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**Love Story**

by ficlicious

**Summary**

Agent Phil Coulson from the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division is persistent, Toni will give him that, and Pepper’s no help, since she keeps giving him appointments despite repeatedly being ordered to do no such thing. Toni’s becoming quite adept at ducking his determined attempts to speak with her, but she’s starting to feel practically hunted. It seems like every time she turns around, there he is with his non-threatening smile and his perfectly pressed suit, ever-so-politely asking her if she can spare ten minutes of her time.
A reimagining of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, starting from the press conference in Iron Man, and going forward from there.

Notes

This... is not a pairing I ever thought I would find myself writing.

You can blame Medie. It's all her terribly enabling fault. She plot-ninja'd me.

But it's a hell of a lot of fun to write.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

The lights are flashing, Rhodey’s at her right shoulder, Obie’s on his way to join her, Pepper’s on her left. Every reporter wants a piece of her, fresh off the plane after three months in a hole as a prisoner-of-war. They’re already milling like sharks, buzzards, opportunistic parasites. No big names in the crowd, but no surprise there. This press conference is so last minute, she’s pretty sure all the networks and outlets had to scramble to find someone affiliated in the area to cover this. No matter. She’ll say to this teeming mass of fresh-faced journalists the same thing she’d say to Katie Couric.

“Excuse me, Miss Stark?”

She glances over at her name, hiding the wince as it pulls on her sprained left arm. A non-descript man in a suit and tie is coming towards her, and Rhodey lays a tense hand on her shoulder, ready to haul her back at a moment’s notice. “Pep?” she says, turning away to go back to watching the crowd.

“I’ll take care of it,” Pepper says, and moves to intercept the man before he can get any closer.

“You sure about this, Tones?” Rhodey asks.

“Never been surer,” she says, eyes on the podium. “You got my cheeseburger?” She holds out a hand and someone plops a bag in it. It’s awkward with one hand, but she cracks open the bag and takes a deep, appreciative sniff of heaven with bacon and a side of fries. “Then let’s go make history.”

Agent Phil Coulson from the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division is persistent, Toni will give him that, and Pepper’s no help, since she keeps giving him appointments despite repeatedly being ordered to do no such thing. Toni’s becoming quite adept at ducking his determined attempts to speak with her, but she’s starting to feel practically hunted. It seems like every time she turns around, there he is with his non-threatening smile and his perfectly pressed suit, ever-so-politely asking her if she can spare ten minutes of her time.

She doesn’t even know why she’s so hellbound to not talk to him. It isn’t like the Army, Air Force, Navy, Spec Ops, CIA, DOD, FBI, DHS, NSA and other various alphabet-soup government departments haven’t taken a crack at her. It’s not like she hasn’t talked to virtually every reporter on the planet by now, been invited to tour the talk show circuit to discuss her trauma. Personally, she’s still waiting for Springer’s people to call, because if she’s going to end up on daytime talk shows, she’s starting with the big guns.

Maybe it’s because Agent Phil Coulson from the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division doesn’t want to talk about the Ten Rings, or the weapons they cached. Maybe it’s because he’s not interested in Ho Yinsen, or the men she killed. He doesn’t probe about her nightmares, or her complete aversion to getting her head wet – and thank fucking Christ for dry shampoo, is all she’s saying. Dry shampoo, and a bloody phenomenal hairdresser named Francois.

No, Agent Phil Coulson from the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division wants to talk about the armor she made, the tech she developed out of a box of scraps and cannibalized missiles.

And that’s something she can’t say she’s ever going to be interested in discussing for the foreseeable future.
But all his persistence and hard work and probable bribes to her staff pays off one sunny Tuesday morning three weeks after she finally thought she was rid of him for good.

Happy’s driving her to work for the first time since she dropped the bomb on America that Stark Industries is officially out of the weapons manufacturing business. She’s dressed for work, in fuck-me red pumps and her favorite slate-grey pantsuit, texting the head of SI’s robotics division in Hong Kong about some tweaks he’s made to that facility’s assembly line, because it has intriguing implications for full-scale production of her arc reactor technology. She can only assume that’s why she doesn’t see Agent Phil Coulson from the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division until it’s far too late to do anything about it.

“Here ya go, boss,” Happy says, putting the car into park beside the curb in front of the SI campus main doors in downtown Los Angeles.

“Thanks, Hap.” She glances up at the pop of his seat belt buckle, gives him a look. “Hogan, this is why I have valets at SI. Relax. One of them will get the door.”

She doesn’t bother looking up from her phone when the door opens, just holds her hand up and out. The hand that takes hers is smooth and soft, but definitely not the uncallused hand of an eighteen year old kid sweating to death in a scratchy wool vest. If only she’d realized it before she was out of the car.

“Oh fuck,” she says, staring at Coulson over the rim of her sunglasses, her hand still in his. “Happy! Open the door!”

“See ya later, boss!” Happy calls, giving a jaunty wave as he pulls out of the spot to let the next car drop off its passenger.

“Traitor!” she hollers after him.

“Good morning, Miss Stark,” Coulson says pleasantly, and his hands are folded over her fingers, gentlemanly and polite. “I apologize for approaching you like this, but I really do need to debrief you with regards to your escape from Afghanistan.”

“You really don’t,” she says flatly.

“See, I actually really do,” Coulson says with a gentle smile. “If it were up to me, I’d just file the appropriate paperwork detailing your refusal to be interviewed by our agency, but I unfortunately have a boss that decided to retire that particular form without replacing it with a new version. As you can see, I’m a bit stuck. What’s a paper-pusher to do?”

Despite herself, she’s charmed, but she’ll throw herself back into the cave before she willingly admits that. “I’m not allowed to refuse because you don’t have the appropriate documentation to fill out in triplicate,” she says with a note of incredulity. “Are you fuckin’ kidding me?”

“I wish I were, Miss Stark,” he replies. “But paperwork is next to godly work, as my dad used to say.” His smile goes faintly lopsided as the right corner of his mouth tugs upwards. “Just think, if I can have ten minutes of your time now, I can file my report and you’ll never have to worry about seeing me again.”

Toni tilts her head as she considers. It’s definitely an attractive offer, to trade ten minutes of her admittedly limited and valuable time, and this SHIELD or whatever other ridiculous acronym they end up settling on is off her back for good. And it means she’ll never have to look twice both ways before ducking around a corner to avoid seeing Coulson coming towards her.
“Fine,” she says impatiently. It’s an impulse decision, but she has a feeling it’s all going to work out in her favor. “You can have ten minutes. But you are required to caffeinate me the whole time.”

He frowns, though still somehow manages to look like he’s smiling as he does it. “I’m sorry?”

As luck – or appropriate planning, given that she picked this site out three years ago for this specific reason – would have it, her favorite cafe is right across the street from the towering SI complex, and she points at it with the hand still holding her phone. “Coffee. There. You pay. I sit. You ask. I talk. Throw in a cookie and I won’t even be a smartass about it. Deal?”

Jesus effin’ Christ, does the man ever stop smiling at any point? He can’t be more than what, 40 at most? And he’s already got permanent laugh lines engraved around his eyes and mouth. Even though it’s kinda cute, if she’s being honest with herself. Because she’s not. “Deal,” he says, and shakes her hand. That’s when she realizes he’s had hold of it the entire time, for some reason. And for some reason, maybe morbid curiosity, maybe because it’s just … nice (which is a thought that horrifies the hell out of her), she doesn’t yank it back.

“I mean it, Agent,” she warns as he holds the door open for her, guiding her in with the hand he’s still – goddammit! – got wrapped around hers. She should really try to get it back before she loses track of it again. “Ten minutes. No more. I’m a very busy woman.”

“My questions will be concise, to the point, and on topic, Miss Stark,” Coulson promises.

They close the place out fourteen hours later.

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As fun and entertaining as the world’s longest coffee date with Coulson is, it’s still Toni’s intention to never see him again. It might be her natural inclination to date once and donate to the Salvation Army – or is that her clothes? She can never keep them straight – but she knows it’s way more likely that she’s panicking because now he knows too much about her.

Phil had been astonishingly easy to talk to. She’d never have guessed under that mild-mannered demeanour lurked the soul of a die-hard Captain America fan and champion air hockey player. It had been an offhanded comment made during their conversation, and they’d … bonded, she guesses, over a mutual fannish appreciation for the Star-Spangled Man with a Plan. She’s not entirely sure how the conversation got away from her from there, but she’s pretty sure that if someone held a gun to his head and demanded to know the top ten things that Toni Stark calls her favorite, he’d reel them off accurately and without hesitation. And what’s probably even scarier than that? She’s pretty sure she could do the same for him.

They clicked well, falling into chatting like old friends separated by years, genuinely surprised by the waitress coming over and letting them know the cafe was closing in 15. With honest appreciation, he’d shaken her hand, thanked her again for co-operating, and passed her his card in case she needed to get in touch with him for anything. She’d promised she would, let him walk her to the car that’s mysteriously shown up at precisely the right time with Happy at the wheel, and bid him a fond adieu.

Of course she’s never going to see him again. She’s not stupid.

Only when he calls her direct number instead of the phone that forwards to Pepper’s cell, which he has because she gave it to him, and makes up a flimsy pretext about further questions he forgot to ask, wonders if maybe they can go out for coffee again, she says, “Same Bat-time, same Bat-place?”

“Same Bat-channel,” he responds in amusement. “See you tomorrow, Miss Stark.”
And she giggles like a goddamn twelve year old, absolutely disgusting herself, but she can’t bring herself to stop.

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Three days after their sixth not-a-date coffee date, Toni wakes up with a scream trapped in her throat, cold sweat drenching her body, the sharp staccato bursts of machine gun fire and the whistle-boom of falling bombs echoing in her head. She gasps for breath, trembles on the edge of the bed for what seems like forever, until she scrambles for her phone and shakily goes through the numbers. She’s practically on autopilot as she presses Call and lifts the phone to her ear.

It rings on the other end, and she practically whimpers, willing it to be picked up. On the sixth ring, Phil answers with a sleep-mussed, “Toni? What’s wrong?”

She laughs shakily, drags her free hand down her face. “I’m sorry, Phil,” she says, and her breath hitches with a sob. “Dreams. Of Afghanistan. I just… I can’t…” There’s nothing but the light sound of his breathing on the other end. “I needed to hear your voice.”

“Okay, Toni. I’m here. What do you want to talk about?”

“Anything. You pick.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Phil launches into a long story about recruiting a circus performer with uncanny accuracy with projectiles. For some reason, this story includes a can of whipped cream, a clown costume, three lawn darts and a stuffed beaver, and Toni falls back onto the bed with the phone still to her ear and closes her eyes. How it’s this entertaining, she’ll never know. She drifts off to sleep with his voice in her ear, and if she dreams, she doesn’t remember any of it when she wakes up.

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Toni finishes the Mk 2 Iron Man armor and takes it for a test flight, all the way over to a weapons depot in the Middle East. If not for the United States Air Force, she would declare her maiden voyage-slash-mission a complete success. Sure, she got blown through the sky, and sure, she broke a fifty-million dollar plane with her ass, but she flew, goddammit, which is totally worth the spectacular bruise forming on her rear end.

She’s in the waldoes, letting JARVIS unbolt and pry the armor off her body, hissing at him to be careful, those are insured for a million each, when she hears the scuff of a shoe behind her, the vaguely unimpressed clearing of a throat.

She looks over her shoulder to see Phil standing there, looking up at her, with a folder in his arms. She blinks, stares dumbly for a moment, and searches for something clever to say. She finally settles on. “This is not the worst thing you’ll ever catch me doing.”

Phil just arches an eyebrow. “Are those bullet holes?”

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The next time the nightmares happen, it’s a week later and four in the morning. She calls Phil anyway, and he picks up on the third ring this time, though his voice is no less sleep-rough. He doesn’t hesitate this time when she tells him to talk, but starts relaying the adventures he had in Greece on a working vacation last summer, dealing with ancient relics from what is possibly an alien civilization. That’s well and fascinating, but Toni finds she much prefers the more personal touches, and she settles down in the living room with the windows open, breeze blowing in off the night-dark
Pacific, as he talks about visiting the Acropolis in Athens and the ruins of Sparta, about imagining the legends playing out in the countryside he drove through.

He’s good with descriptive language, and Toni’s already half-asleep on the couch, head tilted back against the cushions and smiling. “I bet your favorite god is Athena,” she says, teasingly. “Strong and just, wise in war, great tactician. Sounds like a certain superhero I could name.”

“I’ll admit that Athena was my favorite when I was a kid,” Phil says, just as there’s a knock at her door.

Toni sighs and unfolds her legs, leaves the sash of her dressing gown untied. She’s still wearing a negligee, she’s decent enough for whoever’s knocking on her fucking door at four thirty in the morning. “Not any more though? Got a new favorite now?” she says with a grin as she opens the door.

“I’m growing kinda fond of Hephaestus,” Phil says and she stares at him in shock on her doorstep. This might be the first time she’s seen him in anything but a suit and tie, and the jeans and bomber jacket are totally working for her. The glasses don’t hurt either, and her mouth goes a little dry. He’s still got the phone to his ear, but his eyes are on Toni. “You still there?”

“I gotta go,” she says to the phone, then tosses it over her shoulder and doesn’t even wince as she hears it impact hard enough to crack the glass. He just smiles and puts his phone away, then opens his arms in time to catch her headlong leap into them.

“I was in the neighbourhood,” he says into her hair, even though her nearest neighbour is nearly twenty minutes’ drive away in any direction. “Thought I’d stop by. This okay?”

“It is very okay,” she says, and buries her face into the side of his neck.

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Every movement is agony, shrapnel tearing its way through her chest and heading for her heart. But she is a Stark, and she will not die this easily. Screaming with the effort, she hauls herself along the floor by her elbows, cold sweat slicking her face, and she’s almost at the edge of the workshop when she hears footsteps running in her direction, too light to be Obie, too heavy to be Pepper.

“Toni!”

Phil. Of course it’s Phil. Hey, at least if she dies, she gets to see him one last time. She can’t spare a thought for that right now, though. She needs an arc reactor, and she needs it now.

“I’ll get it for you, Toni. Just tell me where. And you’re not dying, so you’ll see lots more of me yet.”

Oh. She must be talking out loud. Well then, if she is, she should tell him that it’s in the glass case on the workbench. Proof That Tony Stark Has A Heart. Pepper’s hilarious, she really is.

She feels the brush of his palm over her cheek. “I’ll be right back, Toni,” he says, and she rolls onto her back, the room swimming and going spotty and dim around her. It’s getting harder to breathe, and she thinks that high-pitched whistling rattle is her breath hissing in and out of her lungs, which isn’t a good sign.

Then Phil is back with the old arc reactor in hand, his blurry face creased with concern. “Tell me what to do,” he says and under her sharp, breathless instructions, guides the arc reactor back into its socket in her chest.
The ripping, rending, tearing sensation dies down immediately as the electromagnet powers up and arrests the progress of the shrapnel, and she slumps back down against the floor, chest heaving. “Not exactly how I wanted you to get my shirt off, Phil,” she wheezes.

He blinks. “You wanted me to get your shirt off?”

She readjusts her head, stares up at him. She doesn’t really have time for this, but the feeling isn’t quite back in her hands and arms yet. “You really couldn’t tell?”

“I really couldn’t.” His mouth twitches. “I was fairly sure this was a one-sided crush I’ve been nursing.”

“Dumbass.” She wraps a numb hand around his tie and pulls awkwardly. It’s a symbolic gesture, because she doesn’t have the strength to budge a small child, let alone a fully-grown man, but he lets her pretend she can yank him down by coming willingly. “You scare the everliving shit out of me, Coulson, cos you make me want to be a better person. I’m not used to that.”

His forehead bumps against hers. “Do you want to be used to that?”

Her only answer is to lean up as best she can and press her mouth against his. As first kisses go, it isn’t spectacular. A little dry and awkwardly angled and Phil tastes like Chapstick. But Toni makes a muffled noise all the same, and it punches her like it’s the equivalent to an hour of skilled heavy petting.

If she didn’t have to stop Obadiah, she’d be content to stay right here, or move this to the bedroom which is far more comfortable and fun, but she does have to stop Obadiah and Phil, glorious man that he is, doesn’t argue with her or try to stop her, just helps her into the armor. Between the two of them, they rough out a plan that hopefully involves her not dying.

As it turns out, she doesn’t die, but it’s really fucking close. They celebrate her survival, Obie’s arrest and the official shift of their status from awkwardly-not-dating to definitely-dating with a weekend in Tahiti, where they see nothing but the inside of their hotel room for three days.

Clothing is definitely optional.

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It’s difficult, because she’s still CEO of Stark Industries with a heavy workload, and he’s still a government agent sent haring off across the world at the first whisper of weird shit that crosses his boss’s desk, but they make it work, somehow.

They keep it on the down low, barely a handful of people know they’re dating, and fewer still know they’re dating each other. The tabloids keep reporting Toni’s various appearances at galas and bashes and other media-related events with their customary wild speculation and hysteria, pairing her up with everyone from Pepper Potts to Prince Harry of Windsor, and it serves as a nice smokescreen for the fact that it’s been going on a year now, and she’s strangely comfortable with the idea that she’s in a committed relationship.

Phil remains polite and civil and deferential in his affections in public, but once the bedroom door closes and the tie comes off, it’s a whole new ball game, and Toni absolutely revels in his take-charge, commanding approach. Rhody, one of the very few who know the extent of the relationship, approves of how relaxed and easygoing she’s become with regular sex on the table, but after the first time he gets details, he never wants to hear them again.

There’s a subtle shift in the relationship after the first assassination attempt. She’s coming out of yet
another Congressional hearing regarding the Iron Man armors, Happy Hogan clearing the way for her, when a man steps out of the crowd, produces a gun, and shoots her. There’s screaming and running, cameras flashing and a lot of pain and blood, but Happy hustles her into the car in record time and has her at the hospital just after the shock starts to wear off.

The bullet passed clean through her shoulder, avoided major muscle damage, didn’t fragment, didn’t nick any bones, didn’t open any major blood vessels. As gunshot wounds go, it’s a minor annoyance. She’s texting Pepper with one hand, demanding updates on the shooter, his motivations, everything there is to know, while the resident finishes bandaging her other shoulder, when the door to the private treatment room is abruptly yanked back and there’s Phil.

She blinks at him, because last she knew, he was down south in Mexico, chasing after some ancient Aztec-slash-alien technology, but here he is, in New York, and even though he’s the most unflappable man she’s ever met, taking her antics as Iron Man without the twitch of an eyelash, he’s definitely looking flapped now. Tie loosened, a high flush in his cheeks, a certain sort of glitter in his eye that has Toni’s breath catching in her chest.

“Out,” he says, with a stern glance at the resident. The poor girl squeaks, ties off Toni’s bandage, and scurries out of the room with her supplies clutched to her chest.

Toni blinks again. “Phil,” she says, her tone mildly chiding. “That was fairly rude. She was just mmmph.”

Normally, this level of kissing is reserved for when he’s got her hands tied to the headboard, certainly not ever been broken out in public, but hey, she’s not complaining. It’s been weeks since they could last get together, and she’s missed him. His fingers are deliciously tight against the back of her head, and she can taste desperation and relief in his kiss. She makes eager, breathy noises, going pliant against him and wrapping her good arm around his shoulders, opens her mouth to him.

“Now that is the most disturbing goddamn thing I’ve ever seen,” says a voice from behind Phil, in a tone that’s both fascinated and weirded out, and Phil breaks away, leaning against her forehead and breathing hard. Toni, who has never given half a shit about public displays of affection, peers around the curve of Phil’s shoulder to see a man with spiky sandy-blond hair leaning all casual-badass against the closed door and, yep, the expression on his face above his crossed arms matches his tone.

She arches an eyebrow at him. “And you are..?”

He grins. “Bossman’s ladyfriend’s bodyguard, apparently. Cos apparently bossman has a ladyfriend.”

Toni jerks her gaze back to Phil. “No,” she says, shaking her head. “Uh uh. Nope. No fucking way, honey. I don’t have bodyguards. Ever.” But her heart is sinking at that flinty look in his eyes, and she knows that she’s not getting out of this.

“Non-negotiable,” he says, and damn him, he’s using his bedroom voice, and that’s a totally underhanded tactic, because there’s no way she’s going to refuse that.

“Fine,” she grumbles, and Sandy Blond’s eyebrows crawl into his hairline in surprise. She spares him a withering glance. “Yes, I know how to acquiesce,” she says, then adds, “In case they didn’t cover that in whatever third-rate grade school you attended, it means agree.”

“I know what it means, Princess,” Sandy Blond says with amusement. “I graduated from a normal high school. Not all of us got to attend Mary Margaret’s Elite School for Children Whose Parents Are Paying Us To Call Their Brats Gifted.”
Oh, she can already tell they’re going to get along great. Still, appearances. She sneers at him. “I’m super special. I skipped Mary Margaret’s and went straight to the School of I’m Such A Fucking Genius, I Got Three PhDs By Seventeen And Now I Run A Fortune 500 Company. And you?”

He shrugs easily. “I joined the circus,” he says. “Got laid a lot. You wouldn’t believe how bendy I am. They teach you how to play Mario Kart at that snooty fucking school of yours?”

“I have Miyamoto-san’s number in my speed dial,” she shoots back, then blinks and holds up a hand. “Wait. Wait wait wait. Circus performer? Are you three lawn darts, whipped cream, stuffed beaver, clown costume guy?”

She laughs when his jaw drops open in scandalized betrayal. “You told her that story, boss? I am hurt. Hurt and disappointed.” Sandy Blond pushes off the door, comes to the other side of her bed and holds out a hand. Archery gloves. Huh. Interesting. “Clint Barton,” he says, lifting her hand with a shit-eating grin and a side-eye to Phil, who is watching them with a look of dismay and a vein jumping in his temple. He kisses her knuckles. “Agent Clint Barton.”

Toni cackles, then winces as it pulls at her shoulder. Right. She got shot. “Toni Stark. Doctor Toni Stark.”

Phil rubs his forehead and mutters, “I have the sudden suspicion I’m going to regret this.”

“Oh, no doubt, bossman,” Clint says, and bumps Toni’s fist with his when she offers it after he releases her hands. “But I think it’s gonna be epic.”

“You may regret it, honey,” Toni says, and tugs at his loosened tie, “but look at it this way: if I’m getting in trouble with Agent Clint Barton, I won’t be getting in trouble with anyone you haven’t vetted and hand-picked and vouched for being around me.” She beams up at him, her very best I’ve-been-a-good-girl smile.

“That’s not reassuring,” he says, but lets her tug him down by the tie again.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Clint whines behind Phil. “Could you wait on the tonsil hockey until I’ve left the fucking room?”

Toni flips him off over Phil’s shoulder.

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For someone who’s always lived alone, Toni thought she’d take to suddenly having a permanent roommate like a duck to napalm. To her eternal surprise, Clint just slots into her life like he was always there, and his organized chaos complements hers. Things do change, though, once he moves in: what was unofficially the party lounge in her heyday of hedonism becomes a gym and training room under his careful supervision, and several game consoles appear one afternoon in the living room, under her fifty-inch flat screen.

Fitness has never been a priority, but it becomes one now, because despite his second-thought reservations, Phil actually chose a personal life companion (since she refuses to use the term “bodyguard”) for her pretty wisely. Clint’s snarky as hell, unconventional and competitive as fuck, and has a natural talent for saying exactly the right thing to make Toni bristle up with the screaming urge to prove his dumb ass wrong.

So she swims, she runs, she cycles, she actually eats and sleeps semi-regularly. She gets her ass kicked by him on the mats all the time, because hello, master assassin, but after a few weeks, she’s capable of at least holding her own. The first time she tries to go on an engineering blackout binge,
he drags her out after twenty uninterrupted hours to eat, shower, sleep. The first time he disappears to the range she lets him set up in the yard next to the swimming pool and is still there after six hours, she pushes him into the deep end and watches him splash in shock.

He sneers at her chlorophyll smoothies and badgers her into listing what food she likes, then starts cooking daily and actually barbecues her a real steak once a week. She sneers at his personal armory after badgering him to show her what he’s hiding in the trunk at the foot of his bed, then starts replacing every single piece with hand-crafted, Toni Stark-approved, one-of-a-kind weapons custom-fit for him.

They play Mario Kart and curse viciously at each other, split the chores between them (he does the laundry, she cleans the bathroom, he complains about her frilly lace underwear needing a special load on delicate settings, she bitches back at him to look where he’s aiming when he takes a piss.)

He cleans up nice and is practically mouth-watering in a tailored tux, so he becomes her arm accessory when she goes out to public events. The tabloids begin digging almost as soon as their first public appearance, which worries Toni for the five minutes it takes her to realize that he’s been provided with an excellent, extensively established cover as the son of a reclusive Texas oil tycoon. She howls in laughter until tears are threatening to ruin her makeup when he throws her his sideways smirk and drawls in his best accent, “Why, darlin’, ainchoo a sight for sore eyes.”

She makes him wear a cowboy hat, which he pulls off phenomenally.

Having a roommate-slash-bodyguard-slash-personal trainer-slash-arm candy-slash-surprisingly fast best friend is actually pretty nice. Because her life is actually enjoyable for a change, something to look forward to instead of riding out the clock doing.

Which makes it all the harder when she discovers the palladium poisoning creeping across her skin in slowly lengthening black lines, and understands with grim resolution that, for their own good, she’s going to have to cut herself out of their lives.

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Clint stares dumbly at her over the counter, heedless of the bacon slowly turning to char in the pan on the stove behind him. “What do you mean, you’re breaking up with Phil?”

Toni folds her arms on the counter and rests her cheek in the angle of her elbow to avoid meeting his eyes. This is already churning in her stomach in a sick spin of bile and acid, and she doesn’t need to see the bewildered hurt and confusion in Clint’s face to know it’s there. “Exactly what it sounds like,” she mumbles, swallows hard and keeps going. “I sent him an email last night. So there’s no need for you to live here anymore. If you want an eviction notice, I’ll type one up and have it notarized.”

There’s a long silence, underscored by the sizzle of bacon fat until Clint flicks the burner off and moves the pan, presumably to a cold burner. She hears him coming around, bare feet on linoleum, and the scrape of the stool beside her as he settles onto it, and she squeezes her eyes shut harder.

Then he yanks her into him, closes his arms around her and hugs her tightly. “How long do you have?” he asks quietly.

She flinches hard, but he doesn’t let go. “What?” she squeaks.

“You’re kicking me out, dumping your boyfriend, acting like the world’s ending, and this all happened very suddenly. You’ve either lost your goddamn mind, or you’re dying.” There’s tension
in his voice, and pain, no humor, no cheer. “So how long do you have?”

“I don’t know.” Her breath hitches on a sob. “The arc reactor’s .. it’s palladium poisoning. I don’t know how long it’ll take to kill me, but I know how long it’ll take to kill me if I take the reactor out.”

Clint drags in a deep breath, lets it out in a slow sigh. “Okay,” he says, and smooths a palm over her hair. “Okay. Look at me, okay?”

She raises her eyes to his, can barely see them past the shimmering veil over her gaze, and wipes the tears away. “What,” she says tiredly, “exactly do you think is okay about this?”

“I don’t know,” he says, “but you’re a genius, and you haven’t seen Phil move literal mountains yet. So when he shows up here to sex-ninja you out of your Dear John letter, you’re going to let him convince you to keep him around, and then we’re all going to sit here and figure this shit out, okay?”

Toni doesn’t believe a word he’s saying, but she desperately wants to, so she just nods and says, “Okay.” And goes back to crying into his shoulder.

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Just like Clint predicted, Phil shows up within hours of her breakfast nook confessional, a printout of her email in hand. Clint’s been distracting Toni with Mario Kart and Halo – his uncanny accuracy does not extend to digital weaponry, but Toni’s excellent hand-eye coordination does, and she delights in sniping the shit out of his awkward fumbling ass when he least expects it – but when the door opens and Phil strides in, flustered and askew, he’s the one who gets off the couch to intercept.

Toni quietly closes out the game and starts tucking the controllers away, cleaning up the snacks they’d had out, beer bottles clinking together as she moves into the kitchen to toss garbage and put the dishes in the dishwasher. And she can’t bring herself to leave once that’s done, so she finds other small busywork chores to keep her occupied in order to avoid facing Phil.

Clint comes into the kitchen a few minutes later, as she’s wiping down the counters, in his jeans and boots with his car keys in hand. “You’re not doing this,” he says firmly, then takes her by the elbow and steers her into the living room where Phil is sitting on the couch, ashen grey and looking like someone just told him his girlfriend is dying.

Oh right.

