"What if you wake up one day as a six-year old and find out that this was all a {dream}?" - Tony, ft Natasha and basically everyone and Harley Keener.

You awake with a pounding in your head, like you passed out the night before after so much alcohol that your memories are fuzzy. But there’s something wrong – you feel smaller, and still
somehow too small for your skin. Except your head, oh not your head. It feels like your brain is about to burst, and the pounding is actually a sound, because your head.

“-Anthony, open this door!” A voice breaks through the veritable wall surrounding all your capacities. You take a breath suddenly, and choke at the same time, as your lungs are burning and your tongue is tiny and wiggling and you hate it and you try to bring your hands up, but all you do is slap yourself in the face.

Oh, you despair, oh no. Because this is like before you got it under control, before you were able to control your urges to fling your arms about and wave them like a stereotypical, nonsensical, unaware baby. But your arms still flap about, and you try to breathe and fail, and your door is slammed open, and there are large, loud footsteps and a hot, too-tight grip on your wrist, and then your other wrist, and nonsensical words fall out of your mouth, and the person rears back and growls.

“Anthony Stark, stop this at once – you are better than this, boy! You are better than this!” The words make sense and you start to cry, trying to reach your hands to wrap around the man’s neck – familiar, scary, anger, safe, safe, not safe, home – but failing as he keeps you steady, not letting you move. “Anthony-”

You keep crying, your mind shouting and not understanding. Nothing is making sense! The man in front of you is dead but he’s alive. Howard Stark is alive, and you are too small.

Howard Stark is alive, and you are too small.

“Ana, Ana, Ana, Ana…” you repeat slowly over and over, trying to curve the name over your tongue over and over, trying to get some dexterity. Your development is stunted, in a way, because the words don’t come out right – they never did, you can remember, until a year before you went to MIT, and so many speech therapy sessions, a birthday present from Obadiah. But you are six again, and nothing is right, nothing is the same.

People are not dead, and people are too young. Some people aren’t even alive yet. It is the summer of nineteen seventy-six. Peter Parker won’t be born for another twenty-something years. Even Wanda – and Pietro – won’t be alive for another thirteen and a bit years. You don’t even know if Vision will exist, if all of this is true – if you really have come back into the past and it isn’t some elaborate hallucination. You don’t even know if Vision will exist – if JARVIS is going to exist.

You can’t exactly create JARVIS again, not now, not ever. You don’t have his template, or his memory banks, or the technology. Hell, the real Jarvis isn’t even dead yet. Or his wife.

Above you, Ana herself smiles softly, stroking your head, fingers carding through your lush brown hair. Her own – red, light auburn – is dry and curled at the ends, brushing down over your cheek. It is irritating, but it keeps you in the here and now, not letting you slip off into your own head.

“Young, gyönyörű kisfiú, what happens in your mind? What are you thinking of?” She whispers, still smiling. You lift your hand, taking her other one and curling into her lap, dreading the moment you have to leave – that she has to leave. “Is this a talking day?” You don’t answer, and she just hums, before singing something. Her voice is quiet, and off-key at some parts, and you have the urge to teach her Stairway to Heaven, just to hear her sing it.

She probably knows it, due to Edwin’s wide and varied taste in music that he pretends is Howard’s.

You try to form the words on your tongue, making the repeated Ana jumble, as you can’t quite stop
the command to the respective body-parts. Ana continues to sing, becoming even quieter in her words as you try to speak, hating how everything was so slow and bad and nonsensical. You absolutely hate that word.

Eventually, you manage a mangled *Heaven Zeppelin* and Ana understands, laugh light and honest and real as she nods and says “Of course”, before beginning the starting lines. Her voice is stronger, as she sings it, and you can tell she’s sung it a thousand times. For all you know, she’s been to a concert.

It occurs to you before the end of the first verse that, for all you love your *anya*, your second mother, you don’t know much about her at all, and the cancer that will take her next Tuesday will ensure you never will.

You create a lot of things that Howard will be able to do absolutely nothing with, only showing your prowess within the confines of this age’s technology. The one time you create something far-off in terms of technology, Howard states, uncomprehendingly at the water filter in front of him. You reach for a pen and slowly write out in big, shaky capitals that rip the paper in places, *AFRICA WA*. You can’t remember if Water Aid exists yet, so maybe Howard might have just thought you couldn’t write the rest of ‘water’ out, as you get your juice-box and put some workshop dust into the nozzle, then wash them both down through the processor, which is then filtered into pure water and dripped into a dish, the juice concentrate and rust into another, explaining without words what it does.

