

An Ass in the Hole

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An Ass in the Hole

by [wynnesome](#)

Summary

When Tony entrusted Steve and Rhodey with the task of returning his body to his lab In The Event Of His Untimely, he figured either one of them was smart enough to suspect him of having a contingency plan. But he told them nothing of it, not wanting to get their hopes up in case the experimental process failed.

It didn't; the Cradle, in conjunction with FRIDAY, succeeded in rebuilding Tony's body and restoring his memory from his night-before backup. And when he walked out of his workshop alive, none other than a grim-faced Steve Rogers was waiting for him.

It turned out that saving the universe together had made them a little more willing to communicate than they used to be, and in the process, Steve turned some of Tony's choice words back on him to unexpectedly humorous effect.

Notes

Fills the "Presumed Dead" square on my 2019 round 1 Stony Bingo card.

Unbetaed, but **thank you muchly to [swtalmnd](#)** for help with tagging this fic, which is so very ambiguous about just about everything except two true facts: Tony Stark Does Not

Stay Dead, and Steve Rogers Is Very Glad.

This fic started out as a punchline to which I did not know the opener, but I knew it was meant to be one of those couple-hundred word ficlets, basically a two-line exchange between Steve and Tony.

Then my brain decided it wanted to give at least a modicum of explanation as to how Tony was still around to be having this two-line conversation. And considering I have several different, fairly detailed "there is no possible way in which Tony stays dead" headcanons, that turned into 1k or so of backstory before Steve was even written into the scene.

The good thing (for me) about starting with a two-line concept is that when the fic explodes, it still only ends up somewhere in the 2-4k range - still nice and achievable, for a definition of "achievable" that equals "finishing the damn fic in a matter of days, rather than months or NEVER."

So, my two-line ficlet is now a 2k-something Endgame fix-it, which just happens to carry forward from the premise of my first Endgame fix-it, "[Re-entry](#)," which also just so happens to be referenced in this fic. It's not essential to read that one first, but it's only 500 words, for anyone who wants to be able to catch the reference when it comes up.

As far as just how canon-divergent this is, well, I'm intentionally staying very ambiguous with regard to referencing Pepper and Morgan; there's clearly something going on here that's not entirely canon-compliant, but at this point, I'm leaving everything implied and not worrying about defining the exact nature of it.

I mean, Tony Does Not Stay Dead, but what do you mean, that's canon divergent???

Steve and Tony's relationship in this fic can be read as just about any flavor of your choosing, from friendship (with or without benefits), to pre-slash, to established relationship, to past-but-no-longer relationship. Your choice of main course comes with two sides: A Lot Of History and It's Complicated.

Once his... once he'd been in place, FRIDAY had known how to activate the Rock On protocol.

He'd entrusted only Rhodey and Steve with the imperative to return his... to return him to his lab -- not the garage workshop, but the larger facility across the property -- if.

(Thinking about dying, *having* died, a second time now, for everything that really mattered, didn't bother him, but his mind still shied away from the idea and image of his uninhabited, de-animated form.)

He'd put it to them as a fierce insistence that he himself, with his own tech as proxy, retain sole custody of his bodily remains, and certainly, they both knew his need for control, for self-determination. Even past the limits of... any selfhood still existing. But they were also both sharp-witted men and tactical thinkers who knew him well enough -- and he, them, in turn -- to suspect them of suspecting him of a contingency plan in play.

When it came to Tony, Rhodey had long since planted his flag in the bedrock of "Don't Ask," a tenet strictly emancipated from any two other letters, and having zero bearing on "homo" or

"hetero" except for the "genius." Discretion and insurance, rolled into one; his sugar snap knew what he was about.

Steve, though. Tony had half, more like three and a half quarters, expected Steve to press the point. To refuse anything less than full disclosure. He might even have given in. But he'd been relieved not to have to. **It was better this way.** This way, if it hadn't worked -- given it wasn't exactly something he'd been able to test beforehand -- they'd have had to let it go as an unfulfilled wish, rather than a failed reality.

For everyone else, he couldn't have stopped them from wishing, but they'd never have had an inkling it might have been more. He could live with knowing he'd left them to grieve for a day. He couldn't have died wondering if he'd be leaving them to grieve twice over for a lifetime.

~~~~~

And so he woke, alone, nude but for the nano-container, coming to consciousness inside the narrow chamber with a gasp and a spasm of claustrophobia that had him drawing out the armor to flow around him. The enclosure opened with a hiss of smooth hydraulics; the sense of entrapment abated, but he remained in place. Taking stock. Remembering.

The Cradle had done its work: rebuilding his body and restoring his memory, reintegrating his night-before backup with a reconstruction of that last day's events, that latter created from the armor's ongoing 5-senses-surround data capture, fed to and through the algorithm of his mind-imprint.

Armored, he'd never seen with his eyes the damage to his right arm, but he'd experienced it, the screaming agony of flesh consumed by sheer power -- *char-flay-wither -- no, don't, don't imagine the incinerated husk of his limb, don't relive it, slide away...*

Even the arm was whole and intact, within a gauntlet that was now, thankfully, devoid of all fucking cosmic rainbow rocks.

They'd won. And the victory had killed him. And he was alive.

Everything had worked exactly the way it was supposed to, except for everything in the middle -- betrayal and sacrifice and so goddamned much brutal, senseless death -- that should never have had to be at all.

And here he was, selfish bastard. Remade, renewed, rejuvenated. Better than he'd been in a long time, if his little tweaks to the program had been fully implemented, and no reason at this point to think they hadn't.

On the cosmic scale, he'd saved the whole damned universe. But still, so many lost, so many he hadn't been able to save. The small pictures, the snapshots, the microcosms that mattered in people's lives. And he'd cheated death for exactly one of them. Himself. Did it balance out? He wasn't so sure it did.

He... couldn't think any more about that right now. Anything else in his power to fix, to bring back, to make restitution -- that would come. But... a little later. A little more of the selfish. He needed a few... minutes, hours, days, some unit of time moving in only one direction, to... not think about the entirety of it, first.

Speaking of firsts. First things. Up and at 'em. Goings to places and seeings of people.

At a gesture, the armor retracted; he glanced reflexively at his unmarred right arm, but only that.

Didn't flex it, shake it out, didn't fist and open five functioning fingers. Sure as hell didn't snap them. He sat up, stepped out, stood on his feet. He felt like he should be hyperaware of his body, his mobility. But he wasn't. Didn't find himself running his hands down the familiar, sturdy lines of his figure from tip to toe, or feeling over the shape of his face.

As he slipped into a spare set of soft underclothes and sweats, he didn't even have the urge to rub his eyes or stretch and yawn.

That was maybe the oddest part. That sense that there should be some... remnant. Residue. Some need to recover. From the strenuous battle, the terror, the massive adrenaline rush and dump. From being fucking *dead*. Like there should be some kind of byproduct, residual buildup, in his muscles and organs, the way there plainly was in his mind. But there wasn't. Physically, he felt... normal. Like himself. Like he'd never stopped. Halted. Ended. Ceased to be. Like he was just... continuing on into another day -- waking alert and settled in his skin after a night's sound sleep, marred only by a disturbing, vivid, but slightly glass-refracted, distanced dream.

(There'd been another, something gentle, promising and peaceful, but it was already so much vapor wisping away; truly a dream, that one must have been, not a part of his reconstituted memory.)

A sweetly lilting voice dispersed the last traces.

"Welcome home, boss. If I may, I never thought welcoming you back to the land of the living would be so literal."

"I..." There it was, the gravelly refuse, the rust in his throat. He cleared it. "Thanks baby girl. You're a wonder. Feels like I never even left."

She replied with a self-satisfied hum and left it at that, and that was so very FRI, and she was perfect, and he'd never, not ever, get over missing JARVIS's brand of backchat.

He looked around. The bots were dormant in their charging stations; the 'shop was a little bare, the way he'd left it, with everything tidied away at a stopping point before their feature presentation starring in the remake of *Time Bandits*. It was quiet, the perpetually metal-tanged air a little less dense without its customary overpopulation of sound waves battering the walls. He'd get back down here and get some tunes cranking, later.

He had other music to face, first.

"Lift the blackout, and open up, if you would, please, FRI."

"You got it boss, but I should probably warn you, you have a--"

She could be perfect and still need to work on her timing. She'd completed his request before completing her sentence, and the door opened to reveal, standing vigil in the corridor just beyond, a grim-faced Steve Rogers.

~~~~~

Ok, yeah, so Steve had known.

Well, being offensive was the best defense, or however it went.

"You draw the short straw, Rogers?"

Tony clenched his jaw and crossed his arms -- *two unscarred, unmutilated arms* -- to mirror Steve's

position.

But Steve was already unfolding his, lowering his knee from where it'd been bent up with his boot heel braced back on the wall, and striding toward Tony, his dark look unfolding into something wide-eyed and undecipherable as he did.

He'd known, but he hadn't BELIEVED, Tony had time to think, before Steve was folding his arms once again, but this time with Tony inside, and there'd never be a feeling to compare with this, being enveloped against Steve Rogers' impossibly broad chest, warmed to the bone by the barely banked furnace of his serum-stoked body, and leaning into the unshakable thud of his heart.

"Only short straw was thinking we'd lost you for good, *Stark*." Steve's breath gusted hot through Tony's hair and over his ear, his growl rumbling against Tony's temple till its half-life expired and it decayed, broken down into choked-out iterations of his first name. "Tony, Tony..."

Goddammit, he'd been the one dead, and he still had to do the comforting? He worked one arm awkwardly out from the circle of Steve's and wrapped it around his back, light patting turning to steady circling, and circling turning to an equally desperate grip into the thin cotton of Steve's t-shirt.

"I'm not so easy to get rid of, you should know by now," he muttered, trusting Steve to be able to make out the words, however muffled into his shoulder. He breathed him in, skin-warmed fabric and earthy skin itself, with a thread of sharpness that spoke of hours waiting in uncertainty.

By seemingly mutual, but reluctant agreement, they disengaged after a few more breaths, putting enough distance between them for damp eyes to meet, but not enough to split their Venn diagram into two separate personal circles.

Tension coiled in Tony's stomach again; just because Steve was glad he was alive didn't mean there wasn't still a size ten tactical boot poised on a ledge high overhead.

He made himself leave his arms by his sides, holding himself motionless as for a full body scan, even as he scrutinized Steve. Observed as Steve shifted his weight, his eyes flicking from Tony's face downward and back up, once, and again.

Steve's mouth opened and closed on a false start, and then he visibly gathered his resolve, lifting his chin and reaching down to catch Tony's hands -- *both unmauled, unmaimed hands* -- in his fingers. He squeezed lightly and stroked his thumbs over Tony's knuckles, a pleasing catch of calluses over work-toughened skin.

Tony's stomach unclenched; ok, probably no other shoe gonna drop. then.

"Look, whatever you did in there," Steve was saying, "you don't have to explain -- I wouldn't understand the half of it, and maybe it's better if I don't know, anyway--"

...as if he were envisioning an abattoir, arcana and entrails, a necromantic nightmare in place of clean code and immaculate surgical sterility.

"--but I'm just glad it worked." Steve finished with a nod, on a firm note, in that way he had at his best, of simplifying a matter without reducing it.

After the fact as it was, Tony couldn't help but rush in to reassure them both.

"The science was sound, every simulation came back 100%, all the scans and backups verified within some... very intolerant tolerances..." He let his mouth run itself out and sighed. "Yeah. I'm

glad it worked, too."

"You mean you weren't sure?" Steve's eyes flashed fear, and his grip tightened for a moment.

"I was..." Tony shrugged, shoulders rising as their hands remained linked low between them. It had been a chance to take, either way, with one risk acceptable and the other... not. FRIDAY had had the diagnostics to run if he... if anything had come back recognizably wrong -- and she'd had the kill switch, too, but not a soul, including either of his two accomplices, ever needed to know about that part.

"I was pretty sure, but it's not the kind of thing where you get a trial run, you know?"

"That's ok, Tony, your 'pretty sure' is anyone else's Q.E.D."

"Mmm, speak acronyms to me, baby..." He cracked a grin. "So you're saying you weren't standing outside the 'shop to make sure what came out wasn't... I dunno. Ultrony?"

Once upon a time, in a compound far, far away, it would have been forever too soon for that joke, and this might arguably have been a space opera, but it was no fucking fairy tale, neither Disney-esque nor any of the much darker traditions, and though this wasn't an ending, there just might be some happy to be found, and... ah, yes, it had done the trick to lighten the mood.

Steve rolled his eyes and huffed in mock exasperation. "No, I wasn't expecting an evil Tony-bot. I..."

Tony took mercy, returning the hand squeeze. "It's ok, Steve. I'm glad to be back, too." His lips still held a small smile, but he let it fall out of his eyes as they held Steve's. He should probably just... get this out now, while they had this moment, so there didn't have to be any more awkward feelings-talkings later.

He twitched his head back toward the workshop entry behind him. "If that door had never opened, though... you'd have been ok. You all would." He was glad they didn't have to be, on his behalf, but certain of it. His chosen family had a fortitude no force in the universe could defeat.

Steve's hands slackened and his eyes opaqued, sliding off into the distance and taking on that lost, haunted look. "We'd have gone on," he began, pensively. "It's what we do. But it wouldn't'a..." He stalled out and started again. "I mighta done something..." A third attempt, and it caught, this time, like a sputtering motor. "To be honest, I'm not sure how I would have managed it. Nothing would have been the same."

Everything Steve wasn't out-and-out saying was terrifying, and intolerable. "Steve--"

Steve shook his head, shook it off, returning from wherever he'd been. Back to himself, back to Tony.

"Nah, it's ok, no sense living in the might-have-beens, right? You're still here... back... whatever you want to call it, and that's what matters."

Tony's brows raised in question.

Steve's mouth curved and his eyes crinkled. Like one of those physics-defying flip-twisty countermoves in their long-ago training sessions, Tony didn't know exactly what was coming, but he started a mental checklist till it hit.

Hook: *check*. Line: *check*.

Steve released one hand to jerk a thumb over his shoulder. "Because, you know, America's Ass?" He pointed at Tony. "It ain't good for shit without its asshole."

Tony blinked.

Sinker: *check*.

He refused the bright pull blooming in his cheeks -- his facial ones -- in favor of a deadpan, gruff rejoinder.

"Way to a man's heart, there, Steve, buddy, straight through his sphincter."

"Hey, I call it like I see it."

"Yeah, that should at least be Iron Asshole to you, ASCAP." Tony finally relented on the smile, let it shine through, and Steve looked light on his feet again, light in his heart, the way Tony loved to see him. This was it right here, heavy on the happy, and none of the ending.

He tugged his remaining hand free and slung his arm around Steve's apple pie-crust crimp of a waist, giving America's Ass a playful slap to start them moving down the corridor toward the main exit.

"Ok, whaddayou say we head over and give the good news to the ladies of the house?"

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

chaos theory

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/31958158) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/31958158>.

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chaos theory

by [slylyaddictedtostories](#)

Summary

as time flies, we'll meet again,
as ages end, we'll die again,
worlds apart, I feel your pain,
centuries away, my love is still in vain

a.k.a. in which Steve goes back in time to fix the mess they made that led up to Endgame (and his love for Tony transcends time and space)

Notes

Helloooo, people!!

My friend recently began binging the MCU movies and I am overwhelmed by Stony feels after watching IW last weekend... so this [little Endgame-fix-it poem-fic](#) came out :)))

Enjoy!!!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

you were built in fire,
I was steeled in ice:
we were fated for tragedy,
for cruelty, love and lies

our names on everybody's lips,
that's the price of fame:
(they all hate you)
they all love you
(they don't know you)

my head's underwater
(it's freezing cold down here)
and there's blood on my hands,
your blood staining my dreams -
your head's in the clouds,
you look to the stars as they frown upon you
and your blood is warmer than ever on my icy fingers
(the look of betrayal in your eyes lingers)

we were both fools,
for thinking we'd simply play by the rules:
we're flying and drowning,
smiling and lying,
we're tearing the very fabric of nature apart
(a thousand universes between us,
we're still a timeless couple of fools)

I loved you like a soldier loves his home
(he'll never go back home)
I loved you like a mother loves her child
(she'll see him to his grave)
I loved you like earth loves gravity
(a never-ending cycle of falls)
I loved you like liars love sin, like demons love heaven,

I loved you
(I love you)

I wrote hundreds of letters to you
the stack of paper growing day by day
not a single one of them was sent away -
my tower was too tall,
your kingdom was too low

my tears burned the hollows of my cheeks,
fire waterfalls on my lashes -
they turned to sliver ashes
scattered in the crisp winter wind,
invisible wishes, broken and winged

it's lonely, changing endings
it's lonely, cheating beginnings,
it's lonely, being without you
(you're still with me,
you're not here)
you're the peace in my war,
you're the fight of my life,
you hurt like a missing limb
(I'm missing a heart)

the universe is a roulette wheel
(you used to play them like a fiddle)
it's pushing us back, pushing us forward,
we come together and fall apart in the middle -
it's begging us to make it work
(I'm begging you to stay,
begging you to go)

and I've seen us, I've seen it all,
all the what-ifs, the first meetings, the regrets,
through countless imploding collisions
we're still fighting while holding hands
you'd be what I would always come back to
(I'm running aimlessly as fast as can)
you're my all too familiar ghost
and most painful heartache

you're the light in my dark,
I'm the rust on your ring,
you're the cure, I'm the wound,
you're the bullet, I'm the scheme
(my voice is hollow)
you're the love of my life,
I'm the bane of your existence
(I can't cry, but I can scream)

my lips break in silent prayers,
my fists break in your armour,
my heart breaks in your hands,
(you shouldn't be mourning)
your heart shatters in my hands,
you're still falling
(you keep falling)

as time flies, we'll meet again,
as ages end, we'll die again,
worlds apart, I feel your pain,
centuries away, my love is still in vain

you weren't mine to keep,
you weren't mine to lose,
the tears were yours,
the fault was mine,
and yet you're still not mine to mourn,
not in days, not in years,
not in seconds, not in hours -
the house by the edge of the lake
should have been ours ...

End Notes

I really hope you liked it and, as always, us writers thrive on comments, feedback and kudos, so pleeeeeeaaase leave a review if you enjoyed it (and suggestions if there is anything I can do better:))

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

Collecting Kisses

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/31635809) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/31635809>.

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Collecting Kisses

by [inkinmyheartandonthepage](#)

Summary

Morgan Stark knows that the kisses her dad gives her makes everything feel better and so with Tony laid up in hospital with a missing arm, Morgan collects kisses to make him everything better.

Notes

Hi all!

This fic is inspired by this comic on Tumblr

(<https://sreppub.tumblr.com/post/185242245257/happy-birthday-tony-3-your-gift-from-morgan-and>) I saw it and I couldn't help but write a little fic for it :D

This is just a little one-shot and I hope you all enjoy it. My apologies for any mistakes :D

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Morgan Stark knows that her dad, Tony Stark, is going to need a lot of magic kisses to help him feel better. Her dad looks a lot older than when Morgan had last seen him, and she was a little scared the first time her mum brought her to the hospital to see him. Her daddy had looked so sick lying in the hospital, a bandage covering half his face and his arm was missing.

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” Her dad had said as she sniffled against his good side. His one arm curled around her, holding her close. “I’m okay, baby. I’ll be up and walking in no time. Now, come give me some of those magic kisses of yours.”

Morgan had proof that magic kisses work and if she could give some to her dad then she knows he will get better. When she scraped her knee, her dad had carried her back to the house and wiped away her tears. Her mum had cleaned the wound and put a green dinosaur plaster over the top before her dad had swooped down and placed a kiss on it.

“A magic kiss,” Tony had said, bobbing her gently on the nose. “Magic kisses make everything feel better.”

Pepper had kissed the plaster to and Morgan giggled at the sensation. She had hardly felt anything after the magic kisses her parents had bestowed on her, so she knew that magic kisses were going to fix her dad.

Morgan frowned at the place where her dad’s arm used to be. Nobody would tell her where her dad had misplaced his arm, but he assured her that he would build himself a better one. The arm and the black marks that stained her dad’s shoulder and neck were a lot bigger than the scrape on her knee. Her dad was going to need a lot of magic kisses to get better. She and her mum have already given her dad *a lot* of magic kisses, but he was still in the hospital and falling asleep a lot.

When Uncle Happy walks through the door of her dad’s hospital room, she perks up in her father’s grip. He’s got his one arm wrapped around her as she read him a story (story time *always* helps when Morgan isn’t feeling the best. She had picked as many books as she could carry to bring for her dad, unsure which one would make him feel the best) and he winces as he turns his neck to see

who enters.

Morgan perks up, beaming at her Uncle Happy.

“Hey squirt,” Happy greets. “Boss.”

“Uncle Happy,” Morgan beams, abandoning her story book on her dad’s lap. “Stop!”

Happy pauses by the edge of the bed, the white bag he holds crinkling as it sways. He instantly scans the hospital room, looking for a threat. “What? What is it?”

“You have to give daddy a magic kiss,” Morgan says.

The room stills at her words, the only sound coming from the heart monitor that chirps rhythmically. When nobody moves, she huffs and crosses her arms.

“A magic kiss,” Happy finally repeats.

Morgan nods. “Yep! Daddy needs lots of magic kisses to get better. You have to give him one.”

“You heard her, Hap,” Tony smiles, his teeth flashing under the fluorescent lights.

Happy gives a sigh and shuffles closer to the bed. Morgan beams as he leans over the railing and kisses her dad’s forehead before pulling back. He turns to her, his face blank. “Is that okay?”

Morgan nods her head enthusiastically and points to the bag “Are those cookies?”

Happy hands over the bag and Morgan tears it open, squirming when she sees that they are chocolate chip, her favourite.

“Just one,” her mum warns from the plastic chair beside her dad’s bed.

While she is munching on her cookie, she misses the fond looks the adults give her. Instead, she wonders who she can get next to give her dad a magic kiss and if she is able to sneak another cookie.

As it turns out, her dad has lots of visitors to the hospital and she simply has to wait until they come in.

Uncle Rhodey is the next visitor, swinging her up into his arms when she dashes to him. She hugs him tightly around the neck, giggling when he tickles her and rests her on his hip.

“Hey! Are you keeping your dad out of trouble?” Rhodey asks as he walks to the bed.

“I’m reading him stories,” Morgan beams proudly. “And collecting magic kisses.”

“Magic kisses?” Rhodey eyes widened with surprise. “How many have you got so far?”

“Well, me and mum have given dad lots of magic kisses, but he needs *lots*,” Morgan admits. “You have to give one to daddy too.”

“Right here, Honey Bear,” Tony smirks from where he is propped up on the bed. He taps his cheek, tilting his head to give Rhodey access.

Rhodey deposits Morgan on the edge of the bed and stares down at her father. “I don’t think magic kisses can fix that ugly mug.”

“Rude,” Tony snarks. “Come on Honey Bear. Just like in college.”

“That never happened in collage,” Rhodey said, deadpanned.

“Come on! The fourth of July party,” Tony eyes wrinkle as he grins. “When you took that tumble

off the picnic table.”

Rhodey rolls his eyes and leans down smack a big kiss on her father’s cheek. But her dad turns his head at the last second, Uncle Rhodey planting a big kiss on her father’s lips instead.

Morgan giggles as her uncle pulls back, levelling her father with a glare. “You know, the last time you did that you nearly got us banned from the annual MIT Biggest Morning Tea.”

“Of course you two nearly got banned from a charity function” Her mother asks. She shakes her head, her face full of fond exasperation.

Tony shrugs. “I stand by my choices. Besides, I need the full healing of the magic kisses, right Mo?”

“Right!” Morgan beams. “You should give daddy another one.”

“Maybe later,” Rhodey said, swooping down to kiss her forehead. “There, you hold onto that one for me.”

She sits with her dad and Uncle Rhodey for a little while before her mum scoops her off the bed and says something about getting them some lunch. As they head out the door, Morgan briefly catches the conversation between her dad and his best friend.

“So, what’s with the magic kisses?” Rhodey asks.

“I think it’s Morgan’s way of helping me get better,” her dad says.

“Better get the troops on it then,” Rhodey says. “You’re going to need a lot of them.”

It turns out that her Uncle Rhodey understand just how important the magic kisses are because he send lots of people to give them to her dad.

Steve, and Morgan briefly remembers the man coming to her cabin by the lake, comes to check on her daddy and brings a friend with him too. His friend's name is Bucky, and he hovers far away from the bed, keeping his eyes to the ground.

Steve looks rather frightened when Morgan says he has to give her dad a magic kiss.

“What?” he blinks at Tony.

“Part of the healing process, Cap,” Tony grins. “Pucker up. I’m not getting any younger.”

Steve falters, looking between the two until he finally leans down and pecks her dad lightly on the forehead before pulling back. He looks to Morgan, looking uncertain. “Was that okay?”

“It was okay for your first try,” Morgan said decisively. “You’ll have to practice for next time. Maybe you could practice with your friend!”

Her dad laughs loudly at that, and Bucky cracks a smile in the corner while Steve shakes his head with a chuckle.

Steve and Bucky are followed by Bruce and Thor. So far Thor’s kiss is the best. He grabs her dad’s face with both hands before smacking a large kiss on her dad’s lips, then one on each cheek and then lastly planting on his forehead.

“There!” Thor booms loudly, grinning from ear to ear. “Is that enough magic kisses or do you require more?”

“That will do for now,” Tony interrupts before Morgan can say that her dad needs as many magic kisses as he can get.

Bruce simply pats Tony’s head gently before bending over and kissing the top of his head.

Superhero after superhero comes in gives her dad a magic kiss but Morgan frowns when it doesn’t

seem to work. Her dad is still tired, and he keep falling asleep during her stories. He doesn't eat as much and when he thinks Morgan has fallen asleep on his side he will stare at the doors with a sad expression on his face.

The magic kisses should have been working by now.

The idea comes to her when she overhears her mum and dad talking. Morgan is sitting in the plastic chair in the corner of the room, her dad's phone in her hand as she plays an app to pass the time. There are doctors moving around him, checking the stump that was now his arm.

"Have you heard from Peter?" her dad asked, his voice quiet but strained.

"Not today," her mum said. "Give him some time, Tony. He went through a lot."

"I need to see my kid," Tony stressed.

Petey!

Morgan exited the app she was playing with and opened up her dad's camera roll. She didn't have to scroll too far until she came across a picture of her dad and Petey. When Morgan had seen the picture of the two of them in the kitchen her dad had sat her down and explained that Petey was her big brother. When she asked where he was, her dad had tried to explain that he had disappeared before she had been born but she hadn't really understood what it meant. He had showed her pictures and videos and Morgan had been so excited to learn that her brother was a superhero too.

But Peter was back now but she had yet to meet him. Her mum had said that Peter had come to visit her dad, but he had snuck in while her dad had been sleeping and she hadn't been there. She was sad that she hadn't met him yet. She was so excited, and Spider-Man was her favourite superhero and her dad's so his kisses would definitely make her dad feel better.

Making sure her mum and dad were occupied by the doctors; Morgan opened the contact app until she found Peter's name and pressed call. She brought the phone to her ear and waited for the call to go through.

“Mr. Stark?” came an unfamiliar voice but Morgan’s tummy swooped with butterflies.

“Petey!”

There was a pause before Peter asked hesitantly, “Morgan? Is that you?”

“Yes! Petey, you have to come see daddy!”

“What? Is he okay?”

Peter sounded so worried and Morgan hands gripped the phone tighter. “No, Petey. He needs magic kisses. You have to come and give him some.”

“Magic kisses?” Peter repeated.

“Yes! It will help daddy get better,” Morgan kicked her legs out. “You have to come and give him some. You’re our favourite superhero. You can help daddy get better. Please Petey! And I want to meet my big brother.”

“Big...” Peter trailed off. “Are you at the hospital now?”

“Uh huh!”

“Okay. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Peter said.

Morgan squealed.

“Morgan? Who are you talking to sweetie?” Pepper asked as she hurried over.

“Petey,” Morgan beamed. “He’s coming to give daddy magic kisses.”

“Can I talk to Peter for a moment?” Pepper asked, holding out her hand for the phone.

Morgan handed it over and kicked her legs as her mother brought the phone to her ear.

“Peter, it’s Pepper. Yes. Are you sure you can? Alright. Yes, I’ll be here. Okay. See you soon. Bye.” Pepper ended the call, slipping the phone into her pocket.

“Pep?” Tony called from the bed. “What’s going on?”

“Peter is on his way,” Pepper said, pushing back her hair. She looked down at Morgan, giving a big sigh. “Sweetheart, you know you aren’t allowed to call people.”

“Oops,” Morgan looked at her mum with wide eyes. “I’m sorry. But Petey had to give daddy magic kisses!”

Pepper let out another sigh, her lips twitching with a smile. She scooped Morgan up, settling her on her hip.

“Is he really coming?” Tony asked. “He not just going to sneak in and out?”

“He’s really coming,” Pepper smiled.

Morgan knew she had done the right thing because her daddy’s smile was brighter than it had been in days.

“Petey!” Morgan cried as the teenager from the photos stepped hesitantly into the hospital room. She wriggled from her mother’s grip and flew across the room to launch herself at the teenager.

Peter caught her easily, swinging her up to let her wrap her legs around his waist and lock her arms around his neck. She hugged him tightly, unable to stop her legs from kicking out in her

excitement.

“Hi,” Peter said.

“You came,” Morgan beamed and leaned forward to kiss Peter’s cheek. “Now you can give daddy a magic kiss so he can get better!”

“Come here, sweetheart,” her mother said, pulling her out of Peter’s grip and settling her on hip. “Hi Peter.”

“Hi Miss. Potts,” Peter said. He froze, his whole throat bobbing as he swallowed loudly. “I mean, Mrs. Stark. I’m sorry. You’re Mrs. Stark now.”

“You can call me Pepper,” her mum interrupted with a smile.

“Underoos,” her dad called, his voice sound choked and watery.

Morgan watched wide eyed as her dad’s eyes welled with tears. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Her dad was supposed to be happy! She looked to her brother and saw that his face had started to crumble, his shoulders starting to shake.

“Come here kid,” Tony begged.

Peter stumbled the distance between them and fell into her daddy’s chest. Her dad’s one arm came to wrap around Peter, his fingers sliding into his hair and holding him close. Her dad squeezed his eyes shut but tears were flowing down his cheeks.

“You can’t do that to me, Underoos,” her dad growled through gritted teeth. “Never again, you hear me.”

Peter didn’t answer but Morgan could hear him crying.

“Why are they crying?” Morgan asked her mum, her own lip trembling. “Petey is supposed to

make daddy feel better! He's doing it wrong!"

"Come on sweetheart," Pepper said, carrying her out of the room. She paused only to shut the door to the hospital room behind her before carrying Morgan away.

"No! Mummy!!! Why are they crying?" Morgan cried, her own tears starting to build up.

"Shhh, don't cry," her mum smoothed. "Your dad missed Peter very much, sweetheart. It's been a long time since he has seen your brother. They aren't sad tears, they're happy tears."

"Happy tears," Morgan repeated with a sniff. "They didn't look happy."

Her mum reached out to catch the tear that rolled down her cheek and smiled softly. "They were both happy on the inside." She pressed a hand to Morgan's heart. "Your dad loves Peter very much and he was just really worried about him."

"Oh," Morgan murmured. She didn't really understand but she trusted her mother. "Can we go back and see Petey?"

"Let's give them a moment," Pepper said. "Then you can go and sit with them."

Her mum distracted her with a hot chocolate from the cafeteria and by the time her mother had cleaned the milk-tache off her face, she was squirming to get back to her dad and Petey.

When she re-entered the room, Petey was curled up on her daddy's good side, his head resting on his chest. Peter's face was red and blotchy, but he was smiling as her daddy spoke in low tones that Morgan couldn't make out.

"Hey sweetheart," Tony cooed. "Come here love."

Pepper carried her over, gently depositing her on the bed. Morgan crawled across her dad's leg, the man grunting as she did, and settled herself between his legs. She looked to Petey who was watching her with wide curious eyes. Her eyes were really red and his nose looked as if he had been standing outside in the cold for too long.

Morgan frowned. Petey looked like he needed a magic kiss too. She leaned in close and placed a kiss on the top of Peter's nose, making him go cross-eyed. She giggled at his face and his smile grew wider.

"Petey, did you give daddy his magic kiss yet?" Morgan asked.

"Oh, the magic kiss," Peter said. "Not yet."

"Petey! You have to give daddy a magic kiss or he won't get better," Morgan pouted.

"Yeah, Underoos," her dad smiled, and his fingers flexed in Peter's curls. "Come on, give me a kiss."

Peter blushed but he shifted and craned his neck to press a kiss to her dad's cheek. He pressed another one and then another and another and another.

"You have to get better," Peter sniffed between kisses. "You – you have too."

"Shhh it's alright, Underoos," her dad murmured. "I'm getting better. I'm okay. I've got you now. I've got you. I'm not going anywhere. Come here, Mo."

Morgan cuddled up to her dad's chest and she snuggled under the arm that Peter threw over her back. Under the arms of her brother and her father, Morgan felt safe and warm. Her eyes drifted close, and she started to drift off.

She knew her magic kisses had worked for when she woke up later and the doctor told them that her daddy could come home.

End Notes

Happy reading :D

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

home with you

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/22082809) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/22082809>.

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by [natalie_nebula](#)

Summary

“Y’know, Buck, I can get by just fine on my own—”

“Don’t make me say it, punk.”

Steve's having a bit of a sick day, but Bucky has work to do! And so does Steve, and he's certainly not gonna keep Bucky from completing his mission 'cuz of a little cold.

A stevebucky post-endgame sick!fic, part of my weekend memories series and a sequel to "A day in the life of Steve Rogers" (but can be read on its own).

Note: this fic takes place AFTER "they'll hang us in the louvre". I had originally stated it took place before because apparently my brain was off for like a week and a half after I originally posted this.

Notes

IMPORTANT EDIT! Note: This fic takes place AFTER they'll hang us in the louvre, another fic in this series where they come out to the public. Originally I had stated it took place beforehand, even though they do a bunch of affectionate things in public in this? I guess my brain wasn't on for like a week and a half after I posted this. Anyways, sorry about the confusion. Just editing this note, nothing about the rest of the text has changed.

Do you ever understand a character's motivation perfectly in your head, and then somehow fail to translate it into words? That's a little how I felt writing this fic. Despite that though, I had a lot of fun writing it, and the reward for understanding what I'm going for with all the angsty stuff is getting some very cute fluff at the end. This is the longest fic so far in my weekend memories series (besides the original one, a day in the life of Steve Rogers, which I highly recommend if you like this), so enjoy! Here's to 2020 and writing a lot more stories for you guys!

you can follow me on twitter @budgetzendaya

p.s. if you haven't listened to FKA twigs new album, what are you doing

“Thank you so much.”

“Oh no, thank *you*! I'll have that right out for you guys.”

Steve watched as Bucky handed the waitress their menus, his classic charming smile out on display.

As she disappeared into the kitchen, Steve rested his chin on his propped-up hand and peered out the café window. The world just outside was bustling and bright and alive, like something Steve always wanted to draw but never could because everything was moving too fast. Bucky had insisted on taking him into Manhattan to this brunch spot in Union Square where all the waitresses were up and coming models or something. Steve told Bucky that he really didn't care if he brought him McDonald's for breakfast, he just liked spending time with him. But Buck had promised to take him to the farmer's market afterwards, so he grabbed his coat and his metro card.

It was late fall, and New York had turned shades of tawny reds and yellows. The air was becoming cold and sharp, slicing through his bones like it used to slice through the thin walls of their old apartment. When they'd first entered the café—Bucky holding open the door for him, as always, and Steve rolling his eyes, *as always*—and hung up their coats and scarves on the coat rack, Steve had been struck by the sudden warmth hitting his skin, and the sounds of voices, and plates clattering together, and soft music on the radio.

The old red vinyl of the booth squeaked as they slid into it on either side. Bucky winked at the hostess as she flipped over their coffee cups and filled them. Then he turned to look at Steve, smirking at him from across the table. His shoulders were a little hunched, like he was trying to make himself smaller. He licked his lips and timidly slid his hands onto the tabletop, palms up, a shy offering.

Steve smiled back at him and slid his hands into Bucky's. No matter how big or small, how young or old, they always fit together perfectly, like puzzle pieces. *They were meant to be together.*

The late morning was filled with laughter and stories and delicious plates of food being shuffled around the table. Bucky would stab his fork into something on his plate and press it to Steve's lips without even asking, insisting it was delicious and he *had* to try it. After the first few times, it got hard for Steve to pretend like he was bothered. It was moments like these—with the warm midmorning sun pressed up against the window, wrapping them up together like a big fluffy blanket, holding them inside their own little world, just the two of them—that Steve wished would never come to an end. But of course, they always did.

Eventually, the waitress came with the bill. As Steve was settling up, he heard Bucky's phone buzz once, then twice in his pocket. He fished it out and checked the notification, then Steve watched as his eyes flicked up to the TV mounted above the bar. A hush fell over the restaurant as the hostess turned up the volume.

“Breaking news. There has been a bombing at South Station in Boston. The suspected domestic terrorist attack took place at approximately 10:30 AM this morning. Search and rescue are currently on the scene looking for survivors—”

Steve turned to look at Bucky. A cloud had drifted in front of the sun and the booth they were in had gone cold and dark. Bucky was staring at the phone in his hand, his shoulders set and rigid, his face expressionless. Steve could see his eyes scanning the screen, presumably reading a message from Nick Fury.

Steve just sat there across from him, brow furrowed, biting his lip, hands folded in his lap. He didn't speak.

Bucky sighed and flexed his right hand against the table top.

“Fury's got more intel on the attack, says there could be more trouble on the way...”

“—More *bombs*?” Steve leaned in closer, trying to keep his voice down.

“Could be,” He shrugged. “Fury needs me and Sam to go in and find out. Before it gets worse.”

Steve's mind was suddenly flooded with visions of fire and blood, and bright flashes of light swimming behind his eyelids. Loud cracks like thunder and the sound of a train engine echoed between his ears.

“This just in. We've received word of a manifesto released by the domestic terrorist organization claiming responsibility for the Boston train station bombing that occurred this morning. This station will not be reporting on the full transcript which was released, but the summary, reported by the authorities, states they are directly addressing Captain Sam Wilson and his partner, Sergeant James Barnes, in response to their involvement in foiling another attempted bombing by a nationalist group in London four months ago—”

The murmurs throughout the restaurant seemed to steadily grow louder. Steve could feel eyes on him and Bucky from all over the room. The café door swung open and a strong gust of wind came up the street and snuck inside. It wound its way up Steve's spine and he froze. Suddenly, there was a black hole inside his lungs. The vacuum sucking up all the air swiftly crept up the walls of his windpipe. It felt like someone was choking him, pressing their fingers down on his neck. *Hard.*

He gasped for air and clutched at his chest, thumping against it with a closed fist and letting out a deep, raspy cough. He squinted at Bucky from across the booth, but he was blurry. His eyes were beginning to water.

“Steve, *Steve*—can you hear me?” Bucky sat up and leaned over the table, reaching his hands out to cup Steve's face.

Steve frantically nodded and held both hands out in front of him, like he was signaling *I don't need your help.*

“*Bullshit*, Rogers, c'mere.” Bucky swatted his hands away and tenderly gripped him by the shoulders. He felt Bucky gently twisting him from left to right, trying to get a good look at his face.

Steve's throat felt like it was on fire. Every breath of air he managed to pull in seemed to turn into biting smoke that he was forced to swallow down into his broken lungs.

"Can't...breathe—" Steve used whatever strength he had left to force the words out, wrapping his own hands around his neck as a signal.

"Shit—hold on a second, bud. You're gonna be ok." Bucky suddenly drew back, then vaulted up out of the booth and dashed to the front of the restaurant. Steve tried to turn and follow him with his eyes but he broke out in another fit of coughs. He made eye contact with the hostess and saw her frantically whispering to one of the waitresses while she poured a glass of water.

He could hear Bucky's footsteps behind him, coming closer, and the sound of voices on the television, low but present, like an uncomfortable hum in the air that you can't escape:

"...a direct message for Captain Wilson and Sergeant Barnes..."

"...a warning... 'you can't stop us' ... 'get in our way' ... 'suffer the consequences...'"

"We are watching you."

His vision was starting to go dark around the edges, *no, wait, that's*—Bucky's shadow loomed over Steve as he slid into the booth next to him and wrapped his right arm around Steve's shoulders, pulling him close and bringing his left arm up to Steve's mouth.

"Here," he said, his voice soft and controlled. "Breathe in slow."

Steve felt him press the rescue inhaler to his lips. Bucky held down the button and Steve took in a long, deep breath, counting to five in his head.

One.

He closed his eyes.

Two.

Sam and Bucky, they were there.

Three.

They were walking away from him,

Four.

disappearing into a cloud of smoke and ash.

Five.

Communication was lost, all he could hear was static.

“Now hold it.”

Steve held the little ball of air he'd inhaled, tucked away deep inside of him, resting on top of his diaphragm. He imagined himself holding it in his hands like a ball of clay, rolling it between his fingers, compressing it down into the smallest space it could possibly take up, keeping it as close to his center as possible.

“And breathe out.”

Bucky was rubbing tight circles into the center of his back, between the bony points of his shoulder blades. Steve felt his ribcage rattling as he released the tight ball of air, his chest collapsing as it escaped. He confidently picked himself up by his sternum, as though an invisible string were attached to him, pulling his body up towards the ceiling. He tried to take the inhaler out of Bucky's grip but his hands were shaking.

“That's it. You're doing great bud, just keep breathing.”

Steve let out an annoyed sigh that came out more like a grunt (in between all the coughing and wheezing) and set his hands in his lap, focusing on counting his inhaleds and exhaleds in his head. Slowly, time began to pass again, and each breath became easier and easier until Steve could finally push the inhaler away from his face.

“Thanks, Buck,” Steve said. He let out a little cough and Bucky immediately jumped in his seat, bringing the inhaler up again. Steve gently laid a hand on his forearm. “Relax, I'm fine.” Bucky backed away slowly, hesitantly tucking the inhaler in his pants pocket.

There was a long pause between the two of them. The hostess—who had stood back while Steve was using the rescue inhaler—came over with the glass of water. She gave Bucky an apprehensive glance, to which Bucky nodded and she swiftly left them be.

The rest of the diners had returned to their own conversations. The low hum of voices from the tv still permeated the air between them like an electric charge.

Bucky opened his mouth, about to speak, when his phone buzzed again.

His mouth closed as he read the text from Fury.

“Shit, I'm sorry Stevie.” He ran his right hand back up and down Steve's back, keeping his eyes focused on the screen. “I gotta go to work.” He looked up, and when their eyes met, it took all of the strength Steve had left in him not to break.

Bucky lowered his voice and leaned in, soft and close. “You sure you gonna be ok?” He asked. Steve *knew* that tone of voice, that *I mean it, bud, I'm worried sick about you* tone, that Bucky used to whip out whenever Steve got sick and tried to hide it from him, so he wouldn't keep Bucky from living his own damn life for once.

Steve looked down into his lap and rubbed his lips together.

“Yeah, Buck, I'll be alright. Just be careful out there, ok?”