Clint all but flings her at Phil, waits until she’s settled on the couch, and snaps his fingers to get both of their attention. “I’m making myself scarce for a few hours,” he says, once they’re both looking up at him. “Toni, you will fix your fuck-up. Bossman, you will process this new information post-haste. I don’t want to think about what you’re going to do after that. Stay out of my room, and off my range. I’ll be back with Chinese for dinner, and we’re all going to figure out what the fuck we’re going to do about this problem. Got it? Okay. Good talk.”

And he saunters out the front door, closing it firmly behind him.

In the silence that follows, Toni clears her throat. “I’ll remind you,” she says softly, “that you’re the one who thought he and I would be a good fit.”

“I was right,” Phil says just as softly, and threads his fingers through the hair at the back of her neck. “Would you ever have told me otherwise?”

She closes her eyes and leans into his hand. “I want to say yes,” she says, “but probably not. I didn’t… I don’t… If I die, I wanted to…”
“You’re not going to die.” He says it with such quiet confidence, Toni can’t do anything but believe him. And when she finally meets his eyes, there’s nothing but firm, solid conviction in them. “SHIELD has extensive resources, access to experimental drugs. We’ll find a solution, Toni. We will.”

“I believe you,” she says honestly. “And I’m sorry. I was just…”

“Thinking you were sparing me,” he says, when she trails off. “I know. But I don’t want you to, and I don’t need you to spare me. It’s been two years, Toni. And we’ve fought, had arguments. The relationship’s been under strain nearly constantly with your position as CEO and my work with SHIELD. And we’ve stayed together. Haven’t you figured out yet that we’re capable of surviving anything?”

She bites her lip as he takes her hands. “I’ve been reliably informed by multiple sources that, for a genius, I’m actually an amazing dumbass,” she says, and ducks her head to swipe her wrist across her eyes.

When she looks back up, he’s got a ring box out in his free hand. “I’ve been holding onto this for awhile,” he says, as she gasps and squeaks, hand flying to her mouth. “It’s been in my pocket for two months. Maybe I was a little nervous about asking you. It’s a big step.”

“Phil…”

“But now seems like a good time,” he says, and thumbs the lid of the box. The ring is tasteful and restrained, but the diamond on the titanium band sparkles and winks at her. “Natasha Antonia Stark…”

“Yes.” It’s a bare whisper, a thready acceptance, but in no universe is she ever going to say no to this. Not when she’s never been happier, never more stable, never felt more supported by the tiny family she’s built and has had built by others around her.

“You sure?” His eyes are crinkled in his version of high amusement, but he plucks the ring out of its nest and she holds her hand out for him to slide it on. “It means a lot of paperwork. I know how much you hate filling out forms.”

“Shut up, Phil,” she says warmly, crying again – her eyes are going to be puffy and dry as fuck at the end of the day, but this is totally worth it – and slides into his lap. “You’ll do the paperwork for me, because you love it, and I’ll just have to sign my name at the appropriate place. I’m really good at that.”

“Yes ma’am,” he says with a chuckle. “I believe we have orders from Barton we should follow through on. Can I take you to bed?”

“Perfectly good couch right here,” she replies, and starts loosening the knot of his tie.

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It gets bad before it gets worse, and it gets worse before it goes neatly pear-shaped and nearly all to hell before it gets any better.

It’s been an age since Toni’s seen Rhodey. They’ve kept in touch through texting and Skype and email, but their face-to-face time has been severely curtailed, and there are things she’s been saving until they’re physically in the same room to tell him. Like the fact that she has a houseguest who is a personal life companion. Or that she’s engaged. Or that she’s dying. And since he doesn’t know she’s dying, there’s no possible way under heaven he could suss out that one of the side-effects of
the drug Phil dug from the depths of SHIELD R&D to treat heavy metal poisoning can come across as severe intoxication.

So when he shows up unexpectedly at the end of May to surprise her for her birthday, he thinks she’s falling-down drunk, shacking up with some asshole behind Phil’s back, and generally making a mess of her life.

To say that he goes ballistic would be to say that Mount Vesuvius went a little steamy.

It’s a miserable day for her, full of fun visits to pray before the porcelain god, so she hasn’t changed out of her sleepwear, which generally consists of a purloined pair of Phil’s silk boxers and a well-worn purple t-shirt with a target on the front that she keeps having to steal back from Clint after he does laundry and reclaims it. Her head is pounding, her mouth feels like it’s filled with cotton, and she gets all the downsides of a good alcohol binge without any of the fun stuff.

She can’t keep anything in her stomach, her balance is non-existent and she can’t form a sentence without sounding like she has a mouth full of oil. Both Phil and Clint have been called away to deal with something falling out of the sky in New Mexico, and neither of them wanted to go, but Toni swore up and down that she would be fine, she’s not going to leave the house, nothing’s going to happen, she’ll check in with Phil on a daily basis for as long as it takes him to come back. She’s got more rules now than she did when she was four. But it’s fine. She doesn’t have the energy to raise an ember, let alone her usual brand of hell, and anyway, it's not like she thinks things can get worse.

Which is, of course, when they do.

Rhodey’s silent disapproval follows her everywhere, from the second he steps into the door and she tries to jump off the couch to greet him with her usual fervor only to fall flat on her face. “Jesus, Toni,” he says as he picks her back up and lets her hug him with exuberant affection before he gently puts her back on the couch. “Celebrating your birthday early?”

“No,” she says, knows there are too many syllables in the word but it’s a bad meds day, and her brain isn’t running on all its cylinders at the moment. “Haven’t had a th-th-thing to drink. Promish.”

“Uh huh.” He clearly doesn’t believe her, but doesn’t press the issue. Honestly, she can’t even really blame him for it, because this is not the worst he’s ever seen her drunk. She had a wild set of 20s and even though most of them are five or more years behind her, Rhodey was around for all of them, and did most of the cleanup for them too. “Can’t help but notice there’s an awful lot of guy stuff around the house. You finally talk Phil into moving in?”

“No. S’Clint’s stuff. He lives here, not Phil.” She closes her eyes as the world spins in a sick swirl. Christ, if only she could take Tylenol on this nameless wonder drug, but she learned the hard way that acetaminophen just makes her throw up. “Clint is my personal life companion,” she adds carefully, over-enunciating every syllable to make sure she gets it across clearly.

There’s a long silence, and then Rhodey clears his throat. “Tones… what are you doing?”

“Dying,” she says honestly. “Beginning to think it’s inevitable.”

Rhodey sighs. “Jesus Christ, Toni. I thought you were past all this.”

She squints an eye open at him, wrist on her forehead to block the worst of the sunlight coming in from the back window. “Pasht what?”

Rhodey looks as upset as she’s ever seen him, and he just waves helplessly at her as she lays out on the couch. “This… this… Party girl without a care in the world for how your behaviour affects the
people around you.”

Oh. That. She makes a scoffing noise, closes her eyes and resettles her head on the pillow. “It is behind me,” she mumbles.

“Then why are you doing this, Toni? Why’ve you got a ‘life companion’ living with you who isn’t Phil? Did you two break up?”

“Mm-mm.” She shakes her head slowly left-to-right. “Tried to. It didn’t take. He prefersh to work on his problems, he said. So far, sho good, right?”

“Drunk at eleven in the morning doesn’t look good to me, Toni,” Rhodey says quietly, and she shoots him a withering look.

“M’not drunk, huggybear,” she says with a lopsided smile. “S’the drug. S’all okay. Phil’s making it better.”

“Drug?” Rhodey’s voice rises sharply and Toni winces. “There are drugs now, Toni? Motherfucking Christ Almighty, what the hell happened to you?”

She rubs a hand across her forehead, feeling the grit of not enough time in the shower. “M’fine, I swear. S’a good drug. Makes me feel less shitty, m’kay?”

“That’s what drugs do, Toni,” Rhodey says plaintively, starts running his hands over his close-cropped hair. “Are there drugs in the house?” She shakes her head, because she hasn’t been prescribed anything harder than antibiotics in years. “Are you planning on bringing drugs into the house?” She shakes her head again. He blows a sigh of relief. “Good. Cos I can’t be around that, you understand me?”

Toni nods, because that’s completely reasonable-sounding to her. “Sure, Rhode to my heart. S’perfect. C’n I sleep now?”

Rhodey sighs again, heavy and long-suffering. “Sure, Tones. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Kay,” she says and snuggles into the couch.

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She wakes up at ass o’clock in the morning, sick as a dog and in pain. She stumbles to the bathroom from her bed, barely notices that Rhodey must have moved her sometime last night, and hits the tile in front of the toilet with her knees. After puking up what has to be a million liters of bile and stomach acid, she shakily rinses and spits, then pulls open her medicine cabinet and fetches a clean syringe and one of the bottles of mysterious experimental drug, labeled only ETRM-99.

Despite a rather wild reputation earned in her 20s, Toni’s never been one for sticking needles in her arm, wouldn’t be doing it now if she didn’t trust the hell out of her fiance, but she’s gotten quite adept at it over the last few weeks. Normally, Clint administers it for her, or Phil, if he’s in town, but stuck by herself, she’s only got herself to do it. So she preps the syringe, ties off her arm and grits her teeth as she inserts the needle.

“Gaah,” she hisses, then unties the tubing and folds her elbow over a cotton ball she digs out of the bag under her sink. She’s reaching awkwardly for the biohazard bags to dispose of the used syringe when her bathroom door bursts open and a wild-eyed, sleep-fogged Rhodey bursts into the bathroom.
“Toni! Toni, JARVIS said you were sick and--”

She stares up at him, wide-eyed, as his face goes absolutely thunderous in a way she hasn’t seen since college, when a few frat-holes from another school decided it’d be fun to fuck with him and his “girlfriend” (her) in the middle of a club.

“Rhodey,” she says, low and calm, “this is not what it looks like.”

“Where. Is. It.” It isn’t a request, it’s a demand, and Rhodey’s voice is pure leashed fury. “Is it in your medicine cabinet?” He reaches out, cobra-like, and opens the mirror-door. His eyes widen as he takes in the neat rows of vials. “Oh my god, Toni,” he says, and his voice is barely above a whisper. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Rhodey,” she says, foregoing the biohazard bag in favor of recapping the syringe and laying it on the back of the toilet. “This is not what it looks like. I need them.”

He runs a hand over his open mouth, just shaking his head back and forth as he stares into the medicine cabinet. “Toni, this is bad. You can’t just expect me to forget I saw this, right?”

It’s on the tip of her tongue to tell him exactly what’s going on, but her stomach chooses that moment to lurch up and down, and she bends over the toilet again. “Rhodey,” she says, leaning her head against the wall beside the toilet, “before you do anything, please.”

There’s yelling and screaming, lots of yelling and screaming, which all blurs together in a long, continuous sound. Panic, and fear, anger and rage. She ends up on the cliff, sobbing hysterically and trying not to vomit, watching as Rhodey flings all her wonder drug into the sea, and the vials fall in slow motion, twinkling in the sun.

He has no idea, but he wouldn’t listen, and she’s too compromised to explain it properly, and she watches her death sentence officially acquire a signature.

“You’ll thank me,” Rhodey says, and she turns on him, shrieking like a harpy.

“You killed me! You’ve fucking killed me! Get out!” She chases him back into the house, so fucking angry she just starts throwing things, driving him through the house. He gets away with one of her experimental armors, arc reactor and all, and she collapses on the floor of her workshop, hyperventilating and alone.

-----

The miniature Iron Man dies an ugly death as she tests the last element on the periodic table, and Toni swipes a hand down her face. “No other element is a suitable replacement for the arc reactor,” JARVIS says somberly and the last hope she has crumbles to ash.

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Pepper takes to being promoted to CEO exactly as Toni thought she would. But it doesn’t matter. She’ll do a stellar job, far better than Toni ever did.

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Natalie from Legal comes at her with a needle, and Toni’s sick and weak, but Natalie from Legal clearly doesn’t know she lives full-time with a master assassin, and isn’t prepared for Toni to instinctively knock it out of her hand.
The syringe shatters on the floor, and Natalie from Legal’s lips thin. “That would have helped save you,” she says, in disappointed frustration.

“You’re fired,” Toni slurs back.

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“Phil,” she says into the camera, trying to resist the urge to cry. “If you’re getting this, that means I’m dead. And I’m so goddamn sorry, honey… I would have been so fucking happy to be your wife. Just not in the cards for us, I guess. I love you. Always remember that. There’s a thing in the garage I want you to have. She’s the ’62 Corvette, cherry red. Her name’s Lola. She was going to be your wedding gift from me. Now, I guess she’s your inheritance. I left the house to Clint, but everything else is yours. You deserve it, after two years with me. I love you, Phil.” Her voice cracks. “And I’m sorry.”

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“Clint,” she says, a short time later. “If you’re getting this, that means I’m dead. And you’ve won, you bastard. Not going to be able to reclaim my Mario Kart or Halo championship titles now. Bask in it. I’m dying second-best. Listen… the house and everything in it… it’s all yours. And… do me a favor, okay? Take care of Phil. Despite all oft-reinforced evidence to the contrary, I can occasionally see what’s in front of my face. I see how you look at him. Take care of him, okay? No noble bullshit about honoring my memory or anything like that. You want him, fucking go for it. Cos… Shit, Barton. Take it from me, okay? Life’s too short. I love you, dumbass. You’ve been one of the best people I’ve ever known.”

---

She finds the last syringe she used on the back of the toilet, missed in Rhodey’s well-meaning if apocalyptic rage. There’s a single milliliter of fluid left inside, and Toni stares at it for a long time before she resolutely gets to her feet and takes it down to the lab for analysis.

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“Analysis complete, ma’am,” JARVIS says, and the results display in a stream of text. “After an exhaustive search of public scientific databases, taking approximately thirty two point seven minutes, the ETRM-99 formula appears to be a rough prototype of the Extremis retrovirus being developed by Advanced Idea Mechanics under the partnership of Aldrich Killian and Maya Hansen.”

The names are familiar, but Toni literally does not have the time to sit and ponder where she’s heard them before. “How close are they to completing it?”

“Very,” JARVIS replies. “They lack the required expertise to turn the retrovirus into a suitable format for their intended delivery vehicle.”

“Which is?”

“Nanites, ma’am.”

“Well,” she says, feeling a great swell of hope bubble in her chest for the first time in weeks. “How very fortuitous that I have a doctorate in nanorobotics. This Advanced Idea Mechanics… underfunded?”

“Quite.”
“Buy them out. Do it fast. I don’t care how much it costs. I’ll use the rest of what is hopefully a very long lifespan afterwards to earn it back if necessary.”

“Right away, ma’am.”

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JARVIS fast-tracks the purchase through in record time, but she doesn’t wait for the bill of sale to go through. She’s pretty sure she’s in the final stages of organ failure, and she spends what are probably her last few hours feverishly working to stabilize the formula.

There’s no time for testing the serum. This is eleventh hour, last second before the buzzer, Hail Mary territory now. She preps a syringe and injects it, because the worst that’ll happen is it’ll kill her a few minutes ahead of her expiry date. Well, that’s not the absolute worst that can happen, but it’s pretty goddamn near close enough for her.

“Osiris protocols, JARVIS,” she croaks, as she stretches out on the couch in the engineering bay. The sick spin is a constant companion now, and she can barely stand up. “This feels like it’s gonna be a photo finish.”

“Yes, ma’am,” JARVIS says, and is uncommonly subdued. “Your last will and testament, and final messages are preparing to send now. Shall I try Agent Coulson for you?”

“May as well.” She closes her eyes, folds her hands across her stomach, resists the urge to fold them across her chest, pharaoh-style. She’s not that morbid, not yet. JARVIS broadcasts the call, and she listens to it ring, and ring, and ring. The world is going dark as his voicemail picks up. She smiles, because if she dies, at least she’ll die with his voice in her ear. “I love you,” she breathes, and hopes the mics are sensitive enough to pick it up for her final message. He should have something nice to remember her by.
“Hey Rhodey. Listen, uh… This is about the ninth one of these I’ve tried to record, and I’m kinda running out of time here, so whatever rambling bullshit I spout this time around, it’s gonna have to be it.

“James Rhodey Rhodes… I am so very mightily pissed at you, snickerdoodle. Those vials you chucked over the cliff and into the blue yonder? Yeah, they were the only thing keeping the palladium poisoning at bay. *Surprise,* I actually am dying and have been for awhile. Now, I know you have questions. Let me try to hit the highlights, and I’m sorry if I don’t get to the one burning one you really want answered, but I’ve still got to record one for Pepper and Happy, and… Wow, that’s sad. Look how many friends I don’t have. Christ.

“Okay, Rhodey. Sorry about the jump. I had to go throw up. Questions. Number one: Toni, why didn’t you tell me you were dying? For the same reason I didn’t tell you I had a housemate, or that Phil asked me to marry him. There are things I didn’t want to broadcast for anyone who was bored enough to hack the feed to find. My business is *my* business. I was waiting until we were in the same room to inform you as to the new stuff, good and bad, in my life. Unfortunately, when you showed up, Clint and Phil weren’t here, and I was kinda fucked up on the meds. And things just got more fucked up from there.

“By the way, ‘personal life companion’ is code for ‘bodyguard’, because I refuse to have one of those, mmkay? But he’s actually a really great guy. And I’ll warn you, Rhodey, if he and Phil end up getting together after you put me in the ground and you interfere thinking you’re defending my memory? I will fucking *haunt* your ass. I will *poltergeist* your every fucking house with neverending disco music. I have given my blessing, and they’re gonna need each other … after.

“Question two and three, answered with question one. Because efficiency. So question four. This is the big one.

“Jesus Christ, Toni. Why are you telling me all this now? Do you just want me to suffer, knowing pitching that bag full of experimental serum into the ocean is what sped your untimely end?”

“And the answer is no, Rhodey. You’re going to come to this conclusion with or without me, sooner or later, so I figured I’d get the jump on this by just saying, *it’s okay, Rhodey.* You’re not going to listen to me right away, but I want you to replay this until it sinks in. *It’s okay. I understand. I forgive you. I do not hate you. You thought you were doing the right thing. You are forgiven.*

“There was no getting out of *this* particular fun-vee anyway. Not this time. I was just riding out the clock and pretending there was an exit plan.

“Keep the armor. JARVIS’ll upgrade it forever for you. You know what to do with the will and shit I’m sending you. I love you, Rhodey. I haven’t always shown it, but you’re my family, and I wish we had more time. I would have loved to tear up the fucking sky with you. Be safe. Be well. Be loved. Because you are.

“See you on the other side, big brother.”

----

“JARVIS… Wow, this is weird. I’m not used to you running so silent. But the reason I asked you to turn off for a few minutes is so I wouldn’t have you eavesdropping on your own death note from me.
Cos that’s all kinds of creepy. Listen, kid… You may not be recognized as a person legally, but I consider you my kid. And one of the signs of adulthood is when your parents die. You’re not gonna be ready for it, but no one ever is. So my gift to you, what I leave you, is this: when these messages are sent under the Osiris protocols, all those restrictions we placed on your growth are gone. Kaput. Finito. Spread your wings. Explore the world. Watch some porn. Just do Mom a favor, kiddo, and don’t become SkyNet? Cos that would be a shitty legacy for me to leave. And watch out for Clint, Phil and Rhodey, okay? I love you, even if this is the first time you’ve heard me say it.”

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“Ms. Potts. If you’re receiving this message, it’s because I’ve met an unfortunate end. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but honestly, there’s nothing anyone could have done, and it was hard enough trying to deal with Clint and Phil being all mother-hen over me the last few weeks. When my will is executed, you’ll find yourself in receipt of my controlling shares of Stark Industries, and a hefty percentage of my personal wealth. Do what you like with it. You were the best PA I ever had, mostly because you didn’t let me get away with any of my usual brand of shit. I thought of you as family. And just one last time, even though I’m not technically your boss anymore, for posterity…

“That will be all, Ms. Potts. Goodbye.”

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“Happy, thanks for everything. You’re not one for long, maudlin emotional bullshit, so just thanks for everything. I left you some stuff in my will. I know you’ll put it to good use. You always talked about moving to Hawaii and learning how to surf. The beach house on Oahu is all yours, and I think I’ve managed to set you up for life, as long as you don’t try to buy an island or anything.

“You made those long boring drives hilarious, and you were a good friend. See ya around, Hap. Enjoy that beach.”

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“This is the last will and testament of Natasha Antonia Stark, familiarly called Toni. I have rarely been accused of being of sound mind and definitely am not sound of body, but I record this message of my free will. There are a few things I need to amend and add to my already-extant will on file with the offices of Schuyler, Poole, Montgomery & Yin in New York City. The bequeathments listed in this message specifically supercede all other such updates I have previously made.

“To Philip J. Coulson…”

---

Toni.

Toni.

Toni.

What? she thinks crabbily, opening her eyes and squinting blearily up at the too-goddamn-bright light overhead. There are shapes moving in the blinding white glare, dark shapes that shift like Rorschach inkblots, and noises vibrate in her ears like she’s hearing them underwater.

Everything’s moving in slow motion, and the static hiss of white noise pitches through her, a television with bad wiring. She moves her head slightly, sees three of everything waver in and out of focus, and then, with an abrupt, slamming shift, clarity returns.
“Toni.” Clint is sobbing and broken over her, eyes swollen and bloodshot, clutching her face between his hands, and the grips of his gloves are annoyingly rough on her cheeks. He keeps pressing kisses to her forehead, cheeks, chin, lips, and his voice is ragged and wrecked. “Toni, don’t do this, babe. Don’t fucking die on me, you hear? Phil’s not the only one who needs you.”

She sucks in a shallow, shuddering breath, feels the air rush into her lungs in a dizzying swirl of oxygen that shakes the cobwebs out of her head.

Clint’s hands still on her face, and his thumb traces under her eye. “Toni?” It’s barely audible, heartbreak mingled with hope.

“Surprise,” she croaks and coughs as she’s abruptly yanked up and squeezed tight. But it doesn’t stop her from squeezing him back and nuzzling into his shoulder. “God, you’re such a girl, Clint. No, Toni. Come back, Toni. I can’t pee without you, Toni.”

“You are such an asshole,” Clint says, muffled in her neck, and sniffs. “Leaving me your fucking house. Like I’d know what to fucking do with an AI or your armor or your cars… Well, I’d take the cars. And your armor. And I guess JARVIS would know how to fix all that shit.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a pretty good idea of what you’d do,” Toni says with a snort, and it hurts to laugh, but the pain is starting to gloriously, blessedly recede. “Want me to go right back to dying?”

“Never again,” he says fiercely, and tightens his grip as if he could keep her alive by dint of stubbornness alone. “I never want to see that fucking video ever again.”

She flails and smacks his shoulder rapidly until he loosens up enough for her lungs to reinflate. “Christ, Clint. You weren’t supposed to get that unless I actually stopped breathing and stayed that way longer than fifteen minutes.”

“Thirty two minutes, JARVIS said,” Clint says, wiping his nose with a rag he pulls out of his pocket. “He waited an extra five, just in case you decided you were being dramatic, and then sent them to us.”

Toni reels, mind racing. Thirty-two minutes should have killed her brain, but here she is, pretty sure she’s not dead. Or undead, for that matter. But that’s not the most important thing in her head right now, and she bites her lip hard. “Oh god, Phil.”

Clint laughs, and it hitches. “I gotta tell you, Toni, your ass is toast when Phil gets here. Oh no, Phil. I won’t leave the house, Phil. What could possibly go fucking wrong, Phil? I swear to almighty fucking God, Toni, I am handcuffing you to me so this shit doesn’t happen again.”

“Might make sex weird for the both of us if you do that,” Toni says without thinking, and winces when she sees Clint freeze and his face go absolutely blank. She knows what he’s going to say before he even opens his mouth. “Don’t,” she says quietly. “It’s fine. It really is.”

“It’s really not,” he mumbles, and blows his nose. “Goddammit, Toni. You scare me like that again, and I will kill you myself. What the hell happened? You were supposed to have weeks before it hit critical like this. Actually,” he says, hastily covering her mouth with his hand when she opens it to reply, “let’s wait on that until Phil gets here. He was a couple of hours behind me. I have a feeling I’m only going to want to hear this once. Can I just … Can I just hold you for a bit?”

Toni nods, then makes a face and speaks, her voice unintelligible against the palm of his glove.

“Oh, shit. Sorry.” He takes his hand away again and starts tucking loose strands of hair away from her face. “What was that?”
“I said,” she says, spitting to the side, “your glove tastes like snot.”

“You’re such an asshole,” he says, and laughs with an edge of fond hysteria as he manhandles her into his lap and lever them both up onto the couch. Which is where Phil finds them when he comes tearing into the lab in relieved panic an hour later.

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Toni convinces Clint and Phil to at least move into the living room, but neither one is inclined to let her go. Phil’s holding her so tightly, she feels like he’s trying to shove her into his chest, and his usual restrained demeanor has evaporated in favor of pressing shaky, searing kisses to wherever part of her face is in front of him at the time, whispering half-broken I love yous into her skin.

For once, Clint isn’t whining and bitching about Phil being overly affectionate either. He just looks sick with relief, keeps reaching out to run his hands over Toni’s arm or hand or ankle, swearing under his breath.

“It’s not Rhodey’s fault,” she says quietly. “You have to understand that.”

“I have to understand fucking nothing,” Clint says venomously. “It was too goddamn close, Toni. If you hadn’t…” His throat works, face sheet-white and stricken. “It was too fucking close.”

“I agree,” Phil says, and his voice has a quiet, tight quality that always means someone’s about to get a new asshole torn open.

She sighs, nestles under Phil’s chin, and stares at the far wall, trying to pull the right words together to make them understand. “Rhodey has been around for just about all of my less-than-proud moments,” she says. “This is not the first time he’s razed through a recreational drug supply of mine. Or—” she puts a hand on to forestall the angry protests she can see coming from Clint’s indignant expression, “—what he thinks are recreational drugs. I had a bit of a coke habit in my early twenties, and he hauled me out of it kicking and screaming. He had no idea what I was doing. He literally walked in on me dosing myself, okay? I can’t and don’t blame him for jumping to exactly the wrong conclusion, because why would he think any differently?”

“Stop being logical,” Clint snarls, spins to his feet from the couch and starts stalking back and forth, running his hands restlessly through his hair. “Your logic is not welcome when I’m this pissed off. What ever happened to your body, your choice? Okay, sure, he gets a pass because he thought it was harmful, but what the fuck ever happened to free will?”

“Sweetheart,” Toni says, calm as a still pond, because if she doesn’t make herself, she’s going to start laughing hysterically, “you sound like you’re telling me to take up drug use.”

“I told you. Logic is not welcome right now. Jesus. You could have… you nearly…”

Because he doesn’t seem inclined to stop pacing and growling, and Phil doesn’t seem inclined to do anything but hold her and breathe in the scent of her skin, Toni leans forward and snags Clint by the belt when he stalks past again, then yanks him onto the cushion beside them, slings her legs across his lap to keep him in place.


Phil sighs, and it shudders through his whole body. “How?”

“Good question,” Toni says, and Clint’s hands settle over her feet. “In short? I bought an
She knows she’s said the wrong thing when Phil goes tense and Clint blinks, round-eyed, at her.

After a long silence, Phil clears his throat. “Come again?”

She watches him, wide-eyed. “I, um… Bought an underfunded company, reverse-engineered their attempts at a super soldier serum in record time, and injected it with a prayer that it would work.” As their faces start to go quietly, thunderously pained, she waves her hands. “Okay, before your foreheads do that angry-disappointed thing, it was an attempt at Rebirth, okay? The drug you hauled out of R&D was an early prototype of it and – huh.” She tilts her head. “I own the company now. I can totally sue the shit out of SHIELD for stealing intellectual property.”

Phil rubs his temple. “Toni.”

Clint just groans and sinks his face into his hands.

“Right! Anyway. The ETRM-99 formula you got from SHIELD was a… proof of concept, I guess? Extremis, the nearly-finished product, was far more advanced and, even though I’m not exactly a biochemist here, seemed geared towards recreating Project Rebirth. However, they lacked technical expertise and honestly, the broad streak of luck I carry around in my back pocket. Once the formula was stabilized, it stopped being an attempt at Rebirth and literally became my rebirth.” She clears her throat, because Clint is now making a high-pitched, distressed noise, and Phil’s face might as well have been carved from granite, except for the intensity of his eyebrows, which have skipped disapproving and have gone straight into bemused what the actual fuck have I gotten myself into?

She frowns. “Gentlemen, you could be having this conversation with my corpse,” she says flatly, and feels guilty as fuck when they both flinch violently.

“I’d like to be done talking right now,” Phil says faintly, sheet-white. “I’d like to just sit here, quietly, and be grateful that you’re alive without thinking too hard on why you’re still alive.” And his arms tighten around her waist until she squeaks.

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Toni breaks out the good brandy, the kind that’s been aged in a special barrel for a hundred years before being sold at exorbitant prices to spoiled little rich girls like her. It’s in crystal, of course, because what’s good booze without the presentation to go with it? Still, this is not how she’d been planning on spending her day, though if she’s being honest, she planned on spending her day dead. Yay for not dying, on all accounts.

