A Movable Feast

Summary

The epic road trip of food truck hipster Steve Rogers, chef Tony Stark, and self-propelled trouble magnet DJ Fujikawa.

Notes

This is the latest installment in Sam's "Foodieverse" AU; you don't really need to have read the other parts of the story, though it helps. Sam asked Sci if he could write a crossover bringing her original character DJ Stark into the Foodieverse, and if she wanted to help him write it; Sci graciously agreed because Sam is like a golden retriever with a tennis ball until he gets his way.

We're not quite finished with it yet but we're getting there, and since it's an autumn sort of story, we thought we'd start posting it now. The prologue may seem familiar; Sci posted it to her tumblr a while back.
Chapter 1

Prologue:

He had no food.

Tony jammed the phone between his cheek and his shoulder. “I have no food,” he said, and it was so much worse when he said it aloud. He kind of wished he'd kept it to himself, but then again, he had no idea how to fix this, so saying it aloud was really his only hope.

He was working with very little sleep here.

There was a long, strained silence. “What?” Bruce finally asked, his voice slurred with sleep.

Tony stared into the empty maw of his fridge. “You know what's in my fridge?” he asked. “A box of baking soda that's seen better days, something that might once have been a ginger root, some mostly okay looking carrots and shriveled head of cabbage, and two open bottles of mustard.” He stared at them, feeling irrationally betrayed. “And it's not even good mustard, Bruce. It's two jars of French's Yellow Mustard.”

Another long pause. “I like yellow mustard,” Bruce said at last. He seemed to be coming up to speed slowly, but that was to be expected given the hour.

“Yeah, so do I, but not enough to have two open bottles! What-” Tony shoved a hand through his hair, glaring at his fridge and wishing the appliance had feelings he could hurt. “What the fuck is this, Bruce? Why is there NO FOOD?”

Bruce sighed. “Because we've barely left the restaurant in the last two weeks?” he asked. “That's, that'd be my guess, Tony. Just call out for pizza, or Chinese, I don't know, what TIME is it?”

Tony slammed the refrigerator door and stalked across the kitchen. “It's two am, and I'm hungry, and I'm out of the city, so ordering is not a possibility, and even if I wanted to, that's lazy, that's like, a sixth or seventh date thing. That's a 'it's snowing and I don't want to get out of this bed ever, so let's just eat lo mein out of the box and pretend to watch Netflix' thing, I'm not going to be that lazy, at least not this fast, Jesus, I have standards.”

A beat of silence. “No, you don't,” Bruce said.

“I like to pretend I do!” Bruce made a humming noise, and Tony's eyes rolled up towards the ceiling. “Okay, so, I have a reputation!”

“Yeah, but it has nothing to do with your food.”

“I'm a fucking chef.”

“And that has nothing to do with your reputation.”

“I like to think it does, Banner!” Tony said, tossing the pantry doors open. He yanked a shelf out. “Flour. Sugar.” He checked the canister. “Nope. Like, half a cup of sugar, max, if I scrape this thing clean. Baking powder.” He shoved everything out of his way. “Half a box of stale panko breadcrumbs. A solidified bottle of honey. What the fuck is this? Why is there nothing-” He grabbed a can and held it up. “Creamed corn. Why do I OWN creamed corn, Bruce? Jesus!”
There was the sound of fabric rustling, and then the click of a lamp being turned on. “Tony, wait, why are we doing this-”

“I brought someone home,” Tony said. “Wow. At some point, I apparently put the empty linguine box back in the pantry. Why the hell would I do this? Was I drunk? Trick question, of course I was drunk.” He tossed it in the general direction of the trash. “I brought someone home, and I’d like to have food, and I don’t, and this is just-”

“Wait,” Bruce said, cutting him off. “Wait, you're not in the city? Where are you?”

“The house,” Tony said. He kicked the pantry door closed. Pasta but no sauce. Flour but no sugar. He considered the freezer door. Always the last resort.

“You brought someone back to the house?” Bruce asked, shock running through the words. “Since when do you-”

“Since tonight, and I'm supposed to be a chef, that's what it says on the menu, that's what it says in the New York Times restaurant reviews and that article in Empire State Cuisine, and I have no food.” Tony yanked the freezer open. “I'm a chef, not a miracle worker, how do you cook if you have no food?”

Bruce sighed. “Tony. It's two am, does this person even want-”

“Don't care, doesn't matter, really, it does not, I don't care if he doesn't want to eat, I want to-” Feed him. The words stuck in his throat. He sucked in a breath. “I'm hungry,” he said instead. “And I am pretending to have standards instead of a reputation, and right now, you know what I've got?” He reached into the freezer. “Frozen, mass-produced tamales, and a handle of vodka.”

Bruce made a considering noise under his breath. “I've had worst first date meals,” he said, sounding far too amused for Tony's peace of mind.

“Explains your lack of second dates,” Tony said, and it was bitchy, but he didn't care.

Bruce laughed. “For a guy who wants help, you're really, uh, you're lousy at making people want to help you,” he pointed out.

“I don't need help, I need FOOD,” Tony pointed out. “So unless you'd like to drive out here with the truck and the contents of our walk-in, you're useless to me right now.”


“No eggs,” Tony said.

“Okay,” Bruce said. “Freezer.”

“Nothing,” Tony said.

“Bullshit, I know you,” Bruce shot back instantly. “You freeze butter and milk if you're leaving town, don't tell me you don't have-”

“Okay, okay!” Tony shoved a few tin foil wrapped packets. “Butter, and-” He grabbed a bottle and swiped the frost away with his thumb. “Milk. No, buttermilk, there's another one back here...” He flipped a plastic bag onto the counter. “Yeah, I have milk.”

“We had, that thing a few months, I know you had a cheese tray-”
“Cheese is gone.”

“Yeah, not interested in the cheese. You bought a metric ton of nuts, do you-”

“Yeah, hanging in the basement stairs, right, you're right.” For the first time, Tony felt like he could take a deep breath. He grabbed a plastic container out of the fridge. “Praline pecans, roasted in cinnamon sugar, I can.”

“Tony.” Bruce's voice was almost gentle. Kind, in the way he got around Tony sometimes. Like Tony's pain was an echo of his own, and he didn't like it, but he knew how to handle it. “Don't. Just... Simple. Small plates. Small bites. Don't, uh, don't fuss it up. Just clean, strong flavor. It's late. Or, uh, maybe it's early. I don't even know anymore. But eat something light and-”

The mesh bag of nuts hit the counter, rattling against the butcherblock counter. “Yeah. I think I've got it.”

“Good. I'm going back to bed.” Bruce paused. “So. When do I get to meet him?”

“Never,” Tony said, and hung up the phone. It was rude, but Bruce was useless, and he had work to do.

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The tray was heavier than he'd thought it would be.

Tony balanced it on his hip as he wrestled the bedroom door open. The dishes rattled, because he'd always been a lousy waiter, and Steve stirred on the bed.

“Tony?” His voice was husky and thick, and Tony wasn't sure if his name had ever sounded sweeter.

“Hey,” Tony said, his voice soft. He pushed the door shut behind him, sealing in the warmth and the smells rising from his tray. Steve rolled over, unwrapping his arms from his pillow.

“Hey, yourself,” Steve said, pushing himself upright, and leaning back against the pillows. One arm reached out, fumbling for the lamp, and managing to get it on. “Where'd you go?”

“I was hungry,” Tony said, and Steve glanced down as Tony lowered the tray onto the bed, his eyebrows arching.

“Guess so,” he said, reaching out to help Tony steady the tray. His pale hair fell against his forehead, and he pushed it back, those strong, broad fingers tangling in the strands. “Tony, what did you-”

“Hungry,” Tony repeated, sliding into bed. “Want something to eat?”

“I wasn't,” Steve said. “Now, I might be.” He smiled at Tony. “What did you make?”


Steve's face split in a grin. “You have a root cellar.”

Tony gave him an innocent look and reached for the paring knife on the tray. “Of course. I mean, don't you?”
“Doesn't work with the truck, I guess,” Steve said, grinning. He reached out, snagging a nut and slipping it between his lips. “You going to share?”

“If you ask nice, maybe I can.” Tony set the knife against the red of the peel, sliding the blade beneath the thin skin. He rotated it in his fingers, the movement practiced and easy. Almost natural. The peel fell to the tray in a perfect, unbroken spiral, and Tony sliced a wedge of the sweet-tart flesh away from the core and offered it to Steve on the flat of the blade.

Steve took it with a smile. Tony gave him a suspicious look. “What?”

Steve bit into the apple, his tongue flicking out to lick the juice from his lips. “That was just a trick I never expected from you,” he said, leaning back against the pillowed. He was golden and perfect in the low light of the lamp, all sleek muscle and flushed cheeks and tousled hair. Tony concentrated on not slicing his hand open with the knife, and it was damn hard, because his hunger had shifted focus with a vengeance.

“Hey, I got skills,” Tony said, with a smirk and a look, and to his delight, a flush rolled over Steve's face.

“I noticed,” Steve said, finishing his apple slice, and Tony offered him another, pleased. “But your skills are-” His eyes narrowed as he bit into the apple. “Showy.”

“I'd object, but it's true,” Tony said, as the second perfect spiral of apple peel hit the tray. Steve picked it up, fingertips smoothing over the red of the skin. “You should see me teppanyaki.”

“I'm pretty sure that's not a verb,” Steve said, and Tony made a scoffing noise under his breath. Steve ran a fingernail across the peel, raising it to his nose and taking a slow breath, his eyes falling shut. “But this is...” He smiled. “Subtle. Small.” His eyelids slid open, just a bit. “My ma used to do this for me, when I was a kid. She was a meat and potatoes kind of cook, but she made a mean pie, when the apples were cheap, and she'd roll the peel between her fingers just like this.”

“To make you smile,” Tony said, slicing the apple.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Did your mom teach you? Or your dad?”

Tony paused, his thumb braced on the back of the knife blade, steadying it against the apple. “No,” he said at last. “Dad taught me a lot of things, but he was a practical sort of cook. Precision and speed were the important things, not showy flounces like this.” He looked up, one corner of his mouth kicking up in a lopsided smile. “I picked this up a little later. Because I wanted to see-” He stopped, and took a step back from that particular line. Some things weren't first date material.

It wasn't that he had rules about taking lovers, or making dates, or picking people up. It wasn't so organized. It was just... He had things he didn't do. He didn't date people from work, he'd learned that lesson the hard way. He had an apartment in the city, and that's where he took one night stands, or even long time lovers. He didn't bring lovers to the comfortable little house that Obie had browbeaten him into buying.

He didn't date friends, because he didn't have many, and when things ended, and they always ended, and because it was him, they usually ended badly, he lost them.

He'd broken every single one of those rules tonight, and when he looked at Steve, warm and smiling, taking a slice of apple from Tony's fingers, and licking the juice from his own, he couldn't regret it. At least, not yet.

“I met someone I wanted to impress,” Tony said. “And he wasn't easily impressed.” He held out
another slice of apple, and Steve let Tony feed him, his lips parting and his eyes sliding shut. Tony took advantage of his closed eyes, leaning in to press a soft kiss against Steve's parted lips. He tasted like apples and sugar and salt, all the elemental things that Tony wanted, and Steve's arms slid around him, pulling him down.

“Not hungry?” Tony whispered against his mouth, making Steve laugh.

“I'm hungry,” Steve whispered back. “For just what you're offering.”

Tony grinned as Steve kissed his way down Tony's neck. “Well, I can't send you home hungry...” He sank back into the bed and Steve’s embrace, everything perfect for a moment, and as long as it lasted, he was going to savor it.

-Six Months Later-

Food-trucking at TOBRU, Steve often found he faced two distinct waves of business: early in the evening, when people wanted a snack while they were waiting for a table (or waiting for someone to cancel so they could try to weasel in), and late in the evening, when people who hadn't had enough to eat at TOBRU wanted something to take home with them. In between the two, there was often a solid hour or three where the only people who came up to his truck were the odd bike messenger or the adventurous drunk leaving Mjolnir.

He was spending the downtime tidying up, oiling his cast iron and going over his inventory, when he heard a scratching noise from outside. He looked through the service hatch, saw nothing, and then looked down.

Standing on the reinforced fruit crate he put out for his shorter customers was a tiny child, with a head full of curly black hair and wide brown eyes behind a slightly crooked pair of glasses, reaching way up to grip the very edge of his service counter.

"Hiya," Steve said, subtly checking the parking lot for the child's possible parents. "You're a little young to be a bike messenger."

The boy gave him a shy smile.

"What'll you have?" Steve asked. The boy solemnly offered him three very grubby one dollar bills. "Oh, thank you. You know I'm having a special right now, anything on the menu for three dollars."

"Sandwich," the boy said. "Please."

"Sure. Hey, why don't you come around so you can see me make it?" Steve said, ducking sideways to open the back door. He set out another fruit crate. "You sit there and watch. Now, white, rye, or gluten-free bread?"

This earned him a moment of contemplation. "Rye."

"Good choice. Whaddaya want on it?"

"Cheese."

"Mustard?"

A quick, sure nod.

Steve slathered some mustard on a slice of rye and began slicing the cheese. "What's your name?"
"DJ."

"Yeah? Cool name. Hey, where are your parents?" he asked casually, as he layered the cheese on the sandwich. The boy pointed across the parking lot, at TOBRU.

It made sense; TOBRU didn't have a ban on kids but not many parents brought their kids out, and when they did often the children didn't enjoy themselves. Tony and Bruce had developed several standard kids' meals specifically to soothe tearful toddlers (sparkling mac and cheese was Steve's personal favorite) but little kids weren't exactly predictable. That a child should have wandered off from the restaurant without his parents noticing wasn't so surprising.

He'd feed the kid and then take him back inside, he decided. His parents would see him if they stepped outside the restaurant.

"Okay, mustard and cheese. You want some meat on this thing? Turkey, beef?"

The boy shook his head. "Pickles!"

"Well, how European of you," Steve said with a smile, layering some sweet pickles on the cheese. "You need something to cushion the bread from all this vinegar though. How about some tomatoes?"

DJ shook his head vigorously.

"Nothing else at all?" Steve asked, holding up the second slice of rye. "Last chance."

DJ gave him a thumbs-up, so Steve topped the sandwich and sliced it nearly in quarters, laying it out in a little recycled-paper tray. "Hey, I bet if we went across the street Sam would have some potato chi -- "

"DJ!"

Steve heard the frantic cry of a parent, but there was something unsettlingly familiar about it; when he leaned out the back he was just in time to see Tony come skidding across the parking lot and sweep the little kid up in his arms.

"DJ, I told you not to leave the office," Tony said, and Steve could see his hands shaking as he smoothed down DJ's hair.

Oh.

Oh.

"Sandwich," DJ said, pointing at Steve.

Tony looked up and his face went from frantic to hunted in a split second. Steve crossed his arms.

"If you were still hungry, we had food we could have given you," Tony said, turning back to DJ, who looked faintly amused by the whole situation. "I told you we were going to visit Steve's food truck later."

The last of it was clearly for Steve's benefit, and Steve softened a little.

"Hey, we can talk about this some other time," he said, bringing the sandwich to DJ. "It's no big deal, he's easy to cook for."

"He's easy to -- since when?" Tony asked DJ.
"Sandwich for you," DJ said pointedly, taking the paper tray from Steve and holding one of the quarters under Tony's nose.

Tony looked down at it. "So you heard Bruce yelling at me about not eating, huh?"

DJ nodded.

"And you remembered me telling you that Steve made good sandwiches."

Another nod.

"And you gave Peter the slip and came out here..."

"Three dollars," DJ said.

Tony looked at Steve, who held up the three crumpled dollar bills.

"Oh, kiddo," Tony sighed, kissing DJ on the forehead. "It's not your job to feed me, baby."

"Is," DJ insisted, pushing the sandwich at his mouth. Tony rolled his eyes and took a bite.

"Hey, are you bad in the weeds in there?" Steve asked. "I mean, I'm not a chemist but I can help out if you need a break."

"No, the rush just ended," Tony said. "We're fine, that's why I even noticed the brat had gone missing."

"Not," DJ said.

"Brat," Tony told him.

"Not," DJ laughed, shoving another quarter of sandwich into Tony's mouth when he opened it to insist.

"Well, if you're past the worst of it, take a minute, finish your sandwich," Steve said, kicking the fruit crate over to him. "DJ, you want anything to eat?"

DJ considered this. "Smoothie?"

"He lives on the damn things," Tony said.

"Well, I don't have any smoothies," Steve said thoughtfully. "I do have some green tea ice cream. Little bit of milk, little bit of ice cream?"

DJ held up his hands in a gimme motion. Steve found one of the little pre-scooped cups in the freezer, poured some milk over it, and stirred it up with a chopstick, offering it to DJ once it was more or less drinkable.

"Say thank you," Tony said, as DJ downed it like a shot.

"Nkyou," DJ said obediently.

"Now you," Steve said to Tony, who looked startled, then amused.

"Thank you for buying me dinner," he said to DJ. "Don't ever serve me a heart attack as an appetizer again."
"Good pickles," DJ told him, pointing at his sandwich.

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“You FOUND him.”

“I fired you. You are fired,” Tony said, stomping through the door with DJ on his hip. “You were fired, and you are fired, and tomorrow, I’ll rehire you just so I can fire you in the middle of the dinner rush, I don’t care if I have a house full of restaurant critics and you’re the only one I’ve got who can plate worth a damn.” He pointed a finger at Peter’s nose. “This kitchen is for employees, and you are not one anymore, so why are you here?”

Peter looked down at Tony’s fingertip, going slightly cross-eyed at the attempt. “Because you fire me at least twice a week,” he said, holding his hands out for DJ. “It’s lost its sting, Tony.”

Tony’s arms tightened on his kid. “In this kitchen, you will call me chef,” he said, because he didn’t really have anything else to say and he was tired and he still wanted what high ground he could get.

“Tony…” Bruce said, cleaning his station with quick, efficient movements.

“Don’t ‘Tony’ me,” Tony grumbled. DJ kicked, twisting in his grip, and Tony relinquished him, trying not to make it look as reluctant as it felt. “I am due some respect, I am the damn boss.”

“You fired me,” Peter said, his eyes rolling up towards the ceiling. To DJ, he said, “Can you not do that, buddy? Your dad nearly came after me with a cleaver.” DJ huffed out a sigh and flopped against Peter’s chest. “Agreed.”

“Stop telling him lies, I did not come after you with a cleaver,” Tony said. “Jesus. Like I need any more problems. If he repeats that to his aunt, I’m severely fucked.”

“I’d be more worried about him repeating the f-word,” Sue said, her hands moving with smooth, controlled speed, spinning sugar strands into a stunning work of edible art.

“Think she knows I swear,” Tony said. “Pretty sure she doesn’t know I tried to kill my assistant slash intern slash babysitter slash personal servant slash useless human being whom I pay for reasons I do not even understand.”

“Probably because of all those slashes,” Bruce said.

“You,” Tony said, pointing, “shut up. You-” He stabbed a finger in Sue’s direction. “Pan scrubbing duty forever.”

She grinned. “Yes, chef.”

“Does that mean I’m off pan scrubbing duty forever?” Hank McCoy asked, the lights of the kitchen glinting off of his narrow spectacles.

“No, everyone is on pan scrubbing duty forever,” Tony said, making DJ laugh. “Even you.”

“You can’t be any worse at it than Pym,” Peter told him.

“This is true,” McCoy said, with a wolfish smile.

“Cleaver,” DJ said, leaning back in Peter’s arms.

“Great,” Tony said, throwing his hands up. “Everyone is fired, close the joint down, I’m going to be
in court for the next ten years or so.”

“Peter, no one’s in the private room out back tonight,” Bruce said. “Maybe you can take DJ back there and color.” DJ peeked up at him, and Bruce smiled. “That okay with you? Your dad’ll be done soon.”

DJ nodded. “Hungry.”

“I know, I’ll make you the smoothie to end all smoothies,” Tony said, leaning over to kiss DJ’s cheeks. “It will have tomatoes and peppers—”

“No,” DJ said.


“I’ll make you a good one with blueberries and watermelon and peaches,” Bruce said. DJ nodded, and Tony straightened up. Bruce gave Tony a look. “You, let’s let everyone finish up the last seating. We have to run the orders for next week.”

“No one is fooled,” Tony told him.

“They would be if you’d pretend,” Bruce said, putting a hand on Tony’s shoulder and turning him towards the office.

“Peter, come get his cars and his crayons,” Tony said.

“Yes, chef,” Peter said, bouncing DJ in his arms. Despite his slight frame, he was surprisingly strong, with lightning quick reflexes that usually allowed him to keep up with the kid. “What do we say?”

“Yes, chef,” DJ said, smiling.

“Cute,” Tony said. In his office, he collected DJ’s bag of distractions, handing it over and pressing another kiss to DJ’s forehead before Peter beat a hasty retreat. Tony shut the door behind him and slumped against it.

“Don’t start,” he said to Bruce.

“Tell me.”

“Yeah, he went straight out to Steve’s truck,” Tony said, throwing himself into his desk chair. It creaked in protest but stayed intact. He was grateful for that small mercy.

“Steve,” Bruce said, his voice flat.

Tony pressed a hand to his face. “Yeah. Big guy. Blonde. Good with a paring knife and a flat iron. And also with kids as it turns out.”

“Well, that’s good,” Bruce said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“How do you do that?” Tony asked him. “How do you say, ‘that’s good’ in a tone of voice that clearly indicates that you do not think it’s good at all, that, in fact, you think that it’s horrible and that I’m a horrible person?”

Bruce studied him, one hand smoothing over his chin. “I think you’re projecting again, Tony.”

Tony’s head fell back against his chair with a thump. “I am not. I’m—” His mouth twisted up on the impulse to swear, loud and long and in a couple of languages. “I’m fine,” he managed.
“Oh, yeah. Yeah. You look fine,” Bruce agreed. Tony opened one eye, and Bruce was shaking his head slowly from side to side, his mouth a thin line. “Amazingly fine.”

“I’m fine,” Tony said.

“Right. Fine.” Bruce sank into Tony’s visitor chair. “How did this happen?”

“Peter’s a sucky baby sitter?” Tony guessed.

“How did you not tell Steve you have a child?” Bruce said.

“I was working up to it,” Tony said, slumping a little lower in his chair. Bruce gave him a look. “I was. It was just… Slow going.”

“Why did you not tell him before-”

“Because before I never thought it would happen!” Tony said, at a near shout. He kicked his desk. “We didn’t date, Bruce, we didn’t- I didn’t get a chance to work around to seducing him, I just said some assholish thing to a hidden camera documentary crew, and the next thing I know, he’s like, let’s fuck!”

Bruce stared at him. Tony stared back, petulant. “Really,” Bruce said at last, his eyebrows arching. “Steve.”

“Yes.”

“Steve Rogers said, he said those exact words to you, out of the blue, Steve Rogers just said, ‘let’s fuck?’” Bruce asked. Somehow, his voice got more disbelieving with every single word.

“Yes,” Tony said. “Okay, no, words to that effect, you know what I mean.” He exhaled, all the fight going out of him. “I didn’t even think he was interested in men, let alone this particular man, I didn’t have time to properly suss him out, to vet him, it was just a sudden chance at something I wanted and I went for it, because I’m a greedy asshole, okay?”

Bruce took a deep breath, and let it out, then reached up and tugged the bandana he always wore in the kitchen off of his head. His big hands flexed, and he ran one through his salt and pepper curls. “Tony. You had to know it was going to come up. Why didn’t you deal with it before DJ decided to do it for you?”

Tony glanced away, reaching for a pen on his desk. “I figured it wouldn’t have to come up. Why didn’t you deal with it before DJ decided to do it for you?”

Tony glanced away, reaching for a pen on his desk. “I figured it wouldn’t have to come up,” he said. “He drives a food truck, Bruce. He drives a fucking food truck.”

“Are we being a snob here, or-” Bruce asked, shaking his head.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Bruce, what’s the average life span of kitchen help in this city?” he asked, and didn’t wait for an answer. “Months. If that. Everyone’s always jumping ship, to a restaurant that’s doing better, that’s in a better location, that promises better pay or a less stressful work situation. We’re half a step above migrant farm workers when it comes to staying in one location for more than a season.”

“Well, farm workers have to move along, to follow the work that’s offered them,” Bruce said. “And most would prefer a more stable living and working situation with greater protection under the law for them and their children, so I don’t think that-”

“Oh, god, right, please stop,” Tony said, rubbing his forehead. “It was a joke.”
“People aren’t punchlines, Tony.”

“No, but my love life is,” Tony said. “Seriously. I didn’t tell Steve because his entire career choice is based on a lack of commitment. I figured that we’d, you know, have a good time, and then, he’d simply move his truck to another part of the city.” Bruce stared at him, and Tony stared back.

“What?”

“Yeah, that was never going to happen.”

“When’s the last time you—” Tony stopped, holding up a hand. “Never mind.”

“Neither of us have had much luck dating within the culinary scene in this city,” Bruce said, calm and easy. “But still. There was never any chance that Steve was going to break up with you by changing his selling location.” He paused. “He might break up with you—”

“Thanks,” Tony said.

“But he’s not going to do it by moving to the west side of central park, Tony. It’s not his style, and you know it.” Bruce reached out, poking a finger against Tony’s desk blotter. There was a bright blue bandage on his knuckle, and something about that struck Tony as hysterical. Bruce leaned forward, grabbing Tony’s attention. “And you know it.”

“I suspected,” Tony said.

“Right. Well, how are you planning on handling this?” Bruce asked.

Tony mimed putting a phone to his ear. “So since we have nothing of importance to discuss about our days, how about a blowjob?” Bruce stared at him, disapproval writ large on his face. “No?” Tony asked.

“No,” Bruce said.

“Well, then I’m out of ideas,” Tony said.

Bruce rubbed his forehead. “Tony…”

“Look, I was supposed to go up and get DJ this weekend,” Tony said. “There was a plan. I was going to get him, and then spend a day hitting every artisanal dairy and cheese monger in the catskills.” He leaned in. “I was going to come home with a trunk full of goat cheese, my entire menu for the next month was based on small. Batch. Goat. Cheese.” He punctuated every word with a stab of his finger. “But no. Jess and Carol had to drop him off in the middle of the damn dinner rush, and I did not have a chance to tell my latest boytoy that I’m a father.”

Bruce leaned back. “Well, then, I guess you’re fucked,” he said, his voice laconic.

“Yeah. Pretty much.” Tony opened his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of single malt scotch. “And so I’m going to have a drink.”

“I’d say that’s a stupid plan, but I don’t have a better one,” Bruce said. He stood. “I’ll get some glasses.”

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The second wave of patrons that evening was intense, and kept Steve's mind off the issue of Tony and DJ, for the most part. He liked his job, but when you were not only cooking but also selling,
explaining, and hustling for donations to the Sandwiches For The Hungry fund, it did take up a lot of your attention.

Once the crowd thinned out, he usually began packing it in and made a pretty efficient job of securing everything, locking down the cupboards, and doing a quick wipe-down of the counters and fixtures. He found himself lingering, however, serving every single last straggling patron and then leaving the hatch open as he cleaned so any latecomers could get at least a cup of ice cream. His reluctance must have been obvious to Sam; after half an hour of pretending he wasn't stalling, his phone buzzed with a text from Sam.

*What's up, you're moving slow tonight.*

He sighed and leaned against the counter, texting back. *Lots on my mind.*

There was a terrible knowing tone in the response he got. *So the kid's Tony's, huh?*

Steve leaned out the service hatch and saw Sam sitting in the cab of his truck, door open.

"Just come over here," Steve sighed, and Sam grinned, leaping down lightly, locking the truck before sauntering over.

"Lemme help you clean," Sam said, climbing into the back and starting to tidy away the last of the ice-tray and heat-tray leftovers.

"How'd you know?" Steve asked, pretending to do his tallies from the evening.

"Watching you in the TOBRU parking lot is like Days Of Our Lives, it's a neverending saga," Sam said. "Oh the drama of you and Tony Stark."

"Sam."

"Hey, I'm just teasing. I heard Tony yelling and saw him swoop up a kid you were feeding, it wasn't that hard to guess." Sam closed the fridge and swung the latch deftly, glancing at Steve. "He didn't tell you?"

"Did he tell you?"

"No, I had no clue, but I'm also not dating him. That's a weird thing not to tell someone."

"We haven't been dating that long," Steve said. "Not really."

"Usually something like a child comes up pretty fast," Sam pointed out. "That's before-the-fifth-date material, easy." He paused. "You ever been to his place?"

"A couple of times," Steve said. "I didn't see any pictures or anything but I wasn't exactly there to look at the walls. We pretty much -- " he blushed. Sam laughed. "Well, you know, the kitchen and the bedroom are the parts I'm most familiar with."

The bedroom was nice, that was good, but the kitchen of Tony's snug little house was in some ways even better. It was huge and full of light, with a bar just right for sitting at while Tony made breakfast, the smell of coffee perpetually in the air, herbs growing on the windowsill. The clack of a knife on a cutting board, the hiss of food in a cast-iron pan, and Tony's head bent over the stove as he cooked. Steve missed it, suddenly, wished they were there, but that was -- far off, for now.

"He's never had a problem with me staying the night, either," Steve added. "I mean, you know, in
"terms of having to check in with a babysitter or something."

"So either he's the world's shittiest dad, or the kid lives with someone else," Sam said. "Given what I saw, and what we both know about Stark..."

"Well, he might be a bad dad, I don't know what kind of dad he is, but he's not the kind to leave his kid alone so he can go fuck the food truck guy," Steve said, feeling a bitterness he didn't quite understand seeping into his voice.

"I cannot believe you two are still playing Who's More Insecure Roulette," Sam said. "Thor says -- "

"Why are you talking to Thor about my relationships?" Steve asked.

"Because we're part of a community so small that we have to make our own fun?" Sam offered. "Thor and I talk about a lot of shit, you're not the center of our attention, calm down."

"Sorry, Sam. I just -- this is really confusing," Steve said. He caught the milk crate from outside when Sam tossed it to him and turned it over, tucking it beneath the counter with the others. "Maybe he didn't tell me because I'm not, you know, a part of that life. His life. Or he thought I'd cut and run. Neither one's especially flattering, or a great sign for the relationship."

"You gonna talk to him about it?"

"I'm not going to force him," Steve said. "I mean, yes, he should have told me, but on the other hand, who DJ is or where he came from isn't actually any of my business."

Sam cocked his head. "You like the kid?"

"He seems sweet. Aside from ditching his babysitter he's pretty well-behaved."

"Definitely doesn't live with Tony, then," Sam said with a grin. Steve smiled, but he knew he looked tired, and probably not very sincere. "Hey, you'll figure it out."

"We will. Somehow or other. Thanks for coming by," Steve added. "You should take off, though, it's late. I'm gonna close up, I'm just..."

"Waiting for him?"

"Making sure he knows I'm here if he wants to talk," Steve said firmly.

"Uh huh. Days Of Our Lives," Sam said, dropping down off the back fender of the truck. "We good for tomorrow?"

"Sure, I'll text you when I'm on the road."

"I'm doing the thing with the gruyere tomorrow -- "

"I'll lay in some extra tomatoes," Steve said with a grin. "Seeya, Sam."

"Don't drive angry," Sam told him, and Steve waved as Sam pulled Potato Rescue away. He sat down on the back of his own truck, hands folded together, carefully not looking directly at TOBRU so that Tony wouldn't be freaked out or anything.

But he wasn't...not looking at TOBRU either, so when Tony came out carrying DJ against his shoulder, he saw it. He saw Tony stop and hesitate, and then start across the parking lot towards him.
Okay, I know this was boring, and I’m sorry about that, but why did you feel the need to make a blanket fort out of all of our clean table linens, and how in god’s name did you talk Peter into letting you do it?” Tony asked, slipping out the back door of TOBRU with DJ balanced on his hip. “I mean, is he that weak willed, or do you have mind control abilities that I should be aware of, I don’t know how to handle this, how the hell should I handle this, kidlet?”

“Steve,” DJ said, and Tony jolted.

“What?” he asked, dumb as he ever was, and DJ pointed. Tony followed the gesture, his heart skipping a beat when he spotted the familiar blue truck parked in its usual spot. He bit back a curse, his arms tightening on DJ. DJ squirmed in his grasp, kicking at his leg, and Tony made a deliberate effort to relax it. “Sorry. Sorry, sorry, baby.” He pressed a kiss to DJ’s temple. His lips lingered there, against DJ’s skin, taking a deep breath. “You smell like laundry soap and starch,” he said, and DJ giggled. “How many of my tablecloths were on your head tonight?”

“All of them,” DJ said, with all the necessary gravity.

“Great, fantastic, you are a nightmare,” Tony said, even as he kissed DJ’s cheek with a loud smack. Giggling, DJ twisted in his arms. “If we go talk to Steve, can you behave this time?”

DJ thought about that, one leg swinging idly in midair. “Yes,” he said as Tony started humming the Jeopardy theme.

“Good answer, now we just have to actually DO that,” Tony said. “But saying it is a good first step. I appreciate it.” He took a deep breath. “So, this is difficult for daddy, but I’d appreciate it if you tried to be especially adorable right now. Can you try to be, like, sickeningly adorable?”

Steve looked up as they approached, but he didn’t stand up. Tony stopped in front of him. “Let’s try this again,” he said, and Steve’s eyebrows arched. “Steve, I’d like you to meet DJ Fujikawa.” He paused, and managed a strained smile. “My kid.” He gave DJ a bounce. “DJ, this is Steve. Say hi, mini-me.”

DJ smiled at Steve, not bothering to lift his head from Tony’s shoulder. “Hi,” he said, wiggling his fingers in a little wave.

To Tony’s relief, Steve’s face relaxed into his usual warm smile. “Hi,” he said, returning DJ’s wave. “Did your dad eat his sandwich?”

“Yes,” DJ said, his smile stretching into a grin.

“What do we say?” Tony asked.

“Thank you,” DJ said without missing a beat. He wiggled in Tony’s grip. “Truck, please.”

“You can look at the outside, do not go onto the street, and you have to stay in sight of me. Agreed?” Tony asked, and DJ nodded. “Okay.” He leaned over, setting DJ on his feet. For a second, he clung,
his hands tightening on DJ’s sides, and then DJ was wriggling loose. “Where I can see you!” he said, and waited for DJ’s nod before he let go.

DJ darted out of reach, one hand coming up to brush his fingertips over the gleaming blue paint of the truck. He paused, his attention caught by the contrast, and Tony exhaled.

Keeping his eyes on DJ, he shoved his hands in his pockets. “He lives upstate,” he said, his voice quiet. “There was a schedule change, I was supposed to pick him up this weekend, but some family friends were coming down to the city tonight and thought they were doing me a favor.”

Steve was silent for a second. “But… You are happy he’s here?” he asked, his voice cautious.

“God, yes, I just didn’t expect him in the middle of the dinner rush,” Tony said, scraping his hands over his face. “In the middle of the dinner rush after a multi-hour car ride so he arrived wound up, full of energy, and bored out of his mind. I thought he could color in my office until closing, but you saw how well that went.”

Steve smiled. “He does seem energetic.”

He glanced over, keeping a sharp eye on DJ, who luckily seemed more interested in his own reflection than he was with what they were discussing. “He’s smart. He gets bored easily,” he said. He cleared his throat. “I was going to tell you. I just thought-”

He shrugged. “I was going to tell you. I just thought-”

He resisted the very strong urge to say ‘fucking’ because the super serious look on Steve’s face indicated he would not find it funny right now. “Dating?” he finished, instead. “Yes. I told him about you.”

Steve exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. “I figured,” he said, his voice quiet. “He seemed to recognize the truck.”

“Okay,” Steve said. He shifted, bracing his elbows on his knees. “Does he, uh, know?”

“Know what?” Tony looked over at him, and there was color in Steve’s cheeks that wasn’t there before. Tony grinned. “That we’re-” He resisted the very strong urge to say ‘fucking’ because the super serious look on Steve’s face indicated he would not find it funny right now. “Dating?” he finished, instead. “Yes. I told him about you.”

Steve smiled, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. “I figured,” he said, his voice quiet. “He seemed to recognize the truck.”

“Yeah, I sent him a picture,” Tony said.

Steve looked down at his hands. “Just asking because-” His mouth went tight.

“Because I didn’t tell you about him,” Tony finished. He took a deep breath, and wished that he was doing this over a drink, but he’d done everything he could to make sure DJ wasn’t exposed to that. “I’m… Very careful with him,” he said. “Not many people know about him, because right now, the custody situation is rather-” He sighed, his eyes closing. “It’s complicated. The last thing I need is some tabloid story making it look like I’m trying to use him for publicity.”

“His mother wouldn’t approve?” Steve asked.

“Mom’s dead,” DJ said, and Steve went still.

Tony opened his mouth, but Steve was looking at DJ now. “So’s mine,” he said, his voice quiet. “I miss my mom. A lot.” DJ didn’t look away from the side of the truck, but his chin dropped in a slight nod.

“I don’t remember,” DJ said, his voice quiet. “Don’t remember much.”

“But we do,” Tony said, holding his hands out. “I remember your mom, and she was amazing, and
I’m going to tell you about her every single day. Right?”

DJ considered him for a second, and then darted into his arms. “Right,” he said, his arms going around Tony’s waist. He buried his face in Tony’s stomach, clinging. Tony smoothed his hair back, and mouthed “Sorry” at Steve over his head. Steve shook his head.

“It’s fine,” he mouthed back.

“So DJ lives with his aunt some of the time,” Tony said aloud. “Well, his great-aunt, who adores him and spoils him and makes him impossible.” DJ giggled against Tony’s stomach, his breath hot through Tony’s shirt.

“And sometimes, when I’m really, really lucky, she lets him come and stay with me for a little while, and then it’s my turn to spoil him and make him impossible, right before I send him back to the back end of nowhere,” Tony said. He met Steve’s eyes. “Complicated,” he repeated.

Steve was quicker on the uptake than just about anyone Tony had ever met. “It sounds like it,” he said. He stood up, his hands in his pockets. “Does his aunt know-”

“She has no problem with my bisexuality, and no problem with me having a boyfriend,” Tony said, blunt about it. “I think, oddly, she prefers it.” He gave Steve a wry smile. “No potential stepmother to kind of, I don’t know, usurp her? It’s hard to explain.”

“Usurp,” DJ said, his fingers sinking into Tony’s shirt. He tugged on the fabric and raised his head. “Uuuuuuuuuuuusurp.”

“I use big words,” Tony agreed. “It’s pretty funny.” He looked up at Steve. “Look, I know this is a mess, I do, I get that, but you were going to come over tonight, I didn’t know if you were still-” He broke off. “Interested?”

He tried for a smile. “I know, puts a damper on things, so I understand if you’d rather not, but, well, we were going to do my special cinnamon roll pancakes.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “The spoiling begins at dawn.”

DJ looked up. “Breakfast,” he said, drawing the word out. “Please?”

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"Go on ahead," Tony told Steve, as he unlocked the door and carried a mostly-sleeping DJ into the darkened foyer. "I'm just gonna put the sleep monster to bed."

"Monsterrr," DJ mumbled into his shoulder.

"That's you, you're the monster, that's why no other monsters will come in your room," Tony told him, and Steve smiled, passing over DJ's suitcase, which was a whely-bag decorated with a pattern of dancing cartoon fruits. He slipped past Tony and down the hall to the bedroom, digging in the drawer Tony had offered him for a pair of clean pyjamas. He didn't think anything more strenuous than sleeping was on the menu for tonight.

By the time he'd washed his face and hands, pulled on the pyjamas, and turned down the bed, Tony still hadn't returned; Steve crept out of the bedroom silently and peered through the cracked door of what he'd always assumed was a storage room, maybe an office.

It looked like it once had been -- there was a desk and a computer chair in the corner, and a huge bookcase full of cookbooks and binders next to it -- but clearly it had been recently redecorated. A
nightlight threw constellations onto the ceiling, and a largish child's bed at the moment held both DJ, almost asleep, and Tony, lying on his back, legs too long for the bed, knees bent and feet on the floor. There were posters on the walls, a mix of Star Wars and animated cartoons, and a glow-in-the-dark periodic table chart over the headboard. A lamp shaped like a mushroom glowed gently on the bedside table.

"...No other Knight in all the land
Could do the things which he could do.
Not only did he understand
The way to polish swords, but knew
What remedy a Knight should seek
Whose armor had begun to squeak."

Tony's voice was slower than usual, measured, light in tone as he read from the book in his hands; DJ was on his side, staring at him with sleepy concentration.

"And if he didn't fight too much,
It wasn't that he did not care
For blips and bufferings and such,
But felt that it was hardly fair
To risk, by frequent injuries,
A brain as delicate as his."

DJ's eyes wavered from Tony, and Steve caught his gaze through the cracked door; he lifted a finger to his lips, and DJ blinked in acknowledgement, attention drifting back to Tony before he closed his eyes.

Steve backed away silently and went back to the bedroom, busying himself with folding his clothes and throwing his apron in the linen hamper. Tony returned soon enough, shed his clothes down to his boxer-briefs, and crawled into bed wordlessly, back to Steve, with an exhausted huff.

Steve slid into the bed carefully, reaching out a hand to rest on Tony's hip. When he didn't object, Steve slid it around to his belly and pulled him closer, until their bodies were pressed together. He felt Tony relax into him slowly.

"I'm gonna let this go," Steve said into his neck, and Tony tensed all over again. "I am. But I need to know if you really thought I'd ditch out on you because you had a kid."

"That's what you think this is about," Tony said.

"Well, you're not ashamed of him, you obviously love him. So either you don't think I'm a part of your life to that extent, which I am working hard to believe isn't true, or you thought I'd see DJ and bolt."

Tony was silent for a long time, until Steve wondered if he'd decided to just ignore it and go to sleep. Finally he inhaled.

"It's not that I thought you would, so much as that nearly everyone has," Tony said.

"Like who? Not Bruce or Pepper -- not anyone at TOBRU."

"No, but...do you know about me and the pizza monstrosity?"

They hadn't talked about it ever, the fact that Tony had once been head chef at the Big Star Pizza test kitchens, that he'd once been the CEO-in-training for the chain that his father had founded. "Natasha
told me."

"Thought it might've been her if it was anyone," Tony agreed. "I mean I'm on Wikipedia in the Big Star entry, but you're too innocent to have gone looking for me on Google."

"Hey now."

"Well, did you?"

"No," Steve admitted.

"Anyway, I didn't leave Big Star because of DJ, not directly, but he was the catalyst," Tony said. "When he...happened...it was sort of...a last straw. That sounds awful, I don't mean it that way."

"No, I get it. Kids change things."

"Yeah. I sold my shares to Dad's business partner, I handed off duties, I left...and nobody came with me. Nobody I talked to about my ideas for TOBRU, nobody I worked with. Most of them stopped talking to me. The woman I was seeing at the time saw DJ and ran. The only one who stood by me was my friend Rhod, and he wasn't at Big Star to begin with. So experience has taught me that when DJ shows up, people leave, and -- I didn't want you to be one of them. I didn't want that to be something you did."

Ah. That was clearer. Tony hadn't wanted to find out if Steve was the kind of person who would run. He hadn't wanted Steve to be someone who did that.

"People who leave me because of DJ don't deserve to get to stay," Tony added. "He comes first. Forever."

"That's how it should be," Steve agreed.

"Anyway, the jokes on all of them, DJ's their boss now," Tony said, dry amusement in his voice.

"What?" Steve asked.

"Dad left me fifty-one percent of Big Star Holding Group's voting rights stock when he died. Thirty percent went into a trust in case I had kids. Dad was...dynastically minded. I control it, but only until my oldest child turns eighteen. I couldn't sign that over when I left, only the other twenty-one percent."

"So DJ owns thirty percent of the biggest pizza chain in the country."

"If he wants it. If he doesn't, we'll sell it and blow the proceeds," Tony said. "It's already accruing dividends for him, they're going into a college fund. If he wants to go to college, anyhow."

"What does he want to be when he grows up?"

"At the moment? A rocketship."

"Like an astronaut?"

"No, an actual rocketship," Tony said. "In the meantime, he's the Pepperoni Heir."


"The Extra Large Baron."
"Duke Of Delivery."

"Tyrant of Takeout."

"Lord High Extra-Cheese Executioner," Steve said, and Tony made a high, half-suppressed sound that was distinctly giggle-like. "If it helps, I'm not going anywhere. I like him, Tony."

"Good, because he really likes you. You've made an indelible first impression."

"Hmm. I suspect his dad talked me up a little."

"I told only the truth. I don't know why he thinks you're so great, he knows you abandoned your restaurant and spend all your time making ethically-stir-fried seitan for the homeless."

"Well, unethical stir-fry is just the worst."

Tony let out a sigh that was not unlike DJ's, and relaxed that last inch. Steve closed his eyes.

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Tony hated mornings. But he found them to be slightly more tolerable when they involved fresh brewed coffee, fresh baked pastries and/or a warm, willing body in his bed.

He pried one eye open, sniffing hopefully. The first hints of dark, rich coffee aroma hung heavy in the crisp morning air. He considered getting up, but the heavy arm around his waist and the solid body curled against his back was far more tempting.

It said a lot about Steve Rogers’ charms that Tony was willing to put off coffee to enjoy them.

He shifted, pressing back into the solid resistance of Steve’s body. It didn’t take much; Steve was a light sleeper by nature. Tony arched his back, nudging his ass into Steve’s hips, pleased with the immediate and gratifying response that got.

“Morning,” Tony whispered, and Steve’s arms tightened around him. He mumbled something into Tony’s hair, sleepy and incoherent, and Tony grinned. “Isn’t your arm asleep?”

“No,” Steve said, nuzzling at the short hairs at the nape of Tony’s neck. Tony tipped his head forward, giving him better access. Heat curled through him, his breathing going rough, his eyes falling shut.