“I will, bud. Now let's get you home, alright?” He leaned down and gave Steve a tender kiss on the forehead. Steve cherished the feeling of Bucky's warm fingers tangled up in his bangs, and committed it to memory.

The click of the front door closing echoed throughout the entire house. Steve sat curled up in his chair in the sunroom, sketchpad resting on his lap. He felt the ghost of Bucky's lips pressed against him; his face, the top of his head, the bruised, bony knuckles of his hands. Everywhere except those spots felt cold and hollow.

His inhaler sat on the side table next to him. He was shivering, underneath the fuzzy blanket he was wrapped up in.

For the first time in what felt like ages, when he pressed pencil to paper, the lead immediately snapped.

An hour earlier...

"We'll be continuing our ongoing coverage of the terror attack in Boston after these messages from our sponsors—"

"Can you turn that off, please?"

Bucky didn't turn when he spoke, just kept his head down, focused on his hands folding clothes, stuffing equipment into his black, military grade, canvas duffel bag.

Steve was sitting on the edge of the bed, his tablet set down next to him. He exited out of his news app and gently pushed the device away.

A pause. Then, quietly:

"Thank you."

"Sure thing, Buck." Steve's voice tapered off as he got up and wandered into the master bathroom.

He rested his hands on the edge of the counter and his whole body slumped over the sink. He peaked up at his reflection in the mirror. He was still getting used to, *this*—being himself again, like waking up from a long dream. How quickly even he forgot: he spent most of his life as Steve Rogers, *not* Captain America. *And if you really think about it, I spent most of it completely frozen in one spot.*

He turned on the faucet and cupped his hands underneath the cold stream of water, splashing some of it onto his face and rubbing it into his skin. He peaked over his left shoulder, and saw Bucky hunched over his bag, fiddling with something. It reminded Steve of when they had gone to the café that morning, how he'd always get so small in front of him. But this was a different type of small, the kind that made Steve wish he still had the serum, so he could wrap Bucky up completely in between his arms and never let him go. He had a hard time looking at this type of small. When he turned back towards the mirror and reached up to open the cabinet, that's when the coughing

started.

Steve didn't have to turn back around to sense Bucky was moving towards him from across the room.

The coughing was thick and wet and *terrible*, buried deep down in his chest and burning his throat as it tried to come out. He banged a fist against his heart a couple of times and death-gripped the edge of the counter with his free hand. He felt a cold droplet of water slip down the side of his face, onto his chin, then fall down through his shirt, causing an enormous chill to burst up through his entire body. His eyes started to water and he shut them again, right before Bucky placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

"You alright, bud?" He'd switched to his worried voice (or more accurately, his worried about *Steve* voice). Steve opened his eyes.

"I'm—*fuck*, I'm—I'm *fine*, Buck, just—" he kept patting his chest as he struggled to take in enough air to speak.

"Do you need your inhaler again? Should I call a doctor?" Bucky already had one foot out the bathroom door when Steve turned and stopped him with a look.

He took a few more seconds to let out the last few coughs, hand pressed to his heart. "I'm *fine*, Buck. I probably just have a cold—"

"God, Steve, you know it's never just a cold." Bucky reached his right hand up and tenderly pressed it against Steve's forehead. Steve smacked it away.

"I'm not a baby anymore, Buck! I'm fine!" Bucky paused and took a step back at Steve's tone. Steve was taken aback by himself, the sound of his voice echoing against the tile. Gently, he reached out and took Bucky's hand—the one he'd just swatted away—and held it between the two of them. His voice softened. "Buck, I'm *fine*. Besides, we live in the future, and they've got all types of vaccines and antibiotics now, and we finally have insurance to cover all of it. So don't waste your time worrying about me all day, old man."

Bucky smiled down at him, a small smile, but a good one. Steve couldn't help but smile back, even if Bucky's flesh hand felt cold in his.

Suddenly, a buzz came from the bedroom.

Then another.

Bucky's smile fell.

"I've gotta go to work."

And so did Steve's.

Steve worried the edge of the drawing paper between his chapped fingertips. He could still taste the chalkiness of all the pills he'd swallowed, after Bucky had swiftly left the bathroom and finished packing. He didn't like how the taste sat at the back of his throat for so long. *A reminder*

of who I really am.

After those text messages, as was always the case, the bubble burst, and Bucky was on his way back to work. Steve barely even had time to say goodbye, let alone admit to Bucky that he hadn't gotten his flu shot yet. With the way the news anchors were talking, it just hadn't seemed like the right moment. And besides, Steve knew himself better than anyone, and after a hundred years, he was pretty sure he knew when he *just* had a cold. Nothing to worry about.

The old grandfather clock Pepper had gifted them—a relic of Howard's estate—ticked along stoically in the corner of the sunroom. Steve sat back further into his chair and watched the sun move across the sky at the edge of the garden. He spent the rest of the morning slipping in and out of sleep, thinking of ideas for his sketchbook but never actually starting anything, listing out errands in his head; *groceries, cleaning, charity auction, therapy...* Sometimes, when he drifted off, and the sun would peak through the old glass windowpanes and sneak under his eyelids, he'd see the bright lights and smoke of machines. He'd hear whirring and yelling and dress shoes squeaking, as men in white coats ran across sterile tile. Then he'd feel a press of a needle in his arm, and he'd wake up.

As the clock struck two, Steve finally came up from out of his haze and went to work. Go figure, it took Steve actually retiring to realize how stressful being a homemaker could be. Now that he was actually living in a *home*—and not on a quinjet or in an army barracks—he knew how different it felt when it was dirty or clean—*empty or full*. When he'd been an Avenger, his Brooklyn apartment had been decorated for him by SHIELD. It had always felt cold and impersonal, like they'd plucked it out of a museum display about him. Now that he had the time and money to furnish his own place, *his and Bucky's*, he took as much pride in it as he did any of his other work. Which, coincidentally, meant chores, even when he felt a little off.

He found himself in the guest bedroom, changing the sheets and dusting the furniture. After fluffing one of the pillows, he stopped to catch his breath and wipe a bit of sweat off his brow. He rested his hands on his hips and turned to look at the portrait of Nat hung on the opposite side of the room. The guest bedroom wasn't used too often, so Steve figured it could be her room, in its own way.

He sighed and picked up the duster resting on the bedside table, walking over to the old wooden dresser that sat below the painting. When he kicked the dust up into the air, he watched it float on the beam of light coming in through the window, gently caressing the soft edges of her face. Steve reached up and rested a hand on the frame.

Suddenly, his eyes were watering again, and he felt a damp cloud forming in his lungs. He clutched at the edge of the dresser and leaned over it as he heaved out another round of thick, watery coughs. He couldn't tell if it was the light hitting him, but he felt himself suddenly getting very warm.

Damn dusty old house. Steve stumbled his way down the hall towards the master bedroom, unceremoniously dropping the duster somewhere along the way. He wondered to himself if perhaps his own insides were coated with a layer of dust too.

He shuffled into the bathroom, passing by the bed—and the faint indentation left in the comforter by Bucky's heavy duffel bag. He fumbled around in the drawers underneath the sink, listening to

the plastic pill bottles rattling together, until he found some old vitamin C tablets, the label halfway scrubbed off the side. His hands shook as he cracked the lid open, and a couple of the chalky orange tablets fell into the sink. He set the bottle down and scrubbed his eyes. When he glanced back up at himself in the mirror, he saw a ghost.

The grandfather clock struck 2:30. With the taste of artificial citrus stuck to the back of his tongue, he made his way down the stairs, pulled on his coat and boots, and shoved his aching body out the door.

The world outside was frozen over. Everything seemed to have been stretched farther apart than normal, including the people. The sidewalks were barren. Steve trudged along with the wind scratching at his cheeks and nose. He grumbled as he adjusted his scarf so it covered more of his face. The sharp air sliced through the old ratty coat that he refused to get rid of, right through to his skin. He could feel goosebumps prickling up his arms inside of his sleeves.

When he reached for the door to Dr. Johnson's office, his hands were still shaking.

"Hello, Mr. Rogers," The receptionist looked up from whatever she was typing and smiled at him. "If you have a seat, Dr. Johnson will be right with you."

"Thank you," Steve muttered, smiling back. He stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and sat himself down gently in one of the reception chairs. His shoulders burned with a dull ache as he shifted in his seat. He glanced around the quaint waiting room. Everything was in its usual place; the clock ticking away on the far wall, the months-old magazines spread across the coffee table, and the small flat-screen television sitting on a side table tucked away in the corner. The volume was on low, but it was audible (even with Steve's bad ear). They were showing the news.

"We're continuing our coverage of the terrorist attack at Boston South Station today. Captain America and his team were on the scene earlier this morning, accompanied by local law enforcement. According to a report released by Boston PD officials, Captain Wilson and Sergeant Barnes were searching for evidence leading to the capture and arrest of members of a white nationalist terrorist cell based in Upstate New York."

Steve took his hands out of his pockets and wrung them together in his lap. His right leg bounced in his seat.

"This is the first major attack attributed to the group—whose name will not be publicized by this network—but their online presence is allegedly much larger, with their official website touting membership from all across the United States. Their recently updated manifesto includes graphic descriptions of plans to target Captain Wilson and Sergeant Barnes directly. In a statement made to reporters on the scene, Wilson said he and Barnes felt a responsibility to respond to the attack, in order to protect those who were affected by it, and to prevent the spread of further violence—"

A creaking sound—*almost like a piece of metal, twisting and breaking*—echoed between Steve’s ears.

“Steven?” Dr. Johnson peaked her head out of her office. *It was just the door.* “Come on in.” She motioned towards herself, smiling softly.

Steve stood up quickly, wiping his hands on the front of his pants. “Thank you, Doctor.” He sat back down, this time inside her office, while she shut the door behind him.

“Tell me how you’re feeling today, Steve.” Her voice was light and warm.

He fidgeted in his chair. “Uh, I’m alright I guess.” He coughed. “Been feeling a little sick recently.”

“Oh really? She perched herself on the edge of her desk. “And how long has that been going on?”

“Since this morning.”

She looked him up and down. Steve tried not to give away anything with his face as he felt her analyzing him with her eyes. He coughed again.

“Do you have a fever?”

He reached around and scratched the back of his neck. “Uh, I don’t know... Bucky tried to check earlier, before he left for work.”

“I see...” She took out her notebook. “So he’s concerned as well?”

Steve straightened up a little bit. “Well I wouldn’t say *I’m* concerned...”

“Well why not?” She set her paper down and folded her hands delicately in her lap.

He shrugged. “Well, I know myself pretty well, and I used to get sick a lot, y’know, back in the forties, but now—” He broke into another bout of coughs. She pursed her lips and waited until he was done before she spoke again.

“I used to be a medical doctor, Steven. Would you mind if I go ahead and check for you?”

His leg started bouncing again. “Oh! Uh, that won’t be necessary, Doctor, but thank you for offering—”

“Oh no, Steven I’m not offering.” She was already behind her desk rummaging through one of her drawers. “I feel as though it would be *unethical* to continue our session if I knew you required immediate medical attention.”

Steve could sense the sly humor in her voice, but he was not amused. While she was sticking the thermometer in his ear, he stared out the window at the brick building across the street, and listened to the sounds of cars driving past and the wind rushing up and down the avenues.

His temperature was holding at 100 degrees. Dr. Johnson gave him a referral to a walk-in clinic in his neighborhood and sent him on his way.

“...graphic depictions of plans to target Captain Wilson and Sergeant Barnes directly—” The news anchor’s words were still banging around in Steve’s head as he walked, arms wrapped around himself in a feeble attempt to keep warm. “Wilson and Barnes felt a responsibility—” He shook his head and grumbled. He couldn’t be mad—*of course* he couldn’t! He knew exactly how they felt. It wasn’t that long ago that he’d stood in their shoes, held the mantle, fought to protect people. But now, the list of people Steve needed to protect was much shorter.

The wind had picked up since he'd last been outside. He sneezed and it got caught on the edge of his scarf. The damp material quickly began forming gross, snotty crystals that pressed up against his face and only brought the cold in closer. The sharp breeze blew right through him, trying to pick him up off the empty sidewalk like a kite. He watched a few yellow cabs drive by, and considered flagging one down, but then, across the street, something caught his eye.

It was a medium sized corner bodega, like any other in the city. A young couple was just leaving, plastic bag in hand. The woman reached up to the man and folded his scarf around his neck a second time, then rested her palms on his jacket lapel. He looked down at her and smiled, then leaned in and gave her a peck on the cheek.

C'mon girls, they're playing our song...

As they walked down the sidewalk hand in hand, Steve had made up his mind.

He left the store about ten minutes later, headed out with his own bag of goodies in his shaky, frostbitten hands; home remedies like lemon, turmeric, and ginger, some snacks, some produce—who needed the walk in clinic, anyways? Steve had a life at home, he had work to do, groceries to put away, responsibilities of his own. So that’s where he was headed.

He made it just past the front door.

Levels at 100 percent...serum infusion...will cause...immediate cellular change....

“Steve, Steve—”

Every bone in his body seemed to creak and groan as his eyes fluttered open, his body shifting beneath the blanket. A dull, pulsating pain emanated from somewhere on the right side of his head. He felt so *heavy*.

“Steve, are you awake, pal? Can you hear me?”

He turned his head over his right shoulder and peered out the window. The sun was setting over the harbor, the metal of the fire escape reflecting the light into the small bedroom. He could barely make out the spot behind the yellowed curtain where the wallpaper was peeling. He turned his head and his eyes followed his outstretched arm. His left hand was limp at his side. Someone else’s hand was holding it.

“Hey, pal.” Bucky was smiling down at him. His hair was short, his face bare. “You took quite the tumble today, huh?”

Steve smiled back. “Yeah,” he chuckled. “Those punks didn’t know what hit em.” His voice was soft and scratchy.

Bucky reached over Steve with his right hand and gently pushed his hair back from his forehead. Then he cupped his cheek, slowly rubbing his thumb back and forth. His left hand stayed entwined with Steve’s, warm and rough with calluses.

“You had me worried sick, bud.” Bucky let out a brief sigh. “Don’t go running around pickin’ fights without me anymore, alright?”

Steve laughed, and he felt a pinch in his chest. “Sure thing, Buck. I know how much you love to dance.”

Bucky took his hand away and Steve’s whole body went cold.

“Why don’t you get some rest, bud.”

As he started walking, Steve reached his hand out to try and stop him, but he couldn’t manage to sit himself up straight.

“Bucky, wait—”

The bedroom door creaked open and a blinding white light shone through it. Steve’s vision was going blurry. He watched as Bucky stepped into the light, and he heard echoes of gunshots and canon fire in the distance.

“Please! Come back...”

Serum infusion...beginning in 5...4...3...2...

“STEVE! Oh, Steve, thank god!”

His vision was becoming clearer. He felt a throbbing in his temple, and a sharp pain deep inside his chest. Shadows and splotches of light were dancing around the room together. He could hear the grandfather clock off in the distance as it struck: it was five o’clock.

He also heard the clanging of cups hastily being set down, and feet shuffling across the floor towards the bed.

And then there was Bucky, all six feet, 200-something pounds of him, leaning over the bed, his hair hanging down over his face. There he was, all in one piece. *Thank god.*

He reached across the bed and picked the thermometer up off the bedside table.

“Open.”

Steve let his mouth fall open and Bucky proceeded to take his temperature. He hummed as his lips closed around the cold metal and plastic. Bucky looked down at him and their eyes met. His vision tunneled, and all of the warmth inside of their bodies filled up the air between them. Bucky smiled.

Steve smiled back. The larger man reached down and cupped Steve's cheek with his left hand, rubbing his thumb tenderly back and forth below his eye. Steve leaned into the touch, holding eye contact with him as he turned his head and placed a soft kiss on Bucky's metal palm. He knew that Bucky could feel it.

He felt the thermometer slide back out from between his lips. "Hmm... looks like your fever hasn't gone down..." Bucky pursed his lips as he studied the readout closely. "But it hasn't gone up either, so that's a good sign."

Steve looked around. He was in their master bedroom, in the their brownstone in Brooklyn, bundled up in the blankets in a t-shirt and sweatpants, not the clothes he'd gone out in. The last thing he remembered was digging for keys in his pocket with frostbitten fingers.

"What happened?" He asked.

Bucky sat up, placing a hand on Steve's leg and rubbing gently. "Pepper called Nick Fury, told him you were supposed to talk to her about some art auction, and that you weren't answering your phone. She got worried."

"So...you came back?"

Bucky sighed. "Nick called me, asked me if it was normal for you to not answer your phone like that. I told him to send a quinjet to Buffalo, ASAP. I came home, found you passed out in the foyer with your groceries all over the floor, runnin' a hundred-degree fever."

Steve sat up abruptly, causing a fit of coughs in the process. Bucky held onto his shoulders and waited for him to finish.

When he was done spluttering, he spoke, his voice scratchy. "Is Sam alright?"

"Oh, Sam? Yeah he's fine."

"Then why aren't you out there with him?"

Bucky scoffed. "Cuz you were passed out on the living room floor, dumbass!"

"But I'm fine, Buck! I can take care of myself! What about the mission?"

"Some things are more important than the mission, Steve."

Steve was taken aback. He moved away from Bucky slightly and his back thumped up against the headboard.

"But—but they *hurt* people, Buck! Are those people's lives worth any less than mine?"

Bucky looked back at him, confused. "No, no, Stevie of course not." He leaned in and grabbed both of Steve's hands, holding them together in his lap. "It's just—" he sighed again and looked away. "I don't wanna live my life constantly fighting, just 'cuz there's people out there who don't like who I work with, or who I go home to, y'know? That's what they want at the end of the day, Steve, a fight. And when I got that phone call from Nick today—" Steve could see Bucky's bright blue eyes starting to glisten in the low light. "All of a sudden, I had to decide what's more important to me, and in *this* moment, right now, it's you. Alright, pal? It'll always be you. No matter what."

He leaned down and gave Steve a gentle kiss on the forehead.

Steve felt his own eyes begin to water.

He chuckled softly. “Y’know, Buck, I can get by just fine on my own—”

“Don’t make me say it, punk.”

They both laughed.

“Now, let’s get you in the tub, huh?”

Steve remembered how Bucky always used to give him a bath when he was sick. It was something his ma had done for him when he was little, and Bucky had *insisted* on continuing the tradition in her absence. The fact that almost a hundred years had passed was no exception to that rule.

Bucky hoisted him up out of the bed, carefully cradling him in his arms, a big, warm hand resting on the center of his back. Steve always protested this part the most—

I’m not a baby, Buck!

Sure sure, whatever, pal...

—but he secretly liked it and hoped he would never stop doing it. He wrapped his arms around Bucky’s neck and his legs around Bucky’s waist, and held on as he watched the bed get farther away. Once they were in the bathroom, Steve noticed the tub was already full, and that the water smelled like roses and lavender. Bucky gently sat him down on the closed toilet seat and knelt down in front of the tub, sticking his fingers in the water to test the temperature.

“You’re lucky we live in the future now, with that fancy tankless heater thing downstairs? Otherwise, this would *definitely* be cold and you’d be shit outta luck, kid.”

Steve laughed again and stuck his arms out above his head. Bucky stripped him slowly. First came his shirt, pulled over his head (he always seemed to love it when it messed up Steve’s hair). Then, Bucky helped him stand and carefully slipped Steve’s sweatpants and briefs off, leaving them in a messy pile on the floor. Steve stood there and watched as Bucky took off his own clothes and unceremoniously added them to the pile.

Bucky turned around, completely nude, and hoisted Steve back up into his arms again before stepping one foot into the tub, then the other, and finally sitting the both of them down with Steve positioned in his lap, his back resting against Bucky’s front. He heard Bucky let out a deep sigh as the warm water hit his skin. Steve leaned into Bucky’s chest and relaxed as well, tucking his head into the crook of Bucky’s neck. For the first time in a long while, the other man’s skin felt cold.

“God, you don’t know how scared I was when I found you earlier.”

Bucky’s voice was soft and low. Steve felt something in his chest tighten up, and he reflexively rubbed a hand against his knee where it poked out above the water.

“I’m sorry, Buck,” he said quietly. “Didn’t mean to scare you like that.”

“Ahh... it’s all right, pal. I know you worry about me too.” Bucky reached his own hand around and rested it on top of Steve’s knee.

They fell into a comfortable silence. The warm bath and the aroma of lavender oil and rosewater settled deep inside of Steve, and the feeling of Bucky's chest steadily rising and falling eventually lulled him to sleep.

When he woke up, he was being hoisted back out of the water and wrapped up in several giant, white fluffy bath towels. He didn't talk as Bucky carefully toweled him off, letting himself enjoy the feeling of the soft fabric being gently rubbed against his skin and hair by Buck's steady hands. When he finished, he patted Steve gently on his sides.

"Stay put for a minute, alright? I'm gonna go change the sheets real quick."

Steve watched as Bucky left the bathroom and started quickly tearing the sheets off the bed. He sat there for a moment as Bucky worked, looking down at his wrinkly toes. His legs weren't nearly as long as they used to be, and it was easier to kick them while he was sitting. He felt a little bead of water roll down a strand of his hair and drop onto the bridge of his nose.

When he looked back up, Bucky was gone. He stood and waddled to the doorway leading into the bedroom, just in time to see Bucky coming back in with a laundry basket in hand.

"Thought you might want some fresh sheets when you woke up." Steve watched with a smile plastered to his face as Bucky carefully replaced the bed covering, folding the corners of the flat sheet and fluffing the pillows. He could feel the warmth radiating off the linen from across the room.

When Bucky was finished, he came over to Steve and offered him his hand. Steve gladly took it, and was led to the edge of the bed and pushed onto it. As Bucky helped button him into his freshly washed PJs (the fancy ones, that Pepper had gotten him) he took in the smell of dryer sheets and Bucky's wet hair hanging down over his face. It smelled like home.

Soon he was tucked back into bed, sitting up against the headboard while Bucky fiddled with a tray of food on the other side of the room.

"I had to, uh—I had to reheat the tea, so, uh, sorry if it doesn't taste right." He was fiddling with a stirring spoon. "Wanted to make sure it was hot enough so the honey could dissolve." He spun around and brought over the dinner tray, carefully placing it on the bed next to Steve. Then, he cleared his throat and began gesturing at the different food items with his hands, like some kind of fancy restaurant waiter. "Here, we have some lemon and ginger tea, made to order from the ingredients you spilled all over the floor." Steve brought his hand up to his mouth as he chuckled. "—And here you'll see some NyQuil, which you're taking whether you like it or not. And finally, over here, we have a *homemade* noodle soup in an organic chicken broth, served in a whole wheat —"

"That's not homemade, Buck! You bought it from Panera Bread!"

Bucky gasped and dramatically brought his hand to his chest. "I'm *wounded*, Rogers. And to think I went to the trouble of memorizing your order—"

"Postmates has it saved on the app, Buck."

Bucky paused. Steve watched a smile slowly creep up onto his face before he pounced onto Steve, smothering him with face kisses.

"Buck, stop! You'll spill the food!" Steve giggled as the onslaught continued, but Bucky eventually pulled back and smiled down at Steve, his hands resting on Steve's waist as he

straddled him.

“You still mad at me?” His voice was low and tender. It was the same voice Steve had heard him use on beautiful dames countless times when they were younger.

Steve shook his head. “No, Buck, I’m just happy you’re here.”

“Well that’s good, cuz I figured if I made the soup myself you’d get even sicker.”

“Buck!” Steve laughed and swatted at his head. Bucky leaned down and began trailing a line of soft kisses along Steve’s jaw and down his neck. Steve relaxed into the pillows and let him do it.

“Speaking of...getting sick...” He interjected between each kiss, as Steve tangled his fingers in his hair, “Doctors appointment...10am...tomorrow—”

“*Buck!* Way to kill the mood!”

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I will see them when I leave here

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/26401597) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/26401597>.

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I will see them when I leave here

by [ageofgeek](#)

Summary

Tony Snaps the gauntlet, and he dies. At least, he thinks he does. Afterwards, he finds himself in an awfully familiar place, with a very familiar person.

(otherwise known as, "we should've seen Yinsen one last time in the MCU").

Notes

I'm a million years late to the Endgame fix-it fic game, but I had written this almost immediately after the movie came out and just never got around to posting it. Hope you enjoy!

Chapter 1

Tony's eyes closed, and when he opened them, he was in a depressingly familiar cave. He blinked, Pepper's face streaked with tears and a smile still burned into his eyelids. "*You can rest now,*" she had whispered. *Didn't know that resting meant waking up in this goddamned cave in Afghanistan*, he thought bitterly to himself.

He was lying on a cot that was pushed into the corner, spare missile parts and sheets of paper scattered on the ground. His heart skipped a beat when he realized, *oh no, the car battery* – but his thoughts stopped in their tracks when he realized that he was wearing a pair of jeans and one of his AC/DC shirts. There was no battery, no jumble of wires leading into his chest – just the nanotech casing that had housed his most recent suit. Looking at his arm, Tony realized that he wasn't hurt – the unbelievable, almost unbearable pain of the infinity gauntlet was gone.

"Oh shit," he muttered, swallowing. "I'm dead, aren't I? Oh shit, shit, no, Pep, wait—"

"Calm down, Mr. Stark," a voice echoed to his right, and Tony was struck by instant *déjà vu*. For a second, he couldn't place the voice – it was a man, he was sure of that much, and his words had a soothing lilt to them. At first, he thought it was Bruce – *don't tell me he died, too* – but the man's accent was noticeably different.

"What, you do not remember me?" The voice asked, still not attached to a body that Tony could see. "Has it really been so long?"

A shadow passed to Tony's left, and he jumped off of the cot, only to see a small man with wire-rimmed glasses appear in front of him. Tony's brain screeched to a halt, and he could do nothing but stare at the smiling scientist for several moments.

"...Yinsen?"

Yinsen's smile widened. "Really, that took you longer than I thought it would. I'm rather offended."

Tony could feel his heart beating wildly in his chest, and he grinned wildly at Yinsen before pulling him into a hug. "I don't know, it's been a while since I've heard your voice, old man."

"Old man?" Yinsen asked, chuckling as he patted Tony on the back. "You are now older than I am, Stark, and to tell you the truth, you're beginning to look like it."

The reminder of Yinsen's untimely death pulled at Tony's heart, and he hugged the man tighter. "Why did you do that?" He murmured. "Why didn't you follow the plan?"

"I could ask the same of you, Tony," Yinsen said, pulling back and looking at him with a sad mixture of amusement and disappointment that only Yinsen and Bruce could pull off. "You sacrificed yourself for the whole universe. Is it so surprising that I sacrificed myself for you?"

"Yeah, actually, it is," Tony said, pointedly not touching the fact that, *oh yeah, he was dead too*, with a ten foot pole. "I didn't deserve it. Not then, and probably not now."

"Do you still really think that that is true? Come now, Stark. For fifteen years, you have struggled, suffered...broken yourself for the world. Did you really think that I would be disappointed in you?" Yinsen smiled sadly, putting a gentle hand on Tony's shoulder. "Did you really think that you had wasted your life?"

“Of course not,” Tony quickly denied. “You gave me fifteen more years - those were fifteen more years than I thought I’d have. And I tried to do what I thought was right, but—”

“And what did you gain in those fifteen years?” Yinsen interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

Tony stopped and thought about Pepper and Rhodey and Morgan - oh God, his daughter, his little girl - and Peter and Happy and May, and yeah, the Avengers: Bruce, Clint, Thor, Natasha, even Steve at the end. “A family. I got a family.”

Yinsen smiled again, and Tony got the feeling that that had been the correct answer. “Good.”

He sat down on the cot that Tony had vacated and patted the space next to him. “Now sit down and tell me about them.”

“No. No, Tony, no, not you. Not you too,” Steve whispered, broken and with tears streaming down his face. His body ached from the battle, but it was nothing compared to seeing Tony’s burnt and crippled body, cradled by a tearful Pepper and a crying Spider-Man.

The Iron Man gauntlet, still sparkling with the power of all six infinity stones, lay on the ground several feet away. Some might try to stop him - Strange, Danvers, maybe even Thor - so he’d have to be fast.

Steve Rogers wasn’t going to lose another friend today. Not to Thanos. And not to these stones.

“So, is this heaven? Because honestly, I didn’t expect to be back here again - that was kind of a rude awakening.”

“This is...an in-between space,” Yinsen responded, shrugging when Tony gave him a doubtful look. “I knew it as Barzakh. Others know it by other names: hamistagan, Bardo...Limbo, for Westerners.”

Tony continued looking doubtfully at him. Yinsen sighed. “Fine, then you may also view it as an extradimensional space between two realms corresponding to the soul and power stones.”

“...Hmm.” Tony hummed, looking around at the cave. “So, do I wait here for judgment or something? I mean, what do I even do here? Because spending the rest of eternity in this place sounds pretty boring.”

“You are here because it is here that you were born,” Yinsen answered, picking up a sheet of paper from beneath their feet and holding it up to the light. Tony was surprised to see that it was one of his original sketches of the Iron Man suit, broken into pieces to ensure that their captors never saw the whole picture. “Not literally born, of course - you were born in New York Presbyterian Hospital at 2:34 in the morning on May 29th, 1970—” Tony blinked at that, but didn’t interrupt “—but it is here that you were...spiritually born, so to speak.”

“‘Spiritually born’?” Tony asked skeptically, “Alright, Joel Osteen, I’ll bite - how was I ‘spiritually born’?”

“You said it yourself, or do you not remember?” Yinsen chuckled slightly as he walked over to a hot plate and turned it on. “‘Never has a greater Phoenix metaphor been personified in human history’?”

Tony winced at that. “Okay, touché, but to be fair, I was dying when I made that speech.”

“And you were dying when you snapped your fingers a few moments ago,” Yinsen retorted, placing a kettle on the hot plate. “The man who said that - the man who sacrificed himself for the entire universe - *that* man was born in this cave. That man,” he paused, turning to look Tony in the eye, “is the one who escaped here in a flying suit of armor and never looked back.”

This time, Tony outright flinched, looking down so he didn't have to look Yinsen in the eye. “I came back,” he murmured, feeling guilt well up in his chest. “I tried to find your body, I swear, but the fire burned the entire camp down...”

“That's not what I meant, Stark,” Yinsen sighed, turning fully towards him. “I don't blame you for escaping - I do not blame you at all. I am saying that I am proud to have given my life to save yours. You have done more as Iron Man - more as Tony Stark - than I ever could have imagined. You have given my death meaning.

“I told you,” he continued, “that my family had died at the hands of the Ten Rings. That was true. But I had other family - friends, relatives, and colleagues - people who I wanted to protect. You protected them.” Tony opened his mouth to protest, but Yinsen stopped him. “You protected them when you flew a nuclear missile into the wormhole in New York. You protected them when you helped defeat Ultron. And you protected them just minutes ago, when you gave your life for the universe.”

“You made mistakes, yes,” Yinsen continued, smiling sadly at the tears that had welled up in Tony's eyes. “Sometimes very big mistakes. But your heart was always in the right place. You were always doing what you thought was right. You are a hero, Stark. You are a hero now, and you were a hero when you came out of this cave.”

Tony sniffled, trying to swallow over the lump in his throat. This conversation was one that he had thought about having for years. He had asked himself over and over again if Yinsen would be proud of him. If Yinsen would have regretted giving his life for him. In some ways, Yinsen's opinion had mattered infinitely more to Tony than his own father's opinion of him. So to have him so clearly say that he was a hero, that he had deserved to survive captivity in Afghanistan? It was more than he had ever hoped to have.

“Um, thanks,” Tony said after several moments of silence, looking up to see Yinsen now sitting at the table and pouring tea. “I...I don't really know what to say...”

“You don't have to say anything, Stark,” the other man responded, nudging a cup of tea in front of the chair adjacent to him. “Although I will insist that you sit down and have some tea with me. It may be the last chance that we get to talk for a long while.”

Tony got up from the cot and obediently sat down next to Yinsen, picking up the cup and taking a sip before realizing what he had just said. “What do you mean, it might be the last chance?” Tony asked, glancing frantically over at Yinsen. “Are you going somewhere? I'm dead, you're dead, we should be able to talk! This is bullshit, who do I have to talk to about this-?”

“Tony,” Yinsen interrupted, laughing and putting a stop to Tony's slightly panicked babbling. “Tony, it is not me who may be going somewhere. Your life was taken by the infinity stones, yes?” When Tony hesitantly nodded, Yinsen continued, “Then the infinity stones may grant you life again.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony asked, even more panicked than before. “Shit, is Thanos still alive? Who the hell is using the stones?”

“Captain Rogers is,” Yinsen responded, taking a calm sip of his tea. “Or, at least, he will be.”

Peter's wails echoed in his ears, but his enhanced hearing could even pick up Pepper's quiet sniffing and Rhodes' muffled sobs. They didn't deserve this. Tony didn't deserve this. He deserved to live a long and happy life, with his daughter, wife, family, and friends.

Now that he was gone, Steve could *see* Tony Stark so clearly: despite his arrogant façade, despite his rough edges, Tony had given everything he had for the world. He had laid down on the wire and let the entire universe crawl over him. He had fought so hard and so long, and he deserved to be happy. He deserved to rest, and not in the way that Pepper had whispered to him as he lay dying. He deserved *life*.

It was that thought that propelled him forward, dropping his broken shield and Mjolnir and rushing towards the gauntlet. After a second, he heard Thor shout his name, but he ignored him. As he reached the stones, he felt a hot, orange rope wrap around his waist and restrain him - Strange's magic, he thought to himself - but he summoned his last bit of physical strength and broke free.

Scrambling to pick up the gauntlet, he didn't slip it on, but instead, pried one stone off of it. He couldn't wield all six infinity stones, but he could wield one. And one was all he needed.

"Are you fucking serious?!" Tony asked incredulously, jumping up from his seat and beginning to pace around the room anxiously. "He's using the stones? Right now? Fuck, you have to stop him! What if he fucks it up? What if he brings back Thanos instead of me? What if he brings back a not-me?! I don't want to be in a 'Pet Sematary' situation here, Yinsen, ahh, shit, SHIT--"

"Calm down, Stark." Yinsen took a small sip of his tea as Tony flailed. "You have too little faith in your teammates. Do you think that Captain Rogers does not have the will to wield the stones?"

"Doesn't have the will?" Tony scoffed. "No, that's the exact opposite of what I think. I think he has too much fucking will. I think he's going to bring back every single thing that died on that battlefield, including the bad guys."

"I don't think you have to worry about that," Yinsen replied. "The 'bad guys' already know their place. You are here and not elsewhere because your fate is still in flux."

"Are you saying that Cap is going to bring me back to life?" Tony asked, still very panicked at the idea.

"Do you want to be brought back to life?" Yinsen asked in return, and Tony paused at that. Did he want to go back? Pepper had said that he could rest now, that they would be okay without him. But he knew her better than anyone else - even with his eyes hazy and filled with tears and soot, he could see how strong she was trying to be, how she was trying to let him go but desperately didn't want to.

He thought about Morgan, his little girl who he had fought so hard to be able to save, and he thought about Pepper being a widow, a single mom, trying to run a company and raise a daughter at the same time. The thought made his chest hurt. He had always tried to be better to Morgan than Howard had been to him. He had always told Morgan that he loved her, and he always tried to support her and encourage her. But if he stayed dead...how different would he and Howard be? Yeah, Morgan would know for sure that her dad had loved her, but it wouldn't change the fact that he was gone. And Tony intimately knew what that felt like. Tony would never be able to see her grow up - never be able to encourage her in projects that didn't involve macaroni and glue or papier maché.

He swallowed heavily, but forced himself to think beyond Morgan, to a boy who may as well be his son. Peter. He had just gotten Peter back. It was the memory of Peter that had pushed him to look into Lang's crazy time travel idea, and Peter was the first of the Dusted that Tony saw on that battlefield. The kid had already lost so much - first his parents, then his uncle - he didn't deserve to lose another dad, did he? (Did Tony deserve to lose another child? He thought about JARVIS and Vision, and even Ultron, however misguided he was).

Once he began thinking about Peter, he couldn't stop thinking about everyone else. Rhodey - his best friend, his anchor, his brother - and how they had lost and found each other again and again. If Tony died... God, would he keep looking? Tony knew how stubborn James Rhodes was, and despite all evidence to the contrary, he knew that Rhodey would never give up hope for Tony, as long as he lived.

He thought about the Avengers. Clint, who had only recently come back to them after losing his entire family. Bruce, who Tony had (to his shame) ignored for the past 5 years after the man decided to embrace himself to become a hybrid Hulk scientist. Thor, who Tony had also ignored and let wallow in his own guilt and fear - Thor, who had lost almost everything. Natasha, who had shouldered the weight of the Avengers after the Snap, only to give her life in one final act of sacrifice. And finally, Steve. Steve, who had never moved on, not from the Snap, not from Barnes, not from his time in the ice. Steve, who never stopped fighting. Steve, who tried so hard and yet so often came up short (*I said we'd lose, and you said we'd do that together too*).

But then he thought of other memories. He thought of Clint keeping him company in the workshop after Ultron, bringing pizza and beer and shitty B-movies to keep his mind occupied. He thought of Bruce and him tinkering in the lab, both in their own worlds but still aware of each other to be able to wordlessly pass wrenches and holograms between them. He thought of Thor playing Mario Kart at obscene hours of the night, whose laughter shook the walls of the compound and never failed to make Tony laugh in return. He thought of Natasha, and how despite their rough start, he felt perfectly safe and happy curling his head on her lap as they planned team bonding exercises and time travel alike. And lastly, he thought of Steve, and how Tony's stomach had fluttered embarrassingly the first time that he had called him "Tony" instead of "Stark." How they had worked their way through every shitty diner in Brooklyn when their nightmares had kept them up. How Steve had listened to the playlists that Tony had put together for him on repeat (Sam had instilled a love for Marvin Gaye in the captain, but Steve's love of Queen was all Tony). How he had come down to the workshop and shyly apologized for the things he had said on the Helicarrier, how he had said that Tony wasn't just a man in a suit, that he was an Avenger. And Tony remembered the exact moment that he had stopped seeing Steve as the propaganda poster-boy that his dad had never shut up about, and started seeing him as an insecure and stubborn man out of time who only wanted a home.

And suddenly, it wasn't just the original Avengers that he was thinking about, but the extended team that had been forged out of necessity and fear and a sense of belonging. He thought about Sam, Wanda, and Vision; about the Wakandans, T'Challa, Shuri, and Okoye; about Strange and Wong; about the Guardians - assholes though they were - and spending endless days and weeks on that ship with Nebula after watching Quill, Drax, and Mantis fade away into ash; and about the newest addition to their group, Carol Danvers, who had appeared like a goddamn avenging angel to save him on the Benatar, and to save them all again during the battle against Thanos. He thought of Scott Lang, an idiot who turned out to be the linchpin of this entire plan, and how he had fought so hard to be able to see his family again. And finally, he thought of Nick Fury, who appeared in the shadows of his Malibu mansion like a Bond villain fifteen years ago; Nick Fury, who thought of himself as a cynic, and yet believed enough in heroes to form the Avengers.

All of these people - all of these lives that he had touched - he would miss all of them. And for the

first time, Tony knew that they would miss him. Suddenly, he could see his own funeral as if it was already happening: people crying and dressed in black, maybe as it rained, as he was buried in a grave next to his parents. They didn't deserve that.

"I do," Tony whispered, answering Yinsen's question. "I want to live."

Yinsen smiled.

"Captain Rogers, don't-!"

Steve could hear Strange shouting at him, but he ignored him. He grasped the gauntlet desperately and took the soul stone out of its casing. The stone came to him easily, as if it wanted him to take it.

You have lost much, it whispered. *So many of your loved ones rest within our walls...tell us... which shall we release...? We can give them back to you...for a price...*

Sarah Rogers?

Margaret Carter?

Howard Stark?

...Natalia Romanova...?

Their names floated in his mind, and God, for a moment, he wanted, desperately, to give them life - life that they all deserved. But no. Only one would return today. Steve would only risk one.

Anthony Stark. Give me back Anthony Stark. You took him from us. And now?

You're going to give him back.

Tony turned around and looked at the door that led outside. He could have sworn that he had heard Steve's voice from the other side of it. "Cap?"

Give him back. I'm not gonna ask a second time.

"What's happening?" Tony asked Yinsen, running over to the steel door and trying to see through the window. But all he could see was an orange haze, and an endless, still pool of water. "What the hell is this place...?"

We require a sacrifice-

We've sacrificed more than enough to you today! I told you to bring him back!

"It won't be long now," Yinsen murmured, smiling sadly. "Stark, will we part ways again without saying goodbye?"

Tony turned back to the other man and grabbed his arm desperately. "No, no, Yinsen, come with me! You can come too-"

"You know that that's not how this works," the doctor chided gently, grasping Tony's hand. "My place is here, and your place is out there, for many years to come."

“You have been given another chance at life,” he continued, “and this time, your life will be your own. You no longer belong to the world, Tony. Now, you belong to yourself.”

The tears that had begun to pool in Tony’s eyes slowly began to drip down his face. “Thank you,” he whispered, lurching forward and hugging Yinsen one last time. “Thank you, Yinsen.”

“No, Tony...

“Thank you .”

Steve heard screaming as fiery pain shot up his arm, a pain so hot that it became numbing. Distantly, he recognized the voice as his own, but he couldn’t stop himself. All he could think about was Tony.

The stone was resisting, now that it knew that he wouldn’t give it a sacrifice. Not him, not Tony, and not anyone else. This stone had already taken Natasha, and Nebula’s sister, and half of the goddamn universe. He wouldn’t give it anyone else.

We do not trade lives, Captain, the ghost of Vision whispered in his head, and he clung to that memory in the Wakandan forest with everything he had. He showed it to the soul stone. *See? See this?! We don’t trade lives. We won’t play your games anymore.*

He thought about all of the sacrifices they had already been forced to make. Clint’s face when they all returned from their missions and Nat wasn’t with him. Nebula’s eyes when she explained what her father did to her sister on Vormir. Bucky, Wanda, Sam - all of them looking so scared as they faded away into dust. Tony’s broken expression when he stumbled off of the ship five years ago and lurched into Steve’s arms, saying tearfully, “I lost the kid.” That should be enough. *It is enough.*

Another burst of fire erupted along his arm, and he shouted in pain again, but he didn’t let go. He forced himself to keep thinking about Tony, about all of the times that he had been annoyed and amused and entranced and devastated by him. Fighting on the Bartons’ farm, fighting over Vision, fighting in Germany, fighting in Siberia. Feeling like he wanted to die after Tony literally passed out from being so angry at him (*where were you, Steve?!*).

But balanced with every one of those memories was one where Tony showed just how much he cared: Tony explaining how Wanda had showed him his greatest fear (and now that vision had come true); Steve finally learning just how much JARVIS had meant to Tony when he found him crying in his workshop after Ultron; Tony giving Steve his shield back. Tony making jokes about Steve’s age, but never making him feel stupid when he didn’t understand technology or a pop culture reference. Tony helping set up team bonding activities, even when he was no longer a part of the team. Tony funding the entire Avengers, funding their medical bills and equipment, making sure that they were all *safe*. That was who Tony was. More than anything else, he just wanted to protect the people he loved, and he had done it. He had saved them all. And he deserved to live alongside the people who he had saved.