And Howard understands, and it’s amazing and unbelievable how he picks you up and twirls you around, spouting that you are a genius and you make him *so proud* and it’s your body’s fault, and that he’s going to hire the best people to help you get control over it all for when you aren’t hyperfocusing. And he does. And you cry a lot, and have more episodes, but you smile and grip him tightly and your therapists explain to your worried, confused father that you’re just happy.

But the one time you hug your mother causes her to scream and jerk and Howard tears you away as she shrieks and cries, and you wouldn’t see your mother for another six and a half years, when you’re being awarded your PhD Doctorate in Space Science. But unlike the last time around, seeing it as abandonment – because somehow, for a reason you can’t remember, you hugged her back when you were a real six year old – Howard explains and you understand, you understand. Your mother is like you, and she cannot stand touch. You hugged her and the bond you’d shared before you turned three and you drifted hadn’t been strong enough anymore, and your mother is scared and freaked out, and for those next six and a half years she would live in Italy with your grandmother, alone except for a single maid.

You send her letters, and she sends letters, and it’s okay. You’re guilty, and you won’t stop being guilty, but it’s okay.

Howard pays you more attention, which has so many positive effects. But a negative effect it does has? Obadiah pays you more attention, too. And it is too early in your new lifetime when he finally asks you kindly, and nicely, in a way that dazzled and gained your trust in your last lifetime, to draw up plans for missiles. Instead of doing as he says, you throw a pen in his face and get a slap to the face, and Howard doesn’t understand you as you lose your competence in speech as you panic, trying to explain what Obadiah was asking you – though it calms you to know that Obadiah won’t be allowed alone with you if he was going to slap you.

Unluckily, it doesn’t last very long, as your father gets annoyed with Apple for appearing out of nowhere and lowering SI sales, and he goes out more often to work, leaving you behind with your ‘trusted family friend’, Jarvis having died a month earlier. You wonder what would have happened...
if Obadiah had been kicked out of the country along with Vanko senior. Nothing good, you suppose.

The years pass, and you gain more confidence in controlling your body, and your speech. When you take the online college courses, it doesn’t take as long, and your work only has to be proofread once or twice, rather than fifty-million times due to your inadequate writing. When you go to MIT, you are younger, and rather than living in a dorm, Howard moves closer to where you’d be going to school and has Jarvis accompany you everywhere, a constant supervisor, bodyguard and driver.

You meet Rhodey early, and he is curious about the kid who likes to follow him around between the classes they share, but ultimately, your bond is never going to be the same as it was in the original timeline. Your lesson is learnt, and you discard any and all plans to meet anyone else early. Except Pepper. Pepper, you were going to pay through college, and hopefully – oh, hopefully – scoop her up and give her everything she might dream.

Whether you’d ever physically interact her before you turned twenty-three was debatable – and on the ‘no’ side of debatable – but you couldn’t even convince yourself you could resist temptation after your original meeting’s original date and time, if it didn’t pass the same way. You knew it wouldn’t, if all your plans went as they should.

After you graduate from MIT – finally, after so many years, with so many Masteries and PhD’s done out of boredom, and professors who ruffled your hair and or rolled their eyes – you start as an intern in the SI Engineering Department. You are appalled at how badly they get on with technicians, and within a month switch to said profession, to your father’s sighs. Engineering hates you, even as you switch department every couple of weeks, then every couple of days, and then every few hours, just being an annoying little twit as you bring two warring SI groups to a sort of peace.

Howard’s proud of you. It is the only reason he takes your words into account when you tell him that the Winter Soldier is going to assassinate him if he takes the less-populated route to the airport with your mother, who has only just returned from Italy to live with you both.

He still dies.

But SWORD – an independent branch of SHIELD – get custody of James Buchanan Barnes.

You call it a win even as you yourself fall into the custody of Obadiah.

Escaping your reality is fun when you make it fun. You escape your reality by running off every couple of weeks to Tennessee to have sex with a beautiful woman over a…lot of years. Almost ten. What is not escaping your reality is creating realities with said sexy lady in the form of a child.