“Sleep well?” he asked, and Steve’s fingers were slipping under the hem of his shirt, rough, calloused fingertips sliding over the sensitive skin of Tony’s stomach.

“Mmmm,” Steve said, and Tony took advantage of the fact that he clearly wasn’t awake yet, twisting in his arms and pushing him over. Steve went onto his back easily enough, his blue eyes dark and his face flushed. He smiled up at Tony, so adorably happy that Tony wanted to pin him down and do such dirty things to him.

He had a problem.

“Mmmm,” Tony said, his fingers tugging on the waistband of Steve’s shorts. “Why are you wearing clothes?”

“Pancakes?”

Tony’s breath left him in a sound perilously close to a yelp. Steve jerked backwards, his head
slamming with an audible thump against the headboard. They both rolled over with a complete lack of grace, arms and legs tangling in the sheets. It took an embarrassingly long time, but Tony managed to himself into a seated position, the sheets racked up against his belly, with Steve sprawled out on his stomach next to him. His face was bright red, his arms wrapped tight around his pillow.

“Pancakes,” DJ repeated, his arms folded on the edge of the bed, his big brown eyes peering over the edge of the tumbled blankets. He looked hopeful.

“Right,” Tony said, a little too loud. “That’s RIGHT. Pancakes. Pancakes for my kid, who is here, right now, who got dropped off last night, and who is here now and would like some pancakes. And with whom I will be having a long discussion about the importance of KNOCKING in the near future.”

DJ blinked up at him, his brow furrowed. “Promised,” he pointed out.

“I did. That is something I did. I promised you pancakes,” Tony said, yanking the sheets a little higher on his belly, one fist held holding the fabric in place at his waist. “And pancakes you shall have.” He exhaled. “Can you go to the kitchen and pull down the red recipe file for me and choose the pancakes you want?”

DJ’s eyes lit up. “Blueberry,” he said.

“We had blueberry last time,” Tony said. “Remember? You got blueberry…” He shuddered. “Everywhere.”

“Blueberry,” DJ said, and bounced towards the door, his bare feet slapping against the polished wood floor.

“There are other kinds of pancakes, brat!” Tony called after him.

DJ’s head poked back into the room. “Nope,” he said, and disappeared again.

“Brat,” Tony mumbled, as Steve buried his face in his pillow. Tony glared down at him. “Are you laughing at me right now?” he asked.

What was obviously laughter floated up to him, and Tony grabbed a pillow, smacking Steve in the head with it. “I’d like to see you do better,” he said, as Steve rolled over, laughing out loud now as he tried to fend off Tony’s pillow.

Steve’s big hand closed on the pillow, tugging it out of Tony’s hand and tossing it behind him. “I don’t know, you never made me pancakes,” he said, grinning up at Tony. “I was lucky to get eggs.”

“Your fault,” Tony said, leaning over him. Steve’s cheeks were still pink, the flush extending down over his chest, and Tony set a hand there, over his breastbone, where his skin was hot to the touch.

Steve arched an eyebrow. “Yeah?” he asked, and his mouth was the sweetest temptation Tony had ever seen.

“You wear me out,” Tony said, his head dipping down, until his lips were almost touching Steve’s. “I need protein, after a night with you.” Steve’s laugh was soft and breathy, a physical pressure against his skin. “I need salt, and fat, and protein,” Tony said, and Steve arched up, covering the last inch between them to kiss him. “You wear me out, Rogers.”

“I don’t know,” Steve whispered against his mouth, making Tony shudder. “You seem to bear up just fine to me.”
Yeah, that’s because-

“PANCAKES,” DJ yelled from the kitchen, and Steve choked on a laugh.

Reluctantly, Tony pulled away, and Steve’s hands slid along his shoulders, down the length of his arms, to cup Tony’s wrists. There was something intimate about that, about the slow, languid sweep of Steve’s thumb on the inside of his wrist, that threatened to undo him. Tony caught Steve’s hand in his, cradling it in his palm as he brought it to his lips. “I love your hands,” he whispered, burying the words against Steve’s skin, making his breath hitch and his fingers twitch.

“Tony?” Steve asked, his voice rough. “What-

Tony released his hand. “C’mon, you want pancakes? I’ll make you pancakes. Pancakes that’ll make you cry and beg for mercy.”

Steve stretched, pushing himself up as Tony rolled out of bed. For a moment, he seemed content to just sit there, and watch Tony pull on a pair of ragged, worn sweatpants. “I can make hash browns,” he said, running a hand through his hair. Tony paused, glancing back over his shoulder at Steve, who gave him a hopeful smile. “If I won’t get in your way, I mean. I make a mean plate of hash browns.”

Tony shifted, ignoring the heat that pooled low in his stomach. “I think I can make space for you,” he said. “You and your giant shoulders.”

“I’ll try to stay in my corner of the stove,” Steve said, pushing the blankets back. “You’re the one who’s all over the place constantly.”

“I have a kitchen. A big, broad, open kitchen that I run and where everyone flees from me at all times,” Tony said, spreading his arms. “I am the master of my domain. You, meanwhile, have a flatiron grill on wheels.”

“And I make a mean plate of hash browns,” Steve said, unbothered. “Also, I like blueberry pancakes.”

“Well, good, because mine are fantastic,” Tony said. He shoved a hand through his hair, considering a shower, and discarding the idea. Expecting his still-new-to-this lover to keep an eye on his son was probably a bit high handed. He grabbed a shirt, yanking it over his head. “I use a sprinkle of cinnamon in the batter, and some lemon juice to-” He stopped, his hands still locked on the hem of his shirt.


“Why do I smell bacon?” Tony asked, a split second before he sprinted towards the door, his heart in his throat. “DJ!”

He took the hallway at full speed, skidding around the corner and into the kitchen. “Don’t touch the-

Tony stopped dead, his heart still going a mile a minute, his hands braced on the door frame. “How the hell did you two get in here?”

“Language!” Jessica said, mock horrified. She was sitting at the worn kitchen table, DJ perched on a stool next to her. Her black and red motorcycle jacket was thrown over the chair behind her, her long black hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. It was tipped with red, flickers of flame on the edge of her dark locks. An open bakery box was on the table in front of her, and she was working her way
through a cinnamon bun almost as big as her head.

“It’s okay, I’ve heard worse.” Carol was at the stove, wearing one of his crisp red and yellow aprons over her black tank top and leather pants. Her blonde hair was trimmed close on the sides, the longer center drawn up and back into a faux mohawk. Bright gold star earrings swung against her neck with each movement of her head. “I found your bacon.”

“And your coffee,” Jessica said, holding up a coffee cup.

“Who let you in?” Tony asked, knowing the answer.

“Me!” DJ said. He was bent over the table, his shoulders hunched, kneeling on his stool. Bits of metal and mechanical innards were spread out in front of him.

“Don’t open the door,” Tony told him. “And is that my toaster?”

“It was,” Jessica said, amused.

“He’ll put it back together,” Carol said, looking up just as Steve pulled up short behind Tony. Carol looked him up and down. “Oh, God, you were right.”

“I told you,” Jessica said. “He’s dating the hot hipster food truck chef.”

“His name is Steve. Be polite,” Tony told them.

“Did we just get a lecture in manners from Tony Stark?” Jessica asked.

“It wasn’t much of a lecture,” Carol said, grinning.

“He doesn’t know much about manners, so-”

“Why are you here?” Tony asked.

Jessica made a pouty face at him. “DJ left his tool kit in the back of the van. We figured we’d do you a favor and bring it by.”

“And cinnamon buns!” Carol said. She flipped the bacon. “Are you planning on making breakfast at any point here?”

“No. Get out,” Tony said.

“I told them. About pancakes,” DJ said.

“Why would you do that?” Tony asked him. He leaned over, pressing a kiss on DJ’s head. “Don’t do that.”

“Too late,” DJ said, gleeful.

“I got that.”


Steve smiled back, his arms crossed over his chest. “I think I would have remembered that, too.”

“Steve, meet Carol Danvers and Jessica Drew,” Tony said, waving a hand in their direction. He
considered kicking them out, but it wasn’t worth the fight. “They’re problem caterers.”

“Hardy-har-har, Stark,” Carol said, grinning down at her pan. “You’re cute.”

“This is true,” Tony said, throwing open the pantry doors.

“Problem caterers?” Steve asked.

“We specialize in difficult jobs,” Jessica mumbled, her mouth full of cinnamon roll. She licked a drip of icing off of her thumb with a flick of her tongue. “Stuff other catering companies don’t want to touch.” She grinned. “We come highly recommended by a lot of wusses.”

“And there are a lot of wusses in this city,” Carol said, propping one hand on her hip. She somehow managed to make Tony’s oversized apron look chic. “It’s like people don’t want to work for their pay.”

“What makes it a difficult job?” Steve asked.

Jessica shrugged. “Wedding where one family is vegetarian and the other isn’t, but they only want one unified menu, and dad’s new wife will notice if there’s tofu in anything. But Aunt Leslie will definitely notice if there’s chicken.”

“Or Great-Uncle Stu’s going to give you a hell of a wedding present, but he wants to have the reception on his yacht,” Carol said with a grin. “His yacht, which doesn’t have a kitchen or even much room for a reception.”

“Or you want to feed everyone Nana’s special lasagna, but she’s too old to cook for two hundred guests, and she won’t give anyone the recipe,” Jessica said. “That one was a disaster.”

“What’s your newest gig?” Tony asked, piling ingredients on the butcher block island, laying them out with precision.

“Political fund raiser,” Carol said, flipping the bacon with quick, easy movements of her hand. “We’re their third try to get a caterer, and pretty much their last hope. They’re trying to look eco friendly, so they only want ingredients sourced from within fifty miles, all recycled place settings, bamboo tablecloths.”

“All that shhhhhhi- Stuff,” Jessica said, casting a quick glance in DJ’s direction. “It’s going to be a pain.”

“Yeah, but that’s almost common now,” Tony said. He pulled a bin of eggs, washed and stacked, out of the fridge, and tucked the milk in the crook of his arm. “What’s the real problem?”

“The candidate hit on me,” Jessica said, yawning.

Tony winced. “Well, that’s-”

“And his wife hit on me,” Carol said.

“In front of each other?” Tony asked, laying everything out on the counter.

“Don’t be gauche,” Jessica said, flipping a hand through the air. “They did the decent thing and kept it behind each other’s backs.”

“Still, it’s a powder keg, and if we get through a sit down dinner for two hundred without a food fight or a tabloid scandal, it’ll be a miracle,” Carol said. She sounded gleeful, her eyes dancing as she
drained the thick rashers of bacon. “I’m pushing hard for things that are soft and non-staining so when the inevitable happens, at least the dry cleaning bills will be under control.”

“Nothing else will be, but the dry cleaning will,” Jessica said. She grinned at Steve, who looked a little shell-shocked. “We get paid in advance.”

“Preferably in cash,” Carol said. She threw up a double v-for-victory sign, hip cocked and head tossed to the side. Her hair barely moved.

“I guess I would, too,” he said, a smile curling the edges of his lips.

Tony, giving in with something approaching dignity, went for the recipe file. “Fine, you may have breakfast.”

“Aw, thank you, your majesty,” Jess said.

“Only because the kid likes you,” Tony told her. “no other reason.”

“Does it get me pancakes?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t care why.”
Chapter 2

Steve wasn't...well, it wasn't that he was awful in social situations, but he knew himself, and he knew he wasn't great, either. Running the hatch at War on Hunger was one thing, that was basically scripted and people automatically came to the hatch liking you. Meeting new people half-lucid and still adjusting to the presence of a small child in the house, that was different.

He kept quiet, watching Tony banter easily with Carol and Jessica, smiling faintly. He also kept one eye on DJ, who had pulled an entire toaster to pieces and didn't seem at all fazed by small parts or sharp metal edges. He was examining the heating coils interestingly, eyes narrowed.

"Where's your fat catcher?" Carol asked, lifting the bacon onto a plate and popping a foil tent over it, leaning over to put it in the oven.

"Oh, leave the fat in the pan," Steve said, before Tony could speak. Carol glanced over her shoulder at him. "I'll, um, hash browns," he said, reddening.

"Hash browns fried in bacon fat. Is he trying to kill you for your money?" Jessica asked Tony, a teasing look in her eye.

"He knows what I love," Tony replied, bent over the mixing bowl, sifting industriously. "DJ, will you come help crack the eggs?"

DJ hopped off the stool and made a beeline, not for Tony but for the sink. "Up, up, please," he said, and Steve hoisted him by his waist so that he could wash bread crumbs and grease off his hands. He dried them on his pajama shirt, and Tony gave Steve an amused look as DJ reached for the eggs. He tossed Steve a potato. "Get hashin'!"

"So, Steve," Jessica said, as Steve began peeling the potatoes, setting a pan on the stove to heat water for blanching. "We'd ask for your life story but we already saw it on YouTube."

"That video is very prejudicial," Steve said.

"What's it like, dating a celebrity, Tony?" Carol asked, cocking a hip against the counter and taking a cinnamon roll out of the bakery box.

"Not nearly as glamorous as I was led to believe, I honestly feel lied to," Tony said, and Steve glanced sidelong and saw an egg spattered on the floor.

"It's okay, kiddo, plenty more where that came from," Tony said, as DJ stared down at the egg, stricken.

"I got it," Carol said, crouching to wipe up the egg with a sponge. "Better shell on the floor than in the batter, huh?"

Steve watched, momentarily distracted from the potatoes, as Tony took DJ's hand in his and guided it to the edge of the table, cracking it against the flat board, then lifted it up and deftly parted the two halves over the bowl.

"Hey, hipster, choose wisely," Jessica said, as she dangled a box grater from one hand, drawing Steve's attention. "Potatoes: grater or Cuisinart?"
DJ's head whipped around at the word *Cuisinart.* Steve lifted an eyebrow at Tony, who nodded.

"Cuisinart, I think," he said, reaching up to take it from the shelf. "DJ, you want to help me shred?"

He managed to hold a half-decent conversation with the others while he carefully cut the potatoes in half, fitted one to the feeder-fork, and put the shredding blade into the machine. DJ climbed up on the counter, and despite Tony's cry of "Hey, feet on the granite!" crouched in front of the Cuisinart, watching intently as Steve turned it on. The blade spun and Steve didn't take his eyes off DJ as he helped him feed the potato into the shredder.

"Careful, careful with little hands," Carol said, as Steve and DJ fitted the second piece of potato onto the feeder fork. DJ pushed it gently into the lid of the shredder and beamed gleefully as it flung grated potato all over the inside of the bowl.

"Actually, I do have a ton of questions about your truck," Jessica said, as the last of the potato went into the bowl. Steve hefted DJ to the floor and took the lid off, pouring the boiling water straight in to blanch the shreds.

"Sure, fire away," Steve said.

"It's a hybrid," Tony said, voice teasing.

"What are the BTUs like on your stove?" Jessica said, ignoring him. "I've heard some trucks have trouble getting decent heat."

"Well, I'm mostly reheating, on the stove," Steve said. "I only have the two burners."

"Two burners," Carol repeated, looking skeptical.

"Most of what I make hot is either in the hot tray or on the griddle. Nice big griddle," Steve said. "I mean I've got one at twelve thousand for pasta and one at five thousand for reheating but I haven't found a need for more. Even the twelve thousand feels a little macho for how I'm using it."

"Je -- eepers, it's like CAMPING," Tony said.

"I'm not making duck spheres in hoisin foam," Steve retorted. Tony got a thoughtful look. "No duck spheres, Tony."

"It's just a meatball," Tony said. "But if you call it a sphere you can charge four times the price for it. We should do a molecular IKEA night. Duck spheres and cheese noodles."

"Macaroni and meatballs?" Jessica asked.

"IKEA night," Tony repeated.


"Yeah, buddy, Ektorp," Carol agreed. "What kind of pantry do you keep onboard, Steve?"

"Basics, in relatively small amounts. I try to have as much pre-made as I can of the hot stuff before I go out, and the sandwich components and such in the trays. The raw ingredients onboard are usually mostly for if I run out of something." Steve shrugged. "It's a lot like catering on a smaller, slower-motion scale. Are you thinking of getting into the truck business?" he asked, straining the hash browns out of the water and taking out a clean towel to spread them on, pressing the starchy water out of them.
"Just curious. It looks like a lot of fun," Jessica said.

"Well, it's a marathon, not a sprint, that's for sure," Steve said. He lit the burner under the pan full of bacon fat and added a little butter for makeweight. At the griddle on the other side of the stove, Tony was pouring the first of the pancakes, DJ watching intently. Steve noticed DJ also had a handful of blueberries clutched to his pajama shirt. "But, I don't know, I like it more than working in a standard kitchen. You do all the grunt work and then it's done, and for most of the day you're doing final prep and plating, which is the part I liked best anyway. Well, after making the menus, that was the most fun," he added nostalgically.

"Steve likes being boss," Tony said, testing the edge of a pancake.


"And you're finding it pretty sustainable?" Carol asked.

"Well, I'll never get rich off it, but I do all right. I've got it down to very little wastage, especially with all the soup-kitchen stuff. End of the day, nearly everything left over goes to someone who needs it, and I've got this program going..." Steve broke off briefly, the pan crackling and sizzling as he pressed the potatoes into it, "...where people pay me throughout the day for an extra sandwich, and those go to folks who can't afford it."

"That's nice," Jessica said. "We try to do what we can but if you've ever seen catering leftovers..."

"The mess some people make of a buffet," Carol agreed. Steve shook salt and pepper over the hash browns.

"Hey DJ, you like onion?" Steve asked. DJ nodded. "Anyone else object?"

"Onion powder?" Jessica asked, as Steve reached into the spice cupboard. "One, Tony, why do you have onion powder in your home -- "

"Screw you, I like it on fries," Tony replied amiably.

"Two, why on earth wouldn't you use fresh onions in hash browns?" Carol finished.

"It's milder," Steve said. "I like just a hint. I don't want a big chunk of onion in my perfectly nice potatoes."

"That's right, you're the supertaster," Jessica said. "What's that like?"

"A trial," Steve replied, a dry grin on his face. "Makes for very picky eating. When I was a kid I lived on mashed potatoes and plain chicken."

"No lumps," DJ told him. His clutch of blueberries was now roughly the consistency of jam, and spreading a purplish stain on his shirt.

"That's right, lumpy potatoes are strictly for paying customers," Steve agreed. "Hey, you want a bowl for your blueberries there?"

Tony looked down and a brief expression of pained tolerance crossed his face.

"No," DJ said with a giggle.

Tony seemed to be deciding to deliberately ignore the mess until after breakfast, as he took a plate down and flipped two pancakes onto it, then passed it to Steve, who tweaked some bacon out of the
oven and cut a wedge of hash brown. He offered it to DJ, who placed his smashed blueberries carefully on top of the bacon and then carried it to the kitchen table, where Carol was setting out the butter dish, and a little carafe of syrup warmed in the microwave.

They had a leisurely breakfast, although DJ practically inhaled his pancakes and ate all the crispy bits off his potatoes and then returned to the toaster, quietly and efficiently rebuilding it while the adults traded horror stories about bad chefs and angry catering clients and the odd encounter with a Food Network executive. By the time they'd finished eating, the toaster was reassembled and Tony was examining it.

"If I plug this in, is it going to explode?" he asked. DJ shook his head solemnly and then climbed down off his chair. "That's a shame, you know I love a good explosion," Tony called after him, as DJ went to the bread box, delicately taking two slices of potato bread out and carrying them back to the toaster. Tony plugged the toaster in and watched as DJ inserted the bread.

"You have to lower the lever," Steve started to say, but then he noticed the lever for lowering the bread into the toaster was already down. As soon as the bread went in, the coils turned red, as if the toaster was now capable of sensing the presence of something that should be toasted.

Steve blinked at Tony, who shrugged, cuddling DJ back against his chest with one hand. All four adults watched the toaster intently. After about thirty seconds, there was a soft noise and perfectly-toasted bread shot out of the slots in two gentle arcs, landing on the table on either side of the toaster.

DJ spread his hands, clearly waiting for applause.

"If there were any doubt at all he's yours," Steve said in Tony's ear, over Jessica and Carol's clapping.

"Never was," Tony replied with a grin. "Okay, mad scientist, let's get you washed and dressed, we have to go into TOBRU for a few minutes and take Steve back to collect his truck. Jess, Carol, unless you're planning to make dinner, clear out."

"Rude," Jess said, tweaking the last three pancakes from the serving platter and tucking them away in her purse with the toast DJ had made.

"Saw that," Tony called.

"Don't care!" Jess said cheerily.

"Out of my house."

"We have to pick up supplies," Carol agreed, carrying plates to the sink. "DJ, be good. Steve, very nice to meet you," she added, offering her hand. She had a firm grip he liked.

"You as well," he said, including Jessica with a glance in her direction. "I'm sure we'll meet again at some point. Feel free to stop by War On Hunger anytime, I'll give you the nickel tour."

"Bye, Tony! Bye, DJ!" Jessica called, as running water in the bathroom indicated DJ's commemorative blueberries were about to be washed away.

"Bye thank you!" DJ's voice floated back. Steve smiled to himself and headed for the bedroom, to dress and prepare for the day.

*
“Get out.”

Tony paused halfway through the door, his coffee cup at his lips. “I just got here,” he said, arching an eyebrow. “And-” He leaned back out, checking the door. “This is my office. It’s got my name on the door and everything.” He gestured at the wooden panel. “Not just ‘chef’ or ‘your majesty’ or ‘our exalted overlord,’ it actually does have my name right there, you can see.”

Bruce let his head fall forward into the cradle of his hands. “You’re taking the weekend off,” he said, his voice dark. “Long weekend. Three days. You are getting us cheese.”

Tony considered that. “I was,” he agreed, “but then-”

“You are getting us cheese,” Bruce said.

“I like cheese as much as the next guy, probably more than the next guy,” Tony said, “but you seem to be fixated on cheese for reasons that I’m not understanding here, help me out, is the cheese code for something else? Are you under investigation by the IRS or the NSA or some other alphabet soup organization? Are they after the ‘cheese’?” He tried to make finger quotes around the word and ended up nearly dumping coffee down the front of his shirt. “Am I the cheese?”

“I need a vacation,” Bruce mumbled into his hands.

“That would be nice,” Tony agreed. Since Bruce was showing no inclination towards getting out of his desk chair, he took a seat in the visitor’s chair. It was as uncomfortable as he remembered. He bounced up and down in it, trying to find a better angle for his ass. “Maybe a nice cruise, you seem stressed, something with a yoga studio overlooking a pool or the beach or a volcano, I don’t know, what kind of a vacation are you aiming for here? You’re not really a Coney Island kind of guy, or maybe you are? Maybe you are. Coney Island’s a thing, I know-”

Bruce’s hands slapped down on the surface of the desk. “I need a vacation from you,” he said. He stared at Tony, his eyebrows pulled down low over his eyes. “If that involves Coney Island, I’ll do it.”

Tony considered that. “We can rearrange the calendar for later on in the month, and-”

“No. No, no, no, no,” Bruce said, holding his hands up, waving them in front of him. “No. You. You are on vacation this weekend.”

“I was,” Tony said.

Bruce leaned forward. “You ARE.”

Tony sipped his coffee. Bruce stared at him. Tony put the cup down. “I’m not feeling the love here, big guy,” he said.

“Tony, I do love you, I do. I’d just love you a lot more if I could have a few days without having to deal with you,” Bruce said.

“I have new menu ideas,” Tony said.

“That’s the sort of thing I need a break from,” Bruce said. He slumped back in his seat. “Seriously, Tony, give the kitchen staff a break. Go get some cheese, or rework the chorizo tamales that you won’t give up on no matter how many times we tell you that it is not a good idea and that not even you could get it to work.”
“Your doubt just gives me strength,” Tony said.

“That’s, that’s what I’m afraid of.” Bruce reached across the desk, picking up Tony’s cup.

“It’s the good stuff,” Tony warned, and Bruce paused, the cup hovering awkwardly in front of his mouth. Then, his eyes narrowing, he took a quick gulp.

Tony leaned back in his chair as Bruce doubled over, coughing hard enough to make his eyes water. “What I’m hearing here,” he mused, “is that you’d like me to take the night off.”

“No,” Bruce gasped. “I want you to take the vacation you’ve been obsessing over for the last month. Go. Come back when you’re less manic, and hopefully have some cheese so that we can use the menus you’ve been obsessing over for the last two months.”

“Yeah, but I needed the time off so I could go get DJ,” Tony pointed out. “Now I don’t have to. Problem solved.”

“New problem: you’re still here,” Bruce said, risking another sip. He managed not to gag on this one. Tony took the cup away from him anyway. “Look, so DJ’s here. Great. Take him with you. Family road trip.”

Tony frowned. “To where?”

“Does it matter? Coney Island. Tony, anywhere’s better than here. What’s your plan right now?” Bruce asked. He rubbed his forehead with tense fingers. “To bring him here every night and hope that he and Peter don’t light anything on fire? Because, I’m, I’m not sure that’s a good plan.”

“The fire extinguishers were just checked,” Tony said. Bruce gave him a look, and he groaned, his head falling back. “Okay. I don’t know. I don’t know what the plan is. I have no plan. I had a plan, and the lesbian catering mafia had to muddle it up.”

“Someday I will be around when you slip and call them that to their face,” Bruce said. Tony waved him off. “Carol will love it and Jessica likes hitting on me too much to actually hit me.” He braced a foot on the edge of the desk. “Look, give me a few hours to figure this out, as my life is a disaster right now.”

Bruce nodded. “Tony?”

“Bruce?”

“Load your son into the car and head for the hills,” Bruce said. “Heck, shoot the moon, ask Steve to tag along.”

Tony flinched. “Yeah, that’s a great idea, that’s fantastic, Bruce, really.” He mimed holding a phone to his ear. “‘Hey, Steve, want to spend three days locked in a car with me and a slightly hyperactive six year old? What, not a chance in hell? Well, that’s a shock to absolutely no one.’”

Bruce stood. “You’ll never know until you try,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but I get to maintain the illusion of having a relationship for that much longer!” Tony said. Bruce patted him on the head as he headed out the door. “That was condescending.”

Bruce paused in the doorway, his head tipped forward. “Tony?”

“What?”
He reached up and pulled his glasses off of his nose, pointing them in Tony’s direction. “Get out.”

“I’m going to buy you out, you sad sack mad scientist!” Tony yelled after him.

“The whole staff would quit,” Bruce said, unperturbed.

“I don’t need any of you. I can run this place on my own. You’re- Really, you are just holding me back!” Tony said, and it was probably for the best that Bruce had already left and no one was listening to him anymore.

It was always better if no one was around to hold him to the stupid shit he said.

He stood, crossing his office to kick the door closed. It shut with a satisfying bang, and he stalked back to his desk. “Bruce has stupid ideas,” he mumbled to himself. “About relationships.” He grabbed a file from the blotter, flipping it open. “And menus. What the hell is this nonsense?”

Burying himself in menus, recipes and invoices, he managed to avoid thinking about anything but the possibility of a truffle risotto reduction for about half an hour. Then a timid knock on the door interrupted his thought process, and he gave the uncaring panel a glare. “What?”

Peter poked his head in. “Dinner prep, chef,” he said, his voice apologetic. “Can you-”

“Yes, right, kidlet.” Tony pushed his chair away from his desk as DJ came hopping into the office. “Did we destroy anything?” he asked.

“Yes!” DJ said, grinning up at him.

“Wrong answer,” Tony said, holding his hands out. “Peter-”

“Dinner prep, chef,” Peter repeated in a rush before he ducked back out. The door shut, and Tony groaned.

“Don’t ruin the restaurant kid,” he said, scooping DJ up, and swinging him through the air. “Your dad needs it.”

A few more steps, a spin or two, and then he was collapsing down to the carpet, DJ landing heavily on his chest. “Hi,” he said, when he got his breath back.

DJ folded his arms on Tony’s chest and balanced his chin on them. “Hi,” he said, his cheeks pink, his dark eyes dancing.

Tony reached up, pushing DJ’s hair back. “So,” he said, trying not to sound like this mattered. “I’ve got a few days off. I was thinking, maybe we can head upstate? Wanna take a road trip? We can find an apple festival or something, and you can eat your weight in cider doughnuts, and I can be a cheese snob.”

DJ considered that, long lashes dipping low over his eyes. “Steve?”

“No, just you and me.”

“You, me, and Steve,” DJ said.

“Did Bruce put you up to this?” Tony flicked his nose with one finger, making DJ giggle. “You like him, huh?”

DJ nodded. “You, too.”
“Yes, I like him, too.” Tony sat up, tumbling DJ into his lap. “He’s got the truck, kidlet. I set up my
time off. Bruce is going to be taking care of things, and the rest of the staff will have to work super
hard to make up for not having me here. Steve works alone, he doesn’t have anyone to cover for
him.”

DJ’s lower lip poked out. “You, and me, and Steve,” he repeated, and Tony laughed.

“Okay, tell you what. Be good, read and play on your tablet and color with Peter for the rest of the
evening and I’ll ask him. But—” He drew the word out, leaning in until they were almost nose to nose.
“If he says he can’t, you’ll accept that. Okay?” He held up a hand. “Do we have a deal?”

DJ gave him a high five. “Deal,” he agreed.

Tony peered at him “You are totally lying, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” DJ allowed.

“Right.” Tony checked his watch. Steve was probably setting up shop. He had just enough time to
go outside, get rejected, make small talk, and be back in time to ramp up for the dinner rush. He took
a deep breath, and let it out in a rush. “Okay. I’m going to have Peter come sit with you for a few
minutes, all right?” He got up, boosting DJ into his desk chair. “Sit there. Act important. Peter’s
easily intimidated.”

DJ gave him a grin, folding his hands on the blotter. Tony fumbled his phone out of his pocket,
taking a picture. “I’m getting that framed,” he said. “Stay there.”

Ducking through the kitchen, he called, “Peter, if he breaks anything, I’m taking it out of your
paycheck,” and then slipped out the back door. There was some faint, high pitched whining echoing
behind him, but he ignored it.

Steve’s familiar bright blue truck was parked in its usual spot, and Tony jogged in that direction. Sam
was setting up next door, and Tony gave him a wave.

“When do I get to meet the newest staff member of TOBRU?” Sam called, grinning at him.

“He’s still in training,” Tony called back. “I’ll see if I can catch a break, I’ll bring him out tonight
between seatings. Save him an order of sweet potato tots.”

“Will do.”

Steve, hearing the discussion, leaned out of the hatch of his truck, smiling down at him. “Hey,
how’s-”

Tony grabbed the window ledge. “I took a couple of days off, a long weekend, we scheduled it
because I was going to be picking up DJ, but now I don’t have to pick up DJ, he’s already here, but
Bruce is being a, well, I’m going to go with an ungrateful prima donna and he’s implying that I
should really take my vacation even though I don’t particularly need or want a vacation, but here we
are.” Steve’s eyebrows were arching upwards, more with each passing word, and Tony stopped, just
long enough to suck in another breath. “So I figured I could grab Deej and head for the hills, literally
in this case, see if I can’t find something to do, or at least get some cheese so our menus for the next
month aren’t a complete waste, and I thought maybe you’d want to come.

“Except I know you can’t, truck and sandwiches and people who depend on you, all of that, I get
that, still, thought I’d ask, because DJ likes you and I” His shoulders rose and fell in a half shrug. “I
thought you might want to spend three days trapped in a car with a small child kicking the back of
your seat while we wandered from farm stand to farm stand and maybe, super exciting concept, maybe we’ll find a pick your own orchard with a barn yard petting zoo, because wow, living the
good life.”

He was staring at Steve and trying his best not to look like he was staring at Steve, but he’d never
been particularly good at reading people. Especially not Steve. He gave a nod. “Right. Thought I
should offer, but that’s fine, I can’t imagine why you’d turn down something this ‘fun.’” He made
finger quotes around the words. “Want to grab a smoothie after closing?”

Steve’s mouth opened, then closed. “Did you just,” he said, bracing one elbow on the serving
counter, “invite me, make excuses for me, and decide I wasn’t coming, all before I managed to get a
word in edgewise?” he asked.

Tony considered that. “Not my fault that you think before you talk,” he pointed out, tucking his
hands under his folded arms. “I get bored, waiting for you to fill the silence.”

“I’ve never heard silence in your vicinity,” Steve said, his mouth curling up in a smile. “Ever.”

“Yeah, well.” Tony shrugged again. “It’s not like-”

The quick burst of a car horn brought both of their heads around, just in time to see Carol’s familiar
SUV roll into the parking lot. Jessica leaned out of the passenger side window, her oversized
sunglasses perched low on her nose, her arms folded on the window frame. “Delivery!” she called,
as Carol pulled up next to them.

Carol put it in park and slipped out from behind the wheel. “We interrupting?” she asked, tipping her
head forward so she could glance at Tony over the top of her aviators.

“Yes,” Tony said.

“Good, just how we like it.” Carol gave Steve a flick of a salute. “How goes the war, Steve?”

“I’m holding my own,” he said, but his attention was on the back of the SUV, where Jessica was
pulling out boxes and crates of food, stacking them up on the sidewalk. “What’s all this?” He pushed
away from the window, coming around and hopping out the back door. He helped Jessica shift a
large box, and she whipped the cover off.

“This,” she said, her eyes dancing, “is our latest problem catering job.”

“Oh, this is going to be good,” Tony asked, interested despite himself. There was a large box of
mushrooms that he was already coveting. “What happened?”

"So," Carol said, drawing out the word. "We got the contract signed-"

"Because we're smart like that," Jessica said. "Got our deposit. Bought the first load of locally
sourced organic produce."

"Mixed greens, some turnips, beets, lots of squash, a couple of loads of heirloom potatoes," Carol
said, her arms crossed over her chest. "Tomatoes, late season corn, nothing exciting, but good, solid
veg. We showed up to do the initial menu approval-"

"At the same time as the good Congressman's hysterical assistant," Jessica said, her face split in a
broad grin. "Apparently, he's been sleeping around on his wife."

"With his previous caterer," Carol said. She tapped a finger against her lips. "Considering his
'America First, Family First' campaign slogan, it's a problem."

"Not just because of the adultery, but because Jean-Paul's from Quebec." Jess tossed a beet in the air and caught it with a flick of her fingers. "So it was neither family first nor America first. They are a NATO partner, but-"

"So there was a lot of screaming, and then the assistant quit-"

"He might've been sleeping with her, too, but that's just conjecture on our part," Jess interjected, digging through the boxes. "Oh, the chard…"

"The lovely Mrs. Congressman said she was not dealing with this public humiliation any more, she stomped out, he stomped out, the assistant was crying on the couch, so we gave her the rest of the breakfast pastries and made her some tea-"

"I gave her a shot of Jose Cuervo, better than tea," Jessica said, looking up. "Not better than a decent cinnamon roll, but less fattening."

"Can you shut up for five seconds?" Carol asked her.

Jessica considered that. "No," she said with a grin.

"Right, anyway," Carol said, "the event is most assuredly off, we've cashed our deposit check at the bank of issue, as our contract gives us the right to do if the event is canceled for a situation outside of our control-"

"And this definitely is outside of our control. Though, we should probably stop taking jobs from Jean-Paul. This is the third time he's been kicked to the curb for sleeping with the client."

"But after him, we seem almost staid," Carol said. "It's helpful."

"True. But, we asked if they wanted the produce, and the Missus tried to throw a cabbage at the Congressman, and he told us to get all of it out of his house. His soon to be ex-assistant was kind enough to sign over the shipment as a charitable donation to your efforts to feed the underprivileged of this great city of New York."

Jess threw her hands in the air, shaking beet tops like pompoms. "And that's how he got laid, we got paid, and you got-" Her head tipped towards the boxes of vegetables. "Fricasseed?"

"Kinda forced," Carol told her. "Emily Dickinson, you're not."

"Yeah, but she couldn't pull off this top."

"That is true." Carol nodded at the boxes. "Figured that you could get at least a good minestrone soup out of it. Some beans, maybe a little chicken-"

"Borchst and veggie stir fry and vegetable soup," Jessica said. "What do you say?"

* *

"I say you should have said 'sauteed'," Steve said, before he thought about it, and Jess held up her hand for a high-five that took him longer to register than it really should have. Carol pinched the bridge of her nose in gentle tolerance.

He swung down out of the truck to inspect the vegetables, nodding over the crates thoughtfully. "Soup for sure. Sam!"
"Yes!" Sam called, eyeballing the heirloom potatoes.

"Dibs on the mushrooms," Tony interjected.

"Relax, I'm not giving mushrooms to a guy running a potato truck," Steve said.

"Potato-mushroom pierogies," Tony said, and then yelped again, "Dibs!"

Steve placed himself directly between Tony and the vegetables. "Okay, rule one of donated vegetables, like actual legal rule, is that you can't sell them in a for-profit establishment. Sam, would you like to take these potatoes and make them into, say, a large batch of potato gnocci that I can put in my vegetable soup and give to the disenfranchised?"

"Yes I would," Sam said, looking at Tony smugly.

"Tony, would you like to accept these mushrooms as a gift of gratitude in return for a small donation?" Steve asked.

Tony looked at him with suspicion in his eyes that Steve was sure he hadn't earned. "What size is small?"

"I need transportation," Steve said. "I have to go scout some pick-your-own fruit places and organic farmstands upstate. My boyfriend was going to take me but then he bailed. Gas and mileage should cover it."

Tony blinked at him. Steve grinned. Catching Tony off-guard didn't happen very often.

"Steve..." he started, and then huffed. "You've got the truck to think about."

"The truck will be fine for a few days. I can take today, make the soup, box it up, give it to Sam to give out. He owes me for all these potatoes," Steve said.

"I can't decide if this is gross or adorable," Jessica stage-whispered to Carol.

"Boys are obtuse about these things," Carol replied, examining one of the potatoes.

"Ooh! Ooh! Wait, I have an idea!" Jess waved an arm in the air. Tony looked at her, eyebrows raised. "We can run the truck! We're out a catering gig, we have like, a week free now, and I already said I wanted to try -- pleaaaase, Carol, run the truck with me," she added.

"I like how she's asking Carol permission and not me," Steve said to Sam.

"From what I'm seeing, I'd do the same," Sam said. "Can I take my potatoes and go make gnocci now?"

Steve waved for him to take the crate, and Sam disappeared back into his truck.

"It'd be a good taste of how things are run," Carol was saying thoughtfully. "But we're not food-truck experienced. Can you teach us what we need to know that fast?"

"Not really much to it if you're just doing the basics for a few days," Steve said. "Sandwiches and soup, some ice cream, beverages. You have catering experience, it's really not that different. Sam'll keep an eye on you."

"These potatoes are starting to really cost me!" Sam yelled from his truck.
"I'll be on your food youtube!" Steve yelled back.

"Hot damn, okay," Sam said.

"So we're good?" Jessica asked, and when Steve nodded, threw her arms around him in a hug. "Thaaaank you!"

Steve, blushing a little at the attention, untangled himself and started to load the vegetables into the truck, stowing them wherever he could find space. Carol climbed into the front of the truck and started familiarizing herself with the controls, and then with the layout of the cooking surfaces and cabinets.

He was just going over the finer points of the menu when there was a rattle of gravel and a banging sound on the wall of the truck. Steve leaned through the open hatch and grinned down.

"Kamala," he said in greeting, as a dark-haired teenaged girl pulled her helmet off. "You are actually just the responsible young adult I wanted to see."

"Uh oh, what do you want from me?" she asked, locking her bike to the rail on his back bumper.

"Kamala, this is Carol and Jessica. Carol, Jessica, this is my part-time truck intern."

"Kamala Khan, the Marvelous Food Trucker In Training," Kamala announced, striking a pose.

"Oh my god, she's adorable," Jessica said to Carol.

"Steve, are you employing child labor?" Carol asked.

"Technically I'm not employed, he doesn't pay me," Kamala said. "But Chef Rogers --"

"You don't make her call you that, do you?" Jessica asked.

"She insists," Steve sighed.

"I'm his apprentice!" Kamala said brightly.

"She saw me on the documentary and the thing about how Erskine apprenticed me when I was fifteen," Steve said. "She decided I needed an apprentice. I have no say. I tried to pay her."

"I'm gonna work my way up! I can chop, sautee, stir-fry, make rice and pasta, and I'm building my own sous-vide machine," Kamala announced.

"Kamala, I need you to listen to me closely," Steve said, and Kamala, who had been examining Carol's uniform with covetous attention, looked up at him carefully. "Jessica and Carol are taking over War on Hunger for a few days. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to make sure they don't blow up my truck."

"Yessir!" Kamala said. "Your earrings are really cute," she added to Carol.

"Thank you," Carol said, amused.

"Can I go say hi to Peter?" Kamala asked.

"Yeah, see if he needs help with DJ," Steve said.

"Who's DJ?"
"You'll find out," Carol told her with a grin. "Nice meeting you, Kamala."

"We're keeping her," Jessica told Steve. "We're going to take her on the road with us."

"You can't kidnap my apprentice."

"I bet she'd go willingly."

"No, you misunderstand, her parents are really strict," Steve said, mouth twitching in a smile. "The only reason her parents let her run around with me, an unattached white boy in his late twenties, is that Sheikh Abdullah gave me his blessing."

"Sheikh Abdullah?"

"Nice guy. Likes himself a sandwich. Halal, of course," Steve said. "You'll know him if he comes around. Anyway, Kamala can help you with anything I left out, but if you kidnap her, her mother will come for you. So -- make sure you keep the truck topped off with the biodiesel, give everything a good scrub every night, and don't kidnap my intern, as adorable as she is. Any questions?"

"Just one," Jess said. "How many potato gnocci do we think I can fit in my mouth at once? I want to find out."

*

Tony let his head fall into the cradle of his palm. "Hitomi..."

"I sent his work with him," she said, calm and collected as always. But under that, there was a bubbling thread of laughter, a rather undignified sense of glee. "I don't know what you want from me, Tony. He knows what he needs to do."

"He finished his work. On the way down. It didn't even last the trip, Hitomi," Tony said. He scraped a hand over his face. "I don't want him to fall behind."

"He's fine. He has that fancy computer you bought him against my wishes--"

"It's an iPad," Tony said, "my waitstaff uses fancier tablets, it's just--"

"He has worksheets and readings on that," she said, ignoring him. "And if he finishes them, there are more books on his online wishlist."

"Am I going to be in trouble for buying him books, too?"

"You may buy him as many books as you'd like," she said, magnanimous about it.

"Thank you," Tony said, trying to hold back a smile. "How about clothes?"

"If you can get him into new clothes, feel free."

"Knock, knock!"

Tony looked up as Obie poked his head through the door. He gave Tony a broad, easy smile, hefting a couple of familiar looking pizza boxes. "Brought you something," he said, laughter running through the words.

Tony held up a finger. "One sec," he mouthed, and waved his hand at the guest chair. Out loud, he continued, "So we're okay with this. He'll be back, right on schedule, I'll just be the one dropping
him off instead of Jessica and Carol."

She made a soft, scoffing noise under her breath. He waited, as patiently as he was able. "This will
be fine," she said at last, and the tension went out of Tony's shoulders. Across his desk, Obie took a
seat, setting the pizzas in front of him. Tony leaned back in his chair. "His classes don't start until
Thursday, in any case. Make sure he does his readings, and please have him call me every night."

"I can do that. Thank you, Hitomi." He dropped the phone onto his desk and rubbed both hands over
his face. "That went well," he said, to no one in particular.

"Did it?"

Obie was studying him, his hands folded in front of his face, his index fingers pressed to his pursed
lips. Tony pointed a finger at him. "Don't start with me," he said.

Obie shook his head. "I didn't say a word," he said, leaning back in his chair. He crossed his legs, his
perfectly tailored suit shifting with the movement. He folded his hands in his lap and gave Tony a
slightly chiding look. "I just don't know why you put up with that."

Tony threw his hands in the air. "Family!" he said, only a little sarcastic about it. He slumped back in
his chair. "It's a hell of a thing."

Obie chuckled. "Yes, it is." He leaned forward, looking at Tony from under the shelter of his brows.
"You are his father. I do not know why you don't-"

"Because she's the only stability he's known," Tony said, sick of this argument already. "Because
he's a little kid, Obie, and if I piss her off and end up in court-"

"You'd win, you're his father, you have rights here, and we have the best legal representation in the
country, I don't see why-"

"Because he'd lose," Tony pushed himself up. "Obie. No matter who wins in court, he'd lose. It's
not-" He shook his head. "He needs more than I can give him right now. He needs a full time,
dedicated parent, and Hitomi can give him that."

Obie shook his head. "He's a Stark," he said, his voice flat. "And he shouldn't be running around the
hill country barefoot with a bunch of chickens, Tony."

"Seemed to work out pretty well for Rumiko," Tony said. He took a deep breath. "And anyway,
how do you see this working out? I sue Hitomi, get sole custody, drag the kid back to New York and
then leave him with an au pair while I spend fourteen hours a day here?" He paused, eyebrows
arching. "Wait, that IS the Stark way."

Obie covered his mouth, trying to hide his smile. "And you turned out just fine," he pointed out, eyes
dancing.

"Let's just say I'd prefer him barefoot and chasing chickens to sitting here alone and watching his
father chase his nanny," Tony said, arms crossed over his chest. "How many of my rather gorgeous
child care providers DID Dad sleep with, by the way?"

Obie held up his hands. "Okay, I surrender, I get it, we're not discussing his legal status right now."

"Ever," Tony corrected. "I love you, Obie, I do, God knows you were the only one on my side often
enough, but this-" He pushed himself upright. "You're just going to have to let me handle it."
"It's not that I don't think you can handle it," Obie said, with that jovial, warm charm that he turned on when he was trying to 'dad' Tony out of one of his moods, "it's just that I think I can handle it better. I'm not so close to it, Tony. I'm not emotionally invested in it."

