Domestic Life (Was Never Quite My Style)

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Domestic Life (Was Never Quite My Style)

by ketchupcrisp

Summary

It's several months after the events of (That Would Be) Enough. With Tony on the road to healing, the team is finally beginning to work through the romantic and sexual sides of their relationships. Balancing that with their ongoing ageplay, not to mention new jobs, school, a volatile political landscape and an unexpected new resident of the Tower (plus occasionally saving the world) will make things just as complicated and chaotic as ever.

Notes

Hi all! Welcome to the sequel to (That Would Be) Enough! If you haven't read Part One already, I'd suggest starting there. If you don't want to, the big things to know are that the timeline is a bit different (I flipped the order of IM3 and Cap2), and there is a teamwide non-sexual ageplay dynamic featuring Tony as a little, Bucky as a switch, and the rest of the Avengers as Bigs. This sequel will also be exploring their romantic and sexual relationships, though those will always stay separate from the ageplay.

In case you don't want to, and for those of you who might want a refresher, a few quick
things to know about me as a writer:
1) While there are warnings in the tags for dynamics that are major and ongoing parts of the story as a whole, I also tag each chapter in the notes with warnings that are specific to that chapter, and are usually easy to read around if necessary. If you think the story is missing a tag that it should have, you can always feel free to let me know. I'm still fairly new as a fanfiction writer, and the tagging system (while awesome and so very important) is in some ways very intimidating for me.
2) I usually update on Fridays.
3) Like all writers, I thrive on kudos and comments, and do my best to always respond to the latter. I'm okay with gentle con-crit, but no kink-shaming or strictly negative comments please. I also do not have a beta reader, so typos and other mistakes may happen.
4) I'm Canadian, and sometimes my spelling reflects that.

I think that's it for now! No warnings specific to this chapter, I don't think. It uses script-like formatting for reasons I hope are clear, but that's a one time thing, not a general change in how this story will generally be written.
Dear Mr. Stark,

Please find attached the video and full written transcript from Mr. Barton’s self-hosted Avengers@Home footage taken last week. Per Agent Coulson’s standing orders, several scenes have been edited or redacted entirely to comply with security requirements. While his candor and spontaneity are always charming, we would also urge you to remind Agent Barton that he can, at any time, consult the numerous documents we have supplied detailing best practices for producing these types of informal promotional materials. We would also be happy to meet with Agent Barton in person to discuss his plans for future installments. (The editorial staff will not be permitted to sit in on these meetings, for reasons that will likely become evident once you review the footage.)

I would also like to apologize for any extraneous commentary you may find in the transcript; our most recent hire, while exceedingly competent, is a fan, and this occasionally results in descriptions that are rather more detailed and colourful than necessary. Rest assured we will continue to work on strategies for concision and objectivity with this employee.

Best wishes,
Heather Smythe
Director: Stark Industries Public Relations, New York City Division

PS: I realize that Agent Barton was frustrated that his fan base has thus far been less inclined to provide food than the Hulk’s was after his first PR video aired, but perhaps you could speak to him about a more appropriate hashtag? We are having to divert truly distressing amounts of french fries from the Tower on a daily basis; even the city’s food banks and shelters, while of course expressing their thanks, have begged us to make it stop.

AVENGERS TOWER-MORNING

Clint Barton, holding a cell phone camera facing himself: And welcome back to another installment of Avengers Penthouse—

Phil Coulson [offscreen]: Agent Barton, I will confiscate that selfie stick so help me—

[Footage becomes blurry as Agent Barton rapidly departs the room, clearing up again when he has entered an elevator, apparently alone]

Barton: Sorry about that brief delay folks. Now you’re checking in with us on a very important day: it’s Cap’s first day of school!

[Elevator door opens to reveal Captain America pacing the living room of his floor. He is wearing dark wash jeans, a grey t-shirt and hoody, and a bright red backpack. It is a rather adorable and attractive sight.]

Barton: Oh em gee, are you actually wearing the backpack Tony got you? I’m pretty sure that was a prank you know. [The Captain’s face, full of nervous anticipation, falls. He begins to remove the bag from his shoulders.] Aww Cap, no, I was just messing with you. We all love that you’re a dork. Now say hi to the nice people at home and tell them what classes you have today! [The Captain rubs his neck, clearly still nervous, but leaves the backpack where it is and smiles.]
Rogers: Well I’m not actually supposed to say, for security reasons. But I’m real excited. I stayed up all night looking at the syllabi and trying to get some of the readings finished ahead of time. And Natasha took me all around the campus last week to help me scout out the best routes around so I won’t be late—

Barton: And so you wouldn’t be shot or stabbed or mobbed by fans. [The Captain looks disappointed again] Err, no, nevermind. Natasha definitely trusts the legions of security people we’ve had scope the place out. She only wanted to help make sure you got to class on time. Timeliness is next to godliness after all.

Rogers: I think that’s cleanliness.

Barton: See, people? Not even one day of higher learnin’ down and he’s a know-it-all already. Gotta go see the others, but Steve, make sure to come by the penthouse for breakfast before you take off to get to your classes three hours early okay?

[CUT TO: Footage of what can only be described as a chaotic breakfast scene. The entire team, with the exception of Prince Thor Odinson, is present, and having multiple loud and difficult-to-follow conversations. Captain Rogers appears to be struggling to make a dent in the pile of waffles and fruit in front of him. ZOOM IN ON: Tony Stark, placing a hand on the Captain’s back]

Stark: Somethin’ wrong with your breakfast there soldier? Should I fire the help? Full disclosure, by the help I mean Bruce, and I’m not entirely sure that firing him would be in any of our best interests.

Rogers: Just…not hungry.

[Stark moves in closer to Captain Rogers, whispering something that Barton, despite numerous attempts, cannot seem to pick up. After Mr. Stark bats at the selfie stick with a wooden spoon, all while still speaking quietly to Captain Rogers Agent Barton begins supplying his own dialogue in a voice that is intended to mimic that of Mr. Stark]

Barton: Oh Steve, my dearest Cap, thy blondest and fairest of all, I—

[Scene ends abruptly, having apparently been edited to exclude Barton’s no-doubt amusing commentary. Cut to: Agent Barton following Agent Romanov toward the elevator.]

Barton: Wait, wait! I forgot, it’s not just Cap’s first day, is it?

[Agent Romanov, dressed in a tailored black suit with red accents, turns slowly toward Barton. Her expression is unreadable.]

Barton: Wait, wait! I forgot, it’s not just Cap’s first day, is it?

[Their conversation continues, and they are eventually joined by Agent Coulson. However, the entire exchange is sadly inaudible as the theme song from Mission Impossible has been inexplicably overlaid on the footage at a blaring volume. When we regain ambient sound, we are in Mr. Stark’s workshop, where Stark is watching high-resolution footage of what appears to be Captain Rogers.]

Barton: Dude, is that Cap? [Stark blushes, a seriously dark red basically indistinguishable from the Iron Man suits behind him. It is rather cute, and honestly, dear readers, I’ve always been more of a Cap kind of guy.]

Stark: Uh—well, yes, technically.

Barton: [in a tone that conveys pure, almost exultant, delight] Are you spying on Cap’s first day of school?
Stark: [now indignant] Well he wouldn’t let me enroll in his classes with him, and he found the trackers and cameras I had installed in his backpack. What else was I supposed to do but send a tiny, unobtrusive drone to keep an eye on him?

[Stark stops speaking, suddenly zooming in on the footage he’s reviewing to reveal a tall dark-haired man following several paces behind Captain Rogers.]

Barton: Is that—

Stark: [Appearing far more relaxed, throws a handful of dried blueberries into his mouth] Yep.

Barton: You gonna tell him?

Stark: Nope.

[CUT TO: A bedroom. Though it’s not immediately obvious that there is a bed, because nearly every inch of it is covered in clothing. Eventually a frazzled looking Bruce Banner emerges from the adjoining closet, groaning when he appears to see Agent Barton]

Banner: Now? Really?

Barton: Uh, well I’m sure the viewers at home, like me, would be curious as to why every item of clothing you own, including several things I’m damn sure I’ve never seen you wear—

[Barton’s hand darts out, reaching for what looks to be a pair of leather pants, but Banner snatches the item away and tosses it under his bed]

Barton: Hey, I’m just trying to do my due diligence as an investigative journalist. The people need to know, Bruce! [delighted gasp] Wait, is it tonight? [Doctor Banner groans] It IS! You’re picking out date clothes at 10:30 in the morning? I can’t even with how cute this is. Yo, video editing people whose names I don’t know but are undoubtedly gorgeous and wise, when you edit this can you add in some heart eye emojis and kissing sounds?

[The requested effects appear on screen for a frankly absurd amount of time. Seriously it’s a good twenty or thirty seconds. This humble transcriber feels the editorial staff may harbour romantic sentiments toward Hawkeye.]

Banner: Look, I’m sure this is hilarious, but it’s—been a while, alright? I don’t even know what fits anymore, and—ugh. This is stupid. I should just cancel.

Barton: Hey, Bruce, no…

[Camera is turned off; when we return, Dr. Banner is standing in front of a mirror in a pair of jeans and a chocolate brown button-down. There is a low wolf-whistle from offscreen.]

Barton: Damn, Banner. Just…damn.

[CUT TO: Agent Barton’s floor; camera is pointed at a television screen, which is congratulating him on having successfully completed the perfect game in the video game Until Dawn]

Barton: So glad you all were around to see this, yet another victory in the life of Clint Barton. Stay tuned for next week, when one of my best pranks will finally reach its much-anticipated conclusion. Also Thor should be back by then, and he is never not cinematic gold. Hawkeye out.

[Screen turns black]
Barton: [voice over] Hey tech gods and goddesses, can you throw the hashtag we talked about up?

[A white hashtag reading #Hawkfries flashes across the screen]
First Days/Dates and Other Impossibilities

Chapter Summary

In which we continue catching up with the Avengers: Bruce goes on his date, which should be great as long as neither he nor his partner dissolves into an anxious pile of anxious. Steve returns home from school, convinced he might never leave the Tower again.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings: Steve struggles with jealousy in this chapter. This is not a major, recurring theme in the story, it's mainly the result of him not having had the best day (and the fact that starting and maintaining a poly relationship, particularly one involving this many people, can be hard and complicated even when it's all done 'right'.) If you want to scroll past this bit, skip the paragraph that begins "Today, though, it just makes something dark and a little ugly bubble in the pity of Steve's stomach."

There is also an extended scene involving two consenting adults on the team being romantically/sexually intimate. As noted in Chapter One, this story will be dealing those sides of their relationships a lot so they might be hard to skip or read around. If you really want to follow the story, though, and want to avoid those sections or have them redacted, you are welcome to get in contact with me and we'll get it sorted out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Previous Week (same date as the footage)

“Sir, while he has not asked me to inform you of his presence, Dr. Banner has been lingering outside the workshop for going on twenty-two minutes. As you yourself have been running the same numbers on the Captain’s upgraded shield for approximately forty-seven minutes, demonstrating an unprecedented lack of focus I can only attribute to—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get the picture, you snarkmonster.” Tony’s already closing screens left and right, the Extremis-run tech hub that is now his brain working fast enough that he doesn’t even bother to request that JARVIS do it for him. Sometimes, like right now, he kind of misses that sort of busy-work; without the distraction of the minor tasks involved in shutting down the lab, his mind can continue to occupy itself with the same anxiety-ridden monologue it’s been playing all afternoon.

Is the restaurant really right? It had seemed genius to rent out Blue Hill at Stone Barns for the night; Bruce is pretty invested in locally sourced food options, and the place is attached to an actual working farm. On stop of the sheer volume of vegetable options this allows, a major plus given both of their affection for greens, it also means they might even be able to get away with walking around the grounds after they eat without being mobbed by press. But what if it seems pretentious? What if the date goes poorly and the hour long drive back to the city is torturous? What if Bruce is expecting
a Tony Fucking Stark kind of date, and instead he’s going to be stuck with the awkward rich guy wandering around a farm and oh god what if Tony ends up staining his teeth with beet juice, making kissing far less desirable?

“You’re being ridiculous,” he informs himself. Butterfingers hums in apparent agreement, then begins making increasingly smaller circles around him as she attempts to clean the space he’s standing in. “Oh I’m sorry, am I in your way? Dummy, you are really the worst role-model, look what you have your sister doing. Oh hey, J, where are the Asprin?”

“Sir—”

“Save it, JARVIS, I’m serious. Just tell me where they are.” There’s a distinctly pouty sound to J’s tone when he informs Tony where the bottle is; to make matters worse, it’s almost empty, again, so Tony connects back with the wireless link in his mind long enough to order an additional shipment to his office at SI.

“Sir—”

“JARVIS, can it. No kidding. I have enough to worry about tonight. Speaking of which, did I ever end up deciding on clothes?” He’s pretty sure he landed on the red silk shirt; Bruce has ogled him in it on multiple occasions, and it should handle the lengthy car ride to and from the restaurant with minimal wrinkling, but was he going to go with slacks or jeans? And then there’s the damn shoes—if they’re going to be walking around outside then he should go for something a little less formal, but even his nicest trainers would ruin the look altogether. Maybe a pair of loafers…

“Everything you selected last week has been dry cleaned and is hanging in the ensuite bathroom. The four different pairs of Italian leather loafers and, quote, ‘matchy but not too matchy’ belts you ordered arrived this afternoon. You’ve showered twice today, shaved, as well as performing more… intimate grooming activities. Forgive me for being blunt, Sir, but all that’s actually left is for you to get dressed and actually take Dr. Banner out for the wonderful evening you’ve been planning for—what has it been, now, three weeks?”

“Two and a half,” Tony corrects, then glares at the nearest camera. “Fine. I’m going. And also can I put a permanent ban on you ever using the phrase ‘intimate grooming activities’ ever again?”

“Very good, Sir. And Tony?”

“Yeah, J?”

“Have a good evening.”

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When Steve arrives back in the Tower, it’s only his years of military-ingrained neatness that stop him from throwing his backpack to the floor out of sheer relief and exhaustion. He’s fought in wars, he’s saved the world numerous times; heck, it had been just three days ago that he’d had his ass handed to him in a misguided attempt to spar away a demigod’s anxiety about his brother’s ongoing legal and emotional struggles. But he can count on one hand the number of times he’s felt quite this bone-tired.

Syllabi, which are just the descriptions of courses, are typically upwards of 20 pages! (The things he’d read before his first day, it turned out, had just been the standard course calendar descriptions, though they’d seemed more than detailed enough to Steve.) The syllabi are all filled with terrifyingly long lists of readings and assignments that Steve isn’t sure he’ll ever have time to finish, not to mention frightening threats about plagiarism, and computers are allowed (even required) in some classes but banned in others, and he’s still not one hundred percent sure what exactly office hours
are, but he is pretty sure they’re important somehow. And there are so many things that everyone else seems to know already. Like the fact that there aren’t bells to signal the end of classes, and that many courses aren’t just the teacher lecturing. Instead a lot of them require active participation and discussion from students, which would have gotten you a rap on the knuckles or detention in Steve’s day. In a lot of ways, it had felt like repeating his earliest days in the twentieth century all over again, because college really was its own little world with so many tacit rules and norms that Steve was going to have to catch up with. (Plus he hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that he was being followed all day, but he’s chalking that one up to stress. The only people he’d seen trailing him had been the odd fan or two, and they hadn’t been that subtle.)

It’s not that he doesn’t like school, it’s just that it’s only the first day and Steve is almost a hundred percent certain he’s going to fail. All he’s wanted since sometime around two this afternoon is to be back in the Tower, training with Clint and Natasha or helping Bucky with his physio or stopping by the labs to make sure Bruce and Tony eat. Because he knows how to do those things, he’s good at them, and the team doesn’t look at him with a mix of awe, fear, and gratitude the way his classmates (and many of his instructors) do. By the time it was around four, during his last class of the day, he’d even started hoping for his Avengers phone (which he’d had to get spacial approval to be allowed to keep on during lectures) to go off.

It hadn’t, and he’d made it through the political science lecture (which had involved a new terror—the prospect of a heavily weighted group project, for which they’d have to select partners next week). But he’d almost ran out of the classroom the second they were dismissed, and he hadn’t put up a fight when he realized that Tony had sent Happy in a car to pick him up. He’d been so damn grateful to Tony, in fact, that he’d come directly up to the penthouse to thank him, only to find it empty.

His next planned stop is the workshop, but before he makes it to the elevator, JARVIS interrupts his train of thought in a voice that sounds almost a little pitying.

“Captain Rogers, Sir is out for dinner with Dr. Banner this evening. I don’t expect they’ll return for several hours.”

Right. Of course, Tony and Bruce’s date is tonight. Steve doesn't know he could have forgotten; the two men have both been adorably excited about it, and the rest of the team has alternated between teasing and reassuring each of them depending on exactly how high their respective anxiety has been at any point in time. It’s been impossible for Steve, and he thinks anyone else, to be upset about these developments, not only because both Bruce and Tony have more than earned some happiness by now, but also because both men have made it clear that they don’t plan to be exclusive to one another. Steve’s not totally sure how an eight (maybe nine, if they count Jane? he’s not totally clear about her thoughts on all of this) person romantic relationship will function, but even the vague thought has been a comforting and occasionally deeply erotic prospect on the horizon.

Today, though, it just makes something dark and a little ugly bubble in the pit of Steve’s stomach. Bruce has already had so many of Tony’s firsts when the other man has been in Big headspace, did he have to have this too? Are he and Tony going to remain this wrapped up in one another, so that they both eventually forget the awkward but hopeful conversations they’ve had with the rest of the team about their shared romantic future? Was Steve foolish to have ever thought he could capture and retain the interest of men as brilliant and intellectually compatible as Bruce and Tony, when he himself can’t even figure out how to access some of his electronic readings on the library databases, let alone understand them?

“Right…of-of course, I forgot. Is Bucky down on his floor?” The question, which Steve thinks comes out pretty measured and controlled compared to some of the highly immature things he wants
to say, is greeted with a long stretch of ominous silence. “JARVIS? Are you okay? Are you—err, hacked or something?” Already, the strategic part of Steve’s brain is starting to make contingency plans; he’ll need to make sure no one is in the elevators, or using any other potentially dangerous electronic devices controlled by JARVIS. They’ll need to contact Tony, and probably SHIELD, to try to make sure that none of the sensitive data, both personal and professional, that the AI has access to has been disturbed. If the breach is serious enough they might need to vacate the Tower temporarily; the mansion is still being renovated, so that’s out, but he’s pretty sure Tony has other nearby properties that would suit for now.

“My functionality has not been compromised, Captain Rogers.” Given that the AI, who is normally quick to justify and explain even the most minor breaks or disturbances in his service, doesn’t follow that assertion by adding anything else, Steve is still leaning toward at least getting in contact with Natasha. His phone is in his bag, though, and he doesn’t want to make the call through JARVIS, so he trudges over to the backpack and begins tearing through it, trying to locate the StarkPhone under the small mountain of heavy textbooks, coursepacks, and orientation-related detritus that have already managed to accumulate in there. Just when he gets his eyes on the damn thing, JARVIS pipes up again, suddenly sounding much more pleased. “Sargent Barnes is on his way to the penthouse now.”

“Then what was with the intrigue, JARVIS?” he snaps. But the AI doesn’t answer, and Steve is just so exhausted and relieved by the thought of Bucky’s imminent presence that he can’t even bring himself to keep pushing the topic. The other man seems slightly out of breath when he reaches Steve, but he wraps his metal arm (now far lighter and easier to maneuver, thanks to Tony’s re-design) around him readily enough, and Steve doesn’t even pretend that he doesn’t lean into the touch for all he’s worth.

“Long day, Stevie?”

“The longest. Not so sure I’m cut out to be a college guy,” he confesses.

“And you decided this after one day, huh? This from the fella who spent a solid six months reminding me to be patient with myself when I couldn’t do the simplest things like speak in English or remember how exactly to brush my hair?” He ruffles Steve’s own sweaty blonde locks for good measure, and while he’s usually all for affectionate touches from just about anyone on the team, today something about it rubs Steve the wrong way. He bats at Bucky’s hand with a disgruntled growl. The arched eyebrow and smirk he receives in response does little to quell his worsening mood. After spending the day longing for the company of his nearest and dearest, suddenly the last thing he wants is to see any of them.

“I’m gonna go have something to eat on my floor. I’ll catcha later, Bucky.” Luck, apparently, is still not on his side today; it takes Steve too long to gather up the contents of his backpack again, and Bucky easily catches up to him long before he can manage to press the door close button in the elevator.

“I’m not…always good at bein’ soft when you need me to be. I don’t know if that’s the Soldier, or just somethin’ about me that didn’t get put back together quite right. But I’m trying here. Do you wanna come with me to steal Clint’s leftovers from the Japanese takeout the other night and watch bad movies on the couch?” It’s tempting, sorely tempting, especially because it’s been a long time since Bucky was little, and Steve thinks he might see the edges of headspace creeping up on his friend tonight, coming through in his eagerness to please and his readiness to initiate physical contact. But they’re all still learning what it looks like to help Bucky manage his status as a switch, and Steve doesn’t want to risk pushing him in to something should he be wrong.
“I got a lot of reading to do. G’night, Buck.” Trying to temper the rejection, he leans over and drops a light kiss on Bucky’s lips. It’s easily, enthusiastically returned, and for just a moment everything feels just a little less miserable. Bucky tastes the way he so often has, like the little mints he’s always liked sucking on throughout the day. (Like so many of both of their favourite things from the 40s, Tony had tracked down the company that made the candies then and paid them what had probably been an absurd sum to start privately producing Bucky’s favourites again.) That small bit of continuity on a day where Steve has felt even more out of his own time than usual is a welcome lifeline, and for a moment when the elevator doors open onto his floor, he considers letting them close again. But then Bucky pulls away, wishing him a good night with a shy smile on his now slightly-puffy lips, and he decides his first impulse to not inflict his company on anyone else this evening is the right one. If the quiet of his floor gets to be too overwhelming, he can probably talk JARVIS into playing a verbal game of chess with him.

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The first half hour or so of the car ride is, as Tony feared, just a bit awkward. He and Bruce carefully avoid touching like they’re teenagers at a chaperoned dance, and neither of them totally knows what to say. But there’s a reason that even when Tony had been unsure (at best) of the rest of the team, he’d felt comfortable with Bruce, and despite all his jokes to the contrary, it’s not just because of their numerous shared scientific interests. It’s because the man is perhaps the most attentive and generous conversationalist Tony’s ever known.

By the time they reach the restaurant, they’re in the middle of an animated discussion about the future of electronic skin, a new development in wearable tech that collects the same information as many existing monitors via a thin, clear patch placed directly on the skin. Tony thinks it’ll pair well with the StarkWatch, and Bruce is quick to offer suggestions about using the polymers they’d developed to make clothing that could stretch during Hulk-outs rather than tear to make the patches more durable. It’s not just shop-talk either; Bruce is adorably and gratifyingly excited about the tasting menu the restaurant offers, spending a good fifteen minutes alone praising something called cantaloupe tears (made, apparently, by roasting and pureeing the fruit, and then letting the juice drip through cheese cloths overnight). From anyone else, Tony would be inclined to read the lengthy explanation as a show of pretension, but there’s no mistaking Bruce’s attitude for anything but pure appreciation and joy in the artistry, and it’s incredibly easy to become affected by the force of his enthusiasm.

Even easier to get swept up in are the occasions when Bruce feeds Tony from his own plate, usually with cutlery but a couple of times with his fingers. The last time he does so, plucking a ripe strawberry from the honeycomb it was served to them in and pressing sticky, sweet fingers to Tony’s lips, he can’t help but spend longer than is strictly necessary licking the remnants of it all from Bruce’s fingers. When Bruce responds with a quiet but distinct moan, Tony strongly considers abandoning the tour of the grounds altogether, and he’s pretty reluctant to allow Bruce to take back possession of his hand. As if to mollify him, or maybe just because he wants to stay close to Tony too, he doesn’t retreat to the other side of the table, but lets his hand settle close enough to Tony’s that they can thread their fingers together.

“You look gorgeous tonight, Tony, have I said that? And this restaurant is incredible. It’s not the kind of thing I would ever have done for myself, but it’s been really amazing.” Tony wants to pay attention, wants to memorize every word Bruce is saying so he can replay them over and over again later, but also his thumb is rubbing gentle little circles on the back of Tony’s hand and apparently he’s in junior high again or something, because his entire focus has somehow narrowed to that single point of connection.

“I…you look great too. I didn’t even know you owned jeans like that, and now that I do, I find myself excessively interested in what else you’re hiding.” He should stop talking there, he really
should. That reply was pithy and direct, teasing without crossing the line into too overtly sexual. He should really shut up, and he can’t, because something about Bruce always makes him honest. “And I’m glad you like the restaurant. I…out of everyone, you probably ask for the least, and it makes me want to spoil you in the worst way sometimes Bruce. The amount of stuff I bought and then returned in advance of this date…” Bruce chuckles, that deep, throaty laugh that’s Tony’s absolute favourite.

“I appreciate your restraint then, mainly because you already do spoil me all the time, Tony, and it’s so very typical of you to not even see that.” With the bill having been settled long in advance, they are left to talk and touch quietly (and Tony is left to ponder this rather puzzling claim of Bruce’s) until they’re ready. Bruce is too excited about the tour of the grounds for Tony to ever voice his desire to make it back to the Tower sooner rather than later, and given that Bruce never once lets go of his hand, even the detailed lecture the employee delivers about the ins and outs of potato breeding manages to feel like something new and exciting.

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Even more exciting by far, though, is about an hour and fifteen minutes after said lecture, when Bruce and Tony are stumbling out of the elevator and into the penthouse. Bruce’s hands feel huge (were they always this big? has it just been long enough for Tony that every touch feels magnified in intensity right now?), and they’re everywhere, fingers trailing down his throat, skating across his chest, groping boldly at his ass. He’s panting into the open mouthed kisses they’re exchanging, and the only way any of this could be more perfect would be if Bruce would pick up on Tony’s not-so-subtle hints and allow himself to be pulled down the hall and into the bedroom. The man is a damn brick wall when he doesn’t want to be moved, though, and finally Tony can’t take it any longer.

“Bruce. Please.” For a second, he thinks he might get what he wants; Bruce’s hand fists in his hair so tightly that it’s borderline painful, and he makes a growling noise near Tony’s ear that makes his entire body tremble. But then he says,

“I’m not going to bed with you tonight, Tony.” Tony has at least seven different counterarguments to make against this highly disappointing turn of events. He can feel Bruce’s hard-on pressing against his hip, though, so rather than try to verbalize any of them he opts for the more expedient option of grinding himself up against Bruce, letting friction try to speak for him. Bruce groans again mid-way through licking his way into Tony’s mouth, and without breaking the kiss he begins guiding them both toward the couch.

As ‘I’m not going to bed with you’ apparently means ‘I’ll fuck you elsewhere’ and not what Tony had feared, he’s more than happy to be on the couch. The second they’re seated Tony does his best to climb Bruce like a tree, straddling his left leg and continuing to roll his hips while he bends down to press urgent, slightly sloppy kisses to the side of Bruce’s neck.

“Tony. Hey, slow down. Stop.” Tony could never, would never, ignore a clear directive to stop, but that doesn’t mean the rejection is easy to take. He’s already trying to make his way out of Bruce’s lap, probably to go hide somewhere where he’ll never be found, but Bruce’s arms are suddenly gripping him implacably about the waist and all his attempts to struggle do is rub Tony’s aching cock against Bruce’s stomach. He whimpers. “Shh, you’re good right here. I’m not saying no to everything, Tony, I just want us to slow down okay?”

“I’m sorry,” he burbles, wondering the entire time where the cool, calm guy who regularly bedded supermodels and actresses and everyone in between without breaking a sweat has gone. “I don’t know what the fuck’s wrong with me, it’s just, it’s been a long time, and you’re you and—”

“I know, Tony. I want you just as much, maybe even more. But I just..I know we’ve talked a few times about sex since that first time we kissed, and I know probably more than anyone how much
effort and time you’ve put into working through some of the ways you were conditioned to think about sex in the past. But we still don’t need to rush anything. More than anything, do you know what I want for you?”

“Not an orgasm, apparently,” Tony grumps, not even able to bring himself to be embarrassed by his own petulance. Bruce laughs and nips and at his ear, hard enough that it actually stings a bit. Fuck that’s good.

“Oh I want that too, believe me. I want to see you come apart so badly it’s almost embarrassing. You’ve got an entirely unique ability to make me act like a horny teenager, Tony Stark. But more than that, I want you to be able to accept and even seek out touch from people without believing it always has to lead somewhere. You’re so tactile, you ache to be touched so much that sometimes it's hard just to watch. But you rarely seek it out when you’re Big, and it’s still pretty uncommon that you’re comfortable enough to even accept it when it’s offered.” Bruce rarely shows off how insightful he is, how much he sees, and the experience of having him verbally expose Tony with such unerring accuracy, all while he holds him so closely that he can feel every minute twitch and shudder, it’s very nearly too much. “Can I just touch you tonight, Tony, just for the sake of it? Without you worrying about getting to the next part, or what you can do for me?” Bruce’s lips are moving from his ear now, sucking kisses down the side of his neck and leaving a trail of goosebumps in his wake.

“But I want…want to touch you too.” And fuck, Tony really, really does. He can see just a hint of the other man’s chest hair above the top of his shirt, and Tony wants to run his fingers through it, wants to kiss the scar he’d seen on his thigh all those months ago in the shower, and breathe in the scent of Bruce’s skin when it’s damp with sweat and sex. He just wants, so intensely that it’s taking almost all of what’s left of his concentration not to beg with either his words or his body.

“I know you do,” Bruce soothes, all the while unbuttoning Tony’s shirt and revealing his unblemished chest (which is still, months after Extremis and the surgery, a bit hard to get used to). He places a steady hand right over where the arc reactor had once been, where his heart now beats strong and unthreatened by shrapnel or anything else, and it’s the most intimate way Tony’s been touched while Big that he can remember. “You’re going to. I swear Tony, I promise that I want you to touch me in almost every possible way and position imaginable. But tonight I just want to make you feel good and let the rest wait. Okay?” He agrees, he would defy anyone to not agree with Bruce when he uses that voice that’s somehow both sweet and enticingly jagged, but Tony resigns himself to being a bit bored by the experience. It’s not that he’s against foreplay, but for sex to truly take him over and stop his mind from wandering in a hundred other directions, he’s always needed it to be intense to the point of being overwhelming. There’s no way the light, teasing touches Bruce seems to have in mind are going to be enough for long.

The second Tony gives an acquiescing nod, though, Bruce is back to work. His tongue traces a large tendon in Tony’s neck, which he then grazes with his teeth hard enough to send a jolt down the length of Tony’s spine. He makes another of those humiliating whining sounds in the back of his throat, and feels more than hears the approving chuckle Bruce gives in return. Before Tony can get any ideas about hiding, though, or at least asking for a damn gag for himself or something, the fingers Bruce has trailed up his back press more insistently into the skin and begin to move in random patterns Tony can’t quite distinguish. The occasional drag of nails leave behind nothing that could even be called a scratch, but their occasional and unpredictable interjections of sharpness have him oddly captivated.

Just when he thinks he might honestly go insane, both of Bruce’s hands move to Tony’s left arm,
one bracing his shoulder and the other slowly and oh-so-gently working its way down the length of his arm, encouraging the limb to stretch and extend fully. By the time he reaches Tony's hand to interlace their fingers and pull just slightly, Tony can do little more than stare at the man, wide-eyed and bordering on fearful of just how much Bruce can make him feel, how completely devastating these seemingly minor touches can be.

“All your innuendo about partner yoga not seeming so funny just now, huh?” he teases, and the knot of anxiety in Tony’s stomach loosens a bit. Because while he might very well be some kind of sex wizard, it’s still Bruce who’s doing this to him, Bruce who drinks tea and lectures him about lab safety and is currently in the midst of a shameless campaign attempting to win You’s favour away from Rhodey. He seems to feel it when the distress leaves Tony, and he presses a kiss to his bicep. “Good. That’s perfect, Tony. Just let yourself be in your body. You’re not just your brain; it’s gorgeous and brilliant and I love it, I’ll never be less amazed by the things your mind can do. But you’re a body, too, and all you need to do right now is just let yourself feel, let your body take in anything that gives you pleasure and wallow in it.”

It goes on like that for, well, he’s not entirely sure for how long. Bruce stretches and massages and kisses and bites and licks him almost everywhere except his cock, he never goes near Tony’s cock, and somehow it’s still the most intensely erotic thing that’s ever happened to him. He’s making an almost endless stream of noise, sometimes babbling pleas, but mostly just noise that he can’t even classify let alone explain, and god, that’s even more rare than Tony being rendered speechless.

“How do you want to come?”

The answer to that should be easy. Tony is achingly hard, has been this entire time. And he’s never been much for orgasm delay or denial, at least not from the receiving end of things. Right now, though, there’s something…not quite right about the thought, about taking this interaction that has been somehow so much more than sex and reducing it to a singular, defined moment of climax.

“I…no. Can you just keep…can we just stay like this? Is that okay?” It’s a pretty selfish request, really; Bruce may very well want or need to be done with this for tonight, especially since it’s not like Tony is doing much in the way of giving back. But there’s no mistaking the smile Bruce gives him for anything but completely sincere, maybe even a little elated, either.

“That’s more than okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, be gentle, that was the first time I’ve ever written anything even vaguely smutty. Eek.

Thanks to those of you who kudosed and commented last chapter; it was great to see so many familiar names (and a couple new ones too!) And as always, your comments were insightful and funny and motivating. I hope you all had a great week.
Visitors and Other Residual Traumas

Chapter Summary

Tony and Bruce's night together has some unanticipated consequences, as does Natasha's first day at SHIELD. So things are hardly calm at the tower when they're joined by an unexpected guest.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Tony struggles with the aftermath of his vulnerability with Bruce in the previous chapter here. That storyline takes up a fair amount of the chapter so it would be a bit challenging to skip, but if you wish to get a redacted chapter or anything, you can feel free to let me know as always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Memo: SHIELD Upper Management and Field Agents
Re: Our New Co-Director

As most of you know, Natasha Romanov will be joining us tomorrow for her first day in her new official capacity as SHIELD co-director. I have been asked by Director Romanov to remind everyone that she has outlawed the purchase and/or circulation of any celebratory items having to do with said appointment, including but not limited to:

Cake
Other pastries
‘Fancy’ (i.e. non-commissary) coffee
Banners
Balloons
Celebratory name plates for door or office desk
Fake/decorative knives
Anything that plays music of any kind, at any volume

Please abide by her wishes. None of us need a repeat of the April Fools’ Incident of 2010.

