Winner Takes It All, Or: Five People Who Wondered and One Who Didn't Have to

by lavvyan

Summary

Tony can't figure out if Clint and Agent are married or not, so he does the next logical thing: he starts a betting pool.

Notes

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Story contains some slight references to off-screen violence.

1. Tony Stark

The thing is, Tony doesn't like secrets.

Well, no, that's not quite it. One thing is that Tony doesn't like secrets. His own, Pepper's, NASA's, S.H.I.E.L.D's, insert-abbreviation-here's... secrets give him hives, hives are bad for his complexion, and that's a shame because his complexion is damn fine. He can say that; he's got the evidence on hand. So, one thing, Tony doesn't like secrets.
The thing is, Tony's a control freak.

He controls what he does and when he does it. Or, if he doesn't want to do it, he controls who does it instead. He controls his body. He controls the Iron Man suit. He controls, or has built the AIs that control, his house, his cars, his everything. Tony Stark has been without control before and he doesn't care to repeat the experience. Hence his exceptional dislike for secrets, because secrets = Things Tony Can't Control.

Which is why he's a bit peevved when he stumbles into Kitchen Number Four one day, he's going to assume it's day, there are people up besides himself and anyway, everyone knows it gets dark early in December. So he stumbles into Kitchen Number Four – the comfy one – only to find Clint and Agent already there, and he can smell they're keeping something from him.

Well, actually, what he smells is delicious because Clint is cooking. *Clint is cooking*, something that requires a lot of pots and pans and chopped up things that Tony couldn't name but he'd still like to eat them. Very, very much. But it's obvious that Clint's not cooking for the whole team, oh no. Clint's cooking for two. Those two. Clint and Agent.

Clint is cooking for Agent.

"You're cooking for Agent," Tony states in the tone of absolute certainty.

"Yep," Clint says. Something meaty sizzles and Clint pours a glass of some liquid that smells vaguely alcoholic into one of the pots.

'Vaguely alcoholic' abruptly transforms into 'heavenly.'

At the table, Coulson smiles. Faintly, but he does.

"Why?" Tony asks. In his experience, cooking for two only happens on birthdays, dates and anniversaries. It's not anyone's birthday, Clint and Coulson aren't dating and if they were, they wouldn't be doing so in Tony's kitchen, and certainly don't have an anniversary of any sort.

Tony's sure they don't.

He's mostly sure they don't.

Or, well. Almost mostly sure they don't?

Do they?

*Can* they?

"None of your business," Clint says cheerily, and Tony's starting to feel a little unsettled there because Clint's not a cheery guy. Clint's deadpan and almost as ready to take himself too seriously as Agent himself. He's dedicated to SHIELD, just as Agent himself. He doesn't get paid to laugh.

Neither does Agent.

… Oh god, this is an anniversary, isn't it? Those two are made for each other. They're probably married.

Oh god, are they married?

"You live inside a building that is owned by Stark Industries, which is my business, which means that actually, you are my business too," Tony points out reasonably. Coulson frowns like he's going
to argue the point, so Tony hurries to add, "But, I'll leave you to yours. You can be my subsidiaries. I'll have Pepper draw you up a contract. I already own Bruce. We can be the superheroes of capitalism. Go Avengers! And speaking of going..."

He points vaguely towards the door and then gets the hell out of there.

And that should be the end of it. Really, it should. Except that Tony keeps wondering if Clint and Coulson are married which makes it a potential secret they're keeping from him which clearly cannot be tolerated.

JARVIS is no help at all.

"If a secret marriage has taken place, the license might have been obtained under false names. These are SHIELD agents who have conducted a multitude of successful undercover operations," JARVIS says when Tony tells him to hack the records. Any records. "The union might not even have taken place on American soil."

SHIELD's database is a bust as well. All Tony finds out is that Clint and Coulson list each other as emergency contacts and life insurance beneficiaries. The rest is a bust because Fury has learned to keep the important stuff on paper and Tony's not going to break into SHIELD's archives to find their personnel files.