"And that's why you can't handle it," Tony said. "He deserves someone who's totally, one hundred percent invested."

"And that's you?" Obie asked.

"I'm working on it," Tony said. "Until I've got one hundred percent to give, Hitomi's taking good care of him. She's dedicated, loyal, loving, and despite every reason she has to do otherwise, she's never badmouthed me to him, so-" He stopped spreading his hands.

"Lay off and let you handle it?" Obie filled in.

"Back the fuck off and let me handle it," Tony agreed.

"Fine, fine," Obie said, laughter creeping into the words. He reached for the pizza boxes, his eyes creasing at the corners. "I'll just be taking my pizza back, then."

"Good," Tony said. "It's trash."

Obie opened the box. "Spicy sausage and peppers," he cajoled, leaning over the top, his eyes twinkling. "Your favorite..."

"Ugh, trash," Tony said, reaching for a slice anyway. "God, this is crap, you do know that, right?"

He folded the slice in half and stuffed half of it into his mouth in one gargantuan bite. "Horrid," he mumbled around it.

"Yeah, well, so are your manners, who raised you? Wolves?"

"A fast food mascot," Tony said, wrinkling his nose at the crust. "You changed your fat and yeast ratio. Again."

"Freezes better," Obie said, unconcerned. Tony made a face. "Not your problem anymore, is it?"

"Yeah, yeah." Tony licked the sauce from his thumb. "What're you doing here, Obie?"

"Thought I'd stop by and see youngest Stark," Obie said, closing the pizza box. "Introduce him properly to the family business."

"Oh, great, I get to be there when DJ meets his first piece of chain pizza," Tony said. "Let's go, he and Pete are outside."

Obie stood and picked up the boxes. "Outside?"

"They're hanging around the food trucks, trying to look cool. It's easier for DJ than it is for Peter," Tony said, throwing open the door of his office. He waved a hand at the kitchen staff, who ignored him. Business as usual. "Pete is never going to look cool. Despite his best efforts, or maybe because of his best efforts. It's a curse. A reedy, nerdy curse."

Obie made a noncommittal noise as they headed for the back door. "I still think that allowing those things on your property lowers your cachet," he said, his voice pitched low.

"Did you seriously just use the word cachet?" Tony asked him, pushing his way out the back door. "You sell cardboard pizza to drunks and college students whose taste buds have been burned away
by marijuana. What do you know about cachet?" He glanced over. "I caught your latest commercial, by the way. Whose brilliant idea was it to use footage of Dad green screened into the modern restaurant setup?"

"Mine, thank you. It's testing very well," Obie said, the pizza boxes braced on his hip. Tony gave a snort, and Obie grinned. "Say what you will, Tony, your old man had charisma. Man knew how to sell a pizza."

"He'd be pleased to know that you dragged him out of his grave to sell hot wings and garlic knots, too," Tony said. But there was no ire to the words, despite his best effort. Knowing his father, he probably would've been pleased by that. Howard was nothing if not a shrewd, calculating businessman.

But the footage Obie was highlighting showed a cheerful, warm, fifties era man, welcoming one and all into his pizza parlor for a solid, filling meal at a price that a family could afford. The black and white footage was all the more effective over the technicolor glow of the modern Big Star restaurant.

“It's effective,” Tony admitted.

“I know.” Obie cleared his throat. “So.”

“Oh, here we go,” Tony said. Across the parking lot, he spotted DJ and Peter scrubbing the outside of the War on Hunger truck, both of them splashing happily through the suds under Steve's watchful eye.

“The commercial's good,” Obie said. “But another generation would make it even better.”

“I'm out,” Tony said, grinning.


Tony stared at him. “No.”

“Tony-”

“Nooooooooooope,” Tony said, yanking his arm away from Obie's grasp. “Nope, absolutely not, not a chance.” Obie's mouth opened, and Tony made a show of stuffing his fingers in his ears. It was a childish gesture, but damn, it felt good. “No. Give my kid a piece of pizza, and then it's time for us to go home and get some sleep.”

With that, he turned and headed for the trucks. He needed to talk to someone who didn’t remind him so much of his father. Steve might be an authority figure, but he was one Tony was far more comfortable with.

*  

Steve had seen the car pull into the little TOBRU parking lot, but until the man got out of it, he hadn't paid much mind. Conservative, expensive BMWs were a dime a dozen among TOBRU’s clientele. But then the man who got out leaned into the backseat, opened an insulated pizza bag, and took out a box of Big Star Pizza before disappearing into the TOBRU kitchen, and that got Steve's very thorough attention.

"Hey, do you know who that is?" he asked Peter, as the man appeared again, following Tony, still
carrying the pizza box.

"Do you not?" Peter asked, eyebrows raised. Steve would have responded, but by then Tony and the strange new man were within earshot, and clearly headed his way.

DJ, who had been bouncing around in the cab of the truck, dropped off the driver's seat and ran past Steve, out the half-opened back door to greet his father. The other man -- larger, older, and with a narrow gaze that automatically raised Steve's hackles -- loomed over Tony's shoulder as Tony scooped him up.

"So this is the little man," the guy boomed, and DJ visibly flinched backwards, startled. "Hello, DJ."

"Deej, this is Obadiah," Tony said. "He's a friend of mine and of your grandpa's, grandpa Howard."

DJ just stared at Obadiah, who stared right back. Steve watched both in fascination.

"Can you say hi?" Tony asked. DJ held up his hand in a wary, shy half-wave.

"I brought you something, DJ," Obadiah said, bringing the pizza box around in front of Tony, hovering it by DJ's elbow. "You like pizza, right?"

"Here, let me set him down -- Steve," Tony called, and Steve leaned out the hatch with a careful smile. "This is Obadiah Stane, CEO of Big Star. Obie, this is --"

"Steve Rogers," Obadiah boomed again. Steve wondered if he boomed when he met everyone.

"Michelin star, hot hipster food tr --"

"Oh my God, has everyone heard?" Steve asked, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"I might have sent him a link," Tony said.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Obadiah continued. "Come on out, try some Big Star."

"Can we steal a few plates?" Tony asked, with a series of facial expressions and eyerolls that at least partly conveyed his discomfort with this whole situation.

"Sure, hang on," Steve said, ducking back into the truck. He grabbed a few recycled, biodegradable paper trays from the stack and stepped out, setting them on the little folding table he and Sam generally kept between the trucks for people who really wanted to eat in a parking lot for whatever reason. DJ clambered up on a milk crate and sat, watching the pizza box unblinkingly as it was placed on the table and opened with great ceremony. He peered inside, lip curling slightly.

Tony lifted a slice out and began devouring it sans plate. Steve took a slice, set it in one of the trays, and then turned to DJ.

"Want me to cut you a little bit?" he asked. DJ nodded. "Yeah, I like to sample things first too. See, here," he said, and tore off a piece of crust, some sauce and pale cheese clinging to it. He held it up, licking it carefully.

It tasted about like he expected. It wasn't awful; it was actually less offensive to his oversensitive tastebuds than a lot of food Steve put in his mouth. It was lowest-common-denominator bland, with faintly salty cheese, sweet sauce, a hint of garlic butter on the crust, and a faint bite of pepper from the sausage. But it wasn't...interesting. And it certainly wasn't on a par with the pizza Thor had been making at Mjolnir, with sundried tomato pesto for a sauce, provolone cheese, and hand-cured sausage from that butcher out in Red Hook.
He sliced a few inches off his slice with a plastic knife and dished them up to DJ while Obie visibly weighed his dignity (sitting on a milk crate) against how much he wanted DJ to like him. Tony had already settled across from Steve and was grinning at his demonstration of the power of licking.

"When I heard DJ was visiting I had to come down and finally meet him," Obie said, apparently preferring to stand. He put his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels, hovering over DJ. "I helped raise your dad, you know," he said to DJ, who craned his neck up and up, face expressionless. "I met him when he was about your age."

"As I recall, we met when I learned four new swear words watching you try to fix a kneading machine," Tony said, around a huge mouthful of pizza. If he hadn't already discovered Tony's secret weakness for junk, Steve would have been unsettled by how fast he was devouring the slice.

DJ carefully lifted up a strand of cheese and wrapped it around his finger, putting the finger in his mouth. His expression turned thoughtful.

"And you've put those words to good use," Obie said genially, shaking a finger at Tony. Steve watched as DJ lifted the half-slice and licked some of the sauce off the edge.

"Mainly in your employ," Tony replied.

"Aw, come on, you did the job for years, you couldn't have hated it that badly," Obie said. Steve blinked, appalled, but Tony didn't appear to find it unusual. "I put this one in charge of a kitchen when he was barely eighteen," he said to Steve proudly. "I knew the only way to get someone like Tony to step up was to turn up the heat. And you did beautifully, kid, you really did," he added to Tony, who looked oddly pleased by the backhanded compliment. "It was a hell of a day when he left for this little place."

"Blessing for the restaurant community, though," Steve said, because clearly Tony wasn't going to defend himself. He didn't even seem to be aware he was under attack.

"Well, it makes jobs, I suppose that's the main thing," Obie said, as DJ very, very cautiously took a bite of the slice, rolling the food around in his mouth.

"What do you think, Junior?" Obie asked, all smiles, and DJ spit the bite out onto his plate.

All three of them stared at the chunk of half-chewed food. DJ turned to Steve.

"Cosmic?" he asked.

"You know where they are," Steve said, gesturing him towards the truck, while Tony and Obie both studied the pizza in dismay. DJ hopped off the crate and ran back to the truck, clambering inside and rummaging for the little waxed-paper-wrapped packets of cookies.

"Cosmic cookies," Steve said into the awkward silence. "They're jam-filled butter cookies. Recipe's not quite right yet but I think I'm onto something using almond flour."

"Obie, I am so sorry," Tony said, turning to Obadiah. "He's at that stage, he's picky and he's not used to mass-produced food, I mean, there's me, and then his aunt is super crunchy-granola -- "

"It's fine," Obadiah said, with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Little kids! No sense of tact, right Steve?" he asked. Steve didn't dare pick up his pizza and take a bite, even when Obie's eyes fell on his basically untouched slice.

"DJ knows what he likes, I'm afraid," Steve said with an equally grim smile. DJ came back to the
table, climbing up onto Tony's lap but sitting as far away from Obie as possible.

Smart kid, Steve thought to himself.

"So, no on the pizza, huh?" Obie asked, as DJ crammed half a cookie into his mouth. "Guess I'm going to have to get that cookie recipe from Steve here. Hm, cookies with delivery...I bet we could fit a chocolate chip cookie into the personal-pizza pans. Cookie dough freezes pretty well," he said to Tony.

"Well, for God's sake, do something more interesting than chocolate chip," Tony said. "Do, I don't know, salted caramel shortbread or something."

"I'm sure the demographics guys will tell us that people want chocolate chip, but I'll keep that in mind as a backup," Obie said, and to Steve's immense relief, he stepped back from the table. "I need to get back to the office. Steve, nice to meet you," he said, offering his hand. Steve stood and shook. "DJ, wonderful to meet the next generation."

DJ didn't reach out for Obie's hand.

"Touch issues," Tony murmured to Obie.

"Maybe you're raising yourself a food critic," Obie said, still smiling. "Keep the pizza, Tony, let me know if you have any notes."

"Not working for you," Tony sing-songed.

"One friend to another. I'll call you in a few days, we'll talk," Obie said, and turned away, heading for his car. He looked like a man who was very good at concealing how very angry he was about something.

DJ watched over Tony's shoulder until the car was gone, then sat back down on Tony's lap.

"Gross," he said, as Tony took Steve's slice and began to eat it.

"You betcha, baby," Tony replied, licking sauce off his fingers. "Let's go home and I promise I'll put the pizza on the very top shelf of the fridge where nobody but me can get to it."

Steve reflected, as he closed up the truck, that Obadiah Stane might explain one or two things about Tony Stark. He'd wait for Tony to ask before giving his opinion, that was the polite thing to do, but if Tony did ask, he was going to have a number of observations to make about Obie's behavior.

For now, he would sleep; they had a big day ahead of them tomorrow, and if nothing else, curling up around Tony was a good subconscious way of protecting him from the weirdo Obies of the world.

*

The cheerful beeping of his alarm had Tony fumbling haplessly for his phone.

“Fuuuuuuuck,” he mumbled into his pillow. Somehow, he managed to grab his phone and smack it until the noise stopped. Even more miraculously, he managed to do it before it woke Steve. For a moment, he just let himself float, not quite awake, not really asleep any longer, warm and comfortable tucked close to Steve's chest.

Finally, reluctantly, he pulled free of Steve's arms, slipping out of bed and fumbling his way towards the bathroom. He wanted a shower, but more than that, he wanted food. He wanted to eat, and he
wanted to cook. His brain was foggy with the remains of sleep, and he was a creature of instinct.

He had DJ, and he had Steve, and he could feed them both, which was a nice thought. Really nice.

So he skipped the shower, splashing water on his face until he felt a bit more conscious, shoving his head under the tap and rubbing a towel over his wet hair. Feeling a bit more human, he returned to the bedroom, pausing to admire the man sleeping in his bed. Steve was sprawled out on his stomach, his pale hair falling over his forehead and his lips parted as he breathed. He was hugging his pillow, the blankets pooled at the small of his back, revealing the beautiful lines of his back and shoulders. Tony paused, pressing a light kiss onto the warm skin of Steve's shoulder, and pulled the blankets up to cover him.

As quietly as possible, he pulled on a pair of sweatpants and t-shirt, and headed for the kitchen. He opened the bedroom door and nearly stepped on his kid.

“No,” he said. DJ was curled up in a ball, a blanket pulled up under his chin and his bare feet sticking out of the end. He was hugging a black, fuzzy pillow with both arms. Tony pulled the bedroom door shut and crouched down. He reached out, tapping DJ lightly on the head. DJ opened one eye, squinting at him. Tony leaned in. “No,” he repeated.

DJ yawned, wide enough for Tony to see his back teeth. “Morning,” he said.

“No,” Tony said. “No, no 'morning.' Why are you on the floor?” Tony ruffled his hair, his chest aching. He was still caught off guard, every so often by how much he loved the little brat. Especially at times like this, when he was sleepy and still, and Tony could see so much of Rumiko in him, in his easy smile and dark, laughing eyes.

DJ sat up, batting Tony's hand away. “Road trip?” he asked.

“Yes, let's go back to why are you on the floor?” Giving up, Tony took a seat, leaning his back against the wall. DJ scrubbed at his eyes with the heel of one hand. “Have you been here all night?”

“No,” DJ picked up his blanket, folding it to the best of his ability, and his short arms. “Waiting for you.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but next time, wait for me from your own bed,” Tony said, reaching for the blanket. “Here. Let me help.” DJ surrendered the fabric, and together, they did a decent enough job of folding it into a loose square. Tony reached for the pillow. “Did you bring this from home, what-”

The pillow meowed, and Tony groaned. “Is that a cat?” he asked. One golden eye appeared in the midst of the fur, giving Tony a dark look. “Is that my neighbor's cat?”

“Cat,” DJ said, on a yawn. He reached out, his touch delicate as he stroked the cat's head. It arched into his fingers, purring audibly.

“No,” Tony said, and DJ grinned up at him, unrepentant. “What- How- Where did the cat come from, Deej?”

“Porch,” DJ said, scrambling to his feet. He leaned over, scooping up the cat and dragging himself back upright. The cat hung limply from his arms, eyes closed, still purring away.

“Stop opening the door in the middle of the night,” Tony told him. With a sigh, he rolled to his feet. “I need to childproof my doors somehow. Or houseproof my child.”
DJ considered him, his eyes narrowed, his mouth pinched into a thin line. “No,” he said at last, turning on his heel. He padded up the hallway towards the kitchen, dragging the cat along with him.

“Yes,” Tony said, taking one big step, and a second one, and scooped both DJ and the cat into his arms. DJ gave a shriek of laughter, and Tony gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek. “Brat,” he said, warmth curling through him. DJ made a face at him, and Tony made a face back. “Let's put the cat back on the porch, okay, buddy?”

“Cat?” DJ asked. He paused, then tried again. “I want a cat.”

“No, we're not going to get a cat,” Tony said. He very deliberately did not look down at DJ. He knew better. The kid could wrap Tony around his little finger with a sad look, and Tony knew it. “Let's go make breakfast for Steve, because what're we doing today?”

“Road trip!” DJ said, hugging the cat.

“That is correct. Road trip. You are the smartest little short person ever.” Tony pressed a kiss to DJ's head, grinning against his dark hair. “I love you,” he whispered.

“Love you, too,” DJ said. “Cat?”

“I'll think about it.” The kitchen was already bright, the huge windows open to the early morning sunlight. He'd chosen this house for the kitchen alone. The rest of it was nice, but it was the kitchen that he loved. There was something warm and welcoming about that kitchen, the bright fixtures and beautiful wood and granite countertops, the polished wooden floors and the high ceiling. There was a dining room, a formal one with nice furniture, but Tony preferred to eat at the small kitchen table, or at the butcher block island.

Tony grinned at DJ. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Omurice?”

Tony made a considering noise. “I don't know,” he said, trying for a straight face. “Do you think that Steve is ready for omurice?”

He kicked a stool away from the island, and set DJ down on it. DJ settled the limp pile of cat in his lap and scratched it behind the ears. “Yes,” DJ said, grinning at him.

“Well, then.” Tony took a teasing step in the direction of the fridge. “Let's get started.”

“Wash your hands,” DJ said.

“That's my caterer's spawn,” Tony said. He scooped the cat out of DJ's hands. “But first, no animals in my kitchen.” To the cat, he said, “Sorry, fuzzface, but time for you to head home.” The cat growled at him. “Yeah, yeah, same.” He opened the back door, setting the cat down on the back porch, and it flounced off, tail flicking in its wake.

Tony shut the door and dusted his hands off. “Okay,” he said, grabbing an apron from the hook on the wall. “Let's get going, we've got people to feed.”

DJ threw his hands in the air. “Knives!”

Tony threw his up, too. “Absolutely not!” He scooped DJ up and headed for the sink. “Wash up, and let's get started.”
The smell of sausages sizzling in the pan, along with the heavy, eggy scent of the omelets, was apparently effective in stirring the last resident of the house. Breakfast was almost ready to be served by the time he heard Steve's heavy tread in the hallway.

“Morning, sleeping beauty,” he called. “Sleep well?”

“I can't complain. Can I help?” Steve asked, leaning against the doorway, his hands tucked in the pockets of his jeans.

“I think we're about ready,” Tony said, giving the pan of sausages a quick shake. He glanced over his shoulder, smiling in Steve's direction. “We have a good, solid Japanese breakfast this morning. Deej, wanna tell him what’s on the menu?”

“Miso, pickle, omurice, sausage, tea,” DJ said, carefully snipping at a scallion with a tiny pair of scissors. He grinned up at Steve, adorable in his child sized apron.

“And coffee, because I need coffee,” Tony said, hefting his cup. “Luckily for you and your supertaster tongue, he can't bear natto, so we get to skip the fermented soybean-” He made a face. “Stuff.”

“I appreciate that,” Steve said. He crossed to the coffee pot, filling a cup for himself. “What's omurice?”

“Stir fried rice in an omelet,” Tony said, opening the oven, where the plates were keeping warm. “Have a seat.” He snagged a towel, and transferred the plates to a tray, then dumped the sausages into their waiting bowl. “Deej, can you get the pickles from the fridge, please?”

“Yes.” DJ dumped the rest of the cut scallions and slid off of his stool.

“Steve, can you grab the soup tureen?” Tony asked, nodding at the heavy crockery pot.

“Got it.”

In minutes, everything had been assembled on the table, the omurice plates ornamented with sausages, and bowls of pickled vegetables added to each place setting. Tony gave the miso soup a stir before he ladled out the cloudy white broth, dotted with chunks of tofu and thin strips of seaweed. Each bowl got a spoonful of scallions for good measure, and DJ poured fragrant, steaming green tea from the pot, his face screwed up with concentration as he filled each cup.

Steve stared down at the football shaped yellow omelet on his plate. “Did you teach your dad how to make these?” he asked DJ.

“Actually, his mom taught me,” Tony said. He dropped the lid back onto the tureen, handing Steve the bowl of miso soup. “Rumiko could make one of these with her eyes closed.” He removed his apron, tossing it over the back of the chair, and took a seat. “Honestly, I think she could've made one while still asleep. Pretty sure she did.”

He grinned at DJ. “She would make the rice, and then the omelet, so fast it was impossible for me to follow what she was doing most mornings. She'd give me mine, first, then make her own. And she would always put the ketchup on hers. She'd draw a flower, or a sun with big, wavy rays, or a sleeping cat, or sometimes, just a word or a character, for good luck for the rest of the day. But only on her own. She'd just give me mine plain, and the ketchup bottle.”

He paused. “I think,” he said, his voice quiet, “that was the first time I really thought that she might love me. The morning that she drew a smiley face in ketchup on my omurice before she handed it
Hearts,” DJ said.

“You always got hearts,” Tony agreed. “Hitomi told me, in no uncertain terms, that your mom always put hearts on your omurice, and so you must always have hearts.” He picked up the squeeze bottle of ketchup, a professional sauce bottle with a narrow tip for better control, and gave it a brisk shake. Flipping it around with a flick of his wrist, he popped the lid off and started drawing.

“A big one from your mom,” he said, before tracing a second one inside of the first, “a medium one from your auntie, and a tiny one-“ The third one, he filled in completely with a quick squeeze. “From me.” He leaned over and kissed DJ on top of the head.

DJ nodded, accepting this as his due. “Now me,” he said, reaching for the bottle. Tony held it out of reach.

“Are you going to do horrible things to my omurice?” he asked, trying for a stern face.

“Yes.”

“Okay, no, that’s- I’m not going to give you the bottle if you TELL me you’re going to do horrible things,” Tony pointed out. A choked off sound of laughter made him level a glare in Steve’s direction. Steve hid his face behind his coffee cup, but his eyes were dancing.

“Then no!” DJ said, grinning. He wiggled his fingers at the ketchup bottle, and with a sigh, Tony handed it over. He pushed his plate over, so DJ could reach it, then settled back, sipping his coffee, as DJ drew a complicated series of symbols over every inch of his breakfast. After a while, despite his careful attention, it was clear that the pattern had gotten away from him.

Finally, he pushed the plate back towards Tony with a proud grin. “Thank you,” Tony said, deadpan. “Very nice. That’s certainly ketchupy. Drink your miso.”

Pleased with the praise, DJ reached for his soup.

“I don’t get ketchup?” Steve asked, amusement all over his face.

“I’ll trade,” Tony said.

“Thanks, actually, this is fine,” Steve said.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Tony dug into his omelet. “Usually the fried rice inside the omelet is made with, well, more ketchup,” he said, turning his plate so that Steve could see the red rice inside of it. “Yours isn’t, figured that might be a bit more than you could handle. So you get a plain fried rice with chicken, soy sauce, sweet onion and a bit of pepper.”

“You’re a kind man,” Steve said.

“It’s an acquired taste,” Tony admitted. “But once you acquire it-“ He shrugged, and dug into his egg, rice, and ketchup monstrosity with gusto. “It’s really good.”

DJ nodded, his hands wrapped around his tea cup. “Good for you,” he said, his tone serious. “Have to eat all of it.”

“I will,” Steve promised.

DJ peered at his plate. “I can eat your pickles,” he offered. “If you can’t.”
“Very kind,” Steve said.

“Stop trying to steal everyone's pickles, eat your own food,” Tony told him.

“I want a cat,” DJ said to Steve.

“No cat,” Tony said, trying not to laugh. “You are the worst, really, the worst, eat your omurice.”

DJ obligingly shoved a spoonful of rice and eggs into his mouth. “Cat,” he said, his cheeks bulging.

“Lovely,” Tony told him. “Stop trying to use Steve, he sees through your rather transparent attempts.” Tony wasn’t entirely certain that was true, Steve was doing his best to keep a straight face, but he wasn’t a particularly good liar. “Eat.”

DJ grinned at him, but dug in without any further wheedling for a small animal that would ruin Tony's life. “Road Trip,” he said to Steve.

“I know!” Steve said, cutting into his omelet. “Can I come?”

DJ blinked at him. Then he turned to stare at Tony, betrayal all over his little face. Tony held up his hands. “I asked him,” Tony said. “I promise. I asked, and he's coming. He's just teasing you.”

DJ turned the betrayed look in Steve's direction. Steve opened his mouth. Closed it. “Want my pickles?” he asked at last, holding out the bowl.

“Yes,” DJ said, taking it from him, betrayal forgotten in favor of pickled carrots and radishes.

“He's easily bought,” Tony said, pushing the jar of chopsticks towards him. DJ chose a pair of bright pink ones with tiny pandas painted on them. “Thank God.”

“So, after breakfast, we're hitting the road?” Steve asked. He sounded almost excited about this, and Tony grinned at him.

“The convertible is fueled and our bags are in the back,” Tony said. Steve paused, his fork halfway to his mouth. “The convertible?” he asked, eyebrows arching.

“Yep,” Tony said. “DJ and I are already loaded up, just waiting for your stuff.”

Steve set his fork down. “Tony. How much room is left in the trunk for my stuff?”

Tony shrugged, sipping his miso. “You pack light, we should be able to get your overnight bag in there without much of a problem.” Steve was smiling at him, one eyebrow arched. “What?” Tony asked.

“And where are you planning on putting everything else we're planning on buying?” Steve asked, folding his arms on the table.

Tony froze, his mouth hanging open. Steve continued to smile at him, but it had taken on a slightly pitying air. Tony set his soup bowl down. “Okay,” he said at last, “it's possible I didn't think this through one hundred percent.”

“I'm thinking maybe you didn't,” Steve agreed. “I mean, I don't know what you were hoping to bring back, but at the very least, I was hoping for some apples, cheese and some preserves. And in the convertible, that’s not going to be possible.”
Even as he acknowledged the truth of that, Tony tried again. “You can balance at least a bushel of apples and a couple of cheese wheels on your lap, right?”

Steve gave him a look. “No, Tony.”

“No, Dad,” DJ said, cheerfully mimicking him.

“Yes, Dad,” Tony corrected him. “You hush, you are not a part of this conversation.”

“I want a pumpkin,” DJ said.

“No, that is stupid,” Tony told him with a grin, and DJ giggled.

“Pumpkin or cat?”

“Well, I guess pumpkin.” He could find one of those little palm sized ones somewhere along the road. “Fine. I guess we’re taking the truck.” It wasn’t his first choice, but if he was being honest with himself, it was the best one. The modified SUV had a cold case in the back and straps for tying things down, as well as a roomy back seat that would give DJ plenty of room. In the most literal sense, it belonged to TOBRU, and Tony typically used it for small catering gigs for favorite clients or trips to the bigger farmer’s markets when regional specialties were in season. But since this was a buying trip at its heart, and Bruce wouldn’t use it even if he left it behind, it wouldn’t cause a problem. “But I’m buying all the cheese. Every single bit of it.”

“This is going to be one rank ride,” Steve said, his lips twitching.

“Lots of pumpkins,” DJ said, his voice reverent.

“One. One pumpkin,” Tony told him, holding his thumb and index finger up, about three inches apart. “Small one.” DJ held his arms out as far as he could. “No,” Tony said.

“Yes,” DJ said.

“Eat your omelette,” Tony groused, but he couldn’t keep a smile off of his face. He was excited, in ways he hadn’t been anticipated. Under the table, he bumped Steve’s foot with his own, pleased when Steve hooked his foot around Tony’s ankle.

He reached for his coffee cup. “Road trip. Let’s go.”
They'd barely made it out of the city -- DJ and Steve playing I-Spy until there wasn't much other than empty fields left to spy -- when Tony signalled to exit the freeway.

"Forget something?" Steve asked.

"Road trip ritual," Tony said with a grin. "Honestly, it's like you've never done this before."

"I don't get out of New York much anymore," Steve admitted. "Bucky and I always talked about some kind of seeing-America road trip -- you should see the van we designed, it had a compartment for a motorcycle in it -- but we never got around to it. And then I was in France for a while..."

"Well, then let me introduce you to one of the delights of the All American Road Trip," Tony said, pulling to a stop in front of a gas station convenience store. There was a hand lettered sign in the window that read Pork Rinds By The Pound. "Evil snacks."

"Oh, Tony, no," Steve said, horror rising, as Tony unbuckled DJ and set him down. DJ looked around him with anthropological interest.

"Come on, or I'm buying you a family-sized bag of Funyuns," Tony said, leading the way into the store. "I bet we're close enough to Pennsylvania to get Tastykakes. DJ, go pick something terrible that your Aunt would never let you have."

DJ ran off down the aisles, a determined look of exploration on his face, while Tony gathered up packages of snack cakes and bags of chips.

"This is your weird junk food thing again, isn't it?" Steve asked, following him.

"Okay, my junk food thing isn't weird, what's weird is that you don't love junk food. I am doing what thousands of people on road trips do," he added, picking up a little prepackaged soup bowl of chili, and a miniature jar of chopped peppers. "Hey, can I use your microwave?" he called to the bored-looking kid behind the counter, who waved at him to go ahead.

Steve watched, amazed, as Tony popped open the bowl of chili and put it in the microwave. While it was heating he opened the bag of Doritos, unscrewed the lid of the jar of peppers, and dumped the peppers in. When the microwave beeped, he took out the chili and poured that into the bag too, then scrunched it closed and shook it.

"What are you doing?" Steve asked.

"Bag Nachos," Tony replied. "Also known as Walkin' Tacos."

"How are we dating?"

"Don't look at me, you started it."

Steve followed him up to the counter, where DJ was waiting with a package of pink Sno-balls and a bag of granola.

"I give you carte blanche and you want granola?" Tony asked.

"Has banana chips," DJ replied, unruffled.
"Well, I can't argue with Sno-balls. Okay, ring us up," Tony said, taking two plastic forks from a tub on the counter. He handed one to Steve.

"I'm gonna have to use a supertaster veto on this one," Steve said.

"How often do you get out of eating things with that veto?"

"Only when necessary. Tony, you're eating prepackaged chili on Doritos that have been on the shelf a long time -- no offense," he added to the cashier.

"No man, some of them are older than me," the cashier said. Steve gestured at him. Tony rolled his eyes.

"Eat it," he said, holding out the bag. Steve looked into its depths and was reminded of apprenticing with Erskine, in a way that wasn't entirely comforting. "Eaaaaaat iiiiiit. I dare you. I dare you."

Steve narrowed his eyes. "Cheat," he said, but he unwrapped the fork and poked it into the bag, coming up with a decent amount of chili and crushed tortilla chip. He didn't think he could lick it; he just popped it into his mouth and tried not to breathe as he chewed.

Then he paused, frowned, and chewed some more. DJ was watching him, unblinking, fascinated.

It...it wasn't bad. Or maybe it was so bad it was good. The tomato sauce cut the sharpness of the ranch, and the crunch of the chips was a nice contrast to the overprocessed beans. The whole thing was sweeter than he'd anticipated, but the sweetness of molasses, which he preferred to sugar anyway.

God help him.

"AHA!" Tony said, pointing at him. "You like it."

Steve was torn between another few chews to really get the last of the flavor, and swallowing so he could defend himself. Tony solved the problem by shoving the fork back into the bag and stuffing another bite in his mouth. DJ hopped up and down, so Tony handed him the bag and let him try some; when he made a face and dove for his granola, Tony just grinned and told him, "Just wait until you try those pink things. Do you need to pee?"

DJ, clutching his Sno-balls to his chest, shook his head and ran ahead of them back to the car. Tony handed the bag nachos to Steve.

Two miles down the road, while Steve was only half-regretting eating an entire bag of Doritos covered in chili, DJ made a noise that sounded suspiciously like "Daaaaaadpeeeweeeee."

Tony grinned at Steve, put on the turn signal, and pulled into another gas station. "No problem, kiddo. I might actually get to eat some of my bag nachos this time."

* *

“Pumpkins.”

Tony glanced up, catching sight of DJ in the rearview mirror. He was pressed up against the window, his fingers spread on the glass and his nose smooshed almost flat. Tony looked out his window. Bright orange pumpkins dotted a huge field of green vines to his left, stretching along the road behind a stone wall.
“They certainly are,” Tony said, resisting the urge to slam his foot down on the accelerator. He could almost feel what was coming.

“Pumpkins!” DJ said, his voice rising with excitement.

“We are not buying a pumpkin now,” Tony said. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steve's head crane towards the window. “We'll get one before we get you home, I promise, but we are not buying one right now.”

DJ tipped his body to the side in his chair, meeting Tony's eyes in the rearview mirror. “Don't have to GET one,” he said, eyes pleading. “We can just SEE them.”

Tony reached for his coffee, still warm from the last rest stop. He drained it. “You can see them from here,” he said.

“Can't.”

“You could see them well enough to point them out to me,” Tony said. “That seems like it's good enough.”

DJ slumped in his seat. “Not,” he said, his voice petulant.

“You'll have to suffer through with a long distance view of pumpkins,” Tony said, glancing at the GPS. “We've got places to be this afternoon, buddy.” DJ made a grumbling noise under his breath, and Tony bit back a slight smile. “Yeah, I know. Life is tough all over.”

Steve made a sound suspiciously like a snort of laughter, and Tony grinned at him. “You have something to say there, Rogers?”

“And have you crush my hopes and dreams, too? Think I'll pass.” Then, in an undertone, he added, “Also I suspect by the time you get him home, we're going to have more than one pumpkin in here.”

“I bet you ten dollars we will not,” Tony said. “In fact, I'll go twenty on that concept.”

“I'll take that bet.” Steve grinned, turning his head towards the window. “I can feed a lot of people with twenty bucks. Thanks for your contribution to the cause.”

Tony knew he shouldn't be grinning, but he couldn't seem to stifle it. “You haven't won yet.”

“Yeah, but I've balanced what I know about you and what I know about DJ, and I'm making an educated guess that you are going to lose here.”

“Rude,” Tony said, because he couldn't really come up with any other comeback. “You know-”

He steered them carefully around a curve, following the winding road and the old stone walls that rolled along beside the fields. The pumpkin vines and masses of berry bushes gave way to orchards of massive, gnarled trees, heavy with fruit. Tony's head swung to the side, staring at the trees, and hit the brakes.

“I thought we weren't stopping,” Steve said, from behind his coffee cup. Up ahead, Tony spotted the signs indicating the orchard entrance. The words 'Pick Your Own' were painted in massive red letters along the top, and Tony grinned.

“We weren't,” he said, turning them carefully into the unpaved parking lot. “Now we are.”

“Way to hold the line,” Steve said, his voice full of laughter. “This is going to be the easiest twenty
bucks I've ever made.”

“We are not here for pumpkins,” Tony said, as he found a parking spot. “We are here for that orchard.” He threw the SUV into park, twisting in his seat to face Steve. “Did you see those trees?”

Steve blinked. “Yes?”

“Real trees,” Tony said, stabbing a finger in his direction. “None of these modern spliced microtrees, those are real apple trees.”

“I think that if it's a tree that produces apples, that makes it, by definition, a real apple tree,” Steve mused.

“If you're being literal, sure.”

“I'm a pretty literal guy,” Steve said.

“I've noticed.” Behind him, Tony heard the dangerous sound of a seat belt being unbuckled and grabbed for his door before DJ could try to make a break for it. “Hey! No. Stay put, you.” Even as he slid out of his seat, he double checked that the child safety locks were engaged, so DJ couldn't unlock his own door. That had been a hard learned lesson.

Tony opened DJ’s door and caught DJ around the waist before he could take off running across the parking lot. “Hey,” Tony said, ignoring the way DJ wiggled and twisted in his arms. He shifted DJ in his arms, until they were face to face. “Cars,” he said, and DJ nodded. “What are the rules around cars?”

DJ took a deep breath. “Don't run. Look both ways. Hold your hand.”

“And be careful,” Tony said, kissing him on the forehead. He lowered DJ down onto his feet, waiting while DJ kicked at the dirt, leaning over to pick up a particularly interesting stone. Tony looked up as Steve came around the car. “Sorry,” he said, his nose wrinkling. “He needs a minute to be comfortable with his surroundings, otherwise, he can get a bit anxious.”

“Makes sense,” Steve said, taking a seat on the stone wall. The wind moved the tree branches above him, and he tipped his head back, his eyes falling shut as he caught the rays of the late afternoon sunshine. Tony's breath hitched in his throat, caught by the visual.

He must've made some sound, because Steve's head came back down, his eyes opening. His lips curled up in a slight smile. “What?” he asked, pushing his pale hair off of his forehead with one big hand.

“Nature looks good on you,” Tony said, smiling.

Steve's smile stretched into a grin. “Doesn't look half bad on you, either,” he said.

DJ tugged on Tony's hand. “Pumpkins,” he said.

“There are pumpkins,” Tony agreed, as Steve pushed himself to his feet. “We are not going to be buying one today, though. We have a long way to go and I don't want to have a pumpkin rolling around in the back of the SUV, buddy.”

DJ frowned at him. “I can hold it.”

“Wow, no, that is a horrible idea,” Tony told him.
“In my lap,” DJ explained, his voice very serious.

“I give you about fifteen miles before you're sick of hugging a pumpkin and it ends up all over my backseat,” Tony said.

“Steve can hold it.”

“Do not volunteer Steve for things you don't want to do, that's very rude,” Tony said, avoiding looking in Steve's direction.

DJ leaned back, looking up at Steve. “You have bigger hands,” he pointed out.

“That's true,” Steve said, his voice full of laughter. “But your dad said no.”

DJ opened his mouth to argue, and Tony gave a tug on his hand. “Look, there's a barnyard. Want to go see? I bet they have goats.” DJ's face lit up, his head swinging in that direction. Immediately, he was off, hopping along at the edge of Tony's reach.

“Goats?” Steve asked, falling into step beside them.

“We really like goats,” Tony explained with a straight face.

“Oh, we do?” Steve tucked his hands into his pockets, and pulled them back out. Without thinking, Tony reached out, snagging Steve's hand with his free one. Before he had a chance to regret it, Steve wove their fingers together, squeezing Tony's hand. “Didn't really see you a goat lover.”

Warmed by the contact, Tony smiled at him. “Yeah,” he said. “Well, DJ likes goats. I like goat cheese.”

“Now, that I can believe.”

The barnyard was a clean, well maintained little area, with goats and chickens roaming freely, and sheep, ducks, an alpaca and a pony in pens around the periphery. Children were running around, petting the animals and feeding them from small cups of treats. DJ scrambled up onto the lowest rail of the fence, peering over the top into the barnyard, his eyes huge. “Wanna feed the goats?” Tony asked, ruffling his hair. DJ nodded, without looking away from the animals.

“You can buy food for them in the bake shop,” a woman said, from the other side of the fence. She had a baby on her hip and two other kids running back in forth in front of her, but with her free hand, she pointed to the white clapboard building nearby. “Careful. It's dangerous in there,” she said with a smile.

“Bake shops usually are,” Tony agreed, giving his most charming smile. “Thank you!” To DJ he said, “Let's go get some snacks.”

“For goats?” DJ asked, hopping down.

“I could use one, too,” Steve said.

“Are you ever not hungry?” Tony asked.

“Keeping up with you two is hungry work,” Steve said, and when DJ took his hand, seemingly without thinking, Steve let him. Tony's stomach turned over, something like heat or pleasure curling through him.

“Let's see if they've got anything you can stomach, then.”
The bake shop was a small, warm building, with glass bakery cases fronting the counters and a couple of refrigerated cases by the exit doors. Cakes, pies, tarts, cookies, breads and muffins filled the glass fronted cases, and jars of sauces and preserves filled the racks on the other side of the room. The air was filled with the scent of sugar and cinnamon, warm and familiar.

“Hi.” A girl emerged from the back room, a tray of steaming doughnuts in her hands. She was wearing a yellow apron with a bright red apple pattern and a matching scarf tied around her long black hair. She gave them a sunny smile, setting the tray down on the counter. “Got some fresh apple cider doughnuts, still nice and hot,” she said. “Any interest?”

“Yes. Also, does anyone ever say no to that?” Tony asked, snagging DJ before he could help himself.

She laughed. “Occasionally, I get a hardcore health food devotee,” she said, grinning. “Luckily, we've got plenty of apples to sell them.”

“Any chance of some cider?” Steve asked.

“We got pints and gallons in the case,” she said, pointing at the fridge. “And milk to go with the doughnuts, you know, in case you're into that sort of thing.”

“He's a borderline health food devotee,” Tony explained, as Steve made a beeline for it.

“I guessed that.”

DJ boosted himself up over the top of the counter. “One, please,” he said.

She looked at Tony, who nodded. “One for each of us, please,” he said. “And half a dozen to go.”

She wrapped one in a napkin and handed it over to DJ, who took it with a wide grin. “Here,” she said, handing a second one to Tony. “But I'd wait til they cool a bit before we put 'em in a box. You planning on doing any picking today?”

“Pumpkins!” DJ yelled, around a mouthful of doughnut.

“Not pumpkins,” Tony said, reaching for another napkin. “Apples.”

“We've got some unusual varieties ready for picking,” she said.

“That is tempting,” Tony said, biting into his doughnut. It was dense and chewy, with a crisp exterior dusted with a perfect blend of cinnamon and sugar. He took another bite, savoring the warm pastry. “And I'll be taking a dozen of these.”

Two gallon bottles of cider hit the counter. “These, too,” Steve said.

She handed him a doughnut. “Anything else?”

Steve considered the bakery cases. “What's the house specialty?” he asked, taking a cautious bite of his doughnut.

“Probably the pies, or the apple turnovers,” she said. “But I like the pumpkin bread.”

“Pumpkins?” DJ asked, and Tony gave him the other half of his doughnut to distract him.

“Give us a Dutch apple pie, a box of turnovers, a lemon poppyseed bread, and one of the aforementioned problematic breads of orange gourds,” Tony said.
“Pumpkin,” DJ said, blinking at Tony over the top of his napkin.

“It would be much easier for me if you’d be less smart.”

DJ considered that. “No.”

“Make it two loaves of pumpkin bread,” Tony said to the girl.

“Gotcha.” She reached for a couple of white bakery boxes. “Anything for you, sir?” she asked Steve.

“Could I have an applesauce cake, two jars of the apple butter, and a jar of strawberry rhubarb preserves, please?” Steve asked, peering into the bakery case. He straightened up. “And a couple of cups of the food for the animals outside?”

DJ tugged on Tony's shirt. “Milk, please?”

“And a pint of milk,” Tony said, ruffling his hair. DJ leaned into the touch, his face screwing up with a smile.

“Make it two,” Steve said.

“I can do it!” DJ bounced across the floor, his hands locked on the hem of his shirt.

The girl tied off a bakery box with twine, pushing it over the counter to join the others. “So any apples today?” she asked with a grin. “That's mostly what we sell here.”

“There's an idea,” Tony said. “Steve?”

Steve took the bottle of milk that DJ handed him. “Thank you,” he said. “And yes, please.”

“Give us two bags, and we'll fill 'em,” Tony said, reaching for his wallet. “So, those goats outside. Don't suppose they get milked?”

“They do, but if you're looking for cheese-”

“I am.”

“We don't sell that here. But I can recommend some local places?”

“Excellent.”

*

In retrospect, he should've gone with the goat petting option.

“Hey!” Tony snagged DJ by his collar as he went running by. He had the front of his shirt wadded up in his hands, apples piled high in the cradle of the fabric. He strained against Tony's grip, and half a dozen apples went bouncing to the ground. Tony gritted his teeth, and forced himself to take a deep breath. “Stop running around like a crazy person,” he said, his voice measured and careful.

DJ blinked up at him, his dark eyes owlish behind the lenses of his glasses. His fingers flexed against the fabric of his shirt. “Want more?”

“Yes, I do, but mostly, I want you to be careful. You're bruising the fruit, and you're going to end up tripping on something, or breaking a leg or something.” Tony crouched down, holding the apple bag
open for him. “Now, let's put your finds in here.”

DJ’s lower lip came out in a distinct pout, but he shifted his burden, transferring the apples into Tony's bag with slow, methodical movements. Tony forced himself to wait, as patiently as he was able, as DJ settled each of his chosen apples into the depths of the bag. When he was done, he looked up at Tony, his mouth turned down in a frown, his brows drawn up tight.

“Thank you,” Tony said, as the ladder behind them creaked. He stood, shifting the bag as Steve hopped down off of the ladder, apples balanced in the crook of one arm. DJ started up the ladder, and Tony snagged him around the waist, setting him back on the ground. “Third warning. You can't go on the ladders,” Tony told him, because DJ needed repetition sometimes. DJ reached for the ladder, a high pitched whine working its way out of his throat, and Tony leaned over so he could meet DJ's eyes. “You can't go on the ladders. Understand?”

It took a second, but DJ nodded, and Tony ruffled his hair. “Good boy.” To Steve, he added, “Sorry. You should've just passed those down.” He scooped up the bag and held it open so Steve could deposit his latest harvest.

“It was like six rungs,” Steve said, smiling as he put the apples into their bag. “Think we should've gotten another one of these?”

“Probably.” Out of the corner of his eye, Tony spotted DJ reaching for an apple that had clearly been on the ground for a very long time. “Do not.” It came a beat too late, and DJ's fingers sank through the rotted skin, releasing a strong smell of fermented apple and a couple of flies.

DJ's whole body snapped back, the apple flying in the opposite direction. He stared down at his hand, his whole face drawing up in disgust. Then, before Tony could even take a step in his direction, he wiped his fingers down the front of his shirt.

“Really?” Tony asked. DJ looked up at him, and Tony's head fell forward. “Come on, kid, work with me, here, that was-”

He felt the fingers swipe against his pantleg and nearly lost it.

“Here, Deej, I have a handkerchief, let's use that instead,” Steve said, and it sounded like he was trying not to laugh. Tony opened one eye, turning a gimlet glare in Steve's direction. Steve just gave him an innocent smile and handed a snow white handkerchief to DJ.