Regards,
Maria Hill

Natasha’s first day in her now job as co-director of SHIELD starts with her nearly being blinded. And not in the fun, mission kind of way involving exposure to some kind of mysterious toxin or powder and the promise of sweet revenge. No, she sees little more than spots into the afternoon because she’s forgotten to bring her sunglasses, and the paparazzi outside SHIELD HQ are worse than they’ve ever been. The camera flashes are a solid wall of painfully bright light, matched only by the noise of so many people competing to shout the loudest in the hopes of garnering a reaction from her.
Normally there’s a strict press-free radius around SHIELD spanning several blocks in every direction, but not today. Because while the identity and appearance of the organization’s directors have usually been a closely held secret, all of that has changed when it comes to Natasha. SHIELD needs a facelift, a way to recuperate its public image after the Hydra infiltration and its disastrous and public attempts to capture Captain America. As they see it, Natasha’s appointment provides just such an opportunity. To her own disbelief and increasing displeasure, she’s still a media darling (and that is the last damn time she’s rescuing a President so help her, even if the next one is on fire right in front of her or something); by making her the public face of the organization, SHIELD gets to claim increased visibility and accountability, and the Avengers are offered access to some of SHIELD’S legal and governmental protections.

The optimistic way to read it is that SHIELD wants a sustainable and symbiotic relationship with the country’s super-, meta-, and inhumans. The less charitable interpretation is that they want to ensure that they, not the federal government, not the UN, nor any other national or international organization, are the ones regulating and controlling those populations. Natasha’s generally inclined to believe, like most issues as complex and significant as this, that it’s a bit of both. What she knows is that she has absolutely zero desire to be the face of this little social and political experiment, and that she has no other choice. Her appointment had been one of the rare topics that SHIELD and Stark/Avenger’s PR teams have ever agreed on.

She does not, at least, have to make any kind of public statement today; SHIELD’s willingness to allow her to be seen walking in the building, combined with their brief press release notifying the public of her new position, is statement enough for now. It seems to take forever for the shouting and the camera flashes to go away, even though the doors that close behind her are sound and bullet proofed (amongst many other things). Maria is there to greet her, and Natasha wastes no time.

“I quit.”

Hill has the audacity to laugh at this entirely serious declaration, and then hands her a file.

“We’re in Conference Room C in ten minutes.”

****

Except for the occasional post-mission briefing, Conference Rooms are not spaces for field agents. They’re unnecessarily large and pretentious and way too damn clean; almost the second she steps inside she misses the cramped, grimy quarters in the lower levels where she’s spent the vast majority of her time with painful intensity. (It might even border on nostalgia, but for people like Natasha that is both a dirty and a dangerous word, so it’s not a thought she lets herself dwell on for any length of time.)

It’s not for nothing that she managed as a spy for so long, though; she knows how to blend into her surroundings regardless of her actual comfort. She takes her time getting settled. The table is way too large for a three person meeting, which strikes her as something Gonzalez, the third co-director, would be more inclined to do than Hill would. And indeed he’s seated at the one end of the long surface, grizzled face severe and challenging. He expects Natasha to seat herself at the other end, a show of power over practicality given that they’d barely be able to hear one another. Instead she sits down directly across from Maria, who has situated herself in the exact middle of the table.

“I wish we had the time to ease you in gently, Co-Director—”

“I don’t,” she parries back. “Time and comfort have rarely been luxuries I’ve had, and it hardly makes sense to pretend this job is going to be easier than what I’ve done in the past.” This earns her a small smile. Gonzalez has been SHIELD for the majority of his life. He’d been on the ground during the worst of the Hydra invasion and its immediate aftermath, nearly losing his life. Afterward, from
what Natasha’s heard, he’d directed most of his rage not at Hydra but at Fury and SHIELD, laying blame for the disaster that had been Insight at the feet of an organization he argued functioned too much in the shadows even from its own members. The three person directorial position had been his brain-child, and though that configuration had been part of what had convinced Natasha to accept the position after having refused the opportunity to eventually run SHIELD solo, he isn’t really who she’d imagined as the third to she and Maria. What he says next does not exactly endear him to her either.

“Then let’s talk about Agent Barton, shall we?”

****

The Next Day-Early Morning

“Sergeant Barnes, you had requested that I inform you whenever a member team gains access to your floor when you are asleep or concentrating deeply. Sir has just stepped off the elevator and looks to be making his way to your bedroom.” Bucky has already set his book down on his nightstand, but before he can even manage to thank the AI let alone ask any other questions, JARVIS speaks again. “I…I believe he’s changing his mind. My apologies, Sergeant. You’re welcome to resume your reading. I shall alert you if Sir or anyone else returns.”

Tony Stark, at least as Bucky has come to know him over these past few months, is many things. He’s brash and cocky, the consummate showman, especially when he’s outside the confines of the tower and in the public eye. Within it he is still all of those things, and he’s unendingly curious and driven, often to his own detriment. But he’s also compassionate and playful and generous and shockingly easy to be around most of the time.

One word Bucky has never once thought of using to describe Tony Stark, however, is indecisive. So there is absolutely no part of him that feels compelled to listen to JARVIS and just go back to his reading. He pauses just long enough to throw some sweats on over his boxers and then takes the hallway at a jog. Tony finally comes into view, illuminated only by the small strip of LED lights above the elevator doors. His back is to Bucky, but he’s full of a twitchy, nervous energy that doesn’t seem quite like anything Bucky has ever seen from him before. This isn’t excitement, not the loud, manic vibrancy that possesses Tony when he’s involved in a project or in the midst of a challenging battle against New York’s endless supply of super villains. This is something quieter, something…wrong.

“Tony?” The engineer starts, then turns to look not at Bucky but just past him. The parts of Bucky controlled primarily by the Soldier are rapidly stirring; the naked sense of fear enveloping Tony make him itch for a weapon, a mission, some kind of guidance about how to make this better and fast.

“I…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you. I tried to be quiet, I—sorry.”

“Tony?” The engineer starts, then turns to look not at Bucky but just past him. The parts of Bucky controlled primarily by the Soldier are rapidly stirring; the naked sense of fear enveloping Tony make him itch for a weapon, a mission, some kind of guidance about how to make this better and fast.

“I…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you. I tried to be quiet, I—sorry.”

“You didn’t,” he says calmly. “After that time when I accidentally knocked Clint out during the middle of his fool attempt at a prank, you helped me set up protocols so that your robot would tell me anytime someone came on to the floor when I was sleepin’ or workin’ on something, remember?” Tony nods in vague agreement, still looking somewhere beyond Bucky. Recalling the ample exercises he’s been forced to do in therapy aimed at helping him to identify and articulate emotions, Bucky uses the awkward silence to consider his next words carefully. “I…it seems like something’s not right. The fact that you’re not tellin’ me what it is makes me feel…nervous.” Then another thought occurs to him. “Wasn’t last night your date with Bruce?”

Tony’s body sort of closes in on itself then: his arms wrap around his own waist in an apparent attempt at a self-hug; he abandons his attempts to fake eye-contact with Bucky in favour of letting his head hang and his shoulders slump; and he starts to rock himself gently from side to side. A growl
rips its way out of Bucky’s throat.

“Did he hurt you? Tony answer me right now.” The second the demand leaves his mouth Bucky already regrets it; regardless of what’s happened, the very last thing Tony needs right now is the Soldier. He expects Tony to shrink further away, maybe even to leave the floor entirely. He does not expect to hear a quiet whimper, followed by,

“Please, Daddy.”

****

Bucky stands stock-still for some of the longest seconds of his life, head reeling. Tony has never called him anything like this before; Big or little, Bucky is always just Bucky, or sometimes James when the ridiculously intuitive man senses that he needs a bit of distancing from his pre-War, pre-Hydra self. He’s also never taken care of little Tony on his own before. It hasn’t been a conscious thing on the team’s part, at least not since the beginning when none of them, including Bucky himself, had been entirely sure how his headspace would work as a switch. Now that everyone is confident that Bucky won’t suddenly drop if he’s in the middle of serving as Tony’s caretaker, they would more than likely be fine with leaving the two of them alone; it just hasn’t happened that way yet.

But there aren’t any other options this morning. Steve’s at school (Bucky not having dared follow him again two days in a row, especially since the punk only has one class today); Natasha, Phil and Clint are all at SHIELD; Thor is off-planet; and Bruce is not an option, at least not until Bucky can sort out what the hell happened between those two.

You can do this. You can do this. The chant might be a bit silly, but it’s enough to convince Bucky’s feet to start moving, crossing the rest of the distance between he and Tony. He’s seen the others, especially Steve and Phil, take a knee in front of the boy when he’s particularly upset, so he does the same.

“Hey sugar.” He waits with all the patience he possesses, and finally his little boy’s gaze finds his. “Aww there’s those pretty eyes. Can I—can Daddy pick you up?” Referring to himself in the third-person the way the others do feels a bit bizarre, but he’ll be damned if he’s going to let Tony feel ashamed of how he’d referred to Bucky just now. Tony gives him a watery half smile and nods, already holding his arms up in preparation for being lifted. The second he’s in Bucky’s arms, he buries his face against his chest, and Bucky feels rather than hears him start to cry in earnest.

Still trying desperately to remember everything he’s seen Steve and Thor (the only two others capable of carrying Tony) do in these situations, he paces his floor in aimless circles, bouncing and rocking and crooning to Tony. It doesn’t seem to matter what he says. Tony doesn’t respond to any of it, but he seems aware enough of Bucky’s tone to take some degree of comfort from it, so Bucky just keeps talking about anything and everything he can think of until the sobs slowly turn into the occasional hiccup. There’s snot all over his bare chest, and Tony makes an entirely ineffective attempt to wipe it up with his fingers that would have been really damn cute and funny if circumstances were different.

“Shh, I got that kiddo, don’t worry about it. I know I scared you earlier and I’m sorry, but I really need you to talk to me at least a little bit here Tony. Can you do that? Then I’ll make you a nice breakfast and we’ll just spend some quiet time together if you want.” Tony doesn’t reply, but Bucky figures this is one of those cases where the lack of a negative response is enough to go on, so he presses forward carefully. “Babe, I know some things are private, and I’m not trying to pry into your time with Bruce. But if he hurt you, whether he meant to or not, that’s not something you need to or should keep private, okay? Did something bad happen last night?”
Try as he might, though, he can’t get anything out of the kid. At this point it’s probably a good thing that no one else is in the Tower, because if Bucky could leave Tony with someone else for even a minute, he’d be forcing his way onto Bruce’s floor and demanding answers. When he’s mid-way through making Tony some eggs and toast and hashbrowns, inspiration strikes.

“JARVIS, can you help me out here? What the hell happened?” The AI is silent for what feels like a long time, which Bucky has learned usually means he’s sorting out how he can best balance fulfilling a request he genuinely wishes to complete with any existing protocols in the system that restrict his ability to do so. Bucky has more sympathy than most for the tension between desire and procedure, and works hard to focus on the food in front of him rather than betraying any sign of impatience.

“Sir and Doctor Banner visited a restaurant of Sir’s choosing last night. Judging from the extravagant tip he left, as well as the Yelp review he drafted but never sent during the journey home which contained excessive use of the phrase ‘fucking awesome duck’, they both enjoyed it. From there, they engaged in what appeared to be entirely consensual…activities, and then fell asleep in Sir’s bed together. If you wish for my analysis in addition to my accounting of the evening—”

“I do. I really, really do,” Bucky says fervently.

“I believe Sir found himself feeling unexpectedly vulnerable after his evening with Doctor Banner for reasons I will not elaborate on, but which I do not imagine originate with or are the fault of Doctor Banner himself. While Sir is slowly learning to allow himself to be less guarded when Big, in this case I suspect the feelings came on too unexpectedly and intensely for him to handle, and so he reverted to his headspace, where he has historically been more comfortable being seen and cared for by others in such a state.”

There’s still a lot of holes to fill in, but this account makes a terrible kind of sense. It also makes some of the comments the others have made about Tony having an unhealthy attitude toward sex (something Bucky himself has never seen evidence of before) suddenly seem to hold a lot more water.

“Daddy, toast!” Tony interrupts, pointing at the slightly burned pieces of whole-wheat that have just popped out of the toaster. Post-sobbing Tony is nowhere near his normal easygoing and animated self, but he’s also not the frightened creature that had tried to shrink himself to nothing in front of Bucky’s eyes earlier this morning. So for now he’s going to take it and leave any further questions for later.

“That’s right, sugarplum, toast’s ready. Should we see what kinds of jam are in the fridge? Daddy Steve went to the farmer’s market last week, and there’s a little old lady there who’s totally enamoured of him. He always comes home with at least five different kinds for both he and I.”

Tony’s already reaching his hands out toward the fridge, despite the fact that he and Bucky are currently several feet away from the thing. While Bucky might still sort of feel worried and scared of messing things up and slightly tempted to punch Bruce even though it seems quite possible none of this is exactly his fault, a small part of him also can’t help but smile at the sight.

****

Bruce wakes up alone in Tony’s bed. This is not, in itself, unheard of; when Tony is little many members of the team are around often end up sleeping in here with the boy, and it’s easy enough to end up waking up alone if the baby wakes and is attended to by someone else. But there’s cool air brushing across Bruce’s thighs, which are mostly bare, and the realization that he’s in just a pair of boxers is enough to trigger his memory. Tony wasn’t little last night, not by a long shot.

It’s still not inconceivable, if a little disappointing, that Tony might have woken up after their evening together and gone straight down to the shop. It happens that way sometimes when he comes out of
his headspace, the opportunity for rest helping his adult mind finally figure out a problem he’s been ruminating on for days or weeks with no results. Bruce is not nearly so eager to leave behind what had been one of the best evenings of his life, though, and he lets himself sprawl luxuriously across the bed, rolling over to Tony’s side to sniff a little at the other man’s pillow. Tony had been so gorgeous and thoughtful and present last night, and as Bruce lays there he indulges himself in a rare moment of optimism, considering how they might spend their time on future nights like the last. He wants something at least as perfect as the restaurant Tony had taken him to, but impressing someone like Tony Stark who can go and usually has gone everywhere of note is going to take some doing. Maybe they could stay in so Bruce could cook? Afterward they wouldn’t have to wait the duration of a car ride to put their hands on one another either; and god but the thought of touching Tony again, watching his body flare to life, so responsive and eager under Bruce’s mouth and fingers. Bringing himself off in Tony’s bed when the man himself isn’t even present is probably a step too far given the early stage this part of their relationship is at, but that doesn’t mean Bruce doesn’t longingly consider the thought for a moment.

What finally gets him up and moving is the realization that he doesn’t have to wait for their next date to cook for Tony; he can just bring him some breakfast in the shop. He hums to himself as he gets dressed, smiling as he passes through the living room and sees Tony’s wine-red silk shirt still draped over the back of the couch where Bruce had left it.

“JARVIS? Could you ask Tony if he has any preferences on what he wants for breakfast?”

“Sir has…already eaten, Doctor Banner.” Bruce pauses midway through rummaging through the fridge in search of eggs; sure, it’s a bit of a surprise that Tony thought to actually feed himself before going down to the shop, but it’s mostly a pleasant one. So why does the AI sound so awkward about it?”

“Alright. Then can you let him know that I’m going to cook something for myself and then come see him in the shop?”

“Sir is not on the workshop level of the Tower, Doctor Banner.”

****

Tony has been in and out of headspace all morning, and it’s starting to wear on both he and Bucky. Take now, for instance: Bucky is elbow deep in diapering supplies (which he’d had to liberate from Steve’s floor, because Bucky doesn’t have this stuff on his own level and Tony hadn’t wanted to risk going up to the penthouse in case Bruce was still there), and Tony can’t seem to decide whether to find the prospect of letting Bucky put him into a diaper horrifying or comforting. He’s currently leaning toward the former, and has managed to escape Bucky’s bed and hide himself in the closet. (Bucky could have stopped him, certainly, but he’s completely terrified of accidentally hurting the baby with his strength, so he’s erring on the side of extreme caution for now.)

“You gonna come outta there kiddo?”

“No thanks,” comes the muffled reply, and Bucky can’t help but grin just a little. Even in the middle of acting out Tony tends to be careful of his manners; it’s one way in which the younger version is markedly different from his older counterpart, who has recently made it a game to try to combine vulgar curses imaginable together all for the sake of ranking Steve’s reactions to them.

“That was very polite, sugar, but—”

“Sergeant Barnes, apologies for the interruption, but I require your permission to relay the most salient details of this morning’s events to Doctor Banner. He is growing quite concerned for Sir, and as keeping him anxious has particularly serious potential side effects—”
“Hey, no need to convince me, JARVIS, I hear you. Tell him the same thing that you told me about what you suspect happened. Tell him I’m taking care of Tony, and that we’ll need some space for a bit, okay?” JARVIS says something in the affirmative, but Bucky’s attention is almost entirely given to the little boy who opens the closet door just a crack and asks,

“Bruce mad at Tony?” Bucky approaches the closet slowly and carefully so as not to startle the kid; when he realizes that even up close he can’t seem to find Tony’s eyes, he kneels down on a hunch. Sure enough, now the light coming through the tiny crack Tony has opened between the doors is catching his rich brown eyes and a bit of his lip, which he seems to be biting on. (Should have got a pacifier while he was down on Steve’s level…)

“Naw, bud. I can’t speak for Bruce and I think it’s important for you to talk when you’re big again, but I’d bet just about anything that the only thing Bruce feels right now is a lot of worry. That’s why JARVIS is telling him that you’re okay and that I have you, okay? You can see him whenever you’re ready.” He considers offering to have Bruce come down here as Papa, to try to show Tony both that he’s still loved and that the ageplay is still its own thing. But that would be a lot to ask of Bruce, who might not be in the right mindset of his own to shift into caretaker role, and it might make Tony’s already tenuous grip on his control over his headspace all the more fragile.

_Steve will be home in two hours. Steve will be home in two hours. We can make it for two hours._

****

After what might have been the longest day in history, it’s with warring feelings of relief and rage that Natasha stalks onto the floor she shares with Clint and Phil. She’d driven home with the latter, who had picked up on her mood and had the foresight not to ask any questions. But he stays close to her left elbow as they exit the elevator, a tactical position that also means he recognizes her tension wasn’t simply a post-first-day reaction. Clint is sprawled across the couch reading a comic, and even that minimal level of distraction is enough to seal his fate. She’s on top of him in seconds, one hand knocking the comic from his hands while her opposite forearm comes to rest across his throat.

“You’ve been lying to me. To both of us.” Next to her, Phil, who had made some noises of protest about her rough handling of Clint, freezes and looks between them. To his credit, Clint at least doesn’t try to deny it. He does, however, give her that shit-eating grin and opine,

“Okay. This looks bad.” Her furious response is cut short by the sudden and blaring sound of an alarm.

“Agents Romanov, Barton and Coulson, your presence is required in the penthouse. There is a situation.” They’re all already in motion, all thoughts of their fight put to the side while they each seek out their nearest weapons. Natasha is still wearing most of hers, but after considering the urgency of JARVIS’s tone, she makes a grab for the push dagger blade she keeps taped to the bottom of the couch.

“Any more intel you can give us JARVIS?” she demands as they sprint toward the elevator. Clint is barely inside when the thing starts moving at top speed.

“There is a known hostile inside. He came accompanied by Prince Thor, who has asked me not to initiate any of the Tower’s defensive mechanisms, but I nonetheless feel that things may escalate quickly and I wish to have all available hands on deck, to speak.” A suspicion is already growing in Natasha’s mind, but she’s put off from seeking more information about the identity of the hostile when JARVIS adds, “Sir is currently little. I will not see him harmed.” If Natasha had been on edge before, that’s nothing to the protective fury that grasps her by the chest now. Her body is a long, coiled line of tension, ready to act with the deadliest force, and she doesn’t need to look at either of the two men beside her to know they’re in the same state.
The elevator doors open, and even despite JARVIS’s warning, a part of Natasha isn’t prepared for the scene that greets her. Tony, wearing one of his warmest and fuzziest sleepers patterned with dancing vegetables, is propped on Bucky’s hip; the Soldier (and there’s very little doubt from his posture and his empty expression that that’s who has control of James’s head right now) has a large hand wrapped around the back of Tony’s head. Steve stands in front of both of them, poised and ready to strike with the shield in one hand. A vicious sound from the opposite corner, she notes with alarm, turns out to be coming from the Hulk. But the green giant has absolutely no interest in anyone but the two people in the middle of the living room: Thor, taller and more magnificent than she even remembered, his massive upper body covered by the limp figure in his arms, who she realizes after a moment to be,

“Loki.” The name comes not from her own lips, but from Phil’s. He says it like an oath, or a curse, like all of his anger and hurt over the pain Loki had brought to them all pressed into that one word. Beside him, Clint makes a noise that doesn’t even manage to turn into a word, but is nonetheless animalistic in its intensity. Thor glances about the room, and it’s the first time she can remember him looking truly afraid.

“Please, my friends. I can explain.”

Chapter End Notes

Eek! It's the moment some of you have been waiting for since like ten chapters into (That Would Be) Enough!

Thanks so much for reading and commenting on the last chapter. You remain the best and most supportive readers ever, and I hope you Septembers all went relatively smoothly <3
Chapter Summary

Thor explains how Loki has suddenly ended up in the Tower with the team, and they attempt to figure out how to move forward. Natasha and Phil learn what's been going on with Clint.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings: Okay, pals, a couple of big ones. First, while I am (as always, because I can't write unhappy endings to save my life) fully committed to leaving these characters in a good place by the end of the story, please be aware that Loki's storyline starts out in a bit of a disturbing way. The ageplay dynamic they'll be entering into is in many ways forced upon him, and for a lot of bad reasons; this wasn't a decision made or supported by Thor (or any of the Avengers) but they will have to help Loki work through some of the consequences, and that will be hard on everyone. I can't say too much more without just recapping Thor's dialogue, but please please take care of yourselves. And if you need more information or have questions before you decide to read, please feel free to get in contact with me.

There's also a sexually explicit scene toward the end of this chapter between Natasha, Phil, and Clint. I'm told by someone who has read it that Natasha could come off a little bit Domme-y. That wasn't necessarily my intent when writing it, but if you want to skip that section for any reason, stop reading when Phil asks Natasha about the surveillance equipment in the office and skip to the end of that section.

“I want Tony out of here first.” It’s not at all surprising that this suggestion comes from one of the overprotective twins (in this case it’s Bucky, though Tony can already see Steve starting to nod in agreement). His little headspace is beckoning to him enticingly, and he does actually consider just letting the others handle this conversation without him. This day has been weird and messed up enough without adding in Loki and the volatile mix of responses he brings out in all of them. But they do things like this together, dammit, even when they’re awkward and everyone probably wishes they could be elsewhere. So Tony starts to wriggle in Bucky’s grip, wincing at the feel of a damp diaper rubbing against sensitive, slightly irritated skin; right, Da—Bucky had been about to change him when all this had gone down.

“No. Lemme down. I’m fine. Just going to go change and then we can all figure this out. Preferably with booze. A lot of booze. Or at least some kind of comfort food; a donair the size of my head, or—ooh, dandan noodles from that place on 3rd.” Caught up as Tony is in imagining their many dinner options, he forgets that this proposal is not likely to go down well with the man holding him until Bucky’s hand tightens at the back of his neck.

“You’ve been between headspaces all day. And I’ve seen footage of what he’s done,” Bucky jerks
his head toward Loki. “I can’t…please, manysh. I can’t think with you in here.” The sheer number of embarrassing Russian endearments Bucky and Nat have amassed between them is really getting out of control, Tony reflects, even as he continues struggling fruitlessly against the endlessly steady arms holding him.

“No gonna drop, James. Please. Loki’s made mistakes, colossal ones, and that’s coming from me, the guy whose charming list of nicknames once included The Merchant of Death. Trust me, I take what he did seriously. But he also…” He’d give almost anything not to have to say it, but he now has the undivided attention of everyone in the room (excepting Loki himself, who remains unconscious) and there’s not going to be any getting out of it. “He probably saved my life, alright? So I’m perhaps the only one in here capable of being neutral-ish on this subject. That means I need to be here, and that you need to let me down so I can get dressed in something that isn’t—this.” The effort it takes the man holding him not to fight Tony on this is evident in every line of his face, and Bucky’s eyes never leave his own, like he’s just waiting for the slightest indication that Tony is lying about being Big in order to sweep him away from danger. Even as Tony starts to walk away (well, it’s more of a waddle with the damn diaper, but he’s doing his best not to think about that) he’s entirely positive that gaze is still trained on him. But he makes it out with as much dignity as he can, yelling, “I want the donair and the dandan. Someone make this happen while I get changed please,” behind him.

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The good and the terrible thing about Thor’s idea of explanation is that it apparently requires a half hour lecture about the intricacies and history of the Asgardian justice system. At first it’s kind of interesting, and definitely a relief to have some idea what Thor has been dealing with over the past months and why he’s been gone from the Tower with increasing frequency. They’ve all, on varying occasions, tried talking to Thor about it, but he usually returns from Asgard exhausted and angry in equal measures, and has tended to prefer changing the subject.

Slowly, though, Clint’s attention and patience starts to wane, and he’s not the only one; even Steve is starting to get a little glassy-eyed, and he’s the only one of them who has never once fallen asleep in a debrief. Eventually, Hulk gets so bored that he surrenders his hold on Bruce’s consciousness. After one last disgruntled noise, the big green form in the corner of the room transforms into the smaller one of Bruce Banner, clad only in the Hulk-proof shorts Tony had perfected a few weeks ago. He takes one look at Loki (now laid out on the long sectional couch) and shudders again, but does not transform. Thor unexpectedly beams at this development.

“Friend Bruce. I had hoped if I spoke long enough about topics that would not cause you further anger that you might appear.”

“Wait, hold up, you just spent the last half hour boring us on purpose?” Clint demands, nearly dropping the remains of his donair on the floor in shock. None of them have ever made the mistake of thinking Thor stupid, but his tendency toward sincerity usually means he’s one of the only people in the Tower whose actions never have an ulterior motive. It’s sort of like being betrayed by Big Bird or Mr. Rogers or something. The demigod at least seems extremely guilty at being called out on his duplicity.

“I…well, I suppose yes I did, my friends. My apologies. Bruce is the only one I have found myself able to speak to about the matter of my brother before, and I found the idea of his presence here… reassuring.” Bruce, Clint notices, seems almost distracted for a moment even in the face of this show of trust; he seeks out Tony, who is sprawled on the floor surrounded by the remains of their take-out. Tony is either distracted by the food or pointedly not looking back for some reason, but Bruce is too good a man to stay focused on whatever his own issues might be for now. When he stands and reaches up to rest a hand on Thor’s shoulder, his smile is as warm and genuine as ever.
“You ready to tell us what happened now, buddy?” Thor heaves a heavy sigh and nods, sparing another glance down toward his unconscious brother.

“My brother, as you know, was suffering. While Asgard is advanced in a number of ways, there is little belief in the idea of what Midgardians call rehabilitation; for crimes as serious as those Loki has committed, he is considered already lost. He is kept alive only to be punished for as long as his body can endure.” Now that some of the shock has worn off, Clint takes another look down at the man on the couch. Loki’s smaller than he was before, not just thinner but weaker-looking; his lips appear painfully chapped, his skin beyond its useful paleness and far closer to the gaunt tinge Tony’s tends to take on when he’s been down in the shop for too long. The man’s fingernails are brittle and discoloured, and he keeps shivering even in sleep like he’s freezing despite the Tower’s comfortable temperature, both of which suggest malnutrition. There might be bruising in various states of discolouration too, just visible through the open-weave blanket under which he’s been draped, but Clint can’t quite bring himself to look that closely just yet. “I asked to speak on his behalf, to request a more lenient sentence, and was given permission to do so. With Friend Tony’s permission, I spoke to them of the spell he used, how he was attempting to help Tony because of similarities he recognized in them. I argued before my Father and Mother and our people that there is good in him still, that Loki’s desire to aid Tony, a man he considered an enemy when they met, means he is not entirely beyond reason or redemption. It took…longer than even I expected, and there was much outcry from some in our ranks, but eventually, they agreed. With…conditions.”

“What conditions.” Natasha’s voice is flat, not even altering her inflection at the end of the sentence to reflect the fact that she’s technically just asked a question. This is Widow at her most dangerous, and after so many years in the field together, it’s almost a reflex for Clint’s back to become a little straighter, his hand reaching toward the bow and arrows he’d placed on the floor.

“It has been decided that if my brother recognized Friend Tony’s need for a childhood because it resembled his own, then he should henceforth be treated as a Youngling.” Clint still isn’t seeing the problem here, honestly; the age play might not always be easy on Tony, but especially compared to what Loki has already been through, how could Thor possibly think this a comparable fate? Why does he look so damn upset? “But they do not…they are angry with Loki still, angrier than even I had realized. A Youngling is usually a sacred position in Asgard; our youth, and those who have need of returning to that place later in life, they are treated with the upmost respect. It is a high honour to care for a Youngling, and treasonous to betray their trust. But this is not what they imagined for my brother. They wished to…force this change upon him, and to use his new status to continue to punish and humiliate him. I spoke to them of consent, of the importance of negotiation and safety and all that we discussed when we began our own play, but they never truly wished to help my brother, only to find a new form of vengeance. They requested the services of the universe’s most powerful mages and sorcerers, who bound many of Loki’s powers, and altered his mind to more closely reflect that of a child; he still has his memories, his knowledge of the world and who he is, but I am told that when he wakes he will not be himself, not as I have known him since he was a child. Perhaps not even then, for even as a youth Loki was oft guarded and secretive, particularly toward me. I…I could not leave him there in such a state, with people who wished to do him harm.”

“Y-your Father? Your Mother?” Phil asks weakly from Clint’s other side. He sounds a long way away.

“My Father believes Loki must be treated in accordance with the severity of his crimes, and subject to the retribution most desired by his subjects. I do not believe this the form he intended that punishment to take, but our people are angry. Learning of Loki’s true lineage, only to have him bring Asgard to the brink of a conflict with Midgard…they cannot see beyond their own rage, and they would not continue to accept a King who would make exceptions for his behaviour. My mother did not agree. In the privacy of our chambers she called him power-hungry and foolish; she railed and
sobbed and did all she could to change Odin’s mind, but he would not, could not, be swayed. So she waited, and plotted, and when we had the chance, she helped me sneak Loki away from Asgard and bring him here.” Thor’s voice breaks just a little not the word ‘here’, but after a long, deep inhalation he squares his shoulders and presses on. “I considered attempting to find somewhere else for us, and I shall if his presence here is too unbearable. But I found I could not force myself to disregard the first request our Youngling ever made of us.” Clint frowns in thought, because he’s pretty damn sure Tones has never made any requests as far as Loki is concerned, but Steve sighs deeply from his place on Tony’s left.

“Come home.” Thor nods severely, glancing down at his brother and then across the room at his friends, his family.

“If you wish it, I shall leave, and remain absent at least until my brother wakes and I can begin to understand what he needs from me now, or whomever he wishes to have care for him. But I…I cannot abandon him. I will not.”

And the thing is, Clint hates Loki. Yes, he helped Tony in his fucked-up and ass-backward kind of way, and yes he’s grateful for that, but first he had nearly taken everything from Clint. Phil, the Earth itself, Clint’s own mind…on his worst days he still wakes in panic, unsure if he truly belongs to himself, or if he might again be used as a tool to harm those he loves. He fucking hates Loki, may never forgive the fact that he’d taken away one of the only constants Clint has ever had in his weird and messed up life—his trust in himself.

But he’s also a parent now, in all the ways that matter anyway. He’s held Tony when he’s cried, fed him, chased away bad dreams and diaper rashes and hunted down lost toys and clothes, and the very thought of Tony ever being left to face the world alone in his little space makes Clint want to either throw up or kill someone. And Tony, at least, usually has some control over his headspace. Loki, apparently, has no choice about his own, may never have any choice in it, and even as angry and mistrustful as Clint feels toward the guy, he just doesn’t have it in him to be the one to argue they should turn him away. From the heavy blanket of silence that cloaks the room when Thor finishes speaking, neither does anyone else.

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“No, just leave the furniture disassembled for now until the painting is done, Thor. Trust me, it’ll be a lot easier that way. And Rogers, you have class in forty-five minutes. Out! I mean it!” Steve, who had in fact been in the middle of trying to sneak back into the bedroom they’re fashioning for Loki, stops in his tracks.

“Look, missing one day won’t be a big—”

“Yes it will,” Bruce, Thor, Bucky and Tony all snap back in stereo. Steve scowls. Easy for them to all say—Tony and Thor in particular have barely even slept since Thor arrived with Loki two days ago, desperately trying to get the room finished before Loki wakes from his enchanted nap. Tony has already missed some schedule little time, and he just popped what Steve’s pretty sure is his third Aspirin of the day, and Steve can miss his stupid class if he wants to damn it.

“Your poli-sci partner was already reluctant to get paired with you because she was afraid a superhero would be unreliable. Don’t prove her right.” This is news to Steve, and while he spares a moment to feel pretty sad and upset by that, another thought hits him a moment later and he wheels around to glare at Tony.

“How did you—”

“Hacked her phone,” Tony says cheerfully, not even stopping in the process of painting a baseboard.
“After I told him she seemed a bit weird and awkward around you,” Bucky adds with an entirely unapologetic grin.

“You two are unbelievable—Bucky, does that mean you’ve been following me?” The last two words come out as a bit of a shriek, but Steve is exhausted and grumpy and perpetually feeling like he’ll never catch up with his own life. Learning that two of his closest friends are apparently spying on him and his classmates is not welcome news. And the continued lack of shame or repentance from either of them is definitely not helping matters either.

“Sorta. Sometimes. But I don’t have to now, I can just walk you there all above board and everything. C’mon, punk, you got your bag?” Steve is still protesting even as he’s herded towards the elevator and then out of the Tower. It’s a beautiful day, so Bucky insists that they walk most of the way to campus even despite the fact that they’re immediately followed by the small group of paparazzi that is permanently parked around outside the Tower. Despite his frustration, Steve feels himself start to relax just a little as he breathes in the crisp air. He’s still worried about everything—school, the entire situation with Loki, the fact that Tony and Bruce are being weird around one another, plus he’s pretty sure something is going on between Nat, Phil and Clint, too, but the particular series of scents that is New York in the fall will never fail to be comforting regardless of the circumstances.

“This doesn’t mean I’m not pissed as hell at you, jerk,” he grumbles.

