolling over and throwing an arm around Steve’s waist.

“Hmm?” Steve murmured.

“Nothing,” Tony said, pressing a kiss to his shoulder.

“Nothing,” Tony said, pressing a kiss to his shoulder.

The Tony Stark Christmas Eve Party was a longstanding tradition, but the Tony Stark New Years Eve Party was brand new, born from a text Steve sent only an hour before he and the rest of the team showed up at the Tower with champagne and paper hats and stupid glasses that spelled out 2017 even though that definitely should have stopped being a thing after 2009. It had started with that same smile on Steve’s face and ended at midnight, Steve’s cheeks pink from kissing Tony in front of all their friends, and Tony had dragged Steve into his bedroom for the very first time and that, well, that was something Tony would have spent a decade lost in space-time for.

Tony laid still for a moment, listening to Steve’s breathing even out. When thirst overcame the squirmy feeling Tony got when he looked at Steve’s chest rising up and down in the moonlight, Tony carefully crawled out of bed and padded barefoot to the bathroom, sipped water from his cupped hands and tried to ignore how stupid happy he looked in the mirror.

He gently pushed the door to the bedroom open and realized, all at once, that he and Steve weren’t alone.

“So,” Tony said after a moment. “This just got very… Scroogey.”

A much older Tony Stark looked up at him. “Yeah, bad news, you do go grey.”

“Could be worse,” Tony said. “Is Clint bald?”

“Clint is as bald as the day he was born,” the other Tony said. “It’s glorious.”

The other version of him was 70, maybe older, depending on how much Botox he got, and seemed
calm, or maybe tired, in a way Tony never was.

“So, the Speed Machine,” Tony asked. “Or whatever you renamed it, please tell me you renamed it. You figured out how to control its effects?”

“Eventually,” the other Tony said, looking back down at Steve, who slept on, completely unaware of the Christmas Carol moment going on over his head.

“You should destroy it,” Tony said, because that much was obvious.

“I will,” his older self said. “Just making some visits first.”

“Can’t stop playing God, huh?”

“Hate to break it to you, but that’s something you never grow out of. God, he looks young.” The other Tony’s hand lifted, like he wanted to reach out and touch Steve, run a hand through his hair, but he stopped himself, clasped his hands behind his back.

“So,” Tony said, trying to sound casual, “do we - does this - work?”

His older self looked up at him, a smile flashing across his face. “Do you really want to know?”

“No,” Tony said.

“Didn’t think so,” the other Tony said. “Well, I should get going. I’m off to visit Jarvis next.”

“Butler or AI?” Tony asked.

“Both,” Tony said. He glanced at his watch and pressed a button, and before Tony’s eyes, he started to fade away.

“What, no parting advice to your younger self?” Tony said, taking a step forward.

“Like you’d listen,” the other Tony said, as he dissolved into nothing.

“You say something?” Steve said, rolling over and blinking up at him.

“Just talking to myself,” Tony said, climbing back into bed.

“Mmm,” Steve said into his pillow. “Come back to bed.”

“You know,” Tony said, pressing himself up against the line of Steve’s back, warm and solid under the covers. “I think I will.”

The End

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