“Who carries a handkerchief?” Tony asked, picking bits of apple guts off of his pantleg.

“Me,” Steve said. “And other old-fashioned folks.”

“Hipster,” Tony muttered under his breath, and Steve just laughed.

“Shut up and invest in a package of disposable wipes, Stark,” he said, as DJ scrubbed his hands with the handkerchief. He held it out to Steve.

“What do you say?” Tony asked, picking an apple off of a low branch. He eyed the limbs, high above his head, where brilliant red apples seemed to glow in the sunshine that broke through the leaves.

“Thank,” DJ said, and then he was off again, running full tilt across the narrow gap between the neat rows of trees. He was halfway up the ladder before Tony realized what he was doing.

“Hey!” It came out too loud and too sharp, but he was on the edge of losing it, losing his temper or
his grip, and he wasn't sure which would be worse. He grabbed DJ, swinging him down off the ladder and back to the ground. “Deej.” He took a deep breath, trying to pull himself together as he crouched down. “What did I just say to you? You cannot go on the ladders.”

DJ pointed. “Apple.”

“Yeah, I know, I know apples, but-”

“Apple!” DJ said, his voice rising to a painful pitch.

Tony's teeth clenched. “That's enough, I think we've have enough apples, it's time to go.”

And he knew, as soon as he said it, that it was one change too many. Even as the words slipped out, hot and hard and angry, DJ's face crumbled. Tony didn't even have time to take another breath before the first tear slid down the curve of DJ's dusty cheek.

For an instant, he was small and scared and trembling, eyes huge and wet, and then he just collapsed.

It wasn't words, it was barely a sound Tony recognized as human. It was just a rolling, stumbling mass of sound, half a scream and half a howl, his small body collapsing under the force of it. He rocked forward, into Tony's body, his forehead slamming against Tony's shoulder, and then he was twisting backwards, his body a live wire of force.

Humiliation churned low in his chest, fear and frustration and a choking sense of humiliation, and Tony shoved it all down. He was good at that. At being a disaster in public, and pretending he didn't care. Besides. He was a lousy father, Steve wasn't stupid, Steve would've figured that out, might as well cut to the chase and have it happen sooner rather than later.

The humiliation would sting, for a long time, but for now, he ignored it, with skills honed over a long, long, misspent life.

He smoothed his hands over DJ's head, over his dark hair, pressing his fingers gently against the contours of DJ's skull. Anchoring him, giving him a point of stillness. Folding his hands over DJ's ears, muffling the sounds of the birds and the wind, the faint distant cries of some other, happier family. He tugged DJ forward, letting him settle against his shoulder.

“It's all right,” he said, his voice quiet. “I'm not mad. No one is mad at you. I am having trouble understanding. But I love you. It's all right.” He closed his eyes, trying to control his own breathing, his own heartbeat, because DJ picked up on stress from him, on stress from anyone around him, he picked up on that anxiety, and it made this worse.

Tony pressed a kiss against DJ's head. “I love you,” he whispered. And then he repeated it, again and again, a slow, rhythmic sequence of words, as DJ relaxed by steps, by stages, his sobs tapering away until he was almost breathing normally again.

Tony waited until he raised his head, just far enough to meet Tony's eye. “I don't understand,” he said, picking the words carefully. “I told you not to climb on the ladder. The rule is you can't climb on the ladder. It is a safety rule. We can't ignore safety rules, right?” DJ nodded, rubbing his damp cheek on Tony's shoulder. “So why did you climb the ladder?”

DJ pointed up. “Apple,” he said, and Tony followed the gesture.

He spotted it right away. It was just above their heads, about eight feet from the ground, a perfect red apple, hanging ripe and tempting just within reach of the ladder. “That's a nice apple,” Tony agreed. “We can get it for you.”
DJ's mouth turned down. “Apple,” he repeated, as if that was all he could manage. Then, “My apple.”

“Okay, I get it, but-”

“Want a boost?”

Tony looked up. Steve was looking up at the tree, his hands on his hips. He looked down at DJ with a wry smile. “Want a boost?” he asked again.

“You don't have to-” Tony started, but DJ sucked in a raw breath, the last of his sobs dying. Behind the crooked rims of his glasses, his eyes were huge and red, and he blinked hard.

Steve crouched down, folding his arms on his knees. “I was really short, when I was a kid,” he said. “Even smaller than you. So my friend Bucky had to give me a lot of boosts.” He tipped his head towards DJ, a faint smile creasing his cheeks. “Since you can't use the ladder, wanna use me, instead? If you sit on my shoulders, you should be able to reach.”

DJ stared up at the tree, and then at Steve. He swiped a hand across his nose, rubbing until it was red. “Yes,” he said, his voice raw. “Please?”

“Okay,” Steve said with a nod, holding his hands out. “Let's give it a try. If you want to get back down, or you get scared, just say 'down,' all right?”

DJ nodded, and Steve lifted him onto his shoulders. DJ latched onto his head with both hands, and Tony winced. “Don't pull,” he said, but Steve just grinned, his hands wrapping around DJ’s ankles. He waited for DJ to center his weight, until he was steady.

“Ready?” he asked, and DJ nodded. Slowly, giving DJ time to adjust, Steve rose to his full height.

DJ rocked on his shoulders, and Tony took an involuntary step forward, his hands coming up, but DJ found his balance, leaning his chest against Steve's head. He blinked down at Tony, a smile blooming. “Tall,” he proclaimed.

“Yeah,” Tony said, tucking his hands in his pockets.

“Taller than you,” DJ said, and Steve bit his lip, struggling to keep a straight face.

“Watch it, brat, you're coming back down eventually.”

DJ considered that. “No.”

“You are absolutely the worst, you know that, right?” Tony leaned over, collecting their bag of apples. “Steve is not here to carry you around on his shoulders. He's not going to be doing this all weekend.”
DJ leaned over, and Steve looked up at him. “Afraid that's true,” he said, his voice warm. But he stood there, tall and straight, his hands firm on DJ's legs, letting the kid use him as a ladder, and Tony loved him so much in that moment that it hurt.

“Little bit?” DJ asked.

Tony opened his mouth to interpret, but Steve was grinning. “I can carry you for a little bit,” he agreed. “Everyone should be tall for a little bit.”

“So, when's my turn?” Tony asked. He snagged an apple the size of his fist and dropped it into their bag.

“Just say the word,” Steve said, and DJ bounced up and down on his shoulders, giggling high and bright.

Tony pointed up at the apple that had started this whole mess. “Get your apple, Deej.” DJ looked up at it, and then at Tony. Tony gave him a nod and a smile. “Give it a try,” he said. “You never know, until you try. But I bet you can get it.”

DJ nodded, and took a deep breath. Then, he reached up, his fingers trembling as they swung through the air. He stretched, shifting his weight forward, and Steve rebalanced him. Another try, and his fingers scraped against the gleaming red fruit. His teeth sank into his bottom lip, and he pushed himself up.

His fingers wrapped around the apple, and his smile was so bright that it hurt to look at. He looked down at Tony, and Tony smiled back. “Look at that,” he said. “Good job.”
“That's good,” Steve agreed, ignoring the way that DJ's free hand tugged on his hair. “Now, gently. Don't hurt the tree.”

“Lift, and twist,” DJ said, nodding.

“That's my farm boy,” Tony said, rocking his weight forward and back on the balls of his feet, a twitch of movement that he couldn't quite repress. But he held his ground, his fingers locked on the handles of the bushel bag. DJ glanced down at him, and Tony gave him a reassuring smile. “You pick fruit all the time. You're just a little taller while you're doing it today.” He arched his eyebrows. “Right?”

DJ took a deep breath. “Right,” he said.

And with a deep breath, and a twist, DJ pulled the apple free from the branch. He let go of Steve's hair, wrapping both hands around the apple. Tony took a step forward, but Steve's grip never wavered, keeping DJ steady on his shoulders. Tony's breath came out in a rush. “Good job,” he said.

DJ rotated the apple between his hands, rubbing the skin against his palms, against his fingers, using the leg of his pants to wipe away the dust. His eyes falling closed, he brought it to his mouth and took a huge bite. Steve, his eyes tipped up in DJ's direction, smiled. “How is it?” he asked.

“Good.” DJ held it out to Tony. “Pumpkin?” he asked.

Tony took the apple from him, and took a bite of it. It was warm from the sun, crisp and sharp, the sweetness of the apple melting into something sharper, cool and biting. He chewed. “What do you think, Steve?” he asked, holding it out.

Since both of Steve's hands were braced on DJ's legs, holding him steady, he just leaned in, and let Tony bring the apple to his lips. Tony watched, more than a little mesmerized, as Steve's lips parted, and his white teeth sank into the flesh of the apple. The juice clung to his lips as Tony pulled it away, and Steve's tongue flicked out, licking them clean.

“I think,” he said, his eyes opening, “that he did find the best apple in the whole orchard.”

Tony considered the apple in his hand, and nodded. “That might just deserve a pumpkin,” he agreed, and took another bite. He looked up. “I think you need to lie down for a few minutes,” he said, and it said a lot about DJ's current mental state that he didn't fight that at all. He just nodded, his arms wrapping around Steve's forehead.

“Goats?” he asked, blinking.

Tony took a deep breath, and a bite of the apple. “We are going back to the car,” he said, making sure that DJ was paying attention. “And you're going to lay down for thirty minutes. We'll set your alarm. When it goes off, we can go and feed the goats. Then we need to get more doughnuts from the bakehouse. You can help pack the car before we leave, so everything is in the right place.” He reached up, rubbing DJ's damp cheek with his thumb. DJ leaned into the touch. “What's the plan?”

DJ took a deep breath. “Nap for thirty minutes. Then goats. Then bake house. Then car.”

Tony nodded. “You've got it.” He managed a smile. “Do you want to walk, or for me to carry you?”

DJ held out his hands. “You.”

“Okay.” Tony helped him off of Steve's shoulders, shifting DJ into his arms. DJ slumped against his chest, his arms around Tony's neck. Tony looked at Steve. “You can stay and get-”
Steve was already picking up the bag. “I think we've got plenty. Let's go.”

The sense of relief was almost dizzying, even if he resented it. Tony just gave him a quick nod, and concentrated on getting DJ back to the car without dropping him. But he was grateful that Steve was there to open the door, so that Tony could just slide him into the back seat, laying him out on the wide bench. DJ blinked up at him, smiling as Tony put his blanket over him, set the alarm on his tablet, and quietly shut the door.

He braced his hands on the roof of the car, and took a deep breath.

“You okay?” Steve asked, his voice low. Just behind him, a car pulled out of the parking lot, trailing clouds of dust in its wake, and Tony moved towards the edge of the lot, just a few feet from the car.

He took a seat on the low stone wall there, bracing his hands on either side of his hips. “Sorry about that,” he said, his voice quiet.

Steve took a seat next to him. “It happens,” he said. “Kids have meltdowns, Tony. It's kind of their thing.”

Tony looked up at the sky, brilliant flickers of blue shining through the limbs of the trees. “It's my fault,” he said after a moment. “I changed the game on him.” He rocked forward, bracing his elbows on his knees and letting his head fall forward. “He adapts pretty well most of the time, I keep forgetting...” His voice trailed away, and he shook his head, exhaustion sweeping over him like a physical thing. “He doesn't handle change well, he can't get a grip on what's happening when he expects one thing and he's presented with something else.”

A small brown bird landed near their feet, giving them a sideways glance before pecking at the gravel of the parking lot, looking for anything the cars had turned up or left behind. Tony watched as it jumped, quick little twitches of movement, from one spot to another.

“When he was first coming to stay with me,” Tony said, with a wry smile, “I thought I'd surprise him with a new desk and bed in his room, you know, how cool would that be? Little kid sized bed instead of the junk that used to be in there.”

Steve shifted next to him, his shoulder brushing against Tony's. “Didn't go well, I take it?”

“Absolute meltdown,” Tony said. “I thought he hated it, but he just needed time to get used to it.” He glanced at Steve, and found that Steve was watching him, a faint smile on his face, his blue eyes brilliant. “What he really needed was a warning, and to have control over his own space.” He inhaled, and tasted dust and sugar on his tongue. “That's why we came back to the car, rather than rest in the orchard.”

Steve nodded. “He'll be okay,” he said, and it wasn't a question, but Tony nodded anyway.

“Quick nap, a snack, and goats, I think,” he said. “My fault. I'm not good with sticking to a schedule.”

Steve took a deep breath, his head bobbing in a slight nod. “Bullshit,” he said, and Tony's head snapped towards him.

“Did you- Did you just swear?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Steve said, eyes dancing.

“You did.” Tony pressed a hand to his chest, his mouth gaping open. “Steven Rogers, I'm shocked. I
am shocked and appalled, if I'd known you were such a pottymouth I would never-"

“Oh, for cripe's sake-"

“I would never have let you near my son, you are a horrible influence, you are just a vulgar-"

“Tony, I've been in your kitchen during the rush, don't even pretend with me, you have the filthiest mouth of anyone I've ever met-"

Tony leaned in, stopping just short before his lips would've brushed Steve's. “And here-” he whispered, “I thought you liked my filthy mouth.”

“It grows on a fella,” Steve said, and Tony dissolved into laughter. Steve leaned in, stealing a kiss, and his breath. It wasn't long, and it wasn't particularly deep, but it felt filthy, for all that. When they broke apart, Steve's cheeks were flushed, and Tony was breathing hard. “You're trouble,” Steve said, his voice shuddering around the words.

“Yeah,” Tony said, because there didn't seem to be any point in fighting that.

Steve looked at him, smiling. “And it is bullshit, you know it is.” His hand settled on Tony's, their fingers tangling. “You run the kitchen in a restaurant that does sittings, Tony. You are a chef in a pre-fixe, reserved seatings restaurant. You not only know how to make a schedule, and stick to it, you know how to change it on a moment's notice, how to adjust yourself to make sure that thirty-five tables all get a dose of maple scented gelatin foam with a lavender infusion-”

“I'm sensing mockery of my menus here,” Tony said.

“That's because you're a smart man and not as dense about being insulted as you like to pretend you are,” Steve said, without missing a beat, and Tony tried to look insulted. Steve grinned at him, clearly not fooled. “Tony. You schedule your working life down to five minute increments for your patrons. You can dang well do it for your kid. If he needs a schedule, make him a schedule, and just-” His broad shoulders rose and fell in a slight shrug. "Make it work, Stark.”

“Spoken like a guy who once made soup in a tea kettle,” Tony said.

“Hey, it wasn't ONCE,” Steve said. “I'm proud of that.”

“You should not be proud of that.”

“Yeah, well-” Steve shrugged. But his gaze was level. “You can do it. You just need to shift gears, Tony.”

Tony made a face. “Okay, where did this come from?” he asked, waving a hand at Steve. Steve arched an eyebrow. “The 'good with kids' thing,” Tony clarified. “Though I do sometimes wonder where all of you came from, so if you'd like to-”

“Do you have any idea how many siblings Bucky has?” Steve asked, ignoring him.

Tony thought about that. “Absolutely no idea,” he said with all possible confidence.

“I don't know either, I can't count that high,” Steve said, and Tony choked on a laugh. Steve smiled. “And he's got even more cousins. My ma worked a lot, and a lot of holidays.” He stretched his legs out in front of him, and that was a hell of a thing to watch. “We always had our own little celebrations, but holiday double time is a hard thing to turn down. So I spent a lot of time at Bucky's, when everyone was over.” He paused. “And I do mean everyone. Most of 'em just assumed I was
someone's kid, after a few times, they didn't think too hard about it.”

“That sounds like pure hell,” Tony said, even though he was pretty sure he was lying. God knows it was probably better than the holidays he'd spent alone. Or at boarding school.

“Not quite that warm, but lots of cheek pinching,” Steve said. “And I was a small kid, I had horrible asthma, so when Bucky was running up to the attic to get the good table runner with the snowflakes, or down to the basement for another bag of potatoes, well, I couldn't do that. So usually I'd be shoved towards a couch and given a baby and a book, and told to keep both of us out of the way.”

He leaned back, grinning up at the sky. “The Barnes family didn't deal well with shirkers. You wanted to eat, you'd better pull your weight.” His eyes slid towards Tony. “I changed a lot of diapers.”

“God you're adorable,” Tony told him, and Steve aimed a mocking kick at his ankle. Tony scooted out of reach. “No, seriously, are you available to baby sit, because Peter's utter shit at it, and I don't want to call a service, so-”

“Shut up, Stark,” Steve said, and Tony was still laughing when he leaned in for a kiss.

* * *

After the nap, and the goats, and the very reluctant purchase of a pumpkin, they managed to get a good few more miles down the road before Steve's stomach started rumbling and Tony started looking like he needed a coffee. The next exit off the freeway had a shabby but clean-looking motel, and after a brief inspection to be sure bedbugs were not an issue, Tony took himself into the bathroom to wash away the road dirt and bits of apple tree. DJ kept busy making a blanket nest for his pumpkin on one of the beds, humming contentedly to himself, while Steve brought luggage in from the car.

By the time DJ had swaddled the pumpkin (named "Cat", because of course it was) in an appropriate number of blankets, Steve had wrangled most of their valuables into the motel room. He grabbed DJ's three-pound sack of apples out of the back seat, sniffed curiously, and opened the bag.

"DJ," he said, walking into the room and gently shutting the door behind him. DJ looked from him to the sack in his hands.

"First bite's best," he said. Steve took an apple out of the sack. It had one child-sized bite taken out of it; the flesh was slowly turning brown.

He set it on the table and took another apple out. And another, and another.

"Hey, I saw a greasy spoon around the corner," Tony announced, emerging from the bathroom and toweling his face off. "What say we -- "

He stopped, staring at the line of apples on the desk of the motel room, each with a tiny bite in the middle of them.

"Is this installation art?" he asked, looking confused.

"Ask your son," Steve said, crossing his arms.

DJ looked at Tony. "First bite's best," he repeated.

Tony covered his face with one hand. "Deej."
DJ very carefully lifted his pumpkin out of its blanket nest, carried it to Tony, and offered it to him.

"Sorry," he said, lip wobbling.

"You are gonna make us eat nothing but apples for dinner, huh kid?" Tony asked. "We're just gonna sit here and eat all the apples you took a bite out of, so they don't spoil..."

Steve picked up one apple and flipped his pocket knife out, carving off the brown bit DJ had bitten into, then taking a bite. "At least they're good apples," he said, because DJ really did look upset, and little kids couldn't always attach "consequences" to "actions".

Tony took the pumpkin from DJ and set it back on the bed, settling next to it and pulling DJ up into his lap so the boy knelt on his thighs. "Next time you're hungry just tell me," he said. "I promise I will feed you. You don't have to eat...one tenth of twelve apples."

"Not THAT hungry," DJ said. "Apples are just good."

"Yes, I know, but you can't eat just ONE bite of twelve of them," Tony scolded. DJ pushed his face into Tony's shoulder, little body taut with tension. "Yeah, yeah, okay, it's been a long day and we all smell like goat, I'm gonna let this one go, no need to pull out all the stops."

"Shame we don't have access to a kitchen," Steve said thoughtfully, as Tony rubbed DJ's back. "I could make some killer apple butter. Little vinegar, little molasses, some cider, some cinnamon, simmer for...well, for like, ever...I guess I could try it in the coffeemaker overnight..."

"Would a rice cooker work?" Tony asked.

Steve looked at him, perplexed. Tony lifted DJ off of his legs and passed him to Steve, who followed Tony out to the car with DJ in his arms and watched as he rummaged under a tarp in the trunk.

"Don't leave home without it," Tony said, coming up with a large steel cylinder.

"That's a pressure cooker," Steve said.

"Indeed it is. It makes rice, that's mostly what I use it for."

"And you just...keep a pressure-slash-rice cooker in the car?"

"You never know when you're going to need to make rice," Tony told him gravely. He opened it up. "Hey, look!" he added, lifting a bag of rice out. "Even stocked it. Good job, past me."

"How old is that rice?" Steve asked.

"It's rice, it doesn't get old," Tony replied.

"How did you become a chef? Don't answer that," Steve said hurriedly.

"Look, we've got cider, there's probably some sugar for coffee in the room, we have knives, you can totally make apple butter. You stay here with Trouble and start slicing the apples, I'll get dinner to go and steal some vinegar from somewhere."

"And cinnamon," Steve said. "Doesn't have to be a lot."

"Okay, and cinnamon."

"Oh, and some vanilla -- okay, not pushing my luck," Steve said, as Tony shot him a look.
"What do you want for actual dinner?"

"Meatloaf if they got it. Burger if they don't. What do you want, Deej?" Steve asked. DJ rubbed his forehead, a move so reminiscent of Tony that Steve smiled.

"Not hungry," he said finally, sounding cranky. Tony rolled his eyes.

"I'll grab something," he said. He leaned up to kiss DJ on the cheek. "Behave. Help Steve make apple butter."

Steve set DJ down and went to his suitcase, taking his knife set out of the pocket. He selected a paring knife and a boning knife, and settled into the one chair in the room, pulling it up to the desk, then lifting DJ up to sit on the edge of the desk.

"Do not touch the knives," he told DJ, tone serious. DJ nodded. "I'm gonna give you the apple pieces and you can put them in the pot, okay?"

"Peel?" DJ asked.

"Yep, we'll peel them, but I'm not as good as Tony so we're going for fast rather than stylish. You wanna eat the peels?" Steve asked, taking a broad slice of peel off with the boning knife and offering the slice to DJ.

"Not hungry," DJ insisted.

"Your loss," Steve said, popping the peel into his mouth. "You know, my teacher, Chef Erskine, taught me to make this great marinated apple-peel salad..."

He kept peeling and chopping as he talked, DJ listening silently but raptly, holding out his cupped hands for piles of diced apple and then dumping them with great ceremony into the pressure-cooker. The apples were all in the pot and Steve was just cracking open some cider for a simmering liquid when Tony returned, carrying two paper sacks in one hand and a plastic bag in the other.

"I have dinner," he said, holding up the paper bags, "and the fixings for dessert," he finished, holding up the other. "I stopped at a gas station, they had vinegar in the cleaning aisle so don't expect too much from it, and literally the only cinnamon they had was packets of cinnamon sugar normally used to dip pretzels into."

"I'll take it," Steve said, pawing through the bag. "What...is this gas-station pound cake?" he asked, holding up the metal tray blazoned SARA GEE POUND CAKE. "You know Sara Lee and Sara Gee aren't the same thing, right?" he asked. "You got generic prefab pound cake?"

"Hey, that's the best pound cake you can get outside of Logan's bakery case back home. Gotta put the apple butter on something," Tony said. "I've been told it's classless to just eat it with a spoon."

Steve shook his head as he added cider and cinnamon-sugar and a spoonful of vinegar to the pot. He put the lid on and twisted it to tighten, then set it to cook for an hour.

"I don't suppose you have a road-trip-specific stick blender for when we need to puree it," he said, as Tony laid out a platter of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, complete with little plastic tubs of butter and a styrofoam cup of gravy.

"I have several extra plastic forks and a very energetic child instead," Tony said. DJ waved a fork, as if proving his point. Tony opened the second paper sack and produced enough french fries to feed a small army, plus a container crammed with ribs.
DJ, chin resting on the desk, eyed the ribs. Ever so slowly, he stretched out a finger and poked the protruding bone of one of them.

"Oh, are you hungry now?" Tony asked, amused. DJ ignored him, tucking his fingers between two of the bones in a subtle attempt to pull them apart one-handed. "Nope. They're all attached. You can't have any."

"Can!" DJ insisted.

"Can't, clearly they come as a set."

DJ turned huge pleading eyes on his father, who looked unimpressed. Steve offered his boning knife to Tony, handle-first, and then took DJ's hand, pulling it away from the ribs long enough for Tony to separate one. DJ picked it up by the bone and began gnawing on it, looking smug.

"This is pretty good meatloaf," Steve said, digging in while Tony retreated with his mountain of fries and his ribs to the edge of the nearest bed. "Tastes like it's got some pork in it. Nice crust. Hard to get a good crust on a meatloaf. How're the ribs?"

"Carolina-style," Tony said. DJ, stripped-clean rib bone clenched between his teeth like a cigar, hopped up and down next to the bed. "Decent. Could be more tender. You know, I had an idea," he continued, and Steve grinned over his potatoes.

"Am I going to want to hear this?" he asked.

"Hear me out," Tony said. "Hot Hipster Food Truck Road Trip."

Steve burst out laughing. "Come again?"

"You should do a TV show. Drive your food truck all over the country and eat at roadside food stands."

"You know I hate food TV, now you're just mocking me," Steve said.

"You don't hate food TV, I've seen you watching Sam's youtube channel on your phone and you are like, Cooking With Dog's number one fan. You just hate television chefs."

"I like Alton Brown."

"See! You could follow in his footsteps, he did a road trip show."

"And I will not sully its memory by ripping it off," Steve said.

"Sully," DJ agreed, leaning on Steve's knees. Steve turned him around by his armpits and pulled him up onto his lap. DJ's hand darted out and he stole a corner of meatloaf from the styrofoam box, popping it in his mouth. "He was the best monster."

"Not Boo?" Steve asked.

"Not a monster!" DJ said, sounding outraged.

"I'm just saying, it'd be a hit. You could shoot it all with a Go Pro and, I don't know, market it using Instagram," Tony said. "It's very hip, very you."

"I would be willing to bet that I am, in fact, the least hip person you know," Steve said.
"Peter," DJ piped up, and Tony cracked up laughing. DJ dunked an inquisitive finger into the gravy in Steve's potatoes.

"Not hygienic," Steve scolded. "Not finger food, DJ."

"Not yummy," DJ added, after a taste. He offered the gravy-covered finger to Tony, who opened one of a small mound of wet-naps they'd given him with his ribs and cleaned it off. "Thank."

"Food isn't just a meal anymore," Tony said. "It's a search for authenticity. You explore a different American identity by trying to find real, authentic versions of other cultures in America through food."

"Who arbitrates authenticity, though?" Steve asked.

"Well, if it's your TV show, you do."

"I don't think I'm comfortable with that. Why is some food more authentic than others?"

"You think Big Star Pizza is as authentic as what you serve in the truck?" Tony asked.

"Who's to say?" Steve shrugged, steadying DJ, who accepted another rib from Tony. "Look, I did my initial training in America, cooking American cuisine under a German immigrant who was trained in France, and then I went to France and came back myself. That's not exactly representative of a culture other than Michelin Star Chef culture. Just because my training was formal doesn't make my cooking somehow more real than the omurice you and DJ made me or Kamala's mom's lamb stew."

"I would shank a stranger for a bowl of Kamala's mom's lamb stew," Tony said.

"Please don't, I'm sure she'll make you some without that," Steve said, grinning. "Anyway, I don't think authentic is an especially useful word sometimes."

"So what do you look for in food?"

"Good flavor, nothing that explodes when you bite into it, cooked by my hot boyfriend."

"That is a terrible venn diagram," Tony said.

"I don't know, you manage it sometimes. The culture wars aren't for me, which means no Food Network reimagining of On The Road," Steve finished, setting DJ down so he could run to the bathroom to wash barbecue sauce off his hands. "I'm happy to feed people who want to be fed."

"Does that include apple butter on -- "

"Nah-ah!" Steve warned, as Tony reached for the pressure-cooker. "Not until the timer's done. I'm gonna phone home and see how Carol and Jess are doing in the truck. You do some non-automotive-based bonding with DJ. Read him a book or something."

"Monsters Inc!" DJ called from the bathroom.

"Ask them to report on Bruce for me, I suspect he's attempting a coup," Tony said, as Steve took his phone out and headed for the door.

"Literally nobody wants your job, Tony, your job is horrible," Steve called over his shoulder, stepping outside.
"That's true, I am deeply unappreciated in my own time. Tell them if he takes my name off the menu I'll choke him with goat cheese!" Tony managed, before Steve shut the door.

Goat cheese would actually be a kind of nice addition to Erskine's old apple-peel salad recipe, he thought, as he called the number Jess had punched into his phone before they left.

"Fancy Pants Chef Temp Agency, Jess speaking," she answered. "You get ill, we can fill!"

"That's -- did you just come up with that?" Steve asked.

"I'm a small business owner, I gotta be on the hustle all the time," Jess replied. "Are you checking up on us?"

"Just making sure everything's going well. How's business?"

"Booming. Kamala's thrilled to be taking command," Jess said. "Glad she's here, too, she knows where everything is and has the energy of a hummingbird on crack."

"She's very passionate about food trucks," Steve agreed.

"I think Carol's giving her a full-day crash course in catering theory. We're gonna have to hire her or she'll be our major competition, because someone's giving away all our trade secrets," Jess said. Steve faintly heard Carol yelp in annoyance.

"Are you parked at TOBRU?" he asked.

"Yep. Nothing's on fire so I assume everything's fine. Bruce is probably annoyed that Peter's been spending all his time out here trying to flirt with Kamala. How's Dad and Junior?"

"They're watching a movie. DJ gets wound a little tightly once in a while."

"Yeah, poor kid. His brain gets out ahead of him, I think. Still, mostly happy?"

"Mostly," Steve agreed. "Did you know Tony hauls a rice cooker around with him everywhere he goes?"

"You mean Old Reliable? Saved our lives a couple of times."

"It's weird I don't think that it's weird, right?"

"Hey, you drive your whole kitchen around with you," Jess said, sounding amused. "Also, Carol found the vinyl records you keep in the cab."

"Those are for when it's nice out, I put on some music so people can dance!"

"Oh my god, such a hipster. You're adorable. You can't let Tony run you off, I'll cry if I can't cater your wedding."

Steve laughed. "Easy there, cowboy."

"I'm just saying, Tony's not good at recognizing what's good for him."

"Yeah, I'm getting that, a little," Steve said, glancing back at the motel room. "I'm pretty stubborn, though. Anyway, I better hang up, Old Reliable's making apple butter and it's probably ready for mashing."
"Save some for your poor haggard substitute chefs."

"We'll see when I see my sales receipts," Steve said, and Jess laughed.

"Later, Steve."

"Bye, Jess," he said, and hung up.

When he returned to the motel room, Tony was sitting in the bed, knees drawn up, DJ tucked in the cradle of his body. They were both watching DJ's tablet propped on Tony's knees, identical expressions of anticipation on their faces. Steve heard Sully roar, and DJ let out a giggle; Tony looked down at him with an affection on his face that was almost painful to see.

Steve checked the slow-cooker's timer, set the pressure valve to release, and came over to slide up next to Tony, settling an arm over his shoulders. DJ reached out without looking and grasped Steve's shirt with one hand. Tony sighed contentedly.

"Bruce gave the restaurant to Peter," Steve said. "He and Kamala are going to turn it into an IHOP."

Tony cracked up laughing, until DJ wriggled and elbowed him to make him stop.

"Hey, by the way," Steve said, checking his phone, "there's a county fair going on this week, not too far from here. It's a couple of miles out of our way, but it could be fun."

The way Tony and DJ's faces both lit up simultaneously told Steve that the county fair was going to loom large in his future.
“Pumpkin...”

Tony stared up. All the way up. “It sure is,” he agreed, taking a bite of his latest fair food find. “That, that certainly is a pumpkin. I mean, the sign is right there next to it. Pumpkin. Blue ribbon winning pumpkin.”

“Pumpkin,” DJ repeated, his voice full of awe. DJ turned around to stare at Tony. “My pumpkin.”

Tony considered the massive, misshapen orange MASS that rested in the center of the dais. He looked down at his son. “No,” he said.

DJ frowned. “But...” He leaned against Tony's leg, his head tipping back to give him the full effect of his sad, needy eyes. “Could be mine.”

Tony cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Ours?” DJ offered.

“Oh, we're sharing now? No,” Tony said, again, his lips twitching as he struggled to hold back a smile. DJ pushed himself up, and gestured at the pumpkin with both hands, his eyes huge. Tony pretended to think about it. “Actually, you know what?” He took a deep breath. “No.”

DJ's face scrunched up, his eyes narrowing. “Pumpkin,” he said.


“Think of the pies we could make with that,” Steve said from behind him.

“Not helping,” Tony sing-songed at him.

“Wasn't trying to help. What are you eating?” Steve asked, shifting a bag of promotional literature and random recipes to his other arm. Tony gave it a look. The man would take anything that was pushed in his general direction by the 'Blueberry Producers of New England' or 'Catskill Beekeepers Association.' Tony wasn't sure if it was adorable or annoying. Maybe the latter, since Steve talked to every little old lady and anxious teenager that staffed every single booth.

Tony was pretty sure that they were never going to make it out of this county fair. Luckily, DJ was easily amused by just about anything, and Tony was eating his way through the worst food this place had to offer. He was pleased with his latest acquisition.

Tony held up his plastic fork. “Pulled Pork Parfait.”

Steve stared at him, his mouth hanging open just a little. “Why?” he asked at last.

Tony shoved a mouthful of pork and coleslaw into his mouth. “They were out of deep fried corn on the cob. We'll have to come back later.”

“Tell me you have a cardiologist,” Steve said.
“On speed dial,” Tony said. “Deej, do not touch the displays.”

DJ pulled his hand back, giving the neat stacks of vegetables a mournful look. “Pumpkins,” he said, and Steve smiled down at him.

“Yeah, pumpkins,” he agreed. He pointed towards the booth in the center of the displays, where a half dozen elderly men in overalls and battered baseball caps were handing out stickers and selling bunches of multicolored dried corn and apples straight from the crate. “Know what? They sell the seeds from the previous winners. Want to get some? Maybe you can grow your own giant pumpkin.”

“Wow, that is a horrible idea,” Tony said, but DJ had already latched onto Steve's shirt hem, pulling him hard towards the booth. “Steve...”

Steve grinned at Tony over his shoulder. “Just going to go get some seeds,” he said, letting DJ muscle him in that direction. He was laughing, his eyes full of warmth, and Tony took a bite of baked beans to avoid saying something obscene in the middle of a group of 4H booths.

Maybe he'd get a cream puff. Cream puffs solved all sorts of problems.

“Hi!”

Tony turned, blinking down at the speaker, a gangly teenage girl in pigtails and a tan 4H vest. She was hugging a stack of pages to her narrow chest, and rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet. “Hi,” Tony said, because she seemed to be waiting for some sort of response and that was all he could come up with.

“We're about to start our celebrity cooking demonstration over on the main stage!” the girl said, her enthusiasm bubbling over. She thrust a piece of paper at him. “Would you like a copy of today's recipe?”

Tony took it, mostly because saying ‘not at all’ was probably rude. “Thanks,” he said. “Celebrity cooking demonstration?”

“Yes!” She bounced up onto her toes. “It's Chef Ty Stone, from 'Ty's Action Cooking!'”

“Of course it is,” Tony said, staring down at the full color picture that took up most of the page. That was a hell of a photoshop job they'd done on him. Tony wasn’t sure it was an improvement.

“I love him, don't you?” she asked, her pigtails bouncing as she turned to continue handing out the fliers. “He'll be signing autographs and selling his book after the show, you should totally go check it out!” She handed a sheet to a woman passing by. “Ty's Action Cooking, here today!” She shoved one at an older couple with a wide grin. “Everything's better with action!” And with that, she bounced off through the crowd, shedding fliers as she went.

“I can't believe that he still hasn't managed to come up with a better catchphrase than that,” Tony said. He gave the headshot on the page a critical look before he shoved it into his back pocket. “Or a better hairstyle.” Mentioning the dye job would probably be catty. He’d save that for internet.

“Back!”

Tony looked down as DJ appeared next to him, his arms full of mini pumpkins. Tony frowned down at him. DJ grinned back, unrepentant, and Tony glared at the source of this problem. “Rogers. What happened here?”
“Turns out,” Steve said, a few steps behind DJ, his attention focused on one of the 4H recipe sheets, “that they sell tiny pumpkins, too.”

“They sell all sorts of stuff,” Tony pointed out. “They sell nail polish guns and horrible, trash knives and bouncing balls that you fill with ice and salt and sugar and milk and kick around in the hopes of getting something like ice cream from it. No, we’re not getting any of those things,” he told DJ. DJ’s face fell, and Tony shook his head. “Just... No.”

“Steve?” DJ asked.

“Not getting any of that,” Steve agreed. He leaned over, opening his totally hipster tote bag. “Here, put your pumpkins in the bag and I'll carry them for you.”

“My pumpkins,” DJ said, his arms tightening on them.

“I'll give them back when we leave, I promise,” Steve said. DJ gave him a suspicious look, clearly uncertain that anyone could resist their warm orange charms.

“Keep one and put the rest in the bag,” Tony said, which was a compromise DJ could live with. After a second of thought, DJ nodded, and crouched down between them, arranging the tiny pumpkins around his feet as he attempted to decide which one to keep. Over the top of his head, Tony spread his hands wide, an expression of ‘why’ on his face. Steve just grinned at him. “Thought you were getting seeds.”

Steve held up a flat yellow envelope between his index and middle fingers. “Got those, too,” he said, and Tony was pretty sure that was a smirk.

Tony shoved a bite of pork into his mouth, chewing until he was calm enough not to use inappropriate language around his child. After some very careful and thorough chewing, he was calm enough to go with, “You're a real peach, Rogers.”

“I try. Also, I got you an apple,” Steve said, unconcerned. “You know, if you'd like to eat something that doesn't involve deep frying or bacon.”

“Is it dipped in caramel and then rolled in candy coated peanuts?” Tony asked.

Steve paused in the act of digging through his tote bag. “No.”

“Then I'll pass.” Grinning, Tony looked back at DJ, who had moved one pumpkin away from the others. “Have we chosen this one to be spared from the horrors of Steve's little fabric satchel of hipster holding?”

“My what?” Steve asked, his eyebrows drawing up.

“Yes,” DJ said. He straightened up, holding up the excess pumpkins. Steve opened his bag with a sigh, and DJ lowered them in, one after another.

“What do we say?” Tony prompted.

DJ stopped, the last of the pumpkins in his hands. He held the last one up. “Hold my pumpkin?” he asked Steve.

Steve bit his lip, his eyes dancing. “Okay,” he said, taking it.

“And?” Tony asked, rubbing his forehead.
DJ grinned. “Thank you!”

“That works,” Tony said, because he'd take what he could get, and Steve was putting up with them.

“You're welcome, Deej. Speaking of pumpkins, this is an insult to them,” Steve grumbled, holding up the sheet. “Have you looked at this recipe?”

“No at all,” Tony said, keeping a wary eye on DJ, who wasn’t paying attention any longer. His attention had been caught by the landscaping displays put together by various 4H clubs. Tony ruffled his hair. “Look, someone made a water fixture. Want to see if you can figure out how the pump works without touching anything?”

“Touching is better,” DJ said.

“Yeah, but figuring it out without touching anything is harder, and therefore, it'll occupy you for more than thirty seconds,” Tony said. “Also, not your pump. So, we're going to figure it out without touching. Right?”

DJ sighed. He sounded very put upon for such a small person. “Right,” he agreed, dismay tingling the word.

“Thank you, DJ,” Tony said. He looked up to find Steve still glaring at the recipe. “What, did that thing talk smack about your mother, or something? It's just a recipe.”

“There's two tablespoons of pumpkin in it,” Steve said. He shook the paper. Tony looked at it, then looked back up at Steve, who looked absolutely incensed by this. “How can they call these pumpkin muffins?”

“Because they're pumpkin spice muffins, which means, like everything else 'pumpkin spice,’” Tony said, making the finger quotes as best as he could without dumping his parfait on the ground, “they're actually using pumpkin pie spice and no pumpkins are actually harmed in the making of your latte.”

“But this isn't a latte,” Steve said. He was still scowling down at the recipe, his brows drawn up tight. “It's a muffin. Pumpkin is an excellent addition to muffins, it's-” He stopped, words failing him. “Pumpkin is excellent in muffins.”

“God, you're cute when you're angry about culinary crimes,” Tony said. Steve glared at him, and Tony offered him a bite of pulled pork, unrepentant. “Come on, champ, you know how these things go. We had this discussion about the seasonal Oreos.”

“I refuse to accept seasonal Oreos,” Steve said, and Tony choked on a laugh.

“Yeah, so you've said, I don't think-”

“Tony!”

Tony's teeth clamped together. “Well, fuck me,” he said, eyes flicking up towards the ceiling.

“Been there, done that, have the t-shirt,” Ty said, his voice pitched so low that Tony could barely hear him, even though Ty was right behind him. Before Tony even had a chance to turn around, a hand snaked around his side, snagging the flier from his back pocket. “Sorry, let me have this, we ran short.” He sounded, as he always did, insufferably smug. Tony looked back over his shoulder in time to see Ty scribble a signature across the page, obscuring the recipe, but leaving his headshot with its smarmy grin unmarred.
Ty handed the sheet off to a blushing woman, giving her an identical, practiced smarmy grin at the same time. “Here you go, thanks for watching!”

“Love the show,” the woman said, blushing, and Ty gave her a wink.

“Thanks, love.” He turned a bit, towards the professional looking woman with a clipboard who was hovering behind him. “Hey, Courtney, this is an old friend of mine, any chance I can grab a few minutes?”

She checked her watch. “Of course,” she said. “Would you like to step back in the-

“No, thanks,” Tony said, because he had no interest in that. He glanced over, making sure that DJ was still right there, sitting cross legged on the edge of the the landscaping display, cheerfully watching the pump go through its paces. “Don't you have a show to put on, Ty?”

“Always have time for an old friend,” Ty said, as the woman moved away, keeping curious onlookers at a distance. Resigned, Tony turned towards Ty.

“Show's working out well for you, I take it?”

“Just got a time slot upgrade and a contract for a couple of holiday specials. How about you? How'd you end up in the back end of nowhere, Tony? Slumming it for a chance to catch a glimpse of me?”

Ty asked, a distinct smirk curling the corners of his mouth up. “Next time, just call. Schedule's pretty packed, but I'd make time for you.”

Tony stared at him, trying to see what he'd found attractive once upon a time. Probably the confidence. He'd always done a good job of faking it, but Ty had had the real thing, at a time when Tony could barely keep his life together. There was something comforting about being around someone who was one hundred percent certain where he was going and how he was going to get there.

Of course, after realizing that the 'how he was going to get there' wasn't particularly fair or pleasant, that killed a lot of Ty's appeal. Tony just wished he'd figured it out sooner.

“We're just here for the giant pumpkins,” Tony said, with an easy smile. He held up his parfait. “And the food, of course.”

“Right,” Ty said. He gave Steve a quick once over with an appreciative glint in his eye. His smile went up another couple of watts as he turned on the full power of his charm. “Hi,” he said, holding out a hand. “Ty Stone, of the ChefPro Network.”

Steve's eyebrows twitched, but he shook Ty's hand with a slight smile. “Steve Rogers,” he said. “Currently untelevised.”

“You hanging out with this guy?” Ty asked, and he threw an arm around Tony's shoulders, dragging him in for a friendly half hug. “He's not much to look at, but he can cook.”

“Which is, oddly enough, the opposite of Ty,” Tony said, amused. “Seriously, are you negging me, Ty? Really? You still pull that shit, what are you, stuck in your twenties?” He shrugged Ty's arm away from him, shaking his head. “You can take the boy out of the frat, but you can't take the frat out of the boy.”

Ty laughed, and Tony just took another bite of his parfait. “Speaking of shit,” Ty said, considering the cup, “what the hell are you eating, man?”
“Pulled pork parfait,” Tony said. “Want one? They sell them out of a truck right outside, five bucks, pretty good deal.”

Ty made a face that would've fit better on a five year old. “Think you overpaid, Tone. That's trash. Even for fair food, that's—” He shook his head. “You always had bad taste in food, man. It's the pizza thing, it's always been the pizza thing.” His smile took on a sharp edge. “What'd you say? You can take the chef out of the pizza chain, but you can't take the pizza chain out of the chef.”

“Actually,” Tony said, because he liked rising to the bait sometimes, it was fun, “you should give this a try. It's better than you'd think; they put actual effort into it. The corn bread has to be heavy and dense to provide a decent base, able to soak up some of the sauce without turning into sludge. It's got a good crumb, decent stone ground cornmeal, not as sweet as Northerner's tend to like the stuff, but that's fine, they've got the sweet covered. They laid salt down with the cornmeal in the bottom of the pan, you feel it crunch between your teeth, not all the time, just enough to cut the sweet-spice of the beans.

“Beans are barbeque beans, but cooked the old fashioned way, long and low, with upper notes of molasses and a subtle bit of heat from fresh ground mustard seed,” he mused, pausing only long enough to tuck another bite into his mouth. “Pork's slow roasted pork shoulder, smoked and then shredded, not braised, but meaty, they didn't trim all the fat, which is nice, let it get a little greasy, because the cole slaw on top, the crispness of the cabbage and the carrots, that gives it a real texture change and balances the heat in the barbeque sauce.”

Ty was staring at him, his lips parted just a bit, and Tony gave him an angelic smile. “Hell, give it a stupid name like 'Texas Tailgate in a Tin Can' and you could get an episode out of this.” He cleaned the tines of his plastic fork with a quick flick of his tongue, because he could, because he was an ass when he wanted to be. Ty's eyes dropped down to watch the movement, and Tony smiled at him, slow and wicked. “You sure you don't want a bite?”

“I'll pass.” The words seemed to be drawn out of Ty by force. He checked his watch. “You staying for my cooking demonstration? I'm mixing up some batter, it should be a quick thing, we could grab a drink afterward, catch up.”

Alarm bells were going off in the back of Tony's head and he couldn't quite figure out why. “Okay, what's up?” he asked.

Ty tried for a hurt face. Tony stared at him, unmoved. Ty shook his head. “What do you mean, what's up, I haven't seen you in years—”

“Right,” Tony said. “And that was deliberate on both of our parts, wasn't it? You don’t hang out just to hang out, Ty, there’s always a reason, and you might have one, but I don’t.” He smiled, and forked up the last of the cornbread. “Now. Don't you have a muffin demonstration to put on?”