Do you understand now? Steve mentally gritted his teeth, forcing the stone to confront these images and memories head on. *Do you get it? We’ve given you your sacrifice. Now give us this. Give me this.*

...Very well, Steven Grant Rogers... the stone hissed, and for a moment, the pain that ripped through Steve’s arm increased to an almost unbearable level. He choked on his tongue, and he could feel hands supporting his shoulders to keep him from tipping over.

We will give you one soul. But are you sure you want his?

Steve hesitated for a moment at that. He only had one chance, one “freebie,” and of course, he immediately thought of Natasha. She hadn’t deserved her fate anymore than Tony had, and God, Steve loved her just as much as he loved Tony. How could he choose between two of his best friends?

But then he thought of what both of them would say to question. They were both self-sacrificial to a fault, of course, so Steve could imagine a rather comical scenario where Tony argued that Nat should be saved while she argued the opposite. And he knew that there was a real possibility that when Tony realized that Steve had been offered this chance by the stone, he would hate him even more for not saving Nat instead. But then he thought about what Nat would say. About how even in the depth of her despair and exhaustion after the Snap, how she would always smile after coming back from visiting Tony, Pepper, and Morgan. How Morgan called her “Auntie Nat.” How Nat had all of these knowing looks and inside jokes with Tony, Pepper, and Rhodes, from years of a hard-fought friendship created while he was still in the ice.

And Steve could so perfectly picture Natasha in his head that it made him want to cry. Because he knew that wherever she was right now, she was smiling at him and telling him to let her go. Telling him that she had fulfilled her mission, but Tony hadn’t. It wasn’t a matter of who deserved to live - both of them did - but it was a matter of who needed to live.

Yes. Steve answered, confidently. *Yes. Him.*

For a second, the fire grew even hotter, and he felt liquid sluggishly dripping down his neck and arm. White light burst in front of his eyelids, and he experienced a brief moment of relief before he passed out.

When Tony opened his eyes again, he was looking up at a white ceiling, and he felt weird and floaty - a sensation that he immediately identified as being jacked full of morphine. He groaned, closing his eyes again to ward off the nausea.

“Tony?” A raw voice whispered, and he suddenly felt an aching familiar hand press into his own. Pepper, oh God - the anxiety in her voice made Tony instinctively struggle to open his eyes, and he groaned again. He needed to see her - was she okay? What about everybody else? Was Yinsen right? Is he actually alive?

“No, hey, hey, it’s okay, just rest, honey, it’s okay, we’re all okay,” Pepper whispered soothingly, sounding more confident now that she knew that Tony could hear her. “Bruce? Bruce, he’s awake!”

He heard heavy footsteps that he had learned to associate with Bruce’s Hulk-Banner hybrid form over the past couple of months, and then Bruce’s voice. “Tony? Tony, can you hear me?”

“Urhghg,” Tony mumbled, trying to get his mouth to work properly. “Y-yeah...I...I’m...Pep...”

“I’m here, Tony,” Pepper said tearfully, and after over 20 years of knowing her, he could hear the smile in her voice without seeing it. His lips twitched, and he managed to squeeze her hand.

“Is...e’ryone...? Peter...Steve...Morgan, where-?”

“Everybody’s fine,” Bruce said soothingly, and Tony could hear him adjusting his IV. “The others are waiting outside, and Happy is looking after Morgan. We’re all safe.”

Pepper slowly lifted his hand to her mouth and brushed her lips against it. Tony could feel the wetness of her tears, and he desperately wanted to hug her, kiss her, hold her close, but Bruce must've upped the dose of morphine. He could feel himself drifting off again...

"You did it, Tony," Pep whispered before he fell asleep. "Thanos and his army are dead. We're all safe. You saved us, honey."

~ one month later ~

"Are you serious? Blue jello?" Tony scoffed, outraged, as Morgan giggled. "Are you keeping the good stuff all to yourself?" He made a show out of looking all around her, peaking into her hair and smiling as she shrieked in laughter.

"Daddy! I don't have any, I promise!" Morgan giggled, and Tony knew that he (and Steve) had made the right decision, because what the hell would he have done if he hadn't heard his little girl laugh again?

Of course, he could've done without the permanent scarring and loss of a limb, but as Rhodey had said, sometimes you get dealt a bad hand (pun not intended).

Tony had woken up a little less than a month ago, and Bruce had told him that they had tried everything to save his right arm - even consulting with Helen Cho and Maya Hansen's notes to see if Extremis or the Cradle could repair the damage - but in the end, the damage had just been too extensive. Tony never would have regained the use of his arm, and with a mysterious infection spreading quickly (probably caused by the use of the stones), they had thought that it was best to amputate sooner rather than later.

Distantly, he realized that the road ahead would be hard, and that he was probably bound for a hard emotional reaction in the future (he had learned this the hard way a few years ago - Rhodey had bounced back surprisingly quickly after the fight in Germany had paralyzed him, but around 6 months later, Tony had found him collapsed in the bathroom of the compound crying his eyes out). But for now, he was okay - he was alive, he was recovering, and he got to spend loads of time in bed with his wife and daughter, complaining about jello and talking with his friends.

"Are you sure about that, sweetie?" Pepper asked teasingly as she walked in with a bottle of water. "Because I'm pretty sure that I saw you sneaking those red jello cups into the back of the fridge."

Tony gasped even louder, looking at Morgan with a betrayed expression. Morgan laughed, and Tony could see a familiar glint of mischief in her eyes. "My own daughter! Betrayed by my own daughter, et tu, Brute-?"

Pepper rolled her eyes and tossed the water bottle on his chest as he moaned in dramatic betrayal. "Alright, Caesar, let's go - Jessica's ready with your physical therapy, and after that, we have to get ready for dinner tonight."

"What about the Spiderling?" Tony asked, ruffling Morgan's hair and smiling as she squawked and jumped off the bed. "He was still undecided when I talked to him."

"Peter's doing okay," Pepper answered, smiling reassuringly when Tony looked even more concerned at that answer. "I texted May around an hour ago - they're both gonna come up to the tower tonight, but they might not stay for long."

Morgan pouted at that, and Tony grinned. Morgan and Peter had become as thick as thieves in the month since the battle, and honestly, although he was mostly ecstatic to see his kids getting along,

a small part of him was also dreading the inevitable science kid team up that would happen in the near future, especially if Harley or (God forbid) the bots got involved.

“How about everybody else?” Tony asked his wife, obediently clicking opening the water bottle and taking a sip when she looked pointedly at it. “Was Thor able to convince the Guardians to stay?”

Pepper nodded. “And Captain Danvers will be there as well - she said that she would be bringing a few friends too, if that was okay with us.”

Morgan lit up at the mention of her newly-dubbed “Aunt Carol.” Her excitement was probably 50% for the woman herself, and 50% for her alien cat named Goose, who Fury seemed to adore and who Quill seemed to be inexplicably terrified of (it had been a weird month).

“The more the merrier,” Tony answered, winking at Morgan and smiling as she giggled.

Holding onto his waist and butt (Tony had tried flirting with her the first dozen times they had done this, but it had gotten old pretty quick), Pepper helped him transfer into the wheelchair next to his bed. Now that he was back in the compound, Pepper and Rhodey had been helping him the most with rehab and physical therapy, although an actual physical therapist came twice a week to help him with exercises. His prognosis was good: his shoulder and torso burns were healing, and his muscles were getting stronger every day. But he would still need to learn how to use a prosthetic (with vibranium courtesy of Wakanda, and no, he was very carefully not thinking about Barnes), and it would take a while longer for the muscles in his legs to fully recover.

The physical therapy was hard, and the reduced mobility was frustrating, and as his therapist said, there were good days and bad days. But he was recovering, and what was more, he was now recovered enough to be able to attend (and host!) what he had named the “Fuck Thanos And His Big Eggplant Face” party (subtitled: “We Won, Dickwad”). Steve and Pepper - as part of the planning committee - had looked at him disapprovingly when he had proposed the name, but come on, Tony had saved the universe, couldn’t he have this one thing? (It helped that both Pep and Steve were vulnerable to his puppy dog eyes when he utilized their full potential).

The dinner had been planned for almost two weeks now, and it would include all of the major players in the final fight against Thanos, both Snapped and Unsnapped. The core Avengers and their families, the Guardians, as well as Thor and the remaining Asgardian leaders (including Loki, who was apparently *not* dead? Tony wasn’t really sure what had happened there - again, it had been a weird month). The wizards were coming (he was pretty sure that Strange was bringing a date, and boy, he couldn’t wait to tease him about that), and so were the Wakandans and the Pym (seeing Janet again, alive and well, had been yet another surprise). Fury had even rounded up what was left of SHIELD.

The dinner wouldn’t just serve the purpose of bringing everyone together to get drunk and eat delicious food and revel in the fact that, *oh shit, we’re alive* - it was also a diplomatic endeavor. Tony and Steve had painstakingly convinced every super or meta human (or alien) who would be in attendance to sign a treaty of sorts. The document wasn’t legally binding, but it was a promise to each other: a promise to come together again if another intergalactic threat like Thanos ever threatened the universe.

Steve had confessed to Tony that he was intimidated by the prospect of more international and intergalactic politics in the near future, and Tony had to agree. The people of Earth (and the entire universe, for that matter) were looking to them for answers on how to deal with problems like population flux, environmental disasters, and governmental restructuring - problems that had been caused by both the Snap and the Unsnap. In several days, the UN was holding a summit to address

the major crises in this new era, and although Tony would be working as a consultant, he was glad to not be taking point on this one.

If someone had asked Tony ten years ago if he was willing to let others take charge in the event of a crisis - if he was willing to hand off the reins to a new generation of heroes - he would have laughed in their face and then gone back to manically building suits. It was that anxiety and fear that had driven Tony and Bruce to create Ultron (and look at how well that turned out). But now? Tony had never been more confident in his choice to take on a more advisory role, and let people like Rhodey, T'Challa, and Carol lead the way. After all, Tony *was* a futurist, and he was certainly not one to stand in the way of progress.

“Mommy, can I go play with Uncle Bruce?” Morgan asked as she hopped alongside Tony’s wheelchair.

Tony smiled and ruffled her hair, eliciting a “Daddy, noooo” from his daughter. “What, you don’t want to spend time with your old man?”

“You’re not old, Daddy,” Morgan said stubbornly, pursing her lips so that she looked just like her mother. “And Uncle Bruce said he was gonna test the new weather stabilizers and that I could watch as long as I stayed inside and I promise I’ll watch through the window, and--”

“Alright, alright,” Pepper interrupted with a laugh, “Off you go. Just make sure to do whatever Uncle Bruce tells you--”

“Follow lab safety, got it!” Morgan repeated back with a toothy grin, kissing Tony on the cheek before running off down the hallway.

“She’s getting cheeky, isn’t she?” Pepper muttered with a pointed, raised eyebrow in Tony’s direction. “I wonder where she’s gotten that from.”

Tony laughed. “I resent the implication, Ms. Potts - I am a *great* father.”

Pepper smiled softly. “Yes. Yes, you are, Tony.”

He turned around to look up at her, and when he met his wife’s eyes, he couldn’t stop a feeling of sheer joy and gratefulness from bursting in his chest. Tony had no doubt that if he had died in that battle, the world - and his family - would have gone on without him. But thank God (and thank Steve Rogers) that *he* didn’t have to go without *them*.

Coda

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

~ three months later ~

“You know, Nick, I saw that SHIELD was requesting representation at the summit on Tuesday, and I found that a little weird, considering that SHIELD isn’t supposed to exist anymore.”

“Tony.”

Steve was wearing his patented *disapproval* face as he looked at Tony, but they had gotten a lot closer over the past few months, so Tony knew that while Captain America may be scolding him right now, Steve Rogers had been trying to find a way to ask the same thing for the past 10 minutes.

“What?” Tony asked rhetorically. “I’m just worried about, oh, I don’t know, a secret Nazi organization taking advantage of a vulnerable world order.”

“HYDRA has been purged from SHIELD,” Fury said, his hologram flickering in irritation (or maybe that was just Tony’s imagination). “The world needs people who know what the hell is going on, and--”

“Oh, come on, Nick,” Tony interrupted, turning to take a bite of the roast beef sandwich that he had ordered for lunch (thank God that the local deli had survived the end of the world). “I thought we were past these kinds of lies. The only ones who know the full story about Thanos--” (Tony praised himself for not flinching at the name) “--are the Avengers. We’re the only ones the UN needs to hear from.”

“But,” Steve interrupted calmly, “if *certain members* of former SHIELD leadership want to attend the summit, I’m sure that we can pull a few strings, Director.”

Tony tried to hide his smile at Steve’s neutral expression, knowing that Steve’s *inner* expression was something closer to a raised eyebrow and a “try me” glare. Apparently Fury knew it too, because he just grumbled something about “*ungrateful morons*,” and promptly hung up the call.

“Well,” Tony said brightly. “That went well. I think after ten years, he’s finally starting to like us.”

Steve chuckled at that. “You and I have very different definitions of ‘like.’”

He grabbed his own sandwiches from the kitchen island (three meatball parms - Jesus, the man could really put it away), and grabbed the seat next to Tony. This time, Tony didn’t try to hide his smile as the super-soldier unashamedly scooted closer to him.

He and Steve had talked *a lot* since he woke up from his post-battle coma, and yes, some of those talks had involved tears, but that was neither here nor there. The airing of shared grievances (in addition to extensive therapy) had done wonders for their relationship, and Tony couldn’t believe how much he had missed (*or purposefully overlooked*, a voice muttered in his head) when it came to Steve Rogers.

Before, Tony had misinterpreted so many aspects of Steve’s personality - dismissing him as self-

righteous or arrogant or stubborn or naive. And yeah, sometimes Steve *was* those things (sometimes he was all of them), but Tony could see now that most of the time, the man was just trying to stay afloat in a world that he fundamentally did not understand.

The historical and sociopolitical lessons that Steve had learned from T'Challa, Okoye, and Natasha in his two years on the run, followed by the five years after the Snap, had made him a more flexible, more responsible, and more intelligent man, and Steve seemed to be much happier for it, like he had been finally allowed to stop wearing an ill-fitting suit. In the midst of the Accords Crisis, Tony never could've imagined a future where he and Steve Rogers sat down and calmly discussed politics over lunch. And yet that was exactly what they were doing.

Then again, it wasn't just that he and Steve had changed. It was also because Steve had apparently decided that he loved Tony so much that he would literally will the universe into bringing him back to life. Which was...a lot to think about, but Tony was slowly coming to terms with it, alright, give him a break.

"What did you think about T'Challa's opening statement?" Steve asked.

"It's good. Solid. Optimistic and 'looking towards the future' - it's what we need." Tony took another bite of his sandwich as he glanced at the super soldier. "And he's the right one to do it. But that doesn't mean that the UN doesn't need to hear from Captain America too."

Steve sighed. "They *will* hear from Captain America. Sam is going to testify."

"Yeah, you know that's not what I meant," Tony rolled his eyes. "This whole 'taking a break' thing is fine - good, even, I totally approve - and it's not like I really have any ground to stand on, with the whole 'benched for the foreseeable future' thing, but--"

"You're worried that I'll regret it," Steve finished, looking expectantly at him.

Tony pursed his lips. "Yeah."

Steve smiled and looked down at his food. "Maybe I will. Maybe in a few months, or a year or two. But it's still something that I have to do.

"Remember when you told me about Rhodes, and how giving him the War Machine armor was like sharing a burden?"

Tony nodded, seeing where the other man was going with this. "A burden that I didn't even realize was weighing me down."

"It's like that. I've been Captain America for so long..." Steve sighed, shaking his head, "...I don't know if I remember how to be anyone else. And I want to remember. I want to remember how to be Steve Rogers again. Handing over the shield - sharing that burden - will help, I think.

"Besides...Sam?" Steve grinned. "Sam will be great. Sam will be better than I was."

"I don't know about that," Tony laughed. "You were pretty good, even with some rough patches."

"So were you, Tony."

"Oh, come on, don't say that like I'm dead--" Steve grimaced as Tony waggled his eyebrows "--I'm still Iron Man. I'll always be Iron Man, just like you'll always be Captain America. We're just...becoming something new, too."

“Yeah,” Steve said contemplatively, taking another bite of his sandwich. “Something new.”

The two sat in a comfortable silence for a few minutes as they finished their lunches. Tony stretched with a satisfied sigh, wincing a little as his new mech arm tugged at his still healing skin.

“How is it feeling today?” Steve asked, trying not to look concerned but failing miserably.

Tony smiled indulgently. “It’s doing fine, Cap. The micro-injections of Extremis are healing the amputation site well - the skin is just a little raw. Soon I’ll be ready to go and take on your other mech-armed best friend.”

Steve rolled his eyes, and it was a testament to their newly healed friendship that neither of them flinched at the mention of Barnes. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled at the chance to test Wakandan tech against Stark tech.”

“Oh please,” Tony scoffed. “*Shuri* will be thrilled, and I am under no illusions as to who will be the winner in *that* contest.”

“Tony Stark showing humility?” Steve raised a cheeky eyebrow, and yep, there was definitely still a part of Tony that wanted to punch him in his perfect teeth. “Maybe the world really did end.”

“You know, I *did* almost die for the entire universe,” Tony shot back, smiling despite himself. “I think that shows a little humility.”

“Keyword being ‘almost.’” Steve wrapped up the remaining half of his parm and got up to put it back in the communal fridge. “I did save you, remember?”

“Who could forget?” Tony asked sarcastically. “Only you could be so stubborn, Rogers.”

“Right back at ya, Shellhead,” Steve slipped into his Brooklyn accent as he glanced back at Tony with a mischievous grin, and hell, how had Tony ever believed that this man was Mr. Goody Two Shoes?

Tony stood up - proud that his legs shook only slightly when he did so - and sighed as he brushed the crumbs off his shirt. “When’s that meeting with the Pym’s again?”

“Three o’clock,” Steve answered, glancing at his phone screen and correcting, “So, right about now.”

Tony sighed again. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

He smiled as Steve walked over to him. After all of these years, all it had taken was the near end of the universe and one of them dying to reconcile and actually learn to like each other. Tony could’ve done without the dying part, but if he was being completely honest, maybe it hadn’t been too bad, if it had given him back his family.

Steve straightened his shirt and gestured in the direction of the conference room. “Ready?”

Tony smiled, genuinely this time. “Yeah. Let’s get to work.”

Hope you enjoyed this short little fic! I wrote most of it immediately after Endgame, but I got stuck on this epilogue part and only found the will to finish it recently.

Also, RIP Chadwick. You will be missed. #LongLiveTheKing

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

I'll Make Peace With Time

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/23053837) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/23053837>.

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|------------------|--|
| Rating: | General Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | Gen |
| Fandom: | Iron Man (Movies) , The Avengers (Marvel Movies) , Spider-Man (Tom Holland Movies) |
| Relationship: | Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe) & Tony Stark Pepper Potts & Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe) , Pepper Potts/Tony Stark , Peter Parker & Tony Stark , Peter Parker & Pepper Potts , Happy Hogan & Peter Parker , Happy Hogan & Pepper Potts , Happy Hogan & Tony Stark , Happy Hogan & Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe) , Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe) & Stephen Strange |
| Character: | Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe) , Pepper Potts , Happy Hogan , Stephen Strange , Tony Stark , Peter Parker , Peter Parker (mentioned) , Original Character , Michelle Jones , Michelle Jones (mentioned) |
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| Stats: | Published: 2020-03-07 Words: 1962 |

I'll Make Peace With Time

by [akasharpiegirl](#)

Summary

“I think I can bring Dad back.”

Notes

Y'all all bullied me into making this into a series, so here is the second part of my new series: "I Won't Leave What Is Lost Behind", which was preceded by "Vivid Dreams and Worst Case Scenarios". Please read the previous part if you haven't already.

Minor warning for cursing, but otherwise, it should be okay!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

“I think I can bring Dad back.”

“And again, I say... What?”, Pepper blinked in shock.

“I think I can bring Dad back,” Morgan repeated.

“Honey, that’s not a good idea,” Pepper states, her now stern voice unable to hide the fear interwoven.

“Mom, I know that dream wasn’t just my subconscious! We actually talked, he explained why he used the gauntlet in a way I’ve never even thought about. I know this can’t be my imagination,” Morgan pleads. “Please just let me talk to Strange about it. I just have a feeling.”

Pepper sighed after taking another sip of her coffee, “I’m sorry Morgan, but I can’t allow it. I want your Dad back as much as you do, but the thought of losing you too? I couldn’t bear it.”

“Mom, please. I know it could work,” Morgan continues.

“I’m sorry, honey. But it’s a no,” Pepper states.

“Mom!”

“I said no,” Pepper said before getting up. “I don’t want to talk about this again. Don’t bring this up to Strange, to Peter, to anyone. Please just let it go, honey. It’s for your own safety.”

“Do you still want to come with me to the city for the weekend?”, Pepper asked, a lapse of memory causing her to forget what door that could open up. “We can leave right after you finish your

homework if you have any. If not, you can stay with Peter and MJ.”

Morgan shot Pepper an inquisitive look, “Sure? I finished my homework in the car.”

The next day:

She covered her tracks by saying she was going to grab coffee from a quaint little shop a block over from their hotel.

“What do you want Morgan?”, Stephen greeted the teenager.

“I’m not leaving until you help me,” Morgan started.

“Is that so?”, Stephen questioned. “You do realize I can send you back to your hotel in a matter of seconds, right?” He started to pull together a portal to her hotel room.

“If you do, I’ll just keep coming back,” Morgan states as she crosses her arms, causing the portal to shrink and break apart. “Whether or not you believe it, I’m mature enough to know what happened to him.”

“Fine,” he rolled his eyes at the curious teenager. “What is it that you want to know about your father?”

“I had a dream about him,” Morgan answered.

“So?”

“He told me why he had to use the gauntlet,” Morgan continued. “He told me it was my subconscious speaking, but there’s no way! Because he explained everything in ways I never fathomed. He kept saying how he’s not one hundred percent gone and I just... I just can’t help but think that I can get him back.”

And just like that, Strange involuntarily went forward in time.

Morgan stared in confusion as she waited.

“...You’re right,” Strange broke the silence a few moments later. “This timeline is damaged. He wasn’t supposed to be the one.”

“You’re serious?”, Morgan asked, hope glistening in her eyes.

“Apparently so,” he answered. “You’d have to use your father’s time travel technology... and if you do everything correctly, he’ll be back.”

“What do I have to do?”

A week later:

Morgan spawned into 2023, her Mother’s old ‘rescue’ armor in tow. It was surreal. Is that the compound? Under rubble? Surrounded by clumps of fire. She had no idea it had been rebuilt. Huh.

The nanotech consumed her from head to toe as she looked around at the scene. She saw Peter, her brother, handing the gauntlet to Carol. She saw Strange get pummeled after attempting to hold off the water threatening to pummel. She saw Thanos fighting off Wanda.

Then that’s when she saw him. Her Dad in a tamer part of the battlefield. She didn’t realize how difficult this moment would be.

Tony got distracted, seeing who he thought was Pepper in one part of the field and seeing a carbon copy of the suit flying right above him. “Strange, FRI... can someone explain why I’m seeing two of them?”

Morgan stood still. Strange finally told her what to do, back in her timeline. But everything she was told? Went down the drain as soon as she saw her father... alive. Which freaked her out, because she was supposed to remember everything.

Strange looked over to Morgan and lied through his teeth, “Nope.” He nodded to Morgan though. Which, she took as a signal.

“Working on it,” was all the Irish entity said.

“Uh, um,” Morgan stuttered, signaling to the nanotech to uncover her face. “What are the chances you’ll believe what I’m about to tell you?”

“Who are you? How did you—“, he asked, staring wide-eyed at this short teenager as his heart tried to tell him that he knew her... somehow.

“We’ve actually met before,” Morgan answered. “I’m Morgan.”

“Last time I checked, my Maguna was a happy five year old that I pray I’ll get to come home to,” Tony answered, confused. “You’re what? 13?”

“I’m 14, actually,” Morgan corrected. “And if you don’t listen to me and trust me, you won’t get to come home to her. I know how my timeline ends for you... please. I can’t let myself grow up without a Dad, *again*.”

“FRI, who is she?”, Tony asked, ignoring Morgan’s comment.

“That is your Morgan Stark, Boss. She appears to be from another timeline. Or, at least the future for you, she’s a fourteen year old sophomore... good standing in school. Birthdate is December 31st of 2018. It’s 2032 there,” FRIDAY explained. “I’d suggest you trust her, sir. She seems safe.”

“So, uh...” Tony pauses. “What happens if I don’t believe you?”

“You die,” Morgan answers. “You take the gauntlet.”

“Strange?”, Tony yelled in direct response to Morgan’s blatant statement.

Strange looked over at Morgan before looking back at Morgan. “Second round, are we? Yeah, Morgan’s right. Her timeline is damaged and she’s fixing it from the source.”

”Second round? The source?”, Tony asked.

”Do you think that really matters? We’re running out of time and even though I don’t like you, I’d like to see you survive this time. So, forget the technical stuff for once... will you?”, Strange rolled his eyes.

Tony looked at Morgan, “So, uh... I never thought I’d take advice from another fourteen year old. But what do I have to do if I want to make it home to my kid? You?”

Just like that, 2032 Strange’s plan came back into her mind at just the right time. “In a couple minutes, Thanos will get the gauntlet. When Carol intervenes, help. But for the love of God, don’t take it from her. She knows it’s up to her to fix the end of this. She’s strong enough to take it without too much detrimental effects. No one but our enemies dies this way.”

“Who the hell is this?”, Pepper’s voice came from behind Morgan, which caused her to flinch.

Morgan turned around to see a younger version of her mother staring at her, “I’m over here trying to save lives and you’re going to kill me when I get back home.”

“What?”, Pepper asked.

“Uh, Pep, you know how I figured out time travel?”, Tony asked.

“Yeah...”, Pepper nodded.

“She’s our kid,” Tony answered.

”What the— you know what? Okay.”

“My Mom doesn’t know I took a suit and crossed through time and space... or rather, you don’t

know,” Morgan answered. “So you can understand why I jumped when I heard your voice.”

“Why’d I marry into this family?”, Pepper asked before letting it go.

“I’m hurt by that, truly,” Tony jokes before the three fixed their suits to finish this fight.

“You’ll get over it,” Pepper states.

2032:

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Pepper muttered as she read the subject line of a new email that had just popped up on her computer screen.

She took a deep breath before reading through it. But her inner monologue was interrupted by her phone ringing. Pepper picked up her phone and was taken aback by the number. Tony’s old number must’ve been reassigned, right? Because... that’s his number. She recognized it immediately. But, she let it go to voicemail, turned her phone on silent, and went back to email responses.

Thirty minutes passed.

Happy burst through her office in a panic, “Tony’s alive.”

“What?”, Pepper asked, looking up from her computer. Her face filled with utter confusion.

“His old number called me, I answered. His voice came through. He said he tried to call you twice, you didn’t pick up... either time. If I hadn’t picked up, he’d have to call Rhodey. His location says he’s near your home. Pepper, he’s alive,” Happy answered.

“How did he—“, Pepper mumbled. Then she saw the photo of her and Morgan from one of Morgan’s dance competitions sitting on her desk. “Happy, where’s Morgan?”

“I thought she was on a field trip to some science museum today? In the city? Why?”, Happy

asked.

“That’s where she’s supposed to be,” Pepper answered as she quickly packed up her things, and pulled up Morgan’s phone number. “Why didn’t I expect her to do this? Pick up, pick up, pick up Morgan. I swear to God...”

No answer. No location calculated either.

“You think she’s behind his return?”, Happy asked.

“Who else would be? She got really worked up about her Dad last week. She begged me to let her talk to Strange...”, Pepper asked. “Plus, Peter didn’t ask for time off, he came into work today. He wants Tony back just as much as Morgan and I do, but I know for a fact he showed up today and didn’t leave work early today.”

“Even if she did mess with time, I thought Bruce said the past doesn’t actually affect your present, though,” Happy questioned.

“Maybe that was a fluke, like what happened with Scott. There’s no way that this wasn’t Morgan’s doing,” Pepper said as she followed Happy out to her car.

“I’ll call Morgan’s teachers and see if they know anything,” Happy offered.

Happy drove away from the compound and called up Morgan’s science teacher. “Hello, this is Mrs. Archuletta with Pinewood Senior High School. I’m currently supervising a field trip with my sophomore science classes. What seems to be a problem?”

“Hello, this is Harold Hogan... one of Morgan Stark’s emergency contacts. Her mother and I have some suspicion that she isn’t with you all on the trip when she is supposed to be. Can you confirm that she is with you and okay?”, Happy asked as Pepper kept trying to get a hold of her daughter through text messaging.

“Oh, uh... hello. As far as I knew, she was. She was marked present when I took roll on and off the bus this morning. Let me check with her chaperone group,” the teacher answered sympathetically.

Both Happy and Pepper could hear muffled talking on the other end of the call.

“Sir, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. She was last seen right before we split into groups. We can keep looking if you would like,” Morgan’s teacher offered.

“No, but thank you though. Morgan’s Mom and I think we know where she is, but just wanted to make sure,” Happy explained. Pepper looked at him and he knew exactly what she was thinking. “I know you’re going to want to suspend her or something, but please don’t let that go to your head until we figure out what’s going on. This isn’t like her.”

“I can’t promise anything sir,” Mrs. Archuletta spoke.

The line went dead a moment later as Happy and Pepper were stopped in a traffic slowdown. It was going to take a bit before they finally got to the lakehouse.

End Notes

Please leave kudos and comments if you enjoyed/want to read more!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

Lake house stay

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/20157223) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/20157223>.

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| Rating: | General Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings |
| Category: | Other |
| Fandom: | Iron Man (Movies) , Spider-Man - All Media Types |
| Relationship: | Peter Parker & Tony Stark , Tony Stark & Morgan Stark |
| Character: | Tony Stark , Peter Parker , Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe) |
| Additional Tags: | Father-Son Relationship , Father-Daughter Relationship , Father Figures , End Game fix it , fix it end game , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Tony Stark Acting as Peter Parker's Parental Figure , Protective Tony Stark , Tony Stark Has A Heart , Not Beta Read , Fix It , Avengers: Endgame (Movie) Spoilers , Post-Avengers: Endgame (Movie) , Endgame , Iron Dad , spider son , EndGame? we dont know her |
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| Stats: | Published: 2019-08-08 Words: 1515 |

Lake house stay

by [Skyrocket25](#)

Summary

short sweet story of Tony after Endgame and dealing with the thought of having Peter back and how to keep both his kids safely protected within his arms. Never to be taken away again.

short one where Tony is with his kids - because i was in the mood to write also Tony finally just gets to spend some time with his kids! Because fuck Endgame! we dont know her!

Notes

short one because i was in the mood to write - hope you enjoyed :)
let me know if any one whats just these little stoires like this every now and than. Also some story ideas any one has would be great :D always love to hear peolpe thoughts.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Tony closed his eyes taking a deep calming breath, for the first time in five years it didn't feel like breathing was a struggle. Didn't feel like his guilt was eating him alive... ever since the snap and Peter was taken away from his world. Tony struggled with the guilt that it should have been him to go not Peter. He had never felt pain like it not even when he lost his parents, the pain of losing your child no one could ever prepare you for the gut-wrenching hole it would leave behind.

He all but shut down because of it, after months of working in the lab trying everything to fix it, with very failed attempt to fix what had gone wrong. To bring the world back to normal... to bring Peter back. A part of Tony died with Peter, so trying to fix It was the only thing he could hold onto, that he could and would fix it! Because he was Tony Stark.

For god sake he was Iron man! Of course, he could fix this.

That thought kept him going for a long time. Up until the day Morgan was born, she was so small so... beautiful, he couldn't believe out of everything he had made in his life time. This breath taking little girl was one of them. The day he held is daughter for the first time, held her close to himself keeping her safely protected in his arms. That was the day he gave up on getting Peter back, and every seeing his boy again.

It was Mays own words that broke him, as she stood there holding his daughter looking down at her with a sad smile pulling on her lips and emptiness in her eyes.

She whispered "*she's beautiful Tony, Peter would have loved her...*"

That was all it took for Tony to crack... for it to really it him that Peter wasn't there... those two words *would have...* Because Peter wasn't here... May was right Peter would have loved Morgan so much if he was there. But he wasn't there and never would be. He would have been the best big brother to her. The thought made his heart ache painfully, he thought with time that pain would go or become easier to deal with. He thought with time he could forget Peter just erase the boy from his mind.

He was wrong.

Without realising it Peter had changed Tony, in so many ways had made him a better Person... Peter may have not been Tony son by blood, but Tony loved him just has much has he loved Morgan. That was something else he hadn't realised till he had his daughter. Which only had his pain and longing for his son back so much worse.

Only a couple of months after Morgan was born, Tony moved him and Pepper out to the lake house with their little girl. It was his last attempt to find some peace to get away from it all.

To forget it all... to move on, from the memory of his son.

It worked and for five years Tony just focused on his family... Peter was always in the back of his mind of course. Every time Tony brushed the hair out of Morgan's face, the memory of how he used to do that to Peter would flash through is mind. Her toothy smile and laughed, reminded him of Peters too... everything she did made him think of Peter. Because his family was missing apart. He was missing apart of himself and the pain never left him.

But he found what would keep him going. The thought that Peter wouldn't want him to waste his life trying to get him back. He would want him to be a good dad to Morgan love and protect her.

He made sure that Morgan knew who Peter was. She would grow up on the great stories of spider man. She loved her big brother the spider hero, to the little guy on the streets of queens... and this

was Tony's life for five years and he was happy... well has happy has anyone could be after losing their son.

Than Steve and the others came onto his door step once again, after all that time and gave Tony something that he hadn't wanted, or had in a long time... hope. To get back everything he had lost... at first Tony couldn't do it. He couldn't let himself go down that path again of pain and suffering. If only he hadn't of seen that picture of peter he wouldn't have... he would have stayed how he was only half a man, living for his daughter and his wife. What a horrible decision that would have been.

He grins to himself, slowly letting his eyes open to look down at the boy sleeping safely wrapped in his arm, snuggled tightly to his side. Morgan had also fallen asleep, took away between the arms of her favourite spider hero. Tony lays his head down onto the curly brunette hair he had missed so much, gently rubbing his cheek across it. Closing his eyes again he just listens to the fireplace, to the crackling of the fire wood letting it fill his ears. Peter was back... Tony had got him back.

He lost an arm in the process and definitely added some new scars to himself. None of that matter because all of it was worth it in the end. Every single last drop of blood he shed to get to this moment was worth it.

It's only been a week since Peter came back... of course May wanted Peter to come home right away wanted to be with her nephew. Tony couldn't... the thought of letting Peter out of his site would send a frenzy though his body to attack and protect his boy. So, in the end they came up with the best solution that May would come to stay at the lake house with Peter for as long as it took to get things settled and calm. But this is only a temporary fix for the time being. Tony isn't worried through he knows how to fix it, he is determined to keep Peter with him at this point.

May wants her own place, so he will just make her and Peter their own lake house right next to his. He is sure there are going to be objectives to this and probably even fights when it comes to Peter. He of course is going to want to go back to queens at some point and pick up, where he left off with spider-man. Tony has no intentions of letting this happen. Tony can't risk losing him again. Can't let Peter died being the hero again.

He wants Peter to have a normal life just grow up and be teenager. At least until he goes to college then Tony can't stop him in what Peter wants to do. He will have to let him go off and do his own things, become his own man. When that time comes he will except it and let his boy fly the nest... the thought makes him want to be sick. Tightening his arm around both his kids.

Tony knows himself and letting go has never been one of his strongest suits. Then again, he had to already let go of peter once before. He doesn't see why he can't hold onto him now, that he got him back. It's only fair... Thanos took him away! Tony, wasn't going to let anyone else do that! Ever again!

He took another deep calming breath turning his nose into Peters hair, slowly just breathing in and out, to keep all his pain and anger down has the memory of Peter disappearing in his arms, flashes in his mind over and over. His arm starting to tremble, pulling both his children closer if that was even possible into his side.

A small gasp escapes him when a hand covers his own, giving it a tight squeeze.

"It's okay *dad*." Peter whispers, rubbing circles into the back of his hand.

Tony smiles jokingly "thought that was my line Pete," Peter just shakes his heading smiling softly.

“I’m not going *anywhere*... I’m right here with you dad. Everything is really okay now. You did it, we won. You can rest now... stop worrying about me.” Tony fights the tears in his eyes.

He always did hate how easily Peter could see into his mind, see all his fears and worries. He hates himself for letting it show... he should be the one comforting his children not the other way around. Tony decides not to say anything just kisses Peter's curls, before letting his cheek rest onto his head again.

slowly with time he hears Peter's breath even back out into sleep, finally Tony lets himself drift off into a deep sleep to, only listening to the sound of his children breathing and the cracking of the fire place.

End Notes

short one because i was in the mood to write - hope you enjoyed :)

let me know if any one whats just these little stoires like this every now and than. Also some story ideas any one has would be great :D always love to hear peolpe thoughts.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

little hands, reaching forward

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/21666790) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/21666790>.

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| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | M/M |
| Fandom: | The Avengers (Marvel Movies) , Captain America (Movies) |
| Relationship: | James "Bucky" Barnes/Steve Rogers , James "Bucky" Barnes & Sam Wilson , Steve Rogers & Sam Wilson |
| Character: | Steve Rogers , James "Bucky" Barnes , Sam Wilson (Marvel) |
| Additional Tags: | Post-Avengers: Endgame (Movie) , Canon Divergence - Avengers: Endgame (Movie) , Not Avengers: Endgame (Movie) Compliant , Pre-Serum Steve Rogers , Post-Serum Steve Rogers , Artist Steve Rogers , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Domestic Fluff , Domestic Bucky Barnes/Steve Rogers , Fluff and Angst , Kid Fic , Prelude to actual kid fic , Fix-It , sequel to A day in the life of Steve Rogers , Non-Serum Steve Rogers/Winter Soldier Bucky Barnes Shrinkyclinks , weekend memories series , Complete |
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| Stats: | Published: 2019-12-04 Words: 4165 |

little hands, reaching forward

by [natalie_nebula](#)

Summary

“What in the hell are you two doing here?”

“What does it look like, Stevie? I’m an art teacher now, just like Professor Gaines, but a hundred times better.”

After the events of Endgame, Steve is retired, in a relationship with Bucky, and spending his time volunteering as an art teacher, when one day he is very rudely interrupted by his friends and by newfound realizations.

Part of the "weekend memories" series and a sequel to "A day in the life of Steve Rogers" but can be read on its own.

Notes

Hello again! YES I'm alive! And back with another update after a couple of months hiatus (I told you guys I'd be back!). After some ups and downs creatively (and getting a new laptop), I finally have another installment out in this series, and plan on posting more often in 2020. If you're new, this is an anthology series based on my Endgame fix-it "A day in the life of Steve Rogers." All of the fics in this AU are tagged under the "weekend memories"

series, and if you liked this one you're sure to love those too! They're all technically readable by themselves, but this fic especially has a lot of minor OC characters that are explained more in my Endgame fix-it, so I recommend reading that one first. Also there's a few lesbian moms in this one which is pretty neat.

Part of what motivated me to write and post this so suddenly was reading comments and getting kudos in my inbox from all of you guys, even though that original fic was posted months ago. It really boosts my creative spirit and I can't tell you how much I appreciate feedback! I try to respond to all the comments that come in right after I post and even if I don't respond I do read and love all of them. Also, if you have any suggestions for scenarios to write in future fics in this universe, please let me know. I love your feedback! (Also I realized right as I was about to hit post that I meant to have a scene where we get to see Bucky draw something so let me know if that's something you'd like to see at some point, I think it'd be pretty funny).

You can also communicate with me on twitter @budgetzendaya <3 love you all and enjoy!

“Alright class, you have five minutes left. Finish up your drawings, please.”

The instructor's heels clicked as she paced the wooden floors. The room filled with echoing pencil scratches on paper and the distant hums and screeching of cars down on the streets below.

“*Pssst*, hey Steve—” Steve kept his eyes on his sketchbook. “How'd yours turn out? Mine's a mess.”

Steve chuckled under his breath and continued drawing. “Y'know you can't *always* blame the model, Buck, *or* Professor Gaines—”

Bucky sat up on his stool and scoffed, “I'm not *blaming* anyone per say, I mean, you gotta admit, though, the dame they brought in last week sat in a pretty awkward position, but—”

“SHH! Three minutes left,” The professor shot a quick glare at Bucky from across the room and he stuck his nose back into his notebook. Steve couldn't help but laugh a little, hiding his grin behind his hand.

“Punk.”

“Jerk.”

As he kept drawing, he could feel Bucky's eyes over his shoulder, watching him delicately shade below her chin or between her brows. Steve didn't like to gloat—in fact, he was raised not to—but he'd always had a knack for drawing.

Beats me why Buck always follows me here, though, He thought to himself as he gently rubbed his eraser over a spot on the page. He felt his heartbeat pick up like a songbird trapped in a hanging metal cage, wings flapping frantically to be set free. He sensed Bucky leaning even closer, resting his left hand on the back of Steve's stool to steady himself as he loomed over him and the sketchpad splayed out on his lap.

“That's beautiful, Stevie—”

“Alright everyone, time’s up! Put your pencils down. Class dismissed, I’ll see you all next week.”

And just like that, Bucky’s whispers disappeared, melting into nothingness against the backdrop of stools moving and people talking and shoes scraping across the old hardwood. Bucky clapped a hand on Steve’s back and smiled.

“So, whaddya say, pal, we comin’ next week?”

It felt like an earthquake.

“Good afternoon, Miss Candace.”

“Good afternoon, class. How are you today?”

The monotone chorus of seven year-olds responded sporadically as they all gathered around their teacher’s feet.

Steve sat towards the back of the small crowd gathered on the rug, watching with eager grins as Candace addressed the class. She wore her hair long in small braids that framed her face and fell down past her shoulders. Steve watched her, excitedly gesturing with her paint-stained hands as she spoke to the captivated audience gazing up at her. Steve had been volunteering at the after school art program for several months, and he pretty much had the routine down pat: he would arrive a little before opening, Candace would give a brief rundown of the day’s activity, he would help her set up, help settle the children as they started trickling in from school, and then she’d explain the project to the whole group, always with the same infectious enthusiasm Steve had come to love about her.

Today, however, was different. Steve noticed an extra bit of nervous jitters whenever Candace spoke, tapping her foot or twirling one of her braids. She’d told him they would be drawing that day, but she never told him exactly *what*. Nevertheless, she seemed excited, more so than most days, and Steve was excited to see what she had in store for them.

“Alright class, I have a *very* special surprise for you today, and I need you all to be on your very best behavior, alright?” A hushed silence immediately fell over the wiggly crowd. Candace clapped her hands together, pleased. “We have two awesome guests to make some art with you guys. Are you ready to meet them?”

Candace’s eyes flicked up at Steve and she smiled and winked at him. He just gazed back, confused.

Earlier that day...

“And what are *you* up to this afternoon, Sergeant?”