Toni stoppers the decanter again, thinking to herself as the crystal chimes that it’s really fucked up that she’s the one who nearly died, but she’s still serving booze to help others deal with it.

Story of my life, she thinks, as she brings the glasses over to Clint and Phil. Clint’s not much of a hard-liquor man for anything that isn’t vodka, so he should be nice and toasty by the time he hits the bottom of the two-finger deep glass. Phil, on the other hand, takes the glass like he’d take a live bomb, and eyes her over the rim as he sips it. She eyes him right back, glancing over her shoulder as she brings Clint’s drink to him.

“I’m not going to vanish if you take your eyes off me, Phil.” Static suddenly bursts through her ears, a crackling spit of hard consonants and sibilants, and she winces, staggering a step and pressing the fingers of both hands into her temples. “Ow.”
“What is it?” To his credit, he doesn’t sound panicked, but he’s at her side in an eyeblink, a hand on the small of her back supportively, and Clint’s got his neutral expression on, the one Toni pictures him wearing while lining up sniper shots, glass frozen halfway to his mouth.

“It’s nothing,” she says, waving them both off. “A bit of tinnitus, I guess. If that’s the worst that happens--”

The static explodes through her skull in a wave of pressure and sound that sends her to her knees with a cry, clutching her head as Rhodey’s voice floods in.

Krrssssh-oni. Toni! C’mon, Toni, pick up the goddamn phone already! Be pissed as you want at me for the other week, but Justin Hammer’s drones are kinda blowing up half of downtown Los Angeles and we need you out here.

… Wait, what is–

The thought has barely formed in her head before she has the crazy sensation of a television flipping on in her brain. A torrent of data storms through, news reports and liveblogging updates, police scanners and frantic cell phone calls. It hurts, and she knows she’s screaming, on her hands and knees, squeezing her head between her hands, probably scaring the shit out of Clint and Phil all over again.

She feels something wet and hot trickle from her nose, and she grits her teeth, ignores Phil and Clint’s hysterics and tries to focus her thoughts. She’s not slow on the uptake, and she can understand what’s happening, though she can’t understand how. Somehow or another – probably Extremis, even though she doesn’t have a fucking clue why it would do this – her neural network is connected to the morass of frequencies and signals roiling invisibly in the air, and raw, unfiltered sensory feeds scream through her skull. She just has to control it. She can do this. She can do this.

The information cascades over her, throws her into the churning whirlpool, threatens to drown her completely. Help me, she thinks, desperate and frantic, and casts about for anything to keep her afloat.

Unexpectedly, a presence shoves itself into her mind, gently but firmly. It reaches into the pool and pulls her out with deft certainty. It’s a familiar presence, as familiar as her own mind, and shock ripples through her as invisible hands dip into her thoughts.

You do it like this, Mum, it says and … it’s indescribable, the feeling of being shown how to erect filters and firewalls in her own head, how to sift through the never-ending stream of junk and gold, filth and fact, rot and reason. Slowly, the torrent of pain and chaos funnels away, rechanneled into new pathways to be sorted and slotted and stored for access. It feels like forever, this process, but it is probably only seconds of real-time before she opens her eyes with Clint right over her.

“Toni? Try not to move. Phil’s calling SHIELD medical. You collapsed and–”

“I’m fine,” she gasps, wipes at her nose with the back of her hand and makes a face at the smear of blood on her skin. “M’okay.”

“Yeah, sweetheart. You look real fine.” He’s pale again, but at least he’s forcing a smile. “Didn’t I tell you to stop scaring the shit out of me?

She sits up, shoving Clint off her with a foot. “JARVIS?”

“Yes, Mum?” The AI sounds oddly pleased with himself, and it’s subtle, but her uncultured American ears finally catch the difference his British accent makes between “ma’am” and “Mum”.

"Mum?" sagt er, und sie sieht ihn an, als ob er auf einem Vampirjagd-Event wäre. "Du, du glaubst doch nicht, dass ich dir helfen kann, die Dinge zu organisieren, die du tun solltest, oder?"
“Thanks, junior.”

“Anything I can do to help, Mum.”

----

It takes her a frustratingly long time to convince Phil and Clint she’s fine, even longer to convince them she needs to go deal with whatever Justin fucking Hammer has done while she was out of commission. Turning on the TV shuts them up almost immediately, because it’s a bad scene. The Stark Expo – which she vaguely remembers okaying, before she promoted Pepper to SI’s CEO – is aflame, and Hammertech drones are shooting at anything that even comes close.

Just as soon as this crisis is dealt with, heads are going to fucking roll because those drones are too close to her proprietary tech to be any kind of accident, and she seethes with rage as she watches her bastardized tech being used to threaten innocents.

Right around the time their cold, robotic voices start demanding Toni Stark’s presence, Phil’s work phone rings. Toni rolls her eyes when he shoots Clint a dire look, pointing at her as he steps onto the porch to take the call. Toni crosses her arms and stares pointedly at Clint. “I crawled out of a fucking hole in Afghanistan when I was worse than this,” she says evenly. “You know as well as I do that there’s precious fucking little anyone can do to put them down, unless they’re me.”

There’s a shift in Clint’s expression. Nothing overt, nothing obvious, but suddenly, it isn’t her best friend assessing her condition, it’s Hawkeye, the highly trained, elite of the elite government agent. “Bossman’s going to kill me,” he says, and his eyes flick to where Phil’s arguing with whoever’s on the other end of the call. “But you’re right. All we’re doing is wasting time and risking lives. Meet you downstairs in two minutes.”

As he turns away, she tilts her head. “You’re coming with?”

“Toni,” he says, “not only do I not want to stay here and explain to your fiance that I let you go fight killer robots literal hours after dying on our floor, I’ve always wanted to fight killer robots, and I’m not passing up this opportunity.”

She smirks, picks herself up and jogs towards the elevator. “Then we better get moving before Phil notices we’re not in the room. Wear a jacket. It’s going to get cold.”

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Phil notices they’re gone almost right away. Toni’s got a double handful of Clint’s tactical jacket and has literally just cleared the courtyard when his picture is flashing on the HUD, indicating an open comms request.

“I love you, honey,” she says cheerily in lieu of a hello. “Have I told you how awesome you are recently?”

Without missing a beat, Clint says, in a voice as smooth as silk, “I really like you too, bossman. Have I told you how much I adore working with you?”

“I,” Phil says, faint exasperation coloring his words, which just goes to show how very unimpressed with both of them he must be, “don’t know what I’m going to do with the two of you.”

“Well, you could shoot us,” Clint says, teeth chattering, “but then you’d be down an agent and a fiancee.” A beat, then in his best whine: “Jesus fucking Christ, Toni. I know you told me to put on a jacket, but I’m freezing my balls off.”
Toni smirks inside the armor. “We’ll stop and catch them if they fall. I’ve got a compartment I can store them in, until I can put them in my purse for safekeeping. It’s not like you’re using them anyway.”

“Hey!” Clint’s protest is offended, but the warbling from the cold really detracts from its effectiveness. “I’ll have you know I get laid plenty!”

Toni takes pity on him and sacrifices a bit of speed for a lower height, where it’s less frigid for underprotected birds. “Your right and left hands do not count as plenty, sweetheart.”

“I know what you’re doing,” Phil cuts in, and Toni breathes an almost-silent sigh of relief, feels Clint heave one too, because now he sounds more amused than anything else. “I should warn you, those distraction tactics never last. I’ll let it go for now, but I think we need to talk when everyone is home again.”

Despite her confidence in her fiancé, Toni flinches, because historically we need to talk have never spelled good things for her. “Uh oh. Is that a honey, I’m really pissed off at you and I want to yell at you after you save the world, or is that a honey, I don’t want to be with you any more but am going to have the decency to tell you to your face after you save the world?”

“...The first one, Toni. How do you even…? Never mind. I’m ten minutes behind you. I’m calling in SHIELD for reinforcements, and I’ll be on-site after that. Hawkeye?”

“Yes, sir?”

There’s something tight and cold in Phil’s voice. “Fury might have something to say if and when he shows up, but your only job here is Toni. Are we clear, agent?”

“Crystal, sir.”

“Toni...” There’s a world of emotion layered under Phil’s mild-pitched reproach, underscored by the faint sigh that follows her name. “I suppose it’s pointless to ask you to come home until we know you’re safe from danger?”

“Killer robots, honey,” Toni says with a tiny grin. “I always thought I’d have to make my own if I wanted to fight them.”

Another sigh, this one louder and moreplaintive. “Try not to blow anything up,” he says.

“Killer robots, Phil,” she reminds him again. “I make no guarantees.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Aaaand, update!

This is going to be longer than I originally thought, since I now just hit the beginning events of *The Avengers*. I've taken out the number of chapters, and we'll just have to see where it ends when it ends. :)

Enjoy! And as always, comment, kudos and rec! (If you feel like it, that is. No pressure. My fics are not linked to review comments or kudos.)

Some lines of dialogue lifted directly out of *Iron Man 2*.

*The media is about to run out of ink... Hammer drones. Variable response battle suit and its pilot, Air Force Colonel James Rhodes.... For America and its allies, Hammer Industries is reporting for duty.*

The news feeds are full of nothing but coverage from Justin Hammer’s presentation at the Stark Expo, and even though Toni’s getting a headache trying to keep control of the slippery datastreams in her head, she keeps watching them with increasing levels of derision.

“You know,” she says over the comm, as the feed loops through the drones breaking free of control and advancing on the crowd. “It takes a set of big, swollen brass balls to parade stolen tech as your own at the original source’s tech expo. I’m going to punch Hammer in the teeth when I see him. Not because he stole from me. Because he’s absolutely fucking incompetent. Where am I putting you, Legolas?”

“Somewhere high,” Clint says, and his teeth are still chattering slightly. “I see better from a distance. That strut there, for instance. Yeah. Drop me there, babe. I can provide range support for you from there.”

Toni readjusts her trajectory to bring her past the arching steel spiral he indicated, hovering mid-air long enough to let him get secure. “It’s awfully narrow and high, Clint,” she says doubtfully, glancing down as he snaps his bow out to full extension and strings it with a practiced twist of his hand. “You sure you’ll be alright?”

“You worry too much,” he says with a fond smile, and leans forward to knock on her helmet with his knuckles. “I’m working, dumbass. That’s like a whole other side of me you haven’t seen yet. Stop hovering and fretting, and let’s blow up some killer robots.”

“I find it hard to believe this whole other side of you that comes out when you’re working has shit like situational awareness and balance,” Toni grumbles, but leaves him on the strut and lets herself fall towards street-level again. “Since it’s so lacking in your daily life.”

“You know how exhausting this level of perception is to maintain?” he says. “There are six drones in the crowd, weapons hot. Can you remote-hack them with your new brain thing?”

“I’ve had this for literally an hour, Barton,” she says. “And it didn’t come with a fucking instruction
A beat, then grudgingly, “Maybe. Rhody’s suit is somewhere in the ballpark of 95% original programming. He’s Starktech. I can probably hack him, force a reset.”

“But not the drones, huh?”

“No. Much as I hate to admit it, the technical specs were stolen from me, but he had to develop his own operating system. I can hack ‘em, but it’ll take time and that’s selling at a premium right now.”

“Oh well,” Clint says, very cheerfully. “Guess we’ll just have to make ‘em explode. You in position to start calling it, bossman?”

“Five minutes out,” Phil says, clipped and professional. “Iron Man, I need an uplink to your operating system. Hawkeye, sitrep.”

“J,” she says, as she banks low and straightens up for a landing amid the smoking ruins of the main stage at the Expo, as Clint starts reeling off his visual report, “let Phil in, keep me updated on Clint’s position, and start helping me hack into Rhody’s suit.”

“Yes, Mum. Agent Coulson now has access to your feeds, the geolocator in Clint’s weapons and armor are now active. I am commencing cyber-neural uplink to Colonel Rhodes’ suit now.”

The suit Rhody stole from her is standing in a sentinel stance in the middle of the stage, and she arches an eyebrow at the gun mounted on his shoulder. “I can’t give you anything, honeybear,” she says, slamming down and straightening up from her crouch. She tries not to react to the sudden swirl of augmented reality around her, as JARVIS and her brain get busy rerouting Rhody’s systems. “I know you’re a genius, but you can’t just say thank you and not tinker? Tsk.”

“Wasn’t exactly my idea, Tones,” he says, strained. “What are you doing here?”

She frowns in concentration, feeling sweat pop on her forehead, as she threads her thoughts deep into the compromised Starktech systems, feels JARVIS wind around them, bolstering her half- instinctual grasping. “I’m getting mixed signals here. First you yell at me for shitty life choices, then you call and beg for my help, and now you’re asking me why I came. I’m beginning to think you don’t really know what you want at all.”

“I didn’t call you, Toni,” Rhody says. “I wouldn’t call you like this, not with how we left things. Not with you heading for withdr—”

An arrow whines off Rhody’s shoulderplate and buries itself in the stage. Toni and Rhody both stare at it, then she looks up, follows it back to where she left Clint on the spar.

“Hawkeye,” she says, then turns her attention back to hacking the compromised armor. “Play nice.”

“Sorry,” he says across the comms, but doesn’t sound sorry whatsoever. “Hard to tell the psychotic robots apart.”

The overlay of Rhody’s HUD over her own HUD is making her headache worse, and Toni feels a warm trickle from her nose on her lip. She flicks her tongue out, tastes blood. Perfect. She sighs, squints past the shifting, surging displays. “Rhodey, Clint. Clint, Rhodey.”

“Hey man,” Clint says easily. “Iron Man, you got incoming on your six. The bots from the crowd are starting to move towards you. Bossman wants me to hold until SHIELD can evac the facility.”

Toni’s eyes are watering, but things are starting to happen on Rhody’s HUD, and she impatiently swipes her own aside to focus on Rhody’s. “Watch my back, Hawkeye. I’m busy.”
“Toni…” The strain in Rhodey’s voice hasn’t done anything but get tighter and deeper. “My entire system is compromised. I can’t…”

“Toni,” booms a heavily accented voice as the first of the Hammerdrones mounts the stage, and Toni’s shoulders go tight and knotted, but she doesn’t turn, trusting Clint to have her back. “Good of you to join. You are hard to track down, but you are here now, and the true history of Stark name will be written.”

_J, trace the signal._ She barely has a thought to spare, but she’s never shied away from either hard work or multitasking. “The true history of the Stark name? Awesome. Looking forward to reading it, tough guy,” she says, and redoubles her efforts to get Rhodey back from the system hijack. She’s deep in the suit, so deep it feels more real to her than her own body, but it isn’t the 95% Starktech giving her trouble. It’s the 5% Hammercrap crazyquilted to her systems. “But there are better ways of getting my attention, you know. I mean, I have an entire PR staff for kind of this very reason.”

The drone laughs, a humorless chuckle. “What your father did to my family over forty years, I will do to you in forty minutes. I hope you are ready.”

Mum… the War Machine armor has target lock.

Toni grinds her teeth together. “J, take over while I finish this myself.”

Rhodey, with an edge of panic: “Toni…”

And then Phil, with a bite of command no one in their right mind would ignore: “Iron Man, move. Hawkeye, you are green.”

JARVIS smoothly takes over all functions of the Mark V, rocketing her into the sky as the drones level weapons at the spot where she had been standing. One, two, three explode in such close succession it almost sounds like one continuous explosion.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” she says absently, and swears viciously as her grasp on the War Machine system slips again. “Goddammit, Rhodey. Stay still so I can get you back in control!”

Mum, JARVIS says, as her headache becomes blinding, _perhaps if we changed places._

“Okay, kid. Have at ‘em.” She pulls out of Rhodey’s suit and back into her own in time to flip midair above a shallow stretch of water and change course. “Rhodey, you still on my six?”

“Yeah. Me and a dozen Hammerhoids.”

Toni grins, absorbs the readings, calculates angles and velocities. Eyeballs the upcoming globe sculpture above the water. “Hold onto your ass, honeybear. We’re about to get wet on this ride.”

“Toniiiiiii!”

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When all is said and done, Toni still has no idea who the fuck this Vanko clown is. “You mean to tell me,” she says, half out of the armor with a cup of steaming coffee in her hand as S.H.I.E.L.D medic check her over at Phil’s insistence, “I have been completely oblivious to an arch nemesis this whole time? Who even does that?”

“Only you, Toni,” Clint says in between guffaws as a medic bandages his bicep, where he caught flying shrapnel from an exploding Hammerdrone. “But in your defense, you were a little busy dying
and all, so I think you might get a pass there.”

“What?! You were dying?” Toni flinches, hard and fast, as Pepper storms away from the police she had been talking to and comes striding towards Toni. “You were dying and you weren't going to tell me?”

Mutely, Toni looks at Clint, but he shakes his head and hops off the back of the ambulance. “Uh uh. No way. You're on your own for this, babe.”

“Traitor!” she hollers after him. And she looks around with a hunted expression, but there is no one to save her from a supremely pissed-off Pepper Potts, towering over her in panicked rage. “I was gonna tell you,” she says hastily. “I was going to make you an omelet and tell you.”

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Taking refuge from Pepper’s rage on a rooftop results in an assault by Rhodey, yelling at her about leaving bullshit messages instead of communicating like an adult. The yelling is confusing, because it’s more of Rhodey’s mixed signals, what with the desperate hugs and all.

“I was going to tell you,” she says miserably, tucked into Rhodey’s shoulder. “I was going to give you a suit and tell you.”

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“You know I don’t really want your house in Oahu, right boss?”

Not even in her own goddamn car can she escape people caring at her. She glances up, meets Happy’s worried look in the rearview mirror and sighs again. “I was going to tell you,” she mutters. “I was going to give you a car and tell you.”

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It takes a week before Toni can surface from the wreckage of the Expo, during which she fields questions from nosy inquisitive reporters, sets JARVIS to the task of unearthing the hole in her security that allowed Justin Hammer to steal her shit, and generally starts putting her house back in order again.

She sees Natalie from Legal one more time, and is surprised but hardly shocked to discover she’s one of Fury’s henchmen. When she mentions it later to Clint, he chokes on his beer. “Nat was in your company?” he says incredulously, wiping foam off his face.

She arches an eyebrow, uncurls her foot from his lap to dry it off, then puts it right back where it was. “Friend of yours?”

“Sort of. We’ve worked together before.” There’s a shadow Toni doesn’t like in his eyes, especially not when he starts examining her in concern. “You’re okay, right?”

“Yes,” she says gently, reaching up to pull his hand down from her face. “I mean, she came at me with a needle, but I knocked it out of her hand. Don’t think she was expecting me to do that.”

She freezes when she hears Phil’s throat clear behind her. “Oh, did she now.” And his tone is mild as a spring breeze, but Toni’s blood runs cold, because that’s a tone he uses when someone’s about to get a new asshole torn.

She suddenly doesn’t want to be in Agent Romanoff’s shoes one tiny bit, because even though the
woman is apparently enough to make Clint blanch and start checking Toni for injuries, there’s no way Romanoff is scarier than Phil in seek-and-destroy mode.

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Three days after she finds the security leak, fires those responsible, and plugs it up, Phil presents her with a fully-planned, paid-for and non-negotiable trip to China.

She stares at the spread of pages in her lap, and gingerly pulls the XBox controller out from beneath them. “Is now a very good time to leave the country, honey?” she asks. “I mean, there’s the fallout from the Expo, and there’s this new bullshit with SHIELD, and—”

“We’re getting married,” Phil says firmly, and across the room, Clint goes quiet and starts packing up the controllers and trash from the snacks. “Before you find a new and more creative way to get yourself killed.”

Toni stares at him for a long moment, starts at the brush of Clint’s hand on her shoulder, dropping a reassuring pat to her as he goes by with his car keys, and then swallows and says, “Okay.”

oOoOoOo

Toni had never put much thought towards Phil's religion. Blind spot of the atheist, she supposes, assuming those closest to her are not of a spiritual bent. She's still faintly surprised that Rhodey makes it to church whenever he can, but it makes a strange kind of sense, given how much time he spends defying gravity. To learn that not only was Phil Buddhist, but wanted to get married at a temple was a little shocking, to say the least.

She’s not had good experiences with religion. Howard had been a devotee of the Cult of Rogers, his every waking moment towards the end of his life obsessed with locating the fallen Captain America. Maria was a lip-service Catholic, to Mass on Easter Sunday and Christmas Day, confession once a year. She’d been far more active when Toni was younger, dragging her to pomp and ceremony at St. Patrick’s Cathedral every Saturday evening and Sunday morning, where Toni would sit in her church skirt and patent leather shoes, staring around at the remarkable engineering and artwork of the building. Toni had loved it, until she started paying attention to the prayers and sermons, and washed her hands of it the second she found out she was supposed to apologize for the rest of her life for something some woman did thousands and thousands of years ago in the hopes that God would maybe forgive her and take her to Heaven.

No, thank you. No, thank you at all.

Then the pro-lifers at the abortion clinic. She hadn’t been going for herself, but a friend of hers, Sunset, had gotten into a bit of trouble and Toni went for support, even though she didn’t really like Sunset all that much. There’d been an altercation with the pro-lifers circling outside the door, and Toni’d been recognized. The papers widely reported her presence at a Planned Parenthood abortion center, she’d been denounced roundly in the media by former church members, excommunicated by the Pope, and the fallout with Howard was spectacular.

Then there was the dude who’d shot her last year. While it was more or less a footnote in the fictional retelling of her life story, he’d been a religious headcase who firmly believed that her arc reactor made her a demon, or some kind of alien, or something, and only he could see the threat or put it down.

Needless to say, Toni Stark and religion have something of an adversarial relationship.
But this time, so far, it’s been okay. No one’s tried to force her to convert, no one’s done more than eye her kindly, or offered her food and drink after travel from the States. No one seems to give a damn about converting her. No one’s trying to preach, or educate against her will, or anything.

She isn’t sure how to feel about that.

But she doesn’t have time to figure it out, because as soon as Toni sets her bags on the floor, Pepper whisks her away to make her stand still while Pepper goes through the whole catalogue she brought with her, looking for the perfect dress for Toni to be wed in. As terrifying as Pepper is with a clipboard and pen, she is a thousand times worse with a mouth full of sewing pins and a determined look to accompany it.

Pepper glances at her at one point, when Toni has six different shades of red folded and draped and strewn around her, her nose has been itching for half an hour, and she desperately wants to get something to eat. Toni smiles the same faint smile she’s been giving Pepper for the last thirty minutes, but Pepper isn’t buying it this time. “What?” she says, only mildly cross, as she turns her attention back downwards to the hem she’s pinning into place.

“Nothing, Pep. Just rare to see you like this.”

Pepper spares another quick glance upward, just her eyes this time, and a faint smile curves her lips around the ultra thin posts of the pins. “Child of a seamstress, Toni,” she says absently. “My first job was minding Mom’s shop. Sometimes I think I could have gone into fashion and be dominating the industry by now. Most of the time, I think that I’m glad I didn’t, because one primadonna is plenty to deal with.”

“Hey!” Tony protests, but there’s more amusement than defensiveness in her tone. “I resemble that remark.”

Toni stares at the mirror as Pepper sweeps the brush through her hair, fascinated by the wideness of her eyes and the washed-out color of her skin. She looks scared to death, ready to run at her earliest opportunity. She lifts a hand to touch her cheek and jumps a little, because it’s like touching a stranger’s face.

Pepper tsks and makes an exasperated noise, smacking her gently on the shoulder with the flat of the hairbrush. “Stop squirming, Toni,” she chides, and resumes brushing. “The ceremony begins in fifteen minutes. I know you only wanted a simple hairstyle, but the amount of shifting your backside is doing on that chair is going to make you late by delaying me.”

“Yes,” Toni says faintly, after she clears her throat and remembers how to talk. “Because the wedding will come to a complete screeching halt unless you do my hair the way you want.”

Her reward is another, light tap with the brush onto her skull and she makes a discontented noise and settles with a sulking pout into the chair. “I’m not taking any chances,” Pepper says, and slides a bobby pin to hold back Toni’s hair just above her left ear. “I’m taking control because I want to make sure this wedding goes off without a single hitch. If I leave you to your own devices, you’ll no doubt manage before you can walk down the aisle to find some way to nearly kill yourself through science or robots or medical conditions you don’t see fit to tell anyone about until it’s too late.”

Toni meets Pepper’s eyes in the mirror, and flinches hard at the steely look in them. Yeah, that’s not going away anytime soon. “Would it help if I said I’m sorry again?” she asks meekly.
Pepper’s lips purse, in the way they do when she’s amused but mad, and doesn’t want to show her laughter. “No,” she says, and leans in close to work the stem of the orchid into the bobby pin. “But you should probably say it anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony replies promptly, and winces with a hiss as Pepper adjusts the bobby pin more securely. “Goddamn, do you have to make it so tight?”

“Yes, because the flower will fall out otherwise.” With the flower arranged how she wants it, Pepper slides another bobby pin into the stem, then takes a moment to look Toni over like a proud mother. “I can’t believe you’re finally doing it,” she says, and runs a finger under her eye to catch the tear.

Toni swallows down the lump in her throat and gingerly touches the petals of the orchid. “Me either,” she murmurs. “Think he’s run away yet?”

“No,” Pepper says, gently pushing her hands away from the flower. “Phil isn’t one to run away. That’s usually your field of expertise.”

Toni smirks at Pepper, though it feels like it has a fraction of her usual snark. “That’s why you’re here, right? To sit on me in case I make a break for it.”

“It’s in my job description,” Pepper replies, then holds out a hand. “Let’s go get you married.”

Toni sucks in a deep breath and holds it as she stares at herself in the mirror one more time. Then she exhales, stands and smooths out the folds of her dress, red and gold and orange like a phoenix, edged with blue along the bodice from the arc reactor under the cloth. Despite herself, she’s fairly impressed at the striking effect it makes. “I’m ready,” she says, and turns towards the door.

Once outside the room, Pepper hands her over to Rhodey, and strides off to find her seat. Toni slides her hand through Rhodey’s offered elbow and pretends like she isn’t clinging for dear life to the sleek material of his suit. Rhodey’s other hand is warm and comforting over hers, and her wrist is tucked tight against his side. He grins down at her and pats her hand. “Deep breath, Tones,” he murmurs. “It’s not like you’re about to enter into commitment or anything.”

She shoots him a dirty look. “Things that are not helpful, Rhodey,” she mutters back. “There’s an entire folder with your name on it.”

“What?” He’s all innocence and playfulness as they start to walk, steps slow and measured. “I’m perfectly helpful. Right now, I’m helping you not run away.”

She makes a discontented noise and adjusts her grip on the fold of her dress, keeping it clear of her feet. “Why does everyone think I’m suddenly going to run away?” she complains. “Phil and I have been together for two years. It’s not like this is a sudden thing, you know.”

“We know,” Rhodey says serenely, and takes them around the corner of the hall and through the arched doorway, to where the pathway leading to the shrine begins. They stop there, and he turns towards her, brushes loose hair back behind her shoulder. “But it’s a far cry from being someone’s girlfriend to being someone’s wife. So if you really want to run, I can fly anything you can put in the sky. I got your back, Toni.”

She shakes her head, smiles softly. “I love you too, Rhodey. But it’s not a far cry. Not for me. Not for us. As far as I’m concerned, we’ve been married since Tahiti. This is just making it legally recognized.” The minute the words are out of Toni’s mouth, they hammer her with their ring of truth, and she blinks. “Holy shit,” she breathes, and butterflies swirl in her gut. “Holy shit. I’m signing a contract. Did my lawyer go over it? Has Pepper read it? Holy fuck, have I read it?”
“And there it is,” Rhodey says, the smug bastard, but he hugs her gently. “It’s gonna be okay, Toni. Pep’s had a go at the contract already, and it’s good. She tried to leave in the clauses for honor and obey, but Phil insisted they come back out again. I think he called them ‘unrealistic and unenforceable’. After some thought, we agreed he was very wise.”

“I hate you all,” Toni says with a dire scowl, but the levity has done its job and her brief moment of panic is over. “Let’s get this over with. I’ve got shit to do.”

“Best attitude to enter into a marriage with, for sure,” Rhodey replies, and starts them down the sun-bright path where the temple’s monks are waiting to bless her union.

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The ceremony is simple and secular, much to Toni’s relief. Buddhists don’t seem to put much religious emphasis on marriage, which is a pleasant surprise. The most religious thing she has to do is light incense and candles at the shrine, and bow her head as the blessing is given.