“Will it help if I pack you a lunch next time, like your Ma used to do?” Bucky jokes back, bumping his shoulder against Steve’s. Most of the team is pretty careful with physical intimacy outside of the tower, all too aware of the way the press gleefully twists even the most innocent situations. But Clint and Bucky seem to delight in stirring up those kinds of rumours just for the fun of it. Both men have been romantically linked to almost every member of the team at some point in the tabloids, and Steve is pretty sure there’s some kind of running tally going that will result in the winner being awarded… well, something ridiculous. Those two really are a dangerous combination.

“Yeah, actually. If you’re going to follow my ass around and make me think I’m losing it because I knew someone was following me damn it, that’s the least you can do; I’ll expect PB&J tomorrow,” he declares with a nod before making a right turn toward campus.

“Hill, I don’t know what you heard, but whatever it is, Thompson started it—” Clint has taken several steps into Maria’s office before it registers that the person sitting behind her desk is not Hill, but Natasha. By then, he’s already too late. A lock snicks behind him (Coulson’s doing, no one else moves that quietly in dress shoes) and he knows he’s not leaving this damn room until they permit it. So he accepts his fate bravely…well, bravely-ish, and sits down in the chair across from Natasha.

“We were interrupted the other day,” she says. “That won’t happen today unless the building is actually on fire, so I suggest you start talking.” Phil still doesn’t say anything, but he comes to stand behind Clint, closely enough that he can smell the man’s aftershave.

“We were interrupted the other day,” she says. “That won’t happen today unless the building is actually on fire, so I suggest you start talking.” Phil still doesn’t say anything, but he comes to stand behind Clint, closely enough that he can smell the man’s aftershave.

“ weren’t you like, my boss’s boss now? Don’t you have slightly better things to do?”

“I do,” she agrees. “And if you’re going to keep dancing around this then I have a whole pile of backlogged paperwork for you to work on in the meantime.” She gestures to a small mountain on the desk, and he winces as he recognizes a blood-stained sheet that’s definitely a piece of his incomplete After Action Report from Germany. That situation had not been his fault, damn it, that really had been Thompson and he’ll be damned if he goes down for it. Despite himself, the edges of genuine anger are creeping in; he’d always known Nat would be his boss one day, and she deserves the promotion, but it hadn’t really hit him until now that this would mean losing her as his constant
advocate and partner. Before it would have been Coulson or Hill chewing both of them out; now Nat is on the other side of the desk, and she has Phil as her ally, and he’d known he wouldn’t get away with lying about what’s been going on with him forever, but he did not imagine it going down like this.

“I didn’t waste time on that shit for Hill and I don’t plan on starting now just because it’s you,” he growls. Natasha’s expression betrays her surprise at the actual antagonism in his voice, and he feels her eyes sweeping his face. After a pause, she shoves the paperwork into a bag next to her.

“That was a low blow. This…this is an adjustment for me too, Clint, and I did not enjoy finding out that you’ve been keeping something from Phil and I during my first day here. Gonzalez wielded that knowledge like a weapon and he enjoyed my surprise and I do not like being surprised when it comes to you.” It’s not an apology, but it’s as close as Natasha is going to get in this environment, and he damn well knows it. So he can either throw away everything they’ve been working so hard to build over his ego and the difficulty of this transition, or he can let it go and try to talk to her. To them.

“I should probably first confess that Tony knows. Not,” he rushes to keep speaking, because he can practically feel Nat’s betrayal, and he wants to get past that as quickly as possible, “not because I trusted him more than you. It just, this whole thing came about because of him.”

“Tony asked you to request that you not be assigned any more long-term SHIELD missions?” Phil asks incredulously.

“No, just…ugh. Okay. You know he’s keeping an eye on that spider kid, right? The one in Queens?” Natasha nods, and Clint doesn’t need to see Phil to be sure he knew as well. “Kid’s uncle got murdered a short while back. Tony was right in the middle of that big product launch with SI, and fixing War Machine, and about a million other things, so I went to see him. He’s a Tony fanboy through and through so I was definitely a bit of a disappointment at first, but we got to talking and I…I think I really helped him.” It’s still hard for Clint, sometimes, to be vocal about when he thinks he’s done a good job. Not at shooting stuff or any of the other things typically required of him; he has no problem bragging about that kind of shit. But he’d spent so damn long thinking he was both stupid and terrible with people that confessing this to Nat and Phil feels incredibly difficult. His throat is dry and he nods in thanks when Coulson pours a glass of water from a pitcher on one of the office’s side tables and hands it to him. He’s a little less grateful when Coulson sits on the edge of the desk so that he, like Nat, can stare at him with eyes that see too damn much.

“I’m sure you did,” he says gently.

“I…he especially wanted advice about what to say to his aunt, because she doesn’t know yet about the whole spider deal. And I uh…it made me realize that as the only 100 percent human on the team now, I have a lot of experience with supporting people in these kinds of positions. I know what it would help their families or loved ones to hear because I know what it’s helped me to hear and understand about what you all go through. And—and, I think…well, I’ve gotten more confident with Tony. When he’s…not himself, I mean.” He’s not certain that Maria’s office isn’t still bugged even though Nat obviously has permission to use it right now, so he’s a little vague in his language, but both of them seem to understand. And again, they both nod immediately.

“You’re perfect with him, Clint. But I don’t…I’m having trouble seeing how all of this is related. Can you help me, please?” One of the things he loves best about Natasha is that when the pieces of what he wants to say get a little bit scrambled in his head, she never blames him or frames her inability to follow as his problem. A grateful tear pricks at the corner of his left eye, and he takes a steadying breath.
“I’m good at being…what I am to him, and I’m good at helping people like us. So lately I’ve been sort of focusing on that. Tony’s been helping me build a database—sorta like SHIELD’s, actually, but I’m a lot less interested in people’s powers than I am in…I dunno, what they might need. How we can try to make sure they get it. I really like doing it, and I think it makes a difference. The last time I was gone on a long-term op, I ended up missing a call from a parent of an Inhuman who really needed some support. When I realized that I wished I had been there on the other end of the phone more than on that op, I put in the request for short-term missions only.” He finally gets brave enough to meet Natasha’s eyes again. “I don’t want to quit SHIELD, or the Avengers or any of that. I just…need something more, too.” He flicks his gaze to Phil, the man who had brought him in, had taken over handling him when everyone else had given Clint up as a bad cause. “Is that okay?” When Phil speaks, it’s in a rough, gravelly tone, and he’s addressing Natasha, not Clint himself.

“You’re positive that all of the surveillance equipment—”

“Yes.”

“I’m not happy you didn’t see fit to tell us this, Clint. But I’m so unbelievably proud of you right now that I can hardly think for how badly I want to get down on my knees and suck you off right here. That alright with you, Agent?” Despite Clint’s best efforts, Coulson has maintained a strict no-touching policy at SHIELD through the entire course of their relationship. Though he still teases occasionally, he’d long since given up on actually talking Phil into anything more salacious than a brief hand-squeeze in medical or an ‘accidental’ brush against one another in the hallways. It’s every filthy fantasy Clint has ever had come to life, and he can’t manage any response at all beyond a tight nod.

Phil’s mouth feels particularly hot and wet and all-encompassing today, and god the sight of him kneeling in his fancy fucking suit on Maria’s floor, it’s too much too fast. His hips buck, completely out of his control, and he winces as he hits the back of Phil’s throat and makes the other man sputter.

“I’m sorry. Sorry, Phil.” Coulson just rubs a comforting hand across his thigh and goes back to trying to suck Clint’s entire life-force out through his cock, and when he feels Tasha’s mouth against his ear, he thinks he honestly might die.

“Nat—”

“Shh. Stay nice and still for him. Christ but you two look good like this.” They’re both indulging him, Nat with his fondness for the way dirty-talk sounds in her sultry whisper and Phil with the way he’s letting the blowjob be messy and noisy and completely undignified. The combination is deadly; his dick hasn’t even had time to harden all the way yet and Clint’s still scared he might come at any second.

“Gotta—slow—” If anything, Coulson’s mouth becomes all the more insistent, and Natasha lifts the back of his shirt to scrape her nails up his spine.

“No. Not slow. So fast and hard you can’t think of anything but us. I’d keep you like this all the time if I could, you know. You’re so fucking pretty, the both of you, I just want to take you over. I want all of you, the whole team, I want to see you like this with Tony, and Bruce and—want—fuck, Clint, fuck.” He dimly registers her moving against the chair behind him, and shudders when he realizes with a start that she’s slid a hand up her skirt to touch herself. Phil looks up, too, and moans low in his throat. The sensation of that is enough to make Clint have to bite his lip to avoid all-out screaming.

“I can’t—I can’t—” He’s done all kinds of fucking—the ‘we nearly died and our adrenaline’s still up’ variety, the soft and caring kinds, the rough and often highly kinky sex they use to chase their
demons away when one of them wakes up sweating or screaming at night, Clint’s done it all. And
then some. But he’s never felt so utterly out of control as he does now. It would be more than a little
frightening if not for Coulson’s steady grip on his thighs and Tasha’s lips at his neck.

“You can. You’re ours, and we have you. I’m never letting either of you go again, I don’t care what
I have to do. I want to see you come apart like this, for me, for us.” Now that his throat is a little
more warmed up, Coulson moves his hands up to Clint’s hips to encourage him to move, to fuck his
mouth. When Clint stays still, scared it might be too much, that he might totally lose himself and
actually harm Phil, Nat nips hard at the side of his neck. “Do it. He wants you to. I’ll never let you
hurt him, you know that.” With those words and a wicked little twist of Coulson’s tongue over the
head of his cock, Clint is lost. He allows his hips to start pistoning as quickly as they want, fucking
Phil’s mouth with the kind of abandon that he hasn’t managed since before New York. He’s
muttering a stream of utter nonsense, his lover’s names and curses in multiple languages and pleas for
more, or for less, or to come, he doesn’t even know anymore. All he knows is Phil’s mouth and
Nat’s hot, possessive voice in his ear, and when he does come he’s pretty sure he’s crying and he
can’t even bring himself to wipe the tears away.

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Per his agreement with the team (well, agreement might be overselling it; he’d wheedled and
harassed and argued this to death, and the majority of them still aren’t happy and Bucky is probably
creeping right outside the door), Tony is alone with Loki when he comes to the following day. The
other man is in his new bed—well, it’s technically a crib, because Thor’s worried that all the magic
that was performed on Loki might affect his balance and lead him to fall out of bed, but they haven’t
put the rails up yet for fear of scaring him. So right now it’s just a particularly low-lying bed, and
Loki’s curled up in it. There are two lines going into his arm, one providing him with a saline
solution and another with the kind of nutritional formula that Bruce still threatens Tony with
sometimes when he neglects eating, but other than that he looks mostly peaceful. Certainly moreso
than Tony has ever seen him.

All of that changes when Loki wakes As soon as he starts to twitch, Tony is kneeling beside the bed,
speaking as softly as he can manage and reassuring Loki of where is, that he isn’t alone. That no one
wants to hurt him. But as soon as his eyes open and lock on Tony’s, Loki opens his mouth and
screams, so long and so loudly that Tony thinks it might never stop. And then Loki starts to cry.

Chapter End Notes

ETA: The version I posted this morning for some reason ended up skipping a brief
section. I didn't want to delete and repost the chapter entirely since there were already
comments, but if you have read the chapter and felt something was weird and didn't
make sense (specifically, the section where Tony leaves to get changed and then Thor
begins speaking) that's why. It's fixed now; sorry for the error!

*hides behind hands* Eek. I hope you liked it!

And thanks for your amazing and supportive response to the last chapter. It definitely
helped get me past my fear of writing (a) smut, and (b) Loki, both of which are pretty
new to me as a writer.
Imposters and Other Syndromes

Chapter Summary

Loki struggles to adjust to his new life, while Tony and the rest of the team face some growing pains of their own.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: Brief and vague-ish mention of Loki's treatment while in Asgard. Tony also drinks in this chapter; he doesn't view it as a relapse, and he's able to stop when he wants to, but the reasons behind it aren't great either. (Namely, he feels pressured to drink in public at SI-related events.) As always, if you want more information or a redacted version of the chapter, just let me know.

Finally, Jane arrives in this chapter. If you want more context about her role in this verse, I'd suggest checking out the Timestamp I posted earlier this week, Coffee Dates and Other Mysteries,

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay, shh, you’re alright, it’s okay.” Loki is plainly terrified beyond all reason, and Tony’s pretty sure the other man can’t even really hear what he’s saying, but he has to say something, dammit, and what else is there right now? He can’t take back what’s been done to Loki, or make promises about the future when he has no idea what it holds. Thor’ll be here in a matter of minutes, they’ll be lucky if JARVIS can hold him off one second past their agreed upon fifteen minutes, and if nothing else, Tony would like to have Loki in slightly better shape for when his brother arrives. But he’s realizing now that may have been a pipe dream.

Then his eyes lock on an object in the corner of the room; it’s still stuffed in the closet, because they hadn’t wanted to make Loki’s room too babyish without first getting a sense of exactly where the headspace that has been forced upon him is going to take him. But even when he’s Big, Tony still finds himself yearning for Sanders sometimes, and so maybe something soft and huggable will help Loki in slightly better shape for when his brother arrives. But he’s realizing now that may have been a pipe dream.

He retrieves the stuffed cat (orange and wearing a green bowtie) and sets it down cautiously next to Loki. For a long moment, Loki just stares back at the stuffie, and Tony considers that perhaps they don’t even have stuffed animals on Asgard, maybe that’s not a thing. Whether it’s a familiar practice or not, though, the cat apparently looks touchable enough that Loki can’t resist reaching out and giving it a little poke. When the fabric squashes underneath his finger, he places his whole hand on it, letting the animal’s fur rub between his fingers and against his palm.

The crying doesn’t stop, not by a long shot, but by the time Thor joins them it’s not the painful-sounding sobs of before. The blonde leans down and cautiously runs his fingers through Loki’s hair; it’s cropped shorter than before, because it had been matted and tangled beyond repair when they’d arrived, but Loki still leans into the touch with something that seems like pleasure. Thor smiles sadly
at him, and picks up the stuffed cat.

“Do you like her? Friend Tony selected her for you.” He holds the animal out for Loki to take, and his brother does lift an arm as if to do so, but then becomes distracted by the IVs going into his wrist. He starts crying again in earnest and trying to pull at the lines. “No, no brother, you must leave those be for now. I promise they are not being used to harm you.” Loki still won’t stop trying to get at the tubes, so Thor eventually lifts him right up and into his arms. “I know you are frightened, Loki, and I do not blame you. What has been done to you is not just, and I regret every day that I did not find a way to prevent it. But I am here, and I will care for you if you permit it. My team is here, and they will help us in any way they can, for they are kind and generous and brave. You are not alone.”

After working so hard to make this space comfortable for Loki, and then fighting even harder to be the one who was with him when he woke, there’s also something utterly terrifying about just watching the other man like this. Without the distraction of trying to calm him, Tony can just take in the fact of what’s happened to Loki, about how much and how little he resembles Tony in his headspace just now, and how painful and strange and terrifying that resemblance is when he knows Loki had no choice in the matter.

He can’t watch anymore. He almost stumbles right into the hall, where he finds someone waiting outside the door, just as he suspected. The only thing is that it’s not Bucky he runs right into, it’s Bruce.

“Woah, hey, you alright?” His head is aching (again), and things have been weird with Bruce since Tony had skipped out on him the morning after their date because Tony is a weirdo who doesn’t know how to handle people being nice to him, and the last thing he needs right now after witnessing what’s happened with Loki is this.

“I’m fine. I have a—a thing. I won’t be home for dinner, tell the others? It’s a charity thing I promised Pepper I’d put in an appearance at weeks ago and then forgot about.” The best part is this isn’t actually a lie; JARVIS had reminded him of the event just this morning and he’d had every intention of pretending not to have heard it, but it gives him an excuse to be out of the Tower, and maybe have a drink or several. The fact that it isn’t a lie does not, however, stop Bruce’s eyes from narrowing.

“Tony—”

“Gotta go, Brucey Bear. Don’t wait up for me.”
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He makes it exactly two hours in to the gala before Pepper corners him. He has no idea why, honestly; he’s only had two drinks (his tolerance is shot to shit after so many months of no booze at all), and he’s been perfectly polite to the donors they’re courting for the Maria Stark Foundation’s latest project (an after school coding course for inner city high schools), and he even danced with several of the more handsy ones. So he’s legitimately confused when Pepper grabs him by the elbow citing urgent SI business and steers him away into a corner.

“What’s wrong with you?” she demands. It actually kind of hurts, he finds; he used to make Pepper mad as a kind of sport, but especially in the wake of their break-up he’s worked as hard as he can to reestablish both their friendship and a healthy working relationship. He tries to be where he’s told her he’ll be at least eighty percent of the time, and to not say anything outrageous when he’s there, and it’s been hard but it’s been working. Or at least he thought it had been.

“I—you told me to be here, did you not, Ms. Potts?” Her nose wrinkles in distaste at the formality, which he does not deliver in the teasing way they usually do when they address each other like that.
“I know I did, and thank you for showing up, but what’s…you’re not you. You’re drinking for one thing, and I know damn well that you haven’t done that for like a year, and—”

“Social drinking, Pep. These people expect me to drink, and it’ll call too much attention to the fact that I’m not if I turn it down every time. I’ve had two whiskeys, one of them pretty watered down, and I don’t plan to have more. I just didn’t want to be asked a hundred questions about my sobriety when I left tonight. Plus there’s still that weird association people have between genius and various kinds of addictions; if they think I’ve gone totally straight the stocks will drop.” She rolls her eyes in distaste but doesn’t argue the point either, because it’s ridiculous but true.

“Okay, fine, but you’re letting Melissa Delaney feel you up, and you didn’t bring anyone from the team with you, and—and that stupid cardboard smile, Tony, I know when you’re being fake.” He could deny it, use the last remnants of post-breakup discomfort to try to make Pepper doubt what she’s seeing and how much she still knows about Tony. But the thought of it makes everything inside him twist and crawl in discomfort. So he says nothing at all. “You don’t have to stay, you’ve more than put in your time,” she offers, putting a hand on his arm. He’s not ready to go home yet, and not willing to tell her that because Pepper will kill first and ask questions later if she thinks the team is upsetting him in any way. He shakes his head. “Then how about you dance with me for a couple songs, huh?”

“Well I don’t know, are you wearing deodorant this time?” he teases. Pepper laughs and hits him on the arm before leading him onto the dance floor. It’s not how he’d imagined it back then; he’s holding her close but not cheek-to-cheek, whispering joking commentary about other party-goers rather than borderline obscene promises about what he’s going to do once they leave. But she is still warm and solid and Pepper, and for a while having one of his oldest and closest friends so close is enough to make the rest of the mess that is his life seem a little less daunting.

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When he gets back home, it’s to find the lights all on in the penthouse living room and Steve curled up on the couch. There’s a huge and heavy-looking textbook in his lap, which Cap is dutifully highlighting…almost every word of, from the huge splotch of bright yellow that Tony can easily see from across the room. Steve’s concentration is just as complete as it is during the heat of battle; he doesn’t even look up until Tony’s right in front of him; then he lays the book down in his lap with a tired smile.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself. It’s three in the morning, you know college guys are still allowed to sleep, right?” Steve cocks a brow at the sheer hypocrisy of Tony harassing anyone else about their sleep patterns, but he still readily moves a clipboard and a pencil case and a pile of index cards so that Tony can sit next to him on the couch. (Not touching, because Bruce is right, he still struggles with that when he’s Big, but closer than he would normally dare, either.)

“It’s just…it’s hard to study on campus sometimes, because I tend to attract crowds. And Loki’s still alternating between crying and screaming his lungs out, and I can’t listen to that and not try to help Thor, so I’m not getting as much done during the days as I should. So that leaves the coveted three a.m. slot; worked out fine tonight anyway, the team wanted someone waiting up for you, and since I was workin’ anyway…how was the gala? Clint’s pissed he didn’t get to go, by the way, he loves the caterer you usually use.” It’s with a pang of guilt that Tony remembers he did promise Clint could be his date to the next event, but he uses the Extremis hub in his mind to place an order for delivery of the little Greek mini-burgers that Clint loves the next day, and assumes that’ll get him out of the worst of the trouble. While he’s at it, he puts out a request to one of the Tower’s preferred contractors to come in and give him a quote on creating soundproofed room on Steve’s floor so that he can study
in peace. “Tony?” He blinks. Sometimes the sheer speed and volume of information accessible to him at all times via Extremis is...well, a lot. Tony’s temple throbs, and he tries to remember how many over the counter pain meds he’s already used today. No, too risky with Steve right here, regardless of whether he’s under the maximum dosage or not.

“Sorry. It was fine. Got to spend more time with Pep than I have in weeks, which is ridiculous given that we technically work for the same damn company, but there you go. I don’t feel that tired, though. Mind if I keep you company while you work?” Steve’s still frowning like he’s trying to puzzle out what’s going on in Tony’s head, and that is never not a dangerous thing; the guy might not be as skilled at reading people as the likes of Clint or Phil or Natasha, but he is doggedly persistent when he thinks there’s something he’s missing. Tony rises to his feet, removes his shoes, and then pads to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

When he gets back to the living room with a cup for each of them, it’s to find Steve frowning dejectedly at his highlighter, which is (kind of unsurprisingly) empty.

“Can—will it bug you if I give you a suggestion?” Steve still feels weird and self-conscious about his education level compared to most of them in the tower (despite repeated assurances that he’s a goddamn genius in all the ways that matter), so Tony’s a little more hesitant than he would normally be to offer advice. But tonight Steve just caps his highlighter and nods. “You don’t have to highlight everything. You want to use that to draw attention to the most important ideas.”

“But they all seem important,” Steve sighs. “I don’t know how to tell anymore.”

“Hey, that’s fine. This is a different kind of writing than you’re used to, Steve, it’s going to take some time. But okay look here; this part is mainly a discussion of this person’s methodology, which is like how they performed their research. It’s good information to have, because sometimes people’s methods are really fucked. Like Hammer. There’s a reason Justin Hammer never publishes. But for the most part if this is being assigned to you in a University class, the methods are solid and you don’t need to spend a ton of time trying to memorize every detail about how they conducted the study. But the discussion section right here below it, that’s probably gonna matter a lot, because that’s usually where they’re going to answer the ‘so what’ question and tell you pretty explicitly what the results of their research mean and why they matter.” Steve nods, and the room is quiet for a while as he scans the section Tony’s just pointed to.

“And you just...knew how to do this?”

“I mean, by the time I got to university yes, but only because my Dad was Howard Stark and I pretty much skipped right from picture books to academic articles. Believe it or not Steve most people there in your classes are a lot like you, trying hard to figure this shit out and struggling sometimes but too afraid to show it or ask questions because they think they’re the only ones who don’t understand. There’s a term for it, actually, it’s called imposter syndrome. It means that everyone there thinks that they’re secretly not smart enough to be there and any moment they’re going to be found out.” The flush that spreads across Steve’s cheeks is the only acknowledgement Tony gets, or needs, that this description is an accurate representation of how the blonde has been feeling lately. “You’re not an imposter, Steve. You’re working with a seventy year communication barrier, and some of the details about how school works have changed, but you work harder at everything you do than anyone I’ve ever met.” Steve just looks at him for the longest time after that—like Tony is something immeasurably precious, like he matters so damn much, and he’s sort of used to that look when he’s little but when he’s Big it’s all Tony can do to stop himself from making a shitty excuse and getting the hell out of the room. But after a long time, Steve just goes back to his notes, and Tony starts to relax next to him. He’s pretty close to drifting off, actually, when Steve stands, jostling the couch cushions. A moment later, a blanket is pulled across Tony and up under his shoulders.
“But we’re pullin’ an all-nighter. I’m good at all-nighters, ask Rhodey. I think we spent more of time at MIT awake than anything else, especially once I perfected my own formula for an energy drink.”

“That…sounds terrifying,” Steve comments. “Go to sleep.”

“Wanna help. You’ve been all stressed and pinched and not Steve-like. Don’t like it.”

“You’ve already given me help I didn’t even know I needed. Go to sleep, sweetheart.” It’s the first time Steve’s ever called him that outside of their ageplay. It should probably feel weird, but whether it’s because Tony’s eyes are slamming shut of their own accord, or because nothing could possibly sound weird or wrong when Steve says it in that particular tone, all he manages to feel is warm contentment as he drifts off to the sound of Steve’s pen scratching across looseleaf.

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Bruce has cultivated an almost endless well of patience as part of his efforts to control the Hulk, but even he’s starting to run low. Loki has been crying and screaming for three days straight now, and he’s happy to help Thor, he really is because he meant what he said all those months ago about wanting the man to just be able to be here with them, but the combination of Loki’s continued distress and Bruce’s own unresolved issues with Tony that are weighing on him has him feeling pretty damn beaten down.

Salvation arrives in the tiny but emphatically strong form of one Jane Foster. Steve had finally convinced Thor to ask her to come out several days ago, and Tony had chartered a private plane to ensure her speedy arrival. The second she steps foot in the Tower, wearing plaid and worn jeans and a tired but warm smile, Thor instantly appears calmer than he has in days. He rises to his feet, balancing Loki on his hip, and presses a kiss to the top of her head.

“My love. You are kind to have come.”

“You should have called me sooner,” she chides. “I know we’re trying to make sure we each have some autonomy, and I appreciate that, but this is absolutely one of those situations where you call me, okay?” Her voice is somehow soft but extremely firm, and after a moment Bruce realizes that he shouldn’t have been able to hear it over the racket that Loki is making. But Loki has stopped crying, or making any noise at all. He’s clutching his stuffed cat with one arm, and staring up at Jane with wide, wet eyes. She brushes her long dark hair out of her face so she can look back clearly and smiles. “Hello Loki.”

Bruce has no desire to reduce a woman as brilliant and dynamic as Jane Foster to her gender, but his surprise gives way almost immediately to understanding. Loki has historically had much better relationships with the women in his life than the men; of course there’s something appealing and comforting to him about Jane. (He’d probably respond the same way to Natasha had their past interactions not been so vicious.)

“Hi.” Well, that answers one of the questions Bruce has been trying to answer for days: Loki does still have some verbal capabilities left. Jane looks just as surprised as any of them to have received a response, but she moves past it quickly.

“How are you feeling? I know you’ve had a rough time of it lately.” Loki shrugs, and brings his cat up so that the stuffed animal is covering most of his face. “That’s a really nice cat, does it have a name?”

“She,” Loki replies.

“She,” Jane echoes kindly. “Does she have a name?” Loki shakes his head. “Mmm, what about
pumpkin?” He wrinkles his nose. “Ginger?” Another head shake. “Aslan?” Bruce is pretty sure Loki doesn’t actually get the reference being made there, but it’s appropriate given the stuffed animal’s little mane. He gives her a shaky little smile and nods anyway. “Alright, Aslan it is then. Now can you and Aslan sit with me and Thor and Bruce and try to have something to eat and drink? You’ve been getting fed through tubes for a while now and that’s just not the same, is it?”

“I can prepare Pop Tarts!” Thor booms, clearly ecstatic to be seeing any progress in Loki at all. Jane smiles and leans up to press a kiss to his lips.

“Maybe in a few days, but he should probably have something a little blander for right now, okay? His stomach hasn’t had food in quite a while and may not respond well to anything rich or full of sugar.”

“There should be some frozen homemade chicken stock in the freezer,” Bruce offers. “Clint’s recently re-discovered the Crock Pot so we’ve been having a lot of big batches lately.” Jane smiles her thanks and proceeds to move through the kitchen with the ease of someone who knows how to adapt to new surroundings on the fly; all three men watch (Jane having turned down multiple offers of assistance), and before Loki even has a chance to get worked up at her absence, Jane is placing several bowls of soup and a huge selection of crackers (she does know Thor well then) on the kitchen table.

Ignoring her own for now, Jane comes to a kneeling position on the floor in front of Loki and holds out a spoonful of soup. He flinches.

“What—”

“Loki was exposed to…extreme temperatures, particularly heat, during his captivity,” Thor says mournfully. For a moment the look of rage that crosses Jane’s face is terrifying, and Bruce thanks every deity he can think of that he’s never managed to piss her off. But when she turns back to Loki, her expression betrays nothing but kindness.

“That’s okay, honey, I don’t like it when things are too hot either. Has anyone ever blown on your soup for you to cool it down?” Loki blinks. “No? That’s okay, I’ll show you, see?” She exhales several puffs of air over the soup, enough that steam stops rising from it, then holds it out to Loki again. “Want to give it a try now?

Cautiously, Loki leans forward and darts his tongue out toward the spoon. He ends up wearing more of the soup than he actually gets in his mouth (the doctor in Bruce can’t help but wonder if that’s just exhaustion and the remnants of trauma or his balance and depth perception being affected by the magic that was performed on him). But he smiles weakly at Jane when he realizes it’s a safe and edible temperature, and he readily opens his mouth for the next spoonful.

“Dig in boys,” Jane invites the two men; both he and Thor, Bruce realizes, are still just standing there staring at her. “And then I think you should go get some rest, Bruce. You look beat, and Thor and I can take things from here, at least for now.” He opens his mouth to protest, and she holds up a hand. “I know there are tests you want to run on him sooner rather than later, but if we rush to that too fast he’ll just be terrified again. We can try it tomorrow.” It shouldn’t surprise Bruce, really, how easily and competently he’s being manipulated; all the women in their lives are forces of nature in their own ways. But he still has a slightly disbelieving smile on his face when he wanders over to the elevator with a full stomach. But he doesn’t want to follow her directions entirely, he realizes once he steps inside. He doesn’t want to sleep yet, he wants—

“Hey JARVIS, is Tony in the middle of anything critical?”
“Not at the moment, Sir. He is in the penthouse, preparing a collection of study-aids for Captain Rogers.” Of course he is, Bruce thinks with a fond smile. He doesn’t know, and doesn’t ask, if JARVIS prepares Tony for his arrival or not, but whatever the case, the other man does not look entirely surprised to see him. Bruce doesn’t draw matters out any further.

“Is now an okay time to talk? About the other night?”

“Uh—yeah, of course.” After agreeing, Tony stands frozen for a long moment with his hand over a large stack of papers.

“Tony?”

“Right. Sorry. Uh, living room. Let’s. Yeah.” It takes them ages to get settled, because they’re dancing a bit awkwardly around each other; Bruce doesn’t want to be touching Tony if the other man doesn’t wish it, but nor does he want to settle himself across the room and create further distance between them. He settles for perching on the armchair beside the couch.

“I should apologize for the other night,” Bruce begins. Tony frowns and opens his mouth to speak. “No, I need to go first, okay, then you can say anything you need to. When you and I talk over each other we just argue in circles. I’m sorry that I didn’t provide you with aftercare. I knew this was something new and difficult for you, and I shouldn’t have just gone to sleep and assumed everything was fine. That’s on me.”

“I don’t—I didn’t need aftercare,” Tony says, spitting the last word like it’s something dirty or shameful. Bruce bites back a sigh. They’ve never totally dealt with Tony’s weird feelings on this topic, he realizes; even after age play Tony’s tendency is still to immediately hide himself away in the shop or somewhere else private. None of the rest of them particularly like it but there’s always seemed like bigger things to work on.

“I think you did, and you do,” Bruce replies calmly. “I know some people don’t, and I’m not trying to be condescending or tell you your business, Tony, but I think if you didn’t need some form of support from me that night you wouldn’t have been so upset that you reverted to headspace without even meaning to and then spent the entire day in acute distress.” There’s no reply from the man beside him, which is as good as admission of truth. “I’m sorry I didn’t give you what you needed.”

“That’s just it, I don’t—I don’t want to need so fucking much from you all, all the time!” Tony shouts suddenly. He gets to his feet and starts pacing. “It’s too much, you make me need you for so much and I can’t, this isn’t, I can just barely deal with how much I rely on you when I’m little. I don’t know how to—how to flay myself open like that for you in this context too. It’s too much.” Tony lifts a hand to rub at his temple and something about the gesture pings for Bruce, makes him uneasy, but he puts it down to the protectiveness he’s already feeling toward his friend and baby and partner.

“We need you that much too, Tony.” This earns Bruce a venomous glare. “I know that it’s in different ways than you need us sometimes, but I swear that it’s true. You don’t see how edgy and moody we get when you’re working to a deadline or otherwise occupied and we can’t ageplay when we’re supposed to. You don’t realize how much I can’t get you out of my head when you’re Big—I pushed everyone away before you, for fear of the Hulk and what he could do, but I have never even tried to do that with you, not since the first day we met. I need you too, all the parts of you I can have in any way I can have them, and I am one hundred percent certain the others feel the same way. You are not the only one who needs things in this relationship, and letting us give you aftercare when you’ve just done things that are new or difficult does not change that.”

“Yes, I want to keep seeing you, and touching you, and being your Papa and your friend and anything else you
want. Do you want those things with me?”

“Yes.” The word comes out in a broken whisper that makes Tony suddenly sound like he’s run several miles or screamed himself hoarse.

“Good. Now what do you say to watching some TV and cuddling on the couch for a bit?”

“Depends. Any chance of making out?” Tony asks with a hint of a smile.

“When it comes to you, Stark, I can usually be persuaded.”

Chapter End Notes

What did you think? Writing the sequel has thus far been such a different beast in some ways than (That Would Be) Enough that I'm especially interested in your feedback. Let me know what you liked, what you're excited for, any questions you have, whatever you want! I love talking about my writing, and as those of you who were around for Part One know, those conversations often end up shaping later chapters.

And speaking of which, thank you for the comments and kudos on last chapter!
Bleeding Edges and Other Extremes

Chapter Summary

Tony, Loki and a somewhat jealous Big Brother Bucky play together for the first time. The side-effects Tony’s been struggling with for weeks come to a head after a particularly intense week.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is being posted a little late today. I have my usual Fall flu (going back to school flu is definitely not just for young kids, Universities are so germy at this time of year!)

No content notes I can think of here, except that little Bucky struggles with some jealousy and anxiety about being replaced by Loki. As always, please let me know if you feel I’ve missed something that should have been tagged.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jane’s near-magic hold on Loki continues through to lunch, and after he eats and drinks, she helps Thor clean him up and get him settled back in his room for a nap. In no time, he’s fast asleep, curled around his cat and a soft yellow blanket. For a long time, Thor just watches him, feelings continuing to battle one another; it’s among his most cherished wishes to have his brother here, safe and cared for and accepting of that attention. It’s all he’s ever wanted, especially since he was old and wise enough to see past his own arrogant lust for power. But it’s also nothing that Thor has ever wanted to see Loki forced here, wounded and frightened and with so many choices taken away from him, perhaps forever. Even Jane’s small, strong hand on his shoulder can only bring so much comfort.