Bucky smirked, coming up behind Steve and resting his hands on his hips before gently placing a kiss on his cheek.

“Making a mess over at the gym with Sam, y’know, the usual.”

“Is that so?”

Steve laughed as he placed another dish on the drying rack, leaning back into Bucky’s chest. Meanwhile, Bucky continued to trail kisses down his neck.

“Mmm... would rather be at art class...mmm...with you though...”

Steve slowed down scrubbing Bucky’s coffee mug with the warm sponge in his hand.

“...Really? I mean—you can come if you want, Buck. Just gotta let Candace know first.”

Bucky just kept trailing kisses. “Mmm... ‘think about it.’” And with that, he snatched his phone and keys off the counter and was already halfway out the door.

“I love you!” Bucky shouted. The door slammed shut behind him.

Steve shook his head, still smiling. “Love you too, Buck.”

“Class, I’d like you all to give a warm welcome to Captain Sam Wilson and Sergeant James Barnes!”

The room immediately erupted into a cacophonous chorus of tiny “oh’s” and “wow’s!” and “that’s Captain America!” as Sam and Bucky sauntered in from the foyer, fully decked out in their uniforms.

“Alright listen up everyone! Since we have such special guests with us today, I thought they could help us out with a special project.”

The two Avengers were now crouched down in front of the group of children sat on the carpet, waving hello and giving out high-fives with enormous smiles on their faces. Sam stood up and clapped his hands together, addressing the tiny crowd.

“Your awesome teacher here, Miss Candace,” Sam gestured towards her and she blushed, “invited us here to help with our new art exhibit!” There was another brief chorus of “ooo’s” and “ah’s” before Sam started speaking again. “Sergeant Barnes and I wanna know, what makes *you* a superhero?”

Candace stepped in to finish explaining, “That’s right, Cap! Today we’ll all be drawing ourselves as superheroes, and those drawings will be put on display in Mr. Rogers’ art gallery for everyone to see. How cool is that?!”

Once again, the room erupted in tiny gasps and cheers, and murmurs of excitement and new ideas (“I’m gonna draw myself flying!” “I’m gonna show myself talking to animals!” “My superhero is gonna breathe underwater *and* on land!”).

“Alright class, listen up.” Candace clapped, “We’re gonna take our seats and Captain Wilson and Sergeant Barnes will come around and work with you guys, alright?”

“Yes, Miss Candace,” the class responded in adorable unison, before getting up and shuffling to the tables.

As all of this was happening, Steve’s eyes were simultaneously glued to the two men at the front of the room and *completely* lost in space. He stood slack-jawed, frozen, until he felt a soft tug on the edge of his right shirt sleeve.

“Um, Mr. Rogers?” It was Aaron, looking up at him with his big brown doe eyes, “Can you please sit with me?”

Steve snapped out of his stupor momentarily and smiled down at him, “Of course, Aaron.” He glanced back up at the front of the room, then gave Aaron a pat on the shoulder. “Why don’t you go sit and I’ll be right with you, okay?”

Aaron nodded and walked over to the little table they usually sat at together. Steve waded through the sea of kids taking their seats and made his way to the front of the room, where Sam and Bucky were making small-talk with Candace before shouts of “Miss Candace!” from one of the other tables pulled her away (*thank god*).

When Steve approached, Sam and Bucky both looked down at him with smug looks on their faces. He quickly glanced around to make sure there were no little ones in earshot.

“What the *hell* are you two doing here?”

“What does it look like, Stevie? I’m an art teacher now, just like Professor Gaines, but a hundred times better,” Bucky chuckled.

Steve gave him his classic scornful mother look, straight out of 1939, when he’d have to drag Bucky out of the drunk tank on *his* Saturday night after a rough week working the docks.

Bucky scoffed at him, “I thought you said I could come.”

“Well, not without warning Candace ahead of time! When did you have time to organize all this? I invited you this morning!”

Sam let out a laugh, resting his hands on the edge of his pants pockets. “What, you thought when I was chatting Candace up at your show that I was asking her out or something?”

Bucky gestured to Sam, “Yeah, and he didn’t even ask her out *after* they talked about art class. Very professional.” They both nodded overzealously.

Steve sighed, crossing his arms and biting his lip.

“*Fine*. I mean, I’m glad you’re here and I’m glad the kids get to see you, I just wish you guys had told me first.”

Bucky reached out and clapped his metal arm onto Steve’s right shoulder.

“Sorry, bud.”

“We wanted it to be a surprise!”

Steve considered the smug smirks still plastered to both their faces, but he also felt Bucky’s metal

thumb drawing gentle circles through his shirt sleeve, and he couldn't resist the warmth he felt spreading from that point all throughout his body.

Goddamnit, Buck.

“Alright alright, you win.”

They both interjected with a stupid little “yes!” and a high five.

“*But*, I already have a table that I sit at and kids that I work with. Try finding your own group of friends, okay?”

“Yessir,” They both saluted him and then wandered off into the classroom. Steve sighed again and shook his head.

Hopefully they won't cause too much trouble...

“Umm... Mr. Rogers?”

“Yes, Aaron?”

Steve turned and looked over his left shoulder and found Aaron pressed up against his side. He glanced down at Aaron's paper and saw the beginning of his self-portrait; a tiny superhero with short curly hair and sweet brown eyes and a kind smile (even if it was just a curved line in crayon). He was standing in the grass with his hands on his hips and he had on a mask, a cape, and a shield attached to his right forearm.

Steve couldn't help but smile, “That's really great so far Aaron.”

Aaron was anxiously kicking his feet under the table. “Thank you Mr. Rogers. Umm... can I ask you a question?”

“Sure thing bud! Shoot.”

The boy looked down into his lap, then looked back up and pointed at Bucky across the room. “Um, my Mama Shirley said, that um, you and...*Srar*-gent Barnes were on the news the other day.”

Steve's eyes widened at that, “Oh yeah? And what did they say about us on the news?”

“That you were married, like Mama Shirley and Mama Ashley.”

“Well we're not *married*, we're just a couple. Were you there when Mama Shirley and Mama Ashley got married?” Aaron nodded enthusiastically. “And you remember the time before that when they were still together?” Another nod. “Welp, it's just like that then.”

“So will you get married someday?”

Steve glanced up at Bucky briefly. He was at a table near the window, helping Shawna use the safety scissors to cut her superhero out like a paper doll. He chuckled at the sight of Bucky—all six feet and 200 pounds of him—tucked into a tiny plastic chair doing arts and crafts with a big dumb

smile on his face that went all the way up into his eyes.

He glanced back down at Aaron and gently patted him on the shoulder. “I think that would be really swell if we did, Aaron.”

“Me too!” The boy eagerly pressed his crayon back to the page and kept scribbling. After a few very focused minutes of drawing, he abruptly looked back up from his work, contemplating. “Um, Mr. Rogers?”

“Yes, Aaron,” This time Steve kept his eyes on his own work: a quick colored-pencil sketch of Sam sitting with the kids, enthusiastically explaining to them what flying feels like. *The light from the window is just hitting him so perfectly...*

“Um, when you were a superhero, The Avengers were you friends, right? And you did stuff all together?”

“Yes, we did. We were like a family.” As Steve glanced up to get another look at Sam, he could have sworn he saw a woman with a spark of red hair walking briskly down the sidewalk, just out of the corner of his eye.

“Should I put all my friends in the drawing then?”

Steve looked down at Aaron’s paper and saw a short blond figure standing in the grass beside his own self-portrait. The man had a red, white, and blue star on his chest and what appeared to be a comically oversized pencil in his hand.

Steve chuckled as he looked down at the drawing, reaching out and gently fussing with the corner of the paper. That same warmth was filling him again. He abruptly glanced back up when he heard uproarious laughter coming from the front of the classroom again. This time, Bucky had Shawna on his lap, and was playfully shaking her, telling her “this is what the Quinjet feels like!” while endless giggles poured out of her and her other little friends at the table. This time, Bucky was smiling with his teeth, and his dimples were showing.

“Yeah, Aaron, I think that’s a great idea.”

“Um, can you and uh, Miss Candace help me?”

Aaron’s genius idea was to put all of the self portraits together into one big superhero mural: The 125th Street Avengers. Needless to say, Candace was ecstatic when Aaron approached her—Steve in tow—and explained his little plan to her. After she announced it to the whole class, Aaron guided Steve to every single table and they personally viewed and complimented every students’ work. When they rounded the corner to Bucky’s table at the front, Steve gently detached himself from Aaron and stood over Bucky, who had to look *up* at him while he sat hunched over in that tiny plastic seat.

“Sure there isn’t a weight limit on that thing, Sarge?”

Bucky clapped a hand over his knee. “Welp, it hasn’t let me down yet.”

“Don’t speak so soon, Buck.” As the larger man readjusted to face him, the chair let out a very loud

creak.

Steve laughed, but Bucky went silent for a moment. He bit his lip and shook his head. “I’m real sorry, Stevie. I mean it. I—Sam and I didn’t know it would upset you so much having us here so sudden like this—”

“Oh shut up, Buck.” Steve kneeled down so they were at eye level. He sighed, “I’m not mad. I just—it caught me off guard, y’know? This is kinda my *thing* now, now that I’m not...” He gestured at Bucky, then over at Sam, who was helping out at the back wall, in charge of the stapler. “And I like having my own thing, it feels good.”

Bucky nodded, “I get it, bud. I’m sorry we intruded on your space like that.”

“Oh no, Buck, it’s fine, really! I mean, seeing you with the kids today—” He glanced over at Aaron, who was bravely conversing with the rest of the kids at the table *on his own*, complimenting their drawings and talking about how *cool* it is meeting Captain America.

“It was really sweet, Buck. I mean it. And the kids loved it! I’m really happy you guys came out today.”

Bucky scoffed, scratching the back of his neck and looking down into his lap. *Like he used to do when he got embarrassed in front of a dame.*

“Well, if Candace lets us, we could probably come back again sometime.”

“Y’mean if she’s not sick of you and your antics riling up her classroom?”

“Hey! You said it yourself, the kids loved us!”

“Maybe it’s cuz you and Sam *are* a couple of kids, ya big dope.”

“Takes one to know one, punk.”

“Jerk!”

“Mission report, Sergeant? How are those dishes coming along?”

They had just finished up dinner. Steve had whipped up some of his famous “Ma’s Macaroni” (referring to *Sam’s* ma, not his), and now Bucky was stuck standing at the kitchen sink, elbow-deep in frothy dishwater with a huge grimace on his face.

“Y’know, I’m pretty sure Shuri said something about not getting this thing wet...”

“*James Barnes*, we live in the *future*, goddamnit. If you can manage to drop your phone in the toilet every other night before bed and still turn it on the next morning, I’m pretty sure a bionic vibranium arm made by the smartest kid on God’s Green Earth can handle a little dish soap.”

Bucky turned and grumbled something under his breath about it being *a lot* of dish soap, but Steve quickly retaliated by snatching the tea towel hanging by the oven door and swatting his ass with it.

“OUCH! Hey, that hurt!” Bucky whined, pouting at him.

“Oh sure it did, soldier,” Steve scoffed as he turned to exit the kitchen. “Now quit yapping and get your ass back to work! Captain’s orders.” He shot Buck a wink as he disappeared into the sunroom and Bucky smirked back at him.

“Yessir, *Captain.*”

Steve chuckled as he rounded the corner into his art studio, then stopped. He stood a little past the archway, just admiring the view of the sunset painting the garden in pinks and blues. *Just beautiful, like a watercolor come to life.*

He stepped towards the back door and slid on his red, white, and blue crocs that Sam had gotten him as a joke for his birthday (“Old men *love* wearing crocs while they put around in the backyard, isn’t that right, Fury?”). Needless to say, the joke went over a lot better with Steve than it had with Nick.

The air was warm, but the breeze was cool and fresh. Smelled like the Atlantic, just like it always had. Steve stopped on the edge of the porch and closed his eyes. He could hear birds, and wind chimes tinkling, and the sounds of children’s laughter drifting over from the neighbor’s yard, just over the wooden fence. Steve looked over his right shoulder and saw a pair of siblings, a boy and a girl, dashing about in the grass, chasing each other in circles, completely carefree. Watching them gave Steve a sense of weightlessness that settled at the center of his chest.

After a few minutes of running and tumbling, as the sun was beginning to bow below the old oak tree that stretched its branches across both their yards, a young woman’s voice came from the direction of the house next door.

“Alright you two, time to come in! Your mother brought home ice cream!”

The two siblings cheered, then, with just as much energy as before, bounded up the wooden porch steps and into the house. Just as they made their way inside, Steve watched as another woman came up to the sliding door and leaned out. She wrapped her arm around the first woman’s waist and gave her a peck on the cheek, before the two of them also disappeared into the neighboring brownstone, and the tiny world of the garden returned to silence. The birds had gone to sleep in the nest, the wind had died down, but that weightless feeling growing in between Steve’s ribs remained.

After watching the sun finally retreat below the horizon, Steve slid open the back door and stepped inside. As he was kicking off his crocs, he heard Bucky talking on the phone in the kitchen.

“Yeah, I know sir, but are you sure we don’t have any other intel? I mean we’d be running into a gunfight blind at this point—yes sir, yes sir I understand...” He sighed, tapping his sock-covered foot anxiously as he stood there in the kitchen, alone. Steve watched silently, leaned up against the archway, peering into the room from the threshold.

“I understand, sir. Tomorrow. 0500 hours. I’ll be there.” He hung up.

Then he tossed the phone halfway across the room and the case went flying.

Steve jolted upright, startled by the sound of plastic hitting hardwood.

That’s when Bucky noticed him watching.

“Shit, *fuck*, god, Stevie, I’m sorry baby.” He wiped his right hand down his face, then back up to tangle his fingers in his hair.

Steve stayed put at the edge of the sunroom.

“It’s fine, Buck, you just scared me there for a second.”

Bucky let out a truly exhausted sigh. “I understand that but it doesn’t make it okay.” He kept his eyes away from Steve, instead sauntering to the other side of the room and slowly crouching down to pick up the phone. Steve just stood there and watched as he snapped the case back on. He could have sworn he saw the outline of Bucky’s muscles through his skin, pulled too taught and worn out over the years. Every fiber stretched thin, threadbare.

That’s when Steve approached him, slowly, arms crossed over his chest.

“Bucky?”

Gradually, Bucky turned around. Steve was looking up at him with wet eyes.

“*Bucky.*” He reached out a hand and gently rested it on Bucky’s left arm. Steve knew that Bucky could feel the warmth of his fingers through the new prosthetic.

“*Steve—*” He swung around and pulled Steve tight against his chest, resting his chin on the top of Steve’s head. Steve melted into the soft cotton of his t-shirt, took in his smell, the sound of his heartbeat—quick, but steady. He took it all in with a deep breath, down to the bottom of his lungs. But the pocket of air was still inside him, and he couldn’t control it as bubbled up out of his lips and burst forth into a sob. It was choking him, he felt like he was drowning in Bucky’s arms. But Bucky held on strong, firm, *reliable*, rubbing broad circles into his back, shushing him, swaying them together as one unit across the cold hardwood floor. Steve felt a small tremor, and then something wet touching the top of his head, but he said nothing. They just stood there, for who knows how long, holding each other’s warmth inside a space so small that their love could have caught fire.

“What time are you leaving tomorrow?”

“Uh...briefing is at 0500, so probably 4:30?”

It was almost ten o’clock. They were tucked into bed, Steve resting his head on Bucky’s chest, listening to him breathe. The room returned to not necessarily a comfortable silence, but an amicable one. Bucky groaned, and adjusted his chin and his left arm, which was cradling Steve to his side. Steve felt him lean over. He reached around with his right hand to rest it on Steve’s cheek, then started planting gentle kisses along Steve’s hairline, then slowly down to the spot between his brows.

“Hey Buck?” Steve voice was so soft it was almost imperceptible in the dark room. *Buck always used to say I was like a cat during the day and a dormouse at night.*

“Mhm?” Bucky moaned, his lips pressed against Steve’s forehead.

Steve didn’t know what had overcome him but in that moment the bubble burst out of him again.

“Would you ever wanna have kids?”

Steve felt Bucky's entire body stiffen beneath him, every muscle contracting and freezing all at once. Steve knew instinctively that if he glanced at his phone clock on the bedside table, it would read out that time had somehow frozen too.

Bucky let out a deep sigh, and his bones rattled like the bones of an old wooden house caught in a storm. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, raspy and warm.

"Honestly, Stevie, I'd love that." The words tumbled out of him like he was letting out a breath after being underwater. Like he'd been down there for some time and had just come up for air. "But I—I don't think that's possible, with the job I've got."

The words looked like they stung coming out of his throat and they stung in Steve's ears. He twisted a little further underneath the covers, a little closer to Bucky's chest, as though they weren't already blending into one another beneath the sheets.

Silence, again, for a beat. And then,

"Would you ever...retire?"

Steve felt Bucky's head as it shot up, and turned his own head cautiously. Bucky was looking down at him, looking at him in a way he had honest-to-god never seen before in his entire life. Steve felt the air bubble in his chest slowly growing again, but this time, it wasn't an empty feeling, it felt *warm*.

Then, Bucky smiled, and he laughed and shook his head.

"To raise a family with *you*, doll?" He leaned down and gave Steve a tender kiss on the lips. "In a heartbeat!"

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

Meet you up there (where the path runs straight and high)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/28097379) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/28097379>.

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| Category: | Gen |
| Fandom: | Spider-Man (Tom Holland Movies) , Marvel Cinematic Universe |
| Relationship: | Peter Parker & Tony Stark , Pepper Potts/Tony Stark , Steve Rogers/James "Bucky" Barnes (implied) |
| Character: | Peter Parker , Tony Stark , Pepper Potts , Morgan Stark (Marvel Cinematic Universe) , May Parker (Spider-Man) , Happy Hogan , Steve Rogers , Harley Keener , Ned Leeds , Michelle Jones , Other Avengers , Red Skull |
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Meet you up there (where the path runs straight and high)

by [bluesweatshirt](#)

Summary

“So, what—you’re not even going to *try* to get Tony back?” Peter shouted, furious. “You’re a bunch of cowards!”

The effect of his anger was probably diminished by the way his voice cracked tearfully.

“I’m sorry, Queens,” Steve said, his expression compassionate. “Tony died so that we could win. We have to respect that.”

Peter gritted his teeth and looked away.

Or, an Endgame fix-it fic.

Notes

Hi all! A couple of notes before the story:

First and foremost, this fic DOES CONTAIN CHARACTER DEATH. I don’t want to say who it is here because it’ll ruin the ending, but I will put the character death in the end

notes if you want to check it out before reading. I promise you this story does have a happy ending for Iron Dad. Tony does come back to life, and Peter doesn't die! But yeah, someone else dies in this story. Read the end notes if you want to know who it is ahead of time.

Second of all, this story does contain discussions of characters wanting to sacrifice their lives to bring Tony back to life. I wouldn't consider this to be suicidal ideation, because these characters don't want to die; they just really want to bring Tony back. But if reading that kind of material might be triggering to you, this might not be the right fic for you.

Also, if there are MCUverse details that are incorrect, please just kindly ignore them. I'm a little fuzzy on the movies and I didn't have time to rewatch all of them to prepare for this fic. For example, I'm straight up just making stuff up about how the Infinity Stones work to suit my needs. I also changed little things, like Morgan being almost 6 instead of almost 5, May surviving the blip, and Tony and Pepper still owning Stark Tower. Just...overall, please suspend your disbelief :)

The title comes from the song "Going to California" by Led Zeppelin, a song that I'm absolutely certain Tony would've introduced Peter to at some point.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It's been very rare to have known you, very strange and wonderful.

-F. Scott Fitzgerald

"But...we could do it again!" Peter argued, crossing his arms in frustration. "We could go back and save him!"

The assembled Avengers exchanged glances with one another, each of them seeming to say *no, you tell the kid the bad news.*

In the end, it was Steve Rogers who did it.

"Look, Peter," he explained gently. "I thought about that too. But like Dr. Strange said, there was only one single path that ended with us winning, and this was that outcome. If we go back—"

"But we wouldn't change anything! Someone else could wield the gauntlet. Hell, I could do it, I've got radioactive powers," Peter babbled.

Steve shook his head grimly. "Even small changes could drastically affect the outcome of the battle. If we went back in time and tried to do it again, and somebody sneezed at the wrong time, it could change everything. Thanos would survive."

"So, what—you're not even going to *try* to get Tony back?" Peter shouted, furious. "You're a bunch of cowards!"

The effect of his anger was probably diminished by the way his voice cracked tearfully.

“I’m sorry, Queens,” Steve said, his expression compassionate. “Tony died so that we could win. We have to respect that.”

Peter gritted his teeth and looked away.

There had been a fire once.

It happened a month or two before the fateful MOMA field trip, when he was swinging home, done with his patrol for the night. He had been thinking about the Spanish test scheduled for the following day, and he hadn’t packed enough web fluid. He smelled the smoke from nearly a mile away.

He saved a teenager, but he’d been too late to save the boy’s mother.

Before he knew it, he was standing on the roof of the Tower, not sure how he’d gotten there. Karen was talking in his ear, telling him that Mr. Stark was waiting for him in the penthouse. Peter continued to stand on the ledge of the roof, staring blankly into the darkness, until Mr. Stark found him.

“Pete,” Mr. Stark called, something tight in his voice. “Get down from there.”

Peter turned around and Mr. Stark’s arm shot out and grabbed onto him, as though he was afraid that Peter might go toppling off the building.

Peter blinked in surprise, allowing Mr. Stark to pull him off the ledge. “I wasn’t going to jump,” he said.

“Okay, well, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t accidentally fall either.”

Peter was too lost to think of a witty comeback. He remained silent and allowed Mr. Stark to steer him into the penthouse and down to Peter’s guest room.

“Shower first, then food. Okay, Spider-Kid?”

Peter shrugged, but he didn’t protest when Mr. Stark directed him to the bathroom.

“I’m going to order us some tacos. Tell FRIDAY if you need anything, okay?”

Peter shrugged again.

Mr. Stark knocked on the bathroom door an indeterminable amount of time later, and when Peter didn’t answer after the third try, he tentatively cracked the door open.

Peter was sitting on the rug next to the shower, staring straight ahead sightlessly. He hadn’t moved in half an hour. The burns on his hands and arms were beginning to heal, but all he could smell and taste was smoke and ash and burning flesh.

“Hey, kid,” Mr. Stark said, his voice quiet. “Come on, shower time.”

That was something Peter appreciated about Tony Stark. Sometimes, he just took charge and told Peter what to do. Some days, Peter was so tired of trying to be independent, of trying to make all the right decisions on his own.

Peter slowly lifted his eyes to meet his mentor’s gaze, wearily pressing the spider on his chest to

make the suit retract. That single act seemed to sap all his remaining energy.

Mr. Stark clapped him on the shoulder, stepping around him to fiddle with the shower settings. It should have been awkward but it wasn't. Peter numbly undressed down to his boxers and stepped into the warm spray.

Before Mr. Stark left, he grabbed the bottle of shampoo and wordlessly squeezed some onto his palm. Peter jerked in surprise when Mr. Stark reached into the shower and began to wash Peter's hair, gently scrubbing at his scalp until the water ran red and brown.

Peter caught himself thinking that this was something that Ben would've done, if he'd lived to see Peter's Spider-Man days.

"Thanks, Mr. Stark," he mumbled quietly, thinking of all the other urgent things that were probably waiting for Mr. Stark—SI business, the Accords, the other Avengers—and here he was on a Tuesday night, his t-shirt getting soaked by the spray of the shower, all for Peter's benefit.

"Pete, I'm washing your hair right now. I think we're at the point where you can call me Tony."

(This wasn't the first time that Mr. Stark had tried to get him to use the name Tony. It wouldn't be until Mr. Stark was dying that the name would finally fall from his lips, unbidden, and by then it was too late, anyway.)

Peter just shrugged, unable to speak further.

Mr. Stark left the bathroom to find him some clean clothes and Peter finished up his shower and got dressed. He curled up in his usual spot on the couch and mechanically ate his way through 7 tacos.

"I want to bandage that burn so it doesn't get infected," Mr. Stark said, grabbing a first aid kit and indicating a nasty blister on Peter's left wrist.

Peter obediently held out his wrist, too tired for his usual arguments that he was fine and didn't need medical attention.

But Mr. Stark's expression was so serious and careful as he rubbed antibiotic ointment on the burn that Peter felt his stomach tighten with guilt.

"Leave it, Mr. Stark," he whispered, suddenly close to tears. "I deserve it. It was my fault—I was careless and I didn't pack enough web fluid. If I had, I could have—I could have gotten to her on time—"

Mr. Stark's fingers were closed around Peter's hand so that he could hold it steady to apply a bandage. His thumb started to rub small circles against Peter's palm. The simple act was his undoing.

"Now s-some poor kid doesn't have his mom because of me. And it's all my f-fault, just like...just like Ben."

Mr. Stark froze. Peter rarely talked about Ben with anyone except Aunt May, but he could never bring himself to admit to her that he felt responsible for Ben's death.

"Peter," Mr. Stark said, his voice sharp. "I don't want to ever hear you take responsibility for things that aren't your fault again. That apartment was on fire because the landlord didn't follow the building codes or because someone was being an idiot while cooking, not because of you."

And...look, your Aunt May told me what happened to your uncle, and you certainly weren't the one to pull out a gun during a mugging—”

“But it was my fault that Ben was out that night! He was looking for *me*, Mr. Stark.”

“Look, kid,” Mr. Stark shook his head. “You told me when I first met you that if you can stop bad things from happening, then you have a responsibility to do so. That still doesn't mean that you are responsible for the bad things in the first place.”

He said this with such conviction that Peter almost believed it. He *wanted* to believe it. He was so tired of remembering Ben with fear and anxiety, of dreaming that Ben was angry with him for causing his death. He missed the happy memories that he had with his uncle - the trips to the beach, the movie nights, the car rides to and from school.

“I miss him, Mr. Stark,” Peter whispered, and to his horror, a tear slipped down his cheek. “I really miss him.”

The thumb pressed against his hand resumed its small circles.

“I know you do, bud,” Mr. Stark said. “I know.”

(After everything was over and Thanos was gone, everyone communed at Stark Tower. Peter reunited with May, who had survived the Snap, but quickly excused himself to take a shower.

He couldn't get over the fact that it had been five years, but it felt like only a few hours. Peter was confused and utterly overwhelmed, but he was also sweaty and dirty from his trip to space. Showering felt much easier than trying to comprehend the Snap—or the blip, or whatever the hell they were calling it.

His mind was blank as he stripped out of his suit—the one that Mr. Stark made for him, *oh god*, he was never going to see Mr. Stark again—Mr. Stark—Mr. Stark—

His mind was like a skipping CD, stuck on that one line.

This time, there was nobody there to make sure the water was warm and to wash the blood and ash out of Peter's hair.

“FRIDAY,” Peter gasped, suddenly dropping to the floor of the shower, wrapping his arms around his knees. “Initiate soundproofing.”

When he was certain that the AI had soundproofed Peter's suite, Peter began to cry, quiet sobs that gradually crescendoed into the loud keening of an injured animal or a frightened child.

He thought about the end of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry destroying Dumbledore's office and screaming.

I've had enough, I've seen enough, I want out, I want it to end, I don't care anymore!

The water ran red and Peter didn't wash his hair.)

He couldn't decide if it was better to be the one to die or the one who was left behind.

Everyone who had remained after the Snap seemed so old and weary, so worn by the events of the past five years that Peter was deeply grateful that he hadn't had to live through the experience of

losing half of his friends and family.

At the same time, however, he had missed *so much* by being dead. He had missed May dating Happy. He had missed Flash apparently growing into a semi-decent human being. (He found a long and emotional email in his inbox from two years ago where Flash wrote that he was sorry for bullying Peter and that he wished he could take it all back.)

Most of all, he had missed *Morgan*—her birth, her first smile, her first steps, her first words.

Morgan was one of the only things that kept him going after Mr. Stark's death. Kids grieved differently; Peter knew that from firsthand experience. Morgan was sad and she missed her dad every single day, but she still wanted to play. She still needed to be loved and looked after.

Still, Peter was rather startled when, after Mr. Stark's funeral, Morgan marched up to him, grabbed his hand, and dragged him over to the little tent where she kept her toys and stuffed animals.

He watched in bewilderment as she wordlessly disappeared into her tent, rummaging around. It was surreal when this little girl with Tony's dark hair and Tony's exact eyes stuck her head back out of the tent, clutching a stuffed penguin.

"This is Bartholomew," she announced seriously. "You can play with him."

"Er—thank you," Peter blinked, accepting the stuffed animal. "Hi, by the way. I'm Peter."

Morgan narrowed her eyes at him as if he were being particularly dense. It was such a Tony expression that Peter's throat tightened and for a second he couldn't breathe.

"Obviously," she said, rolling her eyes. "Anyway, I'm going to be Princess Seraphina." She showed him another stuffed animal, a frog with a ballerina outfit and a crown.

"Okay," Peter said slowly. "Hey, uh, you know who I am?"

Morgan nodded, carefully fixing the ballerina frog's crown. "Yep. There's a picture of you in the kitchen. And Daddy told me all about you."

"He did? What did he say?"

Morgan shrugged. "He told me all about Spider-Man. And about how you're my big brother, but you had to go away."

She said it so nonchalantly, but it felt like a kick to the gut. *You're my big brother*. Tony had said that. Tony had told her about him, about Peter and about Spider-Man. He hadn't said uncle or friend. He'd said that Peter was Morgan's *brother*. Like Peter was—like he was Tony's—

"Well," Morgan said, looking up at him curiously. "Aren't you going to play with Bartholomew? He has to come rescue Princess Seraphina from the evil wizard!"

It felt like one final gift from Tony. Someone who needed Peter. Someone Peter could take care of, someone to distract him from the gnawing hole in his chest.

Was this how May had felt about him after Ben's death?

"Oh, yeah, of course. But Bartholomew got hit by the evil wizard's curse, and now he can only walk upside down and sing opera!" Peter made the penguin mime walking upside down on the roof of the tent, singing in a horrible falsetto.

He was rewarded with a blinding grin and a giggle from Morgan. The knot of grief loosened slightly.

There was a boy at the funeral.

He was about Peter's age, sharp-eyed and a few inches taller than Peter.

After Morgan returned to her mom's side, Peter wandered down to the dock. He didn't want to stand awkwardly on the fringes of the funeral, watching everyone try to contain their grief with composed smiles.

The sun was beginning to sink behind the horizon. Peter was cold, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Mr. Stark knew that Peter couldn't thermoregulate; if he were here, he'd make sure Peter had a warmer jacket on—

“You're Peter,” a voice said from behind him. The boy.

“You're the second person who's guessed that today,” Peter said, trying for a grin but failing.

“It wasn't a guess; I knew. Tony told me about you.”

It clicked then—Extremis. Peter had broken his arm on patrol once and had been confined to MedBay for the night. To pass the time, Tony told him about the Mandarin incident.

“You're Harley Keener!”

Harley grinned, dropping to sit next to Peter. “In the flesh.”

For the first time since Tony died, Peter felt the familiar flash of excitement in his gut that he got whenever he met somebody who had helped save the world.

It faded quickly when he remembered why he and Harley were meeting now.

“So this sucks ass,” Harley said, mirroring Peter's thoughts. “I always knew we were going to meet, but I thought it would be during some epic lab weekend, and we'd terrify Tony with our combined genius.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “At least we're both closer in line to inherit Stark Industries now.”

Peter blinked at him, startled.

Harley nudged his shoulder. “I'm joking, Parker, relax. Did Tony forget to mention that I'm a huge asshole?” He laughed, but the expression in his eyes was hollow.

Peter tried to smile. “I believe his exact words were ‘impressively dickish for an 11-year-old.’”

“Yeah, and the way he described you was ‘about as terrifying as a fruit bat.’”

“Rude,” Peter protested. “I'd like to think I'm at least as frightening as an eastern small-footed myotis.”

Harley blinked at him. “Tony was right. You are a fucking nerd.”

“Yeah, and Tony was right about you too. You are a huge dick.”

They grinned at each other and exchanged cell phone numbers so that they could keep in touch when Harley returned to Tennessee.

By that point, darkness had truly fallen. Pepper came down to the dock to usher them inside. She wrapped an arm around Peter's shoulder, but Harley hung back.

There was something at once very aloof and very vulnerable about him.

He reminded Peter of Tony in that way.

HK: Hey, Parker, it's me. You know, your future MIT roommate.

PP: And they were roommates!

HK: Oh my god, they were roommates.

Peter didn't understand how Pepper could still allow him in her house and in her life.

Everyone had snapped back into existence in early January, and schools had shut down for the rest of the academic year to give everyone time to find housing, reunite with their families, and adjust and heal from the past five years.

This left Peter with months of unstructured time ahead of him and nowhere to be.

He spent most of his days at the lake house so that he could be close to Morgan. He'd overheard Pepper and May having a whispered conversation about this arrangement. Both of them agreed that it "was good for Peter and Morgan to spend time together."

Every Friday, Happy picked him up and drove him back to the city. He spent the weekend with May, patrolled in Queens and hung out with Ned and MJ, and got a ride back to the lake house on Sunday nights from May, who sometimes stayed over.

Everyone seemed happy with this arrangement, but Peter still felt like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop. For Ms. Potts—who was now Mrs. Stark but was still Ms. Potts in his head—to reach the end of her rope and rightfully blame him for Tony's death.

Clint was the one who told Peter that his memory had been responsible for Tony deciding to reverse the Snap. He knew that Clint was a father to three kids of his own; that Clint had probably told Peter about this so that he would know that Mr. Stark had cared enough about his protégé to undertake such a dangerous mission on his behalf.

He also knew that Rhodey and Steve Rogers hadn't wanted him to know. They'd exchanged glances and winced when Clint had told Peter, perhaps because they understood Peter better and knew that he would take the news less as proof that Tony had cared about him and more as a reason that he should be blaming himself for Tony's death.

Rhodey and Steve were right.

And surely Ms. Potts knew that Mr. Stark had allowed himself to get mixed up in time travel and the gauntlet to save Peter.

She was unfailingly kind to him, and it was amazing that she encouraged his budding bond with

Morgan, but he still stayed an arm's length away from her at all times, never fully allowing his shoulders to relax in her presence or his words to flow freely. He tried to stay small and harmless whenever he was at the lake house, always tidying up and volunteering to babysit.

Please don't send me away, Ms. Potts, he wanted to beg sometimes. This is the only place where I still feel close to him.

Peter knew it was risky to keep sneaking down to Mr. Stark's lab at night for this exact reason. If Ms. Potts found out that Peter was messing with Mr. Stark's things and invading her dead husband's space, surely it would be the final straw.

But Peter couldn't sleep.

His sleep had been blissfully dreamless for the first few weeks after his return from Titan. He'd woken up frequently throughout the night with a sense of dread and anxiety, but his actual sleep had been uninterrupted by nightmares.

That changed by the end of the first month. He began to revisit every bad thing that had ever happened to him—Ben's death, the building falling on him, the agony of turning to dust. Tony and Ben frequently appeared in these dreams, and they were both angry with Peter.

We died for you! And for what? There's no way your life could measure up to either of our lives.

After you let Ben die, you really thought you deserved another father figure?

He'd wake up, gasping and crying and wishing so hard that he felt like his atoms might break apart that he would look up and see Mr. Stark's familiar silhouette in the doorway and hear his familiar voice, raspy with sleep.

You okay, Pete? Nightmare?

The first time he snuck down to the lake house's lab, his only intention was to disable the alerts that were set up on FRIDAY. The last thing he wanted was for FRIDAY to wake up Ms. Potts and tell her that Peter was having nightmares. He planned to get in and get out as quickly as possible so that Ms. Potts wouldn't know he'd been down there and so that he wouldn't have to actually look around and think about where he was.

He'd desperately tried not to think about the fact that Tony had set up Peter's guest room at the lake house with the same health and safety monitoring protocols that had been in place at the compound and the Tower. He tried not to think about the fact that the lab door automatically opened for him when he placed his palm on the door, recognizing his fingerprints, as if Tony had been certain that Peter would be here one day.

He stepped into the lab and felt his heart stop. The familiar smells of coffee, motor oil, and a hint of cologne almost brought him to his knees. He was assaulted by a sudden wave of memories—he and Tony sprinting around the lab at the compound during a mock lightsaber duel. The time they'd stayed up all night trying to make a modification to Peter's suit and had both fallen asleep at the lab bench. Endless nights of coffee for Mr. Stark and pizza for Peter, their heads bent close together over the wiring of Rhodey's suit or Peter's web shooters.

He pulled up FRIDAY'S programming and quickly disabled the alerts for his bedroom.

He turned to leave the lab, but his feet guided him over to the couch instead. An old MIT sweatshirt was crumpled next to a fleece blanket, and Peter was drawn to it like a moth to flame.

Before he could stop himself, he pulled it over his head, allowing Mr. Stark's scent to wrap around him like an embrace.

He needed to get up and go upstairs—he needed to get up and go upstairs—he needed to—

Peter was asleep in seconds.

HK: What do you know about this quantum realm stuff?

PP: idk i was blipped when they were figuring it all out, but basically the Avengers went back in time and took all the Infinity Stones to make a different version of the Infinity gauntlet

HK: Where are the stones now?

PP: ...

PP: Why do you ask?

PP: Omg please don't steal them and take over the universe

PP: Let's at least finish our bachelor's degrees before we attempt world domination

PP: ...If any SHIELD agents are reading this text thread, that was a JOKE.

PP: Harley?

Peter had watched *The Land Before Time* once as a kid, and he didn't remember much of the plot, but he knew that he had loved it because it was about dinosaurs. That was why he made the mistake of suggesting it one night when he was babysitting Morgan.

It had been about a month since Tony's death, and Peter and May had finally convinced Pepper to take a night off and go out for a breath of fresh air. After much protesting on Pepper's part, May had dragged her to the nearby town to get pedicures and drink mojitos, and Peter was watching Morgan.

About fifteen minutes into the movie, Peter realized that he had made a serious miscalculation. He watched with rising alarm as Little Foot's mother died trying to save him from a tyrannosaurus rex attack.

He was horrified to see that Morgan was crying, and even more horrified to realize that he was *also* crying.

"Sorry, Morgie!" He exclaimed nervously, jumping to his feet. He hadn't remembered this part, because he'd seen this movie before his parents died. It hadn't meant much to him at the time, but now—

"I miss Daddy," Morgan whispered tremulously, sounding far too old for a 5-year-old.

Peter's heart clenched. "I know, Morgs, I know, here, just let me turn this off and we can watch something else; we can watch *Emperor's New Groove*—"

"No!" Morgan shouted. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him defiantly. "I want to

see what happens next, Petey.”

“I really think we should just watch something else—”

Morgan let out a frustrated wail. “You’re acting like Mommy! I know Daddy is dead. He’s never coming back and I want to watch the movie!”

Peter froze. He had never thought about being a big brother before he met Morgan. He knew that he wasn’t very good at it so far, since he spent a significant portion of his time these days just trying not to burst into tears, and during his first attempt at babysitting he had made his little sister watch a movie about dead parents.

But he also knew that he understood Morgan pretty well.

And maybe...maybe Morgan didn’t want to watch a happy movie. Maybe Morgan wanted to watch a movie where somebody else lost their parents and was sad about it. Maybe she didn’t want to watch *Emperor’s New Groove*, where everybody lived and was silly and happy at the end.

He turned away from the TV. “Okay, Morgie,” he said slowly. “We’ll keep watching. But you let me know if it’s too sad, and we’ll turn it off, okay?”

Morgan nodded. Within ten minutes, she was giggling at the dinosaurs’ antics as they tried to find their way to the Great Valley.

Peter watched her nervously when the movie came to an end. Little Foot and his friends were reunited with their families. Little Foot’s mother was gone, but he found his grandparents and was going to live happily ever after with them.

“Oh,” Morgan said softly when the credits rolled. “I was hoping he was going to get to the Great Valley and see his mom there.”

“Yeah,” Peter agreed. “Me too.”

She curled into his side, and that was how Pepper found them an hour later.

Peter visited the Tower a few times a month for training with the Avengers. They were still rebuilding the compound, so the Avengers had moved back into the old Stark Industries building.

“Nice work, Queens!” Steve called as he sparred with Peter.

Peter didn’t reply; he just ducked his chin and kept on fighting, spinning around with a well-aimed kick to Steve’s jaw.

Steve managed to duck and evade him at the last second, but he could see that it had been a close call.

“Keep those elbows tucked, kid,” Sam Wilson called from the sidelines.

Peter obediently tucked his elbows in and silently advanced again.

Over Steve’s shoulder, he saw Clint and Rhodey exchange a look.

Peter knew that if he wanted them to think he was okay, he needed to talk more. Peter *always* talked while he was fighting. It was one of the things everyone ribbed him for, but it helped him

keep his focus and direct his nervous energy.

Plus, it annoyed a lot of criminals.

Nowadays, he fought silently.

His second of tuning into Clint and Rhodey's reactions cost him. Steve landed a light jab on his ribs.

Peter used his agility to leap up and stick to the ceiling of the gym, swinging his legs so that he could smash Steve's nose with his knee.

He managed to pull back at the last second, since they were just sparring, but a small part of him was tempted to follow through. It was the part of him that remembered the dark bruises Mr. Stark had come back from Siberia with.

He could claim it was an accident, after all. They would all understand.

He felt horrible the second that the thought crossed his mind, and he knew that he needed to tap out of the fight.

"Truce," he called, swinging gracefully down from the ceiling.

Bucky waited patiently behind Steve with a water bottle. The two of them were practically attached at the hip nowadays. "Good fight, Peter," Steve said, grinning at him and patting him on the shoulder.

Peter wanted to hate the guy, but he couldn't quite manage it.

After dinner, the team all drifted apart to complete whatever tasks and hobbies they wanted.

Rhodey and Bucky said goodnight and disappeared into their respective rooms, while Clint and Scott roped Wanda into a Mario Kart tournament.

Peter grabbed a book from his backpack and curled up in the study to read while he waited for Happy to come pick him up and drive him to May's apartment for the next few days.

He'd found the book in Tony's lab and had grabbed it out of curiosity when he was packing for the weekend. It wasn't like Tony to read much, let alone to read physical books. It was a cheap paperback called *The Road*, well-worn and dog-eared and written by somebody named Cormac McCarthy. Tony must have read it often, but Peter couldn't remember ever seeing it in the lab before the snap.

Now, as he curled up on the sofa in the study, bathed in warm lamplight, he slowly opened the book to the first page. Tony had turned these pages and read these words over and over again. Whatever message this book conveyed, Tony had carried it with him. Feeling almost reverent, he brushed his fingers against the first page and began to read:

Chapter 1

When he awoke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. His hand rose and

fell softly with each precious breath.

Peter quickly got absorbed in the story. It was about a father and son, because of *course* it was. They were living through the aftermath of the apocalypse, and the father was trying to get his son to safety and a warm climate, all while they were freezing and running out of food and trying to evade evil cannibals. They walked along the road together every day, pushing their belongings in a shopping cart and barely clinging to life.