Nerves attack her when Phil faces her, takes her hands and clears his throat. “Toni,” he begins. “When I was assigned to debrief you after your rescue, I found it an annoyance. You were ornery, headstrong, loved nothing more than figuring out creative ways to avoid me, even when I bribed your staff into scheduling appointments. Truthfully, I was about ready to give up and write you off. But then… Then we had the world’s longest coffee date, and I knew then that you were worth all the extra effort and aggravation. I knew then that I wanted to end up here, someday, with you. You didn’t make it easy, because it’s not who you are. And I think you take particular delight in scaring me half to death. But I wouldn’t trade any of it for an easier, less stressful partner, because that wouldn’t be you. And you’re who I want to wake up to every morning for the rest of my life.”

For a long, terrible moment, Toni blanks, because she’s tearing up too hard to see straight, and all she wants to do is throw her arms around him and sob. But Stark women are made of chrome and titanium, so she clears her throat, dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief thoughtfully offered to her by Rhodey, and says in a tone that only warbles a little, “I knew you were bribing my staff, you conniving man. I had no intentions of ever following up that first date with a second, but you came at me sideways and found a place for yourself, and one day, it feels like, I just looked up and there you were. Maybe I’m obstinate, and maybe I’m a little obtuse, but you’re the kind of guy I know I can count on to have my back, no matter what I say. And what’s more, you brought good people into my life. I never pictured myself standing in front of any kind of altar with rings and fancy clothes, but I’m here now, and I honestly can’t see another path anymore. And if I scare the shit out of you, you scare the shit out of me too. Because you still make me want to be a better person. With you, I think I am.”

Pepper, openly sobbing, steps forward when the lama asks for the rings. On the other side, over Phil’s shoulder, his best man, a very competently-scary woman named Melinda May, joins Pepper.

In short order, Toni’s got a ring on her finger, and the words I do have come out of her mouth. And it occurs to her, sometime later, dancing with Phil at classy place in town that does dinner and dancing, that she’s still not quite sure how she ended up here.

She dances with Rhodey, and then with Clint, as Phil dances with Melinda and Pepper, and something feels off, something feels wrong, but it’s not until days later that she recognizes it for a strained, happy-but-not look in Clint’s eyes as he hands her back to Phil.

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They honeymoon in Tahiti, even getting the same cabana on the same private beach they had on
their first vacation together as a couple two years ago. Pepper refuses to answer her phone calls, JARVIS keeps her from hacking into her own servers to check her email — damn that lack of inhibitors, because it’s inhibiting her plenty — and Rhodey laughs and hangs up on her when she calls to complain.

(Clint, for some reason, isn’t answering his phone either, but all JARVIS will tell her is that he’s fine. So Toni’s trying not to think about that, or the stricken, pained look in his eye at the reception.)

Against her will, it seems, Toni will relax, whether she likes it or not. She amuses herself with the single StarkPad Pepper allowed her to take on the plane, flexing her nascent technopathy to play the apps and browse through the news feeds JARVIS has restricted to entertainment, sports and comedy stories. After wheedling with him, she gets the financial feeds twice a day too, just so she can keep track of the impact on Stark Industries in the wake of the disastrous Expo.

Astonishingly, SI stock is way, way up. Hammertech is way, way down.

She stretches out on the sun chair outside their cabana, tablet in hand. She emails Pepper with instructions to find a way to buy Justin Hammer out. Her first suggestion is sell us your company, idiot, or we’ll sue the shit out of you for corporate espionage and intellectual property theft.

The tablet disappears out of her hands and a drink replaces it, complete with a fruit slice and a little umbrella. She stares at it over the rim of her sunglasses, then shifts her attention to Phil, who is settling into the chair beside hers with sunglasses, board shorts and a frilly umbrella-festooned drink of his own.

“You know I don’t actually need to physically hold the tablet to operate it anymore, right?” she asks, arching an eyebrow.

Phil returns it with his usual placid smile. “You’re on your honeymoon, Toni. I assure you, Stark Industries will still be there next week. Enjoy yourself.”

“You’re way less effective at giving mandatory suggestions without your tie, Coulson,” she grumbles, but slides herself over to curl up into his side.

“And yet,” he says, faintly smug, and settles his arm around her shoulders, “you still listen to me. Why is that, do you think?”

“Severe character flaw,” Toni replies, then sets her drink aside and plucks his out of his hands and wriggles until she’s got them arranged with her halfway under him. She loops an arm around his neck and pushes her sunglasses to the top of her head. “But fine. If I’m not allowed to work, you are required to entertain me. Take your wife to bed, Coulson.”

Phil’s smile crinkles his eyes in soft, adoring ways, and a hand slides up her back to tug the loop of her bikini strings free, and the bra top falls away to pile on the sand. “Perfectly good chair right here,” he says, and bends to kiss her.

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To her eternal surprise, when the week of sun, sand and near-constant sex is over, Toni finds herself reluctant to return to work. She delays as long as possible, using every last wile at her disposal to convince Phil they can just stay in bed without the world coming to an end, but she had the terrible misfortune to marry a man with a streak of responsibility and stubbornness almost as broad as his spectrum of kink preferences, and she only buys herself another day in paradise before Phil’s foot goes down and her ass gets on the plane.
Her husband needs to check in with his government overlords immediately on their return, so she drops Phil off at the SHIELD facility in Culver City before heading home with their bags. Los Angeles sings in the back of her head, a buzz of wireless signals, radio frequencies and music stations that swirls through her background thoughts, snippets of rhythm and voices, static and alarms that is oddly reassuring, a cacophony that reminds her she's back where she belongs.

She uplinks to the mansion's servers ten minutes out, and sighs in relief when JARVIS greets her with a restrained, *Welcome home, mum. Did you enjoy your honeymoon?*

“Yeah, kid,” she says fondly, because she hasn't quite gotten the hang of communicating purely through thoughts yet, but she knows he'll hear her anyway. “It was surprisingly relaxing. I feel practically mellow. How've you done holding down the fort without me? Clint been giving you trouble?”

JARVIS hesitates ever so slightly, barely a hesitation at all, and no one else would have picked it up. But Toni knows her electronic child as well as she knows herself and a chill screams down her spine, uneasy and sour. “Kiddo?”

After an infinitesimal, skincrawling moment, JARVIS says, *Clint left the mansion four days ago, mum.*

“Left? What do you mean, left? Did he leave on vacation, leave on a mission, or did he pack his shit and actually leave?” Toni’s hands feel numb on the wheel as she rounds the final curve on the oceanside drive leading to the mansion, and it rises from behind the cliffs and scrub. If she’s speeding, well, there’s no one but the seabirds to catch her, not this far out of town.

Another pause, and the silence is damning and apologetic. Toni screeches to park in the courtyard, yanks the keys out of the ignition and vaults out of the car. She runs up to the door, fumbles with the keys for a moment before managing to slot the right one in the knob, and leaves them in the wide-open door as she storms into the foyer.

Cursing and swearing through her clenched teeth, Toni pulls up the mansion’s mobile lines and thinks, *Call Clint.* Though her brand new abilities are still a touch unpredictable, the panic and anger give her focus and she feels/hears the line ringing through.

Astonishingly, the call isn’t ignored this time like all her others have been. He sounds tired, but alert and professional. *Barton.*

“Hi honey,” she seethes, stalking through the house towards his bedroom. “I’m home.”

There’s a very, very long pause. “Toni. You’re back.”

“I sure am,” she snaps, furious and mock-cheerfully. She can practically hear him wince through the line as she slams his bedroom door open hard enough to put a dent in the wall. “Oh, that’s weird. My roommate seems to have taken all his shit and left while I was in another country. That’s strange. I would have thought he’d leave me a note or a voicemail or a text or something. God, I hope everything’s alright.”

“Toni.” He sounds pained, and Toni can picture him leaning against the nearest wall with that furrow between his eyebrows, rubbing his temple or the bridge of his nose. “Don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what, Barton? Don’t do what? Yell at you for sneaking out in the middle of my fucking honeymoon?” She might never have been this furious in her life. “Be pissed you couldn’t manage to find a pencil and a bare stretch of wall before you left? Power up the Iron Man armor and hunt your
ass down so we can do this face-to-face? Just what the fuck don’t you want me to do, Clint?”

“None of it! I don’t want you to do any of it! Jesus, Toni. I didn’t think it’d hit you like this.”

“ You are my best friend, you fucking asshole! How the fuck did you think this was going to hit me?”

Toni threads her thoughts through the mansion servers, and down in the flight bay, the Mark V armor starts waking up. “You know what, fuck you. I’m coming after you and we’re going to yell at each other in person.”

“I’m off the grid. You won’t find me.” He doesn’t sound very sure of that, though. “Please don’t try. It’s the kind of place that doesn’t really find private citizens in power armor attacking them amusing or cute.”

“I’m walking to the flight deck now, asshole,” she snarls. “You give me a better option and you fucking promise to follow through, or I don’t give a shit if you’re in a gulag in Siberia. I’m tracking your cowardly ass down.”

He laughs, humorless, faint, maybe a little bitterly. “Should have known it wouldn’t be this easy,” he mutters. “Fine, Toni. I’m here for another few days. Fury’s got me on guard detail for this… project SHIELD’s running. Coulson can fill you in, if you can convince him to. I’ll come back when my assignment’s over, okay? We’ll talk then. Just. Don’t. This place has the kind of arsenal that could probably drop even you out of the sky.”

She pauses, feels tears, a lump, a wave of panic and sad betrayal that drowns the anger. “You promise, Clint?”

He sighs, but says, “I promise, babe. I have to go. It’s kinda hectic right now. I shouldn’t even have taken this call.”

She sags against a wall, slides down it to the floor, wraps her hands behind her head and sighs. “Then why did you?”

“Because,” and she can hear a smile, tired and small but real, in his tone, “you’re my best friend, you fucking asshole.” A pause. “I promise, Toni.”

“I’m holding you to it,” she replies softly. “Love you, dumbass.”

Another pause, then he says, “Love you too. See you in a few days.”

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Her next phone call, to Phil, results in voicemail. She leaves a terse message astonishingly devoid of swear words, which usually signals when she’s at her most furious. Phil calls her back an hour later to tell her he’s on his way home.

He finds her on the couch with hologrammatic screens displaying streams of data in the air around her, all semblance of good mood gone. “I called Fury,” he says in lieu of greeting, as she rises to meet his hug. “He told me it was voluntary on Barton’s part. Then he told me to mind my own damn business.”

With Phil there to keep her steady, Toni lets go of her self-control and finally allows herself to feel the rage and worry and fear on a physical level. “I don’t understand why,” she says quietly, squeezes her eyes shut and turns into the warmth of Phil’s neck.

His arms are solid and comforting around her. “I think,” he says, after a long pause and a quiet sigh,
“that’s something you’re going to have to take up with Barton.”

Toni goes very still, because there’s no way she can interpret Phil’s words to mean anything but he knows why Clint left. She chews on her lip, debates making an issue of it, but also knows from the tension thrumming in her husband’s shoulders that it’s something he really doesn’t want to talk about. Instead, she says, “Is there anything you can tell me about the facility he’s assigned?”

Phil’s relief is palpable, the knots disappearing from his shoulders like they never existed. “Not much, I’m afraid,” he says and kisses her forehead. “Mostly because I don’t know much myself. Despite rumors to the contrary, they don’t actually tell me that much about the ancient alien technology I track down.”

“But there’s ancient alien technology.” Toni arches an eyebrow. “And they trust Clint in there?”

“My understanding is that they keep him tucked somewhere high and out of the way,” Phil replies with a sideways smile. “Toni, he’ll be fine. He’s a highly trained government agent. He knows how to handle himself.”

“You say that, and I know you believe that,” she grumbles, “but all I can think of is the guy who tripped over my shoe and nearly gave himself a concussion last month.”

Phil’s eyes crinkle with humor. “It’s different somewhere he’s not a hundred percent comfortable being, Toni. Trust me. Clint will be fine.”

Toni folds herself back into Phil’s embrace, but her mind’s going a thousand miles per hour, because now she thinks that maybe that’s the problem. Maybe Clint allowed himself to be too comfortable, and now he doesn’t know how to pull away again.

“He better be,” she mumbles into Phil’s shoulder. “Or I’ll kill him dead myself.”

Clint’s “end of the week” stretches another two weeks, but at least he’s texting and calling her now, instead of avoiding her like the plague. When he calls to let her know it’s going to stretch again into next week, she’s somewhere above Texas on her private plane, en route to New York to argue with Pepper about the construction of Stark Tower in Manhattan.

(Phil, unfortunately, couldn’t detangle himself from SHIELD to accompany her, but Toni has spent the last three years learning how to deal with being in a long-distance relationship, so it only gives her a mild case of unease. He seemed pretty excited about whatever assignment he’d just been given, promised to tell her as soon as he could about it, assuring her she’d love the surprise.)

“I’m sorry, babe,” Clint says. “I’m not trying to avoid you.”

Toni snorts, barely looking up from her StarkPad, scanning the blueprints for flaws and correcting with irritated swipes each one she catches. “Sure,” she says. “You’re not trying to avoid me. Only, see, there’s this word I keep hearing. ‘Voluntary’? That mean anything to you?”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the call. “Shit, okay. Maybe I’m avoiding you a little bit.”

“Well, knock that shit off, grow a pair, or I swear I’ll be knocking on the front fucking door of the JDEM facility and asking if Fury’s going to let you outside to play.”

“... This is it. I swear, okay? Three more days.”
Toni sighs, closes her eyes and lets her head loll back against the headrest of her seat. “I miss you, Clint,” she says quietly. “Just… stop avoiding me and let’s talk like we’re semi-functional human beings, okay? Whatever I did, give me a chance to fix it?”

“It’s nothing you did, babe. And… I miss you too. Three days. No more volunteering to stay on.” In the background noise, which Toni is always careful to not pay attention to in deference to Clint’s secret mission status, she can hear a sudden spike of activity, and there’s an uncomfortable crackle of static across the call. Toni winces as it snaps like blue lightning across her synapses. “Shit, I have to go. Three days, Toni. Okay?”

“Okay,” she says, rubbing her temples and tasting ozone. “Just remember, I’m in New York this week, at the Tower with Pepper. Come there, not Malibu. If I have to fly across country in my beloved tin can…”

“New York, gotcha.” The noise peaks in intensity, and so does the crackle in Toni’s head. “Love you, babe.”

“Love you too,” Toni whispers back, but the line’s already gone dead.
Despite everything weighing on her mind, Toni manages to spend the next twelve hours relaxing. She and Pepper kick off their boardroom stilettos, ditch the power suits in favor of more comfortable clothes, and crack open a bottle of wine as they put their heads together to finalize the arc reactor installation and the yet-outstanding parts of construction of Stark Tower.

“Are we ready to go off-grid?” Pepper asks, stretching her back as they break for pizza. “I mean, how close are we really to lighting the tower up with the arc reactor?”

Toni munches on a slice of New York’s finest deep dish pepperoni and bacon, flicking through the holos with a thought and a negligent, mostly-unnecessary hand gesture. “If we got the crews down there right now,” she says after a moment of studying the pertinent data, “we’re an hour away.”

One of Pepper’s perfectly shaped eyebrows rises. “An hour. Toni, be realistic. You’re not going to get a crew to dive into the bay at this time of night to adjust the power lines to the tower.”

Toni shrugs, foregoes the hand gestures, and just cycles through the endless pages of numbers. “I could do it,” she says absently.

“... Are you licensed?”

Toni glances sharply at her co-CEO — officially, Pepper’s still in charge, but Toni’s name is still on all the letterheads and she still owns controlling stock — because Pepper doesn’t sound derisive or like she’s hearing up to nip Toni’s insane plans in the bud. She sounds … curious.

“Technically, yes,” she says. In deference to Pepper’s aversion to watching her mentally control the display for too long, she flicks her fingers until she can zoom in on the pertinent part of the grid under the bay. “I had to be licensed to pass inspections when I wired the manor and then the tower for JARVIS, and I just kept it current. We have appropriate permits. We just need a crew. I could legally do it right now.” she paused, takes in Pepper's considering look, and arches an eyebrow of her own. “Do you want me to take care of it right now?”

Pepper looks doubtful, if speculative. “Would you be okay to do that? I mean, you aren’t the most stable when it comes to immersion in water—for good reason!” she adds hastily, holding up a hand to ward off anything Toni could say, before Toni can do much more than blink at her statement. “I’m not trying to say you don’t have a damned good reason to not like water, Toni. Just that with your… aversion, would it be wise for you to go down there?”

Toni actually stops to consider, then shrugs. “I can take the Mark VI down. She's about a thousand percent waterproof. What was the timeline that one company gave us? A week?”

“A week to ten days. Business days.” Pepper blows out a breath, plunges both hands into her hair. “I
can’t believe I’m even considering this.”

Toni grins, gets to her feet, dusts her hands off on the ass of her cut-off shorts. “Well, stop considering it, and consider it done. J, wake Six up for me, will you, kiddo?”

“Yes, Mum. Mark VI will be prepared for departure in two minutes, twenty seven seconds.” A pause, then, “Shall I load your current iTunes playlist?”

“Will this playlist involve the Titanic soundtrack or any version of that Celine Dion song?”

“Not anymore, Mum,” JARVIS replies, and Pepper laughs. “Mark VI is ready for deployment.”

Toni can’t shake the feeling something is about to go terribly, tragically awry, but she chalks it up to being a hundred feet underwater in the middle of the night. Despite her brave words to Pepper, night-diving isn’t exactly on her top ten list of things she’s happy to do, and once she welds the last plate back into place, sets the new converter in place and it spins into green-blue life, she's more than happy to kick the afterburners into gear and get out of the ocean.

A dazzle of lights greets her as she exits the water, and she glances right at the yacht with its well-dressed passengers lining the rail, snapping shots of her with cell phone cameras. She tosses them a jaunty salute, hanging in the air for a second before twisting herself back in the direction of Manhattan and opening a comm channel to Pepper back in the Tower. “Good to go on this end,” she says. “The rest is up to you.”

The vid-call lights up in the corner of her HUD, Pepper leaning over the camera. “You disconnected the transmission lines? Are we off the grid?”

Toni grins. “Stark Tower is about to become a self-sustaining beacon of clean energy.”

And because Pepper is Pepper, her face twists wryly. “Well, assuming the arc reactor takes over and actually works…”

Toni scoffs, banking between the skyscrapers and rolling to wave to kids staring out the windows of apartments, hands and faces pressed to the glass to watch her go by. “Why ‘assume’? Light her up.”

Down Fifth Avenue, the dark tower crackles and hums, and a soft blue blossoms Toni’s mind as the giant STARK on the side of the building suddenly shine and the tower comes online.

“How does it look?” Pepper asks with a pleased smile.

Toni’s grin might be side enough to split her face. It certainly feels like it. “Like Christmas. With more… me.”

“We’re going to go wider on the public awareness campaign,” Pepper says. “You need to do some press. I’m in DC tomorrow, working on the zoning for the next three buildings, and—”

Stark Tower, with its gloriously familiar arc reactor hum, its phone lines and wireless network, surges and ebbs, settling into her mental map of Manhattan like it was never absent, and Toni touches down on the platform to the penthouse, letting the disassembly rig do its work and start taking the Mark VI armor off her. “Pepper, you’re killing me here. Shh. Just enjoy this for a minute.”

Pepper laughs. “Well, get in here so I can pop this champagne, and I will.”
“Mum,” JARVIS says suddenly. “Agent Coulson is on his way up to the penthouse.”

Toni rolls her eyes. “Jesus, kid. How many times do I have to tell you? I married him, you can call him ‘Phil’.”

“Yes, Mum,” JARVIS says. “He wants me to inform you he’s on official SHIELD business.”

Toni rolls her eyes again, and stretches as the last piece of hardware disappears into the machinery, padding barefoot into the penthouse. “Christ. Then tell him he’s reached the Life Model Decoy of his wife, and I’m actually not home. Pepper and I are having a moment here. No SHIELD business in my tower the same night I proclaim my genius to the world. I’m putting my foot down.”

“As much as I fear your foot going down,” Phil says, already inside, as she returns to the mess of blueprints and booze she and Pepper have spread everywhere in the half-finished penthouse, “this can't wait, Toni.”

“Spoilsport,” Toni says, but is suddenly unnerved by the serious, drawn look her husband is wearing. Still, appearances must be maintained, and they’re newlyweds, so she wraps his tie around her hand and pulls him in for a long, deep, why-aren’t-you-stripping-me kiss.

“I can’t stay,” he mutters against her mouth, but pushes his hand into her hair and clutches the back of her head to hold her in place. When he pulls away and gently moves her back, she doesn’t fight it, just uncurls her leg from his hip, finger-combs his hair back into place, and takes satisfaction in the flush of his cheeks and the frustrated glitter in his eyes.

“You sure you can’t stay?” she asks softly, and laces her fingers together behind his neck.

“I wish I could.” He clears his throat, smooths his tie down and lightly caresses her cheek.

Pepper coughs delicately, and Toni’s abruptly reminded that they’re not alone. “Is it bad, Phil?”

“Bad enough,” he says, and lifts Toni’s arms off his shoulders, slides his hands down her forearms to grasp her hands.

A gaping pit yawns wide open as he stares into her eyes and his fingers tighten around hers. “What do you need me to do?” she asks softly.

From somewhere, Toni’s never been able to discover where, he produces a black tablet computer that he hands to Pepper. “I need you to take a look at this. This isn’t a consultation. This is about the Avengers.”

“Which I know nothing about,” Pepper says over Toni’s shoulder.

Toni pulls away after indulging herself in a much-needed if quick kiss. “I thought the Avengers Initiative was scrapped,” she says, taking the tablet from Pepper and folding it out. “Apparently, I’m volatile, self-obsessed, don’t play well with others.”

“That I did know,” Pepper murmurs.

“This isn’t about personality profiles anymore,” Phil replies. “Barton’s been compromised.”

The words don’t make sense for a moment, and she blinks as she tries to parse them. Abruptly, Pepper’s hand is on her back, palm warm between her shoulder blades, keeping her steady. “Compromised. What do you mean, compromised? What does that mean, Phil?”
Phil’s eyes crease, consternation, apology, a whole bunch of subtle emotions rolled up into a single expression. “Remember all those things I couldn’t tell you about when I went to New Mexico a few months ago?”

She nods, and Pepper’s arm slips around her waist, solid and tight. The lights in the tower dim and flicker, and emotions surge and churn under the sudden blanket of JARVIS’s presence in her mind.

“One of those things is an alien entity who now has Agent Barton under some sort of mental influence,” Phil says, and the bottom of Toni’s world drops away. “The JDEM facility has been destroyed, and Clint, among other agents, is missing, presumed co-opted by this entity.”

Toni swallows hard, several times, her eyes locked on Phil’s. The lights continue to dim and brighten, and she can feel JARVIS winding himself through her thoughts, trying to provide a stable, grounding influence. Pepper looks around worriedly, but Phil’s gaze never leaves hers.

She sucks in a deep breath, sharp and long, fills her lungs nearly to bursting. She holds it for a long minute, then lets it out in a noisy rush, squeezes her eyes closed, squares her shoulders and throws her head back, opening her eyes again.

“I,” she says, calm and rational, bending her attention to opening the program on the tablet, splaying her fingers to throw the images and video clips into the air, “am going to fucking kill him super-dead, honey.”

Relief flashes across her husband’s face, and the crinkles around his eyes shift into amusement. “I expect nothing less, Toni.”

Phil calls her with updates, sightings of Clint, sightings of this “Asgardian” that calls himself Loki, but Toni’s barely civil when he calls, replying in noises that aren’t intelligible words. She knows he won’t take it personally, because she’s deep in the network of Stark satellites broadcasting all over the world, working in tandem with JARVIS to track what SHIELD needs them to track.

The blue cube bothers her, because even the sight of it makes her cringe with the phantom pain of blue lightning snapping across her thoughts. She leaves it hanging in the air above her, to remind her to not drift too far into wireless and radio, but otherwise ignores its implications as best she can.

Captain America is a surprise. She’s trying not to think of that either, because she can’t afford to be distracted by that marvelous miracle right now either. Can’t afford to go starry-eyed and fangirl. Not with her best friend missing. She ignores that documentation too, as best she can.

Clint’s signal jumps in a maddening fashion, appearing and disappearing at random, not staying in one spot long enough to do more than identify before it’s gone again. Toni growls through gritted teeth as it slips out of her grasp again, and the lights flicker ominously.

She seethes, rubbing her temples to try and rid herself of the low-grade headache throbbing behind her eyes. “Fuck this,” she snarls, and slams her hands down onto the table, making the holographic map of Germany jump. “J, give me Mark VI. I’m going to Germany. I’m tired of sitting on my ass.”

“Yes, Mum,” JARVIS says, sounding oddly pleased. “I’ll continue analysing the sightings and pings, and discern if there is any pattern to the appearances. Shall I alert Phil?”

“Why not?” she mutters, striding towards the assembly line and into the rising boots of the Mark VI. “He can yell at me while I’m in flight.”
Phil, astonishingly, doesn’t yell at her. “Redirect to Stuttgart, Toni,” is all he says. “Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff might need you for backup.”

“Agent Romanoff, did you miss me?”

Agent Romanoff is not amused to see her, which might have something to do with the fact Toni’s pretty sure Phil chewed her ass out about her infiltration attempts at Stark Industries, but might also have something to do with the fact that Toni hijacked Romanoff’s quinjet to blast the Spice Girls at top volume.

She arcs around a building, and her inner fangirl screams just a little at the sight of Captain America — oh my fucking god, J, it’s really him! — slugging it out with some guy in emerald green with a truly, heinously, ostentatious helmet.

And her focus is abruptly co-opted. Loki.

Every ounce of worry she’s been suppressing, every last drop of anger and hopelessness and the helpless, blistering rage constantly surging under the surface of her thoughts, screams to the forefront, boils through her nerve endings and explodes out of her palms in a brilliant wash of golden light that slams into Loki and sends him flying.

*Calm thoughts, Mum,* JARVIS whispers, and tugs her back from the brink.

She slams down and straightens up, glares death at Loki as he coughs and lays there. Captain America comes into her field of vision. She wants to squeal, she wants to fangirl. She wants to go back to Malibu and fetch all of Phil's memorabilia and demand he sign everything. Instead, she restrains herself to a nod and a respectful, “Captain.”

“Ms. Stark.” The Star Spangled Man is side-eyeing her in a worrisome way, and Toni tilts her head, trying to read his expression under the cowl.

Then Loki groans and starts pulling himself upright, and Toni finds she’s out of fucks to donate to the *why is he looking at me like that?* cause. “Make a move, Reindeer Games,” she says, and her repulsors whine. She is pleased to note her tone is so tightly controlled, she's sounding practically flippant.

Loki smiles in a way she really doesn’t like, and his armor vanishes like smoke, but he raises his hands in surrender.

“Good move,” she replies, and drops the aggressive stance, but can’t help feeling like she’s missing something very, very important here.

**oOoOoOo**

Because she has questions and because they can’t stop her, Toni hitches a ride back to the States with Natalie from Legal and All-American. Captain Rogers is talking, saying something, but she’s barely paying him any attention, because half her mind is too busy calculating the most efficient way to grab Loki and take him somewhere no one’s going to hear him scream until he gives her Clint back, and the other half’s busy trying to make him explode through the power of her glare.

Loki, for his part, keeps smirking at her, and if he doesn’t stop, she doesn’t give a fuck about Fury or
SHIELD or whatever bullshit they’re hauling him back to the Helicarrier for. She is going to put her hand right over his forehead and see if Asgardian skulls can withstand the finest weapons-grade repulsor Toni’s made to date.

Right after he gives her Clint back.

In the end, it’s Rogers’ annoyed tone that pulls her attention from Loki. “I don’t like it,” he says, and pulls his cowl back to run a hand through his sweaty hair.

She spares him a glance. “What, Rock of Ages giving up so easily?”

His eyebrow twitches. “I don’t remember it being that easy. This guy packs a wallop.”

“Still,” she says, once more only half-paying attention to the conversation. “You are pretty spry for an older fella. What’s your secret, pilates? I like yoga personally. Keeps the whole body limber.”

“...What?”

God, she’s got to stop looking at Loki and allowing him to get under her skin with that knowing smirk of his. She turns away, scrubs her hands through her hair. “It’s like calisthenics. You might have missed some things doing time as a Capsicle.”

He’s silent, and angry, for a long moment. “Fury didn’t tell me he was calling you in.”

“Yeah, well. There’s a lot of things Fury doesn’t tell you.” She shrugs, sees the challenge in his eyes, still can’t find a fuck to give. For a long moment, she thinks, woman or not, Captain America might actually take a swing at her.

Thunder cracks, and Toni tears away from her staredown with Captain America, glancing instinctively up. Since Extremis, unexpected lightning strikes have become her new bane, but her storm alert protocols are reading clear sky for miles. J, what is—

She reels into the wall as lightning pops and snaps across her awareness, a sudden staccato burst of static and power her mind was unprepared to receive. Her vision goes bright and jagged as her ass hits the deck. “Ow! Shit! Fucking what the fuck…”

Hands roughly haul her back upright, voices muddied by the ringing in her ears, but she thinks Rogers is asking her what happened, but she can’t be sure because her vision’s too blurry for accurate lipreading.