So Tony does the only sensible thing that's left.

He starts a betting pool.

He figures if he can't find any evidence one way or another, maybe one of his teammates will. If they're properly motivated.

"Clint isn't married to Agent Coulson!" Steve says, scandalized, once Tony proposes the bet.

Tony shrugs. "Five thousand dollars says they are."

Steve sputters, but Natasha perks right up.

"Agreed," she says, and Tony wavers for a moment. If anyone would know for sure, it's Natasha. Then again, if anyone would be on Clint and Agent's side, it's also Natasha. This could be a ploy to throw him off the scent. It's exactly the kind of thing she'd do.

"All right," Tony says. "Steve?"

"I'm not betting!" Steve says.

"Come on, Capsicle, it's practically a team bonding exercise," Tony tells him. "Unity in the face of marriage!"

"That doesn't even make sense!"

"You know he's going to keep wheedling until you agree," Natasha says.

Tony would feel insulted, but it does get Steve to vote Not Married so he's going to ignore the aspersion Natasha is so casually casting on his character.

"Thor?" he asks instead.

Thor, newly set up with a SHIELD expense account and a cushy salary, nods. "I say yes," he says
solemnly.

"Good choice," Tony tells him. "Bruce?"

Bruce shakes his head. "I'm not playing."

"Bruce, buddy-"

"I'm a very poor loser," Bruce says calmly, and yeah, okay, Tony's willing to concede that point.

So, betting pool. Tony's started one. Now they only need to gather evidence and victory will be his.

Well. And Thor's.

2. Thor Odinson

Marriage, as Thor understands it, is akin to handfasting. To a point. The rules seem stricter and one cannot easily change one's mind should the love not last, but the concept appears the same. Two people agree to share their lives and acknowledge their union for the world to bear witness.

The custom is rarely practiced on Asgard anymore. His parents went through a public handfasting, but as rulers it is often necessary to 'put on a show,' as Tony might say. There are those who mourn the loss of the old traditions, but they are the minority. Love can be fickle, and why bind two people who no longer care for each other? Indeed, why limit such bonds to only two when three or more may wish to spend their lives in joyous unity?

It would appear that the people of Earth are yet rather shortsighted where it comes to love. Thor wouldn't say it out loud – he doesn't want to embarrass his new friends – but mortals can be remarkably antiquated in their ways. They still appear to be celebrating the union of two men or two women as a whole new concept.

Some conversations make Thor feel incredibly awkward.

But love, at least, is as recognizable here as it is in all the Realms and Clint Barton loves the Son of Coul as certainly as Thor loves his Lady Jane. More certainly, perhaps. Mortals need to count their years, they have so very few of them, and Thor has known his Jane for barely two. The archer and his agent have much more history in common.

One need only look at the way they move. The Avengers have engaged quite the numerous foe this time, scaly creatures with acid spit enough to corrode even Thor's armor. The Iron Man and Hawkeye are their best fighters against this vermin, but where the iron suit offers some protection against the creatures' spit and razor claws, Hawkeye's back is bare.

Bare, but for the Son of Coul covering it with his own.

They move as one, Coul's son mirroring each twist and turn as he keeps his guns at the ready to defend his shield-mate from unseen foes. There is knowledge in those movements, intimacy and trust, and Thor once again finds himself honored to fight alongside such worthy friends.

If what he has learned about human customs so far holds true, these men are handfasted for sure.

He is glad for them.
Pepper knows about Tony's betting pool, but she's staying well out of it. For one thing, she doesn't want to encourage him. He's impossible enough without her enabling him further and it would do him good to fall on his nose for once. Even if he's only going to lose some pocket money.

For another thing, the idea of Phil and Clint being married is ridiculous. Phil had that cellist a few years ago and has never mentioned anyone since. There can't be a marriage if there's not even dating.