Peter would read a few pages and then look away, feeling his sadness wrapping around him like a physical thing, so thick and suffocating that he almost couldn't breathe. But every time he tried to set the book aside, something about it drew him back in.

He went on this way for about an hour, and was almost grateful when voices outside on the balcony interrupted his concentration. He carefully marked his page and returned the book to his backpack.

He didn't like to use his enhanced hearing to spy on people, but the harsh tones drew him in. It was Bruce and Sam and Steve whispering tensely to one another.

"I finished the machine last week. I don't understand why we're waiting. Steve, you need to return the Stones before something happens to them!" That was Bruce's voice.

Peter sat up straighter, thinking about Harley's text messages about the quantum realm.

"I know, Bruce," Steve sighed. "I'll do it...I just...I need a few months. Just to recover from all of this. I swear, I'll do it then."

Peter frowned to himself. Steve sounded...strange. After all, Captain America was known for being the most dependable human being alive. Not that Peter really knew the guy at all, but he knew that it wasn't normal for Steve Rogers to sound nervous. Or to procrastinate on fulfilling his duties.

"Steve, it has to be done soon. If the Stones fall into the wrong hands, it'll be Thanos all over again. But maybe even worse. Who knows?" Sam said urgently.

"I know, Sam. All I ask is for a few more weeks. I understand that it's time-sensitive."

Sam sounded like he was being careful when he spoke next. "Look, Steve, I don't blame you for being tired. We've all been through hell. I know it hasn't been easy with Tony and Nat's deaths. Why don't you just rest, like you want to? I'll take the Stones back in time and put them back where they belong."

"No," Steve said firmly. "I'm going to do it."

Peter had to stop listening then, because Happy was calling his phone and telling him to come outside.

Peter sat in the back of Happy's car and stared out the window.

He looked down at the text message he'd been drafting. He really hoped he wasn't making a mistake. He knew that it was a terrible idea to encourage whatever thoughts Harley was having about the Stones, but he couldn't deny the spark of niggling curiosity he felt about the Stones' potential.

“What’s going on back there, kid? A quiet Spider-Kid is a frightening Spider-Kid.”

Peter met Happy’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Aw, Happy, you’re frightened of me? I’m honored.”

Happy rolled his eyes. “No, I’m frightened of whatever expensive mess you’re going to cause with your plotting and scheming.”

Peter let out a laugh. “Don’t worry, I’m not scheming or plotting.”

He told himself that this was just a harmless white lie.

“Then what gives, kid?”

He sighed. “I dreamed of training with the Avengers for my entire life. But now...I’m angry at them, Happy.”

Even though he knew it was unfair, he was angry with them for letting Tony die, for guiding him down the path towards the quantum realm in the first place.

Why was Tony always the one who had to make the sacrifice?

“I know, kid,” Happy said. “But they weren’t responsible for Tony wielding the gauntlet. As soon as it became clear that there was a possibility Tony could bring you back, there was never anything that was going to stand in his way.”

“So...it’s not the Avengers fault, then, it’s just my fault,” Peter surmised grimly. “Great.” He let his head thunk against the cool glass of the window, even though he knew Happy hated when he did that.

“That’s not what I’m saying. It’s nobody’s fault.”

“Then...what do I do, Happy? How do I stop feeling so angry?”

Happy was quiet for a moment. “Look, you know I have no clue how to give advice about this kind of stuff. But...I think it’s okay to feel angry. Just don’t let it turn you bitter. Do whatever you can to make the situation bearable for yourself.”

“That was actually pretty good advice, Happy,” Peter mused. “Thanks.”

He sat up a little straighter and he felt more certain when he looked back down at his phone again.

Do whatever you can to make the situation bearable for yourself.

He pressed the send button and leaned his head back on the window, watching raindrops race down the glass.

PP: Avengers still have the Stones. Not sure where they’re keeping them atm. BB rebuilt quantum realm transporter. SR is going to return them to the past in a month or two.

He hated being in the city now.

He still wanted to make sure that he was there for the people of Queens. His home needed him, now more than ever. With so many people returning from the blip, pandemonium and chaos reigned freely in the city. Petty criminals were taking advantage of the widespread shock and confusion to get away with muggings and robberies. Terrified New Yorkers were going door-to-door and business-to-business, desperately searching for family members. Hungry people who didn't have jobs because they'd been dead for five years were rifling through dumpsters and shoplifting from convenience stores.

He supposed that an insane event like the disappearance of half of the global population brought out both the worst and the best in humanity.

Peter tried to sort out who was committing crimes because they needed help, and who was simply taking advantage of the situation. He webbed up the criminals and sent the rest to the shelters and relief stations scattered throughout the city. Pepper had made sure that Stark Industries was contributing substantial funding to the recovery efforts, and May had gotten a new job at a relief center just a few blocks away from their apartment building.

There was less stopping violent crime on his patrols, and more just—helping. Sitting on a park bench and listening to an old woman cry because she'd returned from the blip and found that her husband had died of a heart attack while she was gone. Finding a two-year-old girl who reminded him way too much of Morgan wandering alone in the middle of the street. Turning on his suit's external heater and swinging her to the nearest shelter while she giggled, not understanding that she had been gone for five years and that someone was probably desperately looking for her.

Mostly, he spent his patrol time just trying to avoid looking at the Iron Man murals and tributes that littered the city.

"How was patrol, baby?" May asked with a bright smile one evening as he clambered into the apartment through the kitchen window. He could've easily entered through his own bedroom window, but he liked to drop into the kitchen unannounced, because it never phased May but it always terrified Happy.

"Holy *shit*, kid, I told you to stop doing that!" Happy gasped, clutching his chest.

Peter grinned. "I brought churros," he said, handing the first one to Happy as a peace offering. He collapsed in between the two of them, settling comfortably into the couch cushions. May put an arm around his shoulders, and Happy gave him a once-over, looking for injuries.

This whole thing was new—the two of them being together, Happy being here in this apartment. But it was *good*. May smiled more, especially when Peter was here at the apartment or when she watched him playing with Morgan at the lake house. Happy was different from Ben in a lot of ways - he was gruffer and more pessimistic, certainly. But behind his grumpy exterior, he had the same bone-deep loyalty and earnestness as Ben.

He made May happy, and May hadn't tried to change who she was for him. She was still her weird, beautiful, amazing self, only now, she wasn't alone.

"You staying for dinner, Peter?" May asked. "I made meatloaf!"

Happy gave Peter a subtle look, shaking his head. Peter choked back a laugh. Some things never changed, and May's cooking was one of them.

"Oh, sorry, May—I'd love to try it, but I'm going out for dinner with Ned and MJ. I just came by to change and to say hi first."

“Okay, well, don’t stay out too late, honey. You might not have school right now, but your old aunt doesn’t want to wake up to the sound of shattering glass in the middle of the night again-”

“Hey! That was one time!” Peter protested. He had been so tired coming back from patrol once that he’d swung right into his closed bedroom window.

It hadn’t been his finest moment.

“You’re just like Tony. He broke so many penthouse windows with his suits—” Happy seemed to realize what he’d just said, his sentence dying off abruptly.

They were all silent for a long moment.

“I’m going to go change,” Peter announced hastily, trying to control his breathing.

He practically ran to his bedroom, shutting his door and leaning against it for a long moment.

It wasn’t Happy’s fault. Mr. Stark deserved to be remembered. He would’ve hated to know that Peter ran away and lost his shit every time the older man’s name was even mentioned. But it was just...too much, too soon.

He quickly changed out of his suit and into jeans and a t-shirt, not allowing himself to look around much. He loved visiting May, but there were ghosts in his room.

Ben, standing in the doorway.

School just called—it’s a snow day! Want to go ice skating at the park?

Mr. Stark, a faded bruise under his eye, sitting on Peter’s bed.

I gotta know, what’s your MO? What gets you out of that twin bed in the morning?

Peter’s dad, coming to pick him up from a sleepover at Ben and May’s.

Hey, Petey—did you have fun last night? I hope my useless brother fed you at least one vegetable while you were here!

Ben, carefully balancing a bowl of soup and a portable DVD player.

I’m sorry you don’t feel well, buddy—want to watch Star Wars?

Mr. Stark dropping him off after a patrol that ended poorly, dragging the desk chair next to Peter’s bed.

Get some sleep, Pete. I’m going to stick around for a while and monitor that concussion, okay?

They were gone now, all of them. Three men who would never see Peter go to college or get married or have his own children.

There was a tap on the door. “I’m sorry, Peter,” Happy called. “You okay?”

Peter let out a shaky exhale, opening his door. “Yeah, Happy—don’t worry about it, really. I’m fine.” He tried to smile reassuringly, but he wasn’t sure if it was successful based on Happy’s concerned expression.

He quickly stepped out of his room and closed the door behind him. Given Peter’s track record

with dead father figures, it was probably safest if Happy didn't go in there too.

The green glow of the digital clock next to Peter's bed read the time 3:12 AM.

Peter answered his phone, still half-asleep.

"Wha'?" He mumbled. "'M sleeping."

"Well, wake up, Parker," Harley said matter-of-factly on the other end.

"Keener?" He groaned, scrubbing at his eyes to wake himself up. "This better be an emergency, man."

"I've been thinking—"

"Uh-oh, that's not good."

"—we could get him back, Peter."

Peter was silent.

"There must be a way, with Dr. Banner's transporter."

Peter sighed. "I...I don't think that's a good idea, Harley. Dr. Strange was able to see millions of different possibilities for the confrontation with Thanos, and only one of them was correct. We found the correct one, and if we went back and changed things, Thanos would survive."

"That's just what all the adults are telling you so you don't go messing around with the quantum realm, Peter," Harley scoffed, reminding Peter of Tony in his stubbornness. "We're both just as smart as Tony was; I'm sure we can figure it out together."

But Peter had been thinking about this same idea all week, ever since he overheard the Avengers talking about returning the Stones, and it made him uneasy. "I think we need to think about this more before we decide," Peter said.

"What is there to think about?" Harley demanded. "Do you want Tony back or not?"

Of course I do, Peter wanted to say. I want him back more than I want to breathe or eat or sleep or be Spider-Man.

But...they were talking about going back and changing the past. That wasn't a responsibility to be undertaken lightly. How could he go back and take the gauntlet away from Tony, but not go back and warn his parents not to get on their flight? Or not go back and stay home like he was supposed to on the night of Ben's murder?

It would change everything if he stopped his family from dying. How could he do it?

And yet...how could he *not* do it?

"This is way bigger than us, Harley. Haven't you ever seen *The Butterfly Effect*?"

"Yeah, and I thought it was stupid. There are some risks worth taking, Peter. I didn't think I'd have to try and convince you of all people that that's the truth."

Harley bade him a rather frigid goodbye and hung up.

Peter remained awake until the sun rose and May came home from her shift, staring at the ceiling and pondering whether he had the right to go back and undo what Tony had deliberately chosen to do.

Peter started sleeping in Mr. Stark's lab almost every night that he stayed at the lake house. He'd usually doze off in his own bed around midnight, wake up at 2 with a nightmare, creep downstairs and ask FRIDAY to wake him up at 5:30 so he could sneak back upstairs before Ms. Potts woke up and noticed.

One morning, however, he awoke with sunlight streaming through the lab's skylight.

He jolted upright in terror. "FRI? What—what time is it?" He slurred.

"It's a little after 9," Pepper replied calmly.

She was standing a few feet away and rifling through a filing cabinet.

"You should go back to sleep, Peter," she continued, smiling at him. "I just came down here to get some SI paperwork."

"Oh god," Peter said, guilt sinking in his stomach like a stone. "I'm so sorry, Ms. Potts—"

"Peter," Pepper said, sounding mildly exasperated. "Honey, for the thirty millionth time, *please* call me Pepper."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Po—Pepper," Peter apologized, quickly stumbling to his feet. *Shit*, he groaned to himself, realizing that he was still wearing Mr. Stark's MIT sweatshirt. There was no subtle way for him to take it off now.

"You don't have anything to be sorry for, Peter. Tony would be thrilled to know that you were spending time down here. He made sure to transfer your credentials and your files here even when it seemed impossible to reverse the Snap."

"But I—I shouldn't be sleeping down here. I'm sorry. Ms. Potts, you must hate me—" He scrambled to pull the sweatshirt off, freezing when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Stop," she said. She was using her CEO voice; the one that made him instantly want to behave and have better posture. "Let's sit," she said with a sigh, patting the couch. "I was wondering when this was going to come up."

All of a sudden, this felt so much bigger than her catching him sleeping in the lab. The words started spilling out. "You can say it, Ms. Potts. I know that it's my fault that he's gone. I'm so sorry, I wish he'd never done it, I swear—"

"Peter," Pepper interrupted calmly. "Let's get one thing straight—it isn't your fault that Tony died. It's Thanos' fault, not yours."

Peter blinked at her in disbelief. "But...no, you don't understand! He never would've been in that situation if it weren't for me! Clint told me that Tony agreed to help with the time travel thing because of me."

Pepper smiled sadly. “Let me tell you something. I knew Tony for a long time, and he was a lost, arrogant asshole when I met him. But he grew and he changed so much. I’m so proud of the man he became. And that man was willing to sacrifice anything and everything for his kids. That’s just who Tony was, honey.”

Peter stared at her blankly. “His—his what?”

Pepper laughed. “His children, Peter. You and Morgan. And Harley, too, although Harley would never admit it.”

“Um...I...I don’t—” Peter stammered, letting out a shaky exhale.

“Tony never wanted kids when I met him, you know. He was too afraid of being like his dad. But you know what changed all of that?”

Peter shook his head wordlessly.

Pepper laughed again. He didn’t understand how she could say such earth-shattering things with a smile and a comforting hand on his knee.

“It was you, Peter. All of a sudden, he was muttering about this Spider-Kid he had to look out for. He spent hours making suit updates so that you’d be as safe as possible. He even reconnected with his MIT friends so that he could talk you up to them.”

Peter swiped at his eyes quickly. He’d never heard this side of his early relationship with Tony before.

“And then the Snap happened, and...he was so lost, Peter. So lost. Harley was gone, too. But I found out I was already a few months pregnant with Morgan, and it was like...like early spring, you know?” She gestured to the sunlight outside. “Just like right now. When it’s still cold and miserable, but every so often it’s warm enough to take your jacket off, and then you feel the warmth on your skin for the first time in ages, and you realize you’d forgotten what the sun felt like.” She smiled wistfully. “That’s what Morgan’s birth was like.”

They both glanced over at the closest lab bench, where a picture proudly showed Tony giving a toddler version of Morgan a piggyback ride.

“He was such an amazing dad to her, Peter. I wish you could’ve seen it. And it was because of you. Because you made him brave enough to do that...to be her dad, and give her all of the love and affection in the world.”

“But now she doesn’t have him anymore,” Peter whispered, trying to keep the tears at bay. He couldn’t bring himself to say it, but he hated that he’d inadvertently put Morgan in the same situation he’d been in himself ten years ago. He knew what it was like to lose a parent that young, to slowly forget the sounds of their laugh and the color of their eyes, to rely on other people to give you their memories of your mom or dad because you didn’t have your own.

But Pepper—smart, intuitive Pepper—already knew everything that Peter didn’t say.

“We’ll keep him alive for her,” she said, determination clear in her voice. “We’ll tell her everything about him. We’ll show her footage from FRIDAY, and we’ll never let her forget him.”

Peter didn’t understand how anyone could simultaneously be so strong and so compassionate. She was just like May. No wonder Mr. Stark had loved Ms. Potts so much.

“Do you remember,” he said, “how Mr. Stark used to pretend that he liked May’s cooking, even when the rest of us teased her about it? And how he loved cream and sugar in his coffee but he never wanted to admit it?”

“Remember how he used to fall asleep all over the penthouse after he’d pull an all-nighter? But he’d always deny that he was sleeping?”

“I found him napping on the floor of the coat closet one time, and he tried to convince me that he’d just been testing FRIDAY’s heat signature detection abilities,” Peter snorted, and then suddenly, they were both laughing and crying and hugging each other, the walls between joy and grief and guilt broken down.

The next time he crept down to the lab in the middle of the night, a stack of three more of Mr. Stark’s sweatshirts waited for him on the couch. There was a new framed photograph on the lab bench, right next to the picture of Tony and Morgan. A sticky note was attached to it.

Peter, it read in Ms. Potts’ precise cursive.

Tony kept this picture in the lab at the Tower. I thought it was time to move it here, where it belongs. He’d be so proud to know you were using the lab.

-Pepper (not Ms. Potts! Or Mrs. Stark!)

Peter slowly pulled the sticky note off the frame, revealing a familiar old photo from his sixteenth birthday. He and Mr. Stark were sitting at the kitchen table of his and May’s apartment, and Mr. Stark was leaning close to the cake, trying to blow out the candles before Peter could do it. Peter was looking at his mentor with an expression of shock and betrayal, and Ned stood in the background, his mouth open wide as he sang *Happy Birthday*. May had taken the shot with portrait mode on her StarkPhone, and she was much better at candid photography than baking cakes.

He was sure that he would look at this photograph sometime tomorrow or next week or next month and be overcome by grief, but today, it just made him smile. He placed it where he could see it, and instead of taking up his usual position on the couch, he made his way over to Tony’s lab bench.

He wasn’t going to just hide here when he couldn’t sleep, he decided. He was going to keep working to create tech that made the world safer and better, just like Tony had.

“FRIDAY, pull up Mr. Stark’s recent project files,” he called. He had a lot of work to catch up on.

It took a long time for New York to return to some semblance of normalcy. Nobody had known that the blip would ever be reversed. Thinking the worst, they had moved, changed phone numbers, remarried, and switched careers.

It led to months of confusion. People popped back into existence and couldn’t find their families. Some learned that their loved ones had died while they’d been gone. Others were still out there looking.

Over time, it became normal to watch dramatic reunions unfold in public. It was kind of like those “soldiers coming home and surprising their families” compilations that everyone secretly watched and cried over sometimes. It happened everywhere—a neighbor recognized another neighbor at the grocery store. Someone tracked down a missing friend or sibling, and two people sprinted to embrace one another in the middle of a local park. Lost children showed up at their parents’

workplaces, sometimes finding their mom or dad waiting, looking up hopefully each time the door opened.

Peter sat on the front steps of the public library one night after his patrol, eating a sandwich from Delmar's. He was thinking about a project he was working on in Mr. Stark's lab most nights he stayed at the lake house. It was a watch for Morgan that would have a few extra features for her protection. He was designing it based on a similar watch that Tony had given him for his sixteenth birthday. Peter's watch, which he couldn't bring himself to wear anymore, had a tracking device, the ability to monitor his vitals, and the ability to make emergency phone calls.

Morgan's watch was much simpler, but it was based on the same premise. As Spider-Man, Peter had a high likelihood of being kidnapped. As the Stark heir, Morgan had an even higher likelihood of being kidnapped. As much as Peter hated to even *think* of somebody harming a hair on Morgan's head, he knew that it was better to be prepared just in case. She was going off to kindergarten in the fall, and for the first time in her life, she'd be consistently spending time away from the safety of the lake house. And now that Tony wasn't here - now that Tony had died to save Peter's life—the least Peter could do was protect the man's daughter to the best of his abilities.

He'd made the watch purple, since that was Morgan's favorite color, and he'd added GPS tracking and a panic button. He'd carved a little flower into the watch face, and if Morgan popped the lens off, she could tap on the flower twice, and it would automatically alert FRIDAY to track her position and call Peter's phone.

Peter was thinking about how he was going to test the device when he noticed a nervous looking teenage boy in his periphery. He set his sandwich aside and pulled his mask down so that it covered his mouth. The boy, a few years younger than Peter, wandered towards the steps of the library. He was looking all around, but not behind him, which meant that he wasn't being chased. He seemed like he was panicking, but Peter didn't sense any danger.

Frowning, Peter remained seated but stayed poised to spring to his feet just in case.

The boy continued to pace around nervously in front of the library, incredibly unaware of his surroundings. He didn't even spare a glance in Peter's direction, so focused on whatever invisible fears he was fighting in his head.

Peter was about to stand up and ask the kid if he was okay when an old blue car pulled around the corner.

Upon seeing the car, the boy abruptly crumpled to his knees on the cold, damp pavement, letting out a strange moan of shock.

Peter stood now, even though his spidey sense still didn't detect any danger. The car stopped and a middle-aged man jumped out, looking like he'd seen a ghost.

"Eddie!" The man shouted. He ran to the boy, and Peter realized too late what he was watching.

"Baba," the boy, Eddie, sobbed. The two collapsed into one another's arms, speaking rapidly in Arabic.

Natasha Romanoff had only given Peter one brief Arabic lesson, but he didn't need to know the language to understand that the father had been blipped and the boy had remained behind for the last five years. He could tell by the way that the father was looking at his son, his sorrow and amazement at his son's new height and older face.

He could tell by the way that the father's eyes slid over his son's shoulder to the prominent Iron Man mural on the building down the block.

The man mouthed something at the mural, and Peter looked away, his eyes burning. He didn't need to watch what the man was mouthing to understand what he was saying.

Thank you. Thank you for bringing me back so that I can be with my child again. Thank you for not making me leave him.

Peter immediately shot a web and scrambled onto the top of the nearest building. He continued to web his way through the city until his limbs shook with exhaustion and his mind was quiet.

Karen had been speaking to him repeatedly, but he wasn't listening.

"...suggest turning heater on, Peter."

"...vitals elevated, Peter..."

"Would you like me to call Mr. Stark, Peter?"

Peter let out a furious scream, ripping his mask off, cursing Karen's out-of-date coding.

"It's not fair!" He shouted. "It's not...it's not fair." He reached up to touch his cheeks, surprised to find that they were wet. "Mr. Stark," he whispered. "*Mr. Stark—*"

This was why he didn't like the city anymore.

PP: I can't fucking take this, Harley.

PP: I miss him every single second of every single day

PP: I think we should look into the Stones, not the quantum realm stuff. Too much risk of changing the timeline.

PP: Dr. Strange has a sanctum in NYC. I bet he has books about the Stones. I can't break in myself, though. He'd know it was me. He can do magic.

HK: You free next weekend?

Maybe it was selfish, but Peter was profoundly thankful that Ned and MJ had blipped too. Even if the whole universe fell apart, at least his friends were still the same, and they could all understand how the others were feeling.

Apparently Hollywood had marched on, even with half of its actors and audiences dusted. The three of them had been going to the movie theater each weekend to catch up on the movies they had missed during the past five years.

"Wow, that was depressing," Ned said, shaking his head as they left their movie of the week.

"I know; I didn't even know a rom com *could* be depressing," Peter agreed. While the main characters had ended up together at the end of the movie, all of the actors and extras had seemed to be moving on autopilot, their jokes and smiles flat and vacant.

“I thought it was great. That’s exactly the way I like my rom coms,” MJ said, and as usual, Peter couldn’t tell if she was serious or joking.

“Man, it’s crazy that people even *tried* to make rom coms after the blip,” Ned said.

“That’s capitalism for you,” MJ sniffed disdainfully.

“Pizza?” Peter asked hopefully, tugging his jacket tighter around himself. It was February, the worst time of the year to have spider DNA.

“Yeah!” Ned agreed eagerly. “There’s a place down the block that sells slices for \$3.”

Except when they arrived at the pizza joint, it was gone. It was dark and boarded up, another casualty of the blip.

Ned looked crestfallen, and Peter understood. It didn’t matter that this was probably just a random restaurant Ned had visited a few times - it was the idea that five years had passed, and the world was no longer a familiar place in so many small, unexpected ways.

In a rare display of tactfulness, MJ quickly pointed out a Thai restaurant across the street. They piled into the warm restaurant, much quieter than before. Peter grabbed three menus, and they sat at a cramped table by the window, silently perusing the options.

“This shit sucks,” Ned announced suddenly. “My little sister has her driver’s license and is older than me now and my Nana is dead.”

MJ nodded. “My new stepdad is a fucking moron.”

Peter remained silent for a moment. What could he really say? He had died on Titan and woken up what felt like just a few moments later, only to watch Mr. Stark die.

He cleared his throat. “Flash sent me another email redacting his apology. He says he never would’ve sent me that first email if I was alive, and now that I’m back, I have to deal with knowing that I’m inferior to him for the rest of my miserable existence.”

Ned and MJ burst into laughter.

“Are you kidding me, Peter?” Ned chuckled. “That’s practically a love letter, coming from Flash. He must miss you.”

Peter grinned, feeling a familiar band of gratitude and sadness squeeze tightly around his heart.

The grief came suddenly, at completely unexpected times.

He and Ned visited Mr. Delmar’s to get sandwiches. Peter reached into the hidden pocket of his winter jacket to look for cash and found an old note in Mr. Stark’s familiar scrawl.

Hey, Spider-Kid. Sushi tonight?

Morgan smirked at him over a game of cards and the expression was so familiar that he had to stumble to his feet and leave the room, gasping for breath.

The Avengers came over for dinner, and there were two empty seats at the table.

May absentmindedly switched the radio station as she cooked dinner, and Led Zeppelin filled their kitchen.

Spent my days with a woman unkind, smoked my stuff and drank all my wine,

Made up my mind to make a new start, going to California with an aching in my heart.

Peter froze, his fingers clenched tightly around a tomato, remembering when Mr. Stark had been teaching him how to drive, how he'd talked Peter through merging onto the highway, how this song had played as the summer wind messed up their hair and the sun set behind them.

Hey, Pete, maybe once you get your license, we can go on a road trip together.

*Really, Mr. Stark? Oh my god, that would be **amazing**. Can we go to Yosemite? I always wanted to see El Capitan—did you hear about that guy who free climbed it? I bet I could do it with my eyes shut if I used my stickiness—*

“You okay, baby?” May asked.

Peter wiped at his eyes quickly. “Yeah, it’s...onions.”

Neither of them bothered to point out that there were no onions in May’s lasagna recipe.

“What’s the bravest thing you ever did?” The boy from *The Road* asked his father.

He spat in the road a bloody phlegm. “Getting up this morning,” he said.

“Really?”

“No. Don’t listen to me. Come on, let’s go.”

They kept walking.

Peter met Harley at the Greyhound station.

“You think that with both of us having the richest man in the world as a father figure, we could’ve afforded a flight,” Harley remarked as they stepped outside into the evening light. The days were just barely starting to get longer. It felt good, but it still felt wrong that the world should be returning to warmth and light when Tony was gone.

“Yeah, he kept trying to pay me for my internship, but I kept shooting him down. Little did I know I’d need to personally fund my attempts to bring him back to life a few years later,” Peter grinned. It felt strange but good to joke about what they were doing.

“Being a superhero doesn’t pay well?” Harley asked, looking sidelong at him as they walked to the subway.

Peter tried to keep his posture from stiffening. “I...don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said quickly. “It’s Morgan, she’s been blowing through the entire inheritance. Spending it all on dinosaur collectibles.”

But Harley wouldn’t be redirected. “You’re a terrible liar, Spidey. No wonder you use a mask.”

Peter didn't feel the familiar tingle of danger that signaled an imminent attack, but he still wasn't sure how to react to Harley's accusations.

"Relax, Peter," Harley said, bumping his shoulder against Peter's. His grin faded into a more serious expression. "I'm not messing with you or anything. I mean...I figured it out well before the blip. When Tony started telling me that he had a personal intern right around the same time that Spider-Man was swinging around with Stark technology on, I knew."

"Oh." He probably should've kept the lie going, but he was too exhausted. "Tell me something about Tony that only one of us would know about him," he said firmly.

"Easy," Harley grinned. "He was watching *Breaking Bad* with you before the blip. I was watching it at the same time as you guys, and he and I would text about it sometimes. You guys were on Season 3, right?"

Peter felt his shoulders relax. "Yeah," he admitted, relieved. He really didn't want Harley to turn out to be some kind of evil henchman. He didn't want to be alone on this journey to get Mr. Stark back.

"Anyway, can I see the suit?" Harley asked eagerly, reminding Peter of Ned.

"Yeah, I was planning to suit up while you go into the sanctum, anyway. Keep watch for you."

Harley shook his head. "No way, dude. You'll get caught in an instant. I'm going to the sanctum alone. You need to stick around here and patrol, and you need to make it obvious. Get yourself recorded; get an appearance on TV if you can manage it. You're going to need an airtight alibi."

"No way!" Peter exclaimed. "You're going to need me to keep a lookout, trust me. You don't know Dr. Strange. This isn't going to be easy."

"Uh, rude, Parker. You don't think I can handle myself against one sorcerer?"

"Um...no? He has fucking magic, bro."

Harley began to imitate one of Peter's favorite Vines, windmilling his arms and shouting "Don't fuck with me! I have the power of god and anime on my side!"

Several people making their way along in the flow of rush hour traffic turned to look at the pair of them oddly.

"Holy shit," Peter said in amazement, laughing in spite of himself. "I now understand why I was Tony's favorite child. The crazy shit you and Morgan get up to makes me look like a goddamn angel in comparison."

"Uh, excuse me, Parker, you are definitely not the favorite child in this family. You're the forgotten, melancholy middle kid."

"Aren't you like...two months older than me?"

"Yeah, that still makes me older, in case you skipped the day in second grade that we learned about calendars. When I was that age, I was building my own supercomputer during recess."

"Oh, very funny," Peter grumbled. They pushed their way through the crowd and into the subway station.

“Bleecker Street, right?” Harley asked quietly.

Peter nodded.

“Great, thanks!” He said. Before Peter knew it, Harley darted away from him, ducking into the crowd.

“Harley!” He shouted.

Harley turned back to him, smirking. “Alibi!” He shouted back. Then he was moving again, slipping into the crowd and pushing his way to the front of the line.

Peter swore, trying to follow him. The crowd was thick with people, loud and smelly. It was overwhelming to his senses, but he pushed through anyway, ignoring the annoyed grunts and sharp elbows he received for trying to jump the line.

He had to give up once Harley made it through the gate and disappeared towards the trains.

He turned around and fought his way back out of the crowd, grumbling to himself. “This fucking family,” he muttered under his breath. But he was laughing as he suited up and began to swing through Queens.

“That’s a hell of an alibi, Pete,” Harley drawled, startling Peter.

“Jesus! Give a guy some warning when you’re going to interrupt him in the middle of pulling the knife out.”

“Is this the proper medical procedure for stabbings?” Harley asked, dubiously eyeing Peter as Peter winced and pulled the small blade out of his side in one horrible motion.

Stars danced in front of Peter’s eyes for a long moment.

When he came back to reality, Harley was pushing him to sit down, propping him up against the brick wall of the alleyway by the Greyhound station.

“Easy there, Spidey. There’s a CVS across the street. I’m going to go buy some supplies to deal with this. What’s your favorite flavor of Gatorade?”

“I prefer...Vitamin Water,” Peter gasped.

“Fucking snob,” Harley laughed. “Spoken like Tony’s kid.”

“You don’t...have to get me anything. It’s...not too bad. Small knife. Stupid mugger. Super healing.”

“Yeah, nice try, but you still need to disinfect it, bro.” Harley got up to leave and Peter was too dizzy to stop him.

“Keep pressure on that!” Harley called before disappearing across the street.

Peter floated hazily for a few moments, and then Harley was back, tugging the ripped pieces of the suit aside so that he could see the wound.

“The bleeding is starting to taper off,” he exhaled in relief. “Brace yourself, this is going to suck.”

He poured some kind of disinfectant on Peter's side, and Peter drew in a sharp breath. If Tony were here, he would've been making all the pained noises he wanted, and Tony would've been muttering a steady stream of "it's okay," and "almost done," and "I know this is the worst part, but you're doing great, bud."

But Tony wasn't here, so Peter bit down on his knuckles to keep from whimpering.

When the burn faded, Peter sat up straighter and took stock of the injury.

"Thanks, man," he said, his breathing still not quite even. "I can tell that it's starting to close. Just gotta wait a little while and then I can walk again."

"So...do you spend a lot of time hiding in dirty alleyways like this?" Harley asked conversationally, sitting down next to him. He ripped open a pack of Skittles and poured a few into Peter's waiting hand. Peter pulled his mask up slightly so he could eat.

"Well, I am part spider," he shrugged.

"Gotta say, this isn't as glamorous as I imagined it would be."

"Welcome to my fucking life," Peter grinned tiredly.

They'd finished the Skittles and switched to Reese's Pieces when Peter turned to Harley. "So? What did you find in the Sanctum?" He asked expectantly.

Harley's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "A big fat nothing."

"Damn," Peter groaned.

"Yeah. Fortunately, he wasn't home, so it was easy to get in and out. I'm sure I tripped some kind of magic burglar alarm, but I wore a mask and gloves. And like you said, he doesn't know me, so he won't, like, recognize my aura or something."

"Were there books?"

"Yeah, but they were all written in fucking runes."

Harley opened his phone and showed Peter a few pictures of opened books with pages covered in unfamiliar symbols.

"Maybe I could ask Thor?" Peter suggested.

"Right," Harley scoffed. "Like that wouldn't be suspicious."

"I mean...Thor is a bit oblivious at times. But yeah, I suppose even he would wonder why I was asking him about spellbooks."

"And for all we know, these pages aren't even about the Infinity Stones. We could be tipping our hand for this to turn out to be a magical bread recipe or something."

Peter groaned. "Back to square one, then."

He couldn't help but notice that Harley wasn't quite meeting his eyes.

"Yeah, but at least we ruled something out."

“Sure,” Peter agreed. He carefully filed away the fact that Harley didn’t seem to be telling the full truth about his excursion for later examination.

After another hour or two, Peter’s side was knitting itself back together. He slowly hobbled back to the Greyhound station with Harley.

“You sure you have to go back tonight?” He asked. “I’m going to call Happy for a ride to the lake house. Why don’t you come stay for a few days?”

“Nah, I can’t,” Harley shrugged. “I got...stuff to do.”

“It could be fun, though. We could do normal stuff for once - go hiking in the woods. Steal a bottle from the liquor cabinet and get hammered. I’m sure Morgan would love to have two of us to boss around.”

“Some other time, maybe,” Harley demurred. They hugged and then Harley disappeared into the bus station.

That was Harley, Peter supposed. Always holding himself at arm’s length from everyone else.

It was because of Morgan that he first began exploring the woods around the lake house.

“We need to play where there are lots of trees, Petey!” She argued passionately. “How else are we going to hunt for treestars?”

Morgan was still on a major *Land Before Time* kick. After some deliberation, they had decided that she was Little Foot, the main character, and he was Petrie, the pterodactyl who was afraid to fly. Morgan had tried to tell him that he had to be Spike, the dinosaur who ate entire bushes of food in one bite, but he had vetoed that designation.

(Personally, Peter thought that she should probably be Cera, the bossy triceratops, but he was too afraid of Morgan’s wrath to even suggest it.)

“You have to be Spike, because Auntie May says you eat more than ten grown men,” Morgan declared. To be fair, it was a pretty strong argument.

“Well, if I’m Spike, then you have to be Ducky,” he’d pointed out, since the two characters were siblings.

“Nah, Ducky is too nice,” Morgan shook her head.

Peter grinned. “Spoken like Tony Stark and Pepper Potts’ child.”

Peter was a city boy, so the idea of going into the woods made him nervous. He’d spent plenty of time in New York City’s parks, but he’d never been in the real wilderness. He found himself terrified of getting lost, especially with Morgan at his side.

Their first few forays into the forest were tentative. He’d borrowed a map of the property from Pepper and tried to memorize it, to no avail. The Starks’ land stretched over 200 acres, and it abutted a chain of state forests that ran for hundreds of miles, stretching between the Catskills and the Adirondacks up north.

At first, Peter never let them stray beyond the point of being able to see the house. They pretended to be explorers, went on scavenger hunts, waded in the little brook, all within shouting distance of Pepper. Peter had to stop Morgan from eating leaves a few times—she'd taken to calling them treestars and declaring that they looked delicious. He'd been too late to stop her once, and when he'd seen her disgusted face after she took a big bite out of a leaf, he'd laughed for the first time since Tony's death.

After about a week of this, Peter began to realize that he actually *liked* the woods. In fact, his spider side thrived in this new environment. He was used to the cacophony of sounds and smells and lights in New York City, but for the first time, he could let his senses stretch, free of distraction from traffic and other people. His spider side was meant to thrive in a wilderness environment, after all. Compared to the sensory overload of Queens, it was heaven to smell the fragrant scent of pine needles and hear a fox chasing its prey several miles away.

He felt grounded in the woods. When Morgan went to gymnastics class or had her afternoon “quiet time” (Pepper warned him not to call it a nap, even though she fell asleep almost every time), Peter took to exploring, testing himself and his abilities. He found that he could walk four or five miles away from the lake house and still hear the faint, reassuring thump of Pepper and Morgan's heartbeats. In a city environment, he could rarely track somebody's heartbeat or scent for more than a block or two. On one occasion, when he couldn't decide which way he needed to turn to get back to the house, he had used his stickiness to effortlessly scale a giant oak tree. He'd been able to use his sharp eyesight to pick out the lake house.

He couldn't swing anywhere in the woods because of how dense the trees were, but he didn't mind walking. He gradually became familiar with the well-worn hiking trails and mountain biking paths that nobody used anymore. His sense of smell and hearing allowed him to know when animals were approaching, but for the most part, he left them alone and they left him alone.

It was nice to have a place where nobody needed him. And for some reason, the woods made him feel closer to Tony. He doubted that Tony had done the kind of hiking around that Peter was doing—his mentor practically lived in the lab no matter where he was.

But still, Tony had bought this land. Tony had lived here. He'd told Morgan stories about Peter here. And perhaps he'd walked some of these same trails, grieving for Peter, just as Peter grieved for him.

As February bled into March, Peter walked through the forest and looked for signs of life. He imagined himself at Yosemite, tall, silent trees on either side of him.

Some days he would see little green buds on bushes and birds flying from south to north overhead.

But some days everything was still and quiet, and the ground was cold and dead beneath his boots.

The father died at the end of *The Road*.

He managed to keep himself alive just long enough for him and his son to reach a warmer climate. He got to watch his child swim in the ocean for the first time. And then his body gave out, and he succumbed to his injuries and the years of sickness and starvation.

On the last night, the boy sat next to his father. He asked his father about a little boy that he thought he'd seen near one of the houses when they'd searched for food months earlier.

“Do you think he was lost?” The boy asked.

“No. I don’t think he was lost.”

“I’m scared that he was lost.”

“I think he’s all right.”

“But who will find him if he’s lost? Who will find the little boy?”

“Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again.”

The father was gone by the morning light. He’d protected his son from the end of the world, but he’d died doing it. The boy stayed with his father’s body for three days, and then he had to keep walking down the road, all alone this time.

A group of benevolent-seeming refugees found the boy and took him in, and that was how the story concluded.

Peter now understood the message Tony had seen in this book.

When he finished the last page, he screamed into his pillow and threw the book as hard as he could against his bedroom wall, watching with satisfaction as it slipped behind his desk.

It was a book, so it couldn’t shatter, but he left it there to collect dust nonetheless.

Peter had thought the word before.

It would be a lie to say that he hadn’t.

He’d never thought it about Ben. Maybe it was because Ben was his dad’s brother, and he’d known Ben as his uncle first. Maybe it was because Ben was careful to never refer to himself as Peter’s father, wanting to keep Richard’s memory alive.

He’d gotten Ben a Father’s Day card every year, but that was as close as they’d ever come to acknowledging it. And that had been fine with Peter. Sure, he wished that he had a mom and a dad, but he’d never felt unloved or abandoned. After Richard and Mary died, May and Ben became his parents in everything but name.

So Mr. Stark had caught him off guard.

Peter idolized the man since his return from Afghanistan, but he’d never expected to actually *meet* him. It was amazing enough when Mr. Stark saved his life at the Stark Expo and said, “Nice work, kid.”

That was enough for a lifetime, Peter had thought to himself. That was way more interaction than most people got with their childhood heroes.

But then he’d walked into the apartment five years later and seen Mr. Stark sitting on his couch and eating his aunt’s horrible date loaf. And then Mr. Stark brought him to Germany, and the homecoming fiasco happened, and it had been a tough road, but Peter finally earned Mr. Stark’s respect.

And then there was a blissful year before the fateful MOMA field trip and the destruction of half

the world's population where their relationship went beyond baseline respect and into mentor/mentee territory.

They worked in the lab together every Wednesday after school, making his SI internship official, and he visited the compound every other weekend for combat training with Rhodey and Vision. They made upgrades to Peter's suit and improved his web fluid formula. They tested the limits of Peter's superstrength and spider abilities and worked with Dr. Cho to synthesize painkillers that would actually work for Peter's physiology.

But there were other things, too. Things that went beyond the simple bounds of mentorship.

Like Peter's bedroom at the Avengers compound, which had been decorated with *Star Wars* posters, video game consoles, and a mini-lab bench for all his tech, even though he only stayed there a few nights every month.

Or the fact that sometimes Peter finished up his internship work, only for Mr. Stark to announce that he'd ordered them pizza and they might as well pick a movie to watch while they ate. One time, Mr. Stark even spent an evening teaching Peter how to make pasta, reading from an Italian cookbook that Peter suspected had belonged to Maria Stark.

May took Peter to get his driver's permit, but Mr. Stark was the one to teach him how to drive.

Sure, Mr. Stark took care of Spider-Man—patched him up when he was injured after patrol, equipped his suit with a ridiculous amount of safety features—but he also took care of Peter Parker.

Peter didn't give the matter much thought until one of his decathlon teammates, who was a grade older and obviously didn't know Peter's status as a pathetic orphan, tapped him on the arm before a competition.

"Hey, Parker, I think your dad is trying to get your attention," Desiree said, pointing to the crowd.

Peter nearly fell out of his chair in shock when he saw Mr. Stark sitting next to May, a baseball hat pulled down over his hair and dark sunglasses hiding his eyes.

As Peter stared in bewilderment, May waved and Mr. Stark gave him a thumbs up. Peter was so startled that he almost missed the first question of the competition, but then he realized that he didn't want to let Mr. Stark down, and he managed to correct his focus.

Desiree's casual assumption rattled around in his brain after that, though.

It was there when Mr. Stark woke him up from a horrible nightmare about the Vulture one night at the compound, sitting with him until he fell back to sleep. It was there when he picked Peter up from school after Ned called to say that Peter had locked himself into a library study cubicle with a sensory overload attack. It was there on the spaceship, when Peter was dragged up to the stratosphere after Dr. Strange.

Pete, you gotta let go, I'm going to catch you.

Peter never said it out loud, not while Mr. Stark was alive.

And after he was gone, Morgan was the one who said it. She didn't really understand how Peter could be her brother but not have the same parents as her.

When they played together, she'd sometimes stop and tilt her head just like Pepper. "Remember

that song Daddy liked to sing? About the free bird?"

Peter did remember.

Whenever Peter referred to Mr. Stark as "Mr. Stark," Morgan rolled her eyes and told him to stop being weird.

And every once in a while, when he was absolutely certain that Pepper and Happy weren't around, he'd nudge Morgan.

"Hey, Morgie," he'd say. "Remember that amazing soup Dad used to make whenever somebody got sick or hurt?"

Morgan did remember.

Rhodey appeared at the lake house one afternoon, and Peter had a feeling that he knew why the man was there.

"Uncle Rhodey!" Morgan shrieked so loudly that Peter instantly clapped his hands over his sensitive ears.