“I know there are tests you and Friend Bruce wish to perform, but what…what think you, of him? Is he—” Even with the aid of Allspeak, Thor can’t quite find the words for what he wants to ask. Maybe they do not exist, or perhaps he himself is too cowardly to speak them.

“I don’t know how hurt he is, Thor, and I don’t want to error on either side by upsetting you with the worst options or getting your hopes up with the best. But from the little I could tell this afternoon, he has the potential to be things I’ve never seen from him before—sweet and shy and trusting. He certainly does seem young. I’m hesitant to guess at age this quickly, but I can’t see him mentally averaging out to more than about five.” Not much older than Friend Tony had been, then, when Loki’s magic had originally worked on him. Despite their very real differences, it’s so easy to compare the two, to see the adult Tony’s fear of abandonment behind Loki’s wide, fearful eyes and his Youngling’s desire for affection and reassurance echoed in the way his brother sometimes grips Thor’s hands or clothes with all the strength he has.

“Believe you that I…that I can aid him, Jane? I do not wish for my own hubris to hinder his recovery.” Jane, wonderful Jane, does not rush immediately to assure him that his suspicions about himself are incorrect. She considers the question at length, applying all the force of her magnificent
mind and considering all possible responses.

“I…I’m tempted to say yes. I’ve seen the general impact your ageplay has had on Tony, and even though these are different circumstances, I think it’s possible that you all are the only ones who can help Loki. But it might help me to see you all together, to watch you with Tony when he’s being…”

“Little,” Thor supplies.

“Little. Right. It would help me to see that so that I can give you more concrete ideas about how helping Loki is likely to be different and similar. Is that something you think you can share with me?” Thor’s own mind is nothing like Jane’s, but he still tries to give her question the same degree of consideration she gave his.

“I believe so. I myself would enjoy your company, and while I would have to confirm with the rest of our team, they are already aware that you know of our play. I do not think they would be upset for you to witness it.”

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Over the following days, things slowly begin to settle in the Tower. All of Avengers (excepting Phil and Clint, who are currently avoiding much direct interaction with the man for all of their sakes) still devote time to helping Thor and Jane with Loki, but otherwise everyone sinks back into their usual routines; Steve goes to school and trains with the team; Bucky continues the endless process of physio and therapy; Bruce and Tony spend time in their respective labs, while the others go to SHIELD. It should feel like a relief, to be sinking back into something resembling their lives before Loki had entered them, but there’s a pervasive sense of unease Clint just can’t shake.

The prospect of his baby being within 100 yards of Loki, this time on purpose, does not put any of these feelings at ease. He gets it, he understands the logic behind Jane’s request to see them with Tony before she makes any recommendations about how they should proceed with Loki. And from all accounts, the man couldn’t harm Tony or anyone else even if he wanted to, not in his current state. None of this means that Clint’s hands aren’t clenched into fists when he travels down to the workshop to retrieve Tony.

They’ve skipped a couple of weeks of Tony’s regular ageplay now, so this isn’t a trip he’d expected to have to make at all; usually by this point Tony would already be upstairs, trying and failing to mask his eagerness to get started. But he’s been down in the shop a lot lately, and while no one can really argue with Tony using this bit of downtime between potentially world-ending emergencies to upgrade everyone’s suits, the fact that Clint is having to retrieve him puts even more of his overtrained senses on high alert.

Beyond the fact that the man is popping some kind of pill and dry swallowing it (eugh) when Clint arrives, though, nothing seems amiss. For a moment he just watches his friend boss around his bots and make adjustments on both the digital models and analogue Widow’s Bites in front of him. With the Extremis in his system, Tony’s monologues are even harder to follow than ever, because half the time he’s speaking in straight-up computer code, but Clint’s inability to follow doesn’t make watching the process any less remarkable. Finally, though, Tony comes to a natural break in the process and Clint can’t really justify putting things off any longer.

“Hey babe. You ready to come up?” There’s a moment of hesitation then, where Tony’s eyes dart around the familiar room as if to comfort and reassure himself. “We don’t have to do this Tones. If you’re not ready to be around Loki when you’re little then we can spend some time together separately, or—” But Tony is already shutting down the shop in a whirl of activity and brushing past Clint toward the elevator.
The anxious weight in the pit of Clint’s stomach grows heavier as he follows, and some part of him almost expects Tony to make a break back for the shop. But he doesn’t; he even slips his smaller hand into Clint’s calloused one as they walk down the hallway to the bedroom, the voluntary contact a sure sign that he’s starting to come down at least a little. And he consents to being diapered and dressed by Clint in a new Halloween onesie patterned with pumpkins with relatively good grace, even if he’s a little quieter than normal during the process. Still, Clint can’t help but put off the inevitable for a few minutes.

“Wanna sit in here and cuddle with Daddy for a couple minutes before we go see everybody?” he offers. Immediately, Tony makes a quiet noise of agreement and rolls over and up onto his knees to crawl into Clint’s waiting arms. The relief of feeling a lapful of warm, soft baby hits Clint unexpectedly hard, and it’s with a distinctly sappy smile that he kisses Tony’s hair. For several glorious minutes they just sit there on Tony’s bed together, Clint rocking them both slightly and rubbing absent little patterns against the soft fabric of Tony’s new outfit. The baby makes his little purring noises on and off, and Clint wishes fiercely that they could stay this way tonight. But people are counting on them, so he nudges Tony’s shoulder and murmurs, “Hey munchkin. How you been doin’?”

When Tony is kind of in-between headspaces like this is that it’s sometimes possible to watch his little self’s desire to please his caretakers and conform to their house rules by being honest war with his far more adult impulses to lie or minimize his own feelings. That struggle is particularly visible today, Tony squinting at the effort of trying to decide what expressions to allow to play out on his face. “Bud? Somethin’ you wanna tell me?”

“’m fine Daddy. Jus’ tired.” He’s entirely ready to call Tony on the lie. Clint isn’t always the one to push matters like this; sometimes he still leaves those conversations up to Steve or Phil, both of whom tend to handle it better when they become the source of Tony’s anger or frustration. But the last damn thing tonight needs is another variable at play that no one, apparently, knows anything about except Tony himself. Of course, Thor chooses that moment to knock on the door, smiling in apology when he steps into the bedroom and catches the annoyance that must come through in Clint’s expression.

“I apologize my friend. I just wished to ensure that all was well with our Youngling.” Tony is already squirming in Clint’s arms, either eager to avoid the conversation or just happy to see Thor (likely both), and Clint knows damn well the moment is gone. And maybe it’s just nerves anyway. Maybe he’ll get Tony out there and everything will be fine and he’ll feel stupid for worrying about any of this in the first place.

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As Thor carries him from the bedroom to the living room on his back, Tony’s fear of being found out by Daddy Clint slowly starts to morph into something else: terror about actually being little in front of Loki. He’d talked a good game when the others had come to him the idea, brushing away their concerns about him feeling shy or uncomfortable playing with their former enemy there. Because Loki needs this, has needed it since he apparently saw that desire reflected in Tony himself, and Tony can almost feel Thor’s desperation for this to work. So he just can’t bring himself to disappoint either of them.

But what if Loki thinks Tony’s toys are silly? What if Jane laughs at how Tony can’t always get his words to come out right when he’s small? Even worse, what if Thor and everyone else forgets entirely about Tony? After all, Loki actually has a reason to be little, he’s not like Tony who just needs this sometimes for no reason other than the fact that it makes some of his broken parts feel like in they’re in fewer pieces. A small whimper escapes him as he considers this prospect; Thor, of course, hears it, because Tony is both lucky and unlucky enough to be constantly surrounded by
physically gifted people.

“Hush, Youngling. All is well. You have no need to be frightened, and you have your word to tell us if you require a break or halt, yes?” Tony nods. “I apologize, little one, but I would like to hear your voice on this occasion. Can you tell me your word?”

“Suit,” he whispers. At this, he expects to be thrown to the wolves, as it is, but Thor doesn’t set him down on the playmat where Jane and Loki are settled, playing with what looks to be a set of soft cloth blocks. Instead, Tony is settled on the couch between Steve and Phil.

“Hey sweetheart,” Steve greets, with the same big wide smile he always has for Tony. That in and of itself is enough to make the snakes squirming around in his tummy calm a little bit. “Your new PJs look pretty cute. Are you nice and cozy?” He nods, fighting the urge to stick his thumb in his mouth (partly to avoid talking, and partly because it’s comforting and he feels too shy to ask for his paci in front of Loki and Jane). “That’s good baby. Did you eat anything downstairs, or should I make you up a plate of something?”

“Ate.” Tony hates lying to his Dada. It makes his stomach go from swirling to actually aching almost instantly. But if he says he didn’t eat then Steve will want to know why and Tony doesn’t want to talk about his stupid migraines, not when there’s nothing anyone can do about them and not when he’s little for the first time in forever and he just wants to cuddle and try to figure out how to make a new friend. Steve smiles, warm and pleased, and the guilt triples.

“That’s my good boy. So proud of you for remembering to take breaks down there even though you’ve been working so hard.”

For a while (at least once the topic is mercifully changed from Tony’s eating habits), he almost forgets that Loki is even there. It feels just like it normally does, the team fussing over his every comfort and talking and teasing each other. Tony holds an entire conversation with his newest stuffed animal, a platypus being voiced by his Mama (who does excellent voices), and he’s about to suggest introducing the platypus to Sanders when he feels a little tug at his sleeve. He looks down to find Loki on the floor beside the couch, holding up a block.

“You want—come play?”

****

Other than Thor, who immediately makes his way to Loki to praise his politeness and desire to engage with others, everyone in the room goes still as Tony considers the request. Stuck in a confusing place between his Big and little headspaces, Bucky frowns. He’d wanted to be Big tonight to protect Tony and make sure this Loki character didn’t pull anything, but the little part of him is rankling at the idea of his baby brother playing with someone who isn’t him. The second Tony moves an inch toward Loki, Bucky’s mind is apparently made up for him, because the next thing he knows he’s on the floor with the other two.

“Who—” Loki asks, then struggles to complete the sentence. Unexpectedly, this makes Bucky feel a small pang of sympathy. Words aren’t always easy for him some days, either; he might be past the days of lapsing entirely into Russian, but he still has a hard time with finding and using the right words.

“I’m Bucky. Or James.” This established, he turns his attention back to his brother, who is gathering all of the soft cloth blocks on the floor. “Watcha makin’?”

“Ocean castle,” Tony grunts, sticking his tongue out in concentration. “Need more blocks prolly. And the new mermaid toys.” Bucky’s always happiest when he’s helping his brother somehow, so
he makes his way quickly to the toy box and unearths several more sets of blocks, a package of mermaid action figures with soft, squishy tails, and some toy animals like Tony’s favouritest hippo toys that Bucky got him a few months ago, and a mixed package with plastic whales and sharks and a bunch of different kinds of fish. Tony nods his approval at the collection, so Bucky wastes no time dumping the lot onto the playmat. Loki picks up one of the little sharks and waves it at Jane, who smiles gently.

“Yes, that’s a shark. Have you ever seen one before?” Loki shakes his head, and Tony beams in excitement.

“Sharks is cool. They have big teeth and they swim really fast. Sometimes they hurt people, but lotsa them don’t. Maybe the mermaid with the green hair could be the shark’s friend?” He bites his lip after making the suggestion, as if he expects to be made fun of, and Bucky will definitely not be letting the other boy make his brother feel bad. Thankfully, Loki doesn’t try. The more into it Tony gets, spinning a complex and typically science-driven narrative about the mermaids and animals uniting to fight the forces of climate change and ocean pollution, the more invested and confident Loki becomes. It’s around the time point where the other two are making the hippos do a celebratory dance that a new problem occurs to Bucky: he’s never shared his brother with anyone before, and he’s not totally sure he likes it.

Perhaps Phil senses something of this, or maybe it’s hard for him, too, to watch Tony and Loki enjoying one another’s company. Whatever the case, he shortly calls a stop to the game in favour of watching a movie. Bucky initially takes Steve’s invitation to curl up next to him on the couch, but he starts to regret this when Tony elects to stay on the floor and Thor and Jane help he and Loki cuddle up together with a nest of pillows under Tony’s weighted blanket. Then Steve has the audacity to laugh at Bucky’s whine of frustration.

“You can go sit with them if you want, buddy. But remember to use all of your good sharing manners, okay?” He’s already moving before Steve even finishes talking, insinuating himself between Thor and Tony. The baby doesn’t hesitate at all to huddle up next to Bucky, which is enough to appease him for now. Even if Tony doesn’t open his mouth and let Bucky feed him quite as many snacks as usual during the movie, that’s okay because he doesn’t accept food from Loki either, and he falls asleep like always with his quiet little snores sounding in Bucky’s ears.

****

Jane likes to think herself at least somewhat immune to the more obvious shows of Thor’s charm, but the look of almost puppyish enthusiasm he turns on her the second they put Loki to bed that night is pretty difficult to avoid smiling at.

“That went well, did it not?” he asks the second his brother’s bedroom door is closed, bouncing on the balls of his feet. The world is full of so much cynicism now, often for good reasons, and it’s not like Thor doesn’t have just as much a cause as any of them to feel that way. Hell, what’s happened to Loki is, on its own, enough to keep Jane awake at night raging about the horrible range of hurts inflicted on others in the name of justice. But not Thor. He always, always, sees hope and good.

“Yes, love, it went well. I’ll stay here long enough for Bruce to run the assessments he wants to put Loki to bed that night is pretty difficult to avoid smiling at.

“The world is full of so much cynicism now, often for good reasons, and it’s not like Thor doesn’t have just as much a cause as any of them to feel that way. Hell, what’s happened to Loki is, on its own, enough to keep Jane awake at night raging about the horrible range of hurts inflicted on others in the name of justice. But not Thor. He always, always, sees hope and good.

“Yes, love, it went well. I’ll stay here long enough for Bruce to run the assessments he wants to put Loki through, but I think you might all be good for each other. He certainly seemed happier tonight than I’ve seen him so far, and Tony was pretty adorable.” Thor beams in pride as if Tony is truly his son, and while ageplay is still not something she can see herself taking part in directly very often, it still warms something inside of her to have witnessed the commitment and the depth of feeling they all bring to that dynamic.

With the spectre of Loki’s recovery not hanging quite so pressingly over everything, the two of them
make love for several hours after that. (There are more than a few benefits to dating an actual god…) Once her head is pillowed on Thor’s broad chest, long past the point where she would normally have drifted off to sleep, though, a thought won’t leave her alone. Maybe she’s feeling a little protective of Tony because she’s so recently seen him little, maybe it’s the scientist in her, but she can’t help but ask regardless of the fact that she’s currently naked in bed with someone else.

“How’s Tony’s body handling the Extremis? The side effects have got to be brutal.” Thor blinks.

“It took him some time to heal after the surgery, that is true, but I know not of these other side effects you speak of.” That has her sitting up to stare down at the blonde. This isn’t Thor playing down his intelligence the way he sometimes does to tease her about Midgardian customs or just make her laugh. He doesn’t know what she’s talking about, and that’s setting off all kinds of alarm bells.

“You have to understand, the Extremis, it—it didn’t just re-write Tony’s anatomy, it altered him at the internal level. The interface he has now with the suit, the way he carries it inside him and has mental access to all kinds of tech…the human brain isn’t naturally built to absorb that much information that quickly, and it’s happening all the time for him. What he’s done is unprecedented so I can’t say for sure exactly what the side effects are, but there’s absolutely no way that he’s walking around with the suit and the entire Internet in his head with no problems. And if he didn’t warn any of you about that would be the case that certainly doesn’t make me less concerned.”

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Unfortunately, there’s little time in the days that follow for anything much to come of Thor’s conversation with Jane. The Avengers are called a record number of times in a week. The first incident, straight out of a nightmare fairy tale, had involved an invisible flying lion that had wreaked havoc on Wall Street. Tony had been the only one able to track the damn thing using Extremis, resulting in a ridiculous and embarrassing ‘fight’ where most of them had gotten their asses handed to them until Tony had had the genius idea of periodically shooting paint cannons at the animal. That had definitely helped with the visual, but most of them are left picking hot pink paint off of their scalps and suits for ages afterward.

Two days later they’re called in to assist SHIELD with a rogue hacker who has somehow gotten his hands on enough Chituari tech to modify his computer and communicate with non-Earthly realms. This might have been a positive development except for the fact that the kid’s first move had been to challenge the King of Atlantis to a fight. Because of course he did. Thor, Tony, Phil and Natasha spend several days doing damage control on that front, and then Tony and Natasha manage to get into a pretty ugly fight when he attempts to take the kid’s tech home to study it. This is the first time that her new position as SHIELD co-director has put her in such direct conflict with a member of the Avengers, and the ugly reality of going up against her family leaves Natasha in a foul mood even long after Tony has adopted his usual ‘pretend it never happened’ stance.

The third time happens during the middle of an in-class essay Steve has spent weeks preparing for, and that bad omen is only the start of their problems. Almost every one of them manage to get injured during a skirmish where several HYDRA agents pose as Inhumans, using disturbingly advanced tech that mimics Inhuman powers. Even though the Avengers win that particular fight, it doesn’t take long for it to become obvious that HYDRA had won in all the ways they actually intended: the dust has barely cleared before the media is declaring all Inhumans domestic terrorists and discussions surrounding potential registration and regulation for enhanced and meta-humans comes roaring back with a vengeance. The Avengers are left out of the crossfire for the most part, but only by being set up as exceptions to a general rule that the politicians and journalists are arguing exists. It makes all of them feel pretty sick to be pitted against people that are their friends and sometimes allies like that, and they’re all so full of rage and frustration by the end of the week that several enhanced pieces of equipment in the Tower gym still manage to get broken.
Tony and Natasha have been in ‘negotiations’ with members of Congress, the Senate, the UN and several intergovernmental agencies for almost three days solid, and that’s when Natasha starts to realize that the concerns Clint has been voicing to she and Phil about Tony are not only rooted in something real, but that they’ve all been missing something bigger. Midway through a conversation with one of the very few Congressman Tony actually likes, he starts needing to have every second or third thing repeated to him, and he keeps rubbing his eyes and squinting at the tablet in front of him. General Ross looks ready to pounce all over the rare show of weakness.

“The point I believe my esteemed colleague is too polite to make, Mr. Stark, is that regardless of the fact that the Avengers have all the good PR your money can buy, there need to be oversights. You’ve all spent several years now running around like vigilantes, and by permitting it, the US government has already unintentionally sanctioned numerous copycats, super-powered thugs who are stomping all over the constitution and the criminal justice system and overriding the will of the people. Just because you’ve managed to make The Hulk of all things a cuddly household name with his own hashtags and branded snacks doesn’t make his powers any less terrifying or destructive, nor the individuals he emboldens any less reckless.”

“Been waiting to give that little pre-written speech for a while, haven’t you Ross?” Tony snarks, but there’s a distinct slur to his words and he’s bracing himself hard against the table in front of them. That’s enough to make Natasha’s mind up for her.

“We’re going to have to call a halt to this for today.” There’s an immediate uproar, but when Natasha raises her hand the room immediately quiets (which is admittedly gratifying). “You’re all aware that the Avengers have faced a record number of call outs this week. Most of us, including Tony and myself, are still healing from the battle against HYDRA, and our conversation today has gone in circles. I’m going to suggest we table this discussion until next week.” She’s up and gripping Tony by the elbow before some of the members of the group have even realized what’s happening, but she could give a damn because the entirety of her focus now is on getting him out of the building and into a car as soon as possible.

“Tasha—” She’s not sure if she’s more alarmed by his increasing inability to form complete sentences or the fact that he’s calling her by a somewhat private nickname in public like this, but it still has her speeding up her pace and steering Tony more forcefully out of HQ.

“Stay with me, Stark,” she barks. “You are already in so much trouble and you are not going to make it worse by passing out on me, do you hear? Stark? Tony?”

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, another cliffhanger. Sorta. Like I said to someone in comments, I think writing Loki brings out the dramatic in me!

Your response to the last chapter was phenomenal, and this really boosted my confidence about the sequel. Thank you thank you thank you! Keep letting me know what you're thinking and what you want to see.
Consequences

Chapter Summary

The team deals with the fallout from Tony's health crisis.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: There's nothing graphic, but Tony's in pretty acute medical and emotional distress for most of this chapter, and the team is also struggling with feelings of guilt and panic as a result. Reading around that material would be a real challenge in this case because it's the primary focus of the chapter, but if you want more information before deciding whether or not to read, please feel free to let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony comes to with a splitting headache (not all that unusual these days, though it does seem a bit more intense than he remembers) and a general sense of unease. Trying not to betray the fact that he’s woken up just yet, he casts his eyes about the room. They fall first on Cap’s bright red backpack, which is on the floor next to Tony’s bed. It’s covered in a truly adorable number of buttons for a range of political causes; Steve must be picking them up on campus, the wonderful dork. It’s actually a wonder that the news hasn’t ran something about Cap’s accessories yet, some kind of clickbait story about Steve being ‘radicalized’ by left wing groups on campus. Though maybe they’re saving that in the wake of all the other political hot water that superheroes have found themselves in lately…

That…that rings a vague bell. Tony was working on something to do with that, wasn’t he? Fuck, if he fell asleep in that meeting Natasha is truly going to kick his ass, not to mention Pepper if word gets out and the fallout effects SI. But if he has in fact fallen asleep in the middle of yet another Congressional hand-wringing session, they wouldn’t just put him to bed would they?

“Tony. I know you’re awake.”

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Two Days Earlier

Natasha spends the drive back to Avengers Tower in as close to a state of panic as she’s ever felt. Tony is in and out of consciousness beside her. She’ll think he’s passed out entirely, only for him to shoot straight up in his seat, moaning words that are mostly indistinct and clutching his head. The driver (and gods but she misses Happy sometimes) keeps peering back over his shoulder to give them concerned looks and asking if she wants to change their destination to the hospital. The third time he makes this inquiry, she snaps.

“Half the time any of us go to a general hospital they end up doing worse damage because they don’t understand what goes on in bodies like ours. Just get me to the Tower where someone competent can take a look at him.” Then, as if it can compensate for the sharpness of her tone or the marks she’s pretty sure that her nails have left on the leather seats, she grudgingly adds, “Please.” The driver
(Jason? she’s pretty sure his name is Jason) doesn’t say anything in response, but she feels the car’s acceleration pick up just slightly.

She’s in the middle of sending a group text message to the team when Tony wakes again. His eyes are wide and panicked, pupils dilated, and she abandons all sense of decorum at this point to run a soothing hand through his hair.

“Shh, you’re alright, Tony. I’m here, and we’re just a few minutes away from Bruce and he’s going to figure out how to help you. Can you tell me anything about what’s going on?”

“Hurts,” he grunts, allowing his head to fall back into her lap. Something about his voice, the easy way he admits to being in pain, sounds far more like his little self than his Big one, and Natasha winces.

“I know it does, zajka, I know. Can you tell me why? Do you know what’s going on?” Either the question is too challenging for him to handle right now, or he’s too afraid to answer her, because Tony just mumbles something indistinct and lapses back into silence.

If this is how all parents feel when their kids are ill or in danger, it’s a wonder anyone ever gets anything done.

****

@TonyStark reportedly left intergovernmental task force meeting today in health crisis
#PrayForIronMan

ping -t -n 4294967295 -f -i 225 -r 3 target Tony Stark

Play New Voicemail: Tony, it’s Pepper. Are you alright? I’m hearing some things about the meetings today, and I know the press gets things twisted but just—call me, alright?

ping -t -n 4294967295 -f -i 225 -r 3 target Tony Stark
ping -t -n 4294967295 -f -i 225 -r 3 target Tony Stark

Sure I hope @TonyStark is okay, but sorry, #PrayForIronMan has nothing on #JENGA.
#HulkRules.

ping -t -n 4294967295 -f -i 225 -r 3 target Tony Stark

Dummy, stop pinging Sir, you know where he is and that isn’t going to make him respond sooner.

Accept new terms of service for your mobile banking application?

1429 new emails. Begin reading now?

“Agh fuck. Ow. What’s—” There’s some shuffling from next to Tony, and he’s with it just enough to realize it’s probably his head making the noise sound like a bomb has just detonated inches from his left ear. Seconds later, Bruce’s face swims into view. It’s blurry and distorted, but he’s there, and Tony’s ability to even recognize the other man feels like a victory right now.

“Tony. It’s Bruce, I need you to try to talk to me before you pass out again okay? Do you know what’s going on? Can you tell me anything about what you’re feeling or where it hurts?” Tweets and emails and Dummy’s incessant anxious Pings over the network are flooding Tony’s system and his head is beyond painful. It’s like he’s drowning, like Extremis is swallowing him and spitting him
back out over and over again. He tries to talk, to explain, but comes out a garbled mess of code and
equations and everything hurts and Bruce always fixes it why he can’t he fix it now?

“Dr. Banner, Prince Thor and Dr. Foster are requesting entry, and I believe they may be able to
provide some much-needed information on this matter.”

**ping** -t -n 4294967295 -f -i 225 -r 3 target Tony Stark

****

Extremis. Of course. Bruce comes dangerously close to Hulking out when Jane explains it. Not
because he’s angry at her, but because he’s completely furious with himself. He’d been more
involved than any of the others in the discussions immediately before and after Tony’s surgery, but
he’d been so focused at the time on the surgery itself, on the removal of the arc reactor and the short-
term implications of Extremis’s entrance into Tony’s body that he hadn’t really considered at any
length the more long-term, daily impact the virus would bring about on Tony’s life.

Maybe, he reflects bitterly, some part of him had been so caught up with romancing Tony that he
hadn’t really *wanted* to look too closely.

“Tony, I’m going to push some dilaudid, alright? We need to get Extremis to stop running, or at least
slow down. I don’t know how you’ve been doing that on your own and you can’t help me until
you’re in less pain, so you need to be sedated for a while. We’ll be here the whole time, I promise.”
He hates putting Tony under without his clear consent, but the man just isn’t capable of providing it
right now, too consumed by the painful struggle going on in his head.

On its own, the dose he gives Tony should only be enough to keep him consciously sedated, awake
but distanced from the world around him. For now, though, Tony is obviously exhausted, because
it’s less than two minutes from when he’s injected to the moment he passes back out again, this time
without the fitful and brief periods of lucidity he’s been having since Natasha half-carried him into
the Tower. Bruce slumps in relief, allowing himself to real feel the fear and guilt and anger and
myriad of other emotions that have been struggling to the surface for the last hour and a half.

Five minutes. He’ll let himself feel all of it for five minutes. Then it’s time to learn every damn thing
he can find about Extremis.

****

“The others are looking for you everywhere. Coulson’s in the gym, Barton’s crawling through all the
vents, Stevie’s going back and forth between sitting vigil on your floor and down in the labs with
Tony.” Natasha doesn’t turn to face Bucky, nor even acknowledge that he’s spoken. She keeps her
back to him even as she hears him takes several more steps into the dance studio, concentrating on
carefully pulling the laces from her favourite pair of ballet slippers. The edges of the laces are getting
a little frayed, and now that she’s looking at the shoes on the rack, several of them need to be
cleaned. She should have been taking better care of these gifts that she’d been given; how had she
ever become someone capable of taking any kind of luxury or pleasure for granted?

She’s furious at herself, at the whole world, and maybe Phil’s instincts had been the right ones.
Maybe she should be down in the gym finding things to punch and kick and stab until the anger and
self-hatred bubbling insider her have no more energy left to feed them. But everything in her recoils
at the thought of taking one step out of the studio, this place that Tony built just for her, this room
where they’ve danced and played and laughed together, often just the two of them.

“I missed it too. We all did.” She tugs the last of the lace free of the slipper in her hand with brutal
force, very nearly tearing the fabric of the shoe.
“You are still healing, James. It’s not your job to catch everything. It is my job, seeing people and learning them is what I have always done better than anyone else. But somehow, right from the beginning, I’ve never been able to see Tony as clearly as I should. And I thought we were doing better, he and I, I thought—well it doesn’t matter. I was wrong.” The word ‘wrong’ tastes like acid in her mouth and she doesn’t even realize her fingers are fumbling with her other slipper until Bucky’s much larger ones come up around them to steady her.

He doesn’t try to comfort her. He doesn’t tell her that she’s wrong or not at fault or any of the other platitudes that would have gotten him kicked out of the room immediately. For the next three hours, he simply helps her with the monotonous task of maintaining the dozens of pairs of slippers Tony had so painstakingly found and bought for her so many moons ago. The canvas ones go in the wash in a garment bag on a delicate cycle. The leather ones she spot-cleans with detergent and a damp cloth; they have to be worn while the leather is still wet to ensure they continue to conform to the shape of her feet, and she allows Bucky to slip them on and tie them for her with more care than a man with one metal arm should be capable of. The pointe shoes are the trickiest. She makes a baking-soda paste to treat the pairs that are stained. They’ll need to sit soaking that in over night before being rubbed with calamine, but she might as well get it done since the thought of actually sleeping tonight feels like a ludicrous fantasy.

When they’re finished treating every single one of her slippers, she finds herself at a loss. She could, she should, go downstairs and check on Tony, but the last time she’d dared, he’d been in the same terrible half-awake state he’d spent so much of the journey home in, whimpering and mumbling words that were mostly nonsense, interspersed with pleas for someone to make his pain stop. Since Natasha can’t do that, and hadn’t even realized he’d been in pain until it was far too late, she just can’t face him now.

“Most of my boots could use shining. Want me to go get ‘em?” Overcome with a gratitude that feels wrong somehow (because what she’s grateful for, really, is that Bucky is broken and damaged and lost in ways that sometimes make him more equipped to deal with her than anyone else is), Natasha gives a short nod.

****

Most of the information Bruce and Jane can find in Tony’s files and his own concerning Extremis is either descriptive or theoretical, dated prior to Tony’s actual injection with the stuff. If he’s kept any records about his first-hand experiences after the surgery, Tony has obviously hidden them well.

“I believe I could be of assistance,” JARVIS offers, breaking the tense silence of the room. Jane damn near beams at the ceiling.

“We can use all the help we can get, JARVIS. What can you tell us?”

“I’ve reviewed all of my existing security and privacy protocols, and I don’t believe it would violate any of them for me to provide you with a visual representation of the interactions between the Extremis hub and Sir’s mind now that you’re aware there’s an issue. I’ve selected a representative sample of approximately ten minutes from two days ago, shall I project it?” After receiving their assent, a massive holographic screen filled from top to bottom with line after line of text blinks into being. Bruce’s mouth drops open.

It’s so much worse than he’d thought. Even seeing the constant influx of data is completely overwhelming; JARVIS can barely keep the text scrolling fast enough to keep up with the rate at which everything from social media and news updates to emails to updates about minor events in the Tower’s network, are constantly updating. Jane manages to watch the stream for just over two minutes before begging the AI to turn it off and print the material instead.
“That’s…his head. All the time. I’m the one who told Thor this and I still never really imagined… how does he function?” Bruce can only shrug helplessly, but JARVIS offers his input again.

“Sir has been experiencing severe migraines periodically since being injected with Extremis. The health and safety protocols state that other inhabitants of the Tower do not need to be informed about minor health problems, and as Sir was careful to never exceed the maximum daily dosage of over-the-counter medications to treat himself, I was not permitted to alert anyone as to his status. However, the medication is becoming less effective the longer Sir uses it, and combined with the extent of his reliance on Extremis during the Avenger’s recent battles, I believe his mind and body simply became too overwhelmed to function, precipitating his collapse today.”

Bruce’s first, admittedly troubling, thought is that they’re changing all the damn health protocols so that he’ll be alerted if Tony has so much as a hangnail in the future. He doesn’t actually want to infringe upon his friend’s privacy like that, of course, not only because he wants Tony to feel comfortable telling them things himself but also because if backed into a corner like that, Tony would just find more sophisticated ways to hide. So no, Bruce doesn’t really want that, but it’s a comforting fantasy for just a few seconds.

“Any thoughts on where we go from here, JARVIS?”

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Two Days Later

“Just barely, Cap. What happened? Is Nat pissed? If I fell asleep or something I’m sorry, I didn’t—” But even as Tony’s asking, he’s already reaching out to the Extremis hub in his mind, trying to sort through the web of information to figure out what’s happened to him. There’s some kind of hashtag praying for him, which, unless it’s an ironic thing would be kind of weird if Tony just took a nap during a meeting. Before he can suss out more about the history of the tag, though, a sharp spike of pain shoots through his head and he winces. The touch of Cap’s always-overheated hand on his forehead is a welcome distraction.

“Tony. Stop. As much as you can, you need to try not to use Extremis right now, do you understand? I’ll tell you anything you want to know, but I need you to stay here with me, okay? JARVIS, tell the others he’s awake?” Tony is stuck between wanting to explain to Cap that there is no turning Extremis off, that it doesn’t work like that, and a growing sense of alarm about what exactly happened to him that was apparently severe enough to keep the entire team in the Tower during such a busy time. By the time Bruce arrives, there are tears leaking from the side of Tony’s eyes as he does his best to fight off both the waves of information and his anxiety, which is higher than it’s been in months. Thankfully, it doesn’t take long for Bruce to figure this out.

“I’m going to push a little more dilaudid, alright buddy? It won’t be enough to knock you out, it’ll just help keep your mind unfocused enough to keep Extremis at bay a little. Squeeze my hand if you understand, Tony.” He must manage to do as he’s told, because after a few minutes the rush of data all fighting for pride of place in his mind slows to a crawl. He squeezes Bruce’s hand again in thanks, but then an alarming thought occurs to Tony.

“I think…Tasha said…’m in trouble.” Steve makes a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh and moves his hand from Tony’s forehead to his chest, right over where the arc reactor used to be.

“You have no idea. You basically collapsed on her during your meeting, scaring the shit out of her by the way and Natasha does not take well to being frightened. After a couple of terrifying hours where you were in and out of consciousness and none of us knew what was going on or how to help, we had to find out from Jane and then JARVIS that you’ve been hiding major side effects from the surgery and your use of Extremis from us for months. We are all extremely glad you’re doing a
bit better, and I’m so glad to see your eyes actually focusing on me again that I can barely think, but yes, baby boy. You are in a lot of trouble.”

“…well, shit.”

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Despite that rather ominous proclamation, for the first couple of days everyone seems mostly relieved and happy to see Tony awake and capable of coherent speech again. He starts to think that he’ll manage to get out of this one with nothing more than a finger-wag before they all get back to their lives, and he becomes so confident in that assessment that on the third evening, he slides out of bed with the intent of making his way to the shop. He’s been doped up consistently enough over the past few days that he doesn’t know the exact extent to which his To-Do list has grown, but even what he can vaguely imagine is enough to terrify him.