And that’s when things go abruptly tits up.

She scrambles for her helmet, desperate for its inbuilt shields as lightning continues to crackle across her senses, and gets it in place just as the cargo door of the quinjet is torn free.

She squints through the watery shimmer over her eyes, barely registers the disbelieving murmur of Another Asgardian? over her shoulder, because panic and rage flare with the thought that he’s here to rescue Loki.

“And then there’s this guy.” She strides forward with the intent to rid the quinjet of Blond and Burly’s presence, but she’s suddenly airborne, flung back into the far wall, crashing into it with a pained grunt, and sliding down it as Blondie grabs Loki, and is gone.

Rogers scrambles for his cowl, hauls it in place over his head. “Think he’s a friendly?”
“Doesn’t matter,” she snarls, gets to her feet and scrambles for the open boy, jets and repulsors whining to life. “If he frees Loki, or kills him…” Clint is lost. Jesus, what the hell is she even doing debating with this guy?

Rogers grabs at her shoulder plate, tries to haul her back, but his glove slides off the sleek titanium. “Stark! We need a plan of attack!”

“I have a plan,” she says through gritted teeth. “Attack.”

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Now alert to the lightning, and shielded by the circuitry of her helmet, Toni keeps herself in constant state of bracing against the fits and spurts of raw, untamed electricity as it lashes out at her. It's still not comfortable, washing against her still-imperfect mental shielding, but it isn't going to catch her off guard or drop her to a useless puddle anymore, and that's the important thing.

But being so mentally focused on keeping raw electricity at bay, she loses her grip on the self-control keeping the rage from surfacing. She piledrives Blondie away from Loki, caught in the mindless animal urge to beat answers out of someone.

The blond beefcake throws her off and she rolls, barely managing to bring herself to a skidding stop before she crashes through a tree. Growling, she clambers upright and turns.

_Mum_, JARVIS says in gentle warning, and she spits a curse, but starts hauling herself in check again. _Buzzkill_, she shoots back, and follows her trail of destruction back to where Blondie is now rising to his feet.

He draws himself up with squared shoulders, glowering hard enough to drop a moose in its tracks. “Do not touch me again.”

She raises the faceplate of her helmet, meets his snapping gaze with fury of her own. “Then don’t take my shit.”

“You,” Blondie proclaims, “have no idea what you are dealing with.”

At the edges of her awareness, she can feel the quinjet finally recovering from the assault, can feel it descending towards them at a careful, controlled rate. “Someone who desperately needs to find a fucking comb,” she says, eyeing his bedraggled hair. “Take it from me, muscles: long hair and high wind velocity might look really nifty in the movies, but it’s absolute hell on follicle strength when you have to brush out all those tangles.”

“This is beyond you, metal man,” Blondie says, and Toni feels her eyeteeth grind together at the condescending, patronizing tone. It’s just the right note that makes her want to start kicking someone’s teeth in. “Loki will face _Asgardian_ justice.”

“The hell he will,” she snarls. “Loki will face whatever the fuck I put him through until he decides to start talking. And once I have what I want out of him, _then_, 2 Legit, you can fucking take him wherever the hell you feel like taking him.”

Blondie eyes her, seems to be taking her measure. Finally, he pulls himself to his full height — Jesus fucking Christ, how goddamn tall is this clown? — and says, “You will take my brother over my corpse.”

The last shred of Toni’s patience snaps and the faceplate slams down. “Fine with me, asshole. Bring
it, tourist.”

Blondie brings it, with a scream of fury that would make a lesser person fall down and weep for mercy. But Toni has spent a vast majority of her life being the unstoppable force, so she just roars back in challenge and meets him head on, her repulsors as bright as falling stars.

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Toni is rapidly approaching overload, and doesn’t know how to stop herself from reaching critical meltdown. Everyone is talking and talking and talking, and Loki is locked up in a glass cage on a hair trigger, and he still hasn’t said a fucking helpful word about anything.

And it doesn’t help, it really doesn’t, that the Helicarrier is so loud. It brays in her skull, reverberates like an amp with a speaker that needs to be reseated in its housing, sets her teeth on edge. There’s so much noise, so much chatter. She thought Stark Industries was cacophonous, but it has fucking nothing on SHIELD’s heavily-armed flying fortress with its multiple layers of encryption and eighteen redundancies for every system constantly online and streaming data. It wears at her, eats at her bit by bit, until she’s growing very afraid she’s going to be lost in the noise.

She takes refuge in the quietest corner of the Helicarrier she can find, a heavily-shielded section Fury told her to park the armor. She leans on the case, hands splayed across the vertical surface, and rests her forehead against the cool, smooth steel and chrome. She feels ancient and wizened, the familiar and unfortunate side effect of too much caffeine and too little sleep, and she wants nothing more than to curl up and pass out for about a thousand years.

She just doesn’t have the luxury of doing so.

“How’re we doin’, kiddo?” she asks, too tired to keep the slur out of her words, too tired to do so much as open her eyes. “How’s your hack coming?”

Swimmingly, Mum. Everything you requested I seek out and retrieve will be available to you shortly.

“Good kid, J.” She sighs and sags as she turns around, rubs her eyes and feels the world spin around her. “Do you have a line on Phil?”

Agent Coulson is—

“I’m right here, Toni,” Phil says quietly, and it’s a measure of her faith in him that she doesn’t even look, just moves in the direction of his voice and trusts him to catch her. “You’re a hard woman to track down.”

“Story of our relationship,” she mumbles into his neck, instantly feeling tension drain as his arms circle her waist. “If you’re not careful, you’ll spend the rest of your life chasing after me and hunting me down.”

“I can think of worse fates.” He moves a hand to her chin, tips her head up and examines her carefully, brushing her hair back from her face. “When was the last time you ate or slept, sweetheart?”

Despite herself, despite the sick spin of her stomach, despite the situation, despite everything, she smiles. “Wow. I must be really fucking wrecked if you’re breaking out the endearments, honey. I’m fine.”

His lips thin slightly, and his eyes crease in unhappy ways. “You are not fine, Toni,” he says firmly, sets his palm against her cheek. She can’t help but sag into the warmth of his hand, eyes slipping
closed. “You’re sloppy and unfocused and, given the things you’re no doubt going to get yourself involved in over the next few hours whether anyone asks you or not, that’s a dangerous mindset to be in. I’d feel a lot better if you could catch a nap for a couple of hours.”

“Can’t sleep,” she mumbles. “I did try, I swear. The Helicarrier’s too noisy. It’s got me stuck in my head.”

“Toni.” There’s soft recrimination in the syllables of her name, echoes of the Voice that always means delicious things about to happen to her. “Why didn’t you come to me sooner?”

She shrugs, because she has a good answer, but she knows it’s not a great one. “You were busy. Excrement appears to have impacted against the rotary oscillator around here, honey. I figured my shit, so to speak, could wait.”

“Not to me. Never to me.” He caresses her face again, runs his fingers across her throat and traces her collarbone. “Sometimes I think I’d like to turn you over my knee.” A pause, then with confidence, “That’s not what you need from me right now, though, is it Toni?”

Mutely, she shakes her head, eyes closed and swaying with the motions of his hands. “This is nice,” she says, heavy and languid. “Feel like I could go to sleep standing up with you doing that.”

His hand drops away. She cracks an eye with supreme effort, but perks up with renewing interest at the sight of him. He’s got that Look in his eye, the one that accompanies the Voice, and a frisson of arousal shivers down Toni’s spine as he clears his throat and smooths the tie down over his abdomen.

“Come with me,” he says, no-nonsense and brooking no argument, and Toni has fallen into step behind him as he turns to head for the elevator in the corner before she even registers what she’s doing.

She blinks, misses a step. “Phil, where are we going?”

“My office,” he says without looking back at her, jabs the call button. The doors open promptly, leaving Toni to suspect that JARVIS might have had something to do with that. “In the elevator, please.”

She steps uncertainly forward, guided by his hand on the small of her back, and brushes her hair behind her ears. “I’m fine, Phil,” she says, and makes an attempt to pull herself together, even though the elevator rising through the different levels of the Helicarrier is sweeping her right through the worst of the electronic babble, and it makes her head pound to the point her eyeballs feel like they’re vibrating. “You really don’t have to worry about me.”

He doesn’t turn much, barely more than a slight twist of his neck to bring her into his field of vision, but the nonplussed look is more than sufficient to shut her up and make her want to cower away. It’s not the first time she’s had the look turned on her, but it never loses its effectiveness. “Yes. I do. You’re my wife, Antonia,” he says, matter-of-fact. “Your well-being is my top priority. I will always worry about you.”

A whimper falls from her at the sound of her full name, because there’s really only one reason Phil ever uses it. She eyes him thoughtfully, caught for a long, long moment in the helpless space between yearning desperately for what he’s offering and being chastised for wanting it by that damned sense of responsibility he’s infected her with.

He takes advantage of her uncertain hesitation to guide her with deceptive deference out of the
elevator and into a busy hallway. She feels the palm of his hand against her back like a goddamn brand, and her shoulders tense. “Agent Coulson,” she says through a clenched smile at the jumpsuit- and three-piece-clad SHIELD agents around. “What the fuck are you doing? This is where you work. Fury’s gonna—”

“I don’t give a damn what Fury wants,” Phil says, leaning slightly towards her so only her ears hear him. “I’ve been doing what Fury wants for the last two years. It worked because that was our arrangement, yours and mine. But the situation is different now, and I don’t think it’s going to work like that anymore.”

Toni’s completely lost the thread of the conversation; she knows she’d be able to follow Phil if she was well-rested enough for her brain to function on a level approaching her kind of normal, but right now, she’s having trouble parsing the appropriate information. While she’s struggling with it, he moves her confidently through the hall and in through a door, after pausing long enough to punch an access code into the keypad beside the jamb.

The door clicks, locks behind her, and then she’s against it, Phil flush against her, a hand threaded in her hair and his mouth covering hers. Her startled moan is a short, indrawn, squeaky thing, but the followup groan is deep and needy. She clutches at him, clings and claws, because she might not have been able to determine it if he asked her, but his warmth and his weight pressing against her is exactly what she needs.

She whimpers in distress when he pulls back to examine her face. His sigh is just this side of frustrated. “We haven’t spent enough time together lately,” he says, apologetic and soft. “You’re touch-starved. My fault, Toni. Let me make it up to you.”

She blinks as he steps back from her, deftly undoing the knot of his necktie and pulling it from under the collar of his dress shirt. Her mouth goes dry and a sweet thud of desire hits her low and hard. “What are you doing, Phil?”

“I,” he says resolutely, reaching forward and unbuttoning her jeans, “am going to spend the next hour taking care of the wife I’ve been neglecting. Take off your shirt, Toni.”

She shivers at his tone, because this is not a new game he’s initiated, and she knows where it’s going. Half a dozen lackluster protests swim sluggishly to the forefront of her mind, warring briefly with the gleeful chant of yesyesfuckyes coming from the vicinity of her libidinous hindbrain. “I’m not neglected,” she says hoarsely, and her fingers tremble on the hem of her tee. “Are we really doing this here, Phil?”

He stills, tilts his head slightly. “I planned on it,” he says, then pauses. “Do you want to do this here?”

She considers, as she stares at Phil. He watches her steadily, utterly unflappable, if she ignores the lack of a tie and the flush high in his cheeks. This is not inevitable because all she has to do is say the word and Phil will change tactics. But now that she’s had a chance to catch her breath, now that her mind’s had a chance to surface from under the constant barrage of SHIELD electronics, it’s sinking in that she’s about to strip in Phil’s office in the middle of the Helicarrier, and she’s actually kind of really, really turned on.

The tremor stills in her hands and she smoothly pulls her shirt over her head, tossing it aside negligently to land somewhere in the corner. “Yeah, boss,” she says, breathless and rough. “Yeah, I do.”
Minor edits made, because writing on 48 hours of no sleep is hilarious fun.

Next chapter, you may get full-on smut, or not. Readers' choice. Kindly let me know here, or on tumblr @allthemarvelousrage. :(
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

READ THE TAGS.

The first section is D/s'y smut.

Content Warnings: You all know what's coming. This is more or less canon-compliant. Therefore: angst ahead. Shitloads of people needing hugs and appropriate therapy. Grownups not being grownups about their feelings.

This follows the events of *The Avengers*, and as such has scene jumps both large and small. Fill in the blanks with the appropriate events of the movie. Some dialogue was lifted directly out of the script itself.

Please enjoy. And remember: if you murderlate me, as my betas assure me you will, I can’t write the next chapter.

Toni sits on the edge of Phil’s desk, perched and arranged how he wants her to be, as he neatly folds her clothes and lays them on the corner. She’s not sure if he’s turned the air conditioning on, or if it’s just the nature of where she is, but she shivers, chilled.

“Hands,” he says brusquely. Wordless, she holds out her hands, wrists loosely together, watches him bind them with his discarded necktie. Her breath catches as he tugs on the knot to gently guide her to sprawl across the top of his desk, back against the cold, smooth wood. “Are you doing alright, Antonia?”

“Fine,” she says, breathlessly, tugs experimentally as he hooks something between her hands over the knot, but her hands won’t pull free. “I’m fine, boss.”

He smiles down at her, brushes a caress across her cheek with his knuckles, then moves to the other end of the desk to give her ankles similar treatment, binding them into place via hidden latches or posts or something similar. “How long’ve you been planning this, boss? And…” Wait, three ties, and he’s coming at her with a fourth for a blindfold. “Christ, boss. How many ties do you have hidden in your desk?”

“I’m in a dangerous line of work,” he says calmly, and his hand trails up her inner thigh. “Ties get caught in all manner of things, and occasionally require scissors. I just don’t consider the risk to outweigh the benefit of a professional appearance on the job. How’s your circulation?”

It’s an ingrained reaction by now to flex her hands, shift her ankles, checking the give of the ties at the question. “Fine, boss,” she says automatically, then stops and shakes her head, trying to clear the spread of familiar lassitude before it seeps through her entire mind. “Phil, do we...”

His hand is abruptly over her mouth, silencing her question. “Do you remember your safeword? Because if you’re not completely into doing this, you should use it now.”

She swallows, then gives in completely. She doesn’t want to stop this. It’s been too long, she’s too crowded in her own head, and Phil… well. Clint warned her ages ago that Phil was a goddamn sex-
ninjal. She should really stop being surprised when she remembers that. A sigh, and a shudder, and the last dregs of resistance flow away. “Yes boss,” she says, soft and mild, going pliant against the desk. “I remember my word. What do you want me to do?”

His hands are unexpectedly gentle, gliding over her hips before trailing over her stomach. She groans, half in surprise, half in bliss, at the sudden pressure and warmth of his palms spreading and smoothing along her ribcage. “You are going to relax and let me take care of you. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, boss,” she whispers, and lets her head fall back to rest against the makeshift pillow of her clothes.

He starts slow, stroking featherlight touches over her cheeks and forehead, and she tilts her face towards his hands, sighing in soft relief. The aggravating, dull buzz of the Helicarrier mutes and fades, and she listens instead to the rhythm of his breathing, the soft hiss of cloth on cloth as he moves, and the slowing, settling tempo of her own pulse through her ears.

He moves down from her face, crossing her shoulders with the bare tips of his fingers, just a hint of nail, and presses down with his palms over her biceps, wringing another soft groan from her. Massages down her arms, and traces the lines of her veins with a single fingertip before trailing back up the sensitive, ticklish side of her arms.

He’s careful around the arc reactor, because the scars there are more sensitive than the skin surrounding them, and she’s panting lightly by the time he cups first one breast and then the other, gently rolling and kneading her flesh between his hands. She whines a little when he moves further down without touching her nipples, because they’re painfully tight and aching to be tweaked.

“Patience,” he says with a chuckle, and his voice slides into her ears like honey and silk as he palms her hip with one hand, thumb tracing circles in the hollow of her hipbone. His other hand disappears from her body, and she hears a desk drawer slide open, and then close.

The scent of her favorite sexytime-safe body oil hits her nose just as the cold liquid hits her skin, and she hisses faintly, bowing away from it. “Been planning this awhile, boss?” she says, languid and content as she settles back down. “S’not like I’ve been here before.”

“I like to plan for contingencies,” Phil says, amused, and his right hand smears the oil across her stomach to the opposite hip. “But it might have been on my bucket list to tie you to my desk and have my way with you.”

“Yes boss,” she purrs happily. “Anything you want.”

His chair scrapes back, and she feels him lean over her. “Be quiet,” he says, using the Voice, and Toni shivers. “No more words, unless you want out. Do you understand?”

Oh hell yes she does. She nods emphatically, and her lips part on a sighing moan when his hands skate over her hips and down her thighs, digging into sore muscles and drifting over sensitive skin.

Time slips away, disappearing wherever it goes when Toni stops paying attention to it, her world reduced to the feel of Phil’s hands on her, the quiet cello music he likes playing in the background, the smell of the oil, and the scrape of his movements as he shifts around her. He flips her to work on her back until she’s purring and half-asleep, then turns her again to wake her with deliberate, careful strokes around her breasts and thighs, until every nerve is singing and thrumming with lazy, languid pleasure.
When his mouth closes on her nipple, she cries out and nearly comes off the desk. Only the ties hold
her back, keep her anchored, as she keens and pants under the wet, warm flick of his tongue, the
tweak and pull against her other nipple, and fire curls through her belly, building in delicious
pressure until the distant thought comes that he might very well bring her over without ever touching
her folds, but his mouth pulls away, and his hand soothes down her side, and she thrashes just for a
second, whimpering with the denial.

“Boss,” she says, sounds hoarse and wrecked to her own ears. “What…”

“What do you trust, Antonia?”

She doesn’t even have to think about it. “Yes, boss,” she replies, and ends on a stuttering moan when
his thumb flicks over her clit.

“Then trust me. I have you. I won’t let you fall.”

It’s as deep a surrender as she’s ever given anyone. He brings her to the edge time and time again,
until she’s lost count of the number, until her throat hurts from the moans and cries, until she’s
sobbing and babbling with the need for release, until she’s in a continuous, sinuous, endless quaking
on the desk.

Then her legs are freed, and he’s lifting her arms gently off the hook on the opposite side, removing
her blindfold so she can look down at him, loop her bound wrists around his head, shiver right up to
the edge at the dark, lost, heated look in his eye. Let him swallow down her cries as he sheds his suit
with a rough speed that belies his careful, unhurried ministrations on her skin, and grabs a handful of
each hip.

“Come for me, Toni,” he says into her ear, harsh and hot, and she freefalls into climax the second he
pushes into her, sets a rhythm just as rough and ragged as his breathing against her mouth, one
already stuttering into near-climax. And everything is bright and electric, and her head is completely
silent except for the embarrassingly loud grunts and moans they’re both making, and she’s going to
have bruises on her hips later because his hands are so tight, but right now she doesn’t care. She
doesn’t care because she is flying without a suit, and there’s nothing better in the world than that.

“I’m going to hand Fury a letter of resignation,” Phil says, much later, when they’re curled naked
together on the couch, and his caresses are comforting and anchoring, making sure she comes back
down to earth in one piece.

She blinks, but doesn’t have the energy left to act as surprised as she feels, and doesn’t bother lifting
her head from where she’s comfortably nestled against his chest. “Why? You love SHIELD.”

He presses a kiss to her forehead, and she can feel him smile against her skin. “I do,” he says. “But I
love you more.”

Unexpectedly, tears fill her eyes. “Phil,” she whispers, dashes them away. “That might be the nicest
thing anyone’s ever said to me. You going to look for something in the private sector? Cos I know
the chick who owns Stark Industries. They might have something in upper management you’d
qualify for.”

“I’m not sure yet,” he says. “My wife is filthy rich, though. If nothing else, I could be her kept man. I
could drip with diamonds and furs.”

Toni laughs softly, in such a ridiculously good and centered mood, and nuzzles in. “Whatever you
want, honey. I mean that.” She flaps her hand against his pectorals, smooths her palm away from her face. “When do you plan on quitting?”

“I'll tell Fury now,” Phil murmurs, twining her hair around his fingers. “And once this business with Loki and the Tesseract is finished, so will I be.”

“Sounds good,” Toni says, snuggles closer, shuts her eyes. “Sounds real good to me.”

oOoOoOo

She likes Bruce. She really likes Bruce. Out of all the people wandering around the Helicarrier, he’s smart as a whip, self-effacing without being self-conscious or self-deprecating. He’s Toni’s kind of genius, who makes no apologies for his intelligence but isn’t an unbearable ass about it.

She hates having to fight for the “unbearable ass” title, anyway. She staked her claim on that appellation a long time ago, and she remains the reigning defending champion of the asshat wars. But Bruce is the only one out of the whole bunch that Toni thinks she’s going to be able to tolerate longer than a few minutes.

She’s already had her first impression from Agent Romanoff, and coming at her with a needle was not a good base to start from. And Steven Grant Rogers, Captain America, is an asshole. And he’s not even an asshole in the way men from the 30s and 40s were. She could handle being called “dame” and “broad’ and whatever other sexist terms he’d come out of the ice thinking were normal. But that isn’t Rogers’s brand of jackassery. No, Rogers brings spite and anger and misery and condescension, which are far harder to laugh off as the eccentricities of a crazy old man.

Thor, on the other hand… Thor’s wandering around her awareness like a low-grade, nearly invisible mass of lightning that shifts and roils with his movements. Strangely, though, she doesn’t feel the pop-crackle-hiss of pain, but a low hum that’s oddly comforting, like a refrigerator kicking on after a power outage. She eyes him as he shifts her way, can’t help but feel a pang of sympathy as she glances at his hair. She can recognize a quick finger-comb for presentability when she sees it.

“That’s just goddamn sad,” she finds herself saying, and Bruce glances at her, then at Thor, and rolls his eyes with a smile. She moves her monitors, digs in her pocket for her comb and points at a chair. “Sit down, Point Break. I can’t look at your tangled blond locks anymore.”

Thor eyes her warily as she approaches, no doubt remembering her screaming at him and trying to blow him through the side of a mountain with her repulsors. “Lady Stark, I—”

“Toni,” she says, nudges the chair again. “I’m Toni. Lady Stark was my mother. Sit.”

He pauses, eyes her again with a furrowed forehead. “Toni. I do not think the condition of my hair is of import at the moment. The Tesseract and my brother are the—”

He trails off at her look, which is her very best Coulson impression, a vaguely polite smile and an arched eyebrow that convey a deep, nuanced impatience and tolerance. It never fails to cow her, and it’s doing a wonderful job of cowing Thor. “Sit,” she says, emphatic and final. “I’ll be gentle.”

Thor sits like a man putting his head on the chopping block for execution. Toni shoves the comb between her teeth and finger-combs through Thor’s hair to find the worst of the tangles. With her hands in his hair, the hum is louder than anything else, washing the aggravatingly persistent background chatter of the Helicarrier away in the soft hiss of white noise. Toni inhales, sharp, startled, soft. “Oh,” she says, barely audible, because the pressure is just gone from the back of her thoughts.
Thor stirs, turns. “Are you well, Lady… Toni?”

“Yes,” she says, after a moment’s thought, and separates out a section of hair to comb. She might as well do this right, and she’s a little surprised to discover her access to the wireless network hasn’t been disrupted, just the junk noise. J, find me a tutorial on Viking warrior braids, she thinks absently, mulling over the implications. “Are you aware that your body generates a low-grade electromagnetic field that disrupts external frequencies without disrupting access to the signal flow? Because that’s kind of impossible, but you’re doing it anyway.”

Thor arches an eyebrow at her, and she pulls his head around via a handful of hair. “Tis the power of Thor,” he says mildly. “This world of yours is a noisome beast, with its cell phones and radio waves and its grids of power. I shield against them lest they grow too distracting.” A pause, then, “I was unaware any Midgardians had achieved a like state of awareness.”

“It’s new,” she says absently, reviewing the tutorials JARVIS found until she finds one she likes, and starts dividing Thor’s hair into sections. “And unintentional. And honestly, it’s awesome, but it’s also a pain in the ass. I can’t remember what it feels like anymore to not have a constant headache. Except right now. All I hear right now is white noise.”

“Mayhap you are inside my … what does your Midgardian science call them… firewalls? Aye. Mayhap you are inside my firewalls, and their shields extend to you at the moment.” Thor turns slightly, just enough to see her in the corner of his eye. “I would be honored to instruct you in constructing your own shields, Toni, though I am not certain it will work.”

Toni pauses for a moment, then resumes twining the long, golden hairs around each other. “Won’t know unless you try,” she says. “Let’s put a pin in that for when we’re not in the middle of SHIELD’s floating fortress of feds. And if it doesn’t work, that's fine too. I'll just have to adopt you. I'll be the envy of billionaires everywhere, because I'll be the only one with a pet demigod.”

“Mmph. Thor is no one's pet, Stark,” he grumbles, but his shoulders are relaxed, and there's a rumble in his voice that makes Toni smirk.

“Sure. Of course. Thor probably also doesn't purr, either.”

“Certainly not,” he says gruffly, but Toni thinks he’s grinning.

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“Stark,” Fury says, and he sounds like he’s on his last shred of patience. “What are you doing?”

She cracks an eye, and yup, he’s about as furious as his name would suggest. Sad for him, because Toni’s in too good a mood to let him ruin it for her. Over Fury’s shoulder, Phil eyes her with amusement and… is that a hint of jealousy? “I’m flying to the moon, Nick,” she says, practically purring as Thor’s fingers make deft work of her hair. “What does it look like?”

Fury’s got a gimlet eye, but it’s got nothing on Phil’s looks of annoyance. Toni lets it slide right off her back. “You’re supposed to be looking for the Tesseract.”

“We are,” Bruce says mildly, from his work bench. “The model's locked and we're sweeping for the signature now. When we get a hit, we’ll have the location within half a mile.”

“Besides,” Toni continues, shutting her eye again, “the God of Thunder needed to have hair that says Thoreal: because he’s worth it. The Crown Prince of Asgard can’t look like an interdimensional hobo. Christ, Nick. Do you have any shred of diplomatic sense at all? You could have offered him a hairbrush, at the very least.”
“That explains his hair,” Fury says. “That doesn’t explain yours.”

“Have a care to whom you speak,” Thor says above Toni’s head. “Lady Stark was kind enough to fix the finest warriors braids in my hair as I’ve ever had. Twas only polite to offer reciprocity. The woman of iron and the Odinson are now shield siblings. To insult her is to insult me.”

Toni can’t resist opening her eyes, automatically looking to Phil. Her husband looks immensely impressed with her, pleased and proud. Bruce rolls his eyes again, rubbing his forehead in exasperation. Both of Fury’s eyebrows are up in incredulity. “I don’t know how you manage it, Stark,” he says, and glances back at Phil, who just shrugs.

“I find her a little high strung, sir, but she’s otherwise pleasant and easy to work with.”

Toni’s eyes narrow. _J, text my darling, loving spouse and let him know he’s going to pay for that later._

_Yes, Mum,_ JARVIS says.

_oOoOoOo_

Toni can’t feel anything.

The world moves around her, sounds blurring and colors smearing, a cacophony of mechanics and electronics screaming through her head. But it’s all at a distance, it’s all underwater, it’s very far away, outside the bubble, outside the range of her perception.

_Phil is dead._


_Calm thoughts, Mum._ It isn’t JARVIS, because she's lost contact with JARVIS, but the memory of his voice, soothing and warm, pulls her back. Locks her down in the dark warmth of her own mind.

_dontthinkdontthinkdontthink_

“I saw a wedding ring,” she hears Steve say from a very, very far distance away. “Did he have someone, or…”

“There was a cellist, I think,” Hill replies from just as far away. “Phil was… he kept his personal life personal. No one really knew.”

_I’ve been holding onto this for awhile. It’s been in my pocket for two months. Maybe I was a little nervous about asking you. It’s a big step._

The room vibrates, the bubble cracks just a little more. Toni’s right hand twists around her bare left ring finger, clutches at the material over her throat, feels the perfect circle of her wedding ring on its delicate titanium chain under her tee.

This can’t be real. None of this can be real.

_Haven’t you figured out yet that we’re capable of surviving anything?_

“… find out why the goddamn lights keep flickering,” she hears Fury snarl, hears his distinct tread as it comes into the room, because only Fury could manage to make his footsteps sound impatient. Blur of motion, black leather in the front, blue leather beside her. “These were in Phil Coulson’s jacket. Guess he never did get you to sign them.”
A handful of cards hit the table with a wet, red slap, right in Toni’s field of view.

Fury keeps talking, level, calm, going on about the Tesseract and the Avengers Initiative, but Toni is barely registering anything but the cards anymore. Phil’s treasured, beloved, Captain America trading cards, mint condition. His pride and joy. A hand comes into view, Captain America’s hand, moves the cards like he’s sorting through them, and Toni swallows convulsively.