You really, really wonder if Harley Keener from your original timeline had the same father as he does now, because damn, if he had? That was one hell of a way to meet your dad.

Harley Jean-Paul Stark is born on the sixth of August, two thousand and one. No-one knows. For a while. Then someone finds his birth certificate, and you fund Millie’s move to Iowa, and create an identity for her from scratch with the help of JANA, the AI you’d created to fill the space that was JARVIS and FRIDAY, before you decided to create them both after all, but as minor entities, still with just as much power as before – though there was a hierarchy between all the AI’s you make, and it is safe to say that JANA is always at the top. Millie-Anne Keener becomes Matilde Kenier, and Harley gets to keep his name, though obviously in the eyes of everyone other that Matilde and you, he is a Kenier.
It burns to only see him in person on the holidays, but you created SI-Hi early so you could video-call him before he goes to school and after he gets home – twice.

Obadiah unfortunately breathes down your neck, so said calls are short and to the point, though texts are easier – a private server an encryption through JANA ensures that they won’t be seen, though calls don’t have the same security that SI-Hi does. Obadiah wants weapons, and guns, and you give very little of those. You have to give some though – military contracts are renegotiated, not cancelled, because otherwise they’d go to Hammer, and Hammer’s stuff is shit. The military are a bit impatient too, but you give enough things to help their soldiers in the meantime that they aren’t rabid hounds out for blood during the times that you are silent, in regards to bombs and missiles and guns.

Obadiah is always looking for something new and something big. He says you should make a show of power. You tell him to fuck off, finally, after you publicly miniaturise the arc reactor in two thousand and eight, and use the Iron Man suit, Mark VII, to wipe out the Ten Rings. You don’t go to Afghanistan, and you don’t get captured, and you don’t get a magnet tucked messily into your chest to keep away life-ending shrapnel – you don’t even get an assassination of any sort, which sort of says something about Obadiah’s intentions, even as all his little terrorist buddies die.

You don’t call a press conference and tell them that the suit is you and you are the suit, and you don’t have any way to rid yourself of the tall, white leech by your side.

Opportunity comes when Ivan Vanko gets jealous of your miniaturised arc-reactor. Obadiah is all for recruiting the madman, trying to persuade you to make peace and hire him. You ‘agree’ to have talks with him, and as you sit beside Obadiah as he offers Vanko a place in SI rather than prosecuting him, a hulking mass that is the Iron Monger – a scrappy, obviously terrible version of the Iron Man, but without a pilot – flies through the window and ‘tries to kill you’.

It ‘misses’ and kills Obadiah instead.

And oh dear, some stray shots hit Vanko and the – very corrupt, very should-be-behind-bars – cop behind him.

The Iron Monger falls though, after they do, and you hack the records about the robot later, happy at the overviews stating exactly what you thought they’d put down. Your ‘assassination attempt’ is front page of the New York Times, and the wake you hold for ‘Uncle Obie’ is legendary. You don’t know if people realise you’re happy about his death rather than happy for the life he lived.

You find Steve in two thousand and nine, rather than let SHIELD get their Hydra-smeared hands over him, and send the coordinates of Camp Lehigh’s underground AI to Phil Coulson, Natasha Romanov, Clint Barton and Maria Hill. You hear that it is blown up before the week is out, and invite the four of them and Nick Fury – the last one extremely quietly, even more so than Natasha – to tea beside Steve’s defrosting body.

It goes as well as you expected, and afterwards, you go to see Harley and your newest progeny – a little girl called Madeline Clara Stark who adores Dora the Explorer – knowing from FRIDAY, who likes to inhabit Harley’s household security, that Natasha watches on with Clint, eating Doritos and orange jelly out of a jar.

Your science bro, Bruce…he’s a little harder to find. He’s still the Hulk, and he’s hiding out in Asia. You want to leave him be, but you also wants to give him a sort-of-new identity and give him
an R&D Candyland in the Red Tower – previously known, in the original timeline, as Stark Tower and later, Avengers Tower, and previously also built a few years later. You wanted it done earlier, because clean energy in this day and age is a must, and both proving it can happen and making it happen, right before world-changing disasters and attacks, would go a long way.