He makes it exactly three steps outside his bedroom door before the light in the hallway turns on, revealing an extremely pissed looking Natasha Romanov, who has apparently been camping outside his room at night.

“You’re well enough to talk, then. Good. JARVIS, have the others meet us in the living room please.” Dealing with Natasha in this kind of mood is going to be more than a challenge enough; Tony definitely does not want to be facing down the other members of the team as well.

“Woah woah, belay that, J—”

“My apologies, Sir, but I have already forwarded Agent Romanov’s message to the Avengers.”

“Just so you know, JARVIS, that might have been the most insincere apology I’ve ever heard. Like ever. And given that multiple members of the US government have been forced on various occasions to apologize to me, that’s a distressingly low bar you’re failing to meet.” Natasha chooses this moment to interrupt his totally deserved scolding of his AI to push him toward the couch.

“Do you want hot chocolate?”

“That depends. Are you going to poison it?” Rather than smiling, or cracking a joke about the alternative methods she’d use to kill him instead, Natasha simply stares at him, expressionless. Oh she is really pissed then. “…yes please.” She nods, spins on her heel, and makes her way into the kitchen while Tony takes several deep breaths and tries to collect himself. All this can’t be over his hiding a few headaches. Maybe she’s really angry that he let her down, let all of them down, by having an attack during the hearings? He’d at least deserve her rage over that, he’s pissed as hell at himself too. Not only had he given Ross a chance to grandstand, but he’d set back the entire negotiation process, lost everyone days of work and school from the sounds of things.

As Tony ponders this, the room slowly fills up. Bruce arrives first, and he insists on taking Tony’s vitals and asking about a hundred questions about everything from his pain levels to if been up long enough to eat anything and whether or not he thinks he could keep anything down. He frowns when Tony replies to the latter in the negative, but nods and takes a seat on his left. Steve is soon there at his right, Bucky next to him, while Clint and Phil fill in the other side of the long sectional couch. Thor seats himself in his usual armchair, absent both Jane and Loki who must be remaining on his floor. After Natasha distributes hot chocolate to everyone, she curls up on the floor, leaning against Bucky’s legs.

“Uh, so…” For once, Tony Stark is utterly and completely at a loss of what to say, and the solemn looks on the faces of everyone around him are definitely not helping. He sort of feels like he’s attending his own execution.
“Sweetheart, look at me.” The familiar, comforting nickname is maybe the only thing that could have convinced him to make eye contact with any of them right now, and in seconds he’s peering cautiously into Steve’s baby blues. “Hi. How are you feeling?” Going with any variation on his usual ‘fine’ is not, Tony knows instantly, going to be tolerated.

“Uh…tired. Pretty groggy from the meds.”

“Your head hurt?”

“All the time. Not too bad right now, but…yeah.” The combined stares of everyone in the room are just too much, and Tony winces. “Look, I know you’re pissed but this whole intimidation thing is, I don’t really, this isn’t an approach that usually works well with me.”

“It’s not supposed to be an intimidation tactic Tony,” Phil asserts immediately. His voice is as calm and even as ever, and something in Tony clings to that like a life preserver. “We’re not mad—okay, maybe that’s not true. We’re human and we might still be a little upset. But we’re not here to yell at you or blame you. We’re all here together right now to try to figure out what happened and where to go from here.” Tony blinks.

“I thought…it seemed like you guys understood that the headaches, they’re from—”

“Extremis, yes, we’re clear on that thanks to Jane and JARVIS. What we’re not clear on is why you didn’t say anything before it got that bad.” Damn. That actually is what they’re upset about. It would have been so much easier if they were pissed about the loss of man hours and the extra work they’d all had to pick up in his unexpected absence. He could fix that. He could work harder and longer and give more until they forgave him for. But he doesn’t really know how to ask forgiveness for the fact that trusting people is so damn hard for him sometimes.

“I…” This time, no one rushes in to help him. They don’t get mad or try to push him to speak before he’s ready, they just wait in silence for Tony to gather his thoughts and try to explain himself. “It…they were just headaches. It didn’t seem like a big deal.”

“I can buy that that was the case at first,” Bruce says patiently, willing as he always is to give Tony the benefit of the doubt. “From what JARVIS has told me they didn’t interfere much with your daily life, and they could be treated fairly easily with one or two Advil a day. But it kept getting worse, didn’t it?”

“It was gradual. And weighing the costs against the benefits, there was no contest really. I was rid of the arc reactor, and the speed, the amount of information I have access to all the time, it’s incredible. I was okay. Until…”

“Until you weren’t, anymore,” Natasha fills in. It’s the gentlest her voice has sounded since he’s woken up, containing shades of Tony’s Mama and his friend and he could almost cry in gratitude at hearing that again instead of the cool, detached sound of Agent Romanov.

“Until I wasn’t,” he agrees. Trying to articulate why he hadn’t said anything then, when he’d known he was drowning, is the hardest part to put in words, and whether he’s still feeling some of the effects of the drugs or his mind is just that much of a mess, it takes him a long time before he manages to organize his thoughts into anything coherent. “I…I was really relieved, after the surgery. Not just to have the arc gone, because sometimes that’s just as weird as it is anything else, but because having it gone and getting rid of the health issues that came with it, I felt like—well, like less of a pain in the ass. Eating wasn’t as hard, I could lay on my stomach and chest and still breathe comfortably, everything was so much easier for everyone. I didn’t want to be the problem again, not with everything else on all of your plates. I genuinely believed that I would figure out how to handle this
on my own and there would never be a need to bother you. I should have figured it out and I’m sorry, I’m really sorry.” There’s silence in the room for several long moments, and when it continues stretching on, Tony dares a glance around the room. Thor’s face is in his hands, Steve and Bruce are both hastily placing their drinks on the coffee table like they fear breaking the mugs, and Phil’s expression is more openly and unbearably sad than Tony has ever seen it. “I’m sorry,” he repeats desperately. This can’t be it, they can’t leave over this, can they? He can’t lose them over fucking migraines and Congress, because that’s too much, he can’t.

“We’re sorry too, buddy,” Clint surprises Tony by answering. Sometimes the extent of the archer’s growing confidence still takes all of them by surprise, and Clint willingly participating more than required during a Talk like this is definitely one of those occasions. “There were signs. They were small, they were subtle, but they were there. You needed us and we didn’t notice, and you didn’t feel safe or secure enough to ask because you felt like everything else going on was more important. That’s…that’s not just on you. But I am not ever spending another day like the last couple, not when it’s something that was in our control to fix before it reached that point, okay? We uh—we all talked while you were out, about ways to try to help. We want your input, obviously, but do you wanna hear what we’ve got?”

“Christ yes.” This provokes a sea of quiet laughs from the rest of the team, and then Bruce actually reaches over and puts his arm around Tony, and it feels a thousand times better than normal to be touched so soon after he thought he might lose them all.

“The long and short of it is that we need to try to help you separate your natural brain patterns from those of Extremis, to try to make it something you can access when you want and avoid or sort of push to the background when you don’t. Kind of the opposite of what I’m trying to do with the Hulk, really, so we’re going to apply some similar principles. Like you and I are going to be meditating together every morning. JARVIS is going to try to take over some of his old tasks, like managing communications with the Tower’s network so that you’re not constantly accessing Extremis to do that stuff when you don’t need to. And…” Bruce hesitates just long enough for his listener to register it and tense up, but he keeps going before Tony’s forced to ask. “This might be an invasion of privacy, Tony, and I’m sorry, but Jane and I took a look at some of the feedback between you and Extremis. We realized, with JARVIS’s help, that almost all of those processes slow down dramatically when you’re little. I think things kept getting worse so fast because we kept skipping out on little time and re-scheduling it, so from now on there’s not going to be any more of that. We’re going to up our play to twice or three times a week for a while, and we’re gonna stick to the schedule.” The thought of people like Jane and Bruce poking around in his brain actually doesn’t bother Tony much, it’s sort of oddly flattering, but the conviction behind his last statement is…well, a little funny.

“Brucey Bear, we barely have time for the minimal play we’re able to sneak in now. I appreciate the thought, but unless you all want to change the rule about me not being allowed to be little alone—”

“Absolutely not,” Phil grounds out. “Tony, hear me say this and know that I’m speaking for everyone here. We. Will. Make. Time. This is your health and your safety and we will make time. Find one person in this room who you haven’t dropped everything for when it was their life, their health, even just their happiness, at risk. I’m betting you can’t.” Huh. Well that’s…huh.

“Not to mention,” Clint adds, “that I really fuckin’ miss little you, Tones. I’m glad you’ve been doing better and I know there’s new fun stuff to be had while Big like dating, but I really need some time with my baby too. When we don’t play for a while I start to feel kind of unsteady.” To Tony’s utter astonishment, the others nod and murmur words of agreement.

Honestly, it sounds like the kind of idea that’ll last for about a week before the natural insanity of
their lives tears it to shreds. But if pretending to be behind this is what Tony needs to do to make them not be angry with him anymore, he’ll damn well do it.

Chapter End Notes

I almost thought of titling this chapter "The Council of Coulson (reprise)" because it's just as talky as that chapter from way back when. But for those of you wanting to know how the team was going to deal with this, I hope you found all that discussion satisfying.

For those interested, the Extremis side effects Tony experiences here, particularly the migraines, are comics canon. And shout out to BeYourselfHoney, whose request for some Natasha comfort in this chapter inspired the Bucky/Nat scene.

Thank you so much as always for your comments and kudos. Keep letting me know what you're enjoying, what you want to see, what questions you have, any thoughts you want to share I'm happy to hear. They always keep me so motivated and inspired! <3
New-Ish Beginning

Chapter Summary

Tony finds out that the team is a lot more serious about their treatment plan than he'd originally realized. Steve faces new challenges at school, and Clint reaches out—to the PR team?

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings: Tony struggles with his headspace in this chapter. Everything is 100% consensual as always, but he's definitely having a hard time getting into and staying in headspace and needs some nudging from his caretakers.

Also, Steve's storyline involves him wrestling with some of the same political issues as he does in Civil War, but in a very different context. (In other words, while we're exploring some of the same themes, and while Steve is in some ways the same person from that movie, there are a lot of ways in which he's different here, too, so that impacts how he thinks and in what ways he's willing to bend or see other perspectives.)

After Tony has agreed to the team’s terms, the talk after that is mercifully short, and isn’t long before he’s being tucked back into bed with a tummy full of hot chocolate and a mind at least somewhat more at ease than he’s had in a while. Someone also, he registers blearily, seems to tuck Sanders into his arms, but he’s way too exhausted to bother fighting that one.

The addition of the stuffed animal should have been his first clue that the team was damn serious about this new plan of theirs, but Tony doesn’t really start to realize that until the next morning when he wakes up to find Natasha folded into a chair next to his bed reading on her tablet. It’s better than the hallway, he supposes, but it still kind of seems like overkill.

“Uh—hey. Get lost on your way to the bathroom or something?” The smile she gives him in return holds no trace of the anger and tension she’s carried for days. It’s open and warm in a way that he recognizes, but can’t quite place with his head still a little sore and muddled.

“No, zajka, I’m not lost. Just waiting for you to wake up.” Shit. They really think he’s going to play now? Natasha of all people understands just how behind this little stunt of his has put SI, and the negotiations with the government, and that’s not even to mention his constant upgrades to their weapons and suits, plus the other contract work he does for SHIELD. Jesus, he’ll be lucky if he has time for weeks. Wincing, he sits up and tries to shake the residual fog from his mind. Before he can cautiously let the link to the Extremis hub fully open up, however, Nat is gripping him tightly by the chin so that he’s forced to meet her eyes. “No. Right now we’re going to get you dressed, and then you’re going up to meditate with Bruce before breakfast.”

“Tasha, I know you guys are on this Tony-needs-to-be-little-more kick, and it’s sweet and I love you a lot for it. But you can’t possibly think now’s a good time. I’m already going to be playing catch-up
for the rest of my damn life.” Natasha replies by holding up a black onesie covered with a pirate-themed print and a pair of burnt orange shorts.

“I think this for today. Thoughts?” He’s so stunned by this turn of events that she has his pyjama pants off and is sliding a diaper under his butt before he manages to make his mouth work again.

“Tasha! What—no! Even if I had time today, I don’t need—”

“Not negotiable right now bunny. You’ve been a big boy too much lately, and it’s gotten you all confused. So unless you need to use your word, you’re going to wear your diapers and use them because that’s what babies do.” After giving him the span of several long breaths to give his safeword, Natasha nods decisively, but she doesn’t immediately resume getting the garment assembled and taped up. Instead, she just kneels above him, eyes darting over him in scrutiny. “So tense. We’ve done this before, you and I. Trust me, Tony.”

He still has objections, big ones, to this whole plan, but whenever Natasha is the one to diaper or change him she usually tells him some kind of story, and he doesn’t want to miss it regardless of whether or not he can manage to stay in headspace and relax the way she’s asking. Sure enough, as she rubs creme and powder onto Tony, she begins telling him a Russian folk tale called Ivan Tsarevich and the Grey Wolf. It’s a kind of weird and twisted narrative about the son of a tsar who, while investigating the theft of golden apples from his father’s palace, encounters a wolf. The wolf, after eating the prince’s horse, decides to help the prince track down the rival Tsar behind the thefts, and the two embark on many journeys together, ending in the Prince’s happy marriage and the imprisonment of his brothers because, as Natasha says, it wouldn’t be a Russian story if the families weren’t all a little miserable.

If the others were around they’d probably push her to tell Tony happier, more child-friendly stories, but that’s what makes diaper changes with Natasha so special. It’s just the two of them, and she tells him the real stories of her own childhood, not the sanitized versions of things that children are expected to receive now. He can’t help but smile up at her, and she leans down and presses a kiss to the tip of his nose when he does.

“There’s my zajka.” Anxiety about giving in to this still weighs on Tony’s mind at the address, and he frowns.

“Tasha, SI, I don’t—Pep and I have been so great lately and I don’t want to mess everything up—”

“Pepper called a lot while you were sick. We didn’t give her all the details, but she knows that you haven’t been well for a while now and that you need some time to recover. She understands, and she’s not mad at you. The board is still crowing over the updates to the watch, phone sales are still going strong, and she has them all willing to wait basically forever at the very idea of you sharing even some of the tech behind the Quinjets. Everything else is being handled. We’re not keeping you away from your work forever, but you collapsed and were in and out of consciousness for two days. You need some time to heal and to start learning how to care for your body the way it is now.” He sort of likes how she says that—the way his body is now. Not like it’s better or worse, or some kind of value judgement, just a description. Tony likes it even more when she accompanies this by running her fingers gently through his hair. “You need this, Tony, I can see how much work it’s taking you to fight your headspace back right now. Stop resisting and just let yourself be small. Let your mind slow down.”

It’s still a bad idea and he knows it, but does it ever sound appealing to let things be slow and small and simple for a while. Maybe he can just be little this morning, and then convince them he needs to be big in the afternoon? Yeah, that’s what he’ll do.

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“Agent Barton, I was pleasantly surprised by your request for a meeting. Come in, come in.” Even though Clint likes to keep Tony’s PR team on their toes, he does genuinely like them, especially Heather. She’s excessively competent without ever being condescending, and while she defends her sometimes unpopular ideas with confidence, she also listens to the team and makes adjustments around the issues that they’re not willing to bend on. He’s never sought her out on his own like this, but he finds himself not regretting it as he sits down across from Heather. “How can I help you?” He cuts right to the chase.

“I want to start involving some of the other super- and in-humans in our promo material.” For just a second, Heather looks very much like she might spew coffee all over her expensive, tailored suit, but the moment passes quickly and soon her expression is just as calm and placid as ever. (He supposes in hindsight that it must take a lot to shock someone who has worked for Tony Stark for any length of time.)

“I very much admire the sentiment, Agent Barton, and truly the things that are being said about the Inhumans in particular are appalling, but I’m not sure that this is the best course of action. The Avengers currently have higher approval ratings than the sitting President, but all of that can be so tenuous, as you know, and to have all of you lose some of that public goodwill right during the middle of these negotiations could be devastating to your cause long-term.” He nods, and politely waits for her to finish because he has learned long ago not to be the kind of dick who interrupts women just because he disagrees with them. But the second she’s through, he hands her his phone.

“Those are the tweets, just in the last hour, that have used the hashtag #Inhumans. They’re appalling, as you’ve said, but it’s not just—I’m not just out for some kind of moral outrage thing. We’re not gonna win this if we’re being set up as the only ‘good’ superheroes. All it’ll take is one mistake, which will make because sometimes shit just doesn’t work out the way you think, and everything we’ve been building this entire time will be washed away. The Hulk won’t be the funny guy yelling about Jenga and eating cupcakes, he’ll be a vicious, unthinking threat again, and Steve’ll be America’s ‘fallen son’. Thor’ll be just another damn alien taking American jobs and women, and Nat and Phil and I will all be shady spy types that no one should have trusted. And when we go down, everyone else will be twice as fucked. If we get through this, it has to be all of us.” About midway through this rather dire little rant, Heather inexplicably starts smiling. By the time he’s finished, she’s full-on grinning and has already abandoned Clint’s phone in favour of pulling open several documents on her desktop computer.

“So tell me what you have in mind, then, Agent Barton. I assume you intend to start with the spider-kid I officially know nothing about?”

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If Tony had been, perhaps, slightly nervous that being in headspace with Bruce would be weird now that they’re also dating, that fear at least is very quickly dispelled. Bruce is every bit in caretaker mode, and Tony’s fragile headspace responds as it always does to his Papa’s gentle affection and soft tones.

The only thing that could make the morning better is if Bruce would give up on stupid meditation already. It was hard enough before Extremis, when all he had to control were intrusive thoughts about space and the Avengers and SI and his other daily tasks. With Extremis, trying to bring his focus to something as simple as his breathing the way Bruce is instructing feels utterly hopeless. He’s still Big enough that he’s a bit embarrassed by the dispirited whining noise that escapes his mouth, but he’s tired of trying so hard to get his stupid head to work the way it should and he just wants to go downstairs where Mam—Tasha is waiting with breakfast and snuggles and maybe his light-up blocks. Bruce clucks in sympathy and lays his hand on top of Tony’s.
“I know. I know this is hard. Okay, let’s try something a bit different if trying to just re-direct your attention isn’t working. Close your eyes—actually closed, love, I can see you peeking at me. Good. Now I want you to imagine a way to visualize Extremis—not the things it actually shows you, but some kind of visual metaphor for its presence in your head. Can you tell me what it looks like?”

Tony chews his lip, wishing absentely for his paci, but tries to do as Bruce has requested. Its hard, extremely so, to try to mentally separate the virus’s constant presence in his head, its overflowing streams of data, from the more abstract idea of its presence, but he finally figures out something that seems appropriate. It’s weird, because for the original study participants Extremis had literally meant fire, burning from the inside out. But to Tony, it’s always felt more like water.

“River, maybe? Some kind of big body of water. Always flowing, really fast, sweeping me up in it.” Bruce makes the little humming noise he makes when he’s deep in thought.

“Good, love, that’s really good. So what we’re going to try to do in our sessions, then, is try to get the water a little calmer and more under control, so that you can dive in when you want or need to, but it won’t feel like it’s always overtaking you and sweeping you away when you don’t want to be. We’re going to try to get you to focus on you breathing again now, but every time you exhale I want you to imagine that you’re adding one piece to a little dam we’re making in the river. Let’s give it a shot, okay? Big breath in for me, Tony, and hold it.”

Tony only manages to successfully add two pieces of wood to the little dam in his mind over the course of their session; all his other attempts are interrupted by Extremis pushing through phone calls and news updates and a reminder that Happy’s birthday is coming up (had to have been added to his calendar by Pepper). He’s actually sweating from the effort of all of this, which, given the kind of shape he’s in and the ways he tends to spend his time, feels completely absurd. But Bruce is happy enough that they made any progress that he finally calls a halt to things. Though the other scientist apparently has plans in his own lab today, he insists on walking Tony back up to the penthouse where Natasha is waiting, which maybe in hindsight should have been his second clue about just how seriously the team is taking this whole reboot-Tony’s-brain-with-ageplay thing.

“How’d it go?” Nat asks. She’s in the middle of pouring apple juice into one of Tony’s bottles, the sight of which makes him squirm a little. They haven’t given him a bottle in ages, and did the prints on them always look so babyish? Maybe he can talk his way into a sippy cup if he’s good enough and doesn’t spill any of his breakfast on himself. He’s so busy trying to plot this move that he forgets to actually answer Natasha, but Bruce, struggling with no such dilemma, does not.

“Tony worked hard and did very well. We seemed to find a visual that worked for him, and I think with enough time that’ll help him try to create a mental barrier between himself and the virus. He’s a very tired little boy, though, so I’d definitely suggest at least one nap today. I’ll come up and check on him around lunch and see how he’s feeling. If he gets a headache that’s any more painful than it is now, which he’s said is sort of the baseline, then call me immediately.” Then he turns to Tony.

“Now you behave for your Mama today, alright?”

Tony flushes, dark and angry and embarrassed at being addressed like a child. Some part of him knows that’s stupid, and unfair; they’re not treating him this way out of the blue, their dynamic is something they’ve negotiated long and hard about. But for whatever reason, despite how badly he wants to let himself sink down into the familiar comfort of headspace, he’s also overcome with the sensation that it’s something wrong, something that he needs to fight. Without even knowing he’s going to do it in advance, his hand comes up to bat at Bruce’s when the other man attempts to put his hands on Tony’s shoulders. “Woah, buddy, what’s wrong? What happened?”

“I think Tony’s having some issues with adjusting this morning.” Natasha offers when Tony petulantly crosses his arms across his chest and refuses to speak. “He thinks he needs to be our big
boy and he’s having some trouble letting himself be as little as he needs to.” Bruce seems extremely 
concerned by this, and potentially on the verge of offering to stay with them, but the annoying silent 
conversation he and Natasha have with their eyes results in a quick nod from Bruce and a kiss being 
dropped to the top of Tony’s head.

“Tasha—” he starts once they’re alone.

“Mama,” she interrupts. He clenches his hands into frustrated fists, which of course she notices, and 
soon her smaller, cooler hands are on top of his own, encouraging the muscles to elongate and relax 
again. “I know this is hard for you. We should never have gone so long without playing, and I’m 
sorry it’s made the transition into headspace such a challenge. But even if it’s hard right now, you 
need to go through the motions. Let your body and your mind remember that it’s okay to be safe and 
cared for and to let everything else go for a while. Today that starts with you calling me Mama and 
then letting me feed you a bottle and your breakfast on the couch, alright?”

He hesitates, choking on the words he knows she wants to hear, and she kneels in front of him. The 
others do this all the time, probably to avoid the impression oftowering over him, but even when 
he’s little it’s unheard of for Natasha to physically lower herself even for his sake. It means she’s 
looking up just slightly at him, but there’s nothing remotely submissive about her posture or her 
expression.

“Who am I, zajka? Right now, in this room, between you and I, who am I?”

“Mama,” he answers, alarmed when the word comes out accompanied by a sob he just barely 
manages to swallow.

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After pacing the halls of the political science building for twenty minutes, and then spending another 
ten repeatedly verifying that he’s outside the right office, Steve knocks on the door of his political 
science instructor. The second he does he starts wishing that maybe he’s gotten the time of her office 
hours wrong, or that she’s busy with someone else, but the door opens immediately and she smiles at 
Steve.

“Captain Rogers. Glad you found the place, come in.” The office is small, cramped, even, but still 
warm, covered wall-to-wall in books and posters and other artifacts. There’s a thick area rug on the 
floor, too, that reminds him somehow of the one back at the Tower that they tend to dig out when 
Tony is little and will be spending lots of time crawling around the penthouse. Maybe it’s that small 
comfort that finally lets him speak.

“I uh…I wondered if we could talk about my essay, Dr. Dolan. I’m very grateful that you let me 
make it up at all, don’t get me wrong, it just…it wasn’t exactly the grade I was expecting, and I’m 
not sure I understand all of your comments or how to make sure I hand in better work for next time.”

He’d sat the make-up essay after class several days before. She’d informed him that he’d have to 
write on a different topic than his peers had, which made sense since he might otherwise conceivably 
benefit from hearing them discuss their grades and comments. (Steve doesn’t really talk to the other 
students much, but there’s no way for Dr. Dolan to know that.) He had still been pretty nervous 
going in, but when he’d sat down and seen ‘Write an essay that discusses the political benefits and 
drawbacks of a potential Superhero Registration and/or Regulation Act’, it had sort of felt like he’d 
been given an out. This wasn’t some abstract subject that referenced a history he couldn’t remember, 
it was quite literally his life, and a topic with which he was intimately familiar.

How, then, had Steve received a D? He’d stuffed the paper at the very bottom of his bag and hidden 
the results from his teammates for days, telling anyone who asked that he hadn’t gotten his mark
back yet. But he couldn’t keep hiding from the truth forever, and with the Add/Drop period coming up fast, he figured it was in his best interest to know if he just wasn’t prepared to take this course.

Dr. Dolan, at least, does not seem angered by his question. She simply motions to the chair across from her own desk and waits for Steve to settle.

“Then it’s great that you came to see me Captain—is it alright if I call you Steve?”

“Please,” he invites, perhaps a bit too strongly. But the last thing he wants is to associate this feeling of failure with Captain America too, rather than just Steve Rogers.

“Steve, then. Most of my comments were focused around the question of argument. While your paper was eloquently written and touching, it ultimately lacked a clear and defensible thesis about why the proposed regulations would be such a mistake.”

“So it was too, what, personal? I know it’s generally not great to use the first person in academic writing, but it just felt sort of silly to pretend that I wasn’t personally involved in this conversation.”

“It wasn’t the mode of address, no. A lot of feminist academics actually argue that by forcing students never to use first-person in their writing, we neglect and erase the important of individual experience, and I tend to agree. The problem, though, was that your entire discussion centered only those subjective experiences, and it actively refused to see beyond them. Your main argument was essentially to say that to you, the registration act and particularly the proposed accords governing the actions of superheroes feel wrong, and that super-, meta-, and in-humans should be trusted to follow their instincts if they’re acting in the defense of others.” Steve nods, not seeing anything wrong with that at all. “The problem is that there’s a lot of implicit assumptions in there. The question of sovereignty, for one. Several of the countries that you propose are or may soon be in active need of assistance are areas that have been colonized or otherwise exploited by Eurowestern powers. Deeming the desires of their people and their elected officials irrelevant is hard to defend without some kind of parameters or boundaries restricting your actions. And there’s the question of accountability as well. Not in the fake way it’s been brought up in the media lately, as justification to take actions against members of the Inhuman population who have never in fact done anything. But can you say with one hundred percent certainty that everyone who falls under the large banner encompassed by these proposed restrictions will never lose control, never make a mistake? If they do, don’t you think the public has a right to be knowledgeable of and involved in the processes that will decide what happens next?”

It’s not that Steve has never heard versions of these criticisms before, of course he has. They’ve been so much easier to brush aside, though, when they’ve come from people so transparently acting in accordance with their own agendas rather than any sincere desire to protect or serve the public. He’s even had some discussions verging on arguments with Tony about this very topic in the wake of the HYDRA attacks and the negotiations that had followed. But even then, well Tony is always so eager to see the worst in everyone, especially himself. It’s made sense to push his concerns aside and read them as symptomatic of the other man’s pessimism, as well as his comfort and familiarity with governmental and military bureaucratic mechanisms (however much he complains about them).

“I don’t…I don’t know how not to act when someone needs help,” he confesses. “The world is bigger now, more complicated, and I get that. I know I’m still trying to catch up.”

“We all are, Steve.” This seems so patently ridiculous a thing for an educated professional to say that he temporarily forgets his manners and snorts, but Dr. Dolan just grins, a kind of lopsided, goofy smile that reminds Steve just a little bit of Pepper when she’s away from the cameras spending time with Tony and the others. “I’m sure that sounds like I’m just pacifying you, but I’m not. We’re all trying to keep up with and make sense of an unprecedented flow of information, and to act ethically
and responsibly in response to it. I can’t tell you how to make those decisions, because I don’t believe there’s ultimately one right way. What I want you to take from this class if you take nothing else is the fact that eventually you, and the others like you, have to be able to face hard questions like the ones I’m asking you. You’ll have to learn how to answer them with some measure of objectivity and attention to the broader context in which you’re acting without completely losing everything about you that makes you, well, you.” While he takes this in, Dr. Dolan picks up his paper from where it lies on her desk. “I can’t let you re-write this a second time. But I’m going to suggest that your final project for this class should revisit this conversation.”

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After he manages to cross that first big boundary and call her Mama, Tony and Natasha’s day gets easier, but it’s still far from the solely relaxing experience she’s come to expect from their play. Tony is moody and anxious and still extremely embarrassed by so much of what is usually normal for him when little that he ends up spending most of his time engaged in solo games and play. More than once, he invites Natasha to simply leave him on his own, and seems simultaneously frustrated and relieved by her insistence on staying in the room.

It's painful and frustrating to feel as if they are back at square one in so many ways, and it’s with an undeniable feeling of consolation that she hears JARVIS announce Steve’s arrival. Several seconds later, she registers pressure at her hip and thigh and realizes Tony is suddenly clinging to her.

“Tony, what—”

“Nap now? Need ‘nother nap.” Given that the baby has fought both the naps she put him down for tooth and nail, this is far from a convincing explanation.

“Bunny, are you scared of seeing Steve?” Tony doesn’t agree, but doesn’t deny the charge either, which is as good as an admission. Her mind races through possibilities: is he afraid Steve is still angry, that he might somehow harm Tony? Is the part of Tony that’s still resisting the ageplay worried that seeing Cap, whose very presence can sometimes push Tony further into headspace, will force him to give up the last of the fight? There’s just too many variables too narrow them down quickly enough, so she settles for hauling Tony to his feet and leading him toward the elevator to face whatever this is head-on.

Steve takes two long strides out of the elevator and into the penthouse, eyes Tony briefly, and then sinks bodily to his knees, dropping his backpack carelessly next to him with a heavy thud.

“Oh sweetheart, thank goodness. Dada’s needed to see your face all day long; I’ve had the most horrible day. Can you give me a big hug?” Whatever his misgivings, whatever his hesitations, Tony has never been anything but eager to please in the face of naked need like this, especially from Steve. He breaks away from Natasha’s loose hold to basically throw himself at the man, and Steve catches him with wide arms and a big, grateful smile. It provokes something a little like jealousy in Natasha to watch them come together so easily, but there’s a relief there, too, a happiness in their happiness and in the fact that their joy doesn’t come at her expense, not really. “My beautiful, perfect boy. Thank you.” After a few seconds, Steve moves to release Tony, but the baby clings to him with a whine, settling his head in its familiar resting place over Steve’s heart. “Not movin’ huh? Fine by me, baby boy. Just wrap your legs around Dada so I can pick you up. We’ll go over to the couch and you and Mama can tell me all about your day, okay?”

“I might actually go down to my floor for a while and catch up on some things if you have him, Steve,” she says, trying to give the two what seems like some much needed time alone. But to her surprise, Tony reaches behind him to make grabby hands in her direction.

“Stay, please Mama?” They haven’t somehow instantly healed or fixed everything that’s gone wrong
between them all in the past few months within the span of a single day. But when she nods and he responds by slipping his hand into hers, it feels for the first time in a while like they might get there someday, and for Natasha that thought is pretty damn optimistic.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so very much for your comments and kudos last chapter. I absolutely love hearing what ya'll are thinking and feeling as the story progresses. (And for those of you anxious for more Loki, he has a starring role in the next chapter. Tony just needed a bit of time on his own first.)

Have a wonderful weekend!
The Return of Phil Coulson's Pinterest and Other Miracles

Chapter Summary

Clint submits the first of his planned videos in support of the in- and super-human community. Phil works Tony past some of the hurdles he's facing with ageplay with the help of his Pinterest and, surprisingly, Thor and Loki.

Chapter Notes

No warnings I can think of here except that this chapter gestures to a fan theory that has recently been semi-confirmed by Marvel about the identity of the little boy in the Iron Man mask that Tony saves during Iron Man 2. So a potential spoiler for that?

There's also mention (past-tense) of entirely consensual but anger-fuelled kinky sex between Coulson and Clint.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clint chalks it up as a personal victory when he arrives at Heather’s office two days later and she visibly betrays some surprise.

“Already? We don’t want this to be a rush job—”

“Ha yeah no it’s not. It’s just that Spiderkid has been a huge Avengers, and especially Tony Stark, fan since he could barely walk. He already has a huge stockpile of material like this that’s ready to go the second we let him release it.”

“I don’t know whether to be amused or frightened by that,” Heather confesses, gesturing for Clint to take his familiar seat across from her while the boots the video onto her desktop computer. The camera zooms in on Spidey walking around the streets of Queens; he’s using the suit’s voice modulator, as Clint had virtually demanded, but the kid is practically vibrating with energy that makes his youth and enthusiasm basically impossible to miss.

“I’m so excited! Cl—Hawkeye has finally given me permission to start sharing all this awesome stuff I’ve shot with you! And you guys, I have so much stuff—like, things you won’t even believe. But today we’re going back in time to my origin story, if you will.” Images of the most recent Stark Expo start flashing across the screen as Spidey continues narrating in almost ecstatic voiceover. “The year was 2010. We were only on the iPhone 4, there wasn’t even such thing as the Starkphone, people wanted to Bring Back Conan, some sports teams did some stuff, and most importantly: it was time for the revival of the Stark Expo. I was there in the front row—okay not quite, but I was there, ready to soak in all the cool tech and maybe catch a glimpse of Tony Stark a.k.a. Iron Man a.k.a. my soon to be BFF.” Heather snorts.

“Oh Stark is going to love that, especially if it spawns some kind of MakeIronManMyBFF hashtag.”

“Gonna help that along?” Clint asks, because for all that he used to think Heather to be rule-bound
and boring, he’s learned recently that she also has a pretty huge mischievous streak. Especially where it concerns forcing Tony to actually accept rather than smother stories about all the small acts of good her performs.

“Oh you have no idea.” Her expression turns more somber, however (as does the music in the video—really gotta talk to Spidey about not overdoing it with the dramatic scores here, and Clint is pretty damn sure they don’t have the rights to Ride of the Valkyries anyway) when the images on screen shift to display Whiplash, Hammer’s ill-fated bots, and the scenes of destruction and chaos that had followed.