She concedes that they'd be cute together, though. Phil needs someone he can take care of, but even more than that he needs someone he can rely on. She doesn't know Clint as well as she does Phil, but he strikes her as very reliable. And likeable, from the times she's met him. Clint has a way of taking care of people without trying to get them to notice. She's seen him do it with Natasha once or twice, and with Bruce at least a dozen times. Phil could only benefit from that. He's so lonely, sometimes.

Pepper tries to help with that whenever she can. Which isn't as often as she'd like but still often enough that she can tell when Phil's in an unreasonably good mood for a Thursday.

"Okay, spill," she says as they're both waiting for the elevator. He took her out for dinner and they need to go back to their respective jobs, but she wants to know the good news. "Did you get another clearance level?"

S.H.I.E.L.D's clearances are notoriously difficult to understand, and even harder to obtain. Phil can never tell her what level he's at, but sometimes he lets himself be a little smug, just around her.

"That's classified," he deadpans, and she grins at him. "But I may have obtained a one-of-a-kind Captain America cuckoo clock from Bavaria."

She can't help it. She laughs.

"Poor Steve," she says. "Does he know you have a shrine dedicated to him?"

"It's not a shrine," Phil says. She gives him an amused look and he amends, "It's a collection."

"One of these days, you'll have to show me." Pepper means it as a joke, even though she's curious, but Phil surprises her by looking at his watch.

"I'm free for another ten minutes," he says and offers her his arm. "May I?"

"By all means," she says graciously. She's sure he can read her surprised pleasure no matter how hard she tries for aloofness.

Phil's rooms are on the same floor as Clint's and Natasha's. Something about keeping the Spies away from the Engineers; Pepper rarely listens once Tony starts his video game references. She's been as far as Phil's living room a few times, but never around the corner he now leads her. He stops in front of a door, clears his throat once, and then unceremoniously leads her inside.

For a moment, she's too overwhelmed to speak. The entire room is full of Captain America collectibles and memorabilia. The walls are covered in framed posters and paintings; a sheet of 20-cent postage stamps; postcards from the 1952 Coca-Cola ad campaign. Shelves proudly display figurines and replicas of the famous shield; cases of bubblegum; the VHS collection of the war reels; action figures from the feature films; Lego sets; computer games. Pepper has no doubt that the filing cabinet to her left holds every single issue of the comics, most if not all in mint condition.

"Wow, Phil, that's..." She laughs, lost for words. "Wow."
"Too much?" Phil offers with a smile.

"Maybe a little," she says, but he knows she doesn't really mean it. Everyone who's spent any length of time with Tony Stark has deleted 'too much' from their vernacular. "It's amazing."

And yes, there's the cuckoo clock, between two framed war bonds adverts, but something else catches her attention. There, on top of the filing cabinet, sits a small gathering of trinkets that on first glance have nothing to do with Captain America. She steps closer, intrigued, and lets her fingers brush over a little black stone with a hole in the middle. Next to it sits a plastic model of the Eiffel Tower. Next to that, a soapstone turtle. She picks it up. What looks like a character from the Chinese alphabet has been carved into the bottom.

"That's an unrelated collection," Phil says, plucking the turtle out of her hand and setting it back onto the cabinet with what looks to her like exaggerated care. Nothing in that 'unrelated collection' can be worth more than ten dollars at most. And yet Phil seems to hold these cheap little things in as much regard as the priceless memorabilia around them. Sentimental value?

"Sorry." Pepper wants to ask, desperately, but something in the set of his shoulders makes her think that he won't tell her. "This is amazing, Phil," she says instead, gesturing at the sheer amount of stuff around her. "It must have taken years to collect all this." She laughs. "It reminds me of The Little Mermaid."

"If you're looking for thing-in-a-box, I assure you that I have more than just twenty," Phil says dryly, and she laughs again.