Besides, you want to get on Wakanda’s good side by proving the world can get up to speed with their technology, and perhaps even overcome it, if you work hard enough before you meet the infamous Black Panther again.

You decide to bring Bruce in though, and question Rhodey on the intricacies of the military over text, because you’ve forgotten over the last few decades – no way is what Ross doing actually legal, you find, even with all the special accommodations for his Hulk-ness. It’s with great pride you show Bruce a live feed from Rhodey’s phone of Ross being arrested, while convincing him to come back to the United States.

And just because you’re feeling extra-generous, you pay for an immediate sub at Culver for one Betty Ross, and get Pepper to use the private jet to bring her over – you’d borrowed a larger one, in case Bruce felt a little cramped on the way back over to New York. Their reunion causes you to beam, as you’ve never seen Bruce this happy before. You offer Betty a permanent position in SI so she could be with Bruce, if she wanted, open for as long as Bruce was with him, and she doesn’t take it – but does ask you if it could wait a couple of months.

Natasha shows up after the two have gone to bed three floors below, and presses a gun against your sternum.

“Why would you bring him to the city?”

“Because he won’t do anything other than Science into Oblivion and have sex with his girlfriend,” you answer in an unamused tone, reaching up to push away the gun. Natasha puts it away, before kissing you.

*Unexpected*, is your first thought, as her tongue slips into your mouth, and an unfamiliar taste coats your teeth.

*Understandable*, is your second, as your vision goes hazy and you fall unconscious.

When you wake, you are still in your Tower.

“Your AI wouldn’t let me out,” Natasha says boredly. “It’s nice to have my suspicions confirmed. What do you call it?”

“Them,” is your reply, before you reach up and drag down your hand through the air. In a wide circle around her, holograms appear, each holding the profile and picture of an AI. There are thirteen in total, though only five have physical forms to photograph. The others are codes in shapes and coloured differently. JANA is white, and JARVIS is orange. FRIDAY is a strange shade of almost-turquoise, still too blue for the word. The five other back-up AI’s, each set into a different type of Iron Man suit, are varying shades of red. “The one who spotted you at my son’s was FRIDAY – she looks after her brother the most, and my household things. JARVIS is more of a business AI. JANA is everything.”

Natasha doesn’t ask about the others, briefly focusing on the categories of the five AI’s that say whatever class of suit they control, not going into any more detail than that.

“Missiles?” She questions. You grimace.
“No. Why would you ask that? Stupid question. I don’t like war.”

“You’re a weapons merchant.”

“I am. Doesn’t mean I like war. If I left the market, the army would go to a stupider company, and I don’t want to injure America’s finest by not making guns that don’t explode in their hands.”

“I have one of your handguns. I know what you mean,” she takes it out of her holster, twirling it. You raise an eyebrow.

“I would have thought you’d like tasers better,” it’s a deliberate remark, and you know she knows you mean her Widows Bites.

“Not everything can be solved with electricity,” she replies, before sauntering over again, walking through the holograms. A machine gun drops down, but you wave JANA off, eyeing Natasha as she sits down on your lap. “What do you want with us?” She means her and Clint. You give a disarming smile.

“Ever heard of the Mad Titan, Thanos?”

You’re there when Thor first appears, working with Dr Foster and bemoaning her cobbled-together machines. Darcy Lewis is strangely absent, a different intern in place, and a peek into Culver U’s list of students shows she’d never attended – which prompts a larger investigation.

You realise with a start that you recognise her mother. It’s Harley all over again, and maybe-perhaps-you-don’t-know Madeline. Except this time, your kid hasn’t even been born.

Thor himself is a dick though. You’re actually disgusted by his attitude, and wonder when the hell he did a one eighty into Brave, Honourable and Noble. You leave halfway through his visit, returning to pay for the town repairs, and increasing revenue by building a heap of houses and a new SI factory a few clicks outside of the town border. You invite Jane to New York, too, and she visits for exactly two hours before flying out to Norway to investigate some ‘disturbances in electrical fields’. It’s all very vague and JANA probably knows, but you don’t exactly care. You might understand it if you knew what it was, but you can’t be bothered to investigate.

Steve wakes up dramatically, confused and upset. You have Harley and Maddie over while their mother is in hospital with really bad pneumonia, and they both help you and confuse the Captain even more as they show the war-hero their phones and tablets, asking the Captain if he can help them complete a level on Flappy Bird, “-because FRIDAY cheats!”