“For a while, it seemed like we were all pretty screwed. My au—uh, my unnamed family member and I were fleeing the Expo grounds when one of the Hammerbots landed right in front of us. But I wasn’t afraid. Why, you ask? I wasn’t yet a superhero after all, just a kid of—err, unspecified age. Nah, I wasn’t afraid because I was wearing the colours of my soon to be BFF.” The camera zooms in Spidey holding up a picture of a young child clad in a souvenir Iron Man helmet and gauntlets. “It later turned out that I had some, well, assistance taking down the Hammerbot courtesy of the original Iron Man, but he still made sure to tell me I’d done a great job before he took off to chase down the others.” Despite the jokey irreverence of the rest of the account, there’s absolutely no mistaking the intense pride Spidey takes to this day in the offhanded compliment Tony had given him after saving the child’s life. There’s an audible sniff from next to him, and Clint smirks.

“Are you—”

“Shut up and watch the footage Agent Barton.”

“You probably wonder why I’m telling you this, and it’s not just because I want people to think well of Mr. Stark—although they should, because he’s great, but he hates it when I say that and I also promised Mr. Hawkeye to mention that he’s really awesome.” Well the brat wasn’t supposed to share that part! “I’m sharing this story today because that day, not the moment when I became Spiderman under circumstances-that-shall-remain-classified-according-to-SHIELD-and-other-entities, that day at the Expo was the first time I ever thought of myself as a hero. Inhumans, superheroes, super soldiers, there’s a lot more that unites us than divides us, whether we daydream being Iron Man or astronauts or Presidents; I know that sounds cheesy but it’s true. I hope that by getting to know me and some of my colleagues and BFFs, America gets the chance to see that and remember it when it really counts. OH! My favourite soft pretzel cart is back! Gotta fly, guys! Later!”

It’s the kind of cheese that would fall flat if the speaker were just a little older, or displayed even the remotest sense of irony or distance from their words. But Peter is nothing if not fully committed to everything he does, and his almost painful sincerity feels to Clint like a welcome balm after weeks of suspicion and mudslinging and outright hatred in the press. Heather is still sniffling next to him, so he strongly suspects she’ll be in agreement after she inevitably swears him to secrecy and reminds him of the countless hours of embarrassing footage they have of Clint.

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“Stark.”

“Nope.

“Tony.”

“Uh-uh. Life-model decoy. Try again tomorrow blah blah pithy joke see ya.”

“JARVIS? Music to 20%; save and close all open projects.” That at least gets Tony’s attention; it’s
certainly not the positive kind of attention given the poisonous look he’s shooting at Phil right now, but it’s something.

“Fuck off, Coulson. Seriously. I have about a hundred thousand things to catch up on; the negotiations start back up tomorrow, I owe Pepper updated completion times on a dozen different projects, Rhodey had some issues with War Machine that I’m trying to troubleshoot remotely, and I still haven’t finished repairs on my own suit since the last fight. I do not have time to fucking play right now. You guys need to give up this ridiculous new schedule.” Rather than ask JARVIS to reopen all the files he’s just shut, Tony evidently attempts to take matters into his own, well, head and use Extremis. Phil doesn’t miss the wince this immediately produces.

“How’s the pain today, Tony?” The other man answers with a growl, which is followed by him chucking whatever’s in his hand (it looks to be a miniscrewdriver) across the workshop. It lands with a clank next to Butterfingers, who replies with an aggrieved chirp. It’s the closest Phil has ever seen Tony to resembling Natasha or Clint in the worst of their post-mission rages. Even when he’d been slowly dying of palladium poisoning the man had been mostly resigned, worrying about his legacy and the future of the world he thought he was leaving behind rather than spending much energy on anger or self-pity. But not now. Now he’s striking out, not just at his bots but at everyone close to him. Perhaps because he’s discovering, like Natasha and Clint, that living under some conditions can be far harder than dying.

With either of his agents, Phil knows what he’d do next. With Nat, he’d first indulge her affection for working problems out with intense physicality. They’d go to the gym, or the firing range; he’d maybe find her a new knife or gun to test, and he’d be a silent witness to the storm of bullets and sweat and curses that followed. When she was ready—not before, never before, Phil had only made that particular, disastrous mistake once—Natasha would carefully lay her weapons in Phil’s hands. Every single one of them, which always had the effect of making her appear far more naked than if she’d simply undressed. Then he would take her back to SHIELD, or more recently the Tower, where she would speak in brief, stilted spurts. When she was ready—again, never before—she’d demand an assessment from Phil, which he would deliver with unflinching honesty. Natasha would nod, once, trusting and accepting his judgement, and the residual anger would seep out of her like poison.

Clint, on the other hand, Clint liked…well no, not liked, Clint needs to be restrained, encompassed, when he feels the way that Tony seems to now. He resists at first, sometimes, bucking Phil’s control and even throwing the occasional punch or elbow in Coulson’s direction on the worst days. When they were younger, what followed was usually vicious, aggressive sex, all biting teeth and bruising grip; Clint would snark and bait and disobey and do everything he could to provoke and challenge Coulson’s dominance. When he found it unshakeable, as he always did, the agent’s fights would slowly lessen in intensity. Clint would slowly start to beg and plead and make painfully sincere promises to be good; by the end, he’d be babbling out slurred apologies to Phil, to everyone on-mission that he couldn’t save,

In the wake of Loki, of losing his control in such a non-consensual and painful way, Clint has yet to seek out that kind of sexual encounter with Phil. The closest they’d come had actually been days ago at SHIELD, when Natasha seemed to have managed to take Clint down just slightly into the submissive headspace he’d once found so comforting. No, when he comes home full of fury these days, Clint usually just wants to be held, as tightly and completely as Phil can manage.

The point is, Phil knows what he’d do for either of the two people on the team he has known best and longest, but Tony Stark is a different animal altogether. Phil has never seen enough of Tony’s anger to know just how hard to push, what exactly will leave the other man feeling secure in the notion that there’s boundaries while avoiding Tony’s tendency to let his anger turn in on himself.
when called on it. But Phil is still this team’s handler, damn it, even on top of his role as Tony’s caretaker, and he’s not about to leave the man down here hurting and afraid just because Coulson himself isn’t entirely confident about the best way forward.

He starts with what he mentally terms Stark Diffusion Strategy One: distraction.

“I think we should do something for Halloween this year.” Tony blinks, eyebrows furrowing as his mind races to try to figure out Phil’s angle.

“I—what?” The screens Tony has just used Extremis to re-open start to flicker off one by one (thank you, JARVIS), and the genius is still too busy trying to suss out Phil’s motives to bother commenting, even if he undoubtedly notices.

“It’s coming up, isn’t it? We haven’t really had a chance to celebrate many holidays together as a family, and Loki’s probably never observed Halloween at all. It might be a nice…welcome, thing.” The proposal had really been a shot in the dark, but the more Phil thinks about it, the more he finds himself getting kind of excited. Not so much about Loki, honestly; he’s trying when it comes to that, but he feels absolutely no guilt over the fact that he’s primarily just using the other man right now to try to get Tony interested. “I know we can’t go anywhere, but we could decorate the Tower; I’m sure JARVIS could help out with some pretty fun special effects. And we could have some fun themed snacks and watch movies together. What Halloween movies do you like, honey?” Calling Tony that name Phil only ever uses when he’s little is a risk, a subtle push that might blow up in Coulson’s face. For a moment, it seems to work. The engineer’s movements become just a little less frantic, and his posture softens.

“The uh, the Charlie Brown thing is cute, and—” But Tony is not a genius for nothing, and midway through the sentence he stops and scowls at Phil. “Fuck’s sakes, Coulson that was low. None of what I said when you came down here is changed at all by the prospect of some kind of humiliating party. I have too much to do right now.”

Phil nods. Time for a different Stark Diffusion Strategy then. This time, he tries compromise.

“What’s at the top of your list right now? What absolutely has to get done?”

“War Machine,” Tony responds immediately. And of course, Phil should have known that keeping Rhodey safe would be even more important to Tony than repairing his own suit.

“Okay. I have a one-time only offer for you, take it or leave it and do not tell Steve or he’ll kick my ass.” Despite himself, Tony immediately gives Phil all his attention at the very suggestion of any illicit rule-breaking. “I’ll give you a one hour extension to try to finish up helping Rhodes because I recognize how much that matters to you. But I’m staying down here with you to supervise. And when the hour is up then it’s time for you to be little, and you’re not going to put up a fight about anything I ask you to do for the rest of the day unless of course you need to use your word.” A hint of tension finds its way back into Tony’s body, just a flicker of the same anger and fear that had overtaken him earlier. Phil is already scrambling for another diffusion strategy, but he doesn’t end up needing one. Phil’s willingness to bend the rules in order to recognize the legitimacy of Tony’s needs and feelings is paying off, because there’s already a hint of his little boy in Tony’s voice when he asks,

“The—the Halloween thing. Was that just—were you—”

“Totally serious honey. We can talk about it with the others tonight, maybe spend part of today making some plans for decorations and looking up some recipes and stuff, alright?” Tony smiles, and it’s a little more hesitant and sad than Phil is used to when Tony’s in or near headspace, but it’s still
enough to make him want to smother his boy’s face with kisses. “One hour, Tony. JARVIS, set a timer please?”

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Thor is in the middle of his third attempt at getting lunch into Loki. His brother has been in a foul mood since waking from his nap; he’d wet himself during it, and no matter how often both Thor and Jane have explained to him that his lack of control in that area is no fault of Loki’s own, that it’s a consequence of the magic that had been performed on him, it still makes him bitterly angry to wake up that way. Thor cannot truly blame Loki for resenting it, all of this, given how it had come about, but the part of him that’s used to being permitted to comfort and soothe Tony aches at the way Loki pushes him away in moments like that. Having macaroni thrown at him twice had not been entirely enjoyable either.

He’s still picking the orange pasta out from the long strands of his hair when JARVIS announces the imminent arrival of the Son of Coul. This news is surprising enough that Thor temporarily abandons his attempts with Loki. All members of Thor’s noble and giving team have kindly assisted he and Loki in their own ways, but neither of the two men Loki had most directly affected have spent any time alone with him since his arrival at the Tower. And Friend Phil was scheduled to spend time with their Youngling today, making his unscheduled visit to Thor’s floor all the more curious. He steps out of the elevator clad in the loose pants and a well-worn Army Rangers t-shirt, and seeming distinctly nervous. Given that this is one of the bravest and most even-tempered men Thor has ever had the pleasure of knowing, this show of feeling is downright alarming.

“Is aught amiss, Son of Coul?”

“No. I…well, Tony is little and we’ve been throwing together some ideas for a Halloween party here in the Tower. He was wondering if you and Loki might want to join us once you’re done eating.”

Thor could not have been more surprised had Coulson announced that he was leaving the mighty SHIELD to take up a position farming llamas. Between Friends Phil and Clint’s understandable difficulty adjusting to Loki in their living quarters and the team’s desire to give Tony some time to be little apart from Loki in order to remind him that he is valued on his own terms, Thor has seen very little of both his babe or the Son of Coul as of late. The unexpected opportunity to spend time with both (and to get off his own floor, which has felt a bit suffocating particularly after Jane’s departure) is almost frighteningly enticing. But he can’t help but notice the wariness in his friend’s frame, the way his posture and his positioning in the room suggest that he’s more in his mission-headspace than the more relaxed and loose version of himself that usually cars for Tony. His frequent and uneasy glances in the direction of the kitchen leave Thor in little doubt about the source of his uneasiness.

“My Friend, this might be our Youngling’s desire, but is it yours? I do not wish to force Loki’s company upon you before you are truly ready, however much I appreciate the offer.” Coulson’s face does something complicated then that Thor can’t quite keep up with, and he uncharacteristically leans against one of the walls for apparent support.

“I can’t deny this is difficult for me, but I can’t and don’t want to avoid him, or you by extension, forever. And he and Tony are—cute together. So it lets me see Loki in his best light and helps me remember that he’s not the man who inflicted all the damage of before, that he can’t be even if he wants to.” As if to corroborate this statement, Loki (whom Thor had left in his high-chair in the kitchen) starts to whine from the other room, apparently distressed at having been left alone. “Why don’t you go and see to him? Tony’s just napping but it’s time for him to wake up, so I’ll get him ready and we can all meet up in the penthouse.”

Still in a state of cautiously pleased disbelief, Thor barely takes notice of Coulson’s actual departure,
but when his feet eventually recall how to move, he rushes back to his charge. The prospect of seeing Tony cheers Loki immensely, and he submits to finishing the remains of his lunch with good grace. He also participates in choosing the clothes he’s going to wear downstairs, an unprecedented step since Loki has thus far seemed to want to pretend to ignore the childish designs and patterns of his Midgardian apparel.

Once the boy is settled in a soft blue t-shirt featuring images of sea animals (a recent obsession of Loki’s since his last play-date with Tony) and a pair of stretchy grey pants, he permits Thor to carry him to the elevator and into the penthouse. There they find Tony huddled up on the floor in front of penthouse coffee table with the Son of Coul, surrounded by haphazard piles of art supplies, snacks and a laptop opened to display pictures of what seem to be folded paper bats. The baby is chattering away to Coulson, making animated gestures with his arms (and entire body, really) that threaten, several times, to send everything on the table flying. It’s with something close to relief that Phil registers Thor’s arrival, and he nudges Tony while holding a nearly-toppled bowl of Rolos with his other hand.

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Even though Tony invited Loki and Daddy Thor to join them, his words still die in his throat for just a second when he actually sees them standing there. He’s littler than he’s been in ages, and extremely enthusiastic about this Halloween party plan, so asking Loki to be involved had seemed harmless. But what if he thinks Tony’s ideas are all stupid? Even worse, what if he thinks Tony’s behaving too much like a baby instead of the bigger boy he’d tried to pretend to be the first time they’d played together? Especially without his big brother here to serve as a buffer, the thought is utterly mortifying.

But Thor, wonderful, perfect Thor to whom it so rarely even occurs to judge others harshly, beams warmly at him and lifts him bodily from the floor, so that he and Loki are each propped on one of the god’s hips. His strength is honestly a bit terrifying, but with Thor mostly out of commission for the past weeks while he’s focused on Loki, Daddy Steve has been the only one available able to lift Tony and carry him about the Tower. He would never admit it to anyone, but he’s missed feeling this small and well-protected. Also there’s a bit of macaroni in Thor’s hair (the boxed kind that he’s rarely allowed to eat), and Tony is very seriously considering going for it.

“My wonderful Youngling. What are you creating, little one? The Son of Coul mentioned something about a celebration.” Loki’s eyes widen, but as the response doesn’t seem to be rooted in disgust or fear, Tony lets the excitement from before take him back over as he launches into an explanation.

“Hall’ween, Daddy! We’re going to make special snacks, and watch movies, and decorate the Tower! Daddy Phil found a buncha stuffs on Pinterest, and I don’t really wanna dress up but other people can if they want, and we’re gonna make sure everyone takes a night off! Even Daddy Steve! Phil says we can confiscate all his school stuff and we won’t even get in trouble because it’ll be under the orders of SHIELD!” Some part of Tony’s brain is aware that this half-shouted account is not the most coherent introduction of Halloween to two beings likely unfamiliar with it, but Thor is still grinning at him, and Loki is cocking his head.

“Dress up?” he asks, looking between Thor and Tony with wide eyes. To everyone’s surprise, it’s Phil who answers.

“Lots of people wear costumes at Halloween, Loki. If that’s something you’d like, we could find or make you something once you decide what you want to be.” Tony might be a bit biased, but he thinks his Daddy is pretty smart for making such an offer. Loki is, after all, a highly theatrical kind of guy, and having an outlet for a part of his personality that had existed before everything that’s recently happened to him seems like an excellent way to make Loki feel valued and included.
From there, things aren’t exactly easy or comfortable between all of them, but having a task helps to break the ice a bit, and they spend several glorious hours planning and finding recipes and making sketches (okay, sketches might be a generous word for the drawings Tony and Loki manage to create, but they have fun anyway, especially with the smelly markers and the new package of stickers that Phil has unearthed from somewhere featuring witches and cauldrons and spiders). They even send photos of the drawings to the rest of the team, who all respond almost instantly with goofy and loving and supportive messages; Nat even asks if she can hang Tony and Loki’s depiction of a pumpkin robot on her fridge.

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Tony is still high on feeling so close to his family (not to mention the corresponding decrease in the severity of his migraine) the next morning when he runs into Steve in the kitchen immediately following his meditation session with Bruce. The blonde’s morning class has been cancelled today, and, being Steve, he’s celebrating by making breakfast for Tony and whomever else is currently present in the Tower. Tony’s not sure if it’s a leftover from having spent so much time in headspace lately, or if Bruce’s efforts to familiarize Tony with touch when Big are starting to effect more than just their relationship, but before he even knows he’s about to do it, he reaches out and wraps both his arms around Steve’s waist from behind. He’s warm, like always, and he smells like cinnamon and his old-fashioned deodorant. He’s too tall for Tony to comfortably rest his head on top Steve’s shoulder, but pressing up against the man’s stupidly muscular back is almost as satisfying.

Steve makes a startled noise, but before Tony can even start to think about regretting his impulsive decision, the other man’s arms are sliding atop his own and his fingers are threading in amongst Tony’s.

“Morning sweetheart. You want blueberries in the pancakes this morning? Or bananas just on top with that caramel Clint made the other day?” He asks like it’s any other morning, like the two of them touching this way isn’t in any way unusual or surprising, and Tony grins absolutely stupidly into Cap’s back, relieved that no one, including Steve, can see his face fight now.

“Bananas please. And a date tonight, if you don’t mind.” At this, Steve whirs around so that they’re facing one another, though he’s careful never to break Tony’s grip. There’s a bit of pancake batter on his nose, and a smile on his face Tony’s never quite seen before. It’s a relative, he thinks, of the way he looks at Tony sometimes when he’s little, but it’s not the same either. There’s a heat there that’s entirely adult, and an excitement that promises something entirely new. He could honestly kiss Steve right here, but Tony has the feeling that his old-fashioned guy might prefer to do things in the ‘right’ order, which means dinner first.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I—this is sort of spontaneous on my end, so I don’t have something huge or impressive planned. And if you’d prefer that we can definitely wait, but I figured you might prefer something low key anyway.” The longer Tony talks, the easier it becomes to convince himself that this is a bad idea and he’s made a terrible mistake, so he quickly shuts himself up before he can make matters worse. Steve’s hands are still gripping his, and his thumb traces little patterns on Tony’s hand as he answers.

“I’m meeting with my group work partner at five. I’ll swing back by the Tower and change and then I’m all yours. I…you’re sure, right? You don’t feel pressured somehow?” Tony blinks, unsure how to even begin responding to that. “I just, I felt so jealous the night you and Bruce went out the first time. It wasn’t right or fair, and I worked hard to not let it effect anything, but I was just so surprised when you asked that I worried for a second that you’d picked up on it and were trying to—I don’t know, appease me or something.” He doesn’t mean to, he really doesn’t, but Tony snorts.
“Uh, yeah, me asking you out has motives that are one hundred percent more selfish than that Steve-o. We can talk about your unexpected fit of jealousy at dinner if you’d like, but I assure you I had no idea you’d felt that way. Now, if I’m not mistaken, those pancakes are about to burn.” Steve curses and turns back to the stove, fit of nerves apparently forgotten as he does battle against the slightly charred food on his skillet. Grinning to himself, Tony begins gathering plates and cutlery and, when he’s sure Steve’s back is fully to him, allows himself a brief, silent and highly dorky celebratory dance.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a struggle, and I'm still not totally pleased with it. But I don't think I'm going to get happier since this is already draft four, so I'm leaving it with you wonderful folks.

Thanks as always for your comments and kudos; I always love knowing what you're enjoying, what you're excited for, basically anything you want to tell me! And I hope November is off to a smooth start for all of you.
The Room Where It Happens

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony go out on their date. Tony encounters more than a few surprises at a PR meeting, and enjoys a rare afternoon to himself.

Chapter Notes

I'm back! I know it's been forever (if you want to know where I've been you're welcome to take a look at my latest on Tumblr (http://www.tumblr.com/blog/ketchupcrisp), which also includes some information about other writing I'm working on) but I'm SO happy to be back in this verse again. And apologies in advance if this chapter struggles with flow a bit; it was written really piecemeal over the course of a couple of months, and while I did a couple rounds of editing to try to make sure it flowed reasonably well, I'm not that confident I succeeded.

Content warning for this chapter: Steve struggles in this chapter with coming to terms with his 'new' body in sexual situations. I wouldn't quite classify his feelings as body dysmorphia, because he doesn't hate or even dislike himself as he is now, he just doesn't quite know how to come to terms with the ways in which his body sometimes feels alien to him outside of combat and ageplay situations. Nonetheless, it may be triggering to those with body dysmorphia or similar issues. If you want to read around that section, stop reading at "Steve, you alright?" and start again after the section break.

There are also spoilers for the plot of Hamilton and Netflix's Jessica Jones Season 1.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay, so at first I was thinking super informal for tonight. Like questionable street meat and maybe renting out a movie theatre because you’ve never actually seen a movie in a theatre this century because of crowds and press.”

“Well that explains the last-minute request that I wear a suit, a suit that you apparently bought months ago without even telling me,” Steve teases. He’s not actually angry. While he’ll never be as comfortable in fine clothes as Tony, who can go from workshop shabby to designer chic without ever seeming uncomfortable or out of place, even Steve knows enough to know that the dress pants and blazer he has on are exquisite. They’re well-cut, fitted without making Steve feel like he’s on display, and they lack the stiffness he’s come to associate both with his military uniforms and the cheaper suits he’d borrowed or purchased in the thirties. Tony’s paired it with a royal-blue button up that JARVIS had smugly confirmed bring out Steve’s eyes and the honeyed tones in his hair. “Now, you wanna tell me why you felt you had to dress me for our date? And I swear if you make one crack about khakis—” Tony, clad in a grey suit with red accents (of course), holds his hands up in mocking surrender, and for a minute Steve almost forgets what they’re talking about. After waiting so long, and wondering anxiously if they’d ever expand their relationship out of the ageplay, it feels completely surreal to be standing here laughing and joking with Tony like nothing is different. It
“No grandpa-pants jokes, got it. And I didn’t feel like I had to dress you, I just knew you’d want to
dress up a little for where we’re heading, and since you have yet to actually let me take you out for
clothes beyond what I originally stocked your closet with, I was forced to improvise. Now spin.
Gotta make sure it fits right.” Tony, who has all of their measurements on file with at least a dozen
different tailors in the city, knows damn well the suit fits, but Steve obligingly rotates in a circle about
the penthouse floor. His date licks his lips again, and this time Steve is positive it’s on purpose.
“Damn you clean up good, Rogers. Alright, let’s get going. I bought you a new coat—don’t even
start with me, your bike jacket would ruin the look—it’s right there on the back of the couch.” They
bundle themselves up against the cool fall air (without ever being told, Tony has been careful from
day one to ensure that Steve is never cold) and depart the Tower.

The drive to wherever they’re heading (Tony’s still being uncharacteristically tight-lipped on this
one) almost feels too short. There are still a couple of occasions where Extremis seems to overtake
Tony’s consciousness—his speech stumbles just slightly, or his eyes get that slightly glazed look
Steve has trained himself to become more aware of in recent days, but mostly the other man is as
loose and relaxed as Steve has seen him in weeks, maybe months. He deftly keeps the conversation
moving without the slightly manic edge he takes on after too long in the shop, chatting about
everything from what areas of the city Steve still has left to explore (“Seriously? You’ve never been
to Winnie’s on karaoke night? We have to address this oversight in your education immediately!”) to
updates about some of their mutual friends (“Oh yeah, Pep and Happy are totally a thing now. I tried
to give them a cute ship name, like Peppy or Happer, but for some reason they just aren’t going for
it.”). Just when Steve’s nerves have died down enough that he’s considering making a grab for
Tony’s hand, the engineer nudges his shoulder and points out the window to a well-lit sign reading
‘Richard Rodgers’; Steve might not necessarily be familiar with that particular theatre, but the sign
above it leaves little room for doubt about why they’re here.

“I thought—didn’t you say tickets are really hard to get?” he asks. Despite his hesitation, caused
mainly by guilt over what Tony must have done (or paid) to make this happen, even Steve can hear
how his voice comes out a little breathy in surprised pleasure. The team is pretty great about coming
with him to various artistic events in the city, but he never thought Tony of all people would choose
this as their first date.

“I mean, they might have been a little less happy with me if I’d asked for tickets for the entire team,
which was my original plan. But I contribute a lot to the arts in this city, and while Hamilton doesn’t
exactly need much publicity, it still doesn’t hurt to have Iron Man and Captain America in the
audience.” They park a couple of blocks away, and Tony actually walks around the car to open
Steve’s door for him. Steve replies by blushing like a fool, but for once Tony doesn’t make a joke,
doesn’t do anything except thread his gloved fingers with Steve’s.

Steve is aware enough to realize that their picture is taken numerous times on the brief walk to the
theatre, and then several more times in the lobby. But Tony doesn’t seem bothered at all, and it
certainly doesn’t stop him from leaning close to Steve to point out other famous figures in the crowd
or pressing a hand to his back to lead him around the room. Even when Steve decides to purchase
merchandise for the entire team, Tony is nothing but patient, offering suggestions about sizing and
design choice and smiling fondly when Steve walks away from the booth with a heaping bag full of
almost everything they sell.

“I’ve—just never had this many people to buy things for, let alone money to buy it with,” he says
with a self-deprecating shrug. Tony just smiles and leads them to their seats (which are in the centre,
not quite front-row but close enough, closer than Steve has ever been before).
When the show actually starts…well, any chance Steve had of playing it cool on this date was definitely have been shattered if it wasn’t already. He’s completely and totally swept up in all of it, the music, the costuming, the dancing, the story, everything. Steve cheers loudly and unashamedly for Hamilton, for his and his country’s determination and tenacity against insurmountable odds; he laughs at his absolutely whip-smart and often sarcastic humour, and revels in his developing friendships and his romances with the amazing Schuyler sisters. He weeps for the loss of Laurens, even moreso for Phillip, and for the power of love and forgiveness. By the time the last song fades out on Eliza’s gasp and the central question of the play is repeated for the last time (“Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?”) Steve himself is breathless, somehow both exhausted and elated.

When the lights come up, Tony reaches over to brush the last of the tears from Steve’s cheeks. Tony’s own face looks a little red and tear-stained too, but right now it’s dominated mostly by a beatific smile.

“Well I don’t think I need to ask if you liked it. Wanna go get something to eat and you can tell me all about what you thought?” Steve nods, still feeling a little stunned or drunk or something on the experience, and having shared it with Tony, and maybe Tony understands that too, because he doesn’t break the comfortable silence that has fallen between them until they’re curled up in a cozy corner booth of a diner drinking milkshakes. “So tell me.”

“I—it was—I don’t think I really have words Tony.” The one English class that Steve is currently halfway through feels as if it has not at all prepared him to try to talk about his experience tonight. But the last thing he wants is to sound stupid either, not in front of this man who so often circulates in such cultured and well-educated spheres. Hell, he’s pretty sure Tony has mentioned at some point meeting the guy who wrote and stars in Hamilton; how can anything Steve has to say compete with that?

“Who was your favourite character?” Tony asks easily. “I can definitely see you as a Washington kind of guy, and you definitely have the young, scrappy and hungry thing down too.” He’s not surprised Tony thinks it, knows that most people would probably be inclined to read Steve as the general or the stubborn protagonist, but he doesn’t hesitate at all to say,

“Eliza. I—I like everyone, but if we’re talking about where I see myself the most, it’s definitely in her.”

“Not gonna deny you’d look fantastic in a dress Steve, but I gotta hear the explanation for this one.” At some point, Steve doesn’t even know when, their hands found one another’s again on top of the table, and he uses his free hand to grab for his milkshake and finish it off as he considers what to do next.

He knows exactly the reason why, has known it in his gut since Eliza had sung about feeling helpless and overwhelmed and entirely overtaken in the best of ways. And the certainty with which he could answer Tony’s question doesn’t frighten him the way he knows it probably should given the way that so much of his tenure in the twenty-first century has been dominated by loss. But it doesn’t. It just…doesn’t.

Which does not mean he thinks Tony is ready to hear it just yet, and because Steve is Steve, he says as much. Tony’s features go from warm and open to flashing with a hint of the defiance Steve adores but resists in equal measures, but he permits Steve to bring their joined hands up so he can kiss Tony’s knuckles.

“Ask me again some other time.” Steve doesn’t have the kind of control over the most minute aspects of his expressions that so many of his teammates have—his contributions to the work have never relied on that particular form of subtlety, and any attempts he’s made to learn it have been met with
resistance both personal and professional. (Personal because all of his teammates have at one point or
another expressed great comfort from being able to read him like a book; professional because the
public associated Steve’s public mantle with sincerity (bordering on naivety, a perception that really
bugs him sometimes) in a way that would make any attempts at even self-manipulation seem like a
betrayal.) Without that kind of control over his every facial muscle and movement Steve doesn’t
quite know how to make his expression convey how excited he is to be asked that question again
someday, or indeed to be here with Tony at all, with their joined fingers slightly oily from their
french fries and a hint of ketchup staining the corner of Tony’s lips. But he gives it his best shot
anyway, and laughingly allows Tony to steer the conversation toward an argument about the play’s
best song.

The drive home, is just as comfortable and warm as the journey to the theatre, and as a bonus is
accompanied by Tony occasionally reaching over to brush his fingers through Steve’s hair, or resting
his hand on Steve’s knee. When they reach the penthouse, Tony doesn’t even ask before throwing
some snack food (dried fruit, popcorn, the sweet onion chips that Steve could eat by the barrel),
aware that Steve rarely eats until his super soldier metabolism is fully satisfied, especially in public
where he tends to feel ashamed about it. They curl up on the couch and when Steve loses Tony to a
longer spell with the Extremis, he narrowly avoids his tendency to what Clint calls ‘worry-scold’ and
instead distracts the other man with a tickle fight that leads to the two of them eventually rolling right
off the couch with a loud thud.

“Team’s definitely not going to be inclined to read that noise as an indication that we’re up to no
good,” Tony teases from where he’s pinned under Steve. It’s a clear invitation for more, and it’s a
sorely tempting one. And certainly the last thing Steve wants after a night like this is to leave Tony
frustrated or unfulfilled, but, well… “Steve? You alright?”

“I can’t…uh. No, I mean, I can and I have, but I haven’t since before, since I was small, and when
Bucky and I tried I felt—not good.” God, he sounds like a teenager unable to use their damn words
to talk about sex. Tony rolls out from underneath him and brushes a bit of popcorn from his shirt.

“Not good how, darling?” God, it had been embarrassing enough to live that evening with Buck
once, the last damn thing Steve wants is to discuss it now, when he’s here with Tony and the night
has been so damn prefect.

“Just… I don’t… I’m used to how I am now in battle or when I’m your Dada. I value it then, because
I can carry you around, or fight without sustaining a lot of damage. I know what it’s for, and because
I know it’s purpose I understand how it works in those situations. But in other situations, it doesn’t
feel like my body. I don’t know where it ends, or what makes it feel good, it’s totally alien to me and
I, it’s too…” Steve trails off helplessly, and Tony’s frowning in clear concern, but after a few
moments he nods.

“Okay.” It’s simple, the exact same thing he’d said when Steve had safe-worded out of their age-play
scene so long ago. And he loves Tony’s long strings of words, the way his ideas come to him so fast
sometimes that his mouth can barley get them out fast enough, but the calm simplicity that the other
man can bring to moments like this have a very particular way of cutting through Steve’s own racing
thoughts and feelings. It still costs most of the pride he has left to look up into Tony’s wide brown
eyes, but when he does he finds nothing but patience and affection there. “Yes, hi, hello. I have some
thoughts about what you told me and what it might mean, and we can talk about them if and when
you please. But for now just…I’m still learning how to be touched too, alright? For different reasons,
and in different ways, but I struggle here just like you do. So if you want to just get back on the
couch, and I can show you that episode of Drunk History that Lin did, and we can touch and talk in
whatever ways feel good without worrying about the rest of it, that’s okay with me.” It’s tempting, so
damn tempting to take Tony up on that and ignore the topic altogether. And Steve certainly doesn’t
plan on a long talk about it tonight, but he has to know.

“Just...can you tell me, is something wrong with me?” Tony makes a noise Steve’s never heard from him before, something low and quiet and almost hurt, and seconds later he’s cupping Steve’s face between his palms, tracing the lines of his cheekbones with each of his thumbs and smiling sadly.

“Not a damn thing is wrong with you, Steve. Your body went through profound and almost instant changes that your mind barely had any time to process before you were thrown into the middle of a World War, and then a new century. It knows how to do the things it needs to, just like you said. The rest will just take some time to learn. And babe,” one of Tony’s hands drifts slowly, gently down Steve’s chest, following the line of buttons on his shirt with just enough pressure that the soft fabric rubs pleasantly against his skin, “helping teach you that? Watching you find out what makes your body tremble and your breath hitch? Finding out what noises you make when you’re so consumed by pleasure that it just takes over everything? You have no idea what I’d give to do that, what any of us would give to have you that way. Discovery and exploration are not a burden, Rogers.”

For just a moment he thinks that Tony’s touch is going to keep moving past the point where his shirt is tucked into his slacks. He imagines it, even, with equal parts dread and excitement, wondering what those hands would feel like on his thighs, his ass, his cock. He’s seen and known this man in so many ways and situations, but never this, never the confident, seductive would-be lover; he’s had only hints, mostly from witnessing his flirtatious interactions with Bruce. Would Steve recognize himself under Tony’s deft, experienced fingers, which would surely work Steve’s body just as skillfully as he manipulates everything from large chunks of metal to the smallest and most delicate computer parts? Would it feel like coming home to his own body, or would he freeze just like he had under Bucky’s kisses and caresses, feeling like he was watching his lover in bed with someone else?

Instead, Tony leans in and uses his other hand to trace a single finger around the border of Steve’s lips. He just barely prevents himself from chasing it with his tongue.

“You feel me here, babe?” Steve manages a jerky nod. “Feel my fingers on your pretty pink lips? They’re so damn smooth, Steve, you’re like the only person in New York without chapped lips right now. And they’re so thick and sweet; they’ll look even bigger once they’ve been kissed and nipped until they’re swollen.” This time Steve’s tongue does dart out to briefly meet Tony’s finger, and he’s never been more grateful for his superior eyesight than right at that moment, when he can see in such clear detail how Tony’s pupils dilate in response. “Tell me how this feels, Steve.”