She doesn't quite forget about Phil's odd little trinkets, but they're pushed into the back of her mind and slowly gathering dust. She has more important things to think about.

That is, until the day she leaves the elevator to find Clint and Phil waiting for it. Clint has been on a mission to somewhere she's not supposed to know about (Egypt) for reasons unknown (suspected weapons smuggling from Libya). He must have returned earlier that day; he's looking tired and a little bruised. She gives him a sympathetic smile and nods at Phil as the two men step past her and into the elevator.

Then she frowns, pauses, and turns back just in time to catch Phil's wry little smile as the elevator door closes.

He's holding a small black statue of what looks like a hawk wearing an Ancient Egyptian double crown. Horus, probably.

A trinket.

Oh. Well.

Pepper coughs, blows out a breath, and goes to find out who's responsible for the delay of the new Avengers mini game for the StarkPhone 6. Her cheeks feel a bit flushed and she can't seem to stop smiling.

She's still staying out of that betting pool.

No need to give Tony any more ammunition.

4. Steve Rogers
Steve has never made friends easily, but he thinks he's getting the hang of it.

It's a bit strange, but most of what he knows about starting friendships – the kind of friendships you actively apply for, not the ones you just grow into without quite knowing how – he's learned from Tony Stark. Tony's one of those people who dislike the world on principle because it's disappointed them one too many times, but once he's decided to give someone the time of day he's loyal, generous and not above putting others' needs above his own.

Steve is still ashamed of how long it took for him to see that.

Of course, Tony's also an overgrown child with little regard for how his actions and words might affect those around him, but being an absolute pain doesn't mean he's not also a good person. A good person who can act as Steve's role model in some – very few, but still some – ways.

So it's in the spirit of friendship Steve gives Agent Coulson the cards. Coulson seems to be mostly over what Tony calls his 'weird fanboy crush' on Steve or rather, on Captain America. He no longer looks at Steve like Steve's very presence is a cause for nervous giddiness and they've had a lot of pleasant conversations over the more stupefying parts of contemporary American culture. He's a decent man, honorable and reliable, and Steve would like to be not just good acquaintances, but actual friends. Hence the cards.

It's a bit embarrassing, really. Just... Coulson had collected those trading cards and been so very proud of them. He'd asked Steve to sign them. After Fury had practically destroyed them, Coulson hadn't even tried to replace them, claiming they just wouldn't be the same. And Steve feels bad about that because if he'd been more willing to look behind Tony's bluster, Fury wouldn't have needed to go near those cards at all.

Not bad enough to try and find replacement cards. He's not going to stoke that particular obsession back to life. But... bad.

So he'd sat down and drawn some new ones and got Tony to laminate them so they'd be washable in case of future incidents. Seven cards; his very own, very limited run of Avengers trading cards. Or, as he likes to call them: Look At Us Big Darn Heroes Cards.

There's one of Steve himself clutching a wooden case containing 200 pastel pencils with an awed expression on his face. There's one of a grinning Thor twirling his Wii controller like Mjölnir after defeating Dark Samus in one of the Metroid games. He's drawn Tony in sopping wet clothes, glaring at a Dummy who's clearly failing to do the dishes, and Bruce trying to read his StarkPad while doing one of his meditative handstands. Natasha's standing in a supermarket aisle, basket between her legs as she contemplates two nearly identical shades of vibrant red hair dye, and Clint's juggling eggs in their smallest kitchen because Clint's turn at team breakfast always comes with accompanying sideshow.

The drawing on the seventh card is of Coulson, relaxing on the couch as he watches one of his inexplicable TV shows. Because Coulson is as much an Avenger as any of them but Steven doesn't know how to say that without sounding corny.

Coulson's expression as he shuffles through the cards is one of thrilled delight. Steve has signed each card, of course, but he thinks it's less the art that makes Coulson look so happy and more the thought behind it.