The two of them were using Morgan's extensive chalk supply to draw an epic Spider-Man and Morgan-Woman (Morgan's current superhero name for herself) mural on the paved driveway that led from the road to the lake house.

"Hi, Morgan, Peter," Rhodey greeted, hugging Morgan carefully. He always seemed slightly unsure of how to interact with her and Peter, but Peter supposed a military lifestyle didn't lend itself to hanging out with many kids. He thought it was pretty sweet that Rhodey always tried, nonetheless.

"Hi, Rhodey," Peter greeted with a grin. He tried not to think about Rhodey standing behind him on the battlefield, Tony's heart rate fading and the light on his suit's arc reactor flickering out.

He wondered if Rhodey saw the same thing when he looked at Peter.

"Uncle Rhodey, Uncle Rhodey, Uncle Rhodey!" Morgan chirped happily. "Look, I drew you!" She proudly pointed out a misshapen stick figure soaring through the sky, next to something that might have been either Harley or a pumpkin.

"Thank you, Morgan. It looks great," Rhodey said, catching Peter's eye and smiling.

"Here, Uncle Rhodey, you have to draw Mr. Dr. Bruce," she commanded, passing Rhodey a green piece of chalk.

He saw Rhodey mouth the words *Mr. Dr. Bruce* to himself and he snorted, returning to his own drawing. He was working on Wanda, but he'd accidentally made her look evil by giving her cartoonish red eyes.

They worked in comfortable silence for a while until Morgan decided that they needed snacks.

"Wait here," she instructed them. "I'm going to get lots of chips!"

"I should probably go help her," Peter excused himself, hastily standing and wiping his chalky hands on his sweatpants.

“Actually, Peter, Pepper waved to me from the window a few minutes ago. I’m sure she’ll help Morgan.”

“Oh, cool,” Peter agreed, reminding himself that he shouldn’t act like he had something to hide.

“There was something I was hoping to ask you about, anyway,” Rhodey began.

Peter’s heart rate ticked up and his palms began to sweat. *Here we go*, he thought to himself nervously. He wished he was wearing his mask. May had always been able to read him like an open book, and as a result, he’d never gotten very good at lying, unless it was about his Spider-Man identity.

“Dr. Strange called to say that there was a recent break-in and theft at the sanctum.”

Peter blinked in real surprise. “A theft? Really? What did the person take?”

“Dr. Strange wouldn’t say, but it was something very important.”

Peter narrowed his eyes in confusion. *What the hell did you do, Harley?* He mentally groaned.

He tried to remember if he’d glimpsed anything strange in Harley’s backpack when Harley had opened it to fish out his wallet, but nothing stood out. Whatever Harley had stolen was smaller than a backpack, at the very least.

Rhodey looked relieved by Peter’s genuine reaction, and Peter knew he’d definitely been a prime suspect for the break-in. Which meant that Harley had been right to force Peter into patrolling that night, after all.

“It was last Saturday. You were probably out in Queens then, right? Do you remember anything unusual from that night?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah—got stabbed by a mugger. Hard to forget that. But nothing magic-related.”

Rhodey seemed appeased. “You okay? Stab wound all healed up?”

“Oh, yeah, it was fine within a few hours,” Peter assured him. He wanted to close out this conversation as quickly as possible. “Well, I hope Dr. Strange figures out who took it. I’ll keep an ear out as Spider-Man, I guess.”

“Yeah, let me know if you hear about any magical artifacts being passed around.”

“Will do,” Peter agreed, hoping he sounded casual enough.

“You want to go in and grab a snack? I’d like to say hi to Pepper.”

But Peter had been expecting this interrogation, and he had a question of his own that he’d been mulling over. It was something that he thought that only Rhodey, out of all the Avengers, would willingly tell him. It was something that he really didn’t want to know, but it was the only other source of information about the Infinity Stones available, since Dr. Strange’s sanctum had let them down.

“Actually...can I ask you something?” Peter asked tentatively.

Rhodey fixed his calculating gaze on Peter. “Of course,” he said. “Come on, let’s walk.”

They set off slowly down the driveway, and Peter was grateful for the motion. It made it so that he

didn't have to look Rhodey in the eyes.

“How did Natasha die?”

Peter didn't miss Rhodey's slight flinch.

“Why do you ask?”

Peter took a deep breath. He felt awful for bringing this up, and worse for lying about it. “I keep having nightmares about her and Tony dying. And...I don't know what happened to her, so my brain is making up all kinds of horrible things.”

Rhodey frowned. “I didn't know you were close to Natasha.”

To be honest, Peter hadn't really known Natasha well. She'd come to the compound a few times during the year between the Civil War and the snap. Peter hadn't fully understood the dynamic of Rogue vs. Non-Rogue Avengers, but he knew that Nat had straddled the fence between the two groups. Tony looked at her with hurt in his eyes, but he never kicked her out.

But...”She was a spider like me, Rhodey. And she taught me different languages.”

It had been just a few brief lessons—the bare bones of Arabic, Russian, and Mandarin, to complement the Spanish he was learning at school. But every time Spider-Man greeted someone in their native language or was able to help someone who didn't speak English, he thought about Nat.

Rhodey's eyes softened. “She didn't suffer, Peter. It was quick. She and Clint went to Vormir to get the Soul Stone. The Soul Stone has a sort of bartering system attached to it. You can sacrifice one life to bring another life back, or sacrifice one life to wield the stone.”

Peter's breath caught in his throat.

“In order to take the Stone, one of them had to sacrifice their life. She and Clint fought, and...she won the fight. She died as a hero.” Rhodey placed a hand on his shoulder, but Peter almost didn't feel it. He stood stock still, the sound of the cool breeze and birds chirping suddenly overwhelmingly loud as the full reality of Natasha's death sank in.

So that was it, then.

Peter finally understood what his options were.

He could sneak back in time when Steve left to return the Stones, steal the Soul Stone from Steve, go to Vormir and do what Natasha had done. A life for a life.

He could sacrifice himself with the Soul Stone and bring Tony back.

Involving Harley in this plan was obviously out of the question. Peter couldn't let his sort-of-brother know about this, or he would try to sacrifice himself so that Peter couldn't.

Or...he could do nothing. He could let Steve return the Stones like he was supposed to, and Peter could keep on living.

“Rhodey,” Peter said in a small voice.

The man turned to face Peter. In the dying afternoon sunlight, he suddenly looked old and exhausted, far from a superhero. Just a tired, world-worn uncle.

“Do you think...is it better to be the one who dies, or the one who has to keep living?”

Rhodey was silent for a moment.

“I don’t think either of those options is ‘better,’ kid,” he said, shaking his head. “We’re never really given a choice in the matter, anyway. Either we’re the one who survives, or we’re the one who dies.”

He seemed to realize that this wasn’t the response Peter wanted, so he appeared to keep thinking for a moment.

“But...I think it’s harder to be the one who is left behind. It’s an act of great bravery sometimes, just to keep living when someone you love has died and you feel like it’s your fault.”

“Yeah,” Peter mumbled, thinking about Ben and Mr. Stark.

An act of great bravery, he thought to himself as he walked back up the driveway with Rhodey. Would it be selfish of him to trade places with Mr. Stark? Would he simply be passing his burden of grief and guilt onto Tony if he sacrificed himself to bring the man back?

Was it kinder for him to stay alive and let Tony be at peace?

Morgan was waiting for them at the top of the driveway. “Look!” She exclaimed proudly. “I drew Daddy!” She pointed to a red and yellow stick figure that she’d drawn. In Morgan’s picture, one of Tony’s hands was overlapping Morgan’s uneven fingers. His other hand was overlapping Peter’s.

“That...looks great, Morgan,” Peter said, his throat tight. His heart felt unbearably heavy in his chest with the knowledge he now carried.

He knew what he had to do so that Tony could actually be here to hold Morgan’s hand.

PP: WHAT THE HELL, DUDE

PP: omg did you steal stuff from Dr. Strange??

HK: Yeah. Just a few odds and ends. Nothing big.

PP: Wtfffff Rhodey was just asking me about it. It sounded serious.

PP: What did you take?

PP: It’s a good thing you went instead of me.

HK: Just some odds and ends. I needed some samples to experiment with.

HK: I want to see if I can find a scientific explanation for magic.

PP: Good luck with that one. Shit doesn’t make any sense.

The stars frightened him now.

He had always loved astronomy, but living in Queens meant that there wasn’t much opportunity to

actually see constellations or more than a few stars each night.

The sky above the lake house was immense, glittering, dizzying. If he had visited the lake house when he was still a seven-year-old kid, he knew that a telescope would've been at the top of his Christmas and birthday list for eternity.

Morgan loved the stars. Tony had taught her some of the constellations, and she always begged Pepper and Peter to let her go outside before bedtime to look at them. As the weather grew warmer, Pepper sometimes consented, especially on nights when there was no moon or clouds.

Morgan always insisted that Peter join her and Pepper on these evenings. Peter knew that it was important to Morgan; that looking at the stars was a good way for her to feel close to her dad.

He always consented, but he kept his distance, perching on the porch where the roof covered most of his view of the sky, clenching his fists so tightly that his nails formed half-moon crescents in his palms.

The stars had been beautiful to him once, but now they were cold and terrible.

Ever since the blip, sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, and every other kind of academic under the sun had been talking about how the blip affected the scientific understanding of death.

Had the billions who blipped truly been dead during those five years? Or had they merely been trapped in the Soul Stone?

Among those who returned, nobody had any clear memories of their time away, other than orange light and darkness.

Was that what happened after death? Or was that what happened when you were trapped in the Soul Stone?

If the social scientists ever figured it out, Peter didn't want to know the answer. He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to imagine his parents and Ben floating in that darkness, lost and unfeeling.

He saw it sometimes in his dreams—his limbs disintegrating, Tony's panicked expression, and then—

Darkness so thick that he felt like he was swimming through the ocean, unable to tell which direction the surface was. A place where he couldn't reach May's laugh or Tony's grin. A place where he couldn't even remember who he was.

Where had he been when he was gone? Where was Tony now?

You can rest now.

That's what Pepper had told Tony at the end of it all.

But...what if *rest* meant the darkness?

Naturally, Morgan wanted an astronomy-themed birthday party. She was turning six at the end of March, and she negotiated with her mom to have an evening party, so that everyone could have a

constellation scavenger hunt.

Peter helped her look at the calendar. Together, they tracked the lunar cycle and weather forecast so that they could pick a party day with the best chances of clear night skies.

They reviewed constellations together, and Peter made Morgan stay (relatively) on task during the painstaking process of addressing invitations to her gymnastics friends and the Avengers.

Having to keep an unruly five-year-old in check was worth it in the end when he got to see the Avengers interact with a gaggle of five-year-old girls who were hopped up on sugar and party games. He had been in a decidedly somber mood since his conversation with Rhodey, but even he couldn't help but laugh as he watched two girls French braid Thor's hair while three others chased Sam Wilson around, pretending to be monsters.

"You holding up, Peter?" A familiar voice asked.

Peter looked up from frosting Morgan's birthday cake.

"Hi, Dr. Banner," he said. "Yeah. You?"

"For the most part, yeah," Bruce shrugged. He was looking around the lake house as if he expected Tony to pop up at any moment, carrying a tray of margaritas or wandering through with a screwdriver and whatever tech he was fiddling with.

Peter knew the feeling well. He'd seen Tony everywhere when he'd first returned from the blip. The feeling had only diminished for him because he spent so much time at the lake house.

His brain had stopped thinking that Tony was going to appear.

"Hey, I wanted to tell you—I saw the watch you made Morgan. It's really impressive," Bruce smiled.

"Really? Thanks!" Peter smiled, startled. He'd given Morgan the watch this morning, and she'd been proudly showing everyone when they arrived at the party. Bruce's compliment was especially exciting. It had been a long time since he'd had anyone to discuss science with, besides texting with Ned and Harley.

"You should come work with me this summer. Or whenever you feel up to it. I'd love to have your help in the lab."

Peter dropped the knife and almost cut a giant gouge on the top of the cake.

"Are you kidding me?" He gasped, elation blossoming in his chest.

"No, I could really use some help. Dr. Cho and I are working on some improvements to the regeneration cradle. I'm going to visit Shuri next month to pick her brain—"

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" Peter hissed, dragging his hands down his face in shock.

"Language," Steve and one of the five-year-olds chorused in unison.

"Bruce—you are literally my science idol. I've dreamed of this moment since I was eight. Yes, of course, I will come to Wakanda with you and help you in your lab. Please, god! Let's ditch the party and go now!"

Bruce laughed. "I don't think your sister would like that very much. You might upstage her if her

friends see the quinjet.”

Peter’s grin faltered at that. *Morgan. The Stones.* He wasn’t going to be around in a month to visit Wakanda if he carried out his plan to bring Tony back. It had felt hypothetical initially, but now that the time was drawing close for Steve to actually leave to return the Stones, the reality of what he was contemplating was starting to sink in.

“You okay, Peter?” Bruce asked, his kind eyes concerned.

Peter shook his head to clear it. “Yeah, just...wish Tony could be here.”

Bruce placed a gentle hand on Peter’s shoulder. “Me too, kid,” Bruce sighed. “Me too.”

After a pizza dinner, the party moved outside for the constellation scavenger hunt. Peter had been expecting Morgan to be front and center in the proceedings, but she hung back, oddly.

At first, he assumed Pepper’s lectures about letting her friends win had sunk in, but then he noticed that Morgan looked rather lost, meandering among the small crowd of adults and kids aimlessly.

“Come here, Momo,” Peter called. “I need help finding the Little Dipper.”

“Petey,” she exhaled, her lower lip trembling. She flung herself into his arms and he caught her, startled.

“Whoa, hey,” he said, kneeling down so that he could adjust his grip and pick her up properly. He carried her away from the crowd, down to the dock.

“What’s wrong, birthday girl?” He asked, seating them on the wooden bench that faced the lake.

“I’m big sad, Petey,” Morgan sniffed. Pepper had been teaching her to label the size of her feelings as a way to help Morgan understand her own grief better, which was adorable but devastating.

No six-year-old should be “big sad” on their birthday. And yet, Peter remembered feeling the same way on his own sixth birthday, just months after his parents had died. It had been the first milestone where his parents should have been there but weren’t.

“I thought Daddy was going to come tonight,” Morgan confessed softly. “I know he’s dead, but *you* were dead, and you came back. And it’s my birthday. But he’s not coming, is he?”

Peter felt horrible. This was something that many child psychologists had expressed concern about—that the blip would affect how children understood death. That it would make them think that it was normal for dead people to return.

“I’m sorry, Morgan,” he whispered. “I know he would’ve loved to be here.”

I’m going to get him back, he wanted to say. Just hold on. I’m going to take the Soul Stone and sacrifice myself. I’m going to do it for you, Momo, I promise.

But he couldn’t make that promise and give Morgan false hope until he was 100% certain that his plan was going to work. She’d find out on her own, soon enough.

“Maybe if I wish hard enough on my birthday cake, he’ll come back,” Morgan said, her voice wobbling.

“I’m sorry, Morgie. Even birthday wishes can’t bring people back from the dead.”

Morgan sighed, as though she’d been expecting this answer but had been hopeful anyway. “Are we going to be big sad forever, Petey?”

“Well, we’re always going to be big sad sometimes, because we love Dad and we miss him. But you’ll start being happy again too. And it might be sooner than you think.”

They quietly started looking for the constellations on Morgan’s scavenger hunt paper.

“Orion was Daddy’s favorite,” Morgan said. “Because Orion has a bow and arrow. He’s protecting us.”

Peter laughed. “Yeah, Dad would like that.”

He held Morgan close, breathing in the comforting scent of her watermelon shampoo. In the distance, he saw Happy swing May around, while Pepper carefully carried Morgan’s cake down to the picnic table. The girls were singing a Moana song, and Thor and Rhodey were collecting their scavenger hunt papers. Sam, Bruce, and Wanda were sharing beers around the campfire. Steve and Bucky sat together on the rocky beach by the lake, their heads bent close together.

His heart hurt. His heart hurt. He’d had a little sister for three months, and now he had to give her up. He wanted to freeze this moment in time and remember it forever. He didn’t want to go to Vormir and leave these people behind, not when he had already missed so much. He’d never expected to find so many simple, powerful reasons that he wanted to stay alive.

It’s going to be worth it, he told himself stubbornly, pushing his doubts away. May has Happy, and Morgan is going to be so happy to have her dad back. That’s worth it. Don’t think about anything else.

Above all else, he wished for more time. Just a few more days. A week. A month, tops. He needed to finish teaching Morgan to tie her shoes. He and May were supposed to go to a Yankees game in a few weeks, for the first time ever. He and Ned and MJ had plans to go to Coney Island this summer.

Thanks to Parker Luck, however, time was not on his side.

The end of the party was utter chaos. The kids were hugging the Avengers while their parents stammered in amazement. Morgan darted around, distributing party favors to anyone and everyone.

Above the din, Peter heard the exchange he’d been waiting for, listening with a mixture of dread and numb acceptance.

“Next Saturday at the compound, Rogers?” Bruce asked. “You heard Strange’s report about the break-in, right? Someone might be planning to steal the Stones. We need to get them back where they belong as soon as possible.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed softly. “Next Saturday.”

Peter practically ran away from the group. He slipped into the woods and sprinted until he could no longer hear the sound of any human noise.

He bent over and placed his hands on his knees, struggling to catch his breath. Overhead, Orion glinted.

This was possibly his last week of being alive, if he proceeded with his plan.

Peter wrapped cold numbness around himself like a suit of armor. If he was going to get through the next week, he told himself, he couldn't think about how confused Morgan would be when he didn't come home, or how furious and devastated May would be when she learned what he had done. He couldn't think about how Queens would decline when Spider-Man wasn't there to stop crime anymore, or how Ned and MJ would go off to college without him in two years.

Peter's first task was to text Harley and tell Harley that he wanted to back out of the plan.

He had to bank on the fact that Harley didn't have the same information as him about the Soul Stone. Without knowing about the sacrifice on Vormir, Harley wouldn't be able to do anything to bring Mr. Stark back, even if he did try to follow Steve back in time. And with any luck, Harley would give up if Peter did. After all, they'd barely formed any kind of plan since Harley's failed sanctum break-in.

PP: Steve is returning the Stones on Saturday.

PP: But I think—

He was startled when Harley texted him back before he could even finish his second message.

HK: I think we should call it off. We don't have enough info.

PP: Wait, really?

HK: Yeah. I think you were right. I don't think this is what Tony would've wanted us to do. And I think we should respect that. I don't want to mess up the timeline.

Peter frowned at his phone. This was definitely suspicious. Harley had been the one leading them down this path from the get-go. Now *he* wanted to back out at the last minute?

It worked well for Peter's plan to ditch Harley and sneak after Steve alone, but...it was odd. He'd been expecting to have to fight Harley tooth and nail to prevent him from showing up at the compound.

Morgan appeared in the doorway of his room, distracting him.

"Can you read this book with me? It has a lot of big words." She was holding up the first *Harry Potter* book, which May and Happy had bought her as part of her birthday gift.

"Morgan H. Stark!" Pepper called in a warning voice from down the hallway. "You better not be out of your bed!"

Morgan looked at Peter with wide eyes, obviously hoping he'd jump in and protect her from her bedtime.

Peter had to look away. "Sorry, Momo. Maybe we can read it next week when I visit."

He tapped on May and Happy's door on Friday night, and he managed to hold himself together when May opened the door with a smile. She was wearing the llama pajamas he'd bought her for Christmas several years ago, the last Christmas Ben was alive. He wanted to fall into her arms and never leave the safety of her embrace.

"What's up, honey?" May asked with a smile.

"I was wondering if Happy could drop me off at the compound tomorrow for a few hours. I want to see how the rebuild is going."

Perhaps he'd said this too seriously, because May's forehead wrinkled with concern. "Sure thing. But why the long face?"

Peter shrugged. "Just...tough patrol today." He wasn't lying—he'd been in tears for half of his patrol, just thinking about how it was the last time that friendly neighborhood Spider-Man would be able to protect the residents of Queens.

May's eyes softened with empathy. "You want to come in? We were about to start a new episode of *Schitt's Creek*. But if you want to watch something different, you can pick. Or if you want it to just be you and me, I can make Harold go sleep on the couch."

Peter needed to get away. Far, far away. If he stepped into May and Happy's room, there was no way he'd be able to go to Vormir. He'd fall apart. He was already getting too close now. May was wearing her favorite pair of glasses, and Peter remembered how he'd sat on her glasses and broken them once, when he was eight. Ever the little engineer, he'd tried to fix them before she noticed, but he'd accidentally switched the lenses around, and May had almost walked into a wall when she'd put them on.

He remembered how May had held his hand the first time he rode a roller coaster at Coney Island, how many nights of take-out and grief they'd shared after Ben's death.

"I think I'm going to turn in. But thanks anyway," he managed. *Thanks for being my mom. Thanks for raising me, even though you have no blood relation to me.*

"Okay, but if you change your mind, you get your ass in here."

"I larb you, May," he said softly. He flung himself into her arms and hugged her as hard as he could without it being painful.

"Larb you too, honey," May said, her smile slightly confused.

If Morgan had the ability to make him crack, May had the ability to shatter him into a million tiny pieces.

Peter's last day on earth was beautiful. It was almost like the weather was mocking him. The morning sunlight was golden and hazy. The breeze was unseasonably warm, and everywhere he looked, he saw hints of green, buds opening and leaves sprouting. The world coming back to life just as Peter went to his death.

In the woods by the destroyed Avengers compound, Peter crouched in a tree, twenty or thirty feet above the ground. He hadn't known what time they were planning to activate the quantum realm transporter, so he got there early to be on the safe side. He hadn't bothered to pack anything, nor had he eaten breakfast. He was starting to regret that as one hour turned into two hours. His

metabolism required frequent meals, but...he supposed it didn't matter anymore if he skipped a meal.

He swung his legs idly, lifting his face to the sunlight. In the distance, he thought he caught a familiar flash of gold. He strained to track the odd light, but everything was brown and yellow and green this time of year, and he quickly gave up.

His plan was to hide in this tree until the moment the transporter was activated. Then he would use his web shooters to swing down onto the platform at the last second. If he timed it right, there would be no way for Steve or Bruce to stop him from being sucked into the past. He hadn't figured out how he'd get the Soul Stone from Steve or how he'd get to Vormir yet, but he'd deal with that on the fly.

It would be fine. It had to be fine.

Peter's internal clock told him that it was around noon when Bruce, Sam, Bucky, and Steve appeared. Steve was carrying a briefcase and Mjolnir.

"Remember," Bruce said as they walked into the clearing. "You have to return the Stones to the exact moment you got them or you're going to open up a bunch of nasty alternative realities."

"Don't worry," Steve said. He looked serious. Determined. Tired. Everything Peter was feeling. And Peter had a sneaking suspicion that Steve had plans of his own with the Stones.

"You ready to do this?" Bruce asked.

"Actually..." Steve said, tilting his head slightly as though listening to the wind. "Could you guys give me a minute?"

Bruce, Bucky, and Sam all exchanged glances.

"Sure," Bruce said. He looked concerned. Perhaps Peter wasn't the only one who'd noticed that something was off about Steve lately. "Take your time."

Peter watched curiously as Steve simply stood, waiting for them to walk back towards the compound.

After a long moment, Steve opened his mouth to speak. What came out of his mouth was not at all what Peter had been expecting.

"I know you're up there, Peter," Steve stated calmly, staring right at Peter, perched high above the small clearing. "You want to follow me back in time and use the Soul Stone to sacrifice yourself on Vormir so Tony can come back to life, right?"

Peter gaped down at him for a moment, so surprised that he almost fell out of the tree.

"I—I don't know what you're talking about," Peter stammered, internally groaning. There was no point in pretending to hide from somebody who had enhanced hearing and sight.

"That's not a very good hiding spot, Peter. Did you want me to find you and talk you out of doing this?"

"What? Enough with the psychoanalysis, dude. And you're one to talk—you have your own mission with the Stones, don't you, Cap?" Peter accused, crossing his arms over his chest. "You're going to go back to your own time and stay there. You're going to get married and have kids and

grandkids, and show up in the present as an old man, right?"

Steve let out a low laugh. "So, that's the conclusion you've come to?"

"Yeah, I figured it out a while ago," Peter said defiantly. "You've been delaying your trip to return the Stones because you knew you'd have to say goodbye to everyone here and leave the team without a leader."

Steve sighed. "Look, Peter, not to change the subject, but let's talk about you here."

"You can't stop me from following you to Vormir," Peter declared.

To his surprise, Steve's face softened. "You're right, son, I probably can't. You've got a hell of a right hook nowadays." He took a deep breath. "But I can ask you not to follow me."

"I'm not your son," Peter grumbled.

"No," Steve agreed. "But you were Tony's."

He felt like he'd been kicked in the chest.

Anger was easier than sadness. "Why should I listen to you?" He asked, glaring. "You hurt him. You left him in Siberia. You let him wield the gauntlet."

"I know. And I regret all of those things every day."

"Regret isn't good enough! It's not going to bring him back!"

"He wouldn't want to come back like this, Peter."

"Why the hell should I believe you?"

Steve's smile was sad. "Because we both know that Tony would want you to stay safe."

"You're—you're wrong!" Peter exclaimed. He was so agitated that he jumped down from the tree so that he could pace around the small clearing. "He let me do dangerous stuff; he let me be Spider-Man."

Steve followed his movements with a compassionate expression.

"Peter, I saw him when he came back from Titan. He was like a walking corpse. And then he tore the fabric of the universe apart so you could live. Above all else, he wanted you to be alive." Peter didn't understand how he could say it so easily, with such simple conviction.

"Yeah, well...I didn't ask him to tear the universe apart for me!"

"You didn't have to ask, Peter. He always would've done it, no matter what you thought about the matter."

He was so tired of people telling him this.

"Then I should do the same for him!" Peter yelled in anguish.

He kept thinking of the boy from *The Road*, who had once asked his father about what would happen if the boy died.

“What would you do if I died?”

“If you died I would want to die too.”

“So you could be with me?”

“Yes. So I could be with you.”

“Okay.”

He sank to his knees and buried his hands in his hair.

Why was it okay for the father to follow the son if he died, but not the other way around? When the father had died in *The Road*, the boy hadn't been allowed to give up, because his father made him promise to keep going. He'd had to keep walking along the road, to warmth, to safety, to freedom. To the continuation of the human race. It wasn't fair. It wasn't *fair*.

“Tony was—he was reading this book—and—and I don't know what to do, Steve!” Peter knew he wasn't making sense, but he was suddenly terrified by the weight of the decision he had to make. “I want him back more than anything, but I don't want to hurt him again by sacrificing myself to bring him back.”

“You were his kid, Peter,” Steve said quietly. He was gradually moving closer, as if Peter was a wild animal that might be spooked by sudden movement. “He was the one who was supposed to be making the sacrifices. Not you.”

Peter standing on the driveway—Is it better to be the one who dies, or the one who has to keep living?

“Help me, Steve,” Peter pleaded, tears running down his cheeks. “I don't know what to do.”

Rhodey's compassionate eyes—It's an act of great bravery sometimes, just to keep living when someone you love has died and you feel like it's your fault.

Steve took one final step towards him. “Stay here, Peter.” He put one hand on Peter's shoulder. “I know it's the hardest thing you've ever had to do, to watch me walk away with the Stones. But stay here. Stay alive.”

“I can't let him go,” Peter sobbed.

Steve looked pained. “I promise you, kid, it's all going to be okay. I know it doesn't feel like it, but it's going to be okay.”

Peter stood mutely next to Sam Wilson. His eyes stung and his head ached from crying. He normally would've been embarrassed for the Avengers to see him like this, but he was too numb to care right now.

They'd all been nice enough not to comment on Peter's sudden appearance and his shouting match with Steve.

Bruce was back at the transporter, and he was fidgeting with wires, making last minute calculations and adjustments. Bucky and Steve were standing off to the side, speaking intently in whispers, their heads bent closely together.

“Alright,” Bruce called. “It’s time.”

Steve tugged Bucky into an embrace for a long moment. Then they broke apart and Steve marched stiffly to the transporter, looking almost as if he was relying on his military training for the strength to proceed.

“Steve,” Peter called. “Good luck.” If Peter’s suspicions were right, Steve wasn’t going to reappear on the transporter pad when the countdown was up. He was going to be just like any other old man, living in a retirement community somewhere and filling his days with long walks and visits from his grandkids.

Steve nodded at him reassuringly. “Thanks, Queens. Remember what I said. It’s all going to be okay.”

Steve looked away from Peter then, turning his gaze to Bucky, staring like he was memorizing the other man’s face.

Bucky gave a small nod, something unfathomable and heavy in his eyes.

“Going quantum in 3…” Bruce started to say.

Several things happened at once then.

Steve’s mask began to close over his face and the transporter began to make noise as it powered up. Peter felt a sudden flare in his spidey sense, and the jolt of adrenaline that ran through him made the world slow down and come into sharp focus.

As a result, Peter noticed before anyone else that there were footsteps moving rapidly towards them. Some part of him, deep down, knew exactly who it was.

So unlike everyone else, Peter wasn’t surprised when Harley Keener burst into the clearing, moving at a dead sprint. He leaped onto the platform just as Steve began to disappear. And Peter, suddenly knowing exactly what Harley planned to do, used the extra time his spidey sense afforded him and shot a web.

His web wrapped neatly around Harley’s torso, and Peter felt a jerk as he was tugged along with it.

The last thing he saw before he disappeared into the light of the quantum realm was Sam, Bucky, and Bruce’s horrified faces.

When Peter opened his eyes again, all he could think of was not throwing up. By all appearances, they were in the exact same clearing as before, just without Bruce and Sam and Bucky and Steve. A bird chirped in a tree above, apparently undisturbed by witnessing time travel.

“What the fuck, Parker!” Harley shouted near his ear. He was wrestling his way out of the webbing that Peter had wrapped around his chest.

“I could say the same to you, Harley,” Peter grumbled, dusting himself off and dizzily pushing to his feet. Quantum travel was *weird*.

“How did you find out about making a sacrifice to the Soul Stone?” Harley demanded, expression murderous.

“You first,” Peter said, lifting his chin. “You learned something in the sanctum and kept it from me, didn’t you?”

“Fine,” Harley snapped. He pulled out a small blade and cut through Peter’s webbing, something that was supposed to be next to impossible. “Yes, I read about it. In Dr. Strange’s book. Which was written in English, not runes.” He frowned at Peter. “Now you. How did *you* find out?”

“I asked Rhodey about how Natasha died,” Peter said. He crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re not going to sacrifice yourself. I won’t let you.”

“Well, tough luck, Parker, because you’re not going to sacrifice yourself either.”

They stared at each other.

“How the hell did you get to the compound?” Peter asked.

Harley held up a small device. It was familiar.

Peter groaned. “Oh my god. You stole the sling-ring from Dr. Strange?”

“Okay, look, we both lied to each other. We both want to go to Vormir—”

“Actually,” Peter broke in. “I wasn’t going to follow Steve. He and I talked and I had decided to let the Stones go. I think I—I wanted him to catch me and talk me out of it. I had barely planned anything out. I just jumped on the transporter at the last second because I saw you there and I knew you planned to sacrifice yourself.”

“Yeah, well, Captain Douchebag can’t convince me to back out of this plan. And neither can you. So I’ll see you in some other dimension or lifetime.”

“Steve is right, Harley! Tony wouldn’t want us to do this.”

“I don’t listen to authority figures, Peter. Unlike you.”

“Yeah, but you could listen to *me*.”

Harley paused at that, and Peter felt a sliver of hope grow in his chest.

It was short-lived, however, when Harley turned and started marching away.

“You shouldn’t have come,” Harley grumbled. “Now you’re going to try to sacrifice yourself so I won’t, and this is going to get messy.”

“Where’s Steve?” Peter asked. “Why aren’t we with him?”

Harley looked like he didn’t want to talk to Peter. “...He got sucked into the transporter half a second before us,” he explained reluctantly. “In quantum time, that’s a lot. He’s probably already off returning the Stones. I have to get to Vormir before he does.”

“This is 2014, right?” Peter tried not to think about Ben, probably on his lunch break, sitting in his squad car in Queens.

“See for yourself.” They had reached the edge of the woods. Harley pushed a few tree branches out of the way, and there was the compound.

Tony was outside. *Tony was outside.*

Peter immediately started to move forward. Harley grabbed him by the collar and jerked him back, breaking Peter out of his daze.

“He doesn’t know you yet! It’s 2014, dude.”

“I don’t care,” Peter breathed, unable to look away. “I’ll pretend I’m a fan. Ask him for a hug.”

“Oh my god, Parker. He’s got horrible PTSD. If a stranger goes sprinting over to him, he’s going to call a suit and blast you with his repulsors. Just...you can stay here and look, but don’t do anything.”

Don’t do anything I would do. And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. There’s a little gray area in there.

Tony was pacing back and forth on the lawn, talking on the phone. He looked stressed out. Peter wanted to drag him down to the lab and make him tea. Tony claimed to hate tea, but whenever Peter made it, he drank it. Behind Tony, the compound loomed, pristine and intact. Peter wondered if this was around the time when things with Steve began to fall apart.

Peter’s hands were shaking. Tony was here. He was breathing. He was wearing a soft red hoodie that was now in Peter’s possession at the lake house. He didn’t know Peter yet, but Peter could find some way to introduce himself. He could—he could find his younger self and explain everything to him, and then they could share this version of Tony.

Yeah, sure, it was insane, it would change everything, but-

“Can we just stay in 2014, Harley?” He asked wistfully.

Peter was so immersed in Tony, Tony, *Tony* that it took him a second to notice when Harley didn’t respond. He whirled around, spidey sense tingling again.

Harley had slipped away, taking advantage of Peter’s distraction. Peter’s sharp eyes instantly honed in on the light of a familiar golden portal back in the woods, however.

“Harley!” He yelped. He knew that he was breaking the rules of time travel by drawing attention to himself, but he didn’t care. He yanked his sleeves up, making sure his web shooters were accessible.

“Just stay here until Steve comes back from Vormir with our version of Tony!” Harley called back, exasperated. “The quantum realm transporter will pick you up in the clearing.”

“You’re not doing this!” Peter hissed, sprinting closer. The golden portal was almost ready, and if Harley passed through it alone, Peter didn’t think he’d ever come back.

“Let me go, Peter! You’ll get Tony back, I promise.”

“You’re my brother, dumbass! I’m not going to let you die!”

Harley dove through the portal just as Peter shot a web. The last thing Peter glimpsed was Tony, squinting into the woods with a confused expression, unaware that two of his kind-of-adopted children had just broken the laws of physics to be here and bring him back from his future death.

“This is getting really old, Peter,” Harley huffed, ducking behind a rock to dodge Peter’s rapid volley of webs.

They were scrambling up a mountain on Vormir, which was insane. Peter had experienced a lot of bizarre, inexplicable things since he became Spider-Man, but this had to be near the top of the list.

Just a few hours ago, he’d been sitting in a tree and looking down at the destroyed compound. Now he was in the past and on a different planet, trying to stop Harley from giving up his life.

The sky on Vormir was vast and such a deep shade of black that Peter almost felt he might be sucked into it if he climbed too high. The mountains that surrounded them were jagged and irregular, far more sheer than even the Himalayas back on earth, and they were a shade of bluish-purple that seemed like a geological impossibility.

The stars were so close on different planets. Peter was afraid to look down at his legs, terrified that they might begin turning into dust again.

“Don’t act like you didn’t plan for every single second of this,” he retorted, shaking himself from the unpleasant memory of Titan. “You designed a knife that could cut through my webbing. You knew that seeing Tony at the compound would distract me. You had a contingency plan for me finding out and following you, didn’t you?”

He found himself suddenly reevaluating Harley’s break-in at Dr. Strange’s sanctum—his insistence on going alone, Peter’s own naivete. How had a non-enhanced sixteen-year-old bypassed a sorcerer’s security system? Why hadn’t he wondered more about that at the time?

Peter hadn’t given it much thought, but he was now almost certain that Harley had invented some kind of crazy cloaking technology to carry off his heist of the sling ring. Had he even gone after the information in Strange’s books, or had he already known that he was after the sling ring’s transportation abilities?

“Of course I had a contingency plan for you,” Harley scoffed, dodging another one of Peter’s webs. “And even though you’re still tagging along, I have more plans up my sleeve.”

Without further ado, Harley pulled out one of Tony’s gauntlets, yanked it on, and shot a repulsor beam at Peter, who was only able to dodge it because of his spidey sense.

“What the hell, dude!” Peter yelled, diving behind a rock, which exploded in front of him.

“Relax, it’s on a low setting,” Harley said, sounding slightly apologetic.

“Yeah, that doesn’t really make me feel any better,” Peter muttered. He jumped to his feet and resumed chasing after Harley, who moved fast for a non-enhanced person.

“Steve!” Peter shouted for the umpteenth time, trying to catch the hero’s attention. Steve was up on the top of the mountain, a smudge of blue and red in the distance. He was facing away from them and hadn’t moved in several minutes. It was odd, but Peter didn’t have time to wonder what he was doing.

“Steve!” He yelled again.

Once again, the wind whipped past and stole the sound of Peter’s shout. Vormir had a different atmospheric composition from earth, and the terrain was harsh and exposed. Peter’s agility and stickiness aided his climbing abilities, but his spider powers were actually slowing him down in these conditions. It was cold - colder than Peter’s body could comfortably handle. He’d packed his

suit, but he didn't have time to put it on without Harley getting too far ahead of him.

To make matters worse, his bones were lighter than a normal human's bones, which meant he weighed less. With every step he took forward, the wind pushed him half a step back. What would've normally been an easy climb up the mountain felt like a race through a nightmare, running as fast as he could but not going anywhere, screaming but no sound coming out.

"Please, Harley," he called. He needed to save his breath, and it wasn't like Harley had shown any signs of listening to Peter, but—he had to try.

"Let me do this for you, Peter!" Harley shouted back. He was fiddling with the gauntlet, moving slightly slower than before. Maybe Peter could keep him talking, keep him in one place, web him up, and steal that stupid knife so he couldn't free himself.

"You don't understand!" Harley continued. "You—look, I know you've lost a ton of people. But you have your aunt, and Pepper, and that Happy guy, and Morgan, and your friends. I have—I had nobody but Tony. It's not—I don't want to die. But I know that I'm the right person to do this."

"No!" Peter shouted. "You have me! And Pepper and Morgan love you; they just don't know you very well. But they're always saying that they hope you come and visit—"

"It's not the same, Peter," Harley said, turning around to look at Peter and shaking his head. "It's not the same, and you know it."

He seized the moment and shot a web, but Harley pressed a button on the gauntlet and Peter was forced to watch in horror as an Iron Man suit began to form around Harley.

Harley had really planned for everything.

"No," Peter said. "No, no—"

"When you see Tony, tell him—"

"No! I'm not telling him anything! Harley—"

But it was too late. The Iron Man suit shot off towards the top of the mountain. Harley was going to get to Steve first. And with the suit on, he actually stood a good chance of stealing the Soul Stone.

Peter swung to the top of the mountain faster than he had ever swung before. He was being dangerous, he knew that. He didn't know how strong the rocks were on this planet. If one of his webs slipped or didn't catch, Peter would plunge into the mists below. And since he didn't have his suit on, he wouldn't have a parachute to slow him down.

Nonetheless, he gritted his teeth and pushed on. Surely Steve could easily hold Harley at bay, even if Harley did have one of Tony's suits.

After all, he was certainly able to hold his own against Mr. Stark's suit in Siberia, a bitter voice whispered.

He brushed it aside. He needed to stop thinking of Steve as the enemy, because right now, he was the only thing that stood in between Harley and the Stone.

He aimed a web at the edge of a nearby cliff, ignoring how his spidey sense flared at the risk. If he had his suit on, he knew Karen would be lecturing him about only relying on solid surfaces to support his weight. Tony had programmed her with lots of annoying, endearing safety facts and reminders.

Tony.

Peter swung so fast that he felt like he might dislocate his shoulders. He was done with this. He was done watching the people he loved die. He was tired of being too late to save his family. He wasn't going to let Harley go, even if it meant giving up his chance of bringing Mr. Stark back.

He was almost there; he was so close—

The edge of a cliff that he'd webbed crumbled and Peter felt a sharp jolt as he began to fall.

“No!” He gasped, furious tears burning his eyes. He wasn't going to make it in time. He was going to fail again—

As he began to plummet, he found himself reminded of the Vulture, of when the building had fallen on him, and he'd screamed and felt so alone, and he'd known that he was going to die there and nobody would ever find his body or know what happened to him.

But he'd survived that, even without his suit. He was Spider-Man. He was *Spider-Man*. He wasn't going to let his brother die.

Instead of shooting webs frantically as he fell and hoping one of them would catch, he leaned his body towards the sheer face of the mountain. For once, his light weight helped him, the wind dutifully blowing him perilously close to the towering wall of jagged obsidian rock.

Peter reached out with one hand, planting it on the rocks. His body was still falling, and his shoulder jerked uncomfortably, but the stickiness of his fingertips held his weight. He quickly slapped his other palm on the cliff face, following with both of his feet.

Adrenaline buzzed in his head. He didn't stop to contemplate how close he'd come to falling or being dashed into the face of the mountain.

He just kept climbing.

He wasn't sure what he expected to see when he reached the top of the mountain, but it wasn't Steve and Harley frozen in place with a frightening-looking man standing in between them and looking vaguely bored.

Steve's mouth was open like he'd been mid-sentence, and the Iron Man helmet was open so that Peter could see the slightly frightened look frozen on Harley's face.

“Ah, good,” the man said in a slightly accented voice. “Took you longer than I expected to get up here, but now that you're here, we can get started.”

He clapped his hands together, looking pleased. Peter's spidey sense flared again. His stomach churned with disgust as he abruptly realized that the man's scarlet mask wasn't a mask at all - this guy had no skin on his face. His head was just...a bright red skull.

Red Skull. The name was vaguely familiar, but Peter couldn't quite remember why.

“What did you do to them?” Peter asked fiercely, inching towards Harley. He subtly raised his wrist to shoot a web at the red guy.

To his horror, he was instantly frozen into place before he could get a shot off.

“Sorry to freeze you, Little Spider, but I have some things to say before we begin this delightful exercise.”

Peter could only blink and suck in air through his nose. He began to panic, feeling claustrophobic.

“Oh, very well,” Red Guy sighed. He waved his hand, and Peter felt the invisible force holding him in place relax slightly. “I suppose this will be more interesting if you can all talk.”

All three of them began to speak at once.

“Who the hell is this guy, Captain Douchebag?” Harley asked Steve.

“Let them go, Red Skull, I’m telling you—”

“Steve, you have to stop Harley! He’s trying to get the Stone and sacrifice himself for Tony!”

“Isn’t this fun?” Red Skull laughed, and the sound sent shivers down Peter’s spine.

“Ugh, I sense an evil villain monologue coming on,” Harley groaned.

“They have nothing to do with this, Red Skull. This is between you and me—” Steve continued urgently.

Red Skull ignored both of them.

“Isn’t it interesting?” He began.