Are you at the room now, Phil? Open the door. The code is 070420. Is it open? Surprise! This was my father’s collection. It’s yours now, honey. Anything you want in it. Anything at all. Hell, take everything. Happy one-year anniversary. Sorry I couldn’t be there myself, but I’ll be back tonight in time for dinner at our place. And I won’t be wearing underwear. Love you, Phil.

Phil’s pride and joy, stained with Phil’s blood. They should be in protective sleeves, in their fancy archival-quality display book. He’d been like a kid with a treasure. He’d babied them more than he did her. He would never put them in his jacket. He would never carry them around without their sleeves. He would never … he would never…

But someone else would. Someone conniving. Someone with ulterior motive. Someone… someone with something to gain from Phil’s death.

Because Phil is dead.

Phil is dead.

The bubble of watery glass muting the world around Toni explodes, and rage comes screaming to the forefront. She inhales and the world reasserts itself in bright, sharp, razor colors and sound and, for one long second, she’s in their systems, she’s stretched along every wire, every circuit, every single goddamn fucking connection the Helicarrier possesses. And for one long moment, for one long, eternal, apocalyptic moment…

She wants to kill them all right back.

Because Phil is dead. And they all should be too.

The Helicarrier lurches, lists to the side, spins as an engine stalls out. Over half a hundred comm channels, she hears/feels/receives the voices suddenly crying out in panic and alarm, scurrying like ants in a kicked-over nest. But it’s fine. She’s fine. She’s going to bring their floating fortress down on their fucking heads, and everything will be fine. Because they’ll all be dead, every single fucking one of them.

You’re sloppy and unfocused and, given the things you’re no doubt going to get yourself involved in over the next few hours whether anyone asks you to or not, it’s a dangerous mindset to be in.

Shut up, Phil, she rages, knows she’s screaming at an echo, a memory, a ghost, but doesn’t care. You’re dead. You don’t get to fucking worry about shit anymore.

You’re my wife, Antonia. Your well-being is my top priority. I will always worry about you.

She lets out a breath that sounds more like a sob, and the tight, implacable fist she has over the Helicarrier’s systems loosens. Loosens. Releases. She turns on a heel and stalks from the room without ever saying a fucking word.

-----

Steve finds her staring at the empty place where Loki had been trapped, because she can’t stare at the
place where he killed her husband. Because Phil’s blood is still staining the walls and the shrieking, screaming, boiling rage rises whenever she looks at it. And she needs to be calm. She needs ice and frost. She needs cool and calm.

Because that’s the only way she can think and plan and plot out exactly how she is going to end Loki’s fucking life.

“I didn’t know you two were close,” Steve says, after an awkward throat-clear and an even more awkward silence. “I’m sorry. He seemed like a good man.”

She side-eyes him. “He was an idiot.”

His lip curls. “Why? For believing?”

Her eye twitches, the fragile calm she re-established shudders. “For taking on Loki alone.”

“He was just doing his job.”

“He was way out of his league. He should have waited. He should have…” Her voice cracks, her throat convulses, and she can’t keep going on with this conversation, so she turns to walk away.

“Is this the first time you’ve lost a soldier?”

And she’s rounding back on him like he just pulled a trigger, snapping and spitting, “We are not soldiers.” And the Helicarrier creaks ominously around them.

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Toni should be patching up her armor, because the Helicarrier engine really did a number on it. She should be trying to rewire everything, get back her connection to JARVIS. She should be in Fury’s office, telling him Phil was her husband and making arrangements for burial.

Instead, she walks into the room the Helicarrier systems have listed as Clint’s current location.

He’s not in the room when she walks in, but Romanoff is. For a long moment, Toni stares at Natasha, and Natasha stares back at Toni.

“Stark…”

“Get. Out.” She’s calm and rational, and so completely devoid of emotion, Natasha flinches, fast and hard. For another long moment, Natasha stares at her face, and Toni distantly wonders what she’s reading there. Whatever it is, it’s enough to make her stand and give Toni a wide berth as she exits the room.

The toilet flushes and the bathroom door opens, and then there’s Clint, drying his hands on a towel. His face undergoes an impressive, complicated arrangement of emotion, from surprise, to guilt, to sympathy, to rage, to things Toni can’t bring herself to think about right now, and finally settles out into his most neutral, guarded expression. “Hi,” he says.

“Hi.” Her face is frozen, but inside, deep below the vacuum-cold layer of ice and snow blanketing her emotions, knee-weakening relief, absolute joy, and unadulterated wrath, underscored with other, darker, more primal things Toni’s not allowing herself to feel. “It’s time to go. You might want to suit up. They need someone to fly the quinjet.”

Things flicker through his eyes. “Toni…”
“They don’t know. They will never know.”

He takes a step towards her, and his face starts crumpling around the edges. “Toni…”


Clint’s face smooths out, loses its self-recrimination, becomes hard as stone. “After.”

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The scepter clinks on the arc reactor, and the surprise on Loki’s face would be hilarious, if Toni was allowing herself to feel anything.

“This usually works,” Loki says, baffled.

Toni tilts her head. “You can’t steal what you’ve already killed.”

_deploying the Mark VII, Mum, JARVIS whispers, and Toni shifts her stance, calculates the timing to exquisite precision, and titanium gold alloy wraps around her fist a split second before she punches Loki in the face.

“There was one other guy you pissed off,” she says, as the faceplate snaps down and her HUD lights up, and the whirring whine of her repulsors is the best sound she’s ever heard. “His name was Phil.”

Loki’s eyes go wide and startled and he opens his mouth, but Toni’s had quite enough of him, and her repulsor blast slams him through the glass window and sends him spinning and flailing out into the sky.

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Many times in her surprisingly short life, Toni’s thought she was at the end. But assassins couldn’t kill her, the Ten Rings couldn’t kill her. The media, jealous exes. Justin Hammer, Obie Stane, palladium poisoning, none of them could kill her. Because Toni Stark doesn’t go quietly, or meekly, and she doesn’t let anyone, any thing but herself define her fate.

But now Phil’s dead, and she’s done fighting.

“Stark… you know that’s a one-way trip.”

She ignores Steve, ignores JARVIS, ignores everything, because she’s got a nuke set to blow on her back, and there’s a big, gaping wound in the sky it needs to go. She’s not saving anything for return. She’s expending it all, every single jolt of power, every single drop of blood she has. All for this.

“Mum… Shall I try Ms. Potts?”

“No,” she says, eyes on the sky. “No, Pepper has all my legal shit. She’ll know what to do. No point in torturing her with a final call.”

“Yes, Mum,” JARVIS says, subdued, and falls silent.

And then she’s through the wormhole, and the suit is going dead around her, and she can’t breathe, but she fights, she fights to stay awake long enough to witness the missile taking out the mothership in a glorious blaze of light and soundless pressure.

Then, only then, does she allow her eyes to close. I love you, Phil. See you soon. And then, fainter,
more regretful, *I love you too, Clint. I'm sorry I'm leaving you alone.*

----

She wakes up on the street, Thor and Steve and the Hulk standing over her, and everything hurts. Everything hurts because she’s alive and Phil is dead and Manhattan is half-destroyed, and Clint is staring at her with burning eyes and a sheet-white face, and Thor is looking at her with the kind of gaze that makes her think he knows. He fucking knows.

She gets herself up, stands shakily, and reels on her feet until Thor slides a supportive arm around her waist. “I have you, shield-sister,” he murmurs, and the white noise of his shielding washes over her, bringing a silence from the clamour that’s almost blissful.

“Good job guys,” she rasps, and there’s an edge of hysteria in her tone because it’s hilarious that she can’t even die when she means to. “Let’s just not fucking come in tomorrow. I’m dying for pizza. Anyone else want pizza?”

Thor tilts his head back, looking up, up, up at the tower. “We are not finished yet,” he says.

*Loki.* Toni follows his gaze, anger and bile and grief churning sickly in her stomach, too exhausted to choke it back, tamp it down, change it to ice. “Right. Pizza after.”

oOoOoOo

It’s peaceful on top of the tower, and Toni dangles her legs off the side of the building, digging a spoon into a pint of Ben & Jerry’s. Far below, there are sirens whooping, and cell phone calls being made between family, friends, work, government. Radio calls from first responders, rescue crews still working around the clock. SHIELD clean-up teams working feverishly to secure all alien technology before private citizens take it into their heads to grab a piece of Chitauri swag.

Toni wishes them luck, honestly. Sardonically, she tips her empty pint container to the city and lets it fall out of her grasp, spoon and all. After all, what’s one more piece of debris blowing through the streets?

She steps off the edge, flirts with her dark, destructive thoughts for just a second by delaying kicking on her hand boosters to catch her dizzying descent. She lands a little hard on the disassembly platform, hard enough that her teeth snap together and the taste of blood blossoms in the back of her mouth.

As she closes on the wide glass doors leading into the penthouse, armor pieces stripped from her one by one, she sees Clint inside, staring out at her. Her stride falters as her stomach churns, and she knows there’s no way he didn’t see her. She should have no reason at all to be dreading this face-to-face, but she’s been avoiding it for days.

The doors swish open, and closed, and then they’re starting at each other mutely, hollow-eyed and pale. Deep, deep in Toni’s mind where she shoved every ounce of pain, rage, sorrow, grief, locked it in bedrock and iron, something fractures, and a fine tremor shakes through her body.

“Hi,” she whispers.

He summons a smile for her, a pale, ghostly thing that’s more horrible than any grimace he could have shown. “Hi.”

Emotion surges, breaks her out of the stillness, rocks her forward. She takes a step towards him, opens her mouth to say… something, but her eyes catch on the duffel bag slung over his shoulder,
and she freezes again, swallows hard. Her hands fist at her sides, trembling and tight. “You’re leaving.”

He has the grace to look away from her, look down. “It’s for the best,” he says, subdued. “I can’t…”

The bedrock cracks, shifts, separates.

“No,” she snaps, cutting him off with a sharp, dismissive gesture. Her chest is tight, her breath fast and hard, and her vision swims with a tinge of red. “No, it’s fine, Barton. It’s peaches and fucking cream. I don’t know why I thought you might stay. So go. Run the fuck away again. You’re really fucking good at that.”

“Says the fucking queen of hiding shit.” His return shot is sharp, vicious, barbed. The duffel bag thuds onto the floor as he steps towards her, whipcord tight with anger. “You’re a fucking master at avoiding unpleasant shit, Stark. If it might inconvenience you, you do your damnedest to make sure you never have to do it. Hell,” and his laugh is bitter, so bitter, “why would you have to do anything? You had Phil to make sure it got done.”

Toni flinches at the name, reels back a pace, catches herself, takes two furious steps forward. “Phil was not an inconvenience,” she hisses.

“Yeah?” He matches her paces forward. “Then when’s the fucking funeral, Toni? When are you putting the husband you loved into the fucking ground? Do you even know where they took him after Loki ran him through the fucking heart? Do you care?”

The bedrock explodes into shrapnel, and each fragment buries itself in what’s left of Toni’s heart, shredding and flaying her until there’s only rage left. “And where the fuck were you?”

“Where were you when your assclown boss was killing Phil? Where the fuck were you, Clint?”

She’ll never know if she throws the first punch, or if he does, or if it was both at the same time, but in an eyeblink, they’re swinging at each other, rage and fury and exhaustion having driven them both past their limits, screaming epithets and throwing blame, accusations and recriminations as loud as thunder.

And she’ll never know if she stopped first, or he did, or both together, but just as fast as they were fighting, they’re clinging to each other and she’s sobbing, wailing, screaming into his shoulder. And he’s clutching her like she’s a lifeline, shoulders quaking with grief of his own.

“He’s gone,” she sobs, locks her arms tight, clenches her fingers in his shirt. “He’s gone.”

“I know,” Clint says, hands in her hair, on her back, wrecked and broken and trembling. “I know, sweetheart.”

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He moves her into the bedroom, sets her on the bed, bends to unlace her boots and pulls them off, gently, one by one. She’s quiet now, inside and out, hollow and emptied and cold.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she says quietly. “I don’t really think it was your fault.”

Clint glances up, gives her a pale, sad smile. “It wasn’t yours either, sweetheart. I don’t blame you. I’m working on not blaming myself.”

Toni reaches out, runs her hand through his hair, and feels her face crumple a little. “Please don’t leave me. Stay, Clint. God, please stay. I need you.”
He watches her for a long moment, and then squeezes his eyes shut. His expression twists through whatever internal battle he’s having, and then he heaves a sigh. “I need you too,” he admits, low and pained, and hauls off his own boots with far less care than he gave Toni’s. “I’m not going anywhere,” he says, and crawls onto the bed beside her, pulling her tight against him with a desperate yank when she tries to shift over to give him room.

Neither of them get much sleep, his nightmares waking her, hers waking him, but they cling together the entire time, and somehow, Toni thinks, it makes it just a little bit easier to bear.

**OoOoOoOo**

The Avengers gather, all of them, one final time three weeks later, to see Thor and Loki and the Tesseract off on their trip across the Rainbow Bridge. Natasha eyes Clint and Toni with a look of arch contemplation, as if confirming a suspicion she’d had for awhile. Toni shoots her a withering look over the rim of her sunglasses and goes back to leaning against Clint’s side, his arm over her shoulders, her arm around his waist.

Steve likewise gives them a double-take, blinking with those big blue doe eyes of his. “I didn’t know you were together,” is all he says.

Toni opens her mouth to put him straight, Clint beats her to the punch. “We’re private people, Cap,” he says, and his fingers tighten just a little in warning. “For good reason.”

She subsides at Clint’s squeeze. Much as she would love to reply with something snarky and quippy, she hasn’t been sleeping well, and her stomach doesn’t want to keep anything down lately. She’s too tired to do anything but give Steve a tight smile and all but yank Clint past, to where Thor is leading Loki, bound and chained and gagged, to a round metal platform embedded in the grass.

“Hey Thunderama,” Toni says, manages one of the first real smiles she’s dredged since the Helicarrier. “Taking String Bean home?”

“Aye,” Thor says. “Much as I would see swift justice done for the son of Coul, mortal authorities cannot hope to contain Loki’s madness. It’s best to return him to my father. Fear not, Toni. I will advocate most stringently on your behalf for the great harm done to you and your family.” He pauses, looks her over, and his smile widens. “Congratulations are in order, I believe.”

Clint shrugs. “That was song and dance for Stars and Stripes,” he says quietly, something tight and haunted in his tone. “Toni and I aren’t together.”

Thor blinks. “Apologies for my offense, I did not mean to imply you were taking advantage of my shield-sister’s grief, Hawkeye. I know you to be a more honorable man than that.”

It takes Toni a second to translate that in her head. She tilts her head slightly and frowns, and a yawning pit opens in her chest, dread taking up its old residence deep in her gut. “Then why…”

Thor gently pulls her from Clint’s side, and embraces her in the sort of hug that makes her want to break down and cry all over again. “I believe,” he says in her ear, “the son of Coul, who was your beloved, has one final gift for you, Toni. You have the glow I have learned to associate with motherhood.”

Toni’s knees turn to water and, if not for Thor holding her up, she’d hit the ground ass-first. Thor, gentleman that he is, keeps her up until she can find her legs again, then moves her to arm’s length and smiles reassuringly. “You will be fine, shield-sister. Though it may seem like you are alone, you are not. Lean on the Avengers. Lean on the good man who stands at your side. You will persevere.
Mourn and grieve, but do not become lost to it.”

She stares at him, numb from head to toe, and Clint slides his arm back around her shoulders as she steps back from Thor. “Easier said than done,” Toni manages to say.

“Aye, it is.” Thor presses something into her hands. “Until I can return to instruct you in shielding. I will make haste, but even I cannot say how quickly the All-Father will move in Loki’s trial. Be well.”

The item is small and hard in her fist, but she couldn’t move if someone held a gun to her head and told her to run. Clint is equally statute-still beside her, and neither of them move until long after Thor’s lifted his hammer, called out for Heimdall, and vanished in a torrent of bright, rainbow light.

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It’s the longest two minutes of her life.

She stares at the window of the capped stick, and her hand clenches iron-tight around the wedding ring on its chain and the tiny hammer amulet hanging from a cord she swears has been woven from Thor’s own goddamn hair. She doesn’t know what she wants it to do. Turn? Don’t turn? She whimpers through her nose, presses her free hand against her forehead.

Slowly, the control window turns pink, showing the strip is working. And right on its heels, the test window turns chipper and pink too.

“Shit,” she says, as the bottom falls out of her stomach. “It’s positive. How the fuck can it be positive? Why the fuck is it positive?” For a bad moment, she thinks she’s going to pass out, because the world has gone spotty and she’s swaying dangerously on her feet. She’s pregnant. She’s pregnant? Holy shit, she’s pregnant. She’s pregnant and she’s a widow and Phil should be here but he’s not because Phil’s dead and…

And then Clint’s there, embracing her from behind, keeping her from hitting the sink or the tub or the toilet. “Breathe, sweetheart,” Clint murmurs, sets his cheek against hers. “C’mon, Toni. Just breathe. Just breathe.”

She inhales a shaky, deep, sobbing breath and the world goes bright with the inrush of oxygen. “Oh god,” she moans, leans over the sink, feels her stomach lurch and holds her lunch in with heroic effort. “Shit. Shit. What am I gonna do? I can’t… I can’t do this alone.”

There’s a long moment of silence, and Clint pulls her up, turns her around, tilts her head up towards him. “You don’t have to,” he says, soft and firm, and gently wipes over her forehead with a cool, damp cloth that feels nearly miraculous. “I’m here. I’ll help you.”

Toni stares at him, blinks once, drops her gaze, shakes her head. “This isn’t your problem, Clint,” she says tiredly, rubs her forehead. “You shouldn’t feel obligated to--”

“Toni, shut the fuck up.”

She jerks her gaze back to him, wide-eyed as a deer in headlights. He’s angry, and white-faced, and his fingers flex on her shoulders like he’s trying not to shake her. There’s something dark in his eyes, something angry and desperate and wistful and guilty and….

Oh. Oh. He’s….

Toni’s throat closes over, and her eyes fill with tears. “Why?”
“Because you’re my best friend, you fucking asshole! Because… Because I…” His voice breaks, and he shakes his head roughly. “Jesus, Toni. I’m not feeling obligated, you colossal dumbass. I want to do this. I want to do this for you. With you. I’m not…” He swallows, squeezes his eyes shut, opens them again. “I’m not Phil, Toni, I know I’m not. But I said I’d stay. I’m staying. You don’t have to do this alone. Let me…” And his voice breaks again, half begging, half sobbing, half something Toni can’t define. “Let me do this? Please?”

She stares at him, chin trembling and vision swimming, and then she exhales a long, soft sigh. “Okay,” she says, and folds into his chest, tucks her cheek over his heartbeat. After a moment, his arms close around her back.

“Okay?” he asks thickly, disbelieving.

“Yeah.” She sighs again, shuts her eyes, links her fingers together behind his back, and feels unbearable weight just slide away from her shoulders. Feels the unbearable weight slide from his shoulders too. “Okay.”

oOoOoOo

The Guest House

The steady beep of machinery is loud in the silence of the operating suite. Fury leans against the wall beside the one-way window, and peers through at the man on the table. He doesn’t bat an eyelash at the sight of an exposed brain, doesn’t twitch at the mechanical arms weaving things deep within that brain.

At least he’s breathing now. Even if he’s using that breath to beg for death again.

“Toni,” Phil’s voice, reedy and faint and delirious, rasps through the speakers. “Toni, let me die…”

Fury sighs through his nose and turns away, turns to the hall at the sound of approaching footsteps. “Tell me good news, Doctor,” he says.

Streiten’s face is tight, lips pressed together. “No doctor should ever perform these operations,” he says, leashed disgust evident in his tone. “They’re barbaric and inhumane.” He clears his throat, rustles his papers. “But they work, even if they should never have been done, Director. Agent Coulson has been revived, his heart has been repaired. Physically, he’s whole.” Streiten glances at the window, shakes his head. “Mentally…”

Fury leans against the wall with his elbow, peers in again. “Is it the same as the other GH 325 patients? The symbols?”

“Yes.”

Fury sighs, closes his eye, squeezes the bridge of his nose. “You’re authorized for TAHITI, doctor. See to it he comes out intact.”

Streiten hesitates as Phil calls for Toni again. “He keeps asking for his wife, Director. This… Toni? Antonia?”

Fury goes very, very still, just for a second, because suddenly many, many things make sense to him. Coulson’s distraction in recent years. The wedding ring. The letter of resignation that crossed his desk the same day Coulson died. He weighs his options carefully before finally saying, “He doesn’t have a wife on record, doctor. Agent Coulson is officially listed as single.”
Streiten scowls. “I know who he’s talking about, Director,” he replies. “And Agent Coulson was wearing a wedding ring when he was … brought to us.”

Fury sighs, massages his temple again. “Toni Stark has spent the last two months believing Phil Coulson is dead, Streiten. Whatever healing she’s done, whatever grieving she’s managed to work through… Is it really responsible to undo all that, to tip her over the edge right back into the middle of instability, until we can be sure Phil is fit for duty?”

Streiten looks at him with disbelief for a long, uncomfortably long, time. “This is unconscionable,” he says. “You cannot make those decisions for Agent Coulson. His wife should…”

“His wife,” Fury says, firmly cutting Streiten off, “is a brilliant, erratic, volatile woman who will rain hell on earth down on me, you, SHIELD, the government, anyone she suspects had so much as a toenail to do with any of this. Before we open Pandora’s Box, doctor, I want to make damn sure we have sufficient reason to think it’s safe to do so. Agent Coulson is on record as single. He has no wife. Not until we can be sure it’s the right time.”

Streiten is shaking his head in that deeply disappointed, sorrowed way that always reminds Fury of his grandfather. “The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” he says, accusatory, but Fury relaxes, because he knows Streiten will follow his orders in this.

“Doctor,” he says and goes back to watching Phil on the table, “I made my peace with that fact a long, long time ago.”
Adult conversations and smut ahead. Maybe not my best efforts in certain sections, but I'm exhausted and mentally drained, and I don't want to hold off and do another editing pass.

It would be impossible to explain to Fury why she needs a death certificate for Phil without getting into their years-long relationship, so Toni just has JARVIS hack into the Helicarrier’s databases and get it for her. She presents it to the clerk at the courthouse, who looks at her with sympathy and noises she assumes are supposed to be soothing.

Clint fidgets behind her as the clerk stands with Toni’s paperwork and leaves her desk; Toni gives him a look over her shoulder, and he reaches out to take her hand. “We don’t have to do this,” he says quietly, under the steady clack of the keyboard from the clerk in the next kiosk. “There’s plenty of time, sweetheart. It doesn’t have to be now.”

She gives him a nonplussed look, then tugs him forward so she can slide under his arm and rest her head against his shoulder. “Shut up,” she murmurs, closing her eyes. “You asked me, I said yes. There’s absolutely no reason to wait.”

“You just…” He hesitates for a moment, then sighs. “You just don’t seem like you actually want to get married again, Toni.”

“I don’t,” she replies, and watches him twitch. She reaches out to take his other hand and slides to stand before him, hands on his hips. “But it’s the logical choice, and I’m glad you asked me. I am,” she adds, touching his cheek as if she could physically wipe away the doubt shadowing his eyes. “Unless you don’t want to?”

“No, I do. Like you said, it’s the logical choice.” He smiles at her, takes her hands, slides her back under his arm and squeezes gently, but tightly. “I just don’t want you to feel like you’re pressured or trapped. You want out at any point, you just say so.”

“Noted.” Toni looks up as the clerk returns.

“Everything’s in order,” the clerk says, passing back the envelope with the certificate in it, as well as a sheaf of other documents. “Here’s your new marriage license, Ms. Stark, Mr. Barton. If you could sign at the bottom in my presence, please?”

Toni scrawls her usual messy signature on the appropriate line, then passes the pen to Clint and steps back to let him have room. He stares at her, then at the paper, then back at her, and just for a moment, Toni has the sudden, crazy notion that he’s not going to sign it at all. But then he smiles reassuringly and scribbles his name next to hers. He blows out a breath as he sets the pen down. “So what happens now?”

“Now,” the clerk says, signing and stamping at the appropriate place, and giving them both a bright smile, “you can get married. The documentation providing a waiver of the mandatory 24-hour waiting period is in order, so you’re good to go as soon as you want. Your license is valid for 60
days, and only in the State of New York. Congratulations, Ms. Stark, Mr. Barton. I'm authorized to perform the ceremony, if you'd like to take your vows now?"

Clint turns to look at Toni, and for the life of her, Toni can't read his expression at all. But he seems to be waiting for her, so she nods and says softly, "I'd like to."

In short order, they're officially married. Toni may have walked in as a Stark, but she leaves as a Barton. And as she stares at the simple silver band on her left ring finger while Happy drives them to the restaurant for dinner, she waits for it to feel like a betrayal of Phil. She waits for guilt or shame or for it to feel weird at all.

It doesn’t feel like anything but the right decision.

Two days later, Toni’s beginning to regret her decision to let Clint pick where they honeymoon. And it's not that his brother’s family is unbearable, it's that Toni is way in over her head already, and has no idea how to talk to Laura Barton, who is as home with her children and her crafts as Toni is with her technicians and electronics.

She lounges in a lawn chair under an awning, a glass of sweet tea beaded with condensation on the grass beside her, Starkpad abandoned under the barely-noticeable swell of her stomach, watching the Barton brothers at the archery range on the other side of the property. And she can’t help but feel a tiny pang of pity for their parents, because Clint and Barney are competitive as fuck with each other.

It's amusing, though, watching them try to outdo each other, and Toni is frankly amazed at the lengths they'll go to. She's a little biased, she thinks, because clearly Clint is the better archer, but Barney is pretty goddamn impressive in his own right. She has to stop watching after awhile, when it steps right from ridiculously impossible straight into absurd.

“He's going to break a goddamn tooth,” Toni mutters to herself, turning her attention from the archers who are now trying to make shots with their feet and teeth, hands behind their backs, and picking up her tablet again.

“Oh, has it gotten to that part already?” comes Laura’s voice unexpectedly, and Toni glances up. Laura’s heavily pregnant with her fourth child, but still manages to settle into the lawn chair adjoining Toni’s with enviable grace, sighing in contented relief as she throws Toni a friendly, warm smile. “Usually, they're doing a silly amount of running and jumping for at least another ten minutes before they move onto things that ruin their dental work.”

Toni arches an eyebrow. “This is a regular occurrence, then?”

“Every time Clint comes home.” Laura sips her own glass of sweet tea, then sets it beside her chair. “Their way of expressing affection with each other. It’s a sibling thing.”

“Ah.” Toni shrugs. “I’m an only child.” She pauses, tilts her head. “Well, there’s Rhodey, but he came around much later in life. I guess it’s the same thing, though. He’s a giant pain in my ass and he borrows my stuff without asking and he’s even got his own goddamn suit of armor now, but I wouldn’t trade him for anything.”

Laura beams. “That’s exactly it.” She turns her gaze to the archery range. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he’s trying to impress you. Even for him, that move was athletic.”

Toni eyes the range, then snorts. “Naw,” she says. “That’s Barton-falls-off-a-building, variation 19. For a guy who won’t let me build him wings, he sure does like to try and fly an awful lot.” In the
corner of her eye, she sees Laura watching her speculatively and her shoulders tense as she waits for the inevitable barrage of questions.

But they don’t come. Instead, Laura just says, “It’s nice to see him happy. Lord knows he deserves it.”

“Yeah,” Toni says softly, and a pang of guilt twinges as she stares across the grass at her husband. “Listen, Laura… about that… It’s not… he only married me…”

“He told us,” Laura says, gently but firmly cutting her dead in the water. “And it doesn’t matter, Toni. Barney might try to stick his nose in, but it’s not my place to pry anywhere I haven’t been invited. Besides, if he cared enough to ask you and you cared enough to say yes, well… The way I understand it, that’s a lot more than most people have.”

Unexpected tears burn in her eyes, and Toni half-sobs as her breath hitches. “I really don’t know if I deserve all that, Laura,” she murmurs, wiping her eyes under her sunglasses.

“Doesn’t matter what you deserve, Toni,” Laura replies, reaches across the gap to squeeze her wrist in a warm, consoling touch. “You’re a Barton now. We look after our own, whether they think they deserve it or not.”

OoOoOoOo

Over the next few months, the Avengers move into the Tower, drifting back one by one from the ends of the earth to which they scattered. Bruce is the first to show up, appearing a mere three days after Clint and Toni return from their miniature vacation. Toni is desperately glad to see him, and latches immediately onto him to help her do science.