"What's that?" Clint's suddenly there, standing behind Coulson's right shoulder like he so often does, like he's been stapled there. Further into Coulson's personal space than anyone else would even try.
Steve blinks.

"Trading cards," Coulson says, still obviously delighted, and shuffles them slowly to show them to Clint. Leaning even further towards Clint. They have to be almost touching now. "Steve made them for me."

"Awesome," Clint says, but the look he gives Steve over Coulson's shoulder is sharp enough to cut through diamonds.

Right. Steve is an artist; he can identify possessive jealousy when it's glowering at him. Looks like he's read that situation completely wrong.

He makes an excuse and flees.

That night, after Clint and Coulson have disappeared to do whatever it is they do when they're alone, Steve clears his throat.

"I'd like to change my bet." At Bruce's puzzled look, he adds, "Clint and Coulson. I believe they've been together for a long time. I'm changing my bet to Married."

Because in some ways, Coulson is as old-fashioned as Steve. As soon as Coulson realized that he and Clint were serious about each other – and they clearly are; Steve can't believe he missed another so important thing – he would have made it permanent.

"You people are delusional," Natasha says as Tony crows and promptly raises his own bet to ten thousand dollars. Sometimes, Steve fears for Tony's sanity, but he knows what he saw.

Even if Bruce is still staying out of it.

5. Bruce Banner

"So I was walking to that bakery the other morning. The one with the pastries?"

"Barton-"

"And a woman's car broke down at the corner of 18th and 6th. Wouldn't start again. Guy behind her was honking like crazy. Do you know what she did?"

"Barton, if you don't shut up and get into position, there will be consequences. Don't make me elaborate on them."

"She got out of her car, knocked on his window and said, 'hey, would you like to start my car? I'll just keep honking for you.' So hey, Coulson, would you like to climb the side of a six-story building while you're bleeding like a stuck pig? I'll keep up the damn nagging for you."

Clint's voice sounds hoarse over the com, even with the slight static that's overlaying his words. Bruce tries to convince himself that it's thirst parching the back of Clint's throat – he doesn't know exactly where SHIELD has sent Clint, but he's picked up enough to extrapolate it's somewhere hot and dry – but he's been in pain often enough to know what it does to a man's voice.

He and Coulson were in the Eastern kitchen – small and comfortable and by far Bruce's favorite of Tony's insane number of kitchens – when JARVIS had patched the call through to them. Coulson had been reading something on his StarkPad while Bruce had been warming his hands on an
indecently huge mug of masala chai. The moment had been quiet, relaxed. Then JARVIS had apologized for interrupting them, stating it was urgent before his hidden speakers had switched to Director Fury's voice.

'Get him out of there,' Fury had said and, well. Here they are.

"I gave you an order," Coulson says. His manner is calm, if impatient, but Bruce can see the worry in the tense line of Coulson's shoulders, the too-tight grip on the tablet. "A helicopter is waiting for you on the roof. Get to the roof. Please explain to me which part of that order you fail to grasp."

For just a second, Bruce envies them. He doesn't know if Clint and Coulson are an item the way Tony likes to insinuate at every opportunity, or if they're simply friends the way Steve is – was – convinced they are. He does know that the two of them share a history; they trust each other, blindly at times, and for that long, aching second, Bruce wants that for himself.

Even if that means opening himself to the hurt that goes with it.

"Phil," Clint says, and Bruce closes his eyes because that's the voice of a man who's given up. He's intimately familiar with that tone, too. "I'm losing too much blood. Tell them to go and-"

"I already told them to wait for you and bring you home, Clint," Coulson snaps. The tablet hits the table with a clatter, startling Bruce into opening his eyes again. "You're endangering yourself and your team. Now shut up and get to the roof and I might, might be persuaded not to write you up for insubordination and irresponsible behavior in the field."