Peter rolled his eyes, catching Harley’s eye. *Classic bad guy monologue.*

“All three of you have come here to make a bargain with me.” He turned to Peter and Harley. “Since you two don’t know me, I’ll introduce myself. I am Red Skull, the keeper of the Soul Stone. I was sent here as a punishment from a world that simply wasn’t advanced enough to appreciate my contributions to science—”

“He’s the former head of HYDRA,” Steve interjected shortly. “I knew him during World War II. He was a Nazi—”

“Ew, gross,” Peter and Harley chorused in unison.

“Kindly remember,” Red Skull said, voice dropping dangerously. “That I have the power to stop you all from talking again. Or breathing, if I feel like it. And then nobody gets what they came here for.”

They all shut up.

“Now, as I was saying,” Red Skull said, beginning to pace between them. “You can imagine what a delightful surprise it was to see Rogers here and hear that he wanted to bargain with me.”

Peter frowned. What did Steve want to bargain with Red Skull for? He was just here to return the Soul Stone, not do anything with it. Maybe he wanted to bring back Natasha? Peter shot Steve a questioning look, only for Steve to uncharacteristically avoid his gaze.

“Ah,” Red Skull observed, looking at Steve. “They do not know what you came here to bargain for, do they? That only makes this more delightful for me.” His smile made Peter’s gut churn nervously.

“You have to remember that Rogers is responsible for sending me here after the Tesseract...incident,” Red Skull continued.

“You touched the Tesseract by yourself,” Steve muttered.

“And you also have to remember that I was finally freed from my duty as the Soulkeeper when Thanos gained the Soul Stone a few years ago—or rather, in the future, depending on how you view the timeline.”

Peter felt his blood run cold. When they had defeated Thanos—

“Ah, yes, I see the Little Spider understands. When your little group of ‘heroes,’” he sneered the word, “defeated Thanos, you undid my liberation. And so now I am here once again. And if I take the Stone back from Rogers, I must continue to be the Soulkeeper.” He steepled his fingers together, looking thoughtful. Peter suddenly realized why the color seemed familiar—Morgan had a tub of Play-doh in the exact same red color as Red Skull’s skin.

“And yet...I confess that I have come to enjoy my power as the Soulkeeper. The past—or future—years have been very interesting. It was certainly a fun day when I received that visit from Barton and Romanoff—”

“Don’t talk about her!” Peter shouted, temper flaring. “Don’t you dare say her name—”

“I like this one, Rogers,” Red Skull said, turning to Steve. “It will be fun to watch you try to save him.”

Peter snapped his mouth shut. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“Anyway,” Red Skull continued magnanimously. “I think I will accept the Stone back from you, Rogers. But...let’s raise the stakes a little bit, shall we?” He uncurled Steve’s frozen fingers and nimbly plucked the Soul Stone out of them.

A familiar orange glow filled the clifftop as soon as Red Skull had the Stone again. Peter felt a cold sweat break out over his entire body. This was the color that haunted his nightmares. He’d seen an apartment with orange holiday lights strung up on the balcony last month during a patrol and he’d almost thrown up at the sight.

With an easy wave of his hand, Red Skull created a concentrated beam of orange light at the back of the cliff. It looked almost like a transporter beam from *Star Trek*. The wind began to pick up, almost imperceptibly at first, but growing stronger by the moment. Peter could only clench his jaw and hope that he wouldn’t simply be swept off the cliff and down into the abyss below.

“Now, I am going to unfreeze the three of you. Whoever steps into the beam first gets to negotiate with me. It’s the same terms as always—I will take your life, and I will restore the soul of your choice.”

“They’re kids, Red Skull,” Steve said, practically pleading. “They want their dad back. They’re not thinking clearly. You can’t—you can’t do this.”

“This is on you, Rogers,” Red Skull said, shrugging. “If you don’t want one of them to sacrifice themselves, you have to stop them. Otherwise, their blood is on your hands.” From the way he was

smirking at Steve, Peter could tell that this was the real point of this activity: for Steve to watch one of them die and feel responsible in the aftermath when Tony returned.

“It’s okay, Steve,” Peter called. “Let’s just focus on stopping Harley.”

But Steve’s gaze was a little too knowing. And Peter could admit to himself that his earlier resolve to leave Tony’s death alone was dissipating quickly now that the beam of light was only a few hundred feet away from him. Other than the color, it didn’t look too scary or painful. It would be much less frightening than he’d been imagining. He and Steve could block Harley, and then Peter could slip around them both. It would be as easy as just walking right into the light, and then Harley and Morgan and Pepper could have Tony back—

“Hey, no table talk,” Harley muttered, his sharp eyes darting around the clearing, making plans and calculations.

“I think the odds are evenly matched, wouldn’t you all agree? Two enhanced, one in a suit. Nobody can say that the Soulkeeper is not merciful and fair,” Red Skull smiled, showing his teeth.

“Peter,” Steve called. “Please, remember what we talked about.” It was strange to see fear in Captain America’s eyes.

Peter ignored him. He would do what he needed to do. Stop Harley first, and then—

Tony. Pepper’s face when she saw her husband again. Morgan’s happiness. May’s grief.

Warmth began to flow through his limbs and Red Skull reversed whatever he’d done to them earlier.

As soon as he was able, Harley shot off towards the sky like a rocket, Peter diving after him.

This time, he didn’t waste his breath trying to argue with Harley. He shot web after web, but Harley was skilled at dodging them, and anytime a web hit, he used that damn knife to quickly cut it before Peter could paralyze him and bring him back to earth.

Still, he was at least slowing Harley down. For all of Harley’s ability to hack the suit, he still was unfamiliar with flying, and his movements were uncoordinated and just slightly panicky at times. Peter took advantage of that fact, firing his webs so rapidly that he knew a non-enhanced person had almost no chance of keeping up.

Steve had taken off running, presumably since he didn’t really have any weapons that were suited to fight somebody in the air.

Harley shot a repulsor beam at Peter, and his aim was getting better. There were no rocks to hide behind this time, and Peter was forced to backflip to avoid being blasted. This gave Harley a few seconds free of Peter’s constant attacks, and Peter watched in horror as Harley shot another repulsor blast at Steve, hitting his mark.

Steve crumpled to the ground. Peter was certain he wouldn’t be down long, but Harley’s access to the beam was now clear.

Peter took off at a dead sprint. He had to get there before Harley. *Keep going*, he told himself as his lungs burned and his muscles ached and threatened to give out beneath him. He ran past Steve’s prone form, but he could see that Harley was still ahead of him in the sky. *Just step into the orange*

light. This is when you are most alive. When you are brave, when you save others. When you make sacrifices. Keep going, keep going.

So he ran a little harder, trying to be faster and stronger than the truth that he knew, deep down, but refused to acknowledge. He wasn't most alive when his heart was pumping furiously and his limbs were flying across the dark mountain, using his spider powers to the fullest extent and risking his life. He was most alive when dancing with his mom in the kitchen, laughing at Austin Powers with Ben and May, walking home from school with Ned and MJ. Saving the people of Queens from muggings and robberies. Helping Morgan find constellations.

Tony's hand on his shoulder, Tony's arms around him as he turned to dust.

Steve jumped to his feet and threw his shield at Harley. Harley twisted to dodge, but the shield clipped him hard on the shoulder, and he plummeted to the ground, landing with an awful crunching sound. Peter winced, but he knew the suit would protect him from too many injuries.

Peter webbed him up, grinning triumphantly. He ran over and grabbed Harley's knife so that he couldn't free himself from the webs.

"No!" Harley shouted, furious, writhing against his bonds.

Peter turned and resumed his run towards the orange light.

He was getting close now—fifty feet. Forty feet. Thirty—

Sharp pain exploded in his side, and Peter went sprawling toward the ground. He caught a flash of something blue and red before his knees gave out. Steve's shield.

He wasn't going to make it.

No. He was Spider-Man. He began to crawl, his ribs white hot with each gasping breath.

His arms and legs were shaking. *Thirty feet. Twenty-five feet.*

He fell to the ground, darkness swallowing him.

There had been a fire once.

It was Christmas Eve, and Peter and Mr. Stark were the last ones awake.

Pepper had convinced May that she and Peter should spend Christmas at the Tower with her, Mr. Stark, Happy, Rhodey, and Vision. Since May and Peter had no other family to visit, May had acquiesced.

Everyone else had gone to bed when Peter and Tony insisted on watching *Die Hard*.

"It's not a Christmas movie!" May argued, quickly leaving before Tony and Peter could launch a counterattack.

"Rude!" Peter shouted after her.

"Disgraceful!" Tony echoed indignantly.

They both laughed and settled in, sinking further into the couch cushions. Snowflakes drifted down

outside, and a huge Christmas tree stood in the corner of the room, a massive pile of gifts spilling out from under it. A fire crackled quietly in the fireplace. It was basically a Christmas scenario out of a movie.

Peter felt his great mood begin to flag during the movie, however. Christmas was like this for him sometimes. Ever since his parents had died, holidays felt like more of a reminder of what he was missing than a celebration of what he had.

With Ben being gone this year, that ache was sharper than ever.

“You okay, Underoos?” Mr. Stark asked, his voice breaking through Peter’s thoughts.

Peter blinked, suddenly realizing that the movie was over. The TV screen was black. Mr. Stark was eyeing him with concern.

“Yeah,” Peter said, offering a small smile. “I’m okay...just. You know. I miss Ben.”

Mr. Stark nodded. “Yeah, I bet you do. What did you guys used to do on Christmas?”

Peter’s smile grew wistful. “We’d...we’d go to one of those overpriced tree farms and cut down a tree on Christmas Eve, even though I had asthma and I couldn’t really help Ben much with the chopping or carrying. Then Ben would make this amazing dinner. May had to work on Christmas Eve a lot, so it was usually just Ben and I. And then...we’d watch *Die Hard* together.”

“Oh,” Mr. Stark said softly. “Was this okay, Pete?” He asked seriously, motioning to the TV.

Peter nodded quickly. “Of course, Mr. Stark! It was really nice to keep the tradition alive. Just...thank you. For all of this.” He gestured towards the tree, where he was sure Mr. Stark had several embarrassingly expensive gifts waiting for him.

He just hoped May had been able to talk him out of buying Peter a car.

“You don’t have to thank me, kid,” Mr. Stark grumbled.

They lapsed into comfortable silence for a moment. It was kind of surreal that Peter was sitting next to Tony Stark on Christmas Eve at 1 in the morning. He kept talking, where he normally would’ve made himself shut up.

“Mr. Stark,” he began hesitantly. “It’s okay if you don’t want to answer this question. It’s just...you know how people who have near-death experiences talk about the light at the end of the tunnel and stuff? And how scientific studies have shown that those feelings are associated with chemicals that the brain releases to soothe you when you’re dying? So, it might be more of a neurochemical reaction than a spiritual experience—”

“What’s the question, bud?” Mr. Stark interrupted him gently.

“What do you think happens after people die?” Peter blurted.

After all, Mr. Stark was a man of science, too. If he thought nothing happened after death, he would surely tell Peter without sugarcoating it.

Peter stared into the flames, intently watching them dance.

“I haven’t given it much thought, Pete. It’s kind of funny, for all the times I’ve almost died, you’d think I’d have thought about it more.”

“Sorry,” Peter said quickly. “It’s a stupid question.”

“No, it’s not,” Tony said firmly, nudging Peter’s knee with his own. “I don’t really think that there’s a scientific way to measure or calculate what happens to us after we die. So...maybe it’s just peace and quiet. Or maybe our souls stay intact and they go somewhere nice. But...whatever it is, I don’t think it’s anything bad, Pete.”

And there was no real reason that Peter should trust this opinion. After all, Mr. Stark had admitted that his thoughts had no basis in science. But...he couldn’t deny that he felt comforted all the same, much like he had when Ben used to hold him after a nightmare, rocking him in his arms and whispering a steady mantra of *I’ve got you* and *I’m here* and *It’s going to be okay* in the darkness.

“Thanks, Mr. Stark,” Peter said. The light from the flames flickered over Mr. Stark’s face, and he couldn’t help thinking that this was the most human he’d ever seen his mentor, sitting with a snowman-themed blanket draped over his lap in the middle of the night and answering Peter’s questions about the deepest secrets of the universe.

“Don’t worry about it, kid,” Tony said, placing an arm around Peter’s shoulders and looking thoughtful. “I mean, who knows...the universe is a strange place, right?”

Peter scrambled to his knees. His ribs ached, but he could feel his healing already trying to fix them. Harley was still down on the ground, but he was—

He was *dissolving Peter’s webs*. Peter gaped in amazement as Harley poured the contents of a small vial over his suit. The webs began to disappear within seconds, and Harley tossed the vial aside.

Harley had somehow engineered a dissolution formula for Peter’s webs, something Peter had barely managed after two years of trying. His genius would definitely rival Tony’s one day.

Peter looked at the orange beam. It was only twenty-five feet away. To go after Harley would mean putting more distance between himself and the beam, but—Harley could fly. And saving Harley was the number one priority here, he reminded himself. *Harley first, then Tony.*

Before the webs could fully dissolve, Peter took off running away from the beam. Just as Harley took off towards the sky, Peter leaped and landed on his back, so that Harley was forced to carry him in an odd sort-of piggyback.

“Get off, Parker!” Harley hissed. He sounded exhausted and out of breath. “Only one of us can enter the beam. Get your own ride!”

Peter just clung tighter, using his stickiness to anchor himself to the Iron Man suit. He desperately tried not to think about how he’d once done this with Mr. Stark, after he’d gotten a nasty concussion on patrol. His memories of that night were fuzzy, but he knew Karen had called Mr. Stark, and Mr. Stark had shown up to find Peter laying on his back in an alleyway and passionately reciting the Jedi Code to the criminals he’d just webbed up.

“Alright, hop on, Spider-Baby,” Mr. Stark had said, sounding torn between laughter and concern. “But if you tell anyone I gave you a piggyback ride, I’m taking the suit away again.”

Harley tried to shake him loose, but Peter’s stickiness held fast.

Harley was flying them closer and closer to the orange light. Peter knew that he had only a few

seconds left to stop him. He fumbled around, grabbing Harley's left wrist. This was his last resort, and Peter wasn't even sure if it would work, but he had to try.

Harley grunted and wrenched his arm away from Peter, but Peter still managed to press his thumb against a small button on the seam of the gauntlet, praying that Tony had kept Peter's access intact after the snap, like the lab door at the lake house.

He, Pepper, Rhodey, and Bruce had been the only ones with external access to the suit. After Tony had been seriously injured on a mission with Rhodey and Rhodey had been unable to open Tony's suit to get him to safety, Pepper and Rhodey had staged an intervention and forced Tony to implement a protocol that would allow a few close allies to get him out of the suit for medical attention. The small button had been Tony's concession after a tense week of negotiations. (Peter remembered it distinctly, because Mr. Stark had invited him over for two extra lab sessions that week, a sure sign that he was stressed out or avoiding a request from Pepper.)

When the suit recognized his thumbprint, opening and dutifully ejecting Harley, he thought about how some part of Tony must have always hoped that Peter would come home.

And then he wasn't thinking about that anymore, because Harley was plummeting to the earth below.

Peter used both web shooters at once, shooting one web at Harley's falling form, now clad in his usual jeans and t-shirt rather than the imposing metal of the Iron Man suit. His other web went...nowhere. They were already at the top of the mountain, and there was nothing for Peter to catch onto in order to slow their fall.

"Shit, shit, shit," Peter hissed under his breath. He grabbed the web that attached him to Harley and tugged on it sharply, grabbing Harley's weight to slow his fall. Then he streamlined his body so that he was falling faster, so that he could cushion Harley's fall as much as possible. He grabbed Harley's arm, making sure to angle his body beneath Harley's, the ground growing closer and closer—

The impact was brutal. At the very last second, Peter remembered to use his free arm to cushion the back of his head. The back of Harley's head clunked against his sternum, knocking all the air from Peter's lungs. They rolled to a stop in a tangle of limbs.

Harley flopped off of him clumsily, but the fact that he was moving at all was encouraging to Peter. He had survived much worse as Spider-Man, and while he knew he'd be hobbling and sore for the foreseeable future, he could already tell that he hadn't received any particularly serious injuries.

It still took him a long moment before he was able to catch his breath and speak. "Harley," he gasped, frowning. His spidey sense was still tingling, and it was growing stronger by the second. But that didn't make sense, because Harley was pushing himself into a standing position, with no visible blood or twisted limbs.

"Harley," he gasped again, massaging his chest and clambering to his feet. He put one hand on Harley's shoulder, but Harley was staring sightlessly ahead, his expression horrified.

"You...okay...?" Peter managed to get out.

Harley lifted one shaking hand and pointed towards the beam of light.

Peter whirled around, and the feeling of dread intensified.

“NO!” Peter screamed, staring uncomprehendingly as Steve Rogers walked straight into the orange light and disappeared forever.

The wind instantly stopped, and the beam faded before their eyes.

“Oh my god,” Harley exhaled, his fists clenching in his hair, making it stand up in odd tufts. “Oh my god, we killed Captain America. Oh, fuck-”

He bent over, placing his hands on his knees and looked like he was about to either throw up or pass out.

Peter had never seen Harley so rattled before, but he understood. The same shock and guilt paralyzed him. He knew that he would never forget the look of calm acceptance on Steve’s face before he had disappeared, that he would carry the knowledge forever that Steve had sacrificed himself so that Harley or Peter wouldn’t sacrifice themselves.

And yet...

“I think...” Peter said slowly, a sickening realization dawning on him. “Harley, I think he always meant to do it. I think he was planning to bargain for Tony’s life all along.”

He was suddenly flooded by memories from the past few months.

Bruce and Sam, voices filled with concern.

“Steve, you need to return the stones before something happens to them!”

“I know, Bruce, I’ll do it...I just...I need a few months. Just to recover from all of this. I swear, I’ll do it then.”

Steve and Bucky at Morgan’s birthday party, sitting by the lake, Steve’s blond hair illuminated by starlight.

Their knees touching, in a world of their own. When they stood to come sing Happy Birthday, Peter thought he saw their hands brush together.

Peter, his arms crossed over his chest.

“That’s hypocritical—you’re going to go back to your own time and stay there, aren’t you? Get married and have some kids and grandkids, and show up in the present as an old man?”

Steve, letting out a low laugh. “So, that’s the conclusion you’ve come to?”

Bucky giving Steve a small nod when Steve stepped onto the quantum realm transponder, something deep and knowing in his eyes.

“It’s—I think that’s why he was waiting so long to return the Stones. He was—” Peter’s voice broke.

He was seizing a small window of happiness. He was spending time with Bucky, finally being with him, without any wars or death or global crises to keep them apart. He was—

“He was saying goodbye,” Peter whispered. And Peter only knew a fraction of what had transpired between Steve and Tony over the years, but he thought he understood. “I think he wanted to—to do this. To give Tony another chance. For Pepper and Morgan and for us. For Tony.”

“Fuck,” Harley said, his chest rising and falling rapidly. “*Fuck*. God, what a self-sacrificing *idiot* —”

Peter snorted. “I have to say, I think our actions today prove that we both also fit into the category of ‘self-sacrificing idiots.’”

He managed to say this with a grin, but his hands were shaking, and he couldn’t get them to stop.

Steve was gone.

Steve, who had carried a sketchbook with him everywhere but never shown anyone his drawings. Steve, who had kept an eye on Peter from afar ever since Tony’s death, training with him, preventing him from sacrificing himself. Steve, who had made everyone feel safe when they were near him.

Harley suddenly looked very young, back in his usual clothes, his blond hair sticking up oddly near his ear. “Do you...do you think it worked? I mean...Red Skull obviously wanted it to be one of us who gave our life, right? Is he going to honor the deal with Steve?”

“I don’t know,” Peter said, suddenly exhausted. He pulled his suit on over his clothes and turned the heater on.

By unspoken agreement, they both slumped to the ground where they stood. Neither of them spoke for a long time.

Peter rested his head on his backpack. “Hey, Harley, you want to go on a road trip with me this summer?” He murmured. “I was thinking California.”

“Sure,” Harley mumbled back. “Only if we can go to Disneyland, though.”

“Yeah, `course.” Peter’s eyes drifted shut. “DisneyLand first, then Yosemite.”

“Hey, c’n you drive, Pete?” Harley asked.

“Nah.”

“Me neither.”

“Guess we’ll have to bring somebody else with us so they can do the driving,” Peter murmured.

Harley snored in response. Peter pulled the hood of his sweatshirt up and drifted off to sleep.

There was a familiar hand tenderly smoothing the hair back from his forehead.

And Peter felt like he cried constantly nowadays, but it was still odd that his closed eyes instantly filled with tears when the fingers, warm and calloused, slid down to cup his cheek.

He *knew* this hand. He *missed* this hand.

“May?” He mumbled sleepily, because who else could it be?

Everyone else who loved him like this was gone.

There was a rumble of laughter then, deeper than May’s voice.

“Only my kid could fall asleep in the middle of Vormir and mistake this hellscape for his bed.”

Peter went rigid at the sound of that familiar voice.

“That’s it, Pete. Let me see those baby browns, okay?”

No no no no no no no no—

Peter couldn’t open his eyes. He couldn’t bear to wake up and inevitably see that he was in his room at May’s apartment or his room at the lake house or the lab.

It had been a long time since Mr. Stark had visited his dreams like this, kind and warm. Each time he awoke from one of these dreams, it was like he experienced the blow of Mr. Stark’s death all over again, just as vividly as when it had actually happened that day during the battle.

He thought he could even hear the man’s familiar heartbeat, the rhythmic thumping just slightly off.

“No,” he mumbled. He brought his hands up to his ears and pressed down on them hard, trying to block out the sound around him that was dragging him from the dream. It didn’t work, of course, thanks to his super hearing. The tears spilled over and his breath hitched. “Please, no, no.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” the voice soothed. “It’s okay, Spider-Kid. I’ve got you. I’m here.”

“Please,” Peter begged. He squeezed his eyes even tighter, as if that could keep him from waking up. It wasn’t helping, though, and he could feel awareness creeping back in no matter how hard he tried to hold it off.

“Help your old man out here. What do you need, *bambino*?”

Against his own volition, Peter blinked. Mr. Stark had never called him *bambino* before. Why was it happening now in his dream?

He caught only a glimpse of the world around him. Ominous black stone, a bluish-purple sky, and a dark figure kneeling next to him.

Vormir. The Soul Stone. Steve.

“Mr. Stark,” he whimpered. “*Mr. Stark.*”

This was normally the part where he’d wake up, gasping, tears running down his face. If May was home, he’d shove his face into his pillow to sob so that she wouldn’t wake up.

He blinked again, but the dream wasn't fading. Mr. Stark was kneeling next to him, his eyes crinkled in concern. It was...odd. The Mr. Stark in front of him had gray hair near his temples, just like he had on the battlefield when he died. The Tony of Peter's dreams always appeared like Peter had known him before the snap—dark hair, carefully neutral facial expression. That Tony—you had to know him well to be able to read his microexpressions; to understand what he was thinking and feeling. This Tony's face was open and gentle, looking more like Morgan's dad than Iron Man.

"Mr. Stark..." Peter whispered, suddenly sitting straight up. "Your arm—"

Mr. Stark's left arm—the arm that had wielded the Infinity Gauntlet—was gone below the shoulder.

That had also never happened in his dreams before.

"A small price to pay for reversing the snap," Tony answered calmly, his remaining hand returning to Peter's hair, brushing curls off his forehead.

Peter stared.

"Your hair's getting long, bud. Gonna need a haircut soon, huh?"

Peter wasn't sure why this was the comment that made him burst into ugly sobs and launch himself forward at Dream Mr. Stark. He flung his arms around the vision's neck, fingers desperately scrabbling for purchase against the back of the man's t-shirt. If this was a dream, he at least wanted this moment for himself.

The vision didn't fade. The arm that wrapped around him in response was solid. Peter's nose pressed against Mr. Stark's neck, and he could hear the man's pulse thrum.

He could smell motor oil and aftershave. The tears burned in his throat.

"Is...is this real?" He whispered, squeezing his eyes shut tightly. If it wasn't, he didn't want to see the vision dissipate. He felt like he could barely breathe.

"Yeah, bud. Steve...Steve brought me back. It's Tony. I've got you, kid. I've got you. You deliberately mismatch all of your socks. You love swimming, but you're terrible at it. I know you, I've got you."

"Mr. Stark," Peter cried, crowding even closer. "You—the arc reactor light...it went out. I h-heard your heart stop beating." His tears had risen to the level of full-on wailing at this point, the type of crying Peter hadn't done in years.

"Okay, wow," he heard Tony mumble to himself. "First order of business—designing a prosthetic arm so I can properly hug my traumatized children." Tony was rocking them slightly back and forth, much like he probably rocked Morgan on rough nights.

After a moment, he gently pushed Peter back, grabbing onto one of Peter's hands and pressing it to his chest.

Thump-thump, pause. Thump-thump, pause.

The familiar rhythm. Something he could never forget, like the way May's nose scrunched when she laughed, or how Ned talked in his sleep.

Real. This was real. His brain couldn't make this up.

“Don’t leave again,” Peter whispered, anxiously twisting the hem of his t-shirt with his fingers. “Don’t leave, please.”

Mr. Stark’s hand stilled Peter’s fingers. “Never, *bambino*. Steve...” He let out a sad sigh. “Steve brought me back, and now you’re stuck with me forever. After all, I just got you and Harley back from the blip. I’m not going anywhere.”

He lifted his hand to motion for Harley, who Peter now noticed was awake and staring at them with wide, wet eyes, to join the pile-up. Harley didn’t need any further invitation, darting forward and flinging one arm around Tony and the other around Peter.

They stayed like that, silent, for a long time.

Steve’s shield was sitting on the ground next to Harley’s backpack. Peter swallowed back the fresh wave of guilt and sorrow that came with remembering.

He’d ducked out of the hug to give Harley and Tony a minute to reunite alone. They were speaking in low tones with one another, and Peter had wandered away so that his super hearing wouldn’t invade their privacy.

He knelt down next to the shield, remembering the first time he had seen it in person, in the airport in Germany. It felt like a lifetime ago.

“He asked me to pass the shield on to Sam,” Tony said quietly, placing his hand on Peter’s shoulder. Harley stood at his other shoulder.

“You—you saw him?” Peter asked, eyes wide.

Tony nodded. “Only for a moment. He was...adamant that I not blame the two of you for trying to bring me back. He seemed...at peace with his decision.”

Peter felt nauseous.

“We never meant for him to sacrifice himself, honest,” Harley said fervently.

“I know,” Tony said. “He would’ve done it regardless of whether the two of you were here or not. He told me as much.”

Peter’s throat was tight. *But would he have? He wanted to say. Would Steve have gone through with it if he was here alone, or would he have backed out like I did?*

“Bucky is going to be alone again,” he whispered instead. He picked up the shield, holding it carefully, reverently. He would carry it back and hand it to Sam. It was the least he could do.

Tony shook his head. “No, he won’t. We’ll all be there for him.”

Germany really *had* been a lifetime ago, it seemed.

“Anyway, you’re both grounded for the next 40 years for pulling this stunt.”

“Excuse you,” Harley said in mock indignation. “But we literally helped bring you back from the dead, in case you didn’t notice. You’re going to *ground us*? You owe us \$50 in Greyhound tickets.”

“And \$15 for snacks and bandages,” Peter piped up, mustering up a half-smile.

“I knew it would be a bad idea to introduce the two of you to each other,” Tony sighed, but he was grinning, looking between the two of them as if he couldn’t believe that he was seeing them both together. “Anyway, how are we going to get off of this godforsaken planet?”

“Uh...I might have temporarily borrowed this teleportation device from Dr. Strange?” Harley said, pulling the sling ring out of his pocket raising his voice into a question to soften the blow.

“Also...uh, while we’re confessing things, I may have hacked one of your suits?”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose with his good hand. “Never mind, you’re grounded for 80 years. And therapy. Therapy for all of us. *You* get a therapy. And *you* get a therapy—”

The following hours felt like a series of snapshots.

First, Bruce and Sam’s comically shocked expressions when they stepped off the quantum realm transporter. Their joy at seeing Tony and their grief at learning about Steve’s sacrifice on Vormir. Bucky, his face expressionless, turning away and walking off into the woods by himself.

Bruce calling Happy and telling him to get to the Compound ASAP. Happy, honest-to-god speechless and crying, driving 15 over the speed limit to get them to the lake house, continuously glancing in the rearview mirror to check that Tony was really there.

Pepper, who had been so strong during it all, falling to her knees on the porch of the lake house. Tony sweeping her into his arms, the two of them kissing and touching each other’s faces in disbelief.

And Morgan—Morgan, best of all, grumpily meandering outside, rubbing sleep from her eyes, seeing Tony and screaming. When she jumped into his embrace, she almost bowled him over.

The chaos went on for hours as Rhodey and more of the Avengers arrived. Peter knew that grief was coming for them all soon, but for this one night, this first night, it was easiest to focus on the miracle of Tony’s return instead of Steve’s conspicuous absence.

Clint passed out beers to everyone, including Peter and Harley, who shrugged and toasted along with everyone else.

Peter was starting to feel overwhelmed and panicky after a while, however. It was too much noise, too many people. He knew it was selfish, but he wanted the Avengers to go away. He even wanted Happy to leave. And then he wanted Pepper to put on a movie, and for their little family to curl up on the couches until they all fell asleep. Just him, Tony, Pepper, Morgan, and Harley.

So he was surprised but thankful when everyone abruptly stopped talking.

Morgan had laid her cheek against her father’s shoulder, half-asleep. Everyone quickly shut up when they realized she was quietly saying something over and over again. Peter was surprised to see that she had cracked her eyes open and was holding out her arm towards him.

“...Great Valley, Petey. It’s the Great Valley...” She mumbled, her eyes drifting closed again.

Everyone looked questioningly at Peter, who shyly wrapped his arms around Tony and Morgan in an embrace.

“Yeah, Morgie,” he whispered, knowing his voice would crack if he spoke the words out loud.
“You’re right. It is.”

They held a memorial service for Steve about a month after Tony’s return. It was a simple affair, Avengers and family only. Peter was utterly grateful that he wasn’t in Pepper’s position right now, of having to explain to the media and the rest of the world that Tony was back from the dead and Steve Rogers was gone.

But for now, they were in their own little bubble, celebrating their friend. After lunch, everyone stood in a circle near the lake and said a few words about Steve.

“I’ll always remember how fast that damn icicle could run,” Sam Wilson said, shaking his head. “He...Steve taught me a lot about leadership. I’ll use his shield and I won’t let him down.”

“After my kids and Laura were gone during the snap,” Clint said, uncharacteristically sincere. “Steve sent me this big folder of sketches and drawings he’d done of my family over the years. There were so many memories right there, saved for me. It was the first time I was able to smile after the blip happened.”

When it was Peter’s turn, he wiped sweaty palms against his jeans, leaning slightly closer towards May, who was standing at his side.

“Steve was there for me when Mr. Stark couldn’t be,” he said softly. He felt Mr. Stark’s hand on his shoulder. “He...he didn’t have to be there, but he was. I’ll never forget that. He protected me until the very end.”

Then it was Mr. Stark’s turn, the last one in the long line of Steve’s friends and family.

Next to Peter, Mr. Stark drew in a shaky breath. “Steve was my brother. We argued, we fought, we beat the shit out of each other, but at the end of the day, we had each other’s backs.”

It seemed weird for Steve not to be there, chastising Tony for swearing.

“I owe him my life,” Mr. Stark said, his voice thick. Peter broke away from May and leaned into Tony’s side. Mr. Stark’s healthy arm was strong and warm as it wrapped around Peter’s shoulders. “I owe him everything.”

Bucky didn’t speak to anybody at the service, but he didn’t glare or show any kind of negative reaction when Peter tentatively approached him on the dock.

“Sit, Spider-Man,” Bucky said, patting the spot next to him.

“Oh—no, thank you, Sergeant Barnes,” Peter quickly replied. “I don’t want to bother you...I just wanted to say...that I’m really sorry for your loss.” *I’m sorry I got the love of your life killed so I could have my dad back.*

“Thank you,” the former spy said. It was impossible to tell what Bucky Barnes was thinking or feeling.

“You...you probably hate me. I don’t blame you if you do, really,” Peter babbled awkwardly. “But...I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. That my family got our happy ending and you didn’t.”

Bucky sighed. "You're a good kid, Spider-Man. You're a lot like Steve. A lot like Tony too, of course, but...a lot like Steve."

"Thank you," Peter said softly. He sat next to the other man on the edge of the dock, dangling his feet so that his feet almost brushed the water.

Had it really only been a month since Steve and Bucky had sat just a few yards away from this same spot, the night of Morgan's party?

They were quiet for a long moment. It was early May. In a month or two, it might be hot enough to go swimming.

"I read this thing in a book once..." Peter started. He stopped to think about his next words.

Goodness will find you again. It always has. It will again, he wanted to say. But...he didn't want it to sound like an empty platitude. And besides, he didn't think that he'd lived enough life yet to know if it was a true promise; if good really did always return in the end.

"I hope goodness finds you again," he settled on saying. And maybe the phrasing was odd, or maybe it was a pretentious thing to say, but it felt right.

After all, *The Road* was about a father and son, but he supposed that there were many different roads out there, with many different people walking down them, looking for safety, for warmth, for home. For happiness and family.

"Thank you, Spider-Man," Bucky said in his usual quiet, formal way. "Remember to tuck your elbows when you punch."

Peter nodded. Deep down, he somehow knew that none of them would ever see Bucky Barnes again after today.

Tony found him sitting on the front porch steps that night, his arms wrapped around his knees.

"Couldn't sleep?" He asked, draping a blanket over Peter's shoulders. Peter snuggled gratefully into the warmth. The days were warm, but it was still too cold at night for his spider DNA.

"Didn't even make it to bed yet," Peter shrugged tiredly. He checked his watch and winced. 1:57 AM. "I'm fine, you should go to bed. I know Morgan will be waking you up at 7."

"See, that's the nice thing about being a professional stay-at-home dad. Mandatory naptime in the afternoons."

"Just don't call it that."

"*Right,*" Tony snorted. "I mean 'highly suggested quiet time' in the afternoons."

Sleep was hard for all of them nowadays. It turned out that Tony's return from the dead hadn't magically solved everyone's trauma.

Harley had slipped back to Tennessee three days after Tony's return, belatedly texting Peter to say that he was allergic to such high concentrations of happiness in one place. Peter had tried to convince Tony to let him borrow an Iron Man suit so he could fly out to visit Harley and make sure he was okay, but Tony had warned him to give Harley a little space.

“You have to understand, Pete,” Tony had told him, “that Harley is exactly what I was like at that age. And you have to imagine that you’re Rhodey in this situation. Keep sending him memes, keep asking how he’s doing, but don’t try to press him on his feelings. Not for a few weeks, okay?”

And if Harley was dealing with his issues by emulating a brick wall, Peter and Morgan were coping by not sleeping.

Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that Peter and Morgan were barely sleeping, and nobody was coping with it.

In fact, Pepper was probably the only one who had slept more than five hours a night for the past month, and that was only because she was so busy with the post-blip relief efforts and the PR firestorm that was Tony’s return to the land of the living.

Morgan kept waking up, terrified that Tony had disappeared in the middle of the night. She’d come and find Peter, who was either in the midst of his own nightmares, or still awake. The two of them would play card games or watch TV until one of them passed out, or until FRIDAY alerted Tony and he got up to tuck them both back into bed.

Although Tony had come back with the stump of his missing arm looking clean and healed, there were clearly some long-term effects from the Gauntlet that Tony was still recovering from. He got tired much easier than usual nowadays, and Peter tried to avoid waking him up at night whenever possible.

On particularly bad nights, Morgan was afraid to even peek into her parents’ bedroom, frightened that Tony wouldn’t be in bed. Peter would carry some blankets over by Tony and Pepper’s doorway, and the two of them would curl up in a little nest together. Peter could hear Tony’s heartbeat even through the soundproofed door and walls, which he patiently reminded Morgan of every time she asked.

So far, he’d managed to stay awake until she fell asleep and get them both back to their separate beds without Tony or Pepper noticing, but he was sure that it was only a matter of time before the two of them caught on.

“You know, Pete,” Tony said, nudging Peter’s shoulder and jolting him from his thoughts. “I asked May, and she told me that you were the exact same way at that age. You came home from kindergarten claiming that you didn’t need naps anymore, but any time your aunt started playing the kids’ channel, you were out like a light.”

Peter blinked. “You asked May about my childhood?”

Mr. Stark smiled wistfully. “It was five years, Pete. A long five years. And I had Morgan, and she—she reminded me of you in so many strange little ways.”

There was a story there, Peter was sure of it. Something that he wasn’t sure he wanted to know about. He didn’t like to think of May and Tony mourning him, speaking of him in the past tense.

“You okay, Underoos?” Mr. Stark asked, his face kind in the darkness.

Peter nodded. “Just...thinking about today. Steve’s memorial.” He swallowed. “What if—I guess—” He faltered. He’d been trying to ask this question for a month now, but it never came out like he wanted it to.

“Take your time, kiddo,” Tony assured him, wrapping his good arm around Peter’s shoulders. The physical comfort was another thing that Tony had rarely done before the snap that he did all the

time now. Peter was unable to stop himself from letting out a contented little sigh and scooting even closer. He didn't think it would ever get old—Tony being here. Tony holding him, taking care of him.

“Do you think...do you think I deserve this?”

“You're gonna have to be more specific, bud. Deserve what?”

“Having you back. Being happy again.”

“Oh, Pete. Yes. You deserve to be happy.”

“But Steve—”

“—made his own decision. Steve knew what he was doing.”

“I feel like it's all my fault,” Peter whispered.

“Well, you've had a tough go of it, kid. You've gotten used to losing people. But take it from someone who has a guilt complex to top all other guilt complexes—it was never your fault that your parents or Ben or I died.”

“I should probably talk to that therapist, huh?” Peter asked, stomach fluttering nervously. He'd been avoiding Mr. Stark's increasingly direct suggestions that he start going to therapy all month, but he was tired of being sad. Tired of being tired.

Mr. Stark's tired face brightened. “I'll come with you and sit in the waiting room, if you want. Or I'll wait in the car, if you prefer that, and we can do whatever you want after the appointment. Ice cream, *Star Wars*, punching bags—you name it, I'll be there.”

“Thanks, Tony,” he murmured.

“Kid, if I knew dying was all it would take for you to finally start calling me ‘Tony’—”

“Don't even finish that sentence,” Peter said, rolling his eyes. “By the way, Morgan incoming.”

Sure enough, 30 seconds later, Morgan poked her head out the front door. “Can we have juice pops, Daddy?” She asked hopefully.

“It's two in the morning, Morguna.”

“That wasn't a ‘no,’ Daddy,” Morgan observed cleverly.

“She's got you there,” Peter grinned cheerfully. “I want cherry, Momo!”

Tony sighed. “The two of you together—it's not fair.”

“You should've thought of that before you adopted me as your second kid,” Peter joked before he could think twice about it. His chest tightened nervously. “I mean...”

“Let's be honest, Pete,” Tony said, voice raw and honest. “I adopted you long before I had Morgan.”

“Yeah?” Peter asked, his heart in his throat.

“Yeah,” Tony affirmed. “Now take advantage of this hug before I have to use my hand to hold my

juice pop.”

Peter obediently laid his head on Tony’s shoulder, inhaling the comforting smell of aftershave and metal. Tony idly rubbed Peter’s upper arm until Morgan reappeared, juggling three juice pops.

Morgan clambered gracelessly onto Peter’s lap, flinging her legs over Tony’s lap.

“Geez, thanks, Little Miss,” Tony laughed. “What am I over here, chopped liver?”

“Yeah,” Morgan said, sticking her tongue out at him and passing him her orange juice pop so he could open it for her.

“Cheers,” Peter said, holding his juice pop out so that Morgan could tap hers against it before they took their first lick. This was their usual juice pop-eating ritual.

Peter was startled when he looked up to see Tony looking at the two of them with tears in his eyes.

“Are you crying, Daddy?” Morgan asked innocently. She wound one sticky hand around Peter’s neck.

“Yeah,” Tony breathed. “But not because I’m sad. Because I’m so happy that you and Pete are here with me.”

“Oh,” Morgan nodded wisely. “I get it. You’re big happy. Me too.”

“Me three,” Peter chimed in softly.

Tony stared at them for a moment longer, before he blinked rapidly and turned his gaze towards the sky, taking a deep breath.

“Look,” he said after a moment, pointing up towards the stars. “It’s Orion. My favorite constellation; you remember, Morguna?”

Morgan nodded sleepily. “I remember, Daddy,” she mumbled, leaning her head against Peter’s shoulder.

Peter looked up at the sky, finding Orion. Tony yawned next to him and the first summer crickets chirped slowly. For the first time since the blip, Peter didn’t fear the stars.

End Notes

If you're here to find out who dies, it's Steve. :(

If you're here because you finished the fic, I'd love to know what you thought! I know most of us avoid actually killing people off in fic, but I really wanted Peter to have to wrestle with the morality of bringing somebody back from the dead and making a sacrifice to do so.

I know I didn't really address the aftermath of Tony's return much, but I'm thinking about writing a sequel from Tony's perspective. Unless everyone hates me for killing Steve, in which case I'll probably let this fic be a standalone lol.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

our love lasts so long

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/35343160) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/35343160>.

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|------------------|--|
| Rating: | General Audiences |
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| Category: | M/M |
| Fandom: | Captain America (Movies) , Marvel Cinematic Universe |
| Relationship: | James "Bucky" Barnes/Steve Rogers |
| Character: | Steve Rogers , James "Bucky" Barnes |
| Additional Tags: | Not Avengers: Endgame (Movie) Compliant , Canon Divergence - Avengers: Endgame (Movie) , Post-Avengers: Endgame (Movie) , basically just endgame happened but without the end , because Steve going back in time is stupid , and also like no one else is in this fic but everyone lives , because I say so and them being dead makes me sad , Fluff and Angst , Fluff , Angst , Friends to Lovers , Love Confessions , Fix-It |
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our love lasts so long

by [blob_blob](#)

Summary

“I thought maybe you’d go to her.”

“What?” Steve asks. In the dim light filtering around the curtains, Bucky can see Steve turn to face him, but can’t see his face. He can guess though, that adorably confused expression he gets sometimes that always makes Bucky want to kiss him.

“When you went back to return the stones,” Bucky hurries to clarify. “I thought . . . well, I know how much you miss her. You can’t tell me you didn’t consider it.”

Or: Bucky doesn't understand why Steve wouldn't have used the time travel as an opportunity to live out his life with Peggy (like the idiot movie writers thought, although at least Bucky has the excuse of insecurity), but since the thought literally never crossed Steve's mind and also Bucky is very vague, Steve misunderstands the question and thinks he's asking if he went to visit his mother.