Ty's eyes went flat and sharp, all the polished warmth disappearing in a blink. “Yeah, I do.” To Steve, he said, “Stick around. After I'm done beating my batter, I'll give you a free copy of my latest cookbook.”

Steve gave him a tight smile, and a slight nod. Ty, taking that as assent, took off through the massing crowds, waving and shaking hands as he went. Tony watched him go.

“We used to date,” Tony said to Steve.

“Yeah, I figured that out,” Steve said. He was silent for a second. “Can I ask why?”
Tony shrugged. “I got one rule, Rogers. I only sleep with people who can cook. Who can really, truly, knock my-socks-off make food that makes me feel like they give a damn about what they’re doing, and more than that, that they care about the people they’re feeding. Every single person I’ve ever fallen in love with?” His lips kicked up on one side. “I’ve fallen in love with their food, first.”

He pulled a napkin out of his back pocket and wiped his mouth. “Ty's the exception that proved the rule. He can't cook worth shit.” He pitched the cup and the napkin towards the nearest trash can. “Let's go get my kid before he disassembles a display or two.”

It took him a few minutes to coax DJ away from the water feature, and he only accomplished it by pointing out the display of painted pumpkins. That turned out to be a mistake, because coaxing him away from the pumpkins took a lot longer.

“Candy apple?” he asked DJ, who shook his head. “Fried twinkie?” DJ made a face. “Chocolate dipped fruit slices?”

“No,” DJ said. He pointed. “Pumpkin.”


“Do you really think we'll find that many pumpkin desserts in here?” Steve asked him in a low voice.

“I think I can find a lot of things here that I am going to regret later,” Tony told him with a grin. “Pretty much... Everything.”

“Well, at least you're aware of your bad choices,” Steve said. “That's a start.”

Tony opened his mouth to reply, and stopped. At the far end of the room, Ty was standing on the stage that had been set up for the cooking demos, a relatively simple arrangement that allowed the maximum number of people to see the chef working on stage. There was a fridge, a butcher block island with an array of bowls, pans and utensils arranged neatly within reach, and a basic stove with a mirror tilted over it so people could see into the pots on the stove.

There was no actual cooking going on.

Ty was wandering around the edge of the stage, chatting with the crowd via a handheld microphone as the woman who’d been accompanying him alternately fuzzed with the knobs and snapped into her cell phone. Clearly, the stove wasn't working, and judging by the look on Ty's face, he was losing what little patience he had.

Tony bit back a curse. "Wait here with Steve, okay?" he said to DJ. To Steve, he added, "He's going to start yelling at someone soon and while I'd love to see his public personna pancake, I always feel bad when someone starts crying."

Steve caught DJ's hand when DJ made to follow Tony. "What're you-"

Tony wave a hand through the air. "Fixing it, Rogers, it's what I do, I'm a fixer, I am a man who knows a fix when he sees one." He cut through the milling crowd, bracing a hand on the edge of the low stage and swinging himself up. "Stop hitting it, Ty, why is that always your first instinct?" He strode over to the stove. "It never works."

"Yeah, but it feels good," Ty said under his breath before plastering a wide, media-ready smile on his face. "What do you think you're doing?"
"Something useful. Not surprising you wouldn't recognize it." Tony crouched down, tracing the connections back to the emergency shut offs. He flipped the switch and unplugged the oven, just in case, then yanked the door open to peer inside. "Hopefully, it's just a loose wire, but we won't know until I have a chance to open it up." He crouched down. "Any chance of a flashlight?"

"There's a lantern in one of the 4H displays," the woman with the clipboard said.

"Right. Courtney, your name was Courtney, right?" Tony pulled the racks out, and smoothed a hand over the heating element, checking for anything that felt loose or out of alignment. "See if we can borrow that for a second, and I'm going to need some tools, or a tool, something, I need, uh, pliers or-"

"Would a Leatherman help?"

Tony pulled his head out of the oven. The skinny girl in the 4H vest who'd given him the flier was holding up the multitool like it was Excaliber, and he was more than willing to accept that comparison. He grinned at her. "Perfect. You are a credit to your organization, madam." He held up a hand. "Toss it here." She pitched it in his direction, a perfect, arching flip of a pass, and Tony snagged it out of the air one handed. "You are a goddess, thank you, I'll give this back in just a second, just have to-" Still mumbling, he retreated back into the oven. There was a clatter as the lantern was placed next to him, and he managed a 'thank you' before wriggling a little deeper into the oven.

"Tony Stark, everyone," Ty said, leaning his hands on top of the stove. His foot bumped into Tony's hip, and Tony rolled his eyes and considered stabbing him with one of the Leatherman's longer blades. Instead, he flipped them open to a pair of pliers. Ty stepped over his hips. "Michelin starred chef, co-owner of TOBRU, rising star of molecular gastronomy and, apparently, part time handyman."

Tony extended an arm out from behind the oven, waving at the crowd. "When you own the place, you do what you need to do. Easier than trying to get a repairman during the Saturday dinner rush. Especially-" He squinted up at the broil element, the one piece that was hard to see from normal point of view. Unlike the rest of the oven, it was clearly brand new, shiny and obvious against the battered interior of the oven. "Did someone fix this recently?" he asked.

Courtney leaned over. "I'm told it was refurbished," she said, her voice hushed. "It's a loaner from a repair shop in town, and-" Her teeth sank into her bottom lip. "We should've tested it."

"No, I think when they fixed it, they blew the fuse." Tony pushed himself out of the oven, rolling to his feet. "If that's the case, it should be a quick fix, did they leave an instruction manual or-" Courtney thrust it at him, and he flipped it over. A small envelope was taped to the back. "Bingo. Extra fuse. Wanna bet this has happened before?"

He kicked the oven door shut and walked around the stove, flicking the Leatherman around and extending the phillips head screwdriver. "Now, let's pop this off, and see if we've got a simple, easy to fix problem." He looked over, not surprised to find DJ right at the edge of the stage, his chin propped on his folded arms, his dark eyes bright behind the rims of his glasses. Steve was a step behind him, his bulging hipster tote resting on the ground by his feet. A couple of girls were hovering nearby, pointing and whispering, looking up at Steve with besotted expressions. Tony couldn't even blame them.

Steve, for his part, remained oblivious. It was a big part of his charm.

Tony turned his attention back to DJ. "Hey, want to hold the screws for me?"
DJ nodded, and Tony shook the fuse out of the envelope, tucking it into his pocket. "Okay, here, I'll give you the screws, you can put them in here for me." DJ took the envelope from him, peering into its empty depths. Then he held it up. "I know, give me a second, kid, geez." Grinning, Tony crouched down and started unscrewing the back panel of the stove.

Ty was walking back and forth on the edge of the stage now, talking about the exciting world of a televised celebrity chef. It was verbal softshoe, the sort of thing that Tony knew well, and was usually more than happy to ignore. Now, however, he found it got on his nerves, and he focused on getting the screws off the panel as quickly as possible.

Each one, once free, he rolled over to DJ, who slapped a hand down on top of it and then carefully transferred it to the waiting envelope. After the third one, he held the envelope up to Steve, who looked in with all due seriousness, then gave him a grin. "Good job," he said, and DJ beamed.

Tony rolled the last screw towards them, and Steve caught this one, holding it out for DJ to take.

Pushing himself to his feet, Tony slipped fingers under the back panel of the stove and pulled it off. It took him less than a minute to trace the wiring and locate the fuse. "Yep," he said, pulling it out. "Looks like this is our problem. Give me thirty seconds here..." He plugged the fresh fuse into place and stepped back. "Hands off."

Ty held up his hands, and Tony plugged the stove back in and gave one of the knobs a quick turn. He held a hand over the heating coil, waiting to see if they'd get a response this time. And this time, they did, heat floating up almost immediately. "And we're good to go," he said. The crowd started to applaud and Tony couldn't hold back a smile. "You people are very easily amused," he said, raising his voice to be heard, and setting off a wave of laughter.

"Next year, we can schedule 'how to fix your broken appliances' as a demo here on the Kraft Cooking Main Stage," Ty said, and Tony didn't even bother to fight the urge to roll his eyes. Instead, he just unplugged the oven with his foot and crouched down to slap the back panel back into place. In a few minutes later, he'd recovered the screws from DJ's care, the panel was securely in place, the oven was back together, and Tony was wiping his hands on a wad of paper towels that Courtney thrust at him. "And that's that. You're good to go."

Ty gave him a broad, practiced grin. "Let's have a round of applause for Tony, everyone!" He tipped his head forward. "Want to stay and be my sous chef, Tony?"

"You can't afford me," Tony said, unruffled. He balled up the paper towels and pitched them towards the trash can. "Besides, even you can manage muffins alone."

Laughter rippled through the crowd, but Ty's eyes went flint hard in an instant. "Tony and I were in culinary school together," he confided to the audience. There was a rustle of interest. "Bet I can still bake circles around you, Tony."

Tony shrugged. "Probably." He tucked his hands in his pockets, giving the audience a wry smile. "I barely passed pastry," he added in a stage whisper. "No patience. No patience at all."

The audience was laughing now, and Ty moved to regain control. "We've got a full fridge. What's your pleasure? We can have a throwdown, right here, right now, I'll even let you choose the dish."

"Sorry." Tony didn't sound sorry and he knew it. "I don't have my sous vide machine, and I'm utterly helpless without it. If I can't make a foam, I don't know what to do with myself."

Ty let out a heavy sigh. "That's a shame. These people have been waiting so patiently, it would've
been great to show them something a little more interesting than muffins.” He shook his head. “But
since Tony doesn't want to join in on the fun, I guess-”

"You should ask him!"

Tony looked down to find one of the 4H girls, a tiny, round faced teenager with a poof of black curls
held back by a red bandana, pointing at Steve. "You're Steve Rogers, from War on Hunger, aren't
you?” she asked, with the confidence of someone who knew what the answer was going to be. "I
saw the documentary about you."

"We all have,” one of the boys said, a tall, lanky kid whose face was bright red from sunburn or
embarrassment. "Lia showed it to us. The hipster food truck chef, it was great."

"Ask him!” the first girl demanded of Ty, her hands on her hips, and there was a wave of laughter
from everyone watching.

“I don't think-” Steve started.

Ty leaned forward, folding his arms on the stove. "What do you say?” he asked Steve, his teeth
flashing. "Care to do a pumpkin battle?” Steve opened his mouth, but before he could say a word,
one of the 4H kids started to chant.

"Pump-kin bat-tle,” he yelled, and the others immediately took it up, shaking their fists in time with
the syllables. "Pump-kin bat-tle! Pump-kin-" The crowd was laughing and clapping now, people
pressing in towards the stage, cheers erupting from all sides.

"Don't,” Tony said, under the cover of the crowd noise. Ty glanced at him out of the corner of his
eye, and Tony shook his head, a tiny twitch of his chin. "This isn't one of your rigged contests that
your producers set up, Ty."

Ty's smile only got bigger and brighter. "Aw, you worried about your little friend, Tone?"

Tony gave the crowd a wide, easy grin. "He will wipe the floor with you."

"He drives a food truck,” Ty said, and he said 'food truck' with the sort of disgust that most people
reserved for flesh eating bacteria. "It's a step above fast food."

"Or, you know, chain pizza,” Tony said, turning the full force of his smile in Ty's direction. "You
always did underestimate people, Ty." He patted Ty on the back with a little more force than was
strictly necessary. "Don't say I didn't try to warn you."

* 

Steve shouldn't have risen to the bait. He really shouldn't have, and he knew it. And he wouldn’t
have, except...

Erskine had warned him, so many times, never to let another chef get under his skin. Chefs at their
level were almost required to be arrogant, as if cooking a good meal bestowed on you the right to be
a screaming dickhead. He'd had to learn to put up with it or he never would have made it as a chef.
And a fistfight in a kitchen could very quickly get very dangerous.

After Erskine's third or fourth warning about fighting, Steve had tried to parlay his aggression into
other things. Cooking challenges that would crumble a fellow chef's ego were his favorite. They
weren't violent, but they were memorable. And Ty Stone deserved to have his big mouth silenced for
the way he was treating Tony.
So the challenge was suggested and Ty was standing there looking like every butthead who'd ever shouted at his trainees, and Steve said yes before he thought about it.

"What's your pleasure, Chef?" Ty said. "Quickbread? Maybe a pumpkin salad? Pumpkin spice cookies? If you choose cookies I get to glaze the muffins, nobody likes a muffin better than a cookie."

Steve crossed his arms and glanced at DJ. "Tempura," he said.

Ty narrowed his eyes. "Pumpkin tempura?"

"Sure. It'll take about as long as your muffins, and we've got all the dry ingredients we need. I just need a pumpkin and some knives. You got oil?"

"Sure," Ty said, and he gave Steve a sharklike smile. "All right, Chef. Courtney, get Chef Hipster here a mic pack? Ladies and gentlemen," he said, activating his mic again. "Steve Rogers has agreed to a challenge! On this side of the Kraft Cooking Main Stage, yours truly, Ty Stone of Ty's Action Cooking, making pumpkin spice muffins -- you'll find the recipe there on your printouts. On the far side of the main stage, Steve Rogers of food truck fame, making pumpkin tempura."

"You don't have to do this," Tony said, leaning in to speak in Steve's ear as Courtney hooked up a mic pack to his belt and handed him a clean white apron with ACTION COOKING blazoned across the chest.

"Has DJ ever had pumpkin tempura?" Steve asked.

"I doubt it."

"Well, then this'll be a nice treat for him," Steve said, and Tony broke into an unexpected smile.

"Destroy him," Tony whispered, and then Steve's mic buzzed to life, clipped to his shirt collar.

"So Steve," Ty was saying, "I'm going to narrate my method, you go ahead and do the same -- let me know if I'm talking over you, huh?"

"Sure thing," Steve said, acclimating himself to the microphone. "I'm going to start out by cleaning and seeding a nice mid-sized -- oh, this is nice," he said, as a pumpkin was set on his side of the counter by one of the 4-H kids. "This is a pie pumpkin, looks like an Autumn Gold. Make sure you're using cooking pumpkins and not carving pumpkins if you're buying fresh -- carving pumpkins make terrible eating."

"But don't underestimate the advantages of canned pumpkin," Ty added, as he opened a can of it. "Convenient, keeps well, and tastes just like fresh -- especially if you're adding some great Kraft-brand pumpkin pie spice! While Steve over there scoops seeds, I'm mixing my dry ingredients. Remember to sift -- it doesn't seem important, but it breaks up lumps and it evenly distributes the baking powder throughout the flour."

"Normally if I was going to make a pie, I'd pop these pieces in the oven and steam them," Steve said, slicing the seed-strings cleanly off the flesh of the pumpkin, then peeling the other side. He worked quickly, cutting the flesh into finger-length strips. "But we're going to be frying these -- I know, huh?" he asked, amused when the audience went ooooh. "Normally in Japan the Kabocha pumpkin is used, but this'll work just fine..."

"Almost as fine as this great King Arthur flour I'm using for the muffins," Ty said. Steve could feel Tony's death glare on the guy. "King Arthur is probably the best flour for home cooks, especially
since they have restaurant-quality standards for even their all-purpose flours. Now into this great mixture you're going to cut some really cold butter.

"And I've got my pumpkin all butchered properly," Steve said, "so I'm going to steal Ty's sifter -- " he held out a hand and Ty tossed the sifter to him, "thanks, and sift some cake flour, which has a lower protein content than all-purpose flour, together with baking soda and a little bit of starch, plus a very small pinch of cayenne -- you can also use red pepper flakes if you want a kick, but tempura batter's so thin that it's really there to add texture to the natural flavors of what you're frying."

"What's the secret to really great tempura, in your opinion?" Ty asked.

"Fresh ingredients, I think, Ty -- it's what you're frying in the tempura, making sure your veggies are top notch. How about you, what's the best way to keep muffins moist?"

"I think personally you have to make sure you don't over-mix."

"Which is also true of tempura batter," Steve said, taking a jug of water from the fridge at the back of the stage. "I'm going to add an egg and some very cold water, because heat activates the leavening agents and tempura is supposed to puff in the oil -- which -- careful, Ty, I've got oil on the stove and it should be very hot by now," he warned.

"Thank you Chef," Ty said, rolling his eyes. The audience snickered.

"Can't be too careful when you're sharing a kitchen. Anyway, just a few stirs -- a Japanese chef will tell you to use chopsticks, not a whisk," Steve said.

"Meanwhile I've got all this egg and pumpkin to get into the muffins, so I will be whisking, but very carefully," Ty said. "Lumps are okay, as long as they're small."

"Same goes for the tempura," Steve said. "So now we dunk the pumpkin in the batter --"

"And I'll start filling this greased muffin tin -- you can line 'em if you want, I usually don't worry about it -- two thirds of the way full per cup," Ty said. "And I'm going to nip in before Steve starts to hover over the oil, and pop these bad boys in the oven at 400 for twelve minutes. The high temperature gets them nice and crispy and the short cooking time won't dry them out."

"Don't fry too many of these at once," Steve continued, dodging around Ty and laying slices of battered pumpkin carefully in the hot oil. "Never crowd a fryer."

"That's what she said," Ty said, grinning. "While Steve supervises his pumpkin lumps, I'm going to make a little cream cheese frosting."

"Normally I'd make some homemade ponzu sauce to go with this," Steve said, as the tempura puffed gratifyingly. "But I saw some bottled sauce in the fridge, along with some really nice-looking green onions. So I'm just going to chop a few onions into a bowl, add the ponzu, a sprinkle of sugar...woop --"

He broke off before he could add the sugar, scooping the golden tempura out onto a pad of paper towel, then battering another batch for the fryer. While the muffins baked and Steve alternated between ponzu and frying, Ty did some kind of promotional thing that Steve only half-listened to, a pitch for a couple of brand-name foods followed by another ad for his show. The oven beeped just as Steve was scooping the last of the tempura out of the pan.

"Hey Steve, who are we gonna get to judge all this?" Ty asked, as he plated the muffins and set a bowl of cream-cheese frosting next to them.
"Well, I think your handy helpers over here ought to be part of it, don't you?" Steve asked, gesturing to the clump of 4H girls and boys watching raptly from the sidelines. Ty gestured them forward and they came up shyly, exchanging glances like they couldn't believe their luck.

Steve didn't realize his miscalculation at first. Ty offered each of them a muffin, then handed Steve one and gave the rest of them to an assistant to pass around to the audience. Steve broke his open and subtly licked it, as he usually did with new foods; finding nothing especially threatening, he bit into it. There was nothing threatening in the muffin, either, but mostly because there was nothing much to it. Even to his tastebuds it was bland, and while it wasn't dry it also lacked the nice texture that pumpkin usually gave to muffins. He thought idly that the spice mix Ty was using must be past its best-by date. The cream cheese frosting at least added a little tang to it.

The kids seemed to like it, polishing off their muffins and nodding at each other happily. Ty handed them the mic and let them make a few comments while Steve plated his tempura, with little swirls of ponzu and a few spears of matchsticked carrot as a bed for the pumpkin strips. The rest, still on the paper-towel-lined tray they'd been draining, were circulating in the audience.

The kids all took a bite of the tempura nearly simultaneously, and that was when Steve realized the problem. He watched as their faces lit up, which was very flattering, the kind of reaction he loved, and then they turned thoughtful as the heat from the cayenne added a layer. One of them dabbed the pumpkin in the ponzu sauce and then hungrily popped the whole thing in her mouth. Another was nibbling on the crust of hers as if she wanted to make it last.

Then all four of them looked at Steve awkwardly.

Steve glanced at Tony, who had his hand over his eyes. Apparently he'd anticipated this. When he looked at Ty, he could see that Ty was reading the same thing he was: four teenagers who definitely knew which dish they liked better and definitely knew how awkward it would be to say it was Steve's. They'd been helping Ty publicize his cooking demo; they were all fans. And now they had to rule on his cooking.

"Looks like they loved both of them," Steve hedged, because suddenly the idea of totally crushing Ty wasn't as appealing when he was using four kids to do it.

"Ah, but they have to pick one, right guys?" Ty said, slinging an arm around Steve's shoulders. His eyes were flinty.

The four judges had their heads together; Steve heard one of them say "But we can't betray the uniform!" and tried not to smile.

"Which one's it gonna be?" Ty continued, offering the smallest of the four, the girl in the red bandanna, the microphone. She took it and looked warily at the others.

"Well, we think they're both delicious," she said.

"Naturally. Made with the finest ingredients," Ty agreed.

"And after some consideration, we decided that -- uh -- based on um, flavor and presentation, and um, best use of pumpkin..." she took a deep breath, "Chef Rogers wins battle pumpkin."

Steve saw Tony mouth told you so at Ty. The audience applauded; next to Tony, DJ shoved an entire cube of pumpkin tempura in his mouth and beamed at Steve.

"Well, I know when I'm beat," Ty said, managing to mostly refrain from gritting his teeth. "But don't forget, pumpkin muffins with Kraft pumpkin pie spice are still a great fast breakfast for the family on
the go, or an awesome snack at any time of the day. Let's thank our judges and Chef Rogers -- be back here at two pm for the Death By Hershey's Chocolate Demo, sponsored by Hershey's All New Meltable Chocolate Baking Drops!"

"Lord, let's get out of here," Steve murmured, as Ty began a new song and dance while people started filing out.

"You don't want to sign autographs?" Tony asked, amused, but he scooped up the last of the tempura into a napkin and handed it to DJ, who obediently trailed them away from the stage and reached up to take Tony's hand as they blended back into the crowd.

*

“Kid's down.”

“I'm kind of surprised it took this long, to be honest,” Steve said. He was lying on his back, his hands folding on his stomach, his eyes closed as he basked in the last rays of the setting sun. His cheekbones were flushed, and Tony could swear the man was developing freckles. DJ was asleep at the edge of the blanket, his head pillowed on Steve's jacket, his arms wrapped around a particularly wonky pumpkin. His feet were bare, his legs tumbled off the edge of the blanket, his bare toes dug into the grass. Tony smiled at the two of them, a rush of affection swooping through him.

It was Steve who'd spotted the hill behind the fairgrounds, bought a blanket from the Grange building, and herded Tony and DJ, overloaded with their purchases, back to the car. It had been a toss up which of them had fought him harder, but Steve was hard to dissuade once he'd made his mind up.

He'd been right, of course, but he was too polite to say so.

Tony leaned back on his hands, staring up at the deepening blue of the cloudless sky. The sunset was ruby red on the horizon, casting heavy shadows across the fairgrounds below them. They were still close enough to hear the sounds of the carnival music and the cries of the barkers, but far enough away for the sounds to have an ethereal, ghostly quality.

The grass rustled as the early evening breeze rolled over the field, carrying the scent of green growing things and damp dirt, and Tony took a deep breath, filling his lungs, trying to memorize the taste on his tongue. He could replicate this, somehow. He reached out, trailing his fingers through the blades of grass, focusing on the sensation of each leaf sliding over his skin.

“We should pack things up,” Steve said. Despite that, he didn't move.

Tony glanced at the remains of their picnic dinner. Rounds of smoked sausage and kielbasa laid out on white butcher paper, the twine trailing across their blanket. Heavy slabs of sharp cheddar and thin slices of fragile, lacy goat's milk cheese, stacked on slices of wax paper. Open jars of pickled vegetables were half empty, plastic forks still buried in the contents. Half a loaf of fresh bread, studded with seeds and nuts, rested nearby, Steve's knife still embedded in the thick crust, sticky spots of fresh raspberry jam on the wrapper.

Tony reached for the brown paper bag of roast pecans. “I'm not in any rush,” he said. He offered the nuts, still warm from the setting sun, and sticky with a glaze of cinnamon sugar, to Steve. Steve opened one eye, his nose twitching as he considered the nuts.

Then he put his hands over his face, a faint groan slipping out from between his fingers. Tony grinned. “Is that a no?” he asked, pulling out a pecan and waving it in front of Steve's nose.
“That's a 'I'm never eating anything ever again,'” Steve said.

Tony leaned over him, leaned in close, and whispered, “Liar.”

Steve's eyes opened. “I'm not eating anything else today,” he said, his lips twitching.

Tony's eyebrows arched. “Really?” he asked. He tossed the bag of nuts aside, holding the single pecan up between them. He watched, amused, as Steve's eyes nearly crossed trying to focus on it. Tony leaned in, and slipped it between his lips, letting the sugar coat his mouth. He chewed, slowly, deliberately, letting the taste wash over his tongue, his eyes falling closed as the savored the mingling flavors.

Not bothering to open his eyes, he smiled. “How about just a taste?” he whispered, his voice husky and warm.

Steve's lips brushed against his, his breath hot against Tony's mouth. The kiss was gentle at first, tentative and coaxing, and Tony smiled into the kiss. “Well?” he whispered, pulling back.

Steve's tongue flicked out, wetting his lips. “Sweet,” he said, and he reached for Tony, dragging him down.

Sweet was one word for it. Tony sank into the kiss, against Steve's body, and wondered, in some distant, detached part of his brain, if he'd ever had anything like this before. It seemed like the sort of moment he should've had as a teenager, and never managed. A kiss, languid and sweet and too full of affection to really be hot, and hotter for all that, in the last dying moments of summer, a memory to keep him warm through the darkest nights of winter. Tony heard a moan, and was pretty sure that was him, but Steve's hands were on his back, under his shirt, and his leg was between Tony's, and he didn't really care how much of an idiot he was making of himself.

And that's when DJ started to snore.

Tony raised his head, stymied. Under him, Steve had gone still, his hands still locked just above Tony's hips. Then he started to laugh. Tony slowly lowered his gaze, his eyes narrowing on Steve. Steve just kept laughing. “You have to admit,” he managed, between bouts of something Tony would uncharitably describe as giggles, “he does have great timing.”

Tony huffed out a breath. “Yeah, we Stark boys are known for that.” He pushed himself up, taking a moment to elbow Steve in the side on the way. Steve just kept laughing, rolling to the side and out of reach. Shaking his head, Tony scooped DJ up and headed back to the car. It only took a few minutes to get DJ settled in the backseat.

DJ grumbled, one little hand clinging to Tony's sleeve. Smiling, Tony shrugged out of his sweatshirt, letting DJ curl himself around it, and then closed the car door as quietly as he could.

Back on the blanket, Steve was studying him with an expression Tony couldn't quite read. “What?” he asked. “What's that face for?”

Steve shook his head. “Never mind,” he said with a slight smile. “It's none of my business.”

“Steve, if you only focus on the things that are your business, we're going to run out of topics of conversation pretty fucking fast,” Tony pointed out. “In that your business fits inside a pretty small truck, see, I have a whole walk in freezer that's for nothing but other people's business, it's great, you should try it.”

Steve smiled. “That an offer?”
Tony chuckled, shoving a hand through his hair. “Like you'd let me get my grubby mitts on your goods.” He paused, his eyes narrowing. “That sounded dirtier when I intended.”

Steve's lips were twitching. “Imagine that.”

Tony lowered himself down to the blanket, his attention diverted by the bag of dried fruit that was next to Steve's knee. He reached for it, and Steve got there first, moving it out of reach. Tony pouted at him, and Steve rolled his eyes. “Thought we were bringing some of this home,” he pointed out.

“I made that plan before I tasted the dried apples,” Tony said, making grabby hands. “Fork 'em over.”

Steve pulled a single ring out of the bag, and held it out to Tony. Tony studied it, and then him, displeasure all over his face. Steve grinned at him. “Take it or leave it,” he said, and Tony took it, his fingers sliding over Steve's.

He took a small bite, savoring the sweet-tart snap of the chewy flesh. He chewed, watching Steve out of the corner of his eyes. He swallowed. “Ask,” he said, bringing Steve's head up. “I think, all told, I owe you a couple of answers.”

Steve's smile was slight. “You don't owe me anything.”

Tony chewed carefully on another fragment of dried apple. “Yeah, I do,” he said. He looked back towards the car. “You got DJ to eat beets. That alone deserves my undying gratitude.”

Steve glanced at him. “Why didn't it work out?” he asked, his voice quiet. Tony looked at him, not understanding, and Steve took a sharp breath. “With DJ's mother?”

Tony froze, the last bit of dried apple hanging from fingers that had gone suddenly numb. His mouth opened, and closed, and Steve took an audible breath. “Sorry, I know, it's none of my business, it's just...” His head swung in Tony's direction, then dropped forward. “It's pretty clear, from how you talk about her, that things didn't end badly, or rather, it didn’t end because you wanted it to, so...”

His voice trailed away, and Tony forced his mouth open. The words wouldn't come, and he slipped the last piece of apple between his lips, trying to cover for his inability to speak. Steve was quiet, waiting patiently, as Tony pulled himself together.

Finally, he swallowed. “I don't do long term relationships,” Tony said with a wry smile. “I would've thought someone would've told you that by now.”

Steve gave him a look. “Right,” he said. One eyebrow arched. “And how long did you stick with that smarmy talking head and his chewy, tasteless pumpkin muffins?”

Tony choked on a burst of entirely inappropriate laughter. “I'll have you know,” he said, trying for dignity, “that his muffins used to be a lot better, he's let them go.” He folded himself forward, bracing his legs on his upthrust knees. “He started smuggling in Betty Crocker mixes and I got the hell out.” He paused. “Rumiko, she was different.”

He fell silent, and Steve absently rolled up the top of the paper bag of dried fruit. “She didn't do cake mixes?”

Tony smiled. “No. She didn't.” He looked at Steve. “I didn't know.”

Steve looked up. “What?”
Tony sucked in a deep breath, ignoring the way his chest ached with the force of it. “I didn’t know. You have to-” He stopped. Steve didn’t have to anything. No one had to. And no one had. He closed his eyes, struggling against a sensation of impotent frustration.

“Tony?”

Tony stared up at the darkening sky. Even this early in evening, there were stars there, scattered in the dark blue expanse of the sky, pinpoints of light that were invisible in the city. But here, far from the lights of New York, he could see a million sparks, the expanse of the Milky Way, stretching out far beyond the limits of his vision. And it would only stretch on, deeper and brighter, as the night got darker.

There was something comforting about that.

“I fell in love with Rumiko,” he said, and his voice was calm now. Calm and even. It hurt, but not enough to break him. Not anymore. “She was brilliant and warm and funny, tough and kind and god, could she cook, she could debone a fish in under ten minutes. It was-” He shook his head, his lips curling up. “Her knife skills were a thing of beauty.”

He looked over, and Steve was smiling. “She sounds like quite a woman,” he said, his voice quiet.

Tony smiled back. “She was,” he said. “And…” He stopped, his hands going tight on the fabric of the blanket again. “And she was like me. Her family owns a string of, well, Western-style family restaurants in Japan.” He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “She described them like Denny’s. The…” He choked on a laugh. “The Denny’s of Japan. There were other parts of it, but that was what she always said. Asian Denny’s.” He let that sink in. “There had been talk of a strategic alliance, for a long time. A merger, or a buy out. Officially, she’d come to Big Star as a representative of her family.”

He fell silent, and Steve leaned forward. “Officially?” he asked at last. He glanced at Tony. “But not really?”

“Not really. She was determined that she was going to make her own path, find her own place, and the first step was getting out of reach of her family,” Tony said. “So she was like me, but she wasn’t. Because I wanted out. Even then, I knew that nothing was going to change.” He paused. “I had designed a whole new menu, you know. Simple, easy recipes so the pizzas could be made on site, no more frozen, freeze dried ingredients. Everything fresh, everything as healthy as I could manage and still make a pizza for ten bucks.”

He stared up at the sky. “It can be done, you know,” he said, his voice soft. “People don’t have to eat junk. You can have things be affordable, and still be…” He stopped. “Good. That’s all I wanted. To make it so that everyone could have something that tasted good, even if they couldn’t afford something high end.” He straightened up, a dark sort of amusement bubbling through him. “Maybe you can’t have three Michelin stars, but you could have Big Star.

“But the shareholders wanted five ninety-five Wacky Wednesdays,” Tony said, a wry smile twisting his mouth. “Cheap. Plastic. Full of preservatives, so we could order by the truckload and send the same shipments to every store. So we could hire the lowest cost help and not care when they quit in frustration and disgust. Food that was barely better than the cardboard and plastic and tin it came out of.” He stopped, and shrugged, because it still hurt, it was still infuriating. “Trash. Because we could sell trash. We’d been selling trash for decades, and we were going to keep doing it.”

He pushed himself to his feet. He needed to move. Or maybe, he just needed to not be still. He didn't know anymore. “I wanted out, and I couldn’t even admit it to myself. Rumiko…” He shook his head.
“Rumiko wasn't like me. She was better than me.”

He smiled, tucking his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunching forward. “I loved her. I really thought she loved me, right up until the day she disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

Tony glanced at Steve. “She called out sick to work one day. I called, got her voicemail. Didn't really think much of it, figured she was just sleeping off a cold. Two days later, a letter arrived.” He licked his lips, ignoring the way it hurt to swallow. “Typical Dear John template. She was leaving, and she didn't want to see me again. Asked me not to, you know, not to-” He stopped, his throat working. “Not to try to contact her.”

He stared up at the sky. “Her apartment was empty, her phone was disconnected, she'd given Obie a letter of resignation. She was just...” His shoulders twitched up. “Gone.”

His eyes were burning, and he closed them. “I've had some bad breakups, Steve. I've had relationships that ended badly. But I've never...” He shook his head. “I didn't understand. Why she didn't tell me herself, why she didn't just say, I'm done, don't want to do this anymore, it was fun while it lasted. People do that all the time.”

People did that to him all the time. The thought had barely crossed his mind, and Tony was pulling himself back, pulling himself up short. Self-pity wasn't attractive on anyone, his father had always said, and it was one of the few things he'd said that Tony agreed with.

He looked at Steve. “At the time, the only reason I could figure out why someone would do that, tossing her phone number, her email, her apartment, her whole life...” He forced a smile, his throat aching. “Was if she was afraid.”

Steve blinked, his brows drawing up. “Afraid? Of what?”

Tony's shoulder rose in a half shrug. “Me. I guess.” He met Steve's eyes without flinching. “I never...” He stopped, his mouth going tight. “I know I have a temper, and I yell, sometimes, in the kitchen, I can yell at my chefs, I know I do that, but-” He hated it, he hated the words, he hated to have to say them. “I never hit her, I never threatened her, I just-”

“Of course you didn't.” Steve rocked forward, his elbows on his knees. “Tony-”

“So I thought we were okay,” Tony said, not wanting this to be a discussion. He couldn't handle a discussion right now. “I yelled in the kitchen, and she yelled back, but we never fought, we never got physical, except, you know, in the really fun way, the sex was great, so finding out that she was... At the time, thinking that she might be afraid of me, that was a shock. That's hard to take. When you love someone and you suddenly have to face the fact that they might see you as a threat. That you did something, something you didn’t even know you’’d done, that made you...” He stopped, and took a deep breath. “Something to fear.”

“That's a hell of a conclusion to reach,” Steve said, his voice quiet.

“She abandoned her life here,” Tony said. “Turned off her phone, left her job, her friends, she did it pretty much overnight, and left no forwarding address.” He gave a tight smile. “People don't do that because they're bored with their boyfriend. They do that if they're scared.”

Tony reached for his beer. It was mostly empty, but it was something to do with his hands. “They do that if they're scared,” he said, and took a quick drink. “Or, you know, pregnant.”
He drained the remainder of the beer in two quick gulps. “I didn't know,” he said. “We were both, well, we were both angry at the world, and sex was a relatively healthy way of dealing with that frustration, and we were both drinking.” He looked at the bottle in his hand. “Drinking a lot. And we weren't exactly careful about birth control when we were-” He wanted to put it down. Or pitch it into the nearby woods, with all the force he could manage. But he was trying to be an adult. “It's not an excuse. I didn't think about it then, because, hell, I didn't think of much.”

“Life fell apart pretty soon after she left, Steve. I hated the pizza business, and when the merger fell apart, it seemed like the right time to get out. I'd thought that I'd leave with more than I did, with-” He stopped, and shook his head. “I left with what mattered. Pepper, Rhodey, and enough money to get TOBRU off the ground. To change my life, to change my destiny.”

He turned to face Steve. “But I didn't know. I didn't know about DJ, I didn't know she was pregnant, I didn't.” His hands went to fists at his sides, muscles going tense all the way up his arms. “I didn't go after her, because she asked me not to, she told me not to, and for once in my life, I was trying to do the right thing with an ex, if she was afraid of me, if there was something I’d done, that was the only thing I could think of, so-”

He stopped, his shoulders slumping. “I didn’t know.”

Steve was frowning up at him. “Okay,” he said, his voice quiet.

Tony was breathing hard, too hard. He had to try a couple of times to get his tongue to work. “Okay?”


“She told her Aunt that I knew. And that I paid her off. Paid her to leave.” The words came out in a rush, and he sank down next to Steve, exhaustion sweeping over him. “Which... I didn't. But it's my word against her niece's, and her niece...” His voice trailed away.

“Is dead,” Steve said. He glanced up, his eyes bright in the low light.

“Yeah. I didn't find out until after, after she died. There was a car accident, and she died, and her Aunt-” Tony stopped. “She told me. About DJ. And Rumiko, and that- That took some time to work out.” He sat back down, suddenly exhausted, his empty beer bottle clutched in both hands. “Took a lot of fast talking and a lot of fancy footwork, but...” He gave Steve a wry smile. “It was worth it.”

Steve smiled back. “Was it?”

“I got DJ, I got to be a part of his life,” Tony said, blunt about it. “That's worth anything.” He glanced back over his shoulder, keeping an eye on the car, but there was no sign of movement from inside. “He's worth anything. He's-” He stopped, warmth curling through him. “He's just like his mom. Brilliant and warm and sweet and...” His eyes burned, and Tony tipped his head up, staring up at the stars until they went blurry.

Next to him, Steve shifted. His shoulder brushed against Tony's, and Tony leaned into him, leaned into that unspoken, steady support. “How're his knife skills?”

“We're working on that,” Tony said. “He's working his way up with child safe scissors right now.”

“Smart.” Steve took a sip of his beer. “But what does she think now?”
He didn't clarify the 'she,' and he didn't really need to. Tony leaned back. “She's... We're never going to be best friends, Steve, but I think she respects me a little more. Enough to let DJ stay with me, that's all I need.” His thumbnail rubbed up against the paper on the beer bottle. “I think she's convinced herself that there was some sort of miscommunication, between Rumiko and I. That she tried to tell me, but I missed what she was saying. That way, she can keep thinking Rumiko left because she felt she had no choice, but not because I kicked her out.”

Steve took a deep breath. “But that's not what happened,” he said, his voice quiet.

Tony shook his head. “No. She never-” His throat closed, and he raised the empty bottle, pretending to take a sip, just to buy himself some time. By the time he lowered it, he was steadier. “She never said a word to me.”

Steve set his bottle down on the stone next to them. “What would you have done?” he asked, and Tony went still.

“Panicked?” he said at last, and Steve laughed. Tony took a deep breath. “You think I'm joking, but I'm, I am not, I'm not ready for this. I sure as hell wasn't ready a few years ago, Steve. I was drinking constantly, and I hated my life, and my dad-” He ran a hand through his hair. “Wasn't someone I wanted to emulate.”

He glanced at Steve, smiling. “Thank god I've got Obie, or I'd be flying blind in this thing.”

A shadow crossed Steve's face, his jaw going tight for an instant, but as soon as it was there, it was gone. “Seems to me that you're managing just fine,” he said, his voice quiet.

Tony stared down at his hands, fingers tight on the glass bottle. “I didn't know,” he said, and the words were agonizing. “I didn't-”

Steve's hand closed over his, and Tony jerked upright, his head snapping Steve's direction. “He knows how much you loved her. That's... A good start.”

And not nearly enough. But Tony nodded. “You ready to go find a motel?” he asked, forcing a smile onto his face.

Steve was studying him, his face unreadable. “How long does DJ usually nap?” he asked, at last.

Tony blinked. “Half an hour, an hour?”

“So, he'll probably be waking up soon?”

Not sure where this was going, Tony nodded. “Yes?”

Steve smiled at him. “There's a ferris wheel down there,” he said, nodding down towards the fairgrounds.

Tony looked. “It's a cheap carnival,” he said.

Steve leaned back, bracing his hands on the blanket behind him. “Yep.”

“You're suggesting I take my child on a ride possibly assembled by a drunken carnie?” Tony asked.

Steve thought about that. “Yep.”

“That's a horrible idea.” Tony looked at him, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “And you're a horrible person for suggesting it.”
“Tell you what,” Steve said. “I'll sniff the breath of everyone running the rides, check it out before I let you load DJ in.”

“You're offering to sniff carnies,” Tony said.

“It's a sacrifice I'm willing to make for you,” Steve agreed. He leaned forward. “We can just go find a motel, or...”

His voice trailed away, and Tony raised an eyebrow. “Or?”

“Or we can go back down to the fair, and I can win you a horrifying plush,” Steve said.

Tony grinned. “Those games are rigged.”

Steve grinned back. “Clint taught me a few tricks.”

“There are so many ways that sentence could be bad,” Tony said.

“Does that mean you don't want a horrifying plush?”

Tony studied him. “How would I know?” he asked. “Until I see them.”

Steve laughed. “Sounds logical.”

“I'm nothing if not logical,” Tony said. “Let's pick this up and see if any pass muster.”

* *

“You shoulda named it 'Sam's Spuds.'”

Sam froze in the process of wiping down his menu board. For an instant, his face twisted, and Carol watched, amused, as he tried to come up with a response to that. “No, I shouldn't have,” he said at last. “That sounds like something my Ma would've come up with.”

Carol shifted the bags of trash in her hands. “So your mom is awesome and has awesome ideas, but you still don't listen to her, check.”

Sam glared in her direction, but there was no real heat to it. “How'd your night go?”

She grinned. “You should know, you checked in on us often enough. Steve tell you to keep an eye on us? Make sure we didn't make off with his good knives or his good name?”

“Nah, I'm just naturally nosy,” Sam said. He tossed the rag into the bucket he'd parked nearby, and suds sloshed over the edge. He folded up the menu board, shoving it into the back door of the truck. “I liked the empanadas, that your recipe?”

“That one's Jess's,” Carol said, grinning. “They're usually spicier than that, but I made her throttle it back.”

Sam pointed a finger in her direction. “That was your mistake,” he said, his teeth flashing in a wide smile. “Big mistake. They can take the heat around here.”

“You might think they can, but Jess likes to make people cry. In all sorts of ways, but the cooking's the most socially acceptable.” Carol leaned on his service window as he hopped in to continue cleaning. “Liked the samosas. Nice texture, great mix of flavors.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “What're the chances you'll give me the recipe?”
“Slim to none,” Sam said, cheerfully.

Carol groaned. “Thought that would be your answer,” she said, leaning over to pick up the trash bags again. “But it was worth a try. You got trash? I'm making a run to the dumpster.”

Sam looked up from wiping down the stove. “I got it, you don't have to—”

“I'm going that way,” Carol said, cutting him off. “And I appreciate you checking up on us. So let me do you a favor, will ya?”

He studied her for a second, then gave a quick nod, a bare dip of his chin. “There's a bag back behind the step. Thanks.”

Carol walked around back to snag it, and Sam leaned back from his stove. “Still not giving you my recipe!”

“If I really wanted it, I'd wait until you were tossing your own trash, then I'd break into your truck and steal it,” Carol sing-songed back at him. He was laughing as she started across the TOBRU parking lot. Closing hour had come and gone, and the restaurant was quiet and dark. She glanced up the road, finding that most of the parking lots were empty now, with only a few cars rolling by, and only Thor's place still open.

She tossed the trash, waving at Peter as he emerged from the TOBRU kitchens with bags of his own, and headed back towards the War on Hunger, her feet moving in a brisk jog over the pavement. She whistled tunelessly, a faint run of notes forced out between her pursed lips, as she bounced across the parking lot and along the sidewalk.

The sound of shattering glass brought her head up.

In the glare of the streetlight, dark shadows were moving around the War on Hunger. A flash of light on metal, and then the thin blade of the crowbar was smashing into the hood of the truck, the headlight exploding, glass catching the light as it clattered to the sidewalk. Men were circling like vultures, metal crashing against metal, boots stomping, and Carol's heart was in her throat.

Jess was still in the truck.

Carol took off running, her feet flying over the pavement, her entire world narrowing down to instinct and muscle memory. She hit the first man without slowing down, slamming into him with the full weight of her body. He slammed into the panel of the truck, his head cracking against the metal. The knife in his hand slipped from lax fingers, clattering to the pavement right before he did.

Carol turned to face the next attacker, her arm coming up to block a hit. “Jess!”

The back doors of the truck came crashing open, smashing one man in the face, hard enough to knock him back to the ground. Jess came out swinging, her hands clamped on the top of the truck, her legs snapping out ahead of her, one foot smashing into another man's face.

Carol plowed forward, driving her shoulder into a man's side, lifting him off his feet and slamming him into the side of the truck. He bit out a curse, and she closed his mouth with an upcut that she felt, all the way from her fist to her shoulder. “Jess!” she yelled, trying to keep Jess in her line of sight.

Jess turned, her dark hair sweeping out in an arc behind her as her eyes met Carol's. She grinned, wide and bright, and ducked under the crowbar that was swinging straight for her head. “I'm fine!” she yelled back, and landed a solid kick against the man's knee. He went down with a scream, and Jess let out a hoot, her hands coming up. “Watch yourself!”
“But watching you is so much more fun!” Carol yelled back, kicking the knife out of a man’s hand before he could sink it into one of the tires. “Hey, you know how much those things cost, you asshole?”

A flash of movement out of the corner of her eye had her scrambling backwards, just barely managing to keep the crowbar from smashing into the side of her head. It hit the side of the truck, gouging into the paint, and Carol ducked under it, coming up swinging.