You, of course, give him a couple of history lessons, and instruct him on how to use the technology of the modern age, but Steve doesn’t know you – you aren’t friends yet. Hopefully, one day, you will be, but right now, you aren’t. You’re a stranger. A new AI by the name of MARIA gets built and installed into Steve’s phone, to be his guide and advisor. Pepper gets along with him surprisingly well.

You joke that his kink is women in power. He flushes bright red, and Pepper swipes at the back of your head.

Maddie asks what a kink is.

You are sufficiently punished. You make it up to him by calling up SWORD and having them reintroduce Steve to a reconditioned Winter Soldier.
Being given the tesseract…it’s not something you expected, but you’ve been good, responsible in this timeline. You didn’t cause any form of Midguardian Lokasenna or release half a dozen sex-tapes. You’ve been a businessman of high repute, known for your dislike of war and want to make the world a better place. Very frankly, Pepper says you should have expected it, and she doesn’t even know you’re on Take Two, so you have to believe her.

You wonder though, if you should be watching out for thieves and assassins, after Nick Fury ‘dies’ less than a day after giving you custody of the artefact, and SHIELD loses the Cube. SHIELD, aka Hydra, also falls into chaos, and is dealt with by the United Nations and good SHIELD agents alongside Nickity-not-dead-Nick – a lot of who will eventually join SWORD, another agency, or go to the ground.

Unfortunately, the tesseract is a powerful object – too powerful, too alive to be contained. You try, and accidentally send up a giant stream of blue into the sky, unable to stop it for over three weeks. Loki appears soon after.

This time, it’s the Iron Man suit that stops him from taking over your mind, and the arc reactor imbedded in it’s centre rather than your chest.

As an Avenger, you unite forces with Captain America, the Hulk, the Black Widow, Hawkeye, the Winter Soldier…Phil, helpfully called ‘Agent’ over the comms., and eventually, Thor, to defeat Loki and rescue not only Erik Selvig, but Jane Foster too. It’s safe to say that Thor is angry as fuck.

After a few hours, you defeat the little bugger, and though this time the Chitauri do cause enough damage that you become worried for the basic infrastructure of the Red Tower and the surrounding buildings. Some extra-emergency work on them holds up helping the people whose homes were damaged or destroyed during the Battle, but they understand – they don’t exactly want to be resettled inside buildings about to crumble and or around skyscrapers about to fall.

The other Avengers all agree to help in the event that this happens again, before Thor takes Loki back to Asgard, explaining he may not always be able to offer assistance, but when he is he will come – he will visit Jane often, in any case, so there’s that. You take it as a good sign, and turn to your friends and people-you-knew-before-the-invasion. Steve and Bucky already live in the Tower, but want to go on a road-trip. Bruce and Betty were just married the week before but put off their honeymoon to help with the tesseract – they’re going on their honeymoon now for a month and a half, both just because and so anyone other than General Ross interested in the Hulk doesn’t know where to find Bruce if they come looking in New York.

Clint and Phil are apparently married and in a polyamorous relationship with a woman named Laura, who changed her last name to Barton before settling down in Iowa with their two kids – so those two are going to go see them. Natasha would have gone too, but she apparently wants to stay with you in New York to be the voice of the Avengers – you have to force yourself to remember that the world doesn’t actually know you’re Iron Man. Only the Avengers know, and you – Tony Stark, owner of SI, billionaire arms-man – are simply their benefactor. In the eyes of the public, you sponsor them, and as you bought out the copyright for Avengers and all of the related money-making rights for each and every Avenger codename…

The month after the Battle is full of lawyers, is all you can say.

“Tony, you know how I told you I was pregnant again?” Matilde’s voice is tired, and breathy. Your eyes widen, and you get up out of bed, ignoring Natasha as you grab your clothes, tugging them on as you switch your phone to Bluetooth earpiece.
“What hospital are you in?”

“The one Maddie was born in. Come say hello to your second daughter, Stark.”

You let out a laugh, “You owe me permission to send you all to Disneyland!”

“Laugh it up and get out here before I check myself out. Harley and Maddie are at the neighbouring farm – Phillip’s been here with me for the last couple of hours.”