“G-good. Makes me want—”

“Want what, darling?”

“Kiss me?” He doesn’t have to ask twice.

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Tony comes into the PR strategy meeting two days later with a frighteningly long to-do list. He’s going to be paying Heather and her team overtime on top of overtime, but the fact that she and Clint had single-handedly decided to leap into openly aligning the Avengers with the Inhumans and other super- and meta-humans is going to mean reimagining entire strategies, not to mention making small and constant changes based on the status of the ongoing governmental negotiations…

His musings are brought up short when he trips. First he thinks it’s over his own feet, which instantly makes him anxious and wary (he didn’t think he was having a particularly bad Extremis-day, all things considered, but if he’s losing his focus enough that it’s effecting his balance that might not be true), but when he looks down and finds a pair of bright purple Converse sneakers sticking out from beside the table, he reevaluates. And it’s probably not all that surprising that Clint is here, or even
that Natasha showed given her position at S.H.I.E.L.D., but when he looks up to find the entire team gathered around the conference table with Heather seated at the head, that...that's enough to surprise even Tony. It's been months since they'd all actually come in to one of these sessions rather than just relying on Tony to convey the most pressing details. And hell, is that—

"Barnes?" Bucky gives a jaunty little wave from his spot near the head of the table, and then goes back to showing off the latest upgrades to his arm. "What are you—what are all of you doing here?"

"Well, Clint made a good point the other day when I confronted him about not telling any of us what he and Heather planned to do regarding the new campaign in favour of the Inhumans." Phil's tone is as dry and inscrutable as ever, but Tony knows him well enough by now to see the signs that he's fighting off the urge to smile, and seriously what even the hell is going on here? "He said that part of the reason you've been so exceptionally busy lately, even for you, was that the rest of us have kind of taken to letting everything but the actual fighting fall to you. I was not...entirely impressed with his analysis at first—" Clint coughs something like 'understatement,' and doesn't even try to hide his grin when Coulson turns a halfhearted glare on him. "But as is often the case with Hawkeye, he was seeing something I wasn't. Now I can't promise to take everything off your hands—equipment maintenance, for one, remains solely within your purview given that you'd never allow anyone to get between you and the more complicated nuance of material like Barnes' arm. But I can direct Captain Rogers to be in charge of reviewing battle footage and making notes on any potential areas for improvement. Likewise, while we're all pretty useless with the SI side of things, Natasha and I can work to better ensure that during periods when the company requires more of your energy and focus, S.H.I.E.L.D. is not also making demands for instant fulfillment of any of the myriad of projects you always have going with them. In short: the Avengers have a handler, and I intend to fulfill that role more actively as of now. So have a seat, Mr. Stark, and we can begin."

It's a damn good thing that the others are not only here but have come prepared (with notes even! It's damn near impossible for S.H.I.E.L.D. to get Clint to even keep on top of his AARs, and he's showing up to a PR meeting with notes?) because beyond passively taking in information, Tony's functionally useless for at least the first half of the session. He never would have asked for this, had never even realized that he'd missed or needed Coulson's calm or his steady, guiding hand outside of their ageplay; after all, the man had been the Avenger's handler for such a short time before New York. But he can see it so damn easily now, can understand how it was this man, and only this man, who had been able to bring Clint, and then Natasha, into S.H.I.E.L.D. and got them both to stay, to trust in anything beyond themselves and the reach of their weapons.

"Now Mr. Barnes. I was told there were matters you want to discuss." Heather's words take a moment to sink in to Tony's somewhat broken brain, and by the time they do he's preparing himself to respond. He takes a long moment that Tony knows the man often requires to ensure words come out in the order (and language) he intends them to.

"I want to help the team, more openly. I can keep hidden for some of the smaller missions, but I don't want to be stuck behind at the Tower whenever something is high enough profile that there's going to be cameras. But to do that I have to—I have to—"

"You don't have to do anything, James," Tony interrupts, unable to help himself. Steve, of all people, puts a hand up to halt him from speaking further. And how could Steve not be on his side about this? The guy gets damn near murderous if he even thinks that Bucky's team of therapists have pushed him too hard on any particular day, how could he possibly think that Barnes opening his life up to the merciless American press and public is remotely an option? Heather, to both her credit and Tony's everlasting annoyance, doesn't even glance in his direction. Her focus stays entirely on Barnes as she gently completes his thought for him.
“We would need to have a strategy for how to talk to the world about the Winter Soldier.”

“Not before these negotiations are done and we have any sense at all of what ‘justice’ the government is likely to call for,” Natasha cuts in. Tony hadn’t counted on her has an ally in this, because compared to the almost revoltingly pure and sweet relationship Steve and Bucky share, it’s comparatively easy to forget that she too had encountered James before, that she is perhaps more knowledgeable than any of them about the darkest parts of the man.

“If it’s after we would be stuck with whatever gets decided in those rooms. If it’s before, we could actually help influence that decision.” It’s possibly the longest and most sentence Bucky has spoken in front of anyone since the 30s, and Tony is momentarily distracted by his pride in his friend, his brother, for how far he’s come. Steve’s eyes are shining, too, even though he’s shaking his head.

“It could shape things the other way, Buck. You could become some kind of scapegoat, a face for these committees to hold up and paint as the bogeyman. I won’t let you—”

“You don’t decide this for me.” The words are quiet (Bucky never, ever yells, and that’s one of little Tony’s favourite things about him), but this hardly lessens their effect. A heavy silence falls across the room as the two old friends stare one another down. Eventually Steve blinks first, chest heaving. He refuses to meet any of their eyes. “It’s not—this isn’t just for me. Clint’s been telling me about that gal, the one who took down that mind-controlling fucker—”

“Jessica Jones.”

“Yeah, that’s the one. He says she doesn’t want our help, maybe isn’t in a position to let herself want anyone’s, but doing this—it could help more than just me. And I hurt so many people, broke apart so many families…” Tony closes his eyes against the images that swim suddenly and violently to the surface. He’s imagined it hundreds of times since he’d learned the truth, so his brain is more than able to supply them at will: a man and a woman dying by the side of the road. It had been fast, at least, they hadn’t had to be afraid for long, or had much of a chance to feel the coldness of the winter air...

Someone says his name, but it sounds hollow and kind of tinny like they’re whispering from the other end of a long chamber. The hand that finds his elbow, exerting just enough pressure to ground him, is a much more immediate distraction.

“James, it sounds like you’ve made up your mind, and I certainly can’t find any fault with your reasoning. But we’re going to do this the smart way. You’ll listen to everything Heather and her team say, and consult with Natasha, Steve and I every step of the way. No surprises. No heroics. With your permission, I’d also like to discuss the matter with your therapist to try to ensure this process does you as little harm as possible.” Bucky makes a noise of affirmation, and the hand at Tony’s elbow squeezes again. His awareness for fine detail is starting to return as his panic recedes; he can feel the trigger-calluses on Coulson’s index finger, and between he and Natasha and Clint, that particular sensation is familiar and bizarrely comforting enough that his breathing starts to come a little easier, too. “We can cover the rest without you, Tony. For now I believe you and Bruce have a meditation session. I’ll brief you both on anything else of significance this evening.”

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It’s vaguely disconcerting to find he still has more than half the day to himself after having anticipated being in with Heather until at least dinner time. Tony considers trying to get Bruce to play hooky from his own work, but it feels disingenuous at best to goof off when Phil has given him this time to get his own work done. So he wanders down to the shop, and manages to complete the repairs to his own armour and prep for the hearings the following day. Somehow, that only takes him until 3:00.
He thinks about going up to visit with Thor and Loki, but the latter’s moods are still highly volatile (except when Tony is little—he always likes Tony when he’s little) so unannounced visits are just as likely to upset him as they are excite him. But the briefly-lived thought is enough to remind Tony that he still hasn’t looked at the records of the tests Jane and Bruce had performed on the boy. And damn if actually having the time to just do it now doesn’t feel fucking fantastic.

“J, open up all of Dr. Foster and Dr. Banner’s material on Loki. And get more coffee brewing. And send Phil a basket of—what would he want a basket of? Fruit isn’t really his style, and he always thinks people sending flowers are trying to kill him, which would make me call him paranoid if he weren’t right like over half the time…ooh, suits. We have his measurement on file, get in contact with that place on 3rd?” It’s with a disunity amused tone that JARVIS confirms the ‘suit basket’ order several minutes later, and Tony can’t help but grin to himself even as he begins to dig into the difficult reading that is Loki’s file.

Chapter End Notes

If you're still reading after my long and extended break, I'd love to hear from you! I'm working on catching up with comment replies, but I even when I'm delayed I still read and treasure every one.
Inhuman(e)

Chapter Summary

Steve struggles on personal, professional, and academic levels with the concept of choosing inaction. Tony visits Loki and gets started on his treatment. And the plan to integrate Bucky slowly and gently into the limelight is put to the test far quicker and more painfully than anyone had hoped.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for this chapter (These are particularly spoiler-y, but as this one grapples with some big stuff, I don't want anyone going in unprepared who might be harmed): Some pretty serious angst for this chapter and the next few with Bucky and Tony, who are forced to publicly witness footage of the Winter Soldier's assassination of the Starks.

Broader warnings, too, for bigotry and discrimination being directed toward super-, meta- and other enhanced humans, as well as a brief discussion of its intersections with racism. (Steve suspects, incorrectly, that the team isn't stepping in to a particular matter because the person involved is Black. There is also a mention of Canada's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.) It's not overly graphic, but these descriptions may still be upsetting or hard to read, particularly in the present political climate. I'm not sure how/if the chapter could be excerpted to exclude these storylines, but if you want or need that kind of intervention, let me know and I'll see what I can do about sending a redacted chapter.

The 'Humans First' movement, I found out after I wrote this chapter, is something that actually happens in the Agents of SHIELD comics; I haven't read them, so there are no spoilers and this storyline will not be determined or shaped by what happens there, but it still felt important to recognize that (unintentional) connection.

Finally, there are some minor spoilers for Luke Cage season one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve’s meeting with Dr. Dolan was several weeks ago now. The class is gearing towards their final projects, and they have a proposal and annotated bibliography for them due in just a couple of weeks, and he couldn’t possibly be more stuck. It's not, he thinks (he hopes) for lack of trying. Since their conversation he’s thrown himself into research on several of the topics his professor had suggested, from American foreign policy since the Cold War to the post colonialism movements. And in the abstract, it’s easy to see what she means, to understand the importance of concepts like sovereignty and national self-determination. Despite his reputation, he’s never actually thought himself or the country he acts as a representative of to be infallible or all-knowing.

It’s just that every time he goes on to read about atrocities and violence and oppression at home or
abroad, and tries to imagine himself not acting, just sitting on the sidelines and waiting to be told that certain people’s pain does or does not meet a list of pre-determined requirements that decide whether or not intervention is acceptable, he then has to spend several hours in the gym ‘testing’ (read: finding new and creative ways to break) the equipment that Tony has made specifically to handle Steve’s size and strength.

Things between he and Bucky, who is normally the only one he would trust himself with in such moments, are still strained after the PR meeting. Steve has started toward the other man’s floor dozens of times since then with the goal of making up, ending this absurd awkwardness between them because it’s not as if he doesn’t want Bucky to be comfortable voicing his own thoughts and feelings about his future. But Christ, if Steve can’t help Bucky, and may soon be unable to help anyone as Captain America without external permission, what the hell is he good for anyway?

_You don’t decide this for me._
_You don’t decide this for me._
_You don’t decide this for me._

His anger and hurt and feelings of complete irrelevance are so absolute in those moments that it frightens him later, keeps him awake at night and terrified of the topic ever coming up between he and a member of the team ever again. So Steve does not appreciate it when fate forces his hand in the unexpected figure of Luke Cage.

SHIELD and the Avengers have been keeping an eye on the situation in Harlem for several weeks. Clint, Steve thinks, has made provisional contact with the apparently bulletproof man, but Cage has showed little interest in forging connections between himself and other powered people (excepting, if the rumours can be trusted, Jessica Jones.) Now, however, there’s a manhunt on for the guy that’s being lead by such obviously corrupt local politicians that Steve is entirely in favour of stepping in. Which is how he’s found himself in a SHIELD boardroom with Tony, Natasha and Phil, all of whom have been attempting for an hour to convince him that it’s a terrible idea.

“But I just—we’re helping out with the Inhumans, aren’t we? Clint is leading this whole campaign, and it’s working! And Bucky is fixing to open his entire life up to the public not just for himself, but because it’ll have a positive impact on other people who have said they don’t want our help directly, like that Jones woman. This isn’t any different!” Tony’s smile is patient and understanding and somehow it makes Steve’s anger flare all the brighter.

“This is different.”

“Why? Because he’s too much of a PR risk for us? Because he’s African-American? What the hell is wrong with us that we sit in board rooms and decide whose lives matter enough for the Avengers to lend their spotlight to?”

“Because Luke Cage is not alone. Tony can you—” Phil doesn’t bother finishing his sentence, because in a matter of seconds Tony has done something complicated with his phone and taken over the feed of the large screen in front of them. It’s a YouTube video of all things, and if Tony honestly believes that some half-hearted statement of support is going to be enough when all of Harlem is out for this man’s blood…

He watches as a group of young people, mostly Black women, distribute identical dark hoodies to a waiting crowd. The camera pans to show the line of people waiting to receive a sweater, which appears to stretch across several blocks.

“Now don’t be stupid about this,” one of the women instructs as she tosses a hoodie to a man wearing a thick gold chain and jeans, who dons it proudly with a whoop. “We’re not trying to
directly antagonize anybody or put ourselves in danger. The name of the game is distraction and misdirection. We’re trying to keep Luke Cage safe for as long as possible so he can do what he’s gotta do, not get ourselves killed or bring more negative attention to the work he’s been doin’. The woman laughs as a child who can’t be a day older than ten swaggers up to the table. “Mikey darlin’ I think you gotta put some more meat on those bones before you’ll fool anyone into thinkin’ you’re Luke Cage.”

“Sometimes,” Natasha says softly after motioning for Tony to pause the footage, “the best solutions are local ones.”

“I mean it when I say we’re keeping an eye on things, Steve. I’m rooting out the source of those weapons the police have been trying to use against Cage. Natasha and I are going try like hell to force through a provision in the Accords that forbids their use, or the use of anything similar, except under extremely specific circumstances. And Clint and the PR folks are signal boosting efforts like that one you just saw to bring awareness and support for what’s been going on. We are not doing nothing, and Luke Cage is not alone.”

“But we could do more,” Steve insists, because how can Tony not see that? Not want to be there on the ground in the centre of it all instead of maneuvering behind the scenes?

“Yeah, we could. But let’s say, for example, I go in there right now. Rich white guy strolling into Harlem and telling these people that Luke Cage is a hero? They know that! And my saying it actually makes him less credible amongst the people who matter most. Plus it silences the voices that need to be heard who are already speaking up for and with him.”

You don’t decide this for him. The echo of Bucky’s words to him in the boardroom is an unwelcome shock, and Steve just barely manages to stand and push his chair backwards without crushing the damn thing.

“Sounds like our minds are already made up then.”

“Steve—”

“I have a class at two. I need to go.”

****

If the throbbing in his temple growing ever-more-insistent is any indication, today is going to be a bad day Extremis-wise. Add that to the fight with Steve and Tony is sorely tempted to just hide in the shop when he gets back to the Tower. But he knows himself well enough to know he’ll just dwell and agonize if he’s there, so he makes his way to Thor’s floor with a distinctly grumpy feeling.

His mood is not initially helped by seeing Loki. The boy’s actually in a sweet mood today; according to Thor, he’s been looking forward to Tony’s visit all day, and he greets him with a little wave and a wide smile, apparently unconcerned about the fact that he’s wearing nothing but Thor’s shirt and a thick diaper. Even though he knows from reading the guy’s file that bladder and bowel control are major issues for Loki, there’s still a moment after he sees concrete evidence for the first time where Tony almost hates him.

Loki doesn’t have to ask for this. Doesn’t have to feel ashamed of knowing that he chooses to be so completely dependent on other people, or feel constantly aware that the control is ultimately in his hands, that he could stop all of it with a single word the way that Tony can.

And how sick is it that Tony is jealous of that? What’s wrong with him that part of him thinks it cruel to try to fix this completely non-consensual power exchange for Loki instead of just letting him learn
“Hey buddy. How you been doin'? Has your—Thor been taking good care of you? It looks like it, is that a sugar cookie in your hand there?”

“We are testing several recipes for the upcoming Hallows Eve celebration,” Thor explains with a fond grin at his brother, who, apparently fearing that Tony is a bit *too* interested in his cookie, stuffs the rest in his mouth all at once. Tony’s stomach drops. The party’s coming up fast, and with things so awkward between he and Steve (and Natasha too)—maybe they should cancel the whole thing rather than risk the humiliation of half the team skipping out.

“Yeah that’s—that’s cool man. Loki, I thought you and I could work on a puzzle today, what do you think?” The little god of mischief is won over by the brightly coloured representation of a cat that looks a lot like his stuffed animal, Aslan, and he’s quickly whining and squirming to be let down from Thor’s steady grip.

The pieces are large and few, but putting them together is definitely a struggle for Loki. He spends several minutes attempting to force two completely incompatible pieces together, and immediately looks to Tony and Thor for assistance when they refuse to cooperate. The latter is plainly ready to jump in, but Tony shakes his head. He has to know if Loki is unable to complete this task period, or simply used to relying on Thor and others for assistance without even being forced to ask.

“What’s wrong, buddy?”

“Not—not.”

“That’s true, those two don’t go together very well, do they? Try to look at the picture on the box for help. Can you find one that might go with this? There’s green on it from the collar, so we should try to find some more green.” Loki moves slowly and cautiously over the pieces, deliberating, and Thor is almost vibrating next to Tony with the urge to help his brother. Yeah, they’ll have to talk about that and soon. They’re never going to know if Loki’s brain is capable of healing and remembering once familiar skills and processes on its own if Thor does everything for him. But Tony is also not in the mood to alienate yet another member of the team today, so for now he says nothing and just waits it out, hoping Thor can manage to do the same.

“This?” Loki points to the matching piece, and Tony can’t help but smile at the boy’s pride when they slide together easily.

“That’s perfect, bud. Now that other piece you showed me before, that was a piece of an ear, right? Can you find me some more of those?”

After the puzzle, he has Loki work with some blocks, and then Tony directs him to sit in a large green rocking bowl designed to help with his balance. The latter is a big hit, and by the end of Loki’s exploration of it, Tony has taken enough detailed notes and video using the Extremis hub that he allows himself to close it all and just enjoy the sound of Loki’s giggles and Thor’s accompanying booming laughter. It feels even better when the blonde wanders over and presses a gentle hand to the back of Tony’s neck.

“I have missed you greatly, my friend.”

“Missed you too,” he says, not even realizing how true the words are until he’s speaking them aloud. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get here and have time to really focus on helping out with Loki. We can try to make it a regular thing? Are Tuesday afternoons like this good? I won’t always have to work him quite this hard, but it helps to establish a baseline so that I can track his development before...
I make any other plans.” Thor makes an agreeable noise.

“When your schedule permits it, you would also be welcome to stay after your work is complete and simply play with us.” When Tony is silent for just a beat too long, the blonde’s gaze on him sharpens. Not for the first time, Tony thinks that anyone who believes Thor to be unobservant is really damn stupid. “I am…sorely tempted to insist on it today.”

“I really can’t just now,” Tony says with no small amount of regret. “Gotta go back to SHIELD and prep for the negotiations tomorrow with Natasha.” Then he’s backing toward the elevator as quickly as he can, trying not to give himself time to change his mind, to curl up in Thor’s arms and pretend that there’s anything left in the world that’s simple.

****

Even when he’d essentially demanded to resume his duties as the Avengers’ full time handler, Phil realizes now that he’d underestimated all this could truly encompass. When he’d died, after all, handling the team had mainly involved trying to ensure its individual members didn’t kill one another before they could take down the Big Bad—a complex and difficult task to be sure, but still a singular goal with only so many possible variations: stop what Banner had called the chemical mixture of several remarkable and broken people from imploding on itself.

The team as he understands it now is not so much a chemical solution as it is an intricate and highly temperamental piece of machinery. When it works right—when all the small pieces are maintained just so and its surrounding environment is ideal for its functioning—Coulson firmly believes there’s not a force on or beyond Earth that comes close to equalling it. The problem is that when Coulson had come back, particularly before they’d discovered the truth about the circumstances of his death and subsequent resurrection, he’d been so busy trying not to piss them all off any further that he’d neglected that maintenance, let it fall away onto someone else’s plate. And Tony (for much of the daily, mundane work of keeping the team together had indeed fallen on Stark) had done such a good job for so long that it had been easy to miss, to pretend that the team was simply working all on its own with no interventions necessary. He’d upgraded their gear and handled the press and arranged Steve’s studies and hundreds of other tasks that meant when they were needed on the battlefield they were ready.

It had taken Extremis, ironically, to change that; with his mind and body enhanced to their very limits, Tony had taken on more and more until it had begun to all-too-literally consume him. Phil will always be simultaneously proud and horribly embarrassed that Clint had seen it first—that, without asking or even consulting Tony or any of the rest of them, he’d begun to pick up some of the slack by assisting other enhanced humans in their network and contributing more actively to their PR strategy. And even then, Coulson’s first impulse had been to discourage Clint—Tony had just been at this kind of thing for so much longer, it seemed safer, easier, to leave it in his hands. That he was essentially punishing Stark for his own hyper-competence didn’t occur to Phil, hadn’t until Clint had practically screamed it at him.

Even after he’d accepted the truth, the fact that he’d let his own fear and self-hatred, and then the remnants of his own trauma override his duty to handle his team, it had taken Coulson longer than he’d anticipated to come to grips with the scope of what that duty now meant. Stepping up during the PR meeting had been a start, one concrete thing he could take of Tony’s plate, but it had quickly become apparent that the task he’d set himself was bigger than that. He’d drawn up all kinds of plans—training regimens, strategy sessions, group outings—and discarded them just as quickly as the dynamics of the group seemed to shift almost daily. And then he’d realized again the same lesson he’d learned so painfully after single-handedly deciding to end Tony’s de-aging: he could simply ask the team what they needed from him.
So he had. He’d spent a solid two weeks meeting with individual members of the group, having frank conversations about what they needed to feel supported by their handler. Some of it he’d expected: Bruce, for instance, had asked for Phil and SHIELD’s assistance in streamlining his training as a certified medical professional, something he’d brought up several times in the past few months without ever having time to follow through. Clint had requested help in getting a more formalized program for supporting friends and family members of enhanced humans running. Tony, a man who had so recently been a civilian and had never really had anything resembling a handler before (excepting maybe Pepper and Rhodes, and even then only in very specific situations) had confessed that he had no idea what to ask for, which was both unsurprising and a little gutting.

Others had been rather more of a surprise. Natasha had requested, of all things, a rocking chair. Coulson had very nearly snapped, accused her of treating this entire thing like a joke, but the same instinct that had led him to hear Clint out when he’d wanted to bring in the Black Widow instead of putting her down as instructed so many years ago led him to keep his mouth shut, and the decision had been a wise one. She’d gone on to explain that her recent struggles with Tony when her role at SHIELD had come into conflict with his own sense of the best way forward had made her realize that they still didn’t trust, or even know, one another all that well as adults. Marking out a specific space for them to spend time together at home (one that, she’d admitted with a small smile, little Tony would also enjoy) felt to Natasha like a manageable first step. Phil had ordered the glider the next day.

Barnes had asked Phil for a formal assessment of his field readiness. Coulson, who had been fully prepared for Bucky to not even show up to the meeting given that his last handlers were HYDRA agents, hardly knew how to respond to an appeal that demonstrated so much trust. But he’d started attending Bucky’s individual and group training sessions, and would be consulting with his various therapists and aides in the coming weeks.

He’d saved Steve for last. Coulson honestly didn’t know if it was out of nerves on his part or because the two of them seemed to have particularly incompatible schedules these days. But as Steve grew more and more withdrawn and moody after his disagreements with the team over Bucky and then Luke Cage, it increasingly felt like the success of this entire venture was resting on that conversation: either Steve would let himself be handled, would learn to both lead the team and follow when necessary, or he wouldn’t, and the whole thing might well fall apart.

So of course, the days preceding their scheduled meeting are when things start to go downhill. This time it doesn’t happen in a series of major but unrelated attacks; instead, it’s a series of slow-falling dominoes. A government official they’re 90% sure is HYDRA-backed begins airing a new series of attack ads against super-, meta- and other enhanced humans, leading to a ‘Humans First’ rally that rapidly turns violent; several SHIELD agents (who Coulson is pretty sure were plants in the first place, but it’s hard to be as vigilant about screening these days when they’re still trying to rebuild) had publicly resigned in protest of the organization’s statement of condemnation against the HF; one of Clint’s contacts, a young Canadian meta-human working to bring attention and support toward the country’s thousands of Missing and Murdered Indigenous women, had been injured on patrol and the government was refusing to investigate. And in the midst of all of this, James Barnes had begun the slow and painful process of outing himself to the joint-hearings and to the world as the Winter Soldier.

The latter was, surprisingly, the least acrimonious of all of the current PR problems the Avengers and those in their community were facing. That, Tony Stark was currently insisting, was the problem.

“Do you think I want to be right?” he demands of Steve, who has just accused Tony of seeking out trouble where there is none. “Do you honestly think I don’t want this to be as painless and uncomplicated as possible? But I am telling you something’s off. Peterson should be jumping all over
this; the worst that Bucky was forced to do as the Winter Soldier fits right in with the narrative he’s trying to spin about us all as dangerous and immoral. He shot one of his own teammates not once, but twice for Christ’s sake. And yet Peterson abstained when it was his turn to publicly question James? I am telling you we’re about to get hit. Hard.”

“With what?” Coulson cuts in smoothly before Steve can respond. “I trust you and I believe you, Stark, but I need to know what you think we’re firing back against before I can effectively help plan a counter.” At this, Tony grows uncharacteristically silent, staring resolutely at the table and moving his left hand onto his lap (to conceal a tremor, most likely.) Stark’s never liked having to admit to ignorance, but Phil’s pretty positive that’s not what this is; the man can outthink someone like Joshua Peterson in his sleep. “Tony.”

“…Howard and Maria. That’s the only piece of the Soldier’s history we haven’t offered up on a silver platter, so he knows, somehow. He’s waiting for the right moment, probably Monday. So by-the-by I’m going to have to skip our play-time that day because I have to be there. They’ll be able to project any reaction they want onto me if I’m not present.” And maybe it’s the oblique mention of Tony’s little side; maybe it’s that he’s watched Tony, and all of them really, suffer enough for several lifetimes. But for just a moment Phil can’t see, can’t think, can’t do anything past the rage that courses through him. He sees it reflected on all of those around him; the way Steve’s fists clench and Natasha goes entirely still and Bruce’s breathing becomes deep and loud as he attempts to control the Hulk. And if indiscriminate smashing were ever called for, Phil considers bitterly, now would really be the time.

But he’s their handler, and if they ever needed him to put all of that aside and do something, now’s the moment.

“…alright. Then we need to get to work.”

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They spent the entire weekend locked in the Tower. The penthouse becomes a war room, with members of the PR staff, lawyers, trusted SHIELD execs and psychologists appearing on a near-constant rotation for consultation. Nearly everyone loses it at some point; while Bruce’s surrender to the Hulk around Hour 32 is the most dramatic indicator, Phil is more alarmed by Steve losing track of his strength for the first time in months and shattering his favourite mug at Hour 22. Bucky lapsing into silence shortly thereafter, around Hour 27, is also disconcerting, particularly because he too has no choice but to attend the session on Monday. Tony is decidedly the calmest of them all. Phil would like to attribute that to his ample experience with negative press, but he’s pretty certain (and the psychologist who Tony speaks only briefly to agrees) that it’s more likely a delayed response. He’s going to crash, and soon. They’ll all just have to hope that he makes it through the meeting before that happens.

Some time early Monday morning Phil calls a halt to the preparation, sending away everyone but the team and all but forcing Steve into the kitchen with him to help prepare breakfast. (Tony, unsurprisingly, can’t manage to anything solid, but he does choke down a smoothie before retiring to his bedroom to change.) The rest of them eat in tense silence. And then there’s no point in putting it off any longer.

Phil, Tony, Bucky and Natasha all rise in almost eerie unison. Just before the reach the elevator, Steve darts over and takes Barnes aside to whisper something; Coulson is glad that however strained their relationship has been as of late, their goodbye still ends with a hug and Steve brushing a kiss against Bucky’s forehead. His blue eyes find Tony, too, but matters between them have been even worse, and neither can seem to find the right words. Eventually, Steve breaks their gaze with nothing but a short nod.
“Kick some ass!” Clint yells from the kitchen.

Natasha expects it to be a shit day all around. She expects Bucky to be forced to describe, in vivid and gory detail, exactly how the Starks had died. She anticipates dozens, maybe even hundreds of follow-up questions with no purpose other than the production of lurid headlines.

As it turns out, most of what she expects turns out not to be necessary, because they have the damn assassination on video. The first time she manages to get through it feeling relatively little; her first instinct, always, will be to watch even the most brutal acts as an agent, searching for another asset’s strengths and weaknesses, their tells. She notes the brief flicker of recognition on Barnes’ face at hearing his rank and last name fall from Howard’s bleeding lips; she wonders if that moment plays any part in the intimacy of the methods the Soldier chooses to eliminate his targets, or if the mind-control techniques at HYDRA had simply been thorough enough that at this point Barnes had enjoyed killing.

The problem is that they don’t just air the footage once. Peterson keeps the damn thing on a near constant loop behind him while he speaks for over half an hour, constantly manufacturing reasons to refer back to the footage: to zoom in on the damage to Howard’s skull, on Bucky’s impermeable expression, to enhance the sound of Howard’s pleas for his wife’s life and Maria’s subsequent cries for her husband. Over and over again they’re all captives, forced to witness the sights and sounds of Howard and Maria Stark’s terrifying last moments. And after the first time, the empathy Natasha had once truly doubted she was capable of nearly takes her over. Positioned on Tony’s left she can feel the minute flinches too small for cameras to pick up, can hear his breathing grow ragged and the small, involuntary sounds he makes at particular moments in the footage, usually those involving his mother. On what must be at least the twentieth repetition of the macabre scene, a voice sounds from behind her, one she’s just as relieved to hear now as she has been on the worst of her missions.

“That’s enough.”

“Agent Coulson you are here as a witness—”

“And as the Avengers’ handler. I’m not sitting next to them because I don’t pretend at neutrality.”

His cutting tone makes it extremely clear that it isn’t Coulson’s potential neutrality that is truly questionable here. “You have now reviewed this footage so many times that even your most devoted supporters can have no reason to believe you’re doing so for any other reason than to torture the son of the victims as well as the brainwashed prisoner of war who committed the crimes and is undertaking the long, painful process of making amends to the Stark family and the American public. Each of those men is currently displaying far more compassion, generosity and patience than yourself, Congressman.”

“It’s important to underscore the true violence, the heinous—”

“I think we’re all extremely clear on the fact that HYDRA is unparalleled in its use of force, manipulation and coercion. To ‘underscore’ this point any further would not just be gratuitous, it would be utterly inhumane. And we all know how committed you are to humanity, Congressman…”

Phil has always been good at playing the perfect bureaucrat: bland without projecting a lack of empathy, unremarkable, and entirely easy to miss at exactly the moments when he’s doing his most critical work. Perhaps he’s been working more closely with Heather than Natasha realizes, or maybe, like the rest of them, Coulson is just too tired to pretend any more just now. Either way, the inhumane quip is exactly the opening they need (and probably destined to be turned into a pro-Avengers hashtag too—Phil will never live that own). Peterson doesn’t raise a single objection when the Chair calls for a week-long recess of the hearings in order for all parties to ‘digest this latest news
—and, of course, seek any necessary support, Mr. Stark, Mr. Barnes.’

Bucky just barely makes it to the (thankfully covered) parking lot before vomiting spectacularly. Stark is hardly much better, moving next to Natasha like a ghost.

“It’s alright. It’s going to be alright, we’re going home,” Phil keeps repeating. Presumably the comment is directed primarily to Barnes, whose back he’s rubbing, but Natasha holds on to that promise like a talisman.

Chapter End Notes

Eek. This chapter has now taken the cake for the most re-writes I’ve ever done. There were about twenty versions of it that I ended up tossing before I finally got to this one. Hope y’all enjoyed it, and, as always, thank you for reading and commenting!
Chapter Summary

The team begins dealing with the fallout from the latest round of hearings, and finds that even ageplay is a complicated venture right now. Steve and Phil have a long overdue conversation.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: The warnings from last chapter are still in effect here. So if you skipped that one, do make sure to at least glance at the lengthy content notes there before proceeding.

Specific to this chapter, there’s some definite self-risking activity that some might classify as self-harm. (Spoilery details: Bucky is struggling with some pretty severe self-hatred and goads the Hulk to try to provoke a physical confrontation; nothing bad happens to him, but he seeks out that encounter knowing that it might. If you want to avoid it, skip from "Bucky's night proves just as sleepless" until the end of that section.)

As always, be mindful and take care of yourselves when reading, and let me know if you have questions or concerns about whether or not this chapter is for you.

Not my wife. Please. No.

Howard! HOWARD!

Tony wakes with a start for the fourth time that evening. Extremis, reading Tony’s preoccupation with the footage he’d seen today as a request for further information, keeps helpfully replaying the video in crystal-clear detail his mind; even sleep, he’s learned, isn’t safe. He would have given it up as a bad job long ago if not for the fact that the team has insisted that he try.

“We could try a sleeping pill,” Clint offers. His voice sounds a long way away despite the fact that Tony’s pretty sure the archer is in bed next to him on the left.

“Can’t—Extremis keeps—if I can’t wake up it’ll just replay—”

“You want to come rock with me? I think you were right about sleep tonight. I’m sorry we didn’t listen.” Tony nods, grateful for any offer that means getting the hell out of his bed-turned-prison, and he follows Natasha out to their chair. The thing had just shown up one day, dark espresso wood and comfortable green cushions, and far from seeming confused by its presence, Natasha has taken to dragging Tony into it daily. They’ve talked about the silliest, most inconsequential things here—music and TV and how good Clint apparently looks in a hat, basically anything that doesn’t involve SHIELD or the Avengers. But today she doesn’t seem to expect anything in the way of conversation. She just keeps the glider moving at a slow, steady pace while Tony tries to fight back
the images and sounds in his head. His father’s head practically caving in, his mother gasping for breath…

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Bucky’s night proves just as sleepless. He’d locked his floor down the moment they’d gotten home, feeling far too fucking tainted and dirty for the company of the others. But around 3:30 his pulse and breathing all spike, and JARVIS informs him that unless Bucky takes measures of his own, he’ll be forced to permit the others entry. And Christ, Steve will probably call a damn doctor or something, which is the last thing any of ’em need—but huh.