"HEY!"

Sam came charging out of the darkness, moving so fast that Carol could barely track him, already swinging as he crashed into the fray. He was clutching a long wooden pole in his hands, and for an instant, Carol nearly burst out laughing. “Did you bring a broom to a knife fight?” she called, even as she made a grab for a man’s shirt. He twisted in her grip, his arm snapping up and clipping her cheek with enough force to snap her head around.

For an instant, her vision went spotty, and she rocked back, her world going sideways. She saw the asshole raise his hand for another blow, and then Peter was there, leaping out of the darkness to land on the guy’s back. His fingers clawed at the man’s face, and the attacker screamed, stumbling backwards. Carol slammed a fist into his face. “Thanks!”

“Oh my GOD,” Peter said, rumpled and visibly freaked out. Despite that, he scooped up a discarded crowbar, and charged forward, screaming “QUEEEEEEEEEEEENS!”

“What the fuck?” Carol asked, unable to keep a grin off of her face.

“It’s where he’s from,” Sam said, swinging his pole like a baseball bat. “Not a commentary on the company.”

“I’m fine with it,” Jess said, flying by, her arms raised. “QUEEEEEEEEEEEENS!”

Staffers were pouring out of TOBRU and SHIELD, and Sam was swinging his pole with brutal efficiency, Jess was cursing everyone in a ten foot radius in two languages, and their attackers apparently decided enough was enough. Almost as one, they broke and ran.

Carol chased them, one step, maybe two, but they were scattering across the street, disappearing into the darkened corners of the neighboring parking lots. She caught Sam’s elbow as he darted past. “Let them go,” she said, her breath coming hard now. “It’s not worth getting killed over.”

He glanced at her, his jaw tight, his eyes bright in the low light. "You okay?" he asked, his voice clipped.

Carol grinned at him, wiping a hand over her mouth. "Fine. Jesus, you can fly when you want to."

“T’m quick on my feet,” Sam agreed. He leaned the pole against the ground, his shoulders rising and falling with the force of his breathing. “And you do not fuck around. Either of you.”

“Former Air Force,” Carol explained, letting her head fall forward. Adrenaline was singing through her veins, and her hands trembled when she braced them against her thighs. She folded them into fists to keep them still.

Sam’s teeth flashed in a brilliant grin. “Huh. Whatta you know. Me, too.”

Carol held up a fist, and he tapped his knuckles against hers. “Explains why you’re a good man to have in a fight,” she said.
“Nah, just ornery by nature.” Sam glanced over, where Jess was still hanging off the lightpole, shaking her fist and cursing in a variety of languages. "She ex-military, too?"

Carol huffed out a breath, a rush of affection sweeping through her. "No. She just had a really, really messed up childhood." She straightened up, wincing as her ribs protested the sudden move. She wrapped an arm around her middle, trying to ignore it. "They get you, too?"

Sam shook his head. "They ignored me completely. Whatever that was? They were only after you guys." He looked up as Jess came scrambling back to them. "Think they thought you guys were a softer target?"

“Yeah, well, shows what they know, huh?” Jess leaned in, her hands cradling Carol's jaw, tipping it gently up. “How bad?” she asked, and Carol slipped a hand behind her neck, pulling her in for a kiss that was more comfort than heat, but her hands were still shaking and Jess's face was flushed. Jess pulled back, pressing another gentle kiss to Carol's throbbing cheek.

Her lips were gentle, soft, and it hurt for all that. Carol leaned into it anyway, desperate for the contact. But when Jess straightened up, trying to pull away to get a better look, Carol swayed on her feet. Jess grabbed one arm, and Sam snagged the other, both of them dragging her back to her feet. Carol bared her teeth at them. “I'm fine,” she said, stung by the worry in their faces.

“Yeah, we got that.” Sam glanced at Jess, tipping his head in Carol's direction.

“Are you two trying to handle me?” Carol asked, even as Jess wrapped an arm around her back, her grip on Carol's waist firm and strong and steady.

“Would we do that?” she asked with a flirtatious smile. "Here, lean on me, let's get you back to the truck."

"I don't want to go back to the truck, the truck is covered in broken glass," Carol complained, but she wrapped her free arm around Jess's shoulders, letting Jess guide her out of the road.

"Fine, we can bring your unlucky ass back to my truck,” Sam said, falling into step right behind them. “My intact truck."

"Your truck's got tater tots," Carol said, letting her head flop onto Jess's shoulder. She might've been in shock. She wasn't sure she cared. "I like tater tots. And your truck."

"I think if anyone deserves tater tots tonight, it is you," Sam agreed. Peter saw them coming and hopped up into Sam's truck, coming out with the folding chair that Sam stashed under the serving window for rare slow moments.

He flicked it out, and Carol lowered herself down with a groan of appreciation. Peter glanced at Sam. "Is she okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Carol said, taking slow, careful breaths. Ribs felt bruised, all right, but not broken. She'd take 'not broken.'

"She's stubborn and stupid,” Jess said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Fuck you,” Carol sing-songed at her.

"Just to be safe,” Sam said to Peter, “can you hoof it over to Thor's place, see if Jane's hanging out at the bar?"
"She is already on her way." Thor came around the corner of the truck, a massive ice crushing hammer in one hand and a kicking, swearing man in the other. He had the skinny guy in a headlock, effortlessly keeping his feet off of the ground. "This came through my parking lot," he said, his voice a low, sustained rumble. "One of your troublemakers?"

Carol stared up at him. "Yeah," she said, through set teeth. "He's the one who smashed the windshield.

“My staff is chasing the stragglers,” Thor said. “We might yet get others, but for now-” He hauled the man up. “Perhaps this one has answers for us.”

"Fuck you,” the man snarled, clawing at Thor's arm. Thor didn't seem to notice.

“Perhaps not,” he said.

"What if he's armed?” Sam asked, swinging his pole around to his other hand, his gaze wary.

"Oh, he was. He's not any more." The woman two steps behind Thor was tall and slim, with dark hair and a bright red medic bag thrown over one shoulder. She crouched down in front of Carol. "Hi, I don't think we've met. I'm Jane. How're we doing today?"

Carol gave her a thumbs up. Jane arched an eyebrow, but just turned to Jess. "You okay?” she asked Jess.

"I'm fine." Jess tucked her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket. "Unlike Miss 'Punch it square in the face and keep punching it until it falls over or my hands break,’ I know when to duck."

"Ha. Ha," Carol said, and Jess gave her an unrepentant smirk. Jane put gentle fingers under her chin, tipping her head up. Carol blinked as a penlight was shone into her eyes. "Tell me someone called the cops."

"Coulson's on it." Nat came out of the darkness, her hair brilliant in the pale glow of the streetlight. Clint was a step behind her, his head up, his eyes darting from side to side. Despite that, his face was calm and his movements relaxed.

"He knows people," Clint said, crouching down to peer under Steve's truck. "Don't start this up 'til we've had a chance to check it out." He glanced up. "Peter, you guys got a flashlight we can use?"

Peter nodded. "Yeah, sure."

"And bring me some ice and a clean hand towel, please," Jane asked. Peter nodded, and was off and running towards the back door of TOBRU.

Carol looked at Clint. "How bad?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Looks like some dents, some paint damage, and..." He took a step back. "The glass is shot."

"Thanks for pointing that out, we hadn't noticed," Carol told him, unable to keep a smile off of her face.

"I live to serve." His head tipped in Thor's direction. "I got zip ties in my pocket, you want to put that guy down?"

Thor's arm tightened, his muscles bulging, and the goon's face flushed a dangerous sort of red. "No,"
Thor rumbled. "No, I do not."

"Don't strangle him, darling," Jane said, without even looking in his direction. She dabbed at Carol's cheek with a swab soaked with disinfectant, ignoring the way Carol winced. "You're going to have one hell of a bruise tomorrow." Jane gave her a sympathetic smile. "But it should heal clean."

Carol shrugged. "Chicks dig scars," she said with a lopsided smile.

"Chicks do not dig scars," Jess said, one hip cocked, her arms crossed over her chest. "Or at least, this chick doesn't, I like your face pretty."

"Okay," Carol said to Jane, who was struggling against a smile. "No scars."

"I'll put my scalpel away," Jane said, with all due seriousness. Peter appeared over her shoulder, a metal prep bowl of ice and a stack of bleached white towels balanced in his arms. "Thank you, Pete, help me with this, okay?"

Clint stepped around the back of the truck. "Gas can," he said to Nat, who didn't look surprised.

Jess muttered a curse under her breath. "They were going to torch the truck."

It wasn't a question, but he bobbed a nod. "Yeah. Looks like it. Either they thought you'd turn tail and run..." His voice trailed away, and Carol finished for him.

"Or they didn't care." She took a deep breath and glanced at her watch. "Right." She glanced at Sam. "Do I call Steve now? Or wait until morning?"

Sam bounced the broom handle against his shoulder, his eyes narrowed. "Wait until morning," he said at last. His dark eyes were sharp in the low light. "If you’re up to it. ‘Cause otherwise, he’s going to haul ass back here."

Carol took a deep breath and let it out, hating this. "Goddamnit," she muttered. "Guy takes a vacation for a weekend and we let his truck get trashed."

He was already shaking his head. "Not about the truck, the truck can be fixed." She looked at him, and Sam grinned at her. "Call him tonight, and he'll be back here hovering over you making worried noises as fast as the speed limit’ll let him."

Carol grinned. "I’d like to go to bed at some point, so..."

"You should call him," Jess said, tapping a fingertip against her lips. "I wouldn’t mind some hovering." Carol gave her a look. "What? He’s adorable."

"Unless the police wanna talk to him, let him sleep, leave him a message tomorrow," Sam said.

"I think we’re going to listen to the man," Carol said to Jane.

"Always a good idea around here."
Steve woke because something was pushing on his face.

He opened his eyes, bewildered, and got only a sliver of actual visual; something was blocking his view. He shifted, gingerly, and felt something prod him in the chin. It felt like there was a hand gripping the hair at the back of his head.

When they'd finally left the fair the previous night, they'd found a cheap room at a nearby motel (a hand-lettered sign out front had read FAIRGOERS, WE HAVE THE LAST ROOMS IN TOWN - AFTER THIS IT'S THE STABLE!) and Tony and Steve had taken turns washing up and snacking on the leftover junk food from the fair.

DJ had marshalled his pumpkins, assorted flyers, free-giveaway keychains and bottleopeners and pencils, and adorned his bed with them. The centerpiece of the work was what looked to Steve like a big stuffed robot dog, but which DJ insisted was a Pokemon. He'd rolled his eyes at Steve like Steve was impossibly old for not knowing; Steve had made a note to ask Kamala what an Aron actually was. The only one he had known was Pikachu, and DJ had picked the Aron over the Pikachu instantly.

"You planning on moving in?" Tony had asked, amused. DJ, carefully arranging the pumpkins in an arcane pattern only he seemed to see, just grinned and piled up all the giveaway-bottle-openers carefully in front of the giant Aron like an offering.

Now, as Steve untangled himself from what turned out to be DJ's bare feet in his face, he saw Tony wrapped around the plush toy, several pencils lodged in his curly hair. DJ, draped over Steve's neck and shoulder with his hands stickily wrapped in Steve's own hair, gave a sleepy whimper but didn't wake as Steve rolled him off and into the blankets.

Steve pondered taking a photo, because the famous Michelin-star co-owner of TOBRU and two-time Iron Chef champion cuddling a giant pokemon and covered in pumpkins was pretty good blackmail material, but when he picked up his phone he had a text from Jess that made him frown.

Call when you see this. Don't want to alarm you but we need to talk to you.

Perhaps there'd been some kind of problem with the truck. The engine could be a little touchy; it was a hybrid conversion and needed a gentle hand. Still, usually Kamala could get it running without Steve's help, and it wasn't like War on Hunger couldn't sit in the TOBRU parking lot overnight if necessary.

He shrugged to himself, snapped a picture of Tony for posterity, double-checked that DJ was still out, and slipped out into the parking lot, barefoot, to call Jess. The phone was ringing before he considered that she might not be up at seven in the morning any more than he'd been up when she'd texted at midnight.

"Hello," came a voice, whispered and rough.

"Jess?" Steve asked, feeling rude. "Sorry, it's Steve, did I wake you?"

"Steve -- hi, yes, but that's okay, glad you got my text," she said. He heard her grunt, probably getting out of bed. "Don't freak out."
"Is there a reason I might?" he asked. "If it's the truck engine, I meant to tell you --"

"No, just, before I tell you, everything's fine, nothing's damaged permanently, nobody's hurt badly," she said.

"Okay, well, now I'm definitely freaking out," Steve said.

"Some vandals attacked the truck last night."

"What?" Steve asked, then lowered his voice, because yelling in a motel parking lot was poor manners. "Are you guys okay? Were you robbed? It's okay if you were, I have insurance, it's not a big deal. Are you and Carol hurt at all?"

"We're fine. Carol's a little bruised. Peter might be traumatized. Or he might be embarking on a superhero career as The Queens Crowbar, we're not sure," Jess said. The humor in her voice told him simultaneously that it wasn't too serious and that it was...serious. "I don't think they were after the cash box, but either way they didn't get it."

"I can be there in a couple of hours --"

"Hey, you're on the road with Tony and a little kid, don't wake them up, let's talk first," Jess said.

"Sam was there, and the TOBRU staff and Shield folks came out swinging. Thor actually caught one of them."

"Was it..." Steve chewed his lip. "There were some kids hassling Kamala a while back. I thought I'd run them off."

"I don't think so. They were adults, and she wasn't even there."

"Were they...were they after you?" Steve asked. He hadn't been hassled too badly, not in New York, but you got all kinds of strange people and the homophobes could get violent.

"We don't know, Steve. The cops are talking to the guy, he's in lockup, but they took the report and then just kinda left. I haven't called your insurance or anything, but I got the cop's business card."

Steve leaned against the car, rubbing his forehead. "What's the damage on the truck like?"

"Some broken glass, dents, scratched paint. The tires are fine but we had to leave it at TOBRU, the headlights and the windshield..."

"No, that's fine, I'm just glad everyone's safe. I will be home today, there's nothing we're doing here that can't wait -- if Tony can't drive me I'll get a ride."

"Tony would literally run over someone in a car for you," Jess said drily. "He'll drive you home."

"Well, either way, expect me this afternoon, okay? Tell Carol I'm sorry she was hurt. You two rest up, I'll handle everything."

"Steve, you should know..." Jess paused.

"Look, if you don't tell me now I'm just going to worry all the way home," Steve said.

"Clint found a can of gasoline," she blurted. "They were going to torch the truck."

"With you guys in it?"
"Steve, that's what you're worried about? It's your truck!"

"Trucks can be replaced," Steve said. "I bought it once, I can buy it again. Oh my God, they were going to set you on fire. And -- there's propane tanks in the truck. A gasoline fire -- the propane, the biodiesel...the truck would have exploded. Woulda taken out everything within thirty feet. If they rigged it right they could have blown up the truck and TOBRU. The chemicals in the TOBRU kitchen? Hell, Jess, they might have burned down the block."

There was silence on the other end.

"I'm glad you're okay," Steve said finally. "Please, please stay that way today."

"Do you want us to try and get the truck towed somewhere?" Jess asked.

"I'll call Bruce and see what he wants to do. A mess like that in the parking lot's not great for TOBRU, but I don't think he'll care, and I know Tony won't." Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. "Why would anyone...I mean, I've annoyed a lot of people in my career, but rage-quitting haute cuisine hurt me worse than it did anyone else. Anyone I've pissed off would just punch me in the face or give me a savage review. Nobody's the kind of mad at me that gets my restaurant firebombed."

"You are the first Michelin-star food truck," Jess pointed out. "People get jealous. Or it could've been they were after us. But they jumped the truck, not me or Carol."

There was a thump and a click behind Steve; Tony staggered out of the motel room, barefoot and squinting, and then lurched straight past Steve towards the motel office, eyes trained on the coffeemaker inside.

"I gotta go, the zombie awakens," Steve said, watching Tony grope his way into the office and fumble with the styrofoam cups. "Call me if anything else happens. I'll text when I've figured out what we're doing. Stay safe."

"You too. If they went after the truck, they might want to serve you a molotov cocktail," Jess said. "Bye, Steve."

Steve hung up just as Tony emerged, and it was gratifying that Tony had, even in his semi-lucid state, poured two cups of coffee. He stopped mid-sip of one when he saw Steve leaning on the car.

"I'm not naked, am I?" Tony asked.

"What?" Steve asked. "No, why...?"

"You look terrified. And sometimes I forget pants," Tony said, offering him a cup. Steve took it, then reached out and pulled Tony into his body; Tony made a startled noise and held his arm wide to stabilize his coffee cup.

"I gotta go home," Steve said. "Someone attacked War On Hunger last night."

Tony made a second noise, slightly more interrogatory.

"Jess and Carol are fine, but I need to go back. I know you might not want to freak DJ out -- "

"S'fine," Tony mumbled, leaning back just enough to sip some more coffee. The clouds almost visibly faded from his eyes. "Wait, what."
"Apparently the truck got jumped by firebugs," Steve said. "I'm gonna have to go back -- even if the truck's okay, and I'm not sure it is, I need to call insurance, get someone working on new glass, talk to the police..."

Tony, apparently still not quite following, patted Steve's chest. "Okay," he said. "We'll go back."

"If you need to finish your farm tour, I think there's a train station -- "

"Steve," Tony said, and faceplanted into his collarbones. "Your truck's on fire, or something. We will go home."

"Do you want my coffee?" Steve asked, as Tony tried to slurp nonexistent coffee out of his empty cup.

"Yes," Tony said. Steve handed it to him and Tony downed it, exhaling. "Okay. I'll get DJ up and ready, you get us packed and we'll hit the road."

Inside, DJ had migrated back to his own bed and was rearranging his treasures. He looked up when they came inside and beamed. Tony sat down on the bed and helped DJ clamber into his lap.

"Breakfast!" DJ said cheerfully, in a tone that said *good morning.*

"Yep, breakfast pretty soon," Tony agreed, as Steve settled on the bed across from them.

"Then more farms?" DJ asked hopefully. Tony grinned down at him. "Pumpkin farms?"

"Okay, kiddo, a little change of plans," he said, and DJ narrowed his eyes. "We have to go back to the city today."

DJ blinked at him. "Farms," he said, not quite a question.

"I know, but uh..." Tony glanced at Steve, and DJ followed his gaze.

"My truck broke down," Steve said. "So I have to go back and fix it -- "

He broke off because DJ had slithered off Tony's lap, face turning serious. He rested a hand on each of Steve's knees and looked up at him earnestly.

"I will help," he said. Tony bit his lip, eyes lighting up.

"I bet you will," Steve said. "But we have to go back to New York to see it, so we can't go to more farms. I'm sorry, DJ."

"Got pumpkins anyway," DJ said.

"Yeah, and," Steve said, "If we're lucky, Bucky'll come around and you can help him tune up his bicycle."

"But we gotta get breakfast and get packed up," Tony said, pulling DJ back and settling him on the bed. "So pack up the robot -- "

"Aron!"

" -- and the pumpkins and we'll hit the road," Tony said, hauling his suitcase up onto the bed. DJ began piling things into it, carefully arranging them in a way that probably wasn't best for *packing* but looked very nice. Steve caught Tony's arm as he turned away, pulled him gently back, and kissed
"Thanks," he said.

"Hey, you're the one who prevented the Oh God We're Changing Something freakout," Tony said.

"Teamwork," Steve said with a grin, and let him go.

***

It was a long drive back to New York, and Steve was grateful that Tony talked when he was nervous, because it meant Tony did most of the heavy lifting: driving, keeping DJ entertained with chatter, and filling the silence. He could tell Tony was worried, but at least he was coping, because Steve wasn't sure he himself was.

He'd be fine for a few minutes, distracted by a funny road sign or a stray thought crossing his mind, and then it would lead back to the truck -- which was never very far from his thoughts at any rate -- and he'd have a brief, panicked moment of fear. Who would want to hurt him, or Carol or Jess? What if Kamala had been there? (She'd texted him a long string of sad faces; apparently Peter had told her what happened.) He had insurance on the truck and the business, but there would be deductibles and lost sales, and so much paperwork. He'd have to find a good glass guy. Maybe Strange would finally give him the number of the guy who did his detailing so he could get the paint patched if it needed it. And how badly hurt was Carol? Would the attack hurt TOBRU's reputation?

His thoughts kept spinning, then calming, then spinning again. He barely noticed where they stopped for lunch, or what he ate, and he almost always noticed what he ate.

As they reached the more densely-populated areas that indicated they were nearing the city, Tony reached over and rested a hand on Steve's knee. Steve covered it with his hand and leaned in, resting his head on Tony's shoulder for a minute. Then he lifted his head and whispered lovingly in Tony's ear, "Keep both hands on the wheel."

Tony snorted. Behind them, DJ said, "Manhattan!" excitedly.

When they reached the TOBRU parking lot, Tony had to do some fancy footwork to catch and contain DJ, and Steve left him to that and to greeting the staff while he inspected his poor battered truck. Someone had expertly taped cardboard, wrapped in plastic, over the front headlight. The windshield was intact but one corner was spiderwebbed, and the poor thing looked like a beaten animal.

Inside, anything that could conceivably have been stolen had been locked up in the pantry, and a heavy chain had been looped around the front bar of the stove and through the handles of the stainless steel cabinets, just in case.

"Your work?" he asked Bruce, when the other man appeared at the rear door.

"Seemed wise, all things considered. We had people here until 3am, and Coulson sat up with her until the morning shift showed up."

"Thanks for letting the wreckage rest until I could get here," Steve said.

"I think honestly it'll improve our rep. We're edgy again, now," Bruce said.

"The food tastes better if your safety is in immediate peril?"
"Something like that. Steve," Bruce said, because Steve couldn't stop touching the counters, the edge of the stove and griddle, the handles of the cupboards. "They got one guy, the cops are treating this like a hate crime, and you're...incredibly popular. Bucky's got his messenger network talking, and you know how chefs in this city talk. It won't happen twice."

"They must have been aiming for me," Steve murmured. "Something so organized, a group of people. But they also must have known I wasn't there, Jess and Carol and Kamala were running it all day. I just...can't work it out, Bruce."

"People are weird," Bruce said with a shrug. "New York's full of strange little secrets nobody knows. Did you have fun on the road, at least?"

"Oh, yeah -- " Steve nodded. "I should go help Tony get the food inside. We got some of the most amazing apples at a pick-your-own, and I think Tony's going to have a new menu for you."

"Did you at least get goat cheese?" Bruce asked, a weary note in his voice.

"Yeah, buddy, we got the goat cheese," Steve said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Be prepared for an elevated-junk-food theme to the next few months, though."

"Junk food?" Bruce asked, eyebrows creasing. "What, like...canned vegetables?"

"Hold onto that, if it helps," Steve said. "Listen, I can't move the truck until insurance has had a look at it, but I'll try to get them here early tomorrow. Will that be okay?"

"That'll be fine. Take as long as you need. Are you going to keep serving?"

"Don't know," Steve admitted. "I want to do a check of all the fuel lines first, make sure nothing's going to explode when I turn the burners on."

Outside, Bucky had arrived and pulled his bike up to the flat, clear area around the kitchen entrance. It was turned upside-down, propped on seat and handlebars, and he and DJ were squatted in front of it, conferring seriously. When he saw Steve, he uncurled, said a few words to DJ, and then offered Steve a hug. Steve probably held onto him a little too long, but it was hard to care.

"Every messenger in the city's got their eyes peeled," Bucky said. He tipped his head to the side, long hair sliding away from his eyes. "This morning we set up a patrol network; messengers who aren't on a call are tag-teaming each other on guard duty for the rest of the trucks. Workin' out well actually, the trucks are spooked, so everyone's grateful and handing out free snacks to us."

"Pass along my thanks, would you?"

"Course," Bucky said, and then said, "What?" because Steve was grinning. He followed Steve's gaze down to where DJ stood at his side, peering at the fingers of his prosthetic hand, one finger poking at the joints inquisitively. Bucky twitched and curled his fingers and DJ jumped back, giggling.

"You like that, kiddo?" Bucky asked, wiggling the red resin fingers at him.

"Printed," DJ declared.

"Yeah, it's 3-D printed, 'cause I bust 'em regularly," Bucky agreed. "Next time I'm getting silver, but this time I thought I'd try the red."

DJ held out his hand and Bucky, eyebrows rising, bent to rest his hand in DJ's tiny palm. DJ
immediately began examining every joint and wire.

"Keep an eye on him, wouldja?" Steve asked. "I'm gonna go help Tony unload."

"Sure. We're pals, ain't we?" Bucky said to DJ.

"I was talking to DJ," Steve informed him, and DJ laughed as Steve ducked inside in time to hear Bruce yell *I ask for goat cheese and you bring me apple cider!*

* 

"Hey, boss?"

"Oh, God, what's going on, you're calling me boss, that's... That's such a bad sign." Tony glanced up, shoving his hair out of his face. "What'd I do now?"

Pepper leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. "For once, it's not about what you've done," she said, with a slight, amused smile. "As odd as that might be."

"That is odd," Tony agreed. "A relief. But odd." He dropped an invoice onto the pile. God, he hated invoices. He hated everything about running a restaurant that wasn't actually cooking. "Why do I have a partner if I still have to do invoices?" he asked Pepper.

"Because you tried to make Bruce do all the back office work and he ended up going ballistic on three different suppliers and now we don't do that anymore," she said, her voice saccharine sweet.

Tony winced. "Right. That." He leaned back in his chair. "What's up?"

She glanced down at her tablet. "We have a request for a table."

"That's normal, thank God."

"For Friday."

Tony choked on a laugh. "You mean next Friday? Or THIS Friday?"

She waved an idle hand through the air. "It really doesn't matter, because we're booked solid for all seatings for the next twelve Fridays, with a waiting list out the door in case someone cancels."

"Music to my ears," Tony said, saluting her with his coffee cup. "So why are we discussing this person? Is it the president?"

"If it was the president, I'd have a table for him." She paused. "Well, the last president. The distasteful cheeto gets nothing." Pepper said with a raised eyebrow. "It's Ty Stone."

Tony let out a long, heartfelt groan. Pepper smiled. "That was my reaction as well, but he's insisting he's an old friend of yours and he'd like to speak to you about squeezing him in."

Tony propped his chin on one hand. "He doesn't remember you, does he?"

"He does not remember me at all," she agreed. She was clearly less than amused. Tony wondered if he'd live through this. She pointed. "Line two. Take care of it."

"Just hang up on him!" Tony said. "It's very therapeutic."

She tapped a perfectly sculpted nail against her tablet, clearly done with talking to him now. "That
sounds like your job, because you do not pay me enough."

"Hanging up on Ty is a side benefit! You should pay me for it!" Tony pointed out. But he reached for the phone anyway. "Fine, I'll hang up on him, could you let Peter know I'm almost done and will be out to collect my progeny?"

"You need to hire actual child care," Pepper said, with a stern look. "You need to stop using Peter."

"First of all, no, and second of all, Peter prefers folding napkin swans with Deej to cleaning, which is what he should be doing right now," Tony said. She did not look impressed. "Desperate times calls for desperate measures?"

She heaved a sigh, hugging her tablet to her chest. "Tony..."

"Fine, I'll make it up to him, go, shoo!" Tony snagged receiver and punched the blinking line on the phone. He leaned back in his chair, bracing one foot on the edge of the desk. "Okay, what's your play?"

There was a beat of silence. "Sorry?" Ty said, and it was all that Tony could do not to burst out laughing.

"Know what? I think that's the first time you've ever said that word to me," he said, grinning at the ceiling. "Wow. Pretty sure it is."

Ty sighed. "Tony-"

"Yeah, yeah, let's not get into that, there's no point." Tony bounced the tip of one finger on the angle of his knee. "But seriously. What's your play, Ty? Don't pretend you want to be friends, we were lousy at being friends, and we were both smart enough to know that, and smart enough to walk away."

"You're the one-"

Tony's eyes rolled up towards the ceiling. "Okay, I was smart enough to walk away," he said, cutting Ty off without even a flinch. "And you didn't care. You did not care, let's both tell the truth and admit it. But now you're back, and you're trying something, and I need you to not." He stopped. "Just don't. What do you want?"

The silence was longer this time, and Tony could almost feel Ty weighing his options. He waited patiently, shifting idly through a stack of invoices with his free hand.

"I've got a new show idea percolating," Ty said, and that was his professional voice. Smooth. Practiced. Charming. Tony paused, letting the pages slide away from his fingers. "Solid concept. Pre-sold to the network. But I need a sponsor."

"Yeah, TOBRU isn't really in a position to sponsor whatever nonsense you've come up with," Tony said, tapping the tip of his pen against the nearest invoice. "Even if we were..." He hummed under his breath. "We wouldn't."

"Tony."

"You know this, why are you calling me? You've got no interest in molecular gastronomy." 

"And neither does the American public," Ty pointed out. "It's got nothing to do with TOBRU."
“Then we’ve got nothing to talk about.”

“Can you listen for once in your life?” Ty asked, his mask slipping, just a bit, and Tony grinned at the ceiling.

“No,” he said.

Ty ignored that. “This is a totally new concept, Tony. Half-travel show, half food show, half building bridges.”

“Your math is as bad as your cooking,” Tony said. “Stop soft shoeing. What-”

“I want to focus on fast food around the world,” Ty said. “Like, street food, but with a corporate twist.”

Tony paused. "What."

"Like, how McDonalds serves a teriyaki burger in Japan, or a pineapple burger in Hawaii."

Tony downed the rest of his coffee, just to keep himself from saying anything for a second. It didn't help. "Lowest common denominator food no matter where you are?" he asked, dropping the cup back to the desktop with a clatter. "Classy."

"Doesn't matter if it's classy. It'll be popular." Tony could hear the smirk in Ty's voice. "Americans fly halfway around the world, pile off the plane and stampede straight into the nearest Starbucks, Tony. They like the familiar, but they also like convincing themselves that they're being adventurous."

"Yeah, I hate to admit it, but it'd probably be a hit." Tony stopped. Blinded. "You son-of-a-bitch, this is about Big Star." Ty’s silence spoke volumes, and Tony rocked back in his chair with a groan. "Ty, you dumb bastard, you know I have nothing to do with Big Star," he said, not sure if he was amused or frustrated about the fact that this was just a waste of his time. "Sold out years ago, Ty."

"Doesn't mean you don't still have pull," Ty said. "And if it was just Big Star that would be one thing, but word on the street is that there’s a merger in the works."

"Ty." Tony dropped his legs off the edge of the desk, rocking himself forward. "I'm out. I've got nothing for you." He reached for his coffee cup. "And I don't even know what you're talking about. The last merger deal fell through years ago, and there's no chance-"

"Word on the street is that it's back on."

Tony paused, coffee cup halfway to his mouth. His eyes narrowed. "Really?" he said at last, tossing back a mouthful of lukewarm sludge. "You really think you know better than me when it's-"

"I don't think I know anything," Ty said. "But I know that the bean counters behind the network are grasping, clutching, greedy little bastards who'd sell their aged grandmother for a hookup with an international fast food conglomerate."

"So would you," Tony said.

"Yeah, but I'm charming about it," Ty said. "Look, when it comes to cooking shows, the public has a limited attention span. Unless you're a charming southern grandma or Alton Brown, you're going to be out on your ass before you can say ratatouille. The public is fickle, and I'm looking to change my paradigm."
"Of course you are," Tony said, amusement winning out at last. "So, what, you're looking for a corporate partner for 'Ty Stone's Homemade Fast Food Fix'?

"Catchy."

"Feel free to use it. A gift, from me to you," Tony said, waving his coffee cup through the air. "So, you want Big Star as a show sponsor? That's it?"

“That’s all,” Ty agreed. “Big Star would be in a perfect position to help me get this off the ground, if the merger with Fujikawa Dining Group goes through. The biggest names in fast food in Asia are under their banner, Tony. If I can get them on board as a sponsor, RecipeTV can sell it worldwide. It's a new audience, a massive audience for us.”

Tony could almost hear the dollar signs in his voice. “For you, you mean.”

Ty ignored that. “And free advertising, positive advertising for both Big Star and Fujikawa.”

“Right.” There was a tap on the door, and he glanced up. Peter was hovering there, a question on his face and DJ dancing around his legs. Tony held up a finger, mouthing 'one second,' and Peter nodded. Tony pushed his chair back. "Look, there's no merger, Ty, you're operating with old info. Those bridges got burned years ago. But I'll bet Obie's still got connections. I'll let him know about your latest brilliant foray into dumbing down the American palette. He knows good synergy when he hears it, if it'll work for the company, I'm sure he'll be the first one to sign on the dotted line."

“So I've got your endorsement?”

“I'll talk to him about it,” Tony said. “That's it, Ty.”

Ty made a soft, considering sound under his breath. "You do that. And while you're at it, might want to ask him what's happening on the corporate backend. Because if there is a deal in the works, I won't be the last one coming around, looking for a piece of it. Probably better for you if you're not caught flat footed next time."

"Your concern is noted," Tony said. "Disregarded, but noted."

"Now, about that table..."

Tony hung up without a bit of guilt. “What's up, Senor Scuffles?”

Peter gave him a look. “Stop calling me that.”

Tony thought about it. “No,” he said at last. “What's up?”

Peter heaved a very put upon sigh. “There's a cop outside, talking to Sam and Steve,” he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “Didn't know if you wanted to go stick your nose into their business.”

Tony was already on his feet and halfway to the door. “Look, it happened in my parking lot, or next to my parking lot, so that technically makes it my business, or at least it affects my business, and thus, I have the right to put my big nose where ever I want to,” he said. He scooped up DJ on his way past. “So yes. I do. Thank you, Scrappy-Doo.”

“This is the last time I ever try to help anyone ever again,” Peter said to the ceiling.

“QUEEEEEEEEENS!” Tony howled as he headed for the kitchen door. DJ, clinging to his neck,
tipped his head back and added a rather impressive wolf howl to the sound.

“I'm quitting,” Peter yelled after them.

“Cool,” Tony said.

“No, you're not,” Bruce said, sweeping out of the walk in freezer with a stack of neatly labeled plastic bins balanced between his arm and his hip. “Prep. Let's go.”

“Yes, Chef,” Peter said, and Tony ducked out the back door before he could be hooked as well.

“Did you have fun with Peter?” he asked DJ, who nodded against his shoulder. Tony pressed a kiss to his hair. “Thanks for working with me, DJ. I know it's been hard, and I really appreciate it.”

DJ blinked at him, slow and considering. “It's okay,” he said at last.


From across the parking lot, Tony could see a slim form in a dark blue suit crouched beside War on Hunger, looking under the truck. Steve and Sam were standing nearby, Sam with his hands in his pockets and Steve leaning on a pushbroom. They both looked up when Tony approached. “That looks familiar,” he said to Steve, nodding at the broom.

“Sorry, Bruce let me borrow it, but after all the glass...” One shoulder rose in a shrug. “I'll get you a new one.”

Tony gave him a look. “It's fine,” he said, as the woman next to the truck straightened up, smoothing her sleek, well-cut suit jacket down as she turned around. She was tall and lean, with sharp, dark eyes and a perfect afro of black hair surrounding her face like a halo.

“Mr. Stark, I presume?” she said, one eyebrow quirking.

Tony lowered DJ to the ground, but kept a firm grip on his hand. “Stay here,” he said to Deej. “There's glass.” Once he got a nod out of DJ, he looked back up. “Sorry. Yes, Tony Stark.” He held out his hand.

She clasped it with a smile that made her eyes soften. “Detective Knight, NYPD.” Her grip was firm and confident, but her gaze had already dropped to DJ. “And who's this?” she asked, her smile stretching.

Tony ruffled DJ's hair. “This is DJ Fujikawa,” he said. “Can you say hello?” he asked DJ.

DJ stared up at Det. Knight, then gave a slight, practiced bow. “Hello!” he said.

Det. Knight's head dipped in a nod. “How polite,” she said, her lips twitching. “I need to ask-” She paused, her eyes narrowing at Tony. “I need to ask Mr. Stark some questions, can you be patient with us?”

He gave a firm nod. “Yes,” he said.

“Hey,” Sam said. “Wanna go help me wash some potatoes? Let your dad talk to the nice policelady?” He leaned over to give DJ a smile. “We'll just be over at my truck, you'll still be able to see him.” DJ looked at him, then at Tony.

“I bet Sam will let you wipe down the serving counter,” Tony said, and DJ's eyes lit up. He looked at Sam, his face hopeful.
Sam grinned. “Yeah, I mean, if that's what you want to do, sure.” Pleased, DJ reached for his hand and headed for the truck.

Det. Knight pulled a pad of paper from an inner pocket of her jacket and pointed her pen in Sam's direction. “Don't go too far. I need a signature from you before I go.”

Sam paused, DJ pulling on his hand. “I already gave my statement,” he said, a puzzled look sweeping over his face. “Is there a problem with it, ma'am?”

“It's not for your statement.” She gave Sam a brilliant grin. “Just for me. I subscribe to your YouTube channel.”

Tony watched, amused, as Sam's expression went from guarded, to confused, to pleased, to smug. “A fan, huh?” he said, snagging DJ by the back of his shirt.

One shoulder rose in a shrug, but there was a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “I wouldn't go that far. Your sweet potato casserole was a joke.”

Sam grinned at her, rising to the bait in an heartbeat. “Don't knock it til you've tried it.”

“It doesn't have mini marshmallows, it's not sweet potato casserole,” Det. Knight said, and then she turned pointedly towards Steve and Tony. “Don't go too far, Mr. Wilson.”

“Big truck, pretty obvious,” Sam said. “I'll just be over here. Maybe making sweet potato casserole that won't give you diabetes in under four bites.” He looked down at DJ. “Wanna help?”

“KNIVES!” DJ said, very excited by the prospect.

“Oh, hell no,” Sam told him. “Tony, seriously?”

“He gets that from his aunt,” Tony said. He folded his arms over his chest. “Trust me. I'm not a fan, either.” He raised his voice. “No knives, Deej!”

“SOME KNIVES!” DJ said, and, laughing, Sam let himself be towed to the other truck.

“Sorry about that,” Tony said to Det. Knight. “I should've left him inside.”

“Sometimes, when things like this happen, you don't like to let them out of your sight,” Knight said. She tapped her pen against the pad. “I got the details from Ms. Danvers and Ms. Drew, and I've talked to your neighbors-” She paused, her pen hovering over the paper. “Just out of curiosity, does...” One eyebrow quirked. “Thor? Does he have a last name? Down at the station, they told me he's just-” Her head dipped to the side. “Thor.”

“He's just Thor,” Tony agreed.

“It's Odinson,” Steve said, giving Tony a stern look.

“Listen, I'm not telling the good officers of the NYPD that they're not correct,” Tony said with a guileless smile.

“Considerate,” Knight said, but she was struggling against a smile. “Mr. Rogers has given me an overview of your movements over the last few days, but I'm going to need you to go over it with me one more time.”

Tony paused. “I thought you had one of them in custody?” he asked.
“We do, but we also know him. He’s got an extensive rap sheet.” Her mouth went thin, tight. “He’s hired muscle, and he won’t talk. So our question is, who hired him?”

Tony's eyes flicked towards Steve, who gave a faint smile. “Insurance fraud’s a thing,” he said, and Tony sighed.

“Right.” He looked back at Knight, who was waiting patiently. There was no apology, no explanation. She just waited him out. Tony took a deep breath and let it out. “Right,” he repeated. “We left on Friday morning.” Step by step, he went over their movements, giving her as much detail as he could remember.

She took notes, letting him talk without interrupting. Finally, when he’d finished, she gave a nod. “And your son was with you?” Tony nodded. “Thank you.” Her head still down over her notebook, she let her eyes come up to meet Tony’s. “Have you had any other disturbances? Vandalism? Attacks on patrons in the parking lot? Any sign that someone's been trying to force their way into the restaurant?”

Tony shook his head. “Our patrons are pretty well off,” he said, because there was no way around that. “But the scheduled seatings means that people leave in waves, it's almost impossible to catch someone alone in the parking lot.” He glanced over at Sam's truck. “Between Sam and Steve being around most nights, and the paranoid fuckers across the street--” He pointed at SHIELD. “We've never even had so much as an attempted car theft.”

Knight nodded. “I'd like to speak to your staff about the attack.”

“Sure. It would be helpful if you could do it now, before we get too deep into the dinner rush,” he said. “I don't know if anyone would know anything other than Peter. He was the only one who got involved, to my knowledge.”

“That's what Ms. Danvers said, yes. But I'm curious if they've noticed anything over the last few days,” she said. “But it's possible that there wasn't anything leading up to this. The attack was very...” Her eyes narrowed. “Focused.”

“Which is weird,” Tony said. “Everyone on the block has more enemies than him.”

Knight's lips quirked. “Even you?”

“God, yes,” Tony said, pleased by that. “Food critics alone.”

“I'll keep that in mind.” She closed her notebook and slipped it into her pocket. “Can you make the introductions, Mr. Stark?”

Tony looked over to where DJ was enthusiastically scrubbing Sam's serving counter. “I can introduce you to Bruce, if that's okay,” Steve said, before Tony could say a word. “So Tony can get DJ.” He looked at them both. “Okay with you?”

Knight nodded, and Tony gave him a smile. “Thanks. I'll be right behind you.”

Steve headed for the door, Knight close behind him, and Tony headed for Sam’s truck. “Hey, is everything clean?” he asked, leaning on the counter. DJ, wearing what looked like Sam’s spare apron, shook his head.

* 

By the time Detective Knight was done taking statements from the staff, including a mass re-
enactment of Peter's infamous QUEEEEENS moment, patrons were starting to arrive for dinner. Steve noticed some wary looks at his truck as the first few passed, but word seemed to have gotten around to most of them. One, a slick-haired guy in a dark suit, came right up to him and handed over a thick business card with a large law firm's name on it.

"It's all over town, what happened," he said. "If they catch whoever did it, give me a call. Victims can use good legal representation too, and there's always civil suits if the cops fail."

"Thanks," Steve said. "I'll bear that in mind."

"Any time. Hey, what's good tonight?" he added, jerking his head at TOBRU.

"Everything -- but if there's anything with goat cheese, get yourself some of that," Steve said with a grin.

"Thanks. Mike! Haul ass!" the man called at (presumably) another lawyer in a suit who was lagging behind, and the two disappeared inside.

Steve's phone rang as he was putting the business card away, and he was distracted for a few minutes with the logistics of his insurance claim -- answering questions, getting the information he needed, and setting up an appointment for the following day. Apparently the insurance inspector was an early bird, which suited Steve fine. The sooner they got this over with and his truck was back to normal, the better. He still felt anxious, unsettled, like he was missing something, and it was not a sensation he enjoyed.

He hung up the phone and got out of the driver's seat, heading for the back hatch, only to find it open, with Tony and DJ sitting on the back bumper, facing each other, eating slices of pie.

"Hey," Steve said, pulling up a smile. "Where'd the pie come from?"

"I'm a chef," Tony said, waving a fork airily. "When I want pie I know how to find it."

"Coulson," DJ told Steve somberly.

"He dropped off a pie for you. We took a commission," Tony said. "Come on."

"A commission for what, accepting my pie?" Steve asked, as Tony slid off the bumper, DJ following. He let himself down out of the truck and, with a pat on the back doors, locked it.

"Well, someone had to take custody, and pies are a lot of trouble," Tony said. "Besides, I charge a fee for plates and flatware, come on."

"Where are you going?" Steve asked, mystified, as Tony helped DJ into his seat.

Tony gave him a dry look. "Home. With you."

"You've got a seating -- "

"Bruce is handling it."

"Tony -- "

Tony closed the door and leaned against it with his hip, hands in pockets.

"Today was really scary and violent, and I want my child home with me and I want to take you home and feed you," he said.
Steve blinked.

"Believe it or not, one of my favorite parts of food is the fact that it can be used to comfort people," Tony continued, his voice flat. "So get in the goddamn car."

Steve leaned in and kissed him, ignoring DJ's bored groan from the other side of the glass, and then maneuvered around him towards the passenger's-side door.

"So what are we making for dinner?" he asked, as Tony circled the car.

"I'm working that out. We may need to do a quick grocery stop," Tony said. "Now taking requests, which on any other night would cost you upwards of five large."

Steve considered it as he climbed inside, but he felt too exhausted to come up with a menu, usually one of his favorite things.

"Omakase," he said, and DJ echoed it cheerfully, Omakase!

"Chef's choice," Tony said. "I gotcha. I think I have a plan."
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

WARNING: In this chapter, warning for nonconsensual/involuntary drugging in a non-sexual situation and kidnapping, canon appropriate levels of violence.

When they arrived home, after stopping at a corner produce market near the house, Tony shooed Steve into the living room with DJ.

"But I can help prep --"

"Honestly, it won't take long," Tony said, handing Steve a pile of plates and bowls for the table. He passed the silverware to DJ, and then said, "DJ, make him read to you."

DJ tugged Steve towards the dining table, so he went, glancing back in concern; "it won't take long" could mean Tony was going to try some extreme cooking, or it could just mean he'd settled on something simple. But DJ was clambering up onto a chair and opening his tablet, so Steve turned his attention to setting the table, and then to reading some comic book DJ had opened, which as far as Steve could tell was about a masked superhero with particularly stretchy limbs.

True to his word, Tony emerged from the kitchen before they'd even finished the comic; he had a huge bowl in one hand and a saucepan in the other.

"Waldorf salad and udon in dashi broth," he announced.

Steve raised an eyebrow. "Light comfort food?"

"Nothing like carbs and fruit," Tony informed him. "I left the mayo off the salad."

"That's how I know you pay more attention than you pretend to," Steve said, grinning.

"Your dislike of mayonnaise borders on the pathological. Also, the lava cake is in the slow-cooker, it'll be ready in about an hour. Sit. Eat slowly. Breathe."