Bruce stares. Coulson's face is white, his placid expression fallen away to show an anger far deeper than anything Bruce ever expected to see outside of a mirror. It stagers him to a degree that makes the Other Guy take notice, rumbling in the back of Bruce's mind. It's Coulson's eyes that really get to him, though. Narrowed as they are, he finds no anger in Coulson's eyes.

Only fear.

There's a choking sound on the other end of the connection. It takes Bruce a moment to realize that Clint is laughing.

"God, you're stubborn," Clint rasps. His breath is hitching.

Coulson relaxes slightly, clearly picking up a cue that Bruce is missing. "It's one of my best features," he says, anger gone like it was never there. "The roof, Barton."

"Yeah," Clint breathes. A moment later, the speakers broadcast a grunt, a quiet curse, and the sounds of someone slowly, laboriously, making his way up a metal ladder.

Bruce sighs and catches Coulson's gaze. Lifting his mug a little, he tips his chin at the door, eyebrows raised. He doesn't want to leave, not without knowing that Clint is safe, but he's aware that technically, he's not supposed to be listening in on a classified SHIELD mission, not even when the mission concerns one of their own. The Other Guy shifts restlessly beneath Bruce's skin.

They both worry.

Coulson shakes his head slightly so Bruce leans back on his chair with a grateful twist of his lips. He thinks Coulson might appreciate the company but he's not going to ask about it. He's not going to ask why Fury called Coulson, either. For better or worse, Bruce has learned to respect people's secrets as long as they let him keep his own.
Besides, he's pretty sure he already knows.

They listen silently to Clint's breathing as he climbs the side of a six-story building.

All the way up.

+1. Natasha Romanova

Natasha would never admit it, but she appreciates Clint's romantic streak. It makes her feel... not wistful, exactly. But perhaps a little more willing to believe that humanity isn't rotten to the core.

That said, what she appreciates most is not, of course, the sentiment, but the way that Clint tends to go completely overboard. She's noticed this about everything he does. Clint is a sniper who not only scoffs at rifles, but instead uses a bow with so many additional features that anyone who isn't him would need a manual just to string it. His arrows come equipped with explosives, flares, tear gas, smoke bombs, nets, grappling hooks, gasoline, and bolas. He has qualified to pilot jets, helicopters, gliders, amphibious aircraft, dirigibles, and hot air balloons. When Clint cooks, it's always five courses and using most of the spice rack. He is competitive, focused, and never one to pass over a grand gesture.

So when Phil turns 50, Natasha's not at all surprised to find that Clint forgoes the usual happy birthday song in favor of somehow getting the entire New York Symphonic Jazz Orchestra to set up their instruments on the street outside the Avengers Tower and play something loud and energetic that makes Thor bright-eyed with interest.

"Tell me you didn't write the song yourself," she says loudly, leaning on the outside wall next to Clint. He's watching Phil watch the musicians and she couldn't say if it's Clint or Phil who looks more pleased with himself and the world in general.

"Nah. Just told them to play something badass." Clint smirks, but there's a softness to it that makes her smile a little.

"He likes it," she offers because sometimes Clint needs to hear he did good even if the evidence is right in front of him.

Clint keeps smirking and slouches a bit more, but his gaze is locked on Phil. Phil, who's standing in front of the orchestra with a small smile, hands clasped in front of him and eyes shining with glee. It's a good look on him. They're good for each other. And the music suits them, brash and quiet in turns, vastly different sounds that somehow combine to a cohesive whole. Something that shouldn't fit, but does.

Natasha watches the smirk slide away from Clint's face, watches it slip into something sweet and helpless. Besotted, she thinks with fond derision, and waits for him to tell her that-

"I bought a ring," he says, so softly she almost doesn't hear him over the ruckus of the band in front of them.

"Good," she says, and means it.

After all, she's about to win several thousand dollars.
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Podfic of Winner Takes It All, Or: Five People Who Wondered and One Who Didn't Have to by Podcath

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