You go to reply with something witty, but it’s like your brain stops. “You live in Iowa. Fucking hell. Please don’t tell me that Phil Agent Coulson has been holding your hand this entire time.”

“You know him? – Phil, do you know Tony?”

You groan, and hands creep up your front, buttoning shirt-buttons as Natasha tries to listen in and most likely failing.

“What’s happening?”

“Matilde had another baby. Apparently Phil has been in hospital with her the entire time. Want to come visit? Harley and Maddie love you.” She frowns at that, and you wonder if that was the wrong thing to say. Love is for children, and all that. But your kids really do love Natasha, Maddie especially. Maddie’s like you and your mother – she doesn’t like to be touched by anyone other than close family and people she feels safe with, and she likes Natasha very much because the redhead listens properly when she shows her all her Dora things and tells her all the Dora stories. Natasha even talks to her in Spanish, something that makes you feel weirded out, because you’re Italian, not…Spanish. Maddie should be speaking Italian, not Spanish.

The fact that she can speak both fluently isn’t part of the problem, it’s the principle that your little girl’s second language should be Italian, or French, at the very least. Not Spanish.

“I don’t think I should come.”

“But Mads will be so disappointed,” you pout, and she groans, before leaving you with two buttons undone. When you meet your newest baby girl in the hospital later – who is, in a delightfully foreshadowing way, named Maria Darcy Stark – Natasha is there and is named godmother of Darcy-not-Maria-because-Maria-is-your-mother, by Matilde. The Black Widow is stunned, and almost refuses before you write ‘I’M A GODMOTHER’ in sharpie on her collarbone when she can’t move due to having your daughter in her arms. Due to her tank-top, it’s pretty easily seen, and posting the picture to your Avengers Chat on the SI server gets a lot of congratulations directed at her and Phil, as the caption declares that they’re both godparents.

Phil cries.

You make sure that no other pictures are taken for the next minute or so as Natasha wipes her eyes, neatly asking those around you with phones to text those that would want to be here and ask when are you getting here??

Harley and Maddie are of course delighted, when Clint and Laura arrive with them, their own brats in tow, wanting to meet their new baby sister. You watch as Harley sits beside Maddie and Darcy both, protective and patient for his turn. A glance at your phone as a call comes through sees JANA, FRIDAY and JARVIS on the line, with DUM-E, U, Butterfingers, DUST-YN and KEERA on multiple video-chat, all wanting to see the newest addition to the family.

You turn the screen up, turning the camera flipside so they can view Darcy live, sitting in Harley’s
lap with Maddie playing peek-a-boo, because they’re family too.

Later in the year, FRIDAY alerts you to the gossip that is Natasha’s SI-Friends status being changed to ‘In a relationship’. You are disappointed, and strangely hurt, before JARVIS butts in and says that Natasha used your login username and password to change your own status, which has caused many ripples in the paparazzi and different papers and magazines – all of which want to know who your new girlfriend.

You make your morning coffee, and rename Natasha on SI-Friends Chat, changing her nickname from ‘Scary Spider Romanov’ to ‘Guns n Roses’. She shows up five minutes later and steals your mug, pressing a kiss to your jaw before muttering something long in Russian that includes Maddie’s full name and ‘Dora’.

“I didn’t understand that, but if it’s about buying her something, go right ahead.” Your bank card is flashed across your face and you wonder when she swiped it, before you kiss her solidly, muttering the pin afterwards. She drains your coffee before leaving again.

She probably already knows all your passwords and passcodes, but it’s the thought that counts.

Matilde gets into a car-crash on her way to pick up Maddie from swim-club.

Matilde goes to hospital and is pronounced brain-dead before you even find out she’s been in a car crash.

Matilde dies, and Matilde’s lawyer- Millie-Anne’s lawyer, shows up with custody papers and a Will stating that everything goes to him, with the personal anecdote that says “Don’t you dare let either of my bastard parent’s find out about them, and if they do, they never, ever get to meet them”. Knowing Matilde’s circumstances- Mille-Anne’s circumstances, you understand and know that you have full custody now, of a pre-teen, a six year old and an eight-month old baby.