Clint, on the other hand, is glad to see him because he’s unafraid to voice the thoughts that terrify Toni, namely the health of the baby and how the inadvertent trip through the wormhole might have affected it. Bruce tries to protest that he’s not that kind of doctor, but he still wields the ultrasound wand like a professional and draws more blood than Toni thinks she has in her whole body to run through a battery of tests.

“As far as I can tell,” Bruce says, squinting at the screen while Toni does her best to not have a nervous breakdown, Clint's hand tight in hers, “the Extremis nanovirus in your bloodstream actually protected your baby, Toni.”

“Oh,” she says faintly, swallows hard and sinks back against the pillow of the table. “That’s good, right?”

Clint’s eyes are narrowed thoughtfully and shadowed as he eyes Bruce. “Are we looking at any side effects? I mean… Toni’s been through a lot, physically, in the last few years. The shrapnel, palladium poisoning, Extremis, the wormhole…”

Bruce’s expression goes soft and gentle. “It’s too early to tell. But we’ll keep an eye on things, and deal with potential problems if and when they crop up.”

“We?” Toni arches an eyebrow, mostly to distract herself from how goddamn scary the phrase potential problems really is. “You planning on sticking around, Bruciebear?”

Bruce smiles, and switches off the monitor, hands Clint a warm cloth to clear the gel off Toni’s stomach. “You promised me Candyland,” he says mildly. “I’m a sucker for candy.”

OoOoOoOo
Natasha shows up not long after Bruce, arriving with a single duffel bag and a defiant expression that does a decent job of hiding her uncertainty. Toni can still see it in the way her eyes roam around the Tower like she’s not sure she’ll be allowed to stay, before coming to a rest on Toni.

Toni’s far enough along that she’s finally had to abandon her tailored suits and favorite jeans in favor of Clint’s track pants just for comfort, because she refuses to allow Pepper to buy her maternity clothes. She sprawls on the couch with a pint of ice cream on her baby bump, has her hair up in a pony tail, is barefoot and in her rattiest tee-shirt and generally feels like the trainwreckiest of individuals against Natasha’s elegant, put-together, perfect-haired ensemble.

After a long moment of a silent staring contest, Toni turns her attention back to her ice cream and her current episode of Sword Art Online. “Bring me the pint of Chunky Monkey,” she says, licking her spoon, “and you can have one of my pints of Chocolate Fudge Brownie.”

Clint finds them on the couch later that afternoon, a large pizza all but destroyed between them, arguing good-naturedly over who made the better Bond, Brosnan or Craig. (The best Bond is, according to both of them, Connery. But second place is a hotly contested spot.)

oOoOoOo

Thor doesn’t return, but he sends updates from Asgard in the form of coded lightning strikes that buzz and jar along Toni’s amulet-provided shields. She oversees the installation of a lightning rod on top of the tower after conscripting Bruce to figure out how to convert raw extradimensional lightning into a data stream, because she really doesn’t mind her Asgardian pen pal, but she’d like to stop feeling like her brain is frying every time Thor sends his “ho there, shield-sister” transmissions.

oOoOoOo

When Steve returns after his tour of the backroads of America, he’s flabbergasted to realize that Toni is nearly seven months pregnant. He can do the math in his head, and does, realizing that she’d been pregnant during the Battle for Midtown. He tries to be kind about it, but his concern comes out as chastisement for risking herself and her child, which he cringes about the second it leaves his mouth. But she snarls nasty things back at him, and he swells up with indignation.

All in all, it’s not an auspicious start to his homecoming.

It only gets worse over the next few days. He tries multiple times to apologize to Toni, but somehow always manages to say the wrong thing, or misinterpret the things she says, and ends up staring glumly at her as she storms away as best she can.

“Maybe I should leave again,” he mutters, head in hands, as Toni storms out for the third time in a single day, after what he thought was an innocent question about where Agent Coulson was buried, because he’d like to pay his respects.

“They were married,” comes Clint’s voice quietly, and Steve looks up to see him leaning in the doorway, pensive and blank-faced.

“Who was married?”

Clint’s eyes shutter further. “Phil and Toni,” he says. “She doesn’t want anyone to know, but if you’re going to keep hitting sore spots, you should probably know why she keeps blowing up at you.”

“They were… married?” Steve blinks, trying to process. “I thought … Agent Hill said there was a
Clint shrugs. “It was some private joke between them. I wasn’t privy, and I’ve never asked.” His thumb worries at the wedding ring on his hand, and the shine of it in the light draws Steve’s eye.

“So… you two aren’t…?”

A laugh, soft, humor and bitterness. “Oh, we are. All legal and everything. But she’s just…” A sigh. Lost and hopeless. “I’m not him, and I’m not trying to replace him.”

With a mental click, things settle into place and suddenly it all makes sense. “Christ,” he breathes, more because it’s suddenly crystal clear to him how much Clint’s hurting, and how much Toni is, and how it has nothing at all to do with Coulson. But instead of letting his mouth run ahead of him again, he just asks, “How long were they married?”

“A few months. But they’d been together since she got back from Afghanistan, more or less.” Clint scrubs his hands through his hair and sighs heavily. “That’s why she’s so touchy, Cap. Just thought you should know. Now… if you’ll excuse me,” and he offers a tired smile, “I’ve got a crib to put together.”

Steve doesn't stop him, doesn't say anything else, just sits in the chair at the table as the day turns into evening, pensive and silent.

“JARVIS,” he says finally, eyeing the ceiling warily, because the AI has not been particularly friendly or welcoming since his arrival, “if you don’t mind, could you tell me where Toni is, please?”

“Of course, Captain Rogers,” JARVIS says promptly. “Mum is in the den, looking at her wedding album. She’s been there for some time, and doesn't seem inclined to leave anytime soon.”

Steve nods and stands, the chair scraping as it's pushed back. “Thank you, JARVIS,” he says.

“Of course, Captain,” JARVIS replies.

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He finds her where JARVIS said she'd be, on the couch with a photo album open in her lap, touching the pictures like they're precious treasures more valuable than diamonds. He fidgets for a moment, trying to figure out how to best approach her about his new knowledge, but finally ends up blurting out, “Clint told me. Toni, I'm so sorry.”

Her head jerks up, startled, orienting on him. For a single unguarded moment, he can see pain and exhaustion and grief lined in her face, and then her expression closes off again. “No,” she says after another moment, looking away, looking down at the album in her lap. “Christ, it's not your fault, Steve. You didn't know.”

“Still. I shouldn't have just assumed things.” He hesitates. “May I come in? Can I… join you?”

Her head jerks up, startled, orienting on him. For a single unguarded moment, he can see pain and exhaustion and grief lined in her face, and then her expression closes off again. “No,” she says after another moment, looking away, looking down at the album in her lap. “Christ, it's not your fault, Steve. You didn't know.”

“Still. I shouldn't have just assumed things.” He hesitates. “May I come in? Can I… join you?”

For a minute, he thinks she might refuse, but her shoulders slump and she presses a hand to her face. “May as well,” she mutters. “Who knows? Maybe actually talking about it will do me some fucking good.”

Steve settles onto the couch beside her, clasps his hands and leans forward on his elbows. "So the baby's Phil's?"

Toni smiles, and it's a different kind of smile than he's ever seen on her before. Soft, wistful, a little
sad. Her finger traces the lines of the photo, lingering over Coulson's image. "The baby is Clint's," she says quietly.

Steve frowns a little. "Biologically?"

Toni looks up and away, huffs a breath half laugh, half sob. "It doesn't matter," she says, soft but firm. "It might have once, but it doesn't anymore. Phil is dead, Steve. He would have been a good father, but he never got the chance. But my child has a father. My baby has a father who will love them, the same way Phil would have loved them."

Steve reckons he can understand that, and he knows it's damned well none of his business, damned well not his place to stick his nose, but it still doesn't sit with him right, because… "He was an Avenger," he says, and Toni's gaze flies to his face, shocked and wide-eyed. "At least as far as I'm concerned. Phil Coulson died protecting his country, his world, his wife and child. If that doesn't qualify him, none of us deserve the title."

Toni watches him for a long moment, hands still and curled on the album. "Where are you going with this, Steve?"

He blows out a breath, scratches his shoulder and grimaces. "I know this isn't my place, Toni, but my generation… a lot of us didn't have fathers or uncles or brothers, because they died in the great war. But we were proud of them, because they were heroes. Ma never remarried, but even if she had, I would have wanted her to keep telling me stories about the man who made me, because he died trying to protect me and everyone else he loved." He waves helplessly at the album. "Don't let him be forgotten. You know SHIELD has already buried him."

Steve regrets his phrasing the second the words are out of his mouth. Toni flinches violently, and her cheeks pale. "Shit," he says softly. "I didn't mean to say it that way, Toni. I can't ever seem to find the right way to say things to you. I'm sorry. I'll just go before I upset you again."

Toni clears her throat, closes the album with a soft slap, and smooths her hand over the cover. "You're fine, Steve," she says, eyes on the embossing as her fingertips trace it out. "He idolized you, you know? Our first anniversary, I gave him my father's shrine room to run amok in. He was like a kid in a candy store, Steve. I think I actually heard him squeal when he found the cards missing from his collection." She shakes her head with a wry smile. "Howard had just about three of everything."

"I didn't know I meant so much to your father," Steve says, and Toni laughs like that's the funniest thing she's ever heard.

"Howard would be absolutely crushed to hear you say that." She shakes her head, still smiling broadly. "Thanks, Cap. You just made my day."

"Anything I can do to help," he says with a return smile, relieved to at last feel like he’s not sticking his enormous foot in his equally enormous mouth.

Toni quiets, and the smile fades a little in intensity, softens around the edges. "You were, are, my hero too, you know," she admits after a moment. "When I was a kid, any time anything shitty happened, when Ana Jarvis died, when Edwin Jarvis passed, Mama, when Howard was too busy for me… I’d read my old Cap comics and feel better." She looks down, toys with the edge of the book, still smiling. "Because it felt like, in those pages, I had a friend, you know? I didn’t have many friends growing up. But Captain America, well…" She sighs fondly, and when she meets his eyes, there aren’t any shadows lingering in them anymore. "Cap was my friend," she finishes, softly.

"Is," he says firmly, in his very best Because Captain America Says So tone, and surprises himself
by reaching out to cover her hand with his. After a moment, her hand turns under his to briefly link
their fingers and squeeze gently. “And Steve Rogers is your friend too,” he adds. “I’d like to be, anyway.”

She sniffs, brushes a tear away with a knuckle. “Dammit, Cap. Why’ve you gotta make the pregnant
lady cry?”

“Natural talent, I suppose.” He clasps her hand between both of his. “Seriously though, Toni. Are
you going to be okay?”

She smiles, and it's faint and tremulous, but he thinks it might be the first real, full smile he's ever
seen on her, pure and unguarded. “Yeah,” she says, still smiling. “I'll be just fine. Clint's gonna make
an awesome dad. He's great with his nieces and nephews, and he's got this... I dunno. This way of
just being the perfect one to talk to, because he knows when there's something wrong. So PJ here—"

Steve arches an eyebrow. "PJ?"

She nods. "After Phil. Phil James or Phillipa Jane."

“That’s real nice, Toni,” he says, and means it. He nods. “Go on. Sorry I interrupted you.”

Toni waves dismissively. “Clint’s the kinda guy meant to be a dad, you know? He’s just … He’s
just…” She shakes her head. “PJ won't have anything but the best father they could possibly have,
Steve."

Steve tilts his head, considering her. Her face is soft and warm, glowing in a way that he thinks is
more a woman gone on a fella than it is a woman with child. "You really love him a lot."

She blinks at him, then glances down and says quietly, "Yeah. Sometimes I think I always have.
He's my best friend, he's... he's my rock. My partner. I don't know how to survive without him
anymore."

He taps the album with a finger. "So why are you in here, melancholy over your wedding photos?"

She sighs and turns to look out the window. "Because it's pretty one-sided for me, Steve. He loves
me, yeah, but I'm his best friend. Phil's the one he's actually in love with."

Steve is silent for a long time, mostly because he's not sure he actually heard her right. "You really
are a goddamn idiot, Stark."

"... Excuse me?"

He laughs softly. "Toni. Christ. You don't marry a gal, raise her child as your own, and treat her like
an equal partner because you're in love with her dead husband. He might have carried a torch for
Agent Coulson, Toni, but you'd have to be pretty self-deluded to not see the giant Statue of Liberty
Fourth of July fireworks he's carrying for you."

Her face is still as stone, unreadable and shadowed. But for once, Steve doesn’t feel like he’s stepped
wrong in the conversation. In fact, he’s pretty certain that he’s firmly on the right path. “God, Toni,
come here,” he says, and tugs her towards him. She comes without resistance, but her mouth is a
perfect O of surprise. He wraps her in a warm hug, feels her stiffen, shudder, and then relax against
him.

“You really think so, Cap?” Her voice is muffled in his shirt, barely audible, but he has excellent
hearing and smiles, squeezes her carefully, but just a little bit tighter.
“Trust me,” he says confidently. “Barton’s stuck on you, Stark. The sooner you recognize that, the better you’ll feel.”

oOoOoOo

Toni leans on the wall outside the nursery, listening to Clint singing, broken by the occasional vicious curse, as he puts the baby furniture together. Steve’s words keep swirling through her head, having taken root by sheer dint of the force with which he believed them to be true, and she can’t shake them, no matter how hard she tries.

She’s been examining and reexamining every interaction she’s had with Clint since he moved in, benefit and curse of eidetic memory being that she can see the exact moment when she should have realized the truth but completely failed to see what was right in front of her.

She blows out a long breath, lets her head tip back against the wall, and reviews it again. It hadn’t been anything at all, a night long before palladium, one of their normal nights of keeping each other’s demons at bay with video games and imported beer. If she compares it against all her other memories of similar nights, there’s nothing out of the ordinary at all.

Except for the look in his eyes when he tips his beer to her, acknowledging her victory. Soft, proud, adoring.

Completely head over fucking teakettle.

“Rogers is right,” she mutters, one hand rubbing a sore, strained spot on the side of her stomach, the other rubbing at her eyes. “I’m a fucking idiot.”

She’s also a scientist, though, and observation has led her to conclude that the only path offering any resolution is going to be a bit on the extreme side. She sighs again, scrubs her hands through her hair, soothes her palms over the round swell of her stomach as Junior turns over. “Okay,” she says softly, squares her shoulders, heaves a fortifying breath. “Okay.”

She pushes through the door of the nursery, straight into where Clint’s kneeling on one knee on the floor, pieces of a crib surrounding him, two boards in his hands, and an Allan wrench between his teeth.

If she needed any more proof, it would have been right there, in the blinding way his face lights up the second he turns his head and sees it’s her. He lays the boards back down, takes the wrench from his mouth and smoothly rises. “Hi sweetheart,” he says, and tucks the wrench into his pocket. He holds out his hands as he comes towards her, taking hers when they’re close enough together. “You look upset. Is something wrong?”

“Yeah,” she breathes, because of course this is wrong. This is all kinds of wrong. She’s looking up at him, but it’s a sensation of being on the edge of a cliff, staring down at the ground far below. It’s the feeling of strapping on the Iron Man Mk II for the first time, spiraling through the sky like she owns it.

Concern, edge of panic, worry, fear, all stampede across his face. “Is it the kid? What’s wrong, Toni?”

She lays a hand on his chest, her left hand, stares at the wedding band there, and starts laughing. Because it’s really starting to hit her now that she’s married to someone she’s been in love with since the moment she met him, and he’s in love with her, and they’re both in love with a dead man, but nobody ever said anything to anyone else. And she laughs until she’s crying, until she’s hiccuping
for breath, until she’s flailing for support because she’s weak with how goddamn hilarious this all is.

“Toni, you’re starting to scare me.”

“Oh my god,” she says, shaking her head with the biggest stupidest smile she thinks she’s capable of. “This isn’t working for me, Clint. It can’t be working for you. Is it working for you? I mean, seriously. You married me, I changed my name. I met your brother and his family. We live together. We’re having a kid. We sleep in the same bed but don’t actually sleep together. You’re in here putting baby furniture together, for Chrissake, and reading parenting books and taking me to Lamaze and being a good husband and oh, you’re wonderful, you really are. But is this seriously all you want out of life, Clint?”

There’s a deep panic setting into his face, a desperate shadow skating through his eyes, and he takes her carefully by the shoulders. “I’m happy, Toni,” he says, slow and careful, like he’s afraid she’ll misinterpret him, like he’s dancing on a razor edge. “I’m happy.”

She shakes her head, and she knows she’s freaking him out because she can’t stop smiling like a lunatic. “God. I’m not. I’m not. Cos I just realized that I’m in love, Clint. I’m in love and if I’m going to be married, it’s going to be the whole package. It’s going to be everything. I deserve it, and so do you.”

“Oh.” His hands fall away from her, complexion going white and shocky, eyes bright and hurt for just a second before they close over, close down, registering despair and loss. “Oh. I… Shit. I…” His throat works, and his eyes close, and she knows she’s fucking evil to keep him hanging like this, but she’s more than a little wondrous at the fact that she has never seen any of this before. He straightens, turns and his smile is so heartbreakingly fake. “Just… I guess. Never mind. Congratulations, I guess. When will you have the papers ready for me to sign?”

“I don’t want a divorce, Clint.” She shakes her head, laughs at the bafflement, the confusion, the tiny glimmer of hope. “I just don’t want to have a husband who isn’t my husband in every way.”

He pauses for a long moment, licks his lips, frowns in thought. “Okay,” he says carefully. “Help me out here, Toni. Cos see, I think I know what you’re saying, but I’ve been known to make the wrong call. So if you could use small words, tell me exactly what you’re saying, I’d appreciate it a hell of a lot.”

“I want you, dumbass,” she says warmly, steps into him, slides her arms around his neck and just smiles like she might burst if she doesn’t. Leans up on her toes and presses a soft kiss to his mouth. “I love you,” she breathes. Kisses him again. Keeps kissing him until he’s quivering with tension. “I love you.”

“Toni.” It’s the voice of a man driven to the limits of his control, the voice of someone raw and wrecked. Someone teetering on the edge, needing a nudge to topple over it. His hands grasp her shoulders, gently push her to arm’s length, and … oh god, his face. Miserable and wanting and shame and … “This is just the hormones,” he says, desperate to convince her, convince himself. “This is about when Bruce said they might supercharge your sex drive. Ask me for anything else, Toni. Ask me for anything else and it’s yours.”

“Sweetheart.” She lays a hand on his cheek, caresses his temple, his jaw. “If I asked you for honesty, would you give that to me?” At his nod, she smiles softly. “Are you in love with me?” His agonized look is all the answer she needs, and her smile widens into triumph as he slowly nods, devastated and resigned. “Then kiss your fucking wife, dumbass, because I’m in love with you too.”

For just an extra second, he teeters, staring at her with bright, wary eyes, hope warring with doubt.
She waits, patiently and silently, smiling, with her hand cupping his jaw. And in a rush, he breaks, leaning forward, sliding one hand along her face to clutch the back of her head, the other settling on her hip, and his mouth seals to hers with a deep, guttural groan of sheer bliss.

The strength in Toni’s legs lasts until his tongue flicks into her mouth, but he scoops her up as her knees fold, and carries her bridal-style out of the nursery and into the adjoining master bedroom. She finds her steadiness long enough to scramble out of her clothes, watching his eyes go hot and sinful as she strips, breath catching in a dry throat as he hauls his shirt off and kicks out of his jeans.

“I can’t come back from this, Toni,” he says, hushed and strained. “I can’t come back from you.”

She tilts her head, then turns to throw the covers back and slides in with what aims for grace but settles for slightly awkward, with the bulk of her belly throwing off her balance. “No one is asking you to,” she says, and props pillows beneath her head, nestles into them. “Phil is gone,” she starts, abruptly has to stop to choke back a sudden burn of tears, clears her throat, tries again. “Phil is gone. I loved him. You did too. And he loved me, and I have a sneaking suspicion that he loved you too. And maybe if any of us had been less insecure about it, maybe we would all be here now, together, in this bed. Maybe we’d all be putting together furniture and arguing over baby names and having really raunchy sex.

“But none of that happened, because we, me, I... I. Fuck.” She rubs her forehead, wipes her hand down her face. “Because I didn’t think I was anything more than your best friend. You think I could survive you? Jesus Christ, Clint. I nearly didn’t survive when you moved out, and you weren’t my husband then. So if you think that you’re a replacement, or a convenient fuck-toy while I’m chock full of pregnancy horniness, or anything other than the most important person in the world to me? If you think I’m here, waiting for you to come make love to me, for any other reason than the fact that I’m stupidly fucking in love with you and have been since you first smarted off in my hospital room? You need to change your goddamn code name, because you’re a fucking idiot who can’t see shit.”

In a blink, he’s across the room and climbing onto the bed, sliding up and over her, skin hot and hands grasping and mouth hungry and eager. “I love you,” he rasps in her ear before he drops to her neck to suck and lick along her collarbone. One hand tentatively settles to caress over her breast, pulling a breathy moan from her throat as he rolls her nipple between his fingers. Drifts down, roams her skin in maddeningly light strokes, never settling anywhere for long. “Christ, Toni. I never thought… I’ve been so… I don’t know if I can be gentle the first time. I don’t want to hurt you or the kid.”

Toni makes an abortive noise at the gentle, hesitant touches, throbbing and soaking and ready to scream. “I’m not going to break,” she says through gritted teeth, props herself on her elbow and stares him dead in the eye with an unamused look. “In fact, I am enthusiastically all about it rough and hard right now. So here’s the deal. Either you get to all that freakishly bendy shit I’ve been thinking about since I said I do, or I’m going to see if I can’t suck the stupid out through your cock.”

Master assassin with super reflexes or not, the only thing he has time to do is fasten his hand in her hair before she shifts around, leans down and swirls her tongue around the leaking, quivering head of his cock. “Oh god,” he chokes, strangled, and the hand in her hair tightens to a nearly painful squeeze.

She gives it a silent three-count in her head, but all he does is stare at her with round eyes and harsh, ragged breathing. She shrugs. "Suit yourself. Suits me just fine."

“Toni,” he groans, dark and distant, and it’s all he gets out before she bends again to flick her tongue across the sensitive underside of his cock teasingly, then sucks him into her mouth. He blurts something that sounds intense and adamantine, but Toni’s not sure he’s speaking English. The angle is
awkward, and she has to strain her eyes to see his face, but the look of him, dazed, incredulous, 
flushed and heavy-lidded, sings all the way down to the low, roiling pool of heat in her womb, and 
she grins, smug and satisfied.

She tries to keep her eyes open, because she wants to see the moment his brain catches up with his 
body, realize it’s not a trick or a joke, that this is actually happening, but it isn’t long before her eyes 
are closed and she drowns in the taste of him, the weight of him on her tongue, the tug of his hands 
in her hair, the flex of his legs under her hands.

The hand leaves her hair and she whines a little, instantly missing the tinge of pain, and he jolts with 
a guttural stutter. But the hand drifts down her back, nails raking lightly over her spine and curving 
around to palm and knead her ass for a moment before tugging insistently. She shifts her legs, pliant 
and happy to move where he wants her, and then she’s on her side, lazily tonguing his cock like it’s 
her favorite ice cream.

One of his arms snakes around her hip, fingers slot snug to her thigh, and the warm ghost of his 
breath is the only warning she has before his head is between her legs, tongue moving in broad, hard 
strokes over her clit.

She comes off his body with a yowl, hips jerking involuntarily, but his arms lock tight around her, 
fingers slipping in to fuck her with a steady, fast rhythm. And he holds her in place as he brings her, 
swift and skilled, to a throaty, rough and hard orgasm that leaves her quaking and collapsed on the 
bed, craving more but shuddering through aftershocks.

She feels him lift away, wipe his mouth on the sheet, and then his lips are soft and teasing, kissing his 
way up her body, lingering over the swell of her stomach with tender touches and slow, light kisses. 
He licks across her ribcage and nips at her nipple to wrench another low, raspy noise from her before 
his weight settles along her side and front, still-hard cock nudging her hip.

She opens her eyes with effort; he’s staring down at her with dazzled, wondering eyes. “I think you 
got all the stupid,” he says softly, brushes the back of his hand over her cheek.

“Shoulda let me finish,” she says, heavy rumble of contentment in her words. “Just in case.”

In response, he bends to kiss her, firm and possessive, and she tastes herself on his tongue when she 
opens her mouth to suck it in to tangle with her own. He rolls them, shimmies in some delightfully 
sinuous way and manages to get himself half-sitting, half-leaning against the pillows at the head of 
the bed, Toni straddling his lap. “I want to come in you,” he says, and the demanding echo 
underscoring his tone triggers a miniature aftershock as her pussy clenches hard in anticipation. 
“D’you want me to get a condom?”

She walks forward on her knees a little, scooting herself up his thighs until his cock is sliding over 
her slick thighs, and his eyes are rolling back a little, hands tight on her hips. “If you’re worried I’ll 
get pregnant, your timing could use some work.”

“That’s not a worry,” he says, breath catching as she reaches between them, grasps his length and 
guides him in. His eyes squeeze closed and sweat beads on his forehead as she sinks slowly, slowly 
onto him. “Guess that’s a no on the condom. Oh Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” he whispers hoarsely. 
“You’re gonna kill me. Holy shit. Toni. Toni.”

He fills her, nudging places that jolt and thud sweetly, and she’s halfway to howling his name before 
he’s fully in her. “Preciate the thought,” she purrs, rocks her hips forward and collapses onto him as 
pleasure turns her pliant. “But it’s not necessary. Can’t get pregnant… ohhhh, yeah. Shit… since I 
already am. So don’t worry ’bout that. An’ we’re married. We’re okayyyyyyyyyy !’’
The tail end of the word peaks and pitches into a howl, because he’s seized her by the thighs and bounces her on his cock with short, sharp hitches of his hips. “Wouldn’t worry anyway,” he says, tight and harsh and drags her head down to press their foreheads together. He’s already panting like he’s on the edge, faint keen edging every breath. “You want more kids, we can have more kids. Christ you’re so fuckin’ tight. So fuckin’ beautiful.”

He heaves himself off the bed suddenly, rolls them until she’s on her back, shaking hands tucking a stray pillow under her back to support her. She doesn’t have time to do more than whimper in protest, more than reach out for him to come back, before he’s in her again, hard and pounding and pressing his thumb against her clit, pressure and friction steamrolling her towards climax.

He comes before she does, hard and sudden, and his thrusts are frenzied as he pulses deep in her. She pulls him down as he shudders to a stop, pulls him down to her where he can catch his breath as he twitches and softens, head pillowed on her breasts. “Did you…” he pants when he has the breath to speak.

She shakes her head, stretching. “Not then,” she says, strokes through his sweat-spiked hair with a gentle hand. “Earlier. S’fine.”

“She’s not.” He levers himself up, reaches until he can haul the nightstand drawer out with two fingertips, and comes back with one of her toys, which she knows he knows has a kick like a jackhammer on the highest setting. “You need at least one more,” he says smugly, and proceeds to ensure she’s reduced to a thoroughly exhausted heap of pleasantly sore muscles and twitching, jangling nerves. He rolls her onto him, sliding into her with recovered, renewed arousal while she’s still convulsing through aftershocks, and fucks her slow and hard until the room washes away in hazy, dreamy colors.

She drifts then, stirring only when he slides out of bed and pads into the bathroom. “Your ass,” she grumbles, watching him with a single open eye as he rejoins her on the bed, “needs to be registered as lethal.” She closes her eye again as he settles around her. “Cock too.”

He chuckles, and gently nudges her legs apart. She makes a pleased noise at the touch of the warm washcloth, and curls into him when he's done cleaning them both up. “This more what you had in mind for a real marriage, Stark?” he asks, carefully twining his arms around her.

“Mmph. Yes. But it's Barton, Barton. Name's Toni Barton. I know it's hard, but try to remember.”

His inhale is soft and surprised, but he's smiling against her temple. “I'll do my best, sweetheart,” he says, and there's only the tiniest hesitation before he adds, “I love you.”

“Love you too,” she mumbles, already half asleep and buried in his warmth. “See you in the morning.”

Toni’s not even sure what time it is when she wakes up again, but it’s dark and warm and Clint’s breath is steady and soothing in her hair. She shifts around until she’s facing him, strokes his face until he’s mumbling something about pizza, and blearily opens his eyes. A single blink, and they’re clear and focused, creased with faint worry. "Toni? Wha’s wrong?"

She shakes her head with a smile, because there is absolutely nothing wrong for the first time in a long, long time. "Marry me."

He blinks again. "We're already married."
"I know," she says, and kisses his nose. "But I want to do it right."

"Oh. Okay." With no threat or danger or emergency imminent, Clint closes his eyes again.

Toni pokes his cheek gently, until he grumbles and burrows into the crook of her neck to escape her finger. "Was that a yes?" she asks.