So his reasons not to are basically "I didn't want to mess with time more than I had to and also how would I explain that to her" and Bucky is hurt because he thinks that means Steve would have ditched him for Peggy if he could have which is . . . not the case

Notes

Title comes from Seven by Taylor Swift

this is absolute chaos and also very soft and idk I had fun writing it, do with it as you will!! also they're absolutely nothing alike, but I got the idea of Steve wanting to visit his mother

from papesdontsellthemselves's fic dance before death
(<https://archiveofourown.org/works/35317465>) and you should definitely go read it because
it was very good and maybe made me tear up a bit

It takes Bucky months to work up the courage to say something. He has Steve back, and he doesn't want to do anything to jeopardize that, because it's damn well the best thing that's ever happened to him. But the thought just keeps eating at him, and in the end, he decides he has to *know*.

Because Steve chose to come back, when he could have gone to Peggy instead, but for the life of him, Bucky can't figure out why. The other Avengers, maybe, except Steve's hardly even seen them since the first few weeks after they reversed the snap. Everyone has been busy, and Steve has seemed content to stay in the drafty little apartment he shares with Bucky, instead of moving back to the newly-rebuilt Avengers compound.

They're lying in bed one morning—Bucky has his own, but he can never fall back to sleep after he's had nightmares if he's alone, so he ends up in Steve's more nights than not—on opposite ends, but with Steve's foot sprawled out so it's touching Bucky's, both of them too lazy to get up and start making breakfast or even turn on the lights, when he finally decides to just get it over with. It'll be easier, he thinks, if he can't see Steve's face if he says something Bucky doesn't want to hear.

Even after his mind's made up, it takes a moment for the words to come, and when they do, it's not carefully practised question that he's been turning over in his head for months, just, "I thought maybe you'd go to her."

"What?" Steve asks. In the dim light filtering around the curtains, Bucky can see Steve turn to face him, but can't see his face. He can guess though, that adorably confused expression he gets sometimes that always makes Bucky want to kiss him.

"When you went back to return the stones," Bucky hurries to clarify. "I thought . . . well, I know how much you miss her. You can't tell me you didn't consider it."

Steve sighs, and after a moment, answers, "Of course I considered it. I wish . . . I'm always going to wish I'd had more time with her. But I wasn't sure how it might muck up time, or how I'd even explain being there."

There it is. The explanation hits Bucky in the chest like a speeding train, and he tries not to let it knock him off his feet. Of course, Steve would have gone back to Peggy if not for fear of messing with time more than they already had. To think it might have had anything to do with him—even just a tiny bit—was arrogance to the utmost degree.

That doesn't stop him from asking in a small voice, "That was your only reason?"

Steve considers this question for longer, before saying softly, "Maybe I still would have, if not for the fact that this way, she didn't have to know all the bad stuff. She'd seen enough already, without having to know . . ."

He trails off, but he doesn't need to speak the horrors for Bucky to know. Hydra coming back. Aliens. Thanos. Maybe even Bucky himself. Peggy could have handled it, and Steve knows that even better than Bucky, but he sees why it would be a comfort to Steve to know she didn't have to.

Steve sucks in a sharp breath, and pulls himself together. “I miss her. I miss her so fucking much, Buck. Sometimes I think I’d do anything to see her again. But . . . I can’t have her back, so I need to move on.”

To anyone else, Steve would sound as if he wasn’t even upset, despite his words saying otherwise. But Bucky can read the tension in his voice, can hear the pain as clear as day.

So as much as it hurts, he makes himself clap a hand to Steve’s shoulder and say, “I’m sorry, Steve. It’s shit, the way things happened.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, voice wavering just a bit.

And Bucky—he knows he should stay, should comfort Steve, but he just . . . can’t. That pain isn’t anywhere near the pain Steve would feel for him, he knows that. Maybe once, back when he fell from the train, back when he was that cheerful man he used to be, but the man he is now, haunted and bearing the weight of so many lives? Steve would have left without more than a second thought, if he could have, and that *hurts*.

“I’m gonna go make you some breakfast, okay punk?” he says instead, pulling back the covers and walking to the door. “You good on your own?”

“Yeah, Buck, I’ll be fine. I’ve had a long time to get used to having lost her, you know.” But still, there’s pain in his voice that Bucky doubts will ever fully go away. He knows something of grief, and Steve’s might not be raw anymore, but it’s still there.

Bucky wishes he could wipe it away, could make Steve feel okay, but even the old Bucky couldn’t do that—he could help, when Sarah died and Steve needed someone to cling to, but he couldn’t fix it—and Bucky as he is now . . . well he’s not even sure if he can help, anymore. Maybe he’s just another burden.

If he’s being honest, he hasn’t been sure where he stood with Steve for a long time. He’d come to visit now or then in Wakanda, but it had always been brief, and Bucky had never quite known what to make of it. He’d thought once or twice that maybe Steve would ask to stay, but he always looked so sad when he visited, so other times Bucky wondered if maybe he only came in hopes that Bucky would be who he’d used to be.

And then Thanos came, and everything went to shit, and Bucky woke up five years later to absolute chaos, and somehow he’d ended up coming home with Steve to Brooklyn, even though he wasn’t sure he deserved to call Steve’s place home. And now they co-existed, shared a bed, shared meals, laughed and watched movies together, but . . . something felt different, as if Steve was holding back.

He still wasn’t sure if it was because Steve would rather be with Peggy, or if it was because he couldn’t see Bucky without remembering everything he’d done, or if it was because he pitied Bucky, or what, but god, he sort of wished he didn’t have confirmation that that first point *was* at least true, reason or not.

He knew Steve didn’t love him that way. He’d known that for as long as he’d known he did love Steve that way. He’d wondered, sometimes, when Steve seemed uninterested in the dates Bucky set up for him, but he’d always known that was just wishful thinking. It hurt, but Bucky would never have been able to get this far if he hadn’t accepted that part. He’d thought, though, that maybe he meant more to Steve than some girl he’d only known for a few years.

And that wasn’t fair. Peggy had helped Steve save his life, and probably saved it herself a fair few

times too. Peggy was a goddamn incredible woman, and Steve deserved to love someone like that. Bucky genuinely liked her, and respected her, and he could hardly blame Steve for missing her.

Even knowing, he thinks, that Steve had wanted to go back . . . it wouldn't have hurt so much, if only Bucky had even been a thought in Steve's head. Of course, Steve missed her. Of course, Steve wanted more time, to see her again.

But that after everything, Bucky was only a consolation prize—the person Steve fell back to, because he was who he could have without fucking up time—and not even a fraction of the reason Steve had stayed . . . that hurt. That hurt a fuck ton, actually.

The worst part was that he knew that wasn't fair of him. Steve had done so much for him. He'd almost let Bucky *kill* him, in D.C., and then he'd violated the accords and ended up on the run just to make sure Bucky was safe. Not to mention storming Azzano. Or the fact that Bucky had literally been dead for five years until Steve and his friends undid it, although Bucky wouldn't kid himself that that had been about him.

Steve didn't owe him anything, and Bucky should really count himself lucky he even had somewhere to go, someone to fall back on. But . . . god, he wished he hadn't asked about Peggy at all.

Steve didn't notice, at first, that Bucky seemed distant. It wasn't uncommon for him to have bad days, where he barely spoke and moved around the apartment like a ghost. And this wasn't quite that, not so bad, just quiet and withdrawn, so Steve took note, made sure to be gentle with him, but didn't worry overly much. He stopped coming to Steve's bed in the night too, but at first, Steve thought maybe Bucky was actually sleeping through the night.

Then he woke up one night, maybe ten days since Bucky had last crawled into his bed, to the sound of screaming from the other room. Instinctively, he lifted the blankets on the other side for Bucky to crawl into.

But Bucky didn't come.

Steve frowned, but figured maybe Bucky had gone back to sleep on his own. Or had a particularly bad dream about Steve himself—he knew it didn't happen so much anymore, Bucky having finally started to forgive himself for what had happened in D.C., but it was possible he didn't want to see Steve for fear of hurting him. Steve considered going to check on him, but he wasn't sure if Bucky'd want that, so he sighed, and tried to fall back asleep. He didn't have a lot of luck.

The next night, there wasn't screaming, but Steve was still awake when Bucky started whimpering, and his enhanced hearing was good enough that when the whimpering stopped, he could hear the creaking of floorboards and running of the tap, presumably Bucky getting up to splash some water on his face before coming to Steve's room.

He waited, expecting to see the familiar form in the doorway, but still, he didn't come.

After that, he started to notice the difference in the day, too. Bucky barely met his eyes, and when Steve offered to watch a movie or take a walk or any of the things they usually enjoyed doing, Bucky just shook his head and retreated to his room.

And when Steve lay awake at nights—because he was *worried*; Bucky was a social person, and this was . . . this was how he'd acted the first few times Steve had visited him in Wakanda, minus the skittishness he'd had then, and he'd thought Bucky was doing better now—he heard Bucky whimpering or getting up almost every single time. But he never showed up in Steve's door.

He doesn't want to push, but it worries him. He's not sure if he did something wrong, or if Bucky is doing a lot worse than he lets on, or what, but he knows he wants Bucky to be okay. And he wants *them* to be okay.

Distantly, he wonders if maybe Bucky stopped coming to his room because he realized how Steve feels about him, but he tries not to dwell on that thought. It's not like what they do at nights is anything but platonic, and Steve has never told a soul, so he's not sure how Bucky would have figured it out.

He tries to bring it up once or twice, not the nights alone specifically, just asking if Bucky is okay, but he doesn't even get through a whole sentence before Bucky assures him he's fine.

So Steve just keeps going on like normal, shooting him concerned looks sometimes, but not wanting to risk making anything worse if Bucky doesn't want to talk about it.

Until after a few weeks, he wakes up again to screaming. He knows Bucky's had nightmares most nights, but the ones bad enough to make him scream like this—raw and painful and terrified—are less common, and always leave him shaken.

He wants to think Bucky will come to him on his own, but after the last few weeks . . . he's not so sure. So he shoves his feet into his slippers, and pads to Bucky's room. The door is open, because it gets stuffy with it closed, and so Steve arrives just in time to see Bucky jolt upright, one last scream dying on his lips.

He scrubs his hands over his face, and then fumbles for the lamp, filling the room with a soft warm light. Steve notices there are huge hollows under his eyes, and he winces in sympathy.

That's when Bucky sees him, and Steve can *see* the second his guard goes up. It stings, a little, but that hardly matters right now.

"Sorry," Bucky mumbles after a moment. "Did I wake you?"

"Don't worry about it, Buck," Steve says softly. He can still see the other man shaking. "Are you okay?"

"Just a nightmare," Bucky says. "I'll be fine."

"Buck . . ."

Bucky sighs slightly, and for a moment he looks incredibly young. "It was bad," he says after a moment, voice coming out small. "Worse than normal. I was strapped to that chair, and I couldn't move, and I—"

He glances down at his hands, and Steve notices he's gnawing on his bottom lip.

"Do you want me to stay?" Steve asks.

There's a second of hesitation, and then Bucky's composure just melts away entirely, and he nods miserably. "Please."

Bucky's bed is smaller than Steve's, so his arm is pressed against Bucky's when he crawls in next to him, but now is hardly the time to think about that. "I'm here," he whispers. "It's okay. Hydra doesn't have you anymore, and you're here, and you're gonna be okay."

"Thanks," Bucky mumbles, pulling the covers up to his chin.

Steve watches until he falls asleep, before letting himself drift away as well.

It takes Bucky a second to get oriented when he wakes up. He's still used to waking up in Steve's bed more than his own, but even in his own this is strange, because his arm is flung over a torso, and there's warmth against his side.

Last night comes back to him after a moment. The nightmare, Steve in his doorway, Steve crawling into his bed. And fuck, he hates how good it feels pressed up against Steve like this. They haven't really lain like this since the war, huddled together for much-needed warmth, and . . . god, Bucky had forgotten how good it felt to be so close to Steve.

As soon as he opens his eyes, though, Steve shifts and moves away.

"Hey. I didn't want to wake you, but I really need to pee. Then I'll grab us some breakfast and come back, okay?"

Bucky nods, and pulls himself up so he's leaning against the headboard.

"Thanks for staying," he mumbles, as Steve reaches the door. "Last night, I mean."

"Of course," Steve says, before ducking out the door.

Bucky takes a big, shaky breath, and watches him leave. He didn't mean to let Steve back in like that—it just makes everything hurt more, remembering how good it is to feel loved by Steve—but he'd just been so tired.

A few minutes later, Steve is back, with bagels and orange juice. He hands Bucky his, and then perches awkwardly on the foot of the bed with his own. Bucky halfheartedly wonders why he doesn't leave, but he figures maybe it's pity.

They eat in silence, but when they're done, Steve brings a hand to his face, and taps under his own eye. "I don't think these showed up in one night, did they?"

It takes Bucky a second to realize Steve is referring to the bags under *Bucky's* eyes, and then he gives a wry-half smile that he doesn't really mean. He'd hid them on purpose.

"There's concealer in my bathroom drawer," he admits. "I didn't want you to worry."

Steve frowns. "Buck . . . you don't need to be all self-sacrificing, that's my job. You can do whatever you want to your face, if it makes you feel better, but you can let me in, you know that right?"

He doesn't mean to say anything—doesn't even realize how he feels until he's saying it—but somehow the words slip out. "Maybe it is for me. Maybe I—maybe I don't want you to leave me. I know you don't like seeing me like this."

Steve frowns again, looking genuinely confused for a moment until it dawns on him what Bucky's

saying.

“Buck. Bucky. Hey. Do you really think I would leave you? Because, what, because you’re having a hard time?” His voice is even, soothing, but it doesn’t do anything to comfort Bucky.

“You never stayed long, in Wakanda.”

“*Fuck*,” Steve mutters, scrubbing his hands down his face. He swallows hard. “I’m sorry, Buck. I didn’t think . . . I didn’t think you’d want me to stay. You’d spent two years on the run, and I knew if you’d wanted me to find you, I would have. I sort of thought . . . maybe me being around just made things harder for you. You seemed to be doing so well there. I didn’t want to fuck that up.”

“Oh.” He’d thought through a thousand reasons why Steve might not have stayed long, but that had never even crossed his mind.

“I’m sorry, Bucky.” Steve’s voice is so earnest it almost hurts.

“It’s okay,” he mumbles. “You didn’t know.”

“I didn’t ask,” Steve says. “That’s on me.”

Neither of them speaks for a few moments. Silences between them used to be so comfortable, but this is the opposite. Bucky wants to say something to break it, but he doesn’t know what.

“What’s going on, Bucky?” Steve finally says. “You’ve been really distant, and I’m getting worried.” Bucky doesn’t say anything, so Steve continues. “I just want to help, Buck. Please let me?”

He tells himself he’s not going to say anything, but somehow the words start coming anyway, nearly tripping over each other as he blurts, “You pretty much said you didn’t even give me a second thought when you were thinking about staying in the past with Peggy, and you have every right to that, but it fucking hurts, Steve.”

There’s silence, and it’s deafening. Bucky curses himself for saying anything, because how could he be so *stupid*. Steve doesn’t owe him anything, and he’s already sad about Peggy without adding any sort of guilt to that, and god why would he *say* that—

“What?” Steve says, voice so incredulous that it snaps Bucky right out of his spiral. “Bucky what are you talking about?”

Bucky takes a deep shaky breath, and tries to process what that means, tries to keep his hopes down, because maybe Steve doesn’t realize how obvious the sentiment was, or . . . god, he doesn’t even know.

“Last month. We were lying in your bed and I asked you why you didn’t go back to her, and you said you’d wanted to, but you didn’t want to fuck with time more than you had to. And I get it, Steve, I do. I shouldn’t have said anything, because I don’t blame you—”

He doesn’t realize Steve’s jaw is hanging open until it snaps shut, and he says, “That was about Peggy?”

What.

“I—yeah?”

“You . . .” Steve looks dazed. “Bucky, you thought I was going to leave you and, what, live out my life with Peggy?”

The sheer incredulity in his voice is enough to send a wave of relief over Bucky, but he doesn't know what else Steve could possibly have been talking about. His voice comes out small and squeaky when he says, “Yeah.”

“*Buck*. I would never. I thought you were asking . . . the only person I ever considered going back to was Ma. To say goodbye, properly.”

Oh. Of course. Of course, Steve would have wanted one last chance to see Sarah Rogers. He'd been too frail to risk going to see her in the hospital, and he'd been pretty torn up over that.

When Bucky doesn't speak, Steve gently says, “Buck, why would you possibly think I'd go back to Peggy? I've—I've got you. I wouldn't just leave you. I couldn't.”

“Really?” Bucky finds himself asking, because he just . . . doesn't know how to believe it.

“The thought never even crossed my mind. I miss her, of course I miss her, but we got a chance to say our goodbyes, and that's enough for me.”

“But she was the love of your life,” Bucky says. “You never looked at anyone else the way you did her. And I'm just . . . me. Hell I'm barely even me, anymore. I'm damaged.”

Steve actually laughs at that, although it's humourless. “Okay, first of all, you're not damaged. But Bucky . . . *god*, Bucky . . . I loved Peggy. She was incredible. And I thought, maybe, we could be together and I could be happy. But she wasn't the love of my life.”

And, fuck, that shouldn't hurt, but to think that there was someone else . . . someone Bucky never even got to know about . . . god, at least Peggy he'd been able to see with his own two eyes how much she cared for Steve, how good they would be together. He could understand why Steve loved her.

“Well whoever was, she was damn lucky.” He doesn't mean for so much heartbreak to be in his voice, and he winces as the words come out. He sounds bitter, jealous, like he's being ripped in two. Feels that way, too, but he didn't mean to let it show.

When Steve doesn't respond, he glances up at him, hoping that somehow he didn't notice, maybe is lost in thought of this mystery girl. Instead, what he sees is Steve's eyes boring holes into him, understanding dawning on his face.

“When you first met Peggy,” Steve says slowly, “you were all jealous, but you weren't jealous that she wasn't looking at you at all, were you?”

Bucky's breath catches in his throat.

All his instincts tell him to lie, but he doesn't think Steve would believe him. But . . . *fuck*. He's been in love with Steve for as long as he can remember, but he always knew so long as he never let anyone see, he could have Steve in some capacity. That wasn't what he wanted, but it was *enough*. He knows things are different now, knows people accept men loving men now, but that doesn't mean he can just admit to his best friend that he's in love with him and expect them to be okay.

But from the look on Steve's face, he already knows.

He looks away, unable to look at that piercing gaze while he says it. “No. No, that's not why I was

jealous.”

“Buck . . .” He can’t read Steve’s tone, can’t tell whether he’s shocked or upset or disgusted or what.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles. “I never wanted to feel this way, but I can’t turn it off. I thought maybe if you never knew, we could be . . . I wouldn’t have to lose you.”

“Bucky,” Steve says, voice steadier. He takes Bucky’s right hand in his, and starts tracing the lines on his palm. “You’re not losing me. You wouldn’t, no matter what, but I— there was no *other girl*, Buck. There was just you.”

For a second, it’s as if Bucky has forgotten how to breathe. He’s certain he’s forgotten how English works, because there’s no way Steve just said that.

“Just me,” he repeats. His voice sounds distorted to his own ears.

“Just you, Buck,” Steve says, and Bucky finally turns his head to face him. Steve’s expression is so open, so tender, it’s almost hard to look at. Even knowing it’s for him, Bucky feels like he’s intruding on something he’s not meant to see. “I never knew you felt the same way, or I would have . . . Well I wouldn’t have tried to fall in love with Peggy, that’s for sure. But, if it’s not too late, I’d love to . . .”

“Yes,” Bucky says. His voice shakes, but he knows he has to get it out there before he loses his nerve.

“You don’t even know what I was going to ask, jerk.”

“Don’t care,” he says, something close to hysterical laughter threading his voice. He feels suddenly, impossibly, light. “The answer is yes.”

“It could have been something horrible,” Steve says, and then they’re both laughing, shaking with it. For a few moments, all Bucky can feel is the breath wheezing out of his lungs, and all he can hear is the way Steve’s laugh rings through the air. Bucky doesn’t know when the last time he felt this *free* with someone was.

“I know you too well for that, punk,” Bucky says when he finally regains his composure. “But out of curiosity, what were you going to ask?”

“You know,” Steve says thoughtfully, “I’m not actually sure. To take you on a date? To kiss you? Be your boyfriend? Anything you’ll let me, really.”

Bucky tugs on their intertwined hands, and pulls Steve’s up to his lips, pressing a soft kiss onto his knuckles. “Yes, yes, and yes.”

Later, having decided it was silly to bother with separate beds at all given that they never stayed in them, they’re lying in Steve’s bed, a tangle of limbs as the sun goes down. Steve reaches up, and gently brushes a lock of hair from Bucky’s face.

“Hey Buck?” he says softly.

“Mm.”

“You know you mean everything to me, right?”

And honestly, Bucky still isn't sure he believes it. Doesn't know how Steve can look at him and not see all his missing pieces. But he mumbles, “Of course.”

From Steve's sad smile, he thinks he wasn't very convincing.

“Bucky. You're the most important person in my life. You always have been. And I just want you to know that I am so, so sorry if I ever did anything to make you think I would leave you—that I'd even *consider* leaving you. And I'm so fucking sorry that I didn't ask you what you wanted when you were in Wakanda. But I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere, okay?”

“Okay,” Bucky says. His voice is small, but at least for the moment, maybe he can let himself believe it. “I love you, Steve.”

The words feel both too soon and decades too late, but they're true, and he's done pretending otherwise.

“I love you too, Buck,” Steve says, and the conviction in his voice could move armies. “And I'll keep telling you that until you don't have any room left to doubt it.”

Bucky reaches down and finds Steve's hand, gripping it tightly in his own. “Thank you.”

“You don't need to thank me,” Steve says. “You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I want to make sure you know that.”

“You too,” Bucky says, emotion crackling in his voice. He still can't quite believe he and Steve found their way back to each other at all, let alone found their way to this. “You're the best thing that's ever happened to me too.”

Steve wraps an arm around his shoulders and pulls him in close, and Bucky lets him. It's nice to just lie there, being held—being wanted.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

so close to reaching that famous happy end

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/21829903) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/21829903>.

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so close to reaching that famous happy end

by [dragongirlG](#)

Summary

Bucky and Steve's soulbond survived the war, Steve's transformation into Captain America, Bucky's fall from the train, Steve's years in the ice, and Bucky's time as the Winter Soldier—but it didn't survive Thanos' snap, as confirmed by Steve's cold post-battle behavior and subsequent disappearance. Bucky grieves the loss of his soulmate and slowly begins to rebuild his life, only for Steve to return unexpectedly with an old friend at his side.

An Avengers: Endgame fix-it set in a soulmate AU, written for Stucky Secret Santa 2019. Cross-fill for Stucky Bingo 2019 (square: "grief/mourning").

Notes

Happy Secret Santa to swordliliesandebony! I hope I've done your prompt justice.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Bucky and Steve's soulbond snapped into existence on Steve's eighteenth birthday.

It was a surprise to them both—but not entirely unwelcome. Bucky had decided a little over a year ago, on *his* eighteenth birthday, that soulmate or not he would stay at Steve's side forever. The only concern he'd had was whether Steve's soulmate—whenever they were discovered—would agree to it. Steve, meanwhile, never expected to have a soulmate in the first place, and long ago he'd privately decided that he'd stick with Bucky for as long as Bucky and his future soulmate would let him.

When the pair woke up on July 4, 1936 to find a red, glowing thread wrapped around each of their left biceps, connecting them to each other—well. They both let out quiet sighs of relief, and then turned to each other with huge smiles on their faces. Everything was as it should be; they were bonded for eternity, and neither of them had to worry about any interlopers sent by fate.

As dictated by custom, they each pressed a finger to each other's red thread and vowed in unison, "*Tecum sum unus*", Latin for "with you I am one." The red thread sank under their skin, warmth radiating from their hearts to the rest of their bodies. The bond, though invisible, could now only be broken by death.

And—well, that was it for a while. Steve and Bucky slept in the same bed and cuddled just like they had since childhood; on occasion, they even kissed or did other pleasurable things. But in public, they were merely best friends. Society still hadn't acknowledged that soulbonds—and romance, and love—could exist between any pair other than a husband and a wife, and Steve and Bucky were careful not to risk any wrong impressions. Bucky still took girls out on dates regularly, occasionally putting in a show of getting Steve a date too. He let his parents, his sisters, his neighbors tease him about being a cad; better that than being labeled queer.

Bucky always thought that Sarah Rogers knew about his and Steve's bond, though Steve adamantly denied telling her. She died before Bucky could ever confirm his suspicions.

Bucky and Steve's soulbond survived the war, and Steve's transformation into Captain America, and Bucky's fall from the train, and Steve's years in the ice, and Bucky's time as the Winter Soldier. Though the bond was weak and muted and cold during the pair's long years of separation, it never faded completely—and its strength renewed tenfold the moment Steve called Bucky's name on the highway in Washington DC. Ultimately, the bond helped Bucky break through his conditioning as the Winter Soldier. And though Bucky decided to keep himself away from Steve—in Bucharest, in Wakanda—until he could recover his own mind, he always thought he'd have a chance to be with Steve again, to openly acknowledge and enjoy their bond as they should have been able to so many years ago.

But then—Thanos, and the Infinity Stones, and dust, and darkness.

When Bucky came back, thrust into the middle of a battle with Steve halfway across the field, he knew something was wrong. The seed of warmth that had been sitting in his chest since 1936 was missing, its absence a gaping hole that Bucky could scarcely comprehend. He watched Steve lift his cracked and broken shield, watched him grasp Mjolnir with shaking hands—watched him mourn Tony Stark with the rest of their allies, and when all was said and done and the battlefield started to empty—

Steve caught Bucky's eye, expressionless, and turned his back without saying anything at all.

The gesture felt like—like Steve was driving a knife into Bucky's heart, twisting it deep into the hole where their soulbond should be.

"Barnes?" asked Sam, brow wrinkled in concern. "You all right?"

Bucky breathed in and out slowly, pressing his palm against his chest through his tac gear. "I'm fine."

Steve avoided Bucky in the days of cleanup afterward, and Bucky didn't push. He watched from the shadows as Steve caught up with all those who'd been missing for five years—all except for Bucky. (And Romanoff, who was apparently dead on some other planet—Bucky's gut wrenched upon finding that out, because he knew Steve and Romanoff had been close.)

Shuri tried to encourage Bucky to "just say something to the Captain, for Bast's sake," but Bucky didn't. Instead, he threw himself into providing manual labor for the reconstruction of the Avengers compound. At night he lay alone in the makeshift camp, staring at the canvas of his flimsy tent as he ruminated obsessively about how the bond could have been broken. Did it happen when Bucky turned to dust during Thanos' snap? He had actually been dead this time, and not just frozen. But shouldn't Steve be rejoicing in the fact that Bucky had returned? Shouldn't Steve be greeting him with the overwhelming happiness he'd expressed at seeing Sam and Wanda and T'Challa?

The answer came to him the night before Stark's funeral: Steve must have found someone else while Bucky was away. The media was awash with stories of people suddenly becoming un-widowed, of having two living spouses and extra children and all the tawdry drama that entailed. Maybe Steve had even formed a new soulbond—and he was too embarrassed to admit it to Bucky.

Or maybe Steve just didn't want Bucky anymore. Maybe he was tired of having to take care of Bucky when Bucky only brought pain and grief and sadness to his life. Bucky had, after all, taken him from his friends and his home and turned him into an international fugitive. Maybe Steve just wanted a *normal* life now. Maybe he'd even built one already.

The thought settled into Bucky's core, numbing the pain of the missing bond. The next day, when he saw Steve off at the quantum platform, he followed their script to a tee, and so did Steve. They even hugged, and Bucky couldn't help but admit that he was going to miss Steve. But Steve's reassurance that "it was going to be okay" did little to assuage Bucky's grief. He stared blankly as Steve disappeared into time and space—and then failed to return.

"Get him the hell back!" Sam shouted at Banner, desperate and crazed.

Bucky tuned him out and turned away, eyes falling onto a bench near the water. He trudged over to it and sat down heavily, his heart and body aching. Hours passed, and the sun slowly dipped behind the horizon as others came and went. Shuri, trying to offer distraction; Banner, trying to apologize; Wanda and Barton, trying to offer solidarity. Bucky acknowledged them all, trying to show his appreciation, but he found little to say. Eventually they all left, pulled back to the warmth and light of the cabin hosting a celebration of Tony Stark's life.

Sam found him when the sky had gone dark. "Barnes," he said. "Can I sit down?"

Bucky nodded.

"I'm sorry," said Sam. "Steve told me that you two were soulmates. It's—awful, having that bond broken. Feels like nothing's ever going to be right again."

Bucky turned his head. "Who'd you lose?"

Sam swallowed. "My wingman, Riley. He got knocked out of the sky during a mission, and all I could do was watch." He smiled sadly. "Ten years ago now, if I count the ones we were nothing but dust. Still feels like five to me."

"I'm sorry," said Bucky.

"Thanks."

Bucky stared at the reflection of glittering lights on the water, and he said quietly, "I lost Steve before he disappeared today."

A long silence passed, and then Sam asked, his voice carefully neutral, "What do you mean?"

Bucky swallowed past the lump in his throat. "I think the bond broke during the Snap. When I turned to dust." He looked down at his hands, letting his hair fall into his face. "When I returned, the bond didn't."

Sam exhaled loudly. "Shit, Barnes. That's rough."

"Yeah," said Bucky, his voice hoarse. His eyes were hot with tears, but the rest of him felt like it'd never be warm again.

Sam placed a comforting hand on Bucky's shoulder. The two of them sat in silence, mourning the loss of Steve together.

Four months passed. Bucky dragged himself up every morning, forcing himself to contribute to rebuilding efforts under the direction of Colonel James Rhodes (Tony Stark's best friend, and the only current member of the Avengers with an officially recognized connection to the United States government) and CIA agent Sharon Carter (Peggy's niece who kissed Steve that one time and apparently regretted it the moment it happened). Sam kept Bucky grounded during the day, and the two of them slowly developed a comfortable partnership, even without Steve connecting them.

At night, Bucky dreamed of Steve, all the various iterations of him—small and skinny before their first war, strong and golden as Captain America, bearded and smiling as Bucky's houseguest in Wakanda. Steve rarely appeared as the avoidant and cold leader who'd disappeared with the Infinity Stones, but when he did, Bucky woke up gasping and shivering, feeling even worse than he did coming out of cryofreeze or the Chair—and that was really saying something, considering HYDRA's not-so-generous treatment of the Soldier.

Bucky didn't even try to go back to sleep on those nights. Sometimes he'd patrol the Avengers compound until sunrise, and then he'd make breakfast for everyone; other times, he'd marathon a science documentary, catching up on all the scientific achievements he missed while he was HYDRA's captive. (His favorite subject was astronomy; his second favorite, the deep sea.) Once in a while he'd call Shuri, who picked up whether she was in Oakland or in Birnin Zana, excited to talk his ear off about the latest developments of her technology and her Wakandan education outreach program.

Bucky's birthday arrived without much fanfare. He wasn't sure what his true age was, considering the number of times he'd been in and out of cryofreeze, as well as the five-year gap caused by the Snap (or the Decimation, as they were calling it now.) He guessed he was around thirty-five, more or less, which didn't seem all that important, except that he could run for President of the United States—if the world didn't still consider him a war criminal, that is.

Bucky let out a small laugh at the thought, pulling on his boots and contemplating whether he should ask Colonel Rhodes and Agent Carter for an update on his legal status, when he felt warmth spark in his heart.

He gasped and doubled over as it spread from his heart to his lungs to the rest of his body. For a

moment, he thought he'd been shot, but when he pulled his hand back from his chest, there was nothing but flesh and metal. In a blind panic, he swept the apartment for bugs or weapons, but found none—and then, without quite knowing what he was doing, he ran down the stairs and burst out the door of the Compound.

"Steve?" he called as soon as he stepped outside, eyes searching the drive desperately.

"Buck?"

Bucky whirled to his right. Steve—bedraggled, dirty, with a beard almost as long as Thor's—was rounding the corner, wearing a ripped Captain America uniform with his shield on his back. He was carrying the suitcase that had housed the Pym particles.

Next to him was Natasha Romanoff in equally haggard condition, her leather armor fraying at the seams.

Bucky stared at them with wide eyes. "What the hell?" he breathed.

Romanoff waved, smiling wryly. "Hey. What year is it?"

Bucky's heart pounded in his ears. "It's 2024."

"And what date?"

"It's—it's March 10."

"It hasn't been that long for me, then," said Romanoff thoughtfully. She jerked her head toward the front door. "Do you mind? I really need a shower."

Bucky cleared his throat. "Let me just—" He fumbled with the comms device on his wrist, mumbling a coded message into the team's urgent communications channel.

"Barnes, what the *hell* do you mean, Frankenstein's monster has been revived?" Sam's tinny voice demanded half a second later.

"Well, I don't think I'm hallucinating," Bucky responded without dropping his gaze from Steve, "but I'd like some confirmation."

The door clicked open, and Sam, armed and suited up, stepped outside, blinking hard like he couldn't believe his own eyes.

"Okay," said Sam, visibly calming himself, "What the hell is going on?"

"Hey," said Romanoff.

Sam squinted at her. "Not that I'm not glad to see you, Nat, but aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"It's a long story," Romanoff sighed.

Sam's eyes drifted from Steve to Bucky, and he cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. "Uh, Nat. How about we go inside?"

"With pleasure," said Romanoff, a smile playing at the edges of her lips, and she followed Sam past the threshold of the door.

"Steve," Bucky breathed as soon as the door swung shut. "Steve—is it you?"

"Yeah, Buck," said Steve with a choked laugh. "It's me. The real me. I'm—I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be gone for so long."

Bucky let out a shocked, hurt noise, and Steve's face fell. "Buck?" he asked, tentatively.

"Come here, you punk," Bucky managed to say past the lump in his throat.

The two of them fell into a hug, wrapping their arms around each other tightly. Another surge of warmth spread through Bucky's blood, and his breath hitched as he breathed in Steve's scent, not caring how rank it was.

"Happy birthday," Steve murmured quietly.

Bucky blinked back his tears. "Thank you. Steve...where have you been?"

Steve exhaled against Bucky's shoulder. "The first time we...killed Thanos, I—I got trapped in some other dimension. An alien called a Skrull has been impersonating me for the last five years. I guess they did a pretty good job, since not even Nat suspected. And they did help defeat Thanos."

"Our soulbond," said Bucky, his voice wavering. "It—"

Steve's grip tightened. "It broke when Thanos snapped his fingers. And I guess it—it doesn't reach across universes. But it's back now, isn't it? I can feel it." His voice caught. "I—I thought I'd lost you forever."

"So did I," Bucky murmured. "I came back, and...I could tell the bond was gone, and the you—the false you wouldn't even look at me, and I thought you'd moved on. I thought you'd found someone else."

"There's never been anyone but you," Steve said, pulling back to look into Bucky's eyes. "To the end of the line, remember?"

"To the end of the line," Bucky echoed, and he leaned forward and pressed his lips to Steve's, huffing a little as Steve's beard scratched at his skin. "You need a shave."

"I sure do," said Steve, grimacing as he scratched at his cheeks. "You want to help?"

"After you shower," said Bucky. He slipped his metal hand into Steve's, pressing his flesh one to the biometric lock on the door. It disengaged with a loud click, and the two of them stepped inside, smiling as they made their way up to Bucky's apartment.

End Notes

Title from Jon McLaughlin's "So Close," prominently featured in the movie *Enchanted*.

Comments, kudos, and transformative works are always welcome. Please let me know what you think.

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The World Will Always Welcome Lovers

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/31311533) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/31311533>.

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The World Will Always Welcome Lovers

by [andrastes_grace](#)

Summary

Steve searches the past for answers, and realises that's not the right place to look

Notes

This is my second attempt at publishing this because I wasn't happy with the way some scenes played out last time.

This fic assumes Steve told Peggy 'hi, I'm from 70ish years in the future' or something akin to that.

Feedback is always welcome.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The fantasy holds for the length of a song

(it's been a long, long time...)

They hold the moment between them, in the careful movements of their steps, and pretend -

(Pretend it never happened. The plane never crashed. A safe landing was found. They met a week next Saturday at the Stork Club, 8pm on the dot.

Neither of them were late.)

It's a lovely thought and for a moment it's true.

But, eventually, the last note plays, the dance ends and it's years too late for both of them.

"Thank you," Peggy says. Her voice is even and her eyes are dry and she is, as always, the picture of English fortitude. But her hands remain in Steve's even as the music fades.

"Sorry I was late," Steve says, and he thinks *that's the sort of thing Tony would say*. But Tony doesn't exist. He hasn't been born and he hasn't died. And Howard hasn't died on a lonely road in 1991 in 34 years time.

"That sounds like the sort of thing Howard would say," Peggy replies with a small smile and Steve can't explain why he's laughing. It's a punchline to a joke that hasn't been born yet.

This is his past and his present and it feels paradoxical to mourn for those will die in the future.

(the present)

How can you mourn for those who aren't even born?

So he focuses on Peggy. She was 21 when he first met her, 95 when he saw her last and is 35 as he stands with her now.

(She looks like Sharon)

Oh.

So this is what it feels like to fall while still standing on the ground.

He thought he was better acclimatised to time travel than this by now.

"Steve?" Her thumb traces along his jaw, and *god* he could stay here forever. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," he says and he thinks *I attended your funeral*.

"Do you have time for a drink?" she asks, and doesn't say 'before you go'. She doesn't have to.

He loves her. He loves every part of her. Her strength, her kindness, her intelligence. Her stubbornness and quick temper. But there is a gap - 70 years and 12 years - and it's too much.

He's not the man who went down in the plane and she's not the woman he left. Even if he had done things differently. If he turned up at their date - on time and decades late - the years would still be there, separating them.

So he says, "I'd love one, thank you."

"It's just a tea I'm afraid."

"Tea's fine."

He takes a seat on Peggy's barely used couch. He is here, in Peggy's small apartment and he is under the ice hundreds of miles away. He is 27, 105 and 39 years old and he is waiting for a woman who has been dead for 7 years (will die in 59 years) to make tea.

The kettle whistles and the tea is made. It took seconds and centuries to do.

He wants to go home, but doesn't know where to start looking.

The apartment is sparsely furnished. Peggy sleeps here when she's in Washington, DC but she lives in New York. There's only one personal touch. On the coffee table a photograph of a dark haired woman shares a double photo frame with a picture of him before Project Rebirth. Steve doesn't know who she is but, since she's clearly important to Peggy, he feels honoured to share a frame with her.

He keeps Peggy's picture in the place it's been for 12 years and seven decades: in his compass. Natasha once gave him (will eventually) one of her cynical 'love is for children' speeches when he admitted he looks to Peggy when feels lost. But cynicism and dark jokes was how (will be) how Nat showed affection to her friends.

She's probably around somewhere, he realises. Somewhere in Russia. Probably just a kid, or younger. He doesn't know exactly how old his friend is (was. will be) just that she's older than her official documents state.

But she won't be the Nat he left behind in the future. A stranger with his friend's face (and he's played that game before. It's not fun).

"I could stay," he says, as she passes him his tea. He means it even as he doesn't because the gap widens even as they sit there. Peggy doesn't know Nat or Sam or Wanda just as he doesn't know the woman in the photograph. There's decades packed into 12 short years.

"I'd love you to," Peggy puts her own teacup down. A gentle click of china on a saucer. It's too hot to drink, "but -"

"- but I'm ten years too late for that?"

"I was planning on a more delicate way of saying that but: yes. Ten years too late. I love you, Steve." She takes his hand in hers. She has callouses on her fingers and scratches on her knuckles. The hands of an active woman - a fighter. But even as he holds her hand in the this present he feels the soft, wrinkled hand of an old, old woman decades from now. "But I've already mourned you, and whatever future we could've had together. I'm sorry."

"It's been over a decade, Peggy. I was expecting this." He means it. He loves the woman he's sitting next to as much as he loved the woman he left behind but that woman died years ago, decades from now. There's no hardness in his voice, just love. And grief.

The past is a comfort. Safe, stable and ordered.

But this isn't his past, or his present.

He remembers something he said - will say - to Natasha. That it's hard to find dates when no one around him has similar life experiences.

He's fought aliens and gods and things that were both at the same time. He's held a world together

after half the universe was destroyed and somehow managed to bring back what was lost. He's seen his best friend die in front of him twice and travelled to other planets.

Maybe he was looking for the wrong type of life experiences.

So he drinks his tea. It's cooling. Time passes in a linear fashion, always forward.

It isn't fair what happened to him. And it isn't fair that he and Peggy didn't get more time. And it isn't fair that he's been fighting over and over and over again since he woke up.

"I just... wish we had more time." There's a whine to his voice that doesn't belong to the 27 year old under the ice or the 39 year old Avenger or the 105 year old man old enough to know better. "It just... wasn't fair," And now he really does sound he did at 10 being told again that *no, you can't go play with Bucky today. You're still too sick.*

"You're right. It's not." Her voice is soft, "But we can't sit here crying over what we could've had. We get up and we move forward."

"Find new dance partners?"

"Or someone to fondu with." She smiles at him. Soft, affectionate. He loves her so much.

"I'm never living that down, am I?"

"Absolutely not. Howard and I still talk about it." Peggy's smile wavers, then fades.

"I did, you know."

"Huh?"

"Find a new dance partner." There was an edge to something almost like guilt in her voice. He notices the way she glances over to the photographs.

"Huh." Steve says, again. He'd known that before coming here. Her future was his past, after all.

"It's just... you coming back here - needing this closure - it tells me that you haven't moved on, have you?"

There had been a kiss with Natasha, because PDA made people uncomfortable (that didn't count), and whatever confusing mess he'd had with Sharon (probably didn't count. He'd kissed her for the wrong reasons). And before all that there had been a frantic last minute kiss in the Alps because *we might not make it back and I need you to know how I feel.*

He didn't answer.

"You can't live in the past, Steve. And that's all you'd be doing if you stayed here with me."

"I know, I know. I just - " He sighed, looking at his nearly empty cup. No tea leaves, but what did leaves know of the future anyway? He thought of Peggy's photograph, always where he could see it when he needed to find his way. "I guess I just needed to hear you say that."

He let himself relax, and felt Peggy relax against him. For a moment, just one moment, they could enjoy the present together.

There's no future to be found in tea leaves. The only way to truly know what the future holds is to entirely live in the past. But that isn't living, not really

(it's barely existing)

So, no. Tea leaves can't tell the future and, even if they could, he knows he would just ignore them. He already knows what he's going to do.

He's going to go home, wherever (whenever) that is.

And he's going to start living.

End Notes

I've been trying to get this written since I saw Endgame. Credit to Captain America: Man Out Of Time (2010) by Mark Waid for inspiring some of Peggy's dialogue.

Also credit to Dishonored from which I stole the phrase "seconds and centuries" but 1) I love the way it sounds and 2) I love Dishonored.

Title is from As Time Goes By. A song most famous for its use in a WW2 movie about two incredibly attractive people with a doomed romance as they choose duty over love.

Anyway, this story came about because I hated Steve's ending that was not only out of character but also threw away all his previous development. And also disrespected Peggy's character, reducing her to the prize Steve wins for being A Good Boy.

And what exactly does Steve have in common with anyone from the 1950's now? He can't just go back and pick up his life where he left off. You can't live in the past, Steve. Listen to the wisdom of your comic book self: the past is for fossils.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!