You feel so fucking blessed that Pepper is CEO of SI and that you can disappear for as long as you need, provided you sign all remaining rights of SI over to Pepper. Natasha follows you, as you set up house and home in Alaska, somewhere no-one would expect Tony Stark, owner of SI, billionaire arms-man, to live. Harley and Maddie like the snow, but miss Iowa. Darcy is fine. She’s only a baby, after all – though pretty precocious, and keeps trying to find her way out of the house. Natasha calls her your little escape artist – in the plural sense, as in, she called Darcy yours and Natasha’s. It makes your month.

You’d never thought of the Black Widow as a mother before Mille-Anne’s death, but now it’s just natural. Natasha is Darcy’s mom, Natasha is Maddie’s mom, heck, after a couple of weeks even nearly-a-teenager Harley slips up, and they bond more over…something. They speak in Russian, and none of your AI’s will translate it under Family Privacy Protocol Eighty-Six India, so you don’t know until Natasha tells you later in the week that they talked about Clint, Phil and Laura, and how Cooper and Lila wouldn’t even blink before calling both Clint and Phil their dads, even though each is only biologically related to one.

The cuddling that night is epic due to the extra three bodies.

Hydra’s last few powerful cells come out of the woodwork in one giant mess in two thousand and fifteen, and that’s when you finally track down Speedy and Voodoo.

Wanda is a scared child on the battlefield between Hydra and literally everyone else, and Pietro is
basically just disarming every good guy he can find, to the reprehension of his commander, who is constantly shouting for him to just kill them. You can work with that.

“Miss Maximoff!” You call as you drop down a few metres away, blasting a few Hydra goons in the face as you strike up a conversation. “How are you? I wanted to know if you’d like immunity and a safe place to hide while we face off these neo-Nazis?”

“Neo-what?” She’s confused, and Natasha through the comm. is losing her shit and telling you not to adopt people without asking her first. You wonder what she’s on about, because the only example of that is in the last timeline, and Natasha’s from this one.

“Neo-Nazis!” You repeat, coming closer. “These guys were originally Nazis, back in World War two! Do you support the Nazis?”

“No!”

“And are you fighting?” You grin behind your helmet as Thor uses a bolt of lightning to take out a Hydra tank with tesseract-energy blasters, a hidden relic left over from the War.

“I- I do not know how!” She suddenly sucks in a breath, gasping as her hands go to the right of her waist. “Pietro-” Her brother speeds over immediately, gripping her tightly as she falters, the suit’s resident AI informing you that Miss Maximoff has been shot.

“Hey, Maximoff! Get her to our quinjet – we’ll help you both. Immunity, money, safety, anything you want, just name it. But she needs medical attention, now.”

Pietro obviously doesn’t trust you, but Wanda whispers something in Sokovian that causes Pietro’s eyes to widen – JARVIS says that, translated, she just called their so-called allies Nazis – before he nods at you and zips off. The quinjet begins to close and lifts off, disappearing. You’d ordered it brought for this very reason.

“Iron Man, there’s a jet coming in overhead – deal with it,” Steve orders. Tony lifts off after blasting another Hydra goon.

“On it, Cap.”

“I once had a dream that I had already lived another forty years, and that I had fought Hydra and aliens and allies alike.” She says one night, when you’re sleeping in Avengers Tower. Harley is off at MIT and Maddie is studying Media and Spanish in college. Darcy is asleep in the room beside yours, clutching a Winter Soldier Bucky Bear, her favourite Avenger, apparently, “because he shot Thanos in the head while everyone else was busy and saved the universe”. But at this, you forget about your children for the first time in this life, listening with an intensity that Natasha notices.

“You remember too, da?”

“Natashalie,” you mutter, glancing at her as moonlight pools across the bed and reflects off her skin. “I thought it was just me. Me and my suave charm-”

“Your charm had nothing to do with it. You’ve changed, Stark. I have not. It’s what I admire in you now – how you grew and changed and made yourself anew in the new life granted to you. I did not do that. I continued on as the Black Widow. I did not break off early, or do anything about Hydra within SHIELD.”

“If you had, you might not have become an Avenger.”
Natasha shrugs, looking over to her bedside table where a picture of your family – blood and mechanical – sits neatly in a silver frame.

“You did good, Natasha.”

“I know. So did you.”

If your heart fills with emotion, and you relax in a way that all the weights on your shoulders lift off forever, you don’t say a single word.

You did good.

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