Steve nodded, accepting a helping of soup and scooping up a spoonful of waldorf salad that was mostly apples and walnuts. Tony was already stirring dressing into his. DJ slurped up a noodle, grinning, and then dropped a single grape into the broth.

"Eyeball soup," DJ said.

"Gross," Tony remarked.

"Is it any good?" Steve asked. DJ scooped up the grape again, now with a strip of seaweed hanging forlornly off it, popped it in his mouth, chewed, and then shook his head sadly. "Well, you tried it, and that counts."

They talked, over dinner, about TOBRU's new menu, Bruce's reaction to the elevated-junk-food idea, and some gossip Tony had picked up when checking his email. Steve was grateful, in a way, that Tony kept steering the conversation away from the truck, though he wasn't sure if it was for his
sake or because Tony didn't want DJ to feel unsafe.

He offered to do the dishes while Tony put DJ to bed, and was just finishing up when he felt arms around his waist, and the scratch of Tony's goatee against the back of his neck.

"I don't know if I'm gonna actually sleep tonight," Steve said quietly, letting the water run over his hands, washing the suds away.

"Well," Tony said. "I could wear you out. Is that tacky to offer? Do you want to go home? I don't want you to. You know. If I get a vote."

"No, not really. I'm just saying."

"Is that a no on the wearing-out, too?"

Steve thought about it. "Your kid's here."

"He's asleep. Besides, the door has a lock."

Steve patted one of Tony's hands on his stomach. "I'll think about it. Do you have work to do tonight?"

"No, I'll catch up tomorrow." Tony let him go. "Why?"

"I was thinking a movie. Something to get my mind off things."

"Can I try making out with you during the movie and we'll see how it goes?"

Steve grinned. "Are you okay with DJ catching us making out on your couch?"

"He's my kid, and you two are gonna be around each other a lot, I guess. Better get used to the Peril Of Child now," Tony informed him. Steve turned in his arms, leaning back just enough to feel Tony's arms take a little of his weight. It was nice, to know someone would help carry this.

"Let's watch a movie. You can work your wiles on me not earlier than ten minutes in," he said, and Tony nodded, kissing him quickly before letting him go.

Ten minutes into the movie, Steve glanced at Tony, who was out like a light, head resting on Steve's shoulder. He reached up to pull a blanket off the back of the couch, settled it around their shoulders, and tucked his hands up in it, willing himself to relax, to let the weight of Tony and the white noise of the movie distract him. It worked, sort of, but sleep was a while in coming.

* *

"It's probably a bad sign that your insurance guy isn't here yet, huh?"

Steve squinted up the street as Tony pulled into the TOBRU parking lot. "Actually," he said, his voice resigned, "I think he is."

"What? Where?" Tony slammed the car into park. "DJ, sit still, there are cars."

"Well, that looks like Sam, waving at us from in front of Mjolnir," Steve said, pointing. Tony glanced in that direction, and yep, that was definitely Sam, and he was definitely at the wrong restaurant. "Bet the insurance rep's down there."

Tony stared at him. "How," he said, his voice flat. "How did he end up at the wrong restaurant,
“Steve? Your truck is right there. It's—” Tony waved a hand in the direction of War on Hunger. “It's kind of obvious.”

“Oh, right,” DJ said from the back seat, and Tony grabbed the door handle.

“Out now, please,” DJ said from the back seat before Steve could say a word, and Tony grabbed the door handle.

“Yes, yes, I'm coming, thank you for being patient,” he said, opening the back door so he could unbuckle DJ's car seat. “You need to change insurance companies, Steve.”

“Seems like a lot of trouble just because I have to cross the street,” Steve said. He waited until DJ was out of the car, his hand clasped securely in Tony's, then he continued. “I'm going to run over there, see if that's why Sam's trying to flag me down.”

“Bet it is,” Tony said, turning in a slow circle as DJ hopped around him. “Give me a call if he needs to talk to me, okay?”

“Yeah.” Steve started towards the street, then stopped, turning back towards them. “If Jess and Carol show up, can you give me a call?”

Tony nodded. “He need to talk to them?”

Steve smiled. “No, I just want to say good-bye before DJ leaves.”

“Do you work at being perfect?” Tony asked him, because otherwise he was going to say something embarrassing. Something maudlin and pathetic.

“It comes pretty naturally,” Steve said, wrapping an easy hand around the back of Tony's head, dragging him in for a kiss. His lips were warm and gentle on the skin of Tony's forehead, and Tony let his eyes fall shut. Let himself lean into Steve's body, just for an instant, only an instant, because DJ was tugging at his hand.

He let DJ pull him away. “Move your trash heap out of my parking lot!” he called, just to make Steve laugh.

“Working on it, Stark!” With a wave at them both, Steve started up the road in an easy lope.

Tony kept a tight grip on DJ's hand until they were in the restaurant, but as soon as they were through the door, DJ wriggled free. Comfortable in the clean, echoing space of the kitchen, he went scrambling between the prep stations, his feet skidding on the polished tile. Tony made a grab for the back of his shirt and missed. “Don't touch anything,” he said, tossing his keys onto the counter, and DJ promptly slapped a hand on the side of a gleaming chrome cabinet, his fingers leaving streaks on the metal and glass. Tony took two lunging steps forward and snagged DJ around the waist, lifting him off his feet. DJ shrieked with laughter, and Tony grinned into his hair. “You're lucky you're cute, kid.”

“Cute!” DJ said, kicking his legs until Tony set him back down.

“Yeah, you can coast on that for a few more years,” Tony said. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to DJ's head. DJ put up with the cuddling for about thirty seconds, and then he started to struggle. Tony let him go with a laugh. “Right, right, you've got places to be and things to destroy.”

DJ threw his hands in the air. “Destruction!” he crowed, and Tony let out a groan.

“No,” he said, and it was a lost cause, but he felt better for having tried.
“Yes,” DJ said, hopping towards the dining room. Laughing, Tony caught his hand.

“How about we go water Bruce's herb garden?” he asked, and DJ's face lit up. Tony smiled down at him, love an ache deep in his chest. “Yeah, you want to work with the mister?”

“Yes,” DJ said, very sure about it, and Tony let him lead the way, around the back to Bruce's workspace. It had been an office once, tucked far in the rear of the restaurant. Bruce had a desk there, still, but now it was a mad tangle of green, growing things, huge rolling racks of fragrant herbs and fragile, edible flowers that sheltered beneath heavy, slab-like windows. Every time Tony opened the door, he was reminded of spring, that smell of damp soil and new life.

DJ paused, his face tipped towards the warmth of the sunlight, his eyes falling shut as he took a deep breath. Tony wondered if he missed his Aunt's farm, with its slow, easy pace and predictable schedule. Wondered if the city was good for him, at all.

Shaking off the thought, he reached for the small misting sprayer on the rack beside the door. “You remember how to do this?”

DJ nodded, reaching for it. “Yes.” He gave Tony a hopeful look, even as the damp air made his glasses fog over. “Snip?”

“We have to wait for Bruce before we can cut anything,” Tony said. “Because these are his. And you can help him by watering them, but nothing else, okay?”

DJ made a face, but nodded. He headed to the nearest rack. “Okay,” he said, and set to work with his usual single-minded determination. Tony leaned against Bruce's desk, watching him for a few minutes, making sure he was following the rules.

He straightened up. “I'm going to go deal with some boring, boring paperwork, okay?”

“Boring,” DJ said, with such finality that Tony laughed.

“Very boring,” he agreed. “So I'll come and get you when I'm done, or if you finish, you can come to my office. All right?” DJ nodded, his attention focused on the delicate leaves of a parsley plant. Tony leaned over, kissing him on top of the head before heading for the door.

He stopped on his way through the kitchen, long enough to start the coffee machine. As it hissed and bubbled, he stared at the empty prep stations, running over the possibilities in his mind. It hadn't been long. But he itched to make something. Maybe he'd have time to cook DJ lunch before Jess and Carol came to pick him up. Pleased with the thought, he stole the carafe out of the coffee machine, filling a cup before he put it back on to finish brewing.

His office was quiet, familiar. He stared, displeased, at the stack of invoices and reports that were piled high in his inbox. “Being the boss is over rated,” he said, to no one and nothing in particular. Then he threw himself into his chair, and lost himself in the slow, unending march of numbers.

“Hey, Tony!”

Tony jerked, his hand catching on the edge of his desk blotter. His coffee cup went bouncing across the surface, the contents splashing onto his desk. Cursing, Tony made a grab for it, snagging it before the coffee could ruin his invoices.

At the door, Obie made a face. “Sorry, didn't mean to scare you,” he said, before ducking back towards the kitchen. “Let me get a towel.”
His heart was pounding, and he didn't know why. “No, it's-” Tony caught the towel that Obie tossed him, and mopped up as much of the coffee as he could manage. “You just startled me.” He glanced up. “What're you doing here? Were we- We didn't have a meeting or anything, did we? I know I'm a little behind, but-”

“No, just thought I'd pop in and see how you're doing,” Obie said with a warm smile. “Saw your car and, you know, let myself in.”

Tony shook his head. “So you came here, even though we're not open and I'm not supposed to be here?” he asked, amused despite himself.

Obie's mouth twitched. “Tony, you've been away from this place for four days. The moment you're back in town, you're back in the kitchen.” He wandered in, snagging the coffee cup from Tony's desk. “Even if there's no one to cook for.”

“There's always someone to cook for,” Tony called after him. “Always!” He tossed a stack of invoices onto the top of the filing cabinet, flicking coffee from his fingertips. “Knew I should've gone paperless.”

“It wouldn't help,” Obie called from the kitchen. “Trust me, I'd know.” He returned, two cups of coffee in his hands. “Stole you some more.” He held it out, and Tony took it, knowing he didn't need another full cup, but wanting it anyway.

Tony stopped, cup almost to his mouth, and gave the coffee a curious sniff. “Did you spike this?” he asked, startled.

Obie settled down in the chair opposite him with a weary sigh. He took a sip from his mug, holding his other hand up, index finger and thumb a bare inch apart. “Just a touch,” he said, with a smile that made his eyes dance. “Figured you could use it.”

“I could, but it's pretty early in the day to be drinking,” Tony pointed out. He gave it another cautious sniff. God, that smelled good. “I've got a restaurant to run, you know.”

Obie gave him a look. “And it'll be hours before you have to do a thing, and it's not like you haven't done anything and everything drunk, anyway,” he said, and Tony couldn't hold back a laugh. Obie leaned back in his chair, his eyes dancing. “It's just a splash, I promise.”

Tony made a scoffing noise under his breath, but he took a sip anyway. It was hot, scalding his tongue, his lips, but he needed the shock of that heat. There was more than a touch of alcohol in there, and the coffee tasted oddly bitter. “What did you do, boil this down to sludge?”

“I figured you could handle your caffeine,” Obie said. “If I'm wrong-” He reached for the coffee cup, and Tony pulled it out of reach. Obie subsided back into his chair with a chuckle. “That's what I thought.”

“Seriously,” Tony said, “what're you doing here?”

Obie took another long sip of his coffee, and Tony did the same. “Just stopping by,” he said. “Heard about that mess in your parking lot.” He frowned at Tony. “It's not good for business, having that out there.”

Tony waved him off. “Steve's handling it.”

“Not particularly quickly, it seems.”
Tony rolled his eyes. “Obie, I'm giving him a few days for his insurance company to handle it before I call in the bulldozer. The tires are fixed, it’s ready to run. It'll be fine.”

“This is your restaurant, your livelihood,” Obie said, stabbing a finger against the top of the desk. “If he doesn't respect that-”

“And that truck is his,” Tony said, cutting him off. He drained most of his coffee in two long gulps. It burned the whole way down, and he was grateful for it. “It's fine, Obie. He's handling it.” Obie opened his mouth, and Tony cut him off. “How did you even know, anyway? Not like a food truck getting hit by some punks makes the news.”

“You underestimate the gossip mill in this city,” Obie said. He shook his head. “Especially the food service side of it. There's always someone who wants to share bad news.”

“Believe me, I know.” Tony paused, his cup halfway to his mouth. Something was tugging on the back of his mind, and he didn’t know what. He frowned at Obie, not sure why he couldn’t remember. “Speaking of bad news, guess who I ran across this weekend?”

Obie sipped his coffee. “Ty Stone,” he said with a wry smile. Tony jolted, and lost his grip on his cup. He stared at it for an instant, not sure why he was holding it. He set it down on the desk, and it rattled against the desktop, as if he’d dropped it. “How did you-”

The answer occurred to him before he finished the question. “He called you already.”

“What boy?” Obie said with a wry smile. “Always has.” He glanced away, towards the door of the office. “He says you two discussed the merger.”

“He said something about that, yeah.” Tony rubbed his forehead. He had to stop sleeping on the couch. Even with Steve as a pillow, his head felt like it was stuffed with cotton. “He’s always had delusions of being an insider, you know that.”

“He always had a rather...” Obie's eyes narrowed. “Frustrating ability to find out things that were none of his business.” He took a deep breath, seeming to expand with the force of it, and when he exhaled, it sounded sad. Sad and resigned. “You always did know how to pick 'em, Tony.”

Tony reached for the coffee cup and missed. He blinked, confusion sweeping over him. He tried again, and this time, his fingers glanced off the side of the cup, hard enough to hurt. “I-” He blinked, and something was wrong. Something was... Wrong.

He tried to look up, but his head was heavy now, heavy the way his hands were, it took all the effort he could manage to bring his chin up. “Obie-” The word was soft at the edges, slurred, stuck to his lips in a way he didn't understand.

Something was wrong. Something was wrong, but Obie was just sitting there, sipping his coffee, studying Tony with a calm, easy smile. As if he didn't notice. As if he didn't see. Tony opened his mouth, tried to say something, to tell him, but the words were rattling in his head now, falling to pieces before he could put them in order.

He couldn't remember what he was trying to say.

There was a faint click as Obie set his coffee cup down on the desk. “I really wish it hadn't come to this,” he said, his voice calm. “I really do.”

He leaned back in his chair, his hands folded over his stomach. “You were controllable, Tony. You were always so easy to-” He huffed out a breath, not quite a sigh. “Handle. All you needed was a
path and a kind word, a sense of place. Approval.”

Tony stared at him, not understanding. Not wanting to understand.

Obie glanced up, and his eyes were like flint, sharp and cold and dark, empty holes in the jovial mask of his face. “If you could just have just stopped thinking with your dick, we would've been fine.” He heaved to his feet, reaching for the towel. “But that's always been the failing of the Stark men. No self-control.”

He picked up Tony's cup, his hand wrapped in the towel, wiping it down with a twist of his wrist, then dropped it back onto the blotter with a clatter. “Getting rid of most of those girls-” He paused. “Girls and boys.” He shook his head, and his face seemed to blur with the motion, going elastic, going flat. “It was easy. A payout here, a word dropped in the right ear there, a job offer or a quick payoff, and they’d be gone, and you’d be on to the next.”

Obie paused, his hand closing into a fist around the fabric. “I was so close,” he said, and it was ugly, it was full of something horrible, something Tony flinched from. “I was so close. Decades of my life and I was so close to a billion dollar payout. I could've had it, I would've had it, but she-” He leaned in. “But you and your fucking inability to wear a condom, you ruined it all.”

“So much money, wasted, all of it wasted, because she didn't get a damn abortion, she didn't-” Obie's fingers were white knuckled on the towel now, his grip so strong that he was shaking. “Years of rebuilding, of putting the deals back together, and she comes out of the woodwork, out of nowhere, says she wants to meet you, wants to bring it along.

"She knew something. I know she did." Obie threw the towel aside, the gesture violent. There was a crash, but Obie didn’t look to see what had broken, and Tony couldn’t force his head to move. “She knew. She knew, billions, I’d paid her a hundred grand, to make her go away, to make her get rid of the kid, and she shows up just as negotiations start again?” His hand lashed out, latching onto Tony's arm. His fingers bit into Tony's skin even through the fabric of his shirt, his grip hard enough to bruise, and Tony rocked back. The movement was enough to send his head spinning, his vision whitening out at the edges. His head lolled on his neck, and he forced it back upright just in time for Obie to lean in, his face twisting.

It was like something out of a Hollywood special effects department, the way Obie's face changed. The way his lips curled back from his teeth, the way his eyes narrowed into slits. Going alien and violent and horrible. “She KNEW. She was going to ruin EVERYTHING.”

Tony stared at him, his heartbeat thudding in his ears. "What did you do?" For a second, he didn't understand, he couldn't understand, how that was his voice. How he could be saying things like that, how he could be accusing Obie of... Of what? He couldn't think. He couldn't make sense of anything, least of all the way Obie was looking at him, face full of frustration. Anger.

Disgust.
But it was Obie, Obie had been the one solid patch of ground beneath his feet, all along. When he'd lost his mother, when he'd been fighting with his father, when he'd found Big Star crumbling around him, there had always been Obie. There. Steadying him. Being the one thing he could count on. The one person who was on his side, always supportive, always kind, always...

The father he'd wanted.

“She was supposed to have it with her,” Obie said. He jerked Tony out of his seat, and Tony hung, boneless and limp from his grip. He couldn't move. He could barely breathe. Words tumbled over him, barely understandable. Barely words. “She was supposed to bring it with her, to meet you, so show off her hard work.”

It. It. Tony took a breath. Let it out, clearing his mind for a second, just long enough. 'It' was DJ. DJ. She was supposed to have had DJ. She was supposed to have- “She- Bringing DJ?”

“She suspected. She knew. The damn-” Obie's lips peeled back from his teeth. “Then I couldn't go back for it. I couldn't, her death, people accepted it, you accepted it, but another death, so quickly, it would've ruined EVERYTHING.”

DJ. Dead. Dead with his mother. Car accident. She'd crashed that night. She'd died, alone, because DJ hadn't been in the car with her. Because she'd left him behind. Tony's head lolled forward, and he tried to think. Tried to make sense of it.

Obie was moving, was walking out of the office, dragging Tony with him, and Tony had known that Obie was big, was solid. But he'd never realized how strong Obie was, the solid mass of him hiding muscle, hiding a mad sort of intent. “I've wasted my life,” he said, and it was cold and hard. “And I deserve every cent of this. I worked for it, I spent my entire life for this. And I'm not letting you, or that damn stupid brat take it away from me.”

Tony could feel the title scraping along beneath his body, and struggled to get his feet under him. Obie jerked on his arm, knocking him off balance again, slamming his head into the wall. “Don't bother. There was enough sedative in that coffee to take down an elephant,” he said. His voice was amused. Jovial. Normal. “I'm surprised you’re still awake.” He stopped, his hand resting on the gleaming silver door of the walk in freezer. “But we can fix that.”

The rattle of the door was horrible, and Tony struggled, kicked, fought, but nothing stopped the slow, steady advance of Obie's movement. Something crashed to the floor, a bowl or a pan, utensils rattling to the ground. Tony’s fingers scraped across the floor, across the polished surface of cabinets, leaving streaks like scars on the gleaming metal.

“Everyone knows you're a drunk,” Obie said, and the floor was cold now, the air was cold, the light a sharp, hard glare of a bare bulb. “So your progression to pills won't be a surprise to anyone.” He gave Tony one last shake, hard, violent, then let him go. Tony tumbled to the cold tile, his heels kicking helplessly at the icy surface. “Especially once they find the trove of drugs in your car. Good thing I have a spare key, so I can help the police find those. And the ones at the house. And in your apartment. And in your desk.”

He leaned over, blocking out the light. Blocking out everything. “You were never the problem, Tony. But you attracted people that made problems. That didn't understand how things are, how things are supposed to be.” He shook his head. “I will not have all my plans ruined because of you.” He was muttering again, snarling, talking to himself, talking himself through things.

Tony barely heard him anymore. Barely heard anything. His breath formed cold clouds of steam in his vision, and he wasn’t sure if it was that, or the drugs, that made it hard to see. He blinked once,
twice, ignoring the way that his eyelashes tried to freeze to his skin. Light glittered across the floor, and he didn’t understand, didn’t understand anything.

The light shifted, growing wide, flickering in his clouded vision, and a small form slipped into it, a dark shadow hovering silently at the corner of his eye. He blinked, and his eyes refused to open. It took effort, it took more effort than he could imagine, to open them again.

It took him an eternity to recognize DJ, hovering still and silent in the half-open doorway. And then his heart stopped.

Tony tried to breathe. Tried to think. He couldn't move. He couldn't.

Couldn't.

Think.

Think, Stark.

Think.

Because he was going to die here, he could feel the cold seeping into his skin, into the numb muscle and bone beneath. Things were jumbled in his head, a tumbled mess, he couldn't make anything make sense, but he knew they wouldn't believe it. Bruce wouldn't believe it, that he'd taken drugs and fallen asleep here, not here, not here, Bruce would know, Bruce would fight it. Rhodey, Pepper. Pepper would never believe it, Rhodey would know he'd never do risk the restaurant that way, wouldn't taint that, the one thing he’d done right, beside DJ, Steve would-

Steve.

"Truck," he said, and it sounded wrong to his ears. He turned it over, the march of syllables, the structure of it. He repeated it again. “Truck.” Still wrong. Or, no. Right. Just not English. Japanese. That was Japanese. Did he know the word for truck in Japanese? Why had he learned that? Was it right? He couldn’t think, couldn’t...

Obie stared down at him, his brows drawing up, but DJ's eyes flew to Tony's. Tony let his head fall back again. Not enough. But his Japanese was worse than his English, and his English wasn't good. He squeezed his eyes shut. Word. He had to find a way to make DJ understand. And keep him safe.

He could do that. He couldn't save himself, he couldn't save DJ. But Steve could. If he could think, if he could make his foggy brain work.

He could almost taste the word, soft and sibilant, resting on his tongue, on his lips. A word DJ had taught him, and Tony could see the gleaming red peel slide between his fingers, smoothed away from the tart white flesh on the edge of his knife. A curl of red and white, dropping from his hand to the table as if in slow motion. That first day they’d met, the first time that DJ had smiled at him, his little fingers tugging at the end of the peel.

“Apple,” Tony said, and he could hear the echo of DJ's voice say it with him, small and soft and shy, the first Japanese word Tony had learned from DJ.

"What-?" Obie said, dragging Tony up. He gave him a shake, hard enough to send Tony’s head snapping back. "What are you-'

Tony stared at the light above his head, and grinned. "Run," he said. Truck. Apple. Run. Please understand. Please, please, please. He barely understood, he could barely make it fit in his head, in
But Steve could be at the curb, Steve with his easy smile and his kind eyes, holding DJ on his shoulders, holding him up to reach a perfect apple. Please. Tony fumbled out with one hand, his fingers pawing at the edge of the icy shelf. Please understand.

Obie's head snapped around, finally realizing the danger, finally turning towards DJ, and Tony's hand latched onto a seam in the cardboard, and he didn't know what was inside, something heavy, something solid, it didn't matter. His fingers dug in, and he yanked hard. "RUN!" he screamed, and DJ turned, shooting out the door with surprising speed. Tony had a moment to feel triumphant, to let the love and pride and hope wash over him, and then the pile of boxes next to him came crashing down.

The world collapsed around him, boxes of... Of something coming down on them both. Tony knew he took the worst of it, knew that as something slammed against his temple, crashing into his shoulder and his back, and it was agony, but it was worth it, because Obie's hand slipped free from his arm. Obie turned, raising his hands to protect his head, and Tony was beyond that, he didn't care anymore, because he wasn't leaving this freezer.

But DJ had, and that was all that mattered. DJ was gone. He'd slipped out the door and was running, running for the back door, for the parking lot, for the curb where Steve left his truck, it was fine, it was okay, it was going to be fine.

Tony threw himself forward, whatever strength he had left forcing him to move. He crashed into Obie, and it was more his weight than his strength that brought them both down. But the world tipped on its axis, and his vision went black for a second. He crashed to the floor, carrying Obie with him, but he couldn't manage to do more than that. Couldn't do anything as Obie thrust him away, as Obie staggered to his feet, a hulking, monstrous shadow that blocked out the light.

Obie loomed over him, his eyes wild as his fingers snagged on the front of Tony's shirt, pulling him up. "I'm not going to have all my careful work spoiled by a drunken, aimless, spoiled brat," he spat out. "I've worked too long. Too hard. I've poured my entire life into this shithole of a company, Tony, my ENTIRE LIFE." The words were a roar, making Tony's head spin. Obie dragged him up, his fingers white knuckled on the front of Tony's shirt, and Tony couldn't struggle, could barely breathe. He just stared up at Obie, one last distraction, one last delay. Obie leaned in. "And you're not going to stop me."

He shoved Tony down, fast and hard. Tony's head slammed against the floor and there was nothing else.

* *

"So what's your liability if your insurance adjuster dies in your truck?"

Steve's lips twitched, but he gave Sam a disapproving look as he stepped through the piles of items they'd pulled out of his truck. "Stop it," he said, stacking bins of take out trays and napkins by the side of the road.

Sam crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the side of War on Hunger, absolutely unconcerned. "I'm not saying of food poisoning, you know that. I'm saying of plain old age."

Steve shook his head. "Sam..."

"The dude is ancient, Steve. My great-grandma's more spry than him, and she's been dead for ten
years, bless her sainted soul." He leaned forward, just enough to peer around the back of the truck. "I'm not saying he was there when the insurance company was founded, I'm saying he was there when the CONCEPT of insurance was invented."

"Sam..."

"Other people have their first dollar framed on the wall. He's got his first mina."

Steve paused, his eyebrows drawing up. "Is that a Biblical joke?"

"Hey, ten years of bible camp needs to be worth something," Sam said. "Too obscure?"

"Not your best material," Steve admitted. He shifted a stack of pots to the far side of the curb, and grabbed the trash can from the street. "You could help."

"We wouldn't have to take everything out if he could, you know, see more than six inches in front of his face," Sam said. But he took a stack of sheet pans from Steve, piling them up on the stock pots. "You're not putting in a claim for any of this, so why are we taking it all out?"

"Because everything's getting cleaned," Steve said. "Everything." He held up a cast iron skillet, considering the surface with a frown. "I'm going to have to season this all over again."

"You put soap on that skillet and you're dead to me," Sam said. Steve rolled his eyes and Sam reached for it. "I'm serious, you need to leave some things alone, Steve, it's not like they got into the truck."

"Needed a cleaning, anyway," Steve said.

"You keep that truck cleaner than-" There was a crash from the interior of the truck, and both of them winced.

"I'm all right!" Mr. Lee yelled, and Steve scraped a hand over his face.

"Do you need help?" he called, and Sam was impressed. Impressed by the lack of swearing involved in that sentence.

The back door rattled and Mr. Lee stuck his head out. His white hair was a little more wild than it had been when they'd started this, his horn rimmed glasses sitting a little crooked on his nose. "No, no, I'm just fine, son. Stay there, almost done!" He paused, his hand patting at his jacket pockets. "Now, do I have your keys?"

"I... Hope so," Steve said. "Because I gave them to you."

"Right, right." Mr. Lee waved them off. "Right, now, where did I leave those keys?" He retreated back into the truck, and Sam counted off the seconds on his fingers. He got up to seven before there was another crash.

"I need an aspirin," Steve said, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"You need a new insurance adjuster," Sam said, because that absolutely needed to be said. "Man sold his first policy to King Tut. What is he even knocking over? What is left in there to knock over? We took everything out. There is nothing in there."

"There's something," Steve said. Another crash, and he squeezed his eyes shut. "Obviously." He leaned around the corner. "Mr. Lee, are you sure-"
The scream caught them both off guard.

For a second, Sam thought it had come from the truck, because where else could it have come from? He jerked forward, knocking over a stack of platters, but Steve was faster on the uptake than he was. Or maybe just had better ears.

He saw Steve's hand snap out, grabbing the lid from the metal garbage can, and then he was gone, running away from the street and across the parking lot. Confused, Sam pivoted on his heel, turning to face the restaurant. About halfway across the lot, DJ was running towards them, his body canted forward, his face tight behind the lenses of his glasses.

Before Sam could do more than take a step in DJ's direction, the door to TOBRU slammed open, and a massive, rumpled form came crashing down the steps to the parking lot. It took Sam a second to place the face, confusion sweeping through him.

The guy with the pizza. Tony's friend. Stane.

"Hey!" Sam yelled, because he didn't know what was happening, but he didn't like it. And sometimes the difference between someone living and dying was a witness. He shot forward, still behind Steve, so far behind, but running full out, his arms pumping hard at his sides. "HEY!" he yelled again, just as Stane grabbed the back of DJ's shirt.

Stane looked up, his attention caught, just for a second, and DJ lashed out with his leg, catching Stane in the knee. Sam saw his face twist, and he dragged DJ off of the ground, lifting him up by one arm. For an instant, DJ hung there, still kicking with both legs, struggling as hard as he could, and then Stane was dragging him back towards the restaurant. Tony's car was parked there, in its usual spot beside the kitchen door, but there was another one next to it. Big and black and unremarkable.

Ignoring the way that DJ clawed at his hand, Stane wrenched the back door open, throwing DJ inside. He slammed the door, and it was an awful sound, as final as a gunshot. Steve, close but not close enough, brought his hand up, and Sam realized what he was doing.

"Hey, asshole!" Sam yelled, and just for a second, Stane paused, his head swinging in their direction. Never slowing down, never missing a step, Steve wound up and threw.

The trash can lid went arcing across the parking lot, a blur of silver metal cutting through the air, and for an instant, Sam thought it was going to hit its target. At the last second, Stane seemed to stumble, his bulk rocking backwards, away from the car, and the lid slammed into the back window instead. The safety glass shattered, chunks of pale green glass rattling down to the pavement.

Stane lunged for the driver's side door, his fingers sliding across the panel in a desperate grab for the door handle. Steve was charging for him, his legs a blur, but Sam heard the car start before Stane was even all the way in, and knew it wasn't going to be enough. Even as Steve made a grab for the bumper, the car roared to life, tires squealing as it shot forward. Steve's fingers closed on empty air, and the effort cost him. Off balance, he stumbled, hitting the ground hard.

He was back up and running before Sam even had time to curse.

The car roared forward, jumping the curb and skimming a parking meter before hitting the road. The tires squealed as it swerved, but it wasn’t enough to slow the momentum. The car shot off down the street, and Steve was right behind it.

Steve was stubborn, and he was borderline insane, but he couldn't outrun a car. Sam knew it, even if Steve refused to acknowledge it. "God damn it," Sam said, turning on his heel and running straight
back towards the truck. His legs burned and his breath was ragged, but he ran, faster than he could ever remember running before.

Jumping the bumper, stumbling down the length of the truck, past Mr. Lee and to the driver's seat, it cost him time, it cost him too much time. By some miracle, the key was in the ignition, and he reached for it with fingers that shook.

"What's happening?" Mr. Lee asked. "Was that boy-"

Sam cranked the engine. "You don't wanna be part of this, get out now," he yelled over his shoulder.

Mr. Lee wedged himself up against the wall, one gnarled hand grabbing for the strap that held Steve's pots in place. "Gun it, son," he said, and Sam slammed his foot down on the gas.

Not much was open on this stretch of the road, and it was even too early for deliveries, and Sam knew the neighborhood better than Stane did. But he was still driving a giant shiny box on wheels. "Call 911," he yelled to Mr. Lee, who was fumbling in the pockets of his tweed jacket.

"On it." They hit a bump, and Lee rocked from one side to the other, bouncing back to grab for the wall. "What-"

"Non-relative kidnapping," Sam said. "Make sure you tell him this asshole is a family friend-" He spat the word out. "But he's not family."

"Right!" Lee leaned forward as Sam accelerated straight up the road, swerving around a dawdling delivery truck. Just ahead, he could see Steve, still running, his arms pumping with each step. "Think he can make it on board?"

"I left the door open for a reason," Sam said, because he wasn't going to say yes. He didn't want to curse them at this point. He pushed the gas pedal down to the floor, roaring up next to Steve. Steve's head snapped in his direction, and Sam took his eyes off the road just long enough to hook a thumb at the back of the truck. "Hold on, I'll-

"Don't STOP," Steve said, and Sam resisted the urge to throw his hands in the air.

Instead, he shot forward and hit the brakes, slowing down just long enough for Steve to grab hold of the back door and fling himself in. "Where did he go?" Sam yelled over his shoulder.

"Southeast," Steve said, making his way up to the passenger seat. Steve's breath was coming fast, raw pants, but when he pulled his phone out of his pocket, his hands were steady. He collapsed next to Sam, his free hand fumbling for the seatbelt. "Bucky?" He sucked in a breath, and another. "I need you to go to TOBRU and-" He shook his head. "No! Listen to me, here's the code for the door lock." He rattled off the digits, then paused, and repeated it. "I need you to go there and check on Tony, something's wrong, we just-"

They hit a pothole, a little faster than Sam had intended, and the phone slipped out of Steve's grip. He fumbled for it, managing to snag it before it hit the ground. "Sorry," Sam said, the words forced out from between gritted teeth.

"I know, just- Just drive," Steve said. Into the phone, he added, "Hello? Bucky?" His head fell back, impacting against the seat with a vicious thump. "Bucky!" He stared down at his phone. "Goddammit, you-" He redialed with a stab of his thumb, and Sam watched out of the corner of his eye as Steve rocked forward, then back, the frustrated movement of a man who couldn't sit still and couldn't move. "Yeah, this isn't cute," he muttered, and stabbed at the face of his phone again.
"He not picking up?" Sam asked, incredulous.

"He's not picking up, he was in traffic, I don't-" Steve dropped his phone into his lap. "Give me yours. He picks up for you."

Sam shook his head, digging his phone out of his pocket with one hand and trying to keep the wheel steady with the other. "If he's not picking up for you, Steve, he's-"

"He'll pick up!" Steve snapped, and Sam could hear the desperation under it. Shaking his head, he tossed his phone to Steve, who snagged it out of the air.

Mr. Lee leaned over their shoulder. "Dispatcher wants a description of the boy, and my eyesight isn't the best."

Steve's eyes closed. "Give it here."

Lee held it out. "Give me that one, I've got a few favors I can call in." Sam took a turn, scanning the traffic ahead of them, and Mr. Lee leaned over his shoulder. "Take that right, son," he said, stabbing a finger at the front windshield.

Sam shook his head. "He didn't go that way, we woulda been able to see him if he'd gone-"

"Blind alley, drops at an acute angle at the cross street," Lee said, his voice full of glee. "Seventeen accidents there this quarter alone, traffic's from the light two blocks north, it's got a long delay for crosstown flow to eliminate the need for a turn only lane, if we go this way we'll end up half a block ahead of him and two minutes, but it'll be a bitch making it through traffic."

Sam gaped at him. His eyes cut in Steve's direction. Steve, rattling off details to the 911 dispatch, just shook his head. "Do it," he mouthed.

Sam took a deep breath. "It's your paint job," he said, hitting the gas and skimming the curb as he took the turn.

"Don't worry! It's covered!" Lee yelled, dialing Sam's phone with a great deal of enthusiasm. "Hello? Officer O'Brien? It's Stan Lee, from Acme Insurance!" The truck bounced along the narrow street, and Lee didn't seem to notice the trash can that went clanging across the pavement in their wake. "Yes, yes, your settlement is fine, don't worry, this isn't about that."

He leaned forward, his hand clamped on the back of Sam's chair. "You still working that construction site north of the university? Because we might need your help, real soon."

Sam grabbed for Steve's phone, his eyes locked on the street ahead of them. Steve got there first. “What're you doing?” he asked.

Sam glanced at him. “Hit twitter,” he said. “Everyone from the street'll get it, and the other trucks'll push it. We can have half the workers in this city watching the streets in five minutes."

Steve nodded, his jaw tight. “Let's hope that's fast enough.”

*

“Okay, but have you considered-”

“I swear that if the next words out of your mouth are 'we should get a food truck,' I'm leaving you,” Carol said.
Jess waved an airy hand through the air. “Idle threat,” she said, turning a smirk in Carol's direction. “We've got seven catering jobs in the next month. And you don't want to do them alone.”

“I said I'd break up with you, not stop working with you,” Carol pointed out, hiding her smile by glancing out the side window of the car. “Different things.”

“Didn't we try that once?” Jess mused. She braced one booted foot on the dashboard. “I think we tried that once.”

Carol squinted at the street signs, tipping her head forward so she could peer over the top of her sunglasses. “No, we didn't.”

“We absolutely did,” Jess said. “We agreed that this relationship thing wasn't working out. But we could still work together.”

“Got no memory of this,” Carol said. “Let's stop talking about it, we-”

“Well, I do,” Jess said. She pulled a lollipop from the pocket of her sweatshirt, unwrapping it with a twist of her wrist before tucking it between her teeth. Her tongue stud clicked against the hard candy, and Carol's breathing accelerated. Because she had ISSUES. “I remember we broke up and then during our next catering job we ended up fucking in the coat closet.”

“It was in the pantry and you know it,” Carol said. “I'm not fucking where the guests could find us, Jesus, have some class.”

Jess grinned at her, her teeth white against the stick of the lollipop. “No.”

Carol reached out with one hand, flicking at the stick with one finger. “Fine, being work partners without being partners partners probably isn't going to work out-”

“We can be caterers with benefits!” Jess suggested, her dark eyes bright.

“That sounds like we offer insurance, Jessie,” Carol said.

“We could,” Jess said. She slumped down in her seat, her arms crossed over her chest. “If we had a food truck.”

Carol grinned, knowing that she shouldn’t be charmed, but helpless in the face of Jess’ pout. “No.”

Jess gave a melodramatic groan. “You never let me have any fun.”

“True, I make it my mission in life to make sure you have no fun at all,” Carol agreed. “Do we turn here, or-”

“Two streets up, Captain No-Fun,” Jess said, without even looking, because her sense of direction was supernatural. Carol glanced at her, and Jess waved her lollipop through the air. “Why do you ask if you don't want the answer?”

“I want the answer, I just expected you to, you know, look at the GPS.”

“Well, that's dumb,” Jess said. She tucked her hair behind her ear with her free hand. “Don't you ever get sick of being at someone else's beck and call?”

There was a note of melancholy to the words, sudden and unexpected, and Carol glanced at her. “You mean, our job?” She thought about that, her fingers drumming on the steering wheel. “No, not really. I mean, we choose our jobs, we choose our people, we've got more control over our
professional lives than most people.” Jess nodded, her head turned towards the window, and Carol frowned. “Why? Do you?”

One of Jess' shoulders rose in a shrug. “Maybe. A little.” She turned back towards Carol, her usual bright smile in place. “Bored with your shitty recipes, mostly.”

Carol flipped her off with a grin. “Well, if you actually contributed, we wouldn't have to rely on my shitty recipes,” she pointed out, and Jess gasped, clutching at her chest.

“I contribute! You just reject all my carefully structured menus!”

“Yeah, that one that was built entirely around cocoa puffs, I can't imagine why I decided that was inappropriate for a memorial service,” Carol said, rolling her eyes. “What was I thinking?”

“But, see, if we had a food truck, then I could test my recipes out on hipsters,” Jess pointed out. “Cocoa Puff Chicken Vol-au-vents. Ramen burgers with kimchi slaw. Shiitake ravioli burritos.”

“These are all horrible ideas,” Carol told her.

“And the hipsters will eat them up anyway,” Jess said. “Vegan pulled pork waffle sliders!”

“How does that even WORK?” Carol asked.

“Yeah, see, you want it. You're confused, but aroused,” Jess said with a wicked smile.

“That's common around you, but seriously.” Carol spotted Sam's truck, and hit the turn signal, steering the SUV into TOBRU's parking lot. “What do you used for vegan pulled pork that doesn't-”

"Son of a BITCH!"

Carol slammed on the brakes, her foot coming down on the pedal with instinctive force. "What-" she started, and even as the word slipped out, she saw what Jess had seen, the hunched figure in the dark gray hoodie hovering at TOBRU's service door. Other than that shadowy figure, the parking lot was deserted, and a prickle went up Carol's spine. “Wait, we don't-”

It was already too late, because Jess had grabbed the crowbar from under the seat and was shoving her way out the passenger door. Carol made a desperate, pointless grab for the back of her sweatshirt, but her fingers closed on nothing but air. "Dammit, Jess, DON'T-"

She knew it was useless, even as she said it, Jess had always been like a heat seeking missile when she had a target; Carol just focused on keeping up and minimizing the blast radius. She threw the car into park, pausing only long enough to yank the key out of the ignition before she scrambled after Jess.

Jess was a streak of black and red flame, all speed and focused rage, flying across the parking lot, the crowbar up and swinging, even before she reached the guy. At the last second, he seemed to sense the danger, twisting around to meet the threat. Jess brought the crowbar down with all the force her arms, toughened from long hours of heavy cast iron and short circuiting machines, could bring to bear. The man jerked backward, blocking the descent of the crowbar with his own forearm.

Carol wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but the odd, almost metallic clang wasn't it.

There was a second of stillness, as they all stood there, frozen in place. Then the man knocked the crowbar away from the general vicinity of his head. “Are you out of your MIND?” he asked, so indignant that Jess took a step back, the crowbar falling to her side. “Are you-” He waved a hand
around his face. "You just tried to KILL me!"

"Yes," Jess said. "Yes, I did. And I'll do it again." She pointed the crowbar at him. "Did you try to burn Steve's truck down?"

The man gaped at them. "Did I- No! I'm Bucky! His best friend!"

"That's Sam," Carol said, just for something to say, and he turned on her, his face a riot of disbelief and disdain.

"Sam? SAM?" he asked, and Jess brought the crowbar up again, bracing between her hands like a baseball bat. "Jesus, lady, enough! Look, Steve just took off outta here with Sam, I don't know what's happening, but he wanted me to check on Tony--"

"What's wrong with Tony?" Jess shoved past him, grabbing the doorknob. She gave it a hard tug, but the door didn't budge. She braced a foot on the building, pulling hard. "He's here, isn't he?"

"I don't know, Steve told me to go check, he didn't have time to tell me--"

Carol's stomach dropped. "Where's DJ?"

Bucky looked at her, his eyes going wide. "Steve said he was being picked up today, isn't he-"

"By us," Jess said. "We're here to pick him up." Her hand snagged the front of Bucky's sweatshirt, yanking him forward. "Where's DJ?"

"I don't know!" he said, and Carol took a deep breath, ignoring the way her heart was pounding in her chest.

"Move," she said, and Bucky just stared at her, but Jess knew what that voice meant. She yanked, hard, taking him out of the line of fire just as Carol reared up, slamming her heel against the door just below the doorknob. The impact shuddered up the bones of her legs to her hip, and she didn't care. She rocked back, bracing herself for another strike.

"I have the doorcode!" he said. "Stop- Why is your first instinct to punch things?"

"Because it's a good instinct!" Jess yelled back. "If you have the code, then why are we still out here?"

"Because a crazy lady attacked me with a crowbar before we could use it! And-"

Carol pointed at the door. "Flirt later," she bit out, and Bucky punched in the code. A moment later, he was yanking the door open, and Carol was through it before he could take a step. She got past him, got into the kitchen, and froze. Because all it took was an instant to realize something was wrong.

"Oh, fuck," Jess said behind her, but Carol was already moving, her head on a swivel, snatching a knife from a nearby workstation as they passed. There were pans on the ground, stacks of mixing bowls thrown along the length of a prep area, a coffee pot tipped over, the contents dripping from the counter to the floor.

Bucky pushed past her, running towards the offices in the back, and Carol glanced at Jess, who nodded. She didn't say a word, but she didn't need to, she just took off running towards the dining room. Carol glanced at the alarm box beside the kitchen door, her eyes narrowing. Door locked, but alarm off. Car in the parking lot.
Where the hell was he? And where was DJ?

A sound brought her head around, something muted, almost inaudible. She stared at the silver door of the refrigeration unit, not wanting to admit it, but not able to see anywhere else it could've come from. “Jess!”

She didn't wait, mostly because she didn't think she could risk waiting. The lock had been shoved through the handle, but not closed. She yanked it free, letting it drop from her fingers as she yanked the door open. She heard, on some level, the metallic clang of the lock bouncing against the floor, but the door hit her in the shoulder, wrenching the handle from her hand and knocking her back a step.

Tony fell forward, boneless and bloody, into her arms.

Both of them went down, Carol doing her best to slow their descent. They hit the ground hard, and Carol ignored the pain that shot through her hip and her knee with a force of will.

“Oh, shit!” Jess was at the end of the kitchen, her hands braced on the prep station, her face bone white. She flung herself over the counter, moving fast now. “Carol, is he-”

“He's alive,” Carol said, because he was. He was cold, and there was blood on his face, on his white lips, but he was breathing, his body still trying to move. “Tony? Tony, what happened?”

He blinked at her, and his pupils were dilated, unfocused. “Help,” he said, and the word was slurred and slow, the single syllable taking a monumental effort. “DJ-”

Carol looked into the depths of the freezer, her breath swirling in cold clouds that made it hard to see. But there was nothing, there was no one. “Tony, where-”

“Gone.” The word was a snarl, and Carol's arms tightened on him.

“It's okay,” she said, hoping that was true. “It's okay.” She looked up, and Jess was already on the phone, speaking to 911 in a low, calm voice. One of Tony's hands was scrambling against the tile of the floor, a desperate, jerky movement. Jess reached out with her free hand, grabbing Tony's.

Carol looked up. “Bucky, call Steve-” she started, before she was speaking to an empty room, cursing under her breath, she fumbled for her own phone. Men. Not reliable at all.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

We start off with some crazy times! Warnings for blood, drugs, injury, canon level violence, a little child endangerment and threats with weapons, including guns and bikes. DJ's gonna be just fine. Tony is not so fine, but he's getting there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**War on Hunger * @onestarsteve**
Any trucks on the road this morning PLEASE look out for a black BMW a child has been kidnapped

**War on Hunger * @onestarsteve**
DJ Fujikawa age 8 dark hair glasses riding with Obadiah Stane black BMW west through lwr Manhattan, don't have plates

**War on Hunger * @onestarsteve**
My truck is following but we're in bad shape not sure how long we can keep up. Police are aware but we haven't seen them yet

**War on Hunger * @onestarsteve**
Looks like he's headed for the Holland Tunnel - anyone in the area I really need your help to head him off

* 

They hit another bump just as Steve sent the final text, and the phone nearly flew out of his hands. One of the back doors fell off, hitting the street with a metal clang, and Steve winced.