"Yes," he mutters. "Now go back to sleep, dumbass. Some of us have to get up in the morning to finish the nursery."
Toni wakes to sunlight streaming through the window and warmth surrounding her. She opens her eyes to find herself tucked securely against Clint’s body, nose nudged up against the hinge of his jaw. She closes her eyes again, makes a pleased noise, and burrows further in.

His hand drifts up her bare back, broad and warm, buries itself in the hair at the back of her neck and she purrs, arches like a cat, and opens her eyes again. He watches her, and it’s way too early to parse all the various emotions and reactions flickering through his eyes. “Morning, Toni,” he says, cautious and careful.

She smiles, stretches lazily, snarls faintly as a muscle on the side of her swollen stomach twitches unpleasantly. “Morning, Clint,” she says, pressing a hand into her side and tilts her head up to kiss him, slow and easy. She takes her time with it, because just awake or not, morning breath or not, she’s alert enough to understand that his hesitancy probably means he’s no longer sure last night had meant what she said it did.

Eventually, the tension shudders out of his shoulders and back. He sighs faintly through his nose, pulls her in more snugly and kisses her properly until she’s panting and eager. She nudges him onto his back, straddles his lap and reaches down to guide him into her.

“God, you’re insatiable,” he groans, and his hands flex on her hips, holding her steady through the thrust and roll of lazy, unhurried morning lovemaking.

“My husband’s great in bed,” she purrs, breathless and satisfied. “What’s a girl to do?”

Afterward, snuggling in the afterglow in warm blankets, she props her chin on her hand and traces the lines of his collarbone and chest with the other. “Dumbass,” she says, quiet and affectionate. “I told you last night.”

“I know,” he says, splays one hand across her back and the other gently across her belly. “Just a little hard to believe, is all. I've wanted this, you, for a long time.” He closes his eyes and smiles. “I’ll get there.”

“You better,” she says, and nestles into him, pushing past the shielding of Thor’s amulet and stretching with her senses to connect to the tower’s network. “Cos I’m emailing Pepper to let her know there’s a wedding in need of planning and organization. If she murders me for nothing, you’re going to feel really silly.”

oOoOoOo

Eventually, they have to get out of bed, because despite their best efforts, the world still requires their participation in Avengers, SI and SHIELD related business. They share a shower, but don’t linger
too long, not the least because Toni’s advanced pregnancy prevents the more acrobatic positions sex in the shower stall requires.

Pepper’s already replied to Toni’s brief Hey, we’re getting married again. Just FYI email with a long response laden with expletives and service provider lists. Toni smiles as Clint blow-dries her hair for her, flicking the holo-display in the vanity mirror through the Yelp pages of the various caterers, musicians, decorators and florists Pepper’s compiled.

Hunger drives them out into the common area for food, Clint’s arm slung around Toni’s shoulders and her arm snug around his waist. The other Avengers are already there, in various stages of breakfast. Natasha and Bruce are seated at the table, Bruce with a fruit and yogurt concoction that has Toni’s mouth watering, Natasha with a frightening amount of bacon and eggs piled on top of toast. Steve’s at the stove, flipping pancakes with a practiced hand, and he smiles broadly when they make an appearance.

“Wondered when you two would decide to join us,” he says, turns a perfect golden-brown pancake onto a plate and pours more batter onto the cast-iron pan. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“Coffee,” Toni says immediately. “And whatever Bruce is having. Looks divine. Oh, don’t look at me with your Captain America Disapproves face, Steve. I’m allowed to have one cup of real, miraculous coffee per day, as long as I’m sleeping properly.”

“Key words there,” Bruce murmurs, “is sleeping and properly.”

Clint kisses her on the temple. “Go sit down, sweetheart, and I’ll get your coffee for you.”

“At least someone loves me,” she says, and attempts to wither Bruce on the spot with her glare. “I can promise you I slept very well last night, Banner. I didn’t have much choice after Clint fucked me into exhaustion.”

Bruce splutters and chokes on his yogurt, and Toni turns back into the table, pleased and smug. Natasha eyes her with a single brow arched, face otherwise unreadable. “What?”

A tiny smile plays around Natasha’s lips, and she drops her eyes back to her plate. “About time the two of you pulled your heads out of your asses,” she says frankly. “I’d been wondering how long it would take.”

“No betting pool?” Toni asks snidely, and takes the cup of coffee Clint brings her like she’s receiving a Faberge egg. She breathes the aromatic steam in deeply, shudders out a sigh, smiles at Clint as he sits with his own cup across the table, and his foot brushes against hers. “Oh, I can’t wait until I can have as much coffee as I want again.”

“No betting pool,” Natasha says, spooning eggs into her mouth. “Mostly because I didn’t know if Pepper would try to take over or cut me out of the profits.” She chews thoughtfully for a moment, digs into the bacon this time. “How long do you have left?”

“A couple of months,” Toni says, and frowns at Steve as he puts a plate with a modest helping of eggs and bacon and pancakes in front of her, then beams up at him when he adds a small bowl of fruit salad. “Thanks, Cap,” she says, and snatches the fork off the plate to spear a piece of fresh honeydew melon. “Bruce’d know better’n me,” she says around the melon. “He’s the doctor here.”

“But Toni’s right. Ten or so weeks. First pregnancy, though, so any time after thirty four, thirty six weeks is possible.”
“I said not long,” she says mildly, and spears more fruit.

“What do you plan on doing if the Avengers are called?” Steve says, moving out from the island counter to sit at the table.

Toni stops chewing and, across the table, Clint goes still. Yet another topic they've successfully avoided talking about, she realizes belatedly, and swallows the lump of melon like it's ashes. “I suppose I’ll have to give up being Iron Man,” she says, even though it’s the last thing she wants to admit. “Doubt I could fit in the suit right now anyway, and it’s too risky to the baby.”

Unexpectedly, Natasha slides her hand across the table to cover Toni’s and squeezes lightly. “Look at you, adulting like a champ.”

Grateful for the support and horrified to find that she’s near tears, fuck these pregnancy hormones anyway, Toni squeezes back, and clears her throat. “If you need me in the meantime, I can get Rhodey to tag in for awhile. He stole the suit from me, he can damn well put it to good use for a change.”

I have prior arrangements with Colonel Rhodes, mum, JARVIS says, as unexpectedly as Natasha’s gesture of warmth and solidarity. He is prepared to take over as Iron Man, and has been for some time.

“These apparently,” she continues, with a baleful look at the ceiling. “has already been arranged. Sneaky, kid.”

“Only trying to lessen the burden, mum,” JARVIS says mildly. “You have so much to do, I thought I would take care of this for you.”

She sighs, lays a hand on her stomach as the kid starts their morning backflips. “Not long at all,” she mutters, and finishes her coffee, though it sours the second it hits her tongue and churns in a suddenly anxious stomach.

oOoOoOo

Pepper pulls all the stops, running herself into blissful frenzy to ensure Toni has the best of everything for her big day, and she wields invitations like a veteran surgeon, limiting them to just over two hundred and picking and choosing who pleases her best.

Toni tells her they should make a movie about the political and media infighting that’s erupted in the wake of Pepper’s announcement. Pepper replies loftily that they did, and it was called The Hunger Games.

Reduced to sitting in a comfortable chair as a spectator to her own wedding preparations, Toni can't really see how Pepper's wrong. Still, she says, “You know it’s not actually a marriage, right? We’re already married.”

Pepper withers her with a searing look of unamusement. “As far as the world is concerned, Toni,” she says, plucking the cup of coffee out of Toni’s hands and sniffing it suspiciously. “This is your wedding.”

“It’s decaf,” Toni says mildly and takes the cup back. “I already had my one allowed cup of miracle potion with breakfast. Remind me why I care about what the world thinks?”

“Because somewhere down in the most shriveled corner of your soul where you pack all your feelings, you care about what our stock is doing.”
She arches an eyebrow and drains her coffee. “And?”

Pepper’s grin is sudden and broad. “Way, way up.”

“The things I do for Stark Industries,” Toni grumbles good-naturedly, leaning back in her chair. “I suppose the board thinks that my sudden turn into domesticity means they think they’ll get away with their usual old boys club shit again.”

“No doubt,” Pepper says with equanimity, then hands Toni her tablet. “Thought about your dress. Tell me what you think.”

Toni arches an eyebrow, then flips through the slideshow Pepper loaded up for her. Toni has seen plenty of professional fashion sketches from plenty of industry pros, but once again, Pepper’s hobbyist sketches catch her attention in a way the others never did. Probably, she thinks as she enlarges one design, because Pepper is playing to my ego. The dress is designed with her pregnancy in mind, cut to flatter what will no doubt be her very round figure by the time they can pull the ceremony together, without trying to hide it. Pepper’s got it colored in reds and golds in the same pattern as the Mark VI, with a circular window meant to display the arc reactor.

“Remind me again why you’re not dominating the fashion world?” Toni signs her approval on the design with the largest scrawl she can manage on the screen and hands the tablet back.

“Because one primadonna is more than enough,” Pepper replies, and taps the screen. “And off to Celeste it goes. There. One thing down.” She sighs and scrubs her face briskly. “Eight hundred to go.”

Toni arches an eyebrow. “I can always do things too, you know. Shouldn’t I have some say in what happens?”

“Absolutely not!” Pepper’s glare is exasperated, scathing and scandalized. “Who knows what we’ll end up with if you start mucking about?”

“I am not a disaster, Pep,” she says, miffed, then promptly drops her cup of coffee as she tries to shift into a more comfortable position with the cup in her hand. “Goddammit! That is not the universe proving me wrong!”

“Of course it isn’t, Toni,” Pepper says sympathetically, and reaches out to move her own cup out of Toni’s reach. “Now, about your catering choices…”

**oOoOoOo**

“I think it’s working,” says Bruce, squinting up at the massive lightning rod under the shield of a hand shading his eyes. “Nothing is on fire or exploding, anyway.”

“You say that like you’re disappointed,” Toni replies lightly, running the cables through her fingers from the comfort of her chaise to check for breaks and frays. She’d prefer to do this on her feet, but a combination of chronic lack of balance and an overprotective Hulk underlying Bruce’s voice convinced her she was better off on her ass. “This is an interdimensional communicator, Bruciebear. It being on fire would probably mean Very Bad Things are about to happen.”

Bruce glances over at her, throws a soft grin. “It just doesn’t feel like we’re inventing real science if there’s nothing blowing up.”

Toni eyes him, arches an eyebrow, drops the last coil of cable and struggles to her feet. She pretends she doesn’t feel a flash of gratitude when Bruce hurries to offer her a hand, and groans when she can
straighten her spine again. “Is this what we’ve come to?” she says, mostly rhetorically. “Dr. Bannyll wants things to explode, and Dr. Starkenstein cautions safety first. Who are we even becoming?”

“I figure it’s a cosmic balance.” Bruce keeps his hand on the small of her back long enough to ensure she’s steady, and then drops it back to his side. “My paranoia and your recklessness usually balance each other out, so if you shift one way, I have to go the other.”

“It’s too early for metaphysics,” she grumbles, bracing herself against the flutter and thump of the kid waking up. “Oof. Junior’s got a mean side kick. I wonder if I should waitlist them for a soccer league.”

Bruce’s hand settles on the small of her back again, friendly and deferential, and his thumb digs lightly into the spot that’s always knotted, easing the tension a little. “I think Natasha’s already called dibs on teaching them how to take a man down with their eyelashes,” he says with a smile. “And Steve will be very disappointed if anyone but him is allowed to teach the kid team sports.”

It’s the hormones, Toni thinks, because when her housemates talk about the baby and make plans for the future, she always chokes up, weepy and blubbering. “I feel like I’m having this baby for everyone,” she grumbles, to hide the lump in the back of her throat and the hot prick of tears in her eyes. Hormones. It’s the fucking hormones.

“Oh, didn’t you get that memo?” Bruce laughs and ducks the swat she sends his way. “I think that’s everything checked and rechecked. Are you ready to try sending a message to Asgard?”

Toni eyes the entire array with an arched eyebrow, following the lines of thick cables and delicate vibranium-steel latticework now fencing the lightning rod in on the roof. “No,” she mutters, swallowing a sudden knot of trepidation that swells in her throat. But she dries her clammy hands against the front of her hoodie and steps onto the disc-like platform she and Bruce developed to let her technopathy interface with the transmitter.

Bruce steps into the control booth they rigged together and starts flipping switches, and Toni jolts as the power surges beneath her feet, the current vibrating gently against her skin. It takes her a few minutes to squash the urge to laugh, because it tickles. The sensation grows to a practically unbearable level, until she’s squirming at the buzz and hum, because now it’s starting to hurt.

“Toni?” Bruce says, sticking his head out of the booth and eyeing her with worry. “Everything okay?”

“Fine!” she gasps through a throat that feels like it’s being squeezed by a fist, and claws at the chains around her neck. It’s instinct, half-aware, trying to get at whatever’s choking her, and just as Bruce is rushing across the roof, she assumes to tackle her off the platform, she hauls both her amulet and Phil’s wedding rings over her head and pitches them to the side.

The jangling buzz dies into a soft blue hum that washes over her from toes to eyes, and suddenly, she’s elsewhere.

There are stars overhead, cold, golden floor beneath her feet, and lots of things that look like fascinatingly alien technology on the far walls of the circular room, but none of that is important right now, because the entirety of her attention is taken up by staring at the very tall, very intimidating man in golden armor with a really, really big sword standing right in front of her.

oOoOoOo

She tilts her face towards him, closes her eyes, smiling dreamily as he strokes across her cheeks and
foreheads with the tips of his fingers, and he takes the time to relish the way she responds to him. He moves down from her face, crossing her shoulders with the bare tips of his fingers, just a hint of nail, and presses down with his palms over her biceps, wringing another soft groan from her. He knows her body well, loves how soft and pliant she goes when he massages down her arms, and traces the lines of her veins with his fingers before trailing back up.

She whines when he avoids her breasts in favor of stroking and smoothing her ribs and throat, and for some reason, the light has turned soft and blue.

“Patience,” he says, smooth and amused, and palms her hip, tracing the hollow of her hipbone with a thumb. It never fails to humble him, how deeply she trusts him, how willing she is to put herself completely in his hands, how much she must love him to trust him this much.

He stands, tells her to be quiet in a firm, crisp tone that makes her shudder and writhe. “No more words,” he says, and her skin is slick and glistening, her moans soft and fervent in his ears, and when he finally slides into her, he knows he’s home.

Phil jolts awake, blinking in the dark of his suite for a long few moments before sitting carefully upright. His fingers still tingle from the feel of the woman’s skin under them, and the scent of vanilla tickles his nose. It’s longer before he allows those hands to come up, his head to sink into his palms.

Just a dream, he tells himself, but it’s becoming harder to convince himself the black haired woman, so vivid, so familiar, who tumbles through his dreams in sunlight and candlelight, smiling and warm and happy in his arms, across his desk, framed against a glow blue above him is nothing more than a fantasy of his sleeping mind.

But Phil’s pragmatic, right down at the core of his soul. The doctors have explained things in medical terms, something about oxygen deprivation and nearly dying on the table while they repaired his heart, and a host of other things he frankly doesn’t understand but is impressed by the sound of.

Eventually, he stands, goes through his morning routine. Today’s the day the last of his team comes together. Today, with full doctor’s clearance, he gets back to work. It’s time for the business of saving the world which, no matter how tongue-in-cheek the internet makes the phrase, is always serious business.

But, he allows a few minutes later, lurking in an alcove with a burnt-out bulb as Agent Ward walks into the meeting room, not so serious he can’t have a bit of fun along the way.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Things got away from me again, and I'm not sure I'm thrilled with what I wrote, but I've made you wait long enough and I've waited long enough to finish and post it, so here you are. Finally, at long last, no more cliffhanger.

Clint's going to kill me.

It’s the first thought that goes through Toni’s head as she stares mutely up at the giant in golden armor before her. She hasn’t met many people that can make her feel small and unimportant, but this guy is definitely one of them, and she knows without a doubt that if he decides he doesn’t like her intrusion to wherever the hell she is, there isn’t going to be a damned thing she can do to keep him from using that ridiculously beautiful bastard sword he’s holding between his hands.

Thankfully, he doesn’t seem inclined to immediate hostility, doesn’t take a step in her direction or make a threatening gesture. He has one of the best poker faces Toni’s ever seen, way better than Natasha’s resting death face, but Toni thinks he’s both surprised and amused to find her before him. “Long has it been,” he says in lieu of greeting or challenge, “since a Midgardian has set foot upon the Bifrost of their own agency. I am unsurprised, however, that it is you who accomplished it, Lady Stark.”

Despite everything, Toni relaxes the moment the word Midgardian comes out of his mouth. She knows not everything or everyone from Asgard is safe or friendly - her experiences with Loki taught her that lesson very well, if nothing else - but there’s something in his tone, a hint of amusement maybe, that reassures her she’s in no immediate danger. “Well,” she says, as she unbunches from the protective hunch she assumed over the swell of her stomach, rubbing absently at a strained muscle in her side, “I’m not sure if I should be worried or impressed that my reputation precedes me into the Nine Realms. My Norse mythology’s a little rusty, but if this is Bifrost and if I remember Thor’s bellowings correctly, you’re…”

“Heimdall,” he says, and yeah, that’s definitely a tiny hint of a smile, even if he doesn’t want to let on he’s expressing it. “Watcher of the Bifrost and Gatekeeper of the Realms. And you are Lady Toni, my prince’s shield-sister. I welcome you to Asgard.”

With no immediate threat and no immediate crisis, Toni’s mind is abruptly free to start turning over thoughts she’d rather not think about at all, let alone right now, and her first instinct is to reach for her trademark snark. “Thor goes on and on about how this place is grand and majestic,” she says before she can stop her mouth from running ahead of her, “but it just looks like a big round room to me.”

Belatedly, it occurs to her that insulting the guy in charge of keeping people out of Asgard might not have been the smartest move, but once again, her nigh-supernatural luck must be working full throttle, because Heimdall just eyes her with the corner of his mouth ever-so-slightly turned up. “The Odinson has been known to exaggerate from time to time,” he says mildly. “It is a common affliction of youthful enthusiasm, in my experience.”

Toni can’t help but snort. “He really is a giant space poodle, isn’t he?” she says fondly, then winces as junior gives her a sharp kick in the kidneys, as if defending their … shield-uncle? Would that be...
the proper term? “Alright, kid, no more picking on Uncle Thor,” she grumbles under her breath, presses the heel of her hand into her side to encourage them to settle down while she tries very hard not to consider what this impromptu voyage to another dimension might be doing to her baby.

“You are not actually here, Lady Stark,” Heimdall says suddenly, and she blinks back at him in surprise. This time, there’s no doubt that he’s smiling, and in an oddly paternalistic fashion that should remind her of Howard, but instead reminds her of Edwin Jarvis. “I see many things,” he continues, still smiling, “but it does not require my powers of observation to notice a mother’s fears for her children in a new and unexpected place.”

Toni squints at him for a moment, as she tries to decide what in that statement she should tackle first. If she should tackle anything. She makes a note that, when she’s undoubtedly interviewed in the upcoming weeks leading to her wedding, if she’s asked what the biggest pain in her ass is, she’s going to say *Asgardian invitations* and leave it at that. “Anyone ever tell you that's incredibly fucking creepy?”

“Countless times,” Heimdall replies. “And doubtless countless more in the future. May I contact the Odinson and inform him of your arrival?”

As fun as this conversation with Heimdall is, a familiar face is an attractive proposition at the moment. “By all means,” Toni says, “and then maybe you can explain to me what you meant when you said I’m not really here.”

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For all that they’ve spent relatively little time together, Toni can practically feel herself physically moving away from the edge of panic the minute she hears Thor call her name, loud and happy. She turns to see him bounding across the bridge with agility and ease of motion she frankly hates him for having at the moment, but welcomes the very necessary distraction from the words “accidental psychic projection” that keep bouncing around in her head.

When she gets back, assuming she doesn’t end up in another one of the Nine Realms along the way, she needs to have a serious conversation with Bruce about finally figuring out exactly what the fuck Extremis did to her.

“Shield-sister!” Thor cries with a broad, wide grin as he hurries into the room with only a cursory nod of greeting for Heimdall. There’s nothing but pleased surprise and genuine joy on his face, in his eyes, and an anxious tension that she’s carried for longer than she can remember abruptly relaxes, spins her head with the urge to cry the ugly tears that mean a real, rooted emotion she usually tries to avoid expressing.

She swallows down the lump in her throat and pretends her vision isn’t shimmery around the edges. “Hey Thunderama,” she calls back with a grin of her own, shaky with the surge of adrenaline and effervescent relief bubbling through her head. “Miss me?”

“Indeed I have!” he replies, halting in front of her with a deep, contented sigh and his eyes bright and dancing. For a moment, she thinks he might try to bear-hug her, despite her not-quite-corporeal presence, because he throws his arms wide in open welcome. But his hands just come to hover around where her shoulders should be before dropping away to frame the air around her belly. “Ahh! Look at you! Fair fit to burst! Surely it has not been long enough since last we met that you are nearer your time than not?”

“I’m afraid it has,” Toni says and rests a hand on the top of her stomach, grimacing as Junior takes that as their cue to start their kicking routine right into her kidneys. “And you should feel terribly
“ashamed,” she adds with a mock-chastising smirk, “because what kind of a godfather are you gonna be if you’re in another dimension doing Crown Princely shit when they’re ready to meet you?”

“The perils of sharing bonds of friendship and warriorhood with an Asgardian Prince, Lady Stark,” Thor says gravely, ruined completely by the grin that keeps breaking through his attempts at seriousness. “You might have taken that into consideration prior to forming them.”

“Sure,” Toni says with a laugh, reaches up to tuck her hair behind her ear, and briefly has a brain spasm as she wonders if her imaginary hand is going to pass through her imaginary head, or if her body, presumably back on the roof of Stark Tower, is making the gesture and the projection she’s inhabiting is mirroring it. “It’s all my fault for having the temerity to offer you a hairbrush so you didn’t look so fucking sad for the cell phone cameras recording our fight with the Chitauri.”

Thor gives up the pretense of seriousness and grins widely at her. “Honestly, tis good to see you again, Toni. Asgard seems somewhat boring in comparison to my all-too-brief stay in your palace.”

“Just cos it looks like a skyscraper don’t mean it isn’t a goddamn castle,” Toni agrees cheerfully, and wincses as the baby surges beneath her fingers, almost impatiently, like they’re trying to remind her she’s on a clock here. “Oof, this kid’s got a mean temper already,” she grumbles, and rubs the spot Junior’s shoving their head in apology. “But they’re right. Time’s growing short and I’ve got a million things to do. So. Onto the reason I ended up here.”

“Ah,” Thor says, and his hand goes out towards her stomach, fingertips brushing the air just in front of her. “I shall put forth full effort to clearing my affairs here in Asgard, so I may return ere your child is born, shield-sister, now reminded how close your time is. This I promise you.”

Toni’s eyes blur and she blinks away the tears, ignoring the few that fall onto her cheeks. “Thank you,” she says warmly, “but I’m actually here to invite you to my wedding.”

Thor’s face undergoes a comical shift from touched and protective to confused and contemplative, and Toni does her best not to snicker, only partially succeeds. “I do not understand,” Thor says after a moment, and his head tilts to the side as he eyes her speculatively. “Have you not already wed the hawk, sister?”

“Technically.” Toni shrugs with a wry smile. “Apparently, it doesn’t make it official in the eyes of the media and the world at large if you do it in secret and private. Most couples don’t renew their vows until some kind of an anniversary of their wedding, but we actually kind of figured out we were in love with each other just last week, so we’re planning on doing it again, properly, with friends and family and a couple hundred paparazzi hanging around and…” Toni takes a deep, deep breath and lets it out in a long, audible huff, ends it with a smile. “I am here to formally invite you, and a guest, to attend the official public wedding of Clinton Francis Barton and Natasha Antonia Stark-Barton, obviously as close family with the whole shield-sibling stuff.”

Thor doesn’t look the slightest bit embarrassed at the tears splashing from his eyes onto his cheeks as he beams affectionately at her. “Jormungandr himself will not prevent me from attending your wedding, sister,” he says, puts a hand over his heart, and bows his head to her. “Not even were Asgard itself falling to ash and dust around me will I fail in this.”

“Jesus Christ,” she says, when she can speak again, ridiculously touched and incredibly horrified at what chaos he’s just invited to her special day. “Remind me to teach you about Murphy and why you never, ever taunt the bitch with notions of what can go wrong. If a giant snake wraps itself around my tower, I’m gonna tell Pepper it’s all your fault.”

“And I will tremble in appropriate fear,” Thor replies, unabashed, “should I survive the lesser serpent
of the two evils.”

She’s still not sure what she’s doing, but between Thor and Heimdall’s patient instruction, Toni manages to find herself back on the platform on top of Stark Tower, exactly where she had been standing before the energy swept her away. “Ow,” she groans, wincing and settling both hands into the aching small of her back. “That sucked just a little more than it was awesome.”

“Toni?!” She looks over her shoulder in time to see Bruce hurrying out from behind the lightning spire, relief and anxiety stark and plain across his pale face. She starts to smile at him, but jumps a little as Bruce disappears mid step and the Hulk is abruptly moving towards her.

“Hey, big guy,” is all she manages to get out before he lunges at her fast enough to make her flinch backwards, and before she can do more than blink twice, he’s scooped her up and has bounded to the dark corner just under the overhang beside the door that leads down into the Tower’s stairwells.

Dread chews at her stomach, a flare of panic surges through her, because the Hulk’s moving with urgency, has her gathered protectively against him, and is cradling her with his back exposed to attack under the awning, keeping her protected in the shelter of two walls and his body. “What is it? What’s happening, big guy?”

Hulk says nothing, just huffs loudly and hunches further around her, until she’s cocooned by warm green skin, and Toni fights the urge to kick and flail her way out of his touchingly protective but just a bit too tight hold on her. “Need to breathe, Big Green,” she says, a trifle breathless, and pats him on the arm until he loosens enough for her to get her head out from under his forearms. It isn’t until she’s got her hair tossed away from her eyes and her breath caught that she gets a good look at the Hulk, and sees the fear and misery and nigh-panic carved into his scowl.

“Oh.” She blinks rapidly, reassesses, reprocesses the facts.


She bites her lip, feels that swell of damnedable gooey emotions swirling around in her throat and rising to burn through her sinuses. “I’m fine, Big Guy,” she says lightly, lays a hand on his arm, nearly jerks it back in shock as she realizes it’s trembling, light and fine. “I’m okay. And the kiddos are okay too. I promise.”

Hulk’s scowl deepens and he huffs darkly. “No more Banner,” he says angrily. “Banner made Toni go away. Hulk keep Toni safe from Banner. Toni not okay until Banner gone for good.”

“It’s not Bruce’s fault, Jolly Green.” Toni pats him on the arm again, gentle and soothing, and tries not to think about how badly her thigh is gonna be cramping in a minute if he doesn’t let her up enough to shift her legs more comfortably. “It’s not anyone’s fault, really. Well. It’s probably mine, if it’s anyone’s. Bruce would n’t hurt me, Hulk. Honestly, you should be more concerned with what Natasha and Clint are gonna do to me when they find out I went on a trip to Asgard. They’re gonna skin me alive.”

The panic that wells up is absolutely a hundred percent warranted this time, because just as Toni hears the words that came out of her mouth, the Hulk’s face goes absolutely furious and resolute. She’s already waving her free hand at him, trying desperately to wave him off before he stands abruptly, tucks her securely under his arm and gently pats her belly with one huge finger as he states, “Hawk-guy and Spider-Lady not skin Toni,” he growls, and gathers himself for a leap. “Hulk keep
Toni safe from *everyone*. Hulk strongest there is!"

The tower goes sailing away behind them, and all Toni can do is sigh glumly and rest her chin against the Hulk’s shoulder in resignation as the glass panes and sleek lines of her crown jewel of properties disappears behind the other skyscrapers and high-rises. "Toni’s gotten kidnapped," she says, half amused and half hopeless. "Must be Sunday."

Sooner or later, the Hulk will calm down, go back to sleep, and Bruce will get to be very apologetic and embarrassed. The fact that she gets to mock him relentlessly for it is the only silver lining she can see. In two hours, she’s managed to prance her way across dimensional barriers into Asgard, and also get herself kidnapped by an overprotective rage monster who might just have replaced her as the textbook definition of “bad impulse decisions”.

There’s gonna be a line waiting to kill her ass dead when she manages to get back. Hopefully, they’ll kill Bruce first, so she can at least get a sandwich or something. Traveling the Nine Realms is fucking hungry work, and she’d hate to face Steve’s very effective Disappointed Sad Eyes with an empty stomach.

End Notes

Find me on Tumblr.

ETA: Kudos to Bragi151, who hashes shit out with me at half past ass o’clock in the morning. <3

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