"Steve," Mr. Lee called, and he sounded strangely gleeful. "I have a feeling we're gonna have to write the truck off as a loss!"

"Not yet we aren't!" Sam yelled back.

"Well, son, in that case, might as well drive her into the ground!"

"That's the plan," Sam said darkly, as Stane's car came into view again. His lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl. "Gotcha, you son of a bitch."

"He must be goin' for Jersey," Mr. Lee said.

"What the hell does he think he's gonna do once he's in Jersey?" Steve asked.

"I dunno, what does anyone do in Jersey? Suffer, I suppose," Mr. Lee replied.

"Hey! Hey War on Hunger!"

Steve, startled, looked around for who could be yelling, then pushed past Mr. Lee to the gap where one of his back doors used to be.
A bike messenger was cycling furiously behind him, and even as Steve watched, three more pulled in from side streets.

"Bucky put the word out! Where's this asshole?" one of them yelled.

"Up ahead, but I don't think you can catch him!" Steve yelled back.

"Challenge accepted!" one woman cried.

"He's got a kid in the car, don't spook him," Steve said. "Just keep on him in case we lose him. See if you can get a look at the kid, make sure he's okay."

"On it, boss!"

"Did he mention if Tony's okay?" Steve asked, worried.

"Sorry, bossman, no word!" came the reply, even as a cadre of messenger broke off to follow their new leader.

"Bike messengers are motherfucking crazy," Sam announced.

"Thank God," Steve agreed, still worried.

Just as the woman who'd accepted the challenge blew past the truck with what Steve had to admit was impressive power, there was a squeal of brakes and tires as a truck pulled in behind the remaining cyclists. It was bright pink, with a snout painted onto the front and THE BIG PIG RIDE on the side. Steve had occasionally caravanned with Big Pig; they did a nice barbecue pork rib.

"SAW YOUR TWEET!" the driver yelled. "HOW CAN I HELP?"

"Stay in caravan," Steve called. "Try not to hit a bike messenger!"

"Can do! Falafel Waffle, Otter Donuts, and like five taco trucks are on the way from that construction site down by city hall."

"Tell 'em to take Church to Sixth!" Mr. Lee yelled.

"We think he's headed to the Holland Tunnel," Steve added.

Another bike messenger zipped past the truck, and Steve did a double-take; it looked like Bucky, but --

"SON OF A BITCH," Sam yelled.

Yep. Bucky.

"That crazy -- " Sam cut himself off. "Steve, your friend is in pursuit."

"Oh, so when he's doing stupid shit he's my friend?" Steve asked.

"Fellas, we're all doing stupid shit right now," Mr. Lee pointed out. He sounded gleeful.

"What the hell he thinks he's gonna do?" Sam asked, swerving to avoid CUPCAKE QUEENS as their glittery blue truck pulled in next to him. "Climb on the roof and punch his way through the windshield?"
"He's done dumber," Steve replied. If Bucky had left Tony injured -- or worse, if he'd left because there wasn't any helping --

He'd think of that later. Right now he had to focus on DJ. He knew DJ was still alive.

One of the Cupcake Queens rolled her window down and yelled, "Hey, I got a paintball gun. Want me to see what damage I can do?"

"Not with a kid in the car," Sam said, then added, "What are you doing with a paintball gun in a food truck?"

"I've been held up twice," she replied. "Paintball gun's legal with no permit and it scares the piss out of people."

"Fair enough. Fall in with Big Pig, pull up if we have to pull off. EVERYONE KEEP OFF MY RIGHT," Sam added, and there was a chorus of agreement from the bike messengers.

They were closing on the car, and Steve leaned forward sharply, his heart in his throat; he could see little hands on the edge of the window he'd blown out, and then his heart just about stopped as DJ leaned out the window, hair whipping around him in the wind. He opened his mouth to yell, but Bucky was closer, and took one hand off the handlebars briefly to frantically wave him back into the car. He almost lost control of the bike, but DJ ducked back inside, and Bucky fell back a little. Sam leaned out his window to yell, but Steve got there first.

"I told you to check on Tony!"

"Jess and Carol got him!" Bucky said, and Steve could breathe again. "He looked okay. Well -- he looked like shit, but alive shit. Where are the cops?"

Just as he asked it, sirens sounded in the distance, but the far distance -- and Mr. Lee was pushing up next to Steve.

"If there's a kid in the car they're gonna keep their distance," he said. "Look, if he does get to Jersey, the cops'll be all over him out of the tunnel."

"But they won't let us go in after, will they?" Steve asked, as the sirens drew closer. "If he gets into the tunnel, we'll lose him."

"Fraid so," Mr. Lee said. Ahead of them, Obadiah blew through a crowd of early-morning commuters at a crosswalk, and Bucky shoved someone out of the way before Sam would have to brake or hit them. Cupcake Queens leaned out the window and whistled shrilly, tossing Bucky an admittedly very scary-looking paintball gun. He steadied the bike with his prosthetic hand and lifted the gun to his shoulder. People scattered.

Obadiah's tires squealed as he pulled right, into the first entry ramp for the tunnel, and Sam swerved wildly to follow --

Then braked sharply, nearly pitching Steve and Mr. Lee through the windshield.

Up ahead, Falafel Waffle was parked in front of the tunnel entrance, the long golden truck sidelong across two lanes. Half a dozen taco trucks of varying sizes were crowded around behind it, and a very angry looking falafel chef was arguing with a number of equally angry drivers on side ramps. Steve noted, with the only calm remaining part of his brain, that Otter Donuts appeared to have parked on a shoulder and the crew were handing donuts out to the remaining stopped cars.
The BMW ahead of them kept speed, and for a horrified minute Steve thought he was going to slam the truck. He could tell that everyone else did too, by the way they dove away from it, but at the last second the brakes screamed and the BMW slid sideways, nearly bumping the truck blocking its way.

Bucky braked hard, practically dove off the bike, and came up with the paintball gun aimed at the BMW, unwavering. The rest of the bike messengers pulled up behind him, and for a heavy second, nobody moved.

Steve slowly and carefully let himself out of the cab of the truck, despite Sam cursing and the cop cars pulling in behind them.

The door on the BMW popped open and Steve watched warily as Stane climbed out, clumsily, right hand gripping DJ's arm. DJ had tear tracks on his face and bloody knees, but at least he didn't look seriously injured. Stane lifted him up by the arm, and DJ shrieked; Steve started forward, then stopped when he saw the gun in Stane's hand.

"If I have to, I will walk to New Jersey," Stane said.

"It's done, man," Bucky replied. "Come on, you know what's gonna be waiting for you there."

"I have worked too hard for this bastard to ruin me!" Stane roared. He was edging around Falafel Waffle now, a wild look in his eye, like he really thought if he made it through the tunnel he'd be free and clear.

"Look," Steve said, shooting a glance at Bucky, who was following Stane with the muzzle of the paintball gun. "He's just a kid. It's not his fault. You're pissed at Tony and believe me nobody understands that better than --"

Multiple things happened at once. Stane, reaching the corner of the truck, twisted DJ behind him and aimed the gun at Steve; Falafel Waffle's cashier, who had apparently remained in the truck, reached out to grab his hair; and Bucky, seeing his chance, pulled the trigger.

Bright purple goo from a paintball pellet burst all over Stane's face as the woman in the truck yanked hard, slamming him into the door. DJ, apparently aware he was nearly free, bit down hard on Stane's hand and fell away, and Steve dove forward.

"Get the kid, I got him!" Bucky yelled, throwing the rifle aside, and Steve scooped DJ up, covering them both in paint in the process, and immediately curled his entire body around him, away from Stane and the gun. There was a wet thud and a groan, and Steve stayed right where he was until he felt someone touch his shoulder.

"It's okay, son," Mr. Lee said. "Your pal's got him."

Steve glanced around. The cashier was sitting on Stane's legs; Bucky was straddling his neck, prosthetic hand shoved in his mouth to fish-hook him.

"You can bite down all fuckin' day, it's not gonna matter," Bucky informed him. "Steve?"

"Got him," Steve said, uncurling and setting DJ on his feet, hands patting him all over, feeling for broken bones. "You okay, DJ? You good?"

DJ nodded shakily, trying in vain to brush the paint off his arms. A paramedic dropped down next to them and reached for him, but DJ pulled back into Steve's arms, panic crossing his face.

"Hey, hey, sorry," the paramedic said, glancing at Steve. "I just need to make sure you're okay. I'm a
helper, okay? What's your name?"

DJ hid his face in Steve's shirt.

"Can you carry him to the ambulance?" the paramedic asked in a low tone. Cops were converging on Stane. Steve saw one of them high-five Bucky, which was probably inappropriate but definitely well-deserved.

"Are you his father?" the paramedic continued, as Steve gathered DJ up and stood.

"Family friend," Steve said. "His father was attacked, I don't know where he is -- he has, um, he has an aunt....upstate, I can find the phone number..."

"Come on, let's get you cleaned up," the paramedic said soothingly, leading them towards an ambulance. Mr. Lee was taking photos of War on Hunger; several other people were taking photos of everything else. Almost everyone had a taco.

Sam fell into step with them on the way. "I've been calling Tony's phone, no dice. Buck says Carol and Jess picked him up but I can't get them either -- "

Just then another car pulled up, behind the row of cop cars and trucks and cyclists, and Steve saw Jess pop up through the sunroof.

"HEY! HEY, YOU GOT HIM!" she yelled, and then disappeared again, and a rear door of the car popped open, and Tony -- bloody, confused-looking, unsteady, but definitely upright -- stumbled out.

"Your whole family is bananas," Steve whispered to DJ, relief sweeping through him, hitting him so hard he almost ended up on his knees.

DJ whispered back "Bananas" right before Tony let out a yell and DJ all but squirmed out of Steve's arms to run to him.

* 

"Does anyone else think this escalated very, very quickly?"

"Jesus, Jess."

"I'm just saying! It has been a very long weekend!"

Tony heard them, on some level, but his attention was locked on DJ. DJ was all that mattered. His head was still spinning, his heart pounding in his ears, but he stumbled forward, his body outpacing his legs. Hands grabbed his arms, keeping him on his feet until he could find his balance.

He met DJ halfway.

"Hi," Tony whispered, because DJ looked scared, his eyes huge behind the lenses of his glasses. "Sorry. Kind of a - kind of a mess, here, it's okay, I'm okay." He managed to get one leg to bend, and went down on one knee. "I'm okay."

He reached out, and there was blood on his fingers, dried patches of it like rot on his skin. Tony scrubbed his hand against his chest, against his shirt. "Are you okay?" he whispered. "Are you--"

"Yes," DJ said, firm and quiet and so normal Tony wanted to cry. "I'm okay." His face scrunched up. "Hurt?"
“Yes, I am hurt, and yes, I do hurt,” Tony said, and grinning hurt like hell. He was pretty sure he had a split lip. “But I’m okay.” His hand was as clean as it was going to get, unless he wanted to go looking for a bathtub or a gallon or so of hand sanitizer. He reached out again, and it took all the strength he had to keep his arm from shaking. “Okay?”

DJ set his palm against Tony’s, then folded both hands together to lean his weight into Tony’s hand. “Okay,” he said. Tony’s breath left him in a rush, in a sob, and DJ ducked under his hand, tumbling forward against Tony’s chest.

Tony caught him, and dragged him in with his one good arm. The hug was too tight, too strong, too much of everything. He had to be careful. He knew what DJ could handle, what he could process without panicking, and this was too much. He had to let go. Had to. Had to.

But DJ was clinging to him, his arms locked around Tony’s neck in a deathgrip, his fingers digging into Tony’s shoulders, grabbing fistfuls of Tony’s shirt in a desperate attempt to pull himself closer. His breath was coming in quick, sharp bursts, and Tony turned his head, pressing a gentle kiss to DJ’s head. “You were so brave,” he whispered. “So smart and so brave and I’m so proud of you.”

Tony was crying, and that was okay. That was good. Because DJ was sniffling against his neck, and no one should cry alone. Tony was smiling as the world tilted on its axis, as the ground went out from under him.

He never hit the ground.

Everything was noise and color and confusion, and he felt DJ slip from his grip. His shoulder was throbbing, his head, too, and he couldn’t stop the sound of pain that slipped from his lips.

“It’s okay. It’s all right. I’ve got you.”

He blinked up at the blurry face that floated above him. “Hi,” he whispered. “Watch… DJ… Please?”

“Jess has got DJ.” The voice was familiar, brisk and controlled. “I’ve got you.”

Tony grinned at nothing. “Oh. Steve.” He was floating. Or flying. He wasn’t sure, but he wasn’t on the ground any more. His head lolled to the side, his cheek finding a firm, steady spot to rest. “Hi.”

“Why didn’t you call a damn ambulance?” Steve’s voice was sharp now, something disquieting simmering through the words.

“We did.” He knew that voice too. He wasn’t sure why, though. “I called a damn ambulance. And before it could get there, he got out of the kitchen and into his car. I consider we did a good job of keeping him from DRIVING, Rogers.”

Tony was laughing, and he didn’t know why. “Carol.”

The voice stopped. Then, “Tony?”

He flopped a hand in her direction, and that was a mistake, that hurt a lot. A lot a lot. “A lot a lot a lot,” he said aloud, and he was moving. He wasn’t sure how. Or even why. He blinked hard, trying to clear his eyes. Steve was still there, his face tense now, his pale hair a halo around his face, gilded by sunshine and ringed by a perfect blue sky.

“Oh.” Tony blinked up at the sky. “You’re carrying me.”
Steve’s face changed, his head tipping down towards Tony. “Might be,” he said, and Tony could feel the rumble of Steve’s voice against the side of his face. It was nice.

“Awesome,” Tony slurred. “This has always been a fantasy of mine.” Steve was laughing, he could hear it, he could feel it. Tony turned his face into Steve’s shoulder. “I’m going to regret missing this. Pretty sure this’d be hot if I didn’t have a head injury.”

“Oh, Jesus, this is more than I needed to know.”

“Shut up, Barnes, or I’ll let Jess get her crowbar.”

“You’re a psycho, you know that? What is wrong with you? Seriously, what?”

“So many things,” Tony said. He took a breath and man, someone needed a shower. Probably him. Maybe Steve. “Carol is the fuckin’ best.”

“Damn right I am.”

“Put him on the stretcher, and we can take it from here.”

There was a sudden shift, like he was falling, but he wasn’t; he didn’t think he was, because Steve was still right there, right next to him, above him, with him. Tony blinked up at the sky, his head spinning. Something like a face appeared in front of him, over him, and he recoiled as a light was shone into his eyes. “What’s he on?”

“No idea.” Carol’s voice. “He was in bad shape when we found him.”

“Where was that?”

“Locked in a freezer.”

“Put something in the coffee.” Tony was pretty sure that was his voice. “He… Put something in my coffee. I…” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Said there was more. In the car. Or… Somewhere. Don’t—” He grinned. “I threw up.”

“Yeah, that probably was for the best,” the unfamiliar voice said, and he was moving again, and he didn’t know why. His head rolled to the side, looking for Steve, and someone pushed him back into place. “Stay still. You’re bleeding pretty badly here.”

“No best,” Tony managed. “Bruce is going to kill me.”

A hand caught his, big and warm, the grip firm. “Bruce is going to be glad you’re okay. And shutting TOBRU down for ‘cleaning’ is probably the best thing we can do, because this is going to be a mess.”

Tony stared up at Steve. “Yeah. I—” He sucked in a breath, and another, panic sweeping over him like a wave. “DJ! Where’s—”

He was halfway up, halfway off, and there were hands on him, everyone grabbing hold, which didn’t help, nothing helped. He twisted, trying to get an arm free, a scream building up in his throat. “Deej!”

“They’re with Jessica. He. Is. Safe.”
Tony sucked in a breath. “He’s…”

“He’s with Jess. She’s got Hitomi on the phone.” She leaned in, and the sudden shift made her face look alien and strange for a second. “He’s safe. He’s fine. And you look like an extra from the Walking Dead, so let’s stay here and not scare the child.”

He blinked, and it hurt. “Right.” He was falling, again, forever, and that was okay, it was okay that he was on his back again, trying to make sense of the sky. “Everyone’s… A better parent than me.”

It was soft, and slurred, and Steve was there, anyway, his fingers sweeping across Tony’s hair. “Stop lying for attention, Stark.”

Tony tried to smile, because it seemed like the thing to do. “Like attention.”

A soft, slight pressure on his forehead. “I know. Come on. Hospital time.”

The knock on the door roused him from a drifting sort of half-sleep, a hazy, aching place he didn’t enjoy. Tony let his head loll towards the door, his eyes blinking against the subdued light of the hospital lamp. Steve, who’d been dozing in the chair next to his bed, shot upright, instantly awake.

Tony glanced down, but DJ was still sleeping next to him, his arms flopped out as far as they could go, one leg hanging off the edge of the hospital bed. Steve looked at Tony, who nodded. Steve pushed himself to his feet, a little slower than usual, and crossed to the door.

Det. Knight was waiting on the other side, her hair backlit by the hallway into a crown of lace. “Sorry,” she said, her voice pitched low. “He awake?”

“I’m awake,” Tony said. He shifted, trying to push himself upright, and Steve was there before he could, adjusting the bed. “I can sit up by myself,” he groused.

Steve kissed his forehead. “No, you can’t.” Next to Tony, DJ stirred, blinking owlishly at the room. Tony reached for his glasses, sitting on the table next to the bed. As he put them on DJ, Steve leaned over. “Hey,” he said, with a warm smile. “You hungry? Want to get something to eat in the big, terrifying hospital cafeteria while your dad talks to the Detective?”

DJ squinted at him, then at Knight. “I got kidnapped,” he said, with a great deal of gravity.


He hiked up one leg of his pants. “Knee,” he said, showing off the impressive scrape.

Knight nodded, and unbuttoned her jacket. “That’s a rough one.” She slid her jacket off of one shoulder and down her arm, showing off a skinned elbow. “What do you think?”

He considered it, then gave a firm nod. “Very good.”

“Thank you,” she said, without a hint of laughter.

Steve looked at Tony. “You okay with us going to find something to eat?”

He choked on an immediate, irrational ‘no.’ He took a deep breath. “Good luck finding something he’ll eat in this place.”

“They do a decent apple cobbler if nothing else.” Steve held out his hands and let DJ scramble into
“Yes,” DJ said, his eyes huge behind the lenses of his glasses.

“No,” Tony said, but there was no force to the word. He gave Steve a mock glare. “Try to get something good for him into the mix, okay?”

Steve grinned at him. “We’ll bring you some cobbler,” was all he said. DJ flopped against his shoulder, cheerfully waving at his father as Steve carried him out of the room.

Det. Knight lowered herself into the visitor’s chair that Steve had just vacated. “How’re you feeling?” she asked.

Tony peered at her. “Is this a real question or the socially polite kind?”

Her lips stretched in a grin. “Let’s call it real,” she said, bracing her cheek on the cradle of her thumb and index finger.

“All the horrors of hangover with none of the fun of deadly levels of binge drinking,” Tony said immediately.

“The sad thing is that I knew exactly what you mean,” she said. She pulled her notebook out of her pocket before smoothing her jacket back into place. “I’m told your injuries aren’t particularly serious.”

“They sure feel serious,” Tony said, with a lopsided smile. “But yeah. Broken collarbone, messed up shoulder, concussion, a lot of bruising.” He huffed out a breath, ignoring how his ribs ached with the movement. “Oh. And a couple of cracked ribs.”

Knight winced, her nose wrinkling up. “That one, I know,” she said, tapping her pen against her right side. “Broke four of these.”

Tony arched an eyebrow. “Car accident?”

“Dolphin.” She flipped open her notebook. “Thought you deserved an update on the case.”

Tony stared at her. “Really? We’re just going to leave ‘dolphin’ on the table with no explanation?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what we’re going to do,” Knight said, not bothering to hide her smirk. Her eyes cut towards the door, checking to see if anyone had returned, then back to him. “It looks like his legal team’s going to go with an insanity plea.”

Tony didn’t have to ask who ‘he’ was. “Yeah, well, from our last meeting, it’s possible that it’s less a ploy and more a necessity.” He scratched at his cheek. He needed a shave rather desperately. “He was pretty unhinged.”

Her chin dipped in a nod. “Questioning hasn’t been going well,” she said. “Wondered if you had any insights.”

Tony glanced away. It was dark outside the window, and he stared, unseeing, at the blur of the streetlights. “It’s hazy,” he admitted. “Between the drugs and the head injury…”

She nodded. “I know.” But she sat patiently, her fingers cradling the length of her pen.

Tony took a deep breath. “He killed her, didn’t he?”
Knight met his eyes without flinching. “I pulled the accident report,” she said. “And based on what we know now, the chances are very good he had something to do with it.” She leaned back. “The responding officer saw what he was supposed to see, bad weather, a car that hadn’t been properly serviced, a tired driver.” She glanced down at her notebook. “An accident.”

Tony’s throat hurt. He reached for the cup of water Steve had left for him beside the bed. He pretended not to notice how his hand shook. “But it wasn’t.”

“He say that?”

Tony took a sip of water. “Pretty much,” he said. “Said that she was supposed to have DJ with her. He was…” His fingers tightened on the cup. “He took that as a personal affront. That he hadn’t managed to murder a baby.”

“Why was that so important?”

“Money. I guess.” And he hated that idea. That they’d all nearly died, that Rumiko HAD died, over goddamn money.

“I signed away my rights to the family company years ago,” he said. His lips twitched into a tight, thin smile. “Stane’s advice, of course. He knew I wanted out, wanted my own place, my own-” His fingers curled into a fist. “Out.” He looked up. “But there was a provision in my father’s will for any kids I might have. Those shares were held in trust.”

“A trust overseen by Stane,” Knight said.

He nodded. “Yeah. And what I didn’t realize was that-” His throat felt too dry, the words sticking to his tongue. He took another sip of water. “The sort of merger that Stane was working towards, it would’ve dissolved Big Star as a company, meaning there would be no shares to worry about.”

“But if they were claimed before the merger-”

“I guess.” Tony set the glass back down. “Pepper looked at it. She tried to explain, but I don’t really…” He hadn’t wanted to hear it. He hadn’t wanted to know that he could’ve seen this coming, maybe could’ve stopped it, if he’d just been paying attention. Tony gave Knight a tight smile. “He’d worked out something I didn’t see, some loophole, something…” He shook his head. “He had to get this done before DJ or his agent put in a claim. So he was under a lot of time pressure. As long as I kept DJ a secret, he was moderately safe.”

Tony huffed out a breath. “You know. As safe as he could be, after a money crazed asshole killed his mother.”

Knight nodded. “We’re going to try to get him on that,” she said, her voice quiet. “I think we can. We can definitely get him on aggravated assault, attempted murder, kidnapping, reckless driving, a bunch of other charges. Judge is going to deny bail, just so you know. His legal team has done such a good job of selling his obsessive breakdown that it was pretty easy to argue that he was very much a flight risk.” She gave him a smile that was both beautiful and terrifying. “The kidnapping’s a slam dunk, but we will get him on the attempted murder charge. I will see to that.”

“That’s oddly comforting,” Tony said, and he meant it. “Thanks.”

She waved him off. “You going to be able to straighten out the money situation?”

Tony shrugged, and immediately regretted it. He cupped a hand over his aching shoulder. “Pepper’s on it.”
That won him an arched eyebrow. “Your… Front of house manager?”

“She’s brilliant,” Tony said. “Should be doing something that is NOT running my front of house, but she’s also pigheadedly loyal.” He smiled. “If we end up getting control of Big Star back, maybe DJ’ll have her run the place for him.”

“Does she want to be in the chain pizza business?”

“Lady, no one WANTS to be in the chain pizza business,” Tony pointed out, making her laugh. “But I did mention the pigheadedly loyal part, right?”

“Right, that.”

There was a tap on the door, and they both turned to face it as Steve stuck his head in. “He’s with Carol and Jess,” he said, before Tony could start to panic. “He’s with them. Okay?”


Steve waved that off. “Do either of you need anything?” he asked, shoving his hands in his pockets. He looked awkward and anxious, and Tony felt a rush of affection for him.

“We’re just wrapping up,” Knight said, standing. “Good job, by the way.”

“Pretty much expected to get arrested,” Steve said with a sheepish grin.

“Instead-” Tony reached for the newspaper on the bedside table.

“Don’t-” Steve started.

“We get this,” Tony said, ignoring him without a bit of shame. He held up the page, showing off the headline ‘Food Truck Heroes Foil Kidnapping.’ Tony looked at the picture, then back at Steve. “They caught your good side.”

Steve gave him a look. “It’s a picture of my ass.”

“And that’s an excellent side,” Tony said. It wasn’t, really, but Steve had been caught by the photographer looking over his shoulder, his body facing away from the camera. He had one hand braced on the side of the dented, scratched-up War on Hunger, his bicep bunched, his pale hair falling over his forehead. Sam, for his part, was grinning at the camera, hands tucked in his pockets, carefully not blocking the Potato Rescue logo on his shirt.

Steve glared at the picture. “I’m going to kill Sam for that,” he said.

“Yeah, no, you’re not, you’re both going to make bank,” Knight said. She put her notebook away. “I signed up for your text alerts, I’m expecting great things when you get your ride fixed.”

“Sign up for Sam’s,” Steve said. “And eat now.”

Her chin came up. “I do not trust that man with my phone number,” she said, but there was a smile hovering around her lips.

“Make your move,” Tony said, keeping the newspaper out of Steve’s reach. “Before Bucky makes his.”

Knight flexed an arm. “I think I can take him. Plus, he doesn’t seem like the cooking type, and mooches get tiresome fast.”
“Oh, God, it’s going to be a soap opera at the curb,” Steve said to the uncaring ceiling.

She patted him lightly on the shoulder. “Sell popcorn. Make a fortune.” She glanced back at Tony. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“Thanks, Detective.” Tony waited until she’d slipped out the door, closing it quietly behind her, before he looked at Steve. “Did you get something to eat?”

“Later,” Steve said. He paused by the bed, smoothing Tony’s hair away from his face. His big, rough palm was warm and comforting, and Tony leaned into his touch. “How’re you feeling? Need a painkiller?”

“’M fine,” Tony said. He moved to the side, patting the bed next to him. “Lie down.”

Steve gave the bed a look. “That’s more of a DJ sized space, Tony.”

Tony reached up, snagging the front of Steve’s shirt. “Can you please lie down?” he asked. “We’ll make it work.”

He wasn’t sure how they managed it, but he was right. They made it work. It wasn’t comfortable, it wasn’t sexy, but it was comforting having him there, curled close to his uninjured side. Tony let his eyes drift closed. “Tell me he’s okay.”

Steve’s fingers smoothed over his jaw. “He’s okay,” he said. “Tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” Tony said. He opened his eyes, staring up at Steve. “I’m okay.” Steve nodded, but his eyes were wet. Tony reached up, ignoring the way his ribs ached with the movement, to pull Steve’s head down to rest against his shoulder. “I’m okay.”

Steve nodded. “I left you.” A shudder went through his body, and his fingers caught on the blanket, close to Tony’s waist.

Tony smiled. “You didn’t know if I was in trouble. You suspected, sure, but you KNEW DJ was in trouble. You saved the one you knew you could save.” He turned his head, letting his lips brush against Steve’s hair. “You saved him, and you sent help for me. It was the right thing to do and as soon as I can stand up without vomiting, I’m going to give you SUCH a blowjob.”

Steve laughed against his shoulder. “Jesus, Tony.”

Tony grinned at the ceiling, his fingers carding through Steve’s hair. “Fine, two blowjobs, but that’s my final offer.”

“Can you stop?”

“Probably not, actually, I really like blowing you, so-” Steve’s hand closed over his mouth, and Tony met his eyes.

“I love you,” Steve whispered. “And it killed me to leave, not knowing if you were safe, if you were-” His face twisted. “If you were even alive, because I was afraid, I know you, I saw you this weekend, I know you’d never let anything happen to DJ, if you could stop it. You’d never-” His voice broke, and Tony reached up, pushing Steve’s hand away from his face.

“Well, Bucky helped,” Steve said, a faint smile on his face.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t get a blowjob, he’ll have to settle for continuing to be allowed to mooch in my kitchens,” Tony said, just to make Steve laugh. “I’m being very generous here, the man’s a shameless mooch.”

“God, you don’t have to tell me, I’ve been feeding him for decades.” Steve was silent for a moment, his breath coming in slow, heavy waves. “I love you.”

Tony smiled. “If you really loved me, you’d feed me.”

He felt Steve start to laugh, uneven and aching. “Wait until we get home,” he said, his voice a raw, thick growl.

The shock of arousal caught Tony off guard. “Yeah?” he asked, his breathing accelerating.

Steve tipped his head up, his blue eyes dark and heavy-lidded. “Deep fried macaroni and cheese balls,” he whispered, and Tony’s whole body twitched. Steve smiled, slow and confident. “Peanut butter, banana and bacon sandwiches, toasted in the bacon fat.”

Tony stared at him. “What are you- What are you doing?” he asked, but it came out breathy and soft.

“Ever heard of chimidogs?” Steve whispered against his throat, the words hot against his ear. “Hot dog, sliced and stuffed with cheese and chili and salsa. Wrap it in a tortilla, and fry it until crisp and everything inside has melted together.”

Tony’s eyes fluttered shut. “Jesus Christ,” he managed.

“Nacho poutine,” Steve purred.

“That’s just WRONG,” Tony said, but his face felt hot, and his heartbeat was pounding in his ears. He shifted on the bed, uncomfortably aroused. “This whole thing is wrong.”

“Fries, loaded with squeaky cheese curds,” Steve said, one hand smoothing over the tense, jerking muscles of Tony’s stomach. “Smothered in beef gravy.”

“With you so far.”

“Topped with taco beef, lettuce, tomatoes, salsa, guacamole and sour cream.”

“Aaaaaaaaand you’ve lost me again,” Tony said.

Steve’s hand slipped below his waist, a smug grin curling his lips. “Liar.”

Tony slapped a hand over his eyes. “Fine. I’m a slut for bad food, just-” His whole body was a pleasant buzz of arousal. “Just talk high cholesterol to me.”

Steve laughed against his neck. “Food porn?”

“No, that’s watching you make this shit,” Tony said, and Steve’s laughter was like a balm for his aching heart. “Come on, make it hot and cheap, Rogers.”

Steve’s eyes were dancing, full of warmth. “I don’t know,” he said, his voice hot. “I’ve built a reputation for quality cuisine.” He straightened up, bracing his hands on either side of Tony’s chest, looming over him. “Healthy ingredients. Sensible portions. If word got out that I was making this for you, I’d be ruined.”
“This is wrong,” Tony said. “This is absolutely wrong.”

Steve grinned at him. “Don’t you want to corrupt me, Stark?” He leaned over, his breath hot on Tony’s lips.

“In every way possible, but forget going to hell, I’m going to lose a Michelin star for this,” Tony managed.

Steve’s lips brushed against his. “Frito Pie Crescent Roll Ring,” he whispered against Tony’s jaw.


* 

When the car pulled into the driveway, Hitomi was waiting for them, hovering at the front gate, her face tense and set. She barely spared a glance for Tony or Steve, but when DJ came scrambling out of the back seat, his backpack clutched in one hand, all the strain went out of her in an instant. With no regard for her pristine skirt, she went down on her knees, her hands reaching for him.

DJ threw himself into her arms with a peal of laughter.

Tony closed the car door, giving them space. There was a crunch of gravel as Steve walked around the car to stand behind him. “You okay?” he asked, his voice quiet.

Tony nodded. “He’s home,” he said, and when Steve wrapped an arm around his waist, Tony let himself lean into the shelter of his side, exhaustion sweeping over him.

Steve seemed to understand, or at the very least, he was willing to wait, willing to give Tony some time to get his bearings.

Finally, he took a deep breath. “Ready for this?”

“No,” Steve said, making Tony laugh. Steve’s arms tightened, then slid away. “Tell me if I say something wrong, okay?”

“Well, I think that’s a given,” Tony said. “But you saved her kid. Don’t throw around any racial epithets or insult DJ and you’ll be fine.”

“Wow, that’s a tall order, Stark,” Steve said, and Tony caught his hand, tangling their fingers together.

“I think you can pull it off,” he said with a smile, and tipped his chin up to press a gentle kiss to Steve’s lips. “Really,” he whispered. “You’ll be fine.”

Steve nodded, his jaw tight, and Tony hid a smile. “Let’s go.”

As they walked up the path, DJ was showing off his bruised cheek with pride, and Hitomi was nodding. “Does it hurt?” she asked, with all the gravity the question required.

“No!” DJ grinned at her. “Am tough.”

“You are. You are very tough, how lucky I am.” Hitomi stood, dusting off her skirts. “Go, tough guy, and greet your mother,” she said, her voice stern. But her hands were gentle when she smoothed DJ’s hair away from his face. He smiled up at her, leaning into the touch, and then glanced back at Tony.

Tony shoved his good hand in his pocket. “What’re you looking at me for?” he asked, smiling down at DJ. “You know she’s the boss.”
DJ nodded, but he pointed at the ground. “Stay,” he said, so sternly that Tony had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

“I'm not going anywhere, you bossypants,” he said. “Go ahead.”

DJ looked at Steve, who held up the keys. “I'll make sure he's still here,” he promised, and DJ nodded, satisfied.

“Wow,” Tony said to Steve, who just smiled at him as DJ collected his bag from the path and scrambled up the steps to front porch. He stopped just inside the front door, long enough to struggle out of his shoes, and then he was out of sight. Steve's hand settled on the small of his back, and Tony remembered to breathe.

“He's okay,” Steve said, his voice soft, and Tony gave a sharp nod.

“Yeah. I know.” He managed a smile for Hitomi, who was studying them with sharp eyes. “Hitomi, this is Steve Rogers. Steve, this is Hitomi Takahashi. DJ's great-aunt and guardian.”

Steve held out his hand. “Pleased to meet you, ma'am.”

She took it, her head inclining in a sketch of a bow. “You are the one who saved DJ.”

It wasn't a question, but Steve nodded. “One of many, actually.”

She smiled, her face softening, as she caught Steve’s hand between both of hers. “Carol told me what happened.”

“I told her what happened, too,” Tony said, because he'd tried. He'd really tried. “Then Carol took the phone away from me.”

“You have a head injury,” Hitomi pointed out. “You were less than helpful.”

“You should be used to that,” Tony said, with a lopsided smile.

That won him a stern look, but there was a slight smile hovering around her mouth, and her eyes held the kind of affection that he was used to seeing only when DJ was nearby. “You sometimes make sense,” she said. Then, to Steve, “Thank you.”

He gave a half shrug, rubbing a hand over the nape of his neck. “It was-” He gave her an embarrassed smile. “I'm glad I got to him before anything bad happened.”

She nodded, her smile stretching. “He seems very proud of his bruise.”

“He also has a scraped knee that you will have to be very impressed by later,” Tony said. He spread his hands wide. “Very impressed. I was not as impressed as I should've been, and he pouted for like an hour. It's a very impressive scraped knee.”

Hitomi's lips twitched. “I am familiar with those.”

“He trips a lot,” Tony explained to Steve. He paused. “A LOT.”

“He is full of energy, which is good, but he is always in a rush,” Hitomi said, serene. “That, we are working on.” A soft beeping echoed from the house, and brought her head around. “Ah, that is the oven.” She inclined her head towards Steve. “Excuse me, please. My baking is done.”

Steve grinned at her. “I know the tyranny of oven timers,” he said, making her laugh.
“Always, they demand attention. Like a child,” she said. She turned towards the door, her hand ghosting over Tony's arm. She met his eyes for a moment. “I am glad you are all right,” she said, and then she was moving away, up the porch steps, the screen door slamming behind her.

Tony stared after her, surprise sweeping over him. “Progress,” he said, and when Steve looked at him, his face puzzled, Tony just shook his head. “So. This is the Fujikawa homestead.”

Steve nodded, his eyes sliding over the green lawn, over the barnyard and well maintained chicken coop in the rear, the massive old oak and elm trees that ringed the comfortable old farmhouse, dappling the white clapboards with shadows. “It's nice,” he said. “She caters?”

Tony nodded. “Sometimes. Mostly, she makes homemade pastries and baked goods for a variety of local places. Cookies, scones, cupcakes, muffins.” He leaned a hand on one of the newel posts that held up the porch. The wood was smooth and warm, the paint crisp and pristine. “A bunch of cafes and coffee shops in the valley buy her Japanese sweets, too. She’s got a loyal following.”

Steve's head tipped back as he sniffed the air. “I think I can tell why,” he said, and Tony laughed. The smell of citrus and melted chocolate hung over everything, and he had to agree. Steve looked at him. “Greet his mother?”

“Yeah, there's a... A Butsudan,” Tony said. “A home altar. It's tradition to keep a picture of the deceased nearby, so you remember the person when you make your prayers.” He looked over his shoulder. “You mind if I go check on him?”

Steve lowered himself down to the porch steps. “I'll wait here,” he said, with a smile.

Tony leaned over, kissing him lightly on top of the head. “Thanks. I'll be right back.”

Steve tipped his face up towards the sun. “Take your time. It's a nice day.”

He knew the layout of the old house pretty well by now. He moved quietly through the long front hallway, skirting the old polished stairs that lead to the bedrooms on the second floor, stopping short of the open door that lead to the kitchen. He could see Hitomi moving big, perfectly round cookies from the parchment paper covered baking sheets to massive, industrial cooling racks. The smell of warm sugar and spices made his mouth water, but he ducked into the back parlor.

The Butsudan was a small, beautifully carved cabinet, the doors open now, since DJ was kneeling in front of it, his face tipped up towards the picture of his mother. In it, Rumiko was caught mid-laugh, her eyes bright and her cheeks pink, as she pushed her wind-blown hair away from her face. She was so alive, in that picture, that it hurt to look at it.

And on the altar, DJ had placed two offerings: a small, lopsided orange pumpkin, and a polished red apple.

Tony leaned against the doorframe, waiting as DJ finished and scrambled to his feet. “All done?” he asked.

DJ bounced across the polished wood floor, his bare feet squeaking on the polished wood. Tony caught him, one armed, and scooped him up on the crook of his elbow. “Did you talk to your mom?” DJ nodded, clearly pleased with himself. “Good, I bet she missed hearing from you.” Tony kissed DJ's forehead. “Mind if I say my respects, too?”

DJ nodded again. “Thank you,” he said, and Tony pressed his lips to the top of DJ's head. For a long moment, he lingered there, his eyes falling shut, just holding on tight until DJ pushed gently against his chest. Tony leaned back, and DJ gave him a stern look. “Down, please.”
Laughing, Tony leaned over, setting DJ back onto the ground. “Sorry, you're just too adorable.” He smoothed a hand over DJ's head, smoothing down the ruffled strands of his hair. “Your mom would be proud of you, you know that?”

DJ smiled, scrubbing the heel of one hand against his bruised cheek. “Knives?” he asked, hopeful.

Tony grinned at him. “Not a chance.” He pointed at the door. “Go. I gotta talk to your mom. Tell her that you're a menace to society and my apple supplies.”

“Cat?” DJ asked, leaning against his legs.

“No!” But he was laughing as DJ hopped towards the door, pausing only long enough to collect his backpack from where he'd dropped it next to the wall. Tony watched him go, his chest aching. Only when the echoes of his footsteps faded into nothing did Tony turn back to the small, compact household altar.

With some difficulty, Tony lowered himself to his knees, bracing his good hand on his thigh. He looked up at the picture of Rumiko that sat, front and center of the display. He stared at it, his chest aching. “Hi,” he said at last, and there was something small and soft and lost about that single word.

It took him a long time to come up with another. “I miss you,” he said at last. “DJ-” He stopped. “I don't want him to forget you, I want to make sure he always knew his mom loved him. That she changed her life, because she loved him that much, that she risked-” His eyes burned and he squeezed them shut. “Everything.”

In the distance, he could hear the wind rustling through the trees, the sounds of bird calls and the chatter of the chickens in the barn yard. He closed his eyes and tried to feel Rumiko here, in a world so different from the one where he'd known her. This slow, quiet, peaceful place that she'd chosen to raise her child.

Behind him, he heard the sound of footsteps, light and measured. He didn't have to look up to know who it was.

Tony took a breath, and opened his eyes, staring up at Rumiko's smiling face. “It's my fault she's dead.”

There was a beat of silence, and then the soft, almost inaudible sound of Hitomi's feet on the floor. She paused next to Tony, then sank down next to him, side by side, facing Rumiko's portrait. She set her hands together and executed a slight bow, her eyes closing, her lips moving soundlessly.

Then she settled back, her head forward, her chin up. “It is not my job to relieve your mind, to give you comfort,” she said, her voice quiet.

Tony nodded. “I know. You lost more than I did.”

“Loss is not a contest,” she said. “There is no winner to be had in grief.” Her eyes closed. “But if you bear this blame, so do I. I knew something was wrong. I did nothing. If I had-” Her shoulders rose, the smallest fraction of an inch. Her eyelashes fluttered, and a tear slipped down her cheek. “Perhaps she would've escaped this fate.”

“It's not the same,” Tony said. “And you know it. If she hadn't gotten involved with me-”

“No. If she had not kept DJ.” Hitomi looked at him for the first time, her eyes bright with tears. “So if you insist on assigning blame, perhaps he-”
“Don’t.” The word burst out, with more force than he intended. She arched an eyebrow at him, and Tony took a deep breath. “Don’t even-” He shook his head. “Not ever.”

She smiled, and it was a shock, the warmth of that, the kindness. The love. “It is not his fault, or mine, or yours,” she said, and there was something like forgiveness in that, something like absolution. “You know the one to blame.”

Tony nodded. “It's- Easier to blame myself,” he admitted.

“Heh.” She looked back at Rumiko’s picture. “It does not matter, you know. She is dead, and nothing can change that. But.” Hitomi smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling impishly. “Her death caused her killer a great deal of frustration and protected her child. I think-” She paused. “No. I know she would have preferred that death to a pointless accident.”

Tony caught himself smiling. “She’d be pissed that the accident report blamed ‘driver error.’”

Hitomi chuckled. “The indignity, she would be outraged.” She looked at Tony, and there were tears in her eyes, on her cheeks, but she was smiling. “She would want to know how we believed such an obvious lie for so long.”

“Well, she was a pretty lousy driver,” Tony said, and Hitomi cupped a hand over her mouth.

“She will find you, in some other life, and make you pay for saying such a thing,” she said. But when she dropped her hand to her lap, she was still smiling. “She loved you.”

Tony looked up at the picture. “I really did love her. You know that, right?”

Hitomi pushed herself to her feet, graceful despite her age, despite her grief. “I know. And more than that, she knew.” She closed the doors to the small altar, her fingers smoothing over the polished wood. She gave another slight bow, and started for the door. Then, she paused, looking back at him. “She told me, before she left that last day, that you would love DJ. I did not...” Her mouth tightened. “I did not think it wise, to tell you. But she knew. She knew you would love him.”

She turned away. “She knew you. I should have trusted her judgment.”

“Hitomi?” Tony got to his feet, doing his best not to fall on his face. When he was finally upright again, he faced her. “You did. You-” He stopped, and took a breath. “Thank you. For trusting her enough to tell me. About DJ.”

Her head dipped forward, hiding her expression. “It was his mother's wish, that you be his father. In more than just name.” She nodded, once, and then again. “She was... A good judge of character.”

Tony nodded. “He wants a cat.”

Hitomi considered that. “It would be good for him, I think. He finds comfort in routine. A pet would give him one.”

“I was hoping I'd find an ally in a solid 'no' on this one,” Tony said.

She smiled. “We will not always be on the same side, you know,” she said. “Best you understand this, before he learns to use it against us both.”

Tony nodded. “Can we agree on the 'no knives' thing?”

Hitomi considered that. “Small knives,” she said at last, and she sounded so much like DJ that Tony
burst out laughing.

“No. No knives,” Tony said, the words full of laughter. He looked at the altar. “Rumiko. Talk to her.”

“Hah, shows how little you know, she would have had him filleting fish already,” Hitomi said. “Do not look to her for assistance. She knows better than you.”

“I know knives and kids are—” Tony spread his hands. “Bad. They're bad.”

“Bah,” Hitomi said, and her eyes were dancing as they headed for the front door, side by side. She glanced at Tony. “I like your Mr. Rogers.”

Tony grinned at her. “He might be a keeper.” At the front door, he paused, looking out. DJ was seated on the front steps, side by side with Steve, his attention on something Tony couldn’t see. Tony pushed the screen door open, stepping out on the porch. The wood squeaked beneath his foot, and Steve twisted around. In his hand there was a half-peeled apple, and DJ had a strip of peel hanging from his mouth like a long, bright red tongue.

Steve cut a chunk free of the apple with a twist of his wrist, the blade of his pocket knife slipping through the flesh easily. He held it out to Tony with a smile. “Want some?”

Tony looked at DJ. “I don’t know,” he said. “Any good?”

DJ grinned around the peel. He gave an enthusiastic nod.

Tony grinned back. “Well, okay, then.” He reached for the apple.
Chapter End Notes

Sci says: I put out the word for horrifying but delicious foods for the 'food porn' sequence on my Tumblr. The responses were... Terrifying. SO terrifying. However, the Crescent Roll Frito Pie ring came from a google search for terrifying and delicious foods. Google found me a slideshow of Best Foods for Stoned People.


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