“JARVIS, where’s Doctor Banner?”

“He’s not currently available, Sergeant Barnes. The Hulk is currently in the containment unit downstairs.” Bucky breathes a sigh of relief, already in motion. The others should stay with Tony, should comfort the person who actually deserves it in all this mess. But the Hulk…well hell, maybe the Hulk will think now is a good time to do some smashing. Bucky sure as hell deserves it.

“Take me down there.” The elevator doesn’t move. “Now, JARVIS.”

Most of the occasions that Bucky has had to interact with the Hulk down here have been entirely benign. With Banner working on developing the mental link between them all the time, Hulk’s only gotten better at recognizing members of the team and knowing, without any prompting, that they are not to be hurt. He’s still easiest to control with Tony around, but he’s usually more than happy to watch TV or snack or play games with any member of the Avengers.

Not today. The containment unit, while its walls are holding steady as always, has been completely ravaged; pillows, boxes of food and games and the couch which had been bolted to the floor, they all lay in ruin at the Hulk’s feet. Bruce evidently hadn’t handled the news of what had gone on in the hearings today well.

“I wish someone had built a room like this for me,” James tells him as he steps inside. Hulk doesn’t bother to look up from his current project, which appears to involve crushing a container of crayons into a multi-coloured ball of wax. “What, even you’re not talking to me? Can’t say I blame you, though you know you’ve stooped pretty low when the resident monster doesn’t think you’re worth his time.” Hulk pitches the crayon remains at Bucky’s head with a roar.

“HULK NOT MONSTER.” Bucky snorts.

“Yeah that’s definitely why we’re both in here. ‘Cause neither of us are monsters. Right.” Annoyingly, Hulk doesn’t respond to the bait a second time. Either sarcasm is beyond him or he’s gone back to considering Bucky not worth his attention. Well that just won’t do. “Come on Big Man, it’s been ages since Banner really let you out to play. You gone soft on me now? Are you really domesticated, all cupcakes and Jenga? I thought you were the toughest one there is.” This time, Bucky feels Hulk’s roar shake the floor.

“NOT SOFT!”

“Then prove it.” If he waits, delivers just a few more taunts he can probably get Hulk to strike first, but Bucky simply can’t wait that long, so he uses the tattered remains of the couch as a springboard to leap up and deliver a roundhouse kick to the creature’s chest. It’s like hitting a solid concrete wall, or something stronger, Steve’s shield maybe; either way, Bucky crumples to the ground without Hulk having to ever lift a finger. But in seconds he’s back up and pummeling the green legs before him with the hardest punches he can manage. Finally, seeming more irritated than truly angry or hurt, Hulk grips him by the shoulders, lifts him up, and sits down with Bucky practically in his lap. His
arms and legs are immobilized with absurd ease on the creature’s part, but that doesn’t stop Bucky from bidding for freedom, or spitting every curse and taunt he can think of while trying to just get one more punch in.

“Done?” Hulk demands when Bucky has thoroughly exhausted himself and is, for all intents and purposes, now just lying against him. He still manages grunt back a curse in reply, but Hulk just rolls his eyes and then insists, “Hulk not monster.”

“Yeah yeah I got that buddy. Just me then.” This time, the apparently far-sassier-than-Bucky-had-realized monster bops him on the side of the head.

“No. Monsters not—sorry. Not hurt like this when smashing is over.” And it’s this matter-of-fact declaration from someone who knows, who has broken and harmed and killed for no reason other than it was all he had been capable of, all he had known, it’s this that drags the first harsh sob out of James Buchanan Barnes.

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When Bruce emerges from the containment unit the next morning, it’s to find Tony in just as rough shape as Barnes, whom he’d left sleeping under a bundle of blankets the Hulk hadn’t managed to rip apart. The engineer is on the new glider next to Thor, and while both would seem to be watching Loki play in what looks like an oversized, upside-down bowl (Tony must have ordered it to work on his balance), Bruce is now familiar enough with the signs to realize Extremis has a far stronger hold on Tony just now than the scene in front of him. Left in this condition much longer and he’ll be in worse shape than he was when the migraines had driven him to the point of collapse.

Phil, Clint, Steve and Natasha are in the kitchen; the latter, apparently unable to wait for the currently-running coffee machine to finish its five-minute brew cycle, is in the midst of replacing the pot with her own mug. All four of them look as exhausted as Bruce feels.

“Barnes spent the night in the containment unit with me,” he tells Steve. The fact that the blonde looks resigned to learn this news rather than outraged or alarmed is all the confirmation Bruce really needs. “This is not going to work.”

“We’ve talked about having the psych team that works with Bucky move into the Tower for a bit, but I doubt we’ll be able to convince Tony to see them. Not to mention that if the press catches wind…we’re working on it, Bruce, and I’d certainly welcome any input you have. Even JARVIS is currently out of suggestions.” Coulson’s suit (the same one he was wearing yesterday) is ruffled, his tie hanging limp and half-knotted around his neck. He hasn’t seemed so lost since resuming his duties as team handler.

“We have to get them out of the Tower.” It had been the Hulk’s idea, actually, though Bruce is not quite willing or able to admit that just yet. Everyone thinks about he and the Hulk as polar opposites—Bruce seeking flight while Hulk always chooses fight—but the truth is a lot more complicated than that. Hulk is just as inclined to run, to hide, to seek shelter in the most remote and unpopulated areas possible; half the time he does resort to violence it’s because he’s attempting to eliminate the all the barriers keeping him constrained within his immediate environment.

“The press is surrounding the place and Tony and Bucky are probably the two most famous faces in the world right now. I don’t trust the remaining SHIELD safe houses enough for this, and Tony doesn’t want to use the SI private jet to go anywhere further when he’s already afraid how what’s been happening lately will impact the company.”

“So we go to the mansion.” Nearly everyone at the table winces as one. “After last time Tony gave Natasha and I permission to oversee some fairly extensive renovations. They were just completed a
month ago, and while I can’t promise with a hundred percent certainty that anything potentially triggering is out of there, it’s substantially different than what the rest of you remember. It isn’t quite set up for Loki’s needs, but that’s something we could sort out. It’s an easier building to secure, and if we needed to bring in the psych team or anyone else that would be a lot more manageable.”

This is going to work, Bruce thinks, casting another glance at Tony’s nearly catatonic form. This has to work.

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The fortunate and discomforting thing about the state both Tony and Barnes are in is that they don’t require much convincing. Tony hardly even seems to hear them, while Bucky just mumbles ‘affirmative,’ a sign that the Soldier is pressing just as heavily on his consciousness as Extemis is on Tony’s.

The drive there, then, is nothing at all like the loud, joyful trip of months before. Thor, anxious about having his brother’s presence on Earth discovered now, at what would definitely be the worst possible times, chooses to fly to the mansion instead, carrying Loki in the same harness he’d used to transport Tony under much happier circumstances. The rest of them pile into the largest SUV Tony possesses and make as rapid an exit away from the Tower as it is possible to manage in New York traffic.

When they arrive, the shock of their changed surroundings is, as Bruce had hoped, enough to draw both Tony and Bucky slightly out of their shells. He and Natasha had retained the mansions’ general structure, but its appearance is just as radically different as he’d hoped. The dark woods of the stairs and much of the interior accents are complimented by rich, warm colours; a large, thick area rug now dominates much of the living room, which has also seen its showy but incredibly uncomfortable furniture replaced with overstuffed chairs and a large sectional sofa similar to the one in the Tower. The walls, no longer covered in stiff, posed Stark family images and Captain America memorabilia, feature numerous pieces of art Tony has had in storage (Pepper had been particularly helpful on this front, and had seemed thrilled at the idea of this stuff actually being displayed.) Bruce is almost buzzing with anticipation to show everyone the renovated bedrooms upstairs, too, but decides there’s something that’ll put Tony even more at ease first.

“Hey, JARVIS?”

“Greetings, Doctor Banner. Might I say again that yours and Agent Romanov’s improvements to the mansion are quite inspired.” He anticipates a bit of a reaction from Tony—he hates being apart from the AI just as much as JARVIS despises having Tony out of his sight, and they’d both struggled with their separation during the team’s last visit to the mansion. But from the way Natasha just barely manages to steady him, no one could have imagined the way Tony’s knees would nearly buckle at the very sound of the AI’s voice.

“The house looks incredible, but maybe we should take a brief rest from the tour and sit down?” Phil suggests, already in the process of firmly steering Tony to half-sit, half-collapse onto couch. Steve quickly follows suit with Bucky, who presses himself tightly against Bruce the second he sits down next to them. He wonders idly if Bucky is missing Hulk, then takes a brief moment to marvel at the idea of anyone liking the Hulk enough to actively miss him. “I…think I comfortably speak for everyone when I say that I’d like it if you both spent at least some time in the next few days being little. We can have the Halloween party just like we planned, and use your headspaces to try to both distract you and help you work through some of what’s happened. I should warn you both, however; you might find it harder than the times where we’ve played just for the sake of it. You might find it difficult and embarrassing, because we’d be monitoring you extremely closely and probably pushing you a bit if we’re finding that you’re still shutting down and closing off. You’d always be able to
safeword, of course, but otherwise we’d be asking you to put yourselves and some really difficult thoughts and feelings entirely in our hands to deal with as we see fit.”

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“What’s the other option,” Tony demands. Because holy shit does that sound terrifying.

“We bring in some help,” Phil says bluntly. “Bucky, you’re already pretty accustomed to working with mental health professionals, so all we’d need to do on your end is have the team that usually works with you stay at the mansion for a while, just like shortly after you first got here.” Bucky, the traitor, seems both unsurprised and relatively untroubled by this news. “Tony…I know you have a harder time with that option, and I have at least some suspicions as to why. But the fact is you still have a tremendously difficult time processing and verbalizing thoughts and feelings when you’re Big, especially if they’re in any way related to your—to Howard. So if you can’t use the outlet that you’ve been using for the last year or so, then we need to try something else. Shoving all this away and not dealing with it is not an option, you must see that.”

And yeah, some part of Tony knows that’s true, can recognize that the combination of Extremis and the re-opened trauma of what had happened to his parents will be enough to have him in worse shape than he was before Loki’s spell. Already he wants a drink with a fierce intensity he hasn’t felt in months. But how can he possibly choose between letting all of this overwhelm him the way feelings usually do when he’s little, or letting a stranger see him with his goddamn nerves practically exposed? What kind of a choice is that?

“And we should clarify that it doesn’t have to be just one thing or the other; we can give the ageplay a shot and also work at finding a psychologist who might suit your needs. To be honest, even if you elected to go solely with the ageplay Phil or I would probably want your permission to at least consult with someone in the field to make sure none of us do or say anything unintentionally harmful,” Bruce adds.

“But this is the whole damn reason I made BARF, so I could just do this kind of shit on my own.” Tony regrets the words almost as soon as they leave his mouth, and while most of them simply look confused, Phil’s wearing a look of dawning comprehension, and Bruce’s expression is absolutely thunderous.

“That’s what—Tony, are you attempting some kind of solo therapy with that tech?” Apparently his silence is answer enough, and Bruce takes several long, deliberate breaths. “…we’ll talk about that later, don’t think we won’t. If you want to work—I really have to call it BARF?—if you want to incorporate it into some kind of treatment plan then fine, but you are not remotely qualified to be using that thing to try to diagnose and treat yourself without any external consultation. What were you even thinking…”

“Sidestepping that for now,” Phil intercedes smoothly, “what your use of that technology says to me is that you recognize you need better coping techniques for when you can’t or don’t want to be little, Tony. And even if the execution is troubling, I think your instincts are dead-on.” And compared to the fact that an encounter with a psych team of some kind now seems inevitable, the alternative is starting to feel pretty damn appealing.

“Little first. Please, I…if you bring someone in here right now I can almost guarantee I’ll have them resigning and probably seeking professional help of their own in under three hours just like the ones Rhodey made me see after Afghanistan.” Bruce’s expression immediately softens.

“Alright, love. Little first.”

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Almost sick with relief at the idea of being able to care for Tony and Bucky in their headspaces, Steve would be more than happy (and is indeed seriously considering) picking each of the boys up in one arm and barrelling up the stairs to cuddle for hours or days.

Waiting for news of the hearings today had been nothing short of agonizing. Initially Tony had been using Extremis to send the team text-message updates, but then silence had fallen for close to an hour, and Steve had known, just known, it was all going wrong. And then they’d been home, but neither had really been there; Bucky had spent the night with the Hulk of all people, and Tony, while in the penthouse, might as well have been thousands of miles way, trapped so far in his own head none of them could get to him. The same parts of Steve that had wanted to hide Tony from the world when he’d been a biological four year old are, if possible, more intent on protecting and sheltering his boys now.

So it comes as a rather unwelcome surprise all around when Bucky, who has never once been little outside of Steve’s presence, reaches for Bruce’s hand and departs up the stairs to get changed without a backward glance at Steve. Tony, though the little looks he keeps giving Steve are rather more scared and hesitant than he’s used to from his baby, at least seems inclined to engage with him, so when he finds Phil Coulson suddenly blocking his path, Steve is singularly unimpressed.

“Move.”

“Clint and Nat are fine to get him all set up. You and I have a meeting that’s already overdue.” For a moment, Steve is certain this is a joke. A stupid and ill-timed one, sure, but Coulson’s dry wit does have a history of manifesting itself in strange ways. He goes to step around the man, only to find Coulson still there, arms crossed against his chest.

“This—isn’t funny.”

“No it certainly isn’t. Come to the kitchen and help me unpack; might as well multi-task since I’m pretty sure Clint brought half the kitchen with us.”

“I heard that! And I call slander. I even left the stand mixer at home!” Clint yells from the stairs.

“Only because Bruce told you he’d ordered one for out here after your repeated complaints last time. Don’t try to get one past me, Agent, it doesn’t work.” And the fond smile that creases Phil’s face is absolutely the last straw. How can they banter right now and act like everything around them isn’t crumbling?

“Coulson, get out of my way.”

“Captain Rogers, I can promise you that you aren’t getting anywhere near either of those kids until we have a conversation. So I’d suggest you follow me.” With that, Coulson whirs around on his fancy dress shoes and stalks into the kitchen, apparently entirely confident Steve will follow. He doesn’t even look behind him when he tosses a package of pork chops over his left shoulder. “Those go in the deep freeze.” Like his body is on autopilot, Steve deposits the meat where he’s been instructed. “You’ve been unravelling for a while now, since the PR meeting. I would make it my business as your handler anyway, but given that it’s now also affecting your relationships with other members of the team, I consider it priority one. So do you want me to tell you what I think is going on, or would you prefer to let me know in your own words?”

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Natasha’s become entirely accustomed to and fond of the little noises that signal Tony Stark’s little headspace: the gentle sucking sounds his lips make against the nipple of a bottle or a soother; the little yawns he tries and always fails to hide when he’s tired but wants to avoid a nap; the happy little
humming and purring sounds he makes when he’s found a new favourite toy or the perfect cuddling position; even the annoyed grunts and whines he makes when he doesn’t get his way. He’s never needed many words to say so much, and she’s come to value, even crave, every single one of those little signals that her baby is there and trusting them to take care of his needs.

She hadn’t known quite how much she’d come to rely on them, though, not until today when they’re all absent. Clint is getting Tony changed (into one of the thick diapers they usually reserve for nighttime, which would normally be more than enough on its own to get Tony kicking up a fuss) and the baby is just lying there, unnaturally still and entirely quiet.

They try everything. Clint tells him stupid jokes and tickles lightly at his stomach and feet. Natasha, while reluctant to let anyone else in on hers and Tony’s private traditions, tell him another Russian folk tale, this one about Sister Fox and Brother Wolf. When that doesn’t garner any response, she even sings to him (something she’s previously done only for Clint exactly once, when she’d been trying to keep him conscious after a particularly vicious blow to the head.)

She’s almost relieved when she hears sobbing and assumes it’s Tony, because surely any emotional response is better than this horrible blankness. But it’s coming, she realizes after a moment and a glance at the baby, from the other side of the door. She opens it and nearly stumbles over the crying form of Bucky Barnes.

“What—”

“The second he was little he was absolutely terrified of being separated from Tony,” Bruce explains, looking equal parts fond and exasperated as Barnes, upon realizing the door is open, tears across the room and onto the bed next to his brother. “I think he’s…dealing with some of the guilt by trying to protect him even more than usual.” Quickly, though, Natasha is forced to draw a line when Bucky makes to hoist Tony into his arms.

“Uh-uh, nope. Put the baby down, please.” Bucky’s answering glare, paired with his watery eyes and runny nose, is equal parts venomous and completely endearing, and Natasha can’t help but brush a kiss across his forehead. “James, we don’t want either of you getting hurt. How are you going to hold someone’s hand on the stairs like you’re supposed to and keep a good grip on your brother?” Bucky considers this for a long moment, petting Tony’s hair while the engineer lays limp and unresisting in his arms.

“He’s too little to walk right now,” James finally insists. And Natasha’s anxiety just ratchets up another notch, because if there’s one thing Tony simultaneously hates and loves, it’s having his big brother point out just how little he is. And even that hasn’t roused him.

“Think you might be right about that champ,” Clint agrees. “What do you suggest? I can get Steve to carry him down?” Barnes shakes his head vehemently.

“He’s mad at us.” Tony shudders slightly in Barnes’ grip and burrows his head against the other boy’s chest. “S’okay. I’ll take care of you. Promise.”

“We’re all going to take care of both of you, James,” Bruce assures them firmly, seating himself on the edge of the bed. “And I know it’s hard and new for both of you to have been having some disagreements with Steve when you were Big. But I can pretty much guarantee you that whatever he’s feeling he loves you both and wants to be here just as much as always.”

“No Steve,” is Bucky’s only reply. Natasha fights back a sigh as she watches their boys cling to one another as if they’re the only ones left in the world. This is going to be far harder than she’d thought.

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“I failed a paper.” Steve doesn’t even know why he says it. It’s certainly not the most pressing of their issues; hell, after everything Bucky and Tony have been through today, he’s pretty disgusted with himself that he can even think about a bad grade. But there’s no going back now, not when Phil’s already frozen mid-way through organizing the fridge. “I…it was for poli-sci, about all of this, the Accords and the Registration Act and everything, and then Bucky told us he wanted to come forward, and then everything with Tony and Cage…everywhere I turn these days someone is telling me I’m not needed. And not even just that, but that when I want to help I’m at risk of making everything worse.”

“I know it doesn’t feel like it, but you’re doing all the right things. You’re educating yourself on the issues; you’re listening, however grudgingly, to the people you trust. And the questions you’re all facing, the ones that make up your daily reality, the fact that they’ve become kind of quotidian for us does not make them simple. You’re asking questions about what makes people, whether super- or meta- or otherwise enhanced, human, and how we make decisions about which lives to weigh when not everyone can be saved. You’re trying to figure out what it even means to talk about ‘saving,’ because things aren’t as simple as doing everything in your considerable power or doing nothing. And in the midst of all of that, you’re also Steve Rogers, a guy who is trying to figure out how to build a life from ashes and participate in a fulfilling but extremely complex relationship dynamic with a lot of other complicated and confused people. If it felt easy to you I would in fact be far more worried than I am now.”

“Seems like it’s easy enough for everyone else,” Steve can’t help but argue, aware even as he says it of how petulant he must sound. “You, Tony, Natasha, Clint, even Buck—I feel like you’re all just constantly waiting for me to catch up and I don’t know how.”

“That,” Phil says patiently, but with a jagged edge to his tone that wasn’t there before, “is your brain selling you some utter falsehoods, Captain. You’ve seen, are still seeing, what all this costs Tony. You know better than any of the rest of us the toll it takes on Bucky to just be in the world. Maybe Nat and Clint and I don’t wear it quite as obviously to you, but none of this is easy for us either. We might struggle in different ways, or with different parts of it than you, but no one here has all the answers. If you could stop feeling so threatened by the things we have a handle on that you don’t that’d probably be a lot easier for you to see.” Coulson seems content to let Steve take this in for a moment, and he returns to his game of fridge Tetris (Steve takes a moment to feel proud of that mental reference). Clint has indeed packed what has to be most of the food in the Tower; Steve notes with almost painful fondness the entire case of York Peppermint Patties the man must have brought just for him (they’re one of few candies still manufactured which had existed before his plane had gone down). Coulson is currently trying to find fridge space for the whole carton because Steve prefers the little chocolates to be chilled.

“I…maybe if we end up having someone professional come in and talk to Buck and Tony, I’d be able to get some of their time too?” It’s terrifying to ask, to admit that he maybe can’t do this by himself, and Steve stares with what is probably an inappropriate amount of focus at the little silver-wrapped candies and the fridge full of food and at Coulson, who had quite literally come back from death to be here in this kitchen with Steve, with all of them. Maybe he’ll cook a big breakfast for the team tomorrow, he hasn’t had a chance to do that in ages and he misses it, even the dangerous combination of baby Tony and syrup that always ends in a highly sticky bath. He wants to be able to do that, to enjoy those simple pleasures with his family, without the simmering feelings of rage and fear and overwhelming sadness that have enveloped him the past several weeks. He wants to feel needed, and to let himself need them in return.

“That sounds like a good first step, Steve.”
What's this, two chapters in two weeks? Is it possible I'm finally back to something approximating my usual posting schedule? Here's hoping!

Thanks as always for your insightful comments and kudos. You're all wonderful.
Painful Presence

Chapter Summary

Tony and Bucky both struggle in the aftermath of the hearings. Clint brings in specialized help to intervene, and has an unexpected breakthrough with Loki.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings: Same warnings as the last couple. If you have any major triggers and haven't read the notes on chapter 11 in particular, head there before proceeding. I don't think there's anything in this chapter not covered by those warnings, other than a minor spoiler for a character from the Hawkeye comics. As always, if you have questions or concerns before reading, just let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While Steve feels personally more settled than he has in a while, their evening as a team is hardly much easier than the afternoon. Bucky (perhaps influenced more than a little by the Soldier, judging by the barely-contained violence he seems to exude) is almost feral in his protectiveness over Tony; he only permits certain members of the team to touch his brother (this list does not include Steve, whom Bucky seems to fear and resent in equal measure.) Even with those lucky enough to be granted access to Tony, Bucky attempts to dictate everything from how they hold the baby to what and how much he should be fed. For his part, Tony is almost eerily passive in his acceptance of all of this, not even reacting when Bucky announces to the room at large that his brother has wet his diaper and needs to be changed now. Several times Steve gets the impression that Tony is barely here with them, that he’s slipped back into the virtual world Extremis creates in his mind.

Keeping the boys together right now, he realizes, seems to be doing more harm than good. And Bruce, to whom Bucky has persistently clung all evening, is apparently thinking along the same lines.

“Buddy, what say you and I go upstairs and I’ll give you a bath?” Bucky nods and immediately reaches a hand out to Tony, who is currently being cradled in the crook of Thor’s left arm. “No, I think this should be a special you and me thing. We can try that squirty octopus toy your brother doesn’t like because it gets water in his face.”

The others jump in, encouraging Bucky to take advantage of a solo bath, reminding him that Bruce always has the best soaps and salts and that he’ll be the first to try one of the newly renovated tubs at the mansion. Loki, who has been sweet and kind to both boys all evening despite his obvious confusion over their demeanours and the drastic change in scenery, even tries to assure Bucky that he’ll watch out for Tony in his absence. No one’s sure if it’s that promise coming from Loki of all people that does it, or if it’s just the proverbial straw breaking the camel’s back, but upon hearing that Bucky absolutely loses it.

He kicks and flails and aims a punch or two with his metal fist at Bruce, all the while cursing in both
Russian and English. His rage lasts long enough that Steve begins to worry he’ll have to get involved as the only person in the room able to potentially restrain Bucky, but he manages to take only two steps toward his oldest friend before Bucky’s anger shifts suddenly into despair. The other man begins crying uncontrollably while his hatred appears to turn inward; he refuses all attempts at comfort and starts repeating, in between gasping, almost gagging sobs, that he’s bad. Steve’s name works its way into the almost delirious string of words too, but even though keeping his distance feels like being stabbed in the heart, he doesn’t dare risk upsetting Bucky further by intervening.

“No, no, not bad, little one. Remember what you and Hulk talked about, hmm? How things that hurt like this when they’re over don’t make you a monster, precisely because they hurt? You wouldn’t feel like this if you were bad, Bucky; you wouldn’t hate that Tony and the Starks or anyone else was ever harmed by the Winter Soldier.”

Steve’s enhanced hearing picks up a sharp inhalation that definitely doesn’t come from Bucky himself, who barely seems to be breathing at all as he stares, unblinking, at Bruce. A quick glance reveals that Loki, too, is hanging on Bruce’s every word, his mouth wide open and his eyes suspiciously watery. It makes some sense, Steve supposes, that Loki would be just as impacted by Bruce’s words about repentance and evil as Bucky. There’s still a part of him that wants to shout that Loki and Bucky’s situations are still not the same—whatever Thor suspects about Thanos influencing Loki’s behaviour on Earth, the man had still controlled, harmed and killed so many with seeming glee. But this Loki, a man who spends his days attempting to re-learn the most basic things like movement and speech, who despite the fear and anger he’s got to have about his own situation is still so painfully eager for every bit of positive attention he seems to receive, this man is no more the Loki that had killed Phil and brought in the Chituari than Bucky is the Winter Soldier. So Steve smiles as warmly and naturally as he can at the other little, chuckling when the boy hides his face against Thor’s chest.

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“Don’t need that.”

Bruce bites back a sigh at the already-familiar refrain. Bucky’s been resisting nearly every move he’s tried to make so far—helping the boy get undressed he’d understood to some level, but Bucky has since attempted to turn down assistance getting washed, as well as all bath toys and the tearless baby-shampoo they always use on both Tony and Bucky. And now he’s apparently got something against the hooded towel Bruce is attempting to use to dry him. Some of Bruce’s less-than-pleased response to this last one might just be his pride talking; he’d been almost indecently excited to find adult-sized hooded towels to stock the mansion with, and given that they’re also made of some of the softest fabric he’s ever touched, he’d anticipated a positive reaction even from Bucky, whose taste in clothes tends to run more towards the sumptuous than the outwardly childish.

And it’s true that he doesn’t know Bucky as well as he’d like, particularly in the absence of Steve who often helps the little communicate his needs and desires. But there’s still something that isn’t sitting quite right about the way Barnes keeps trying to turn away from basically everything Bruce is offering him, particularly now as his gaze seems to linger with what seems like longing on the giraffe-head that makes up the towel’s hood.

“Alright little man, want to tell me what you do need then? Because I’d really like some part of this to be a positive experience for you.” Bucky often needs time to process questions and organize his thoughts, but his response is nearly instantaneous.

“Need…task. Mission. Can you—what do I do, now?” Bucky’s staring straight forward, his posture an odd mix of rigid lines and a kind of lax clumsiness, and Bruce’s gut clenches and twists. Seeing traces of the Soldier is hard enough for all of them to witness on the average day; to see his
mannerisms emerge from the boy while he’s in headspace is both jarring and devastating. Before he can finish considering whether it’s a good idea to touch Bucky when he doesn’t know just how strong the Soldier’s hold on his mind is, Bruce is gripping him gently by the shoulders and directing him to sit down on the toilet.

“No tasks and no missions. You don’t need to do anything right now but let us take care of you, James.”

“I don’t—I hurt him, hurt so many people. I can remember them all now—I see ‘em sometimes, when I sleep. Don’t deserve—please, Mr. Bruce. Need task.” He’s starting to shiver, whether from stress or because he’s still sopping wet and naked, and Bruce retrieves the towel from the floor, threading it through his fingers and slowly pressing a corner of the fabric to Bucky’s cheek. The boy flinches but he leans into the touch, too, so Bruce cautiously loosens his grip on the towel and begins to carefully dry the little off, beginning with the joint where his shoulder is connected to his metal arm.

“You do deserve this. You deserve care and gentleness and kindness, and nothing you have ever done, ever been forced to do, would make that untrue.” He trails the towel over the numerous scars and marks that comprise Bucky’s chest, taking care to touch every single one without lingering or commenting. “Your family is not going to punish or harm you for what happened. We won’t let anyone do that, and that includes you most of all, sweet boy. You get to have limits, you get to have preferences, but we’re not going to let you turn away from comfort because you think you don’t deserve it. Nor will we allow you to try to use us to hurt you like you did last night when you went in to that containment unit with the goal of provoking the Hulk.” Bucky hangs his head at the gentle rebuke, and Bruce lets him sit with that for a moment, efficiently drying the boy’s bottom half before wrapping the towel around his shoulders and letting the giraffe head hood fall over his head. The little looks adorably stunned by this, nearly crossing his eyes as he attempts to stare up past his hairline. “You look really cute, buddy. Let’s go get you dressed now, alright? We brought some of your PJs from home, but there’s also a new set of footie pyjamas in your bedroom that I think you might really like. Can you be my brave boy and give ‘em a shot for me?”

“Yes Sir—Bruce.” It’s not quite Papa, but compared to Sir or Mr., Bruce will take it in a heartbeat.

By the next morning, all Steve can hope is that Bruce is having more luck with Bucky than the rest of them are with Tony. Because in a lot of ways, it’s like they’re starting at step one with the little. He’s only managing to keep down liquids, barely sleeping, and so consumed by Extremis and his own memories that they can barely pry two or three words out of him at a time. The last thing any of them want is to go against the only request Tony has really made of them so far, that he have time to be little before they call in any of the mental health staff, but from the tenseness of the atmosphere in the mansion is not the only one aware that if this goes on much longer, they may not have a choice.

At about nine, Clint exchanges a few quiet words with Natasha and then leaves the mansion, apparently in need of a breather. Phil, who is bouncing Tony on his lap and trying to convince him to have even a spoonful of oatmeal, sighs in barely-contained frustration when the baby’s eyes become glazed and unfocused again.

“No, honey, Daddy needs you to stay here with me. Focus on right now, right here, not on whatever Extremis is showing you or telling you.” Tony’s only response is a quiet whine.

“Peterson’s been savvy throughout this entire campaign, leaving the most heated and potentially controversial statements to be made by his supporters rather than the Congressman himself. That
has many in Washington wondering if the gamble he made on Friday, essentially taunting Barnes and Stark with the footage of the Starks’ murders, was his first major political misstep in months.”

“I don’t see how anyone could think otherwise, frankly. The Avengers don’t even have to say anything—and indeed, you’ll notice that they’ve all been remarkably quiet since Friday’s session. The best thing they can do right now from a PR standpoint is let Josh Peterson’s actions speak for themselves

@realJPeterson should be ashamed of himself. Since when is it the American, or the human, way to torture political opponents? #Inhumane #AvengersForever

Not my wife. Please. No.
Howard! HOWARD!

Sir, you are greatly worrying your family. Please try to respond to Agent Coulson.

Seriously, where’s the Hulk when you need him? #SmashPeterson #Inhumane

Tony doesn’t know how long it’s been since he woke. Time isn’t working the way it should. It’s just an endless stream of Tweets and concerned messages from JARVIS and flashbacks to his childhood, and the video, that fucking video that he swears has been all but burned into his retinas by now.

Every once in a while he’s aware enough to manage a few words, or to recognize that he’s being moved, shifted into someone else’s arms or taken upstairs for a diaper change, but try as he might, he can’t stay that way for long. At least not until there’s a sudden weight in his lap and something wet and smelling vaguely of pepperoni is all over his face.

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“You actually adopted pizza puppy?” Phil demands for the fourth time. Normally, Clint would take a great deal of joy out of reducing the great Phil Coulson to something as pedestrian as repetition, but right now he has only eyes for his boy. Well, his boy and their new dog, who upon entering the house had immediately jumped onto the couch and begun covering the baby’s face in kisses.

And sure, he can recognize that a dog is a major commitment, and that he probably should have talked to someone other than Natasha before going out and adopting the little blonde golden retriever from the shelter where he volunteers. But he’d loved this damn mutt since the thing had somehow managed to steal an entire twelve inch pizza from Clint on their very first meeting, and in the face of his own powerlessness to help his baby this morning, the only thought he’d kept coming back to had been that maybe Lucky (yes, he named the damn thing on the car ride over, somehow, he doesn’t want to talk about it) would be able to reach the little when they couldn’t.

Even Phil stops bitching when Tony lets out a quiet but unmistakable giggle and presses a cautious hand out to touch the dog’s downy fur.

“Do you like him, munchkin? He sure seems to like you, doesn’t he?” Presented with a new target in the form of Tony’s outstretched hand, Lucky has begun attempting to stick his tongue between every single one of the baby’s fingers, and Clint isn’t even ashamed when Tony’s answering laugh almost brings a tear to his eyes. “Can you say hi to the puppy, babe? His name is Lucky.”

“Hi Lucky,” the baby murmurs. They all watched, damn near transfixed, as boy and the dog get to know one another, but it’s pretty quickly apparent that the puppy’s a bit too energetic to remain on the couch for much longer, leaping and panting and knocking a bottle, a remote control and at least one cell phone onto the ground in his gleeful exploration of his new home. “You’re bouncy,” Tony
informs him. “Daddy can we—outside?” Every one of them nearly trips over themselves in their eagerness to agree, and soon Tony is wrapped in a fleece blanket and securely held in Steve’s arms while he grasps Lucky’s retractable leash and leads him out into the backyard.

They spend an enjoyable half hour or so with everyone gathered in a circle on the lawn around Tony and Lucky, with each of them calling to the dog in turn to try to teach him the ‘come’ command and familiarize him with his name. At least half the time the dog abandons his intended target to throw himself back into Tony’s arms, a fact which perhaps spells bad news for training but which appears to delight the boy to no end.

Before too long, the other residents of the Tower have made also made their way outside. Bucky is first, appearing younger than anyone has ever seen him and wearing bright pink footed pyjamas made to look like a watermelon, complete with seeds, and a matching green hat. He lets out a covetous little moan when he sees the dog and, after a glance at Bruce for permission, the boy plops himself on the ground and beams when Lucky comes trotting over on slightly unsteady legs. Bucky pats his head with exceeding gentleness, as if touching glass, and declares, “You’re not gonna be ‘llowed on the stairs ‘lone either.” Steve, who has been mostly keeping his distance from both the littles thus far, folds carefully to his knees next to his best friend. Bucky gives him a wary glance but continues petting Lucky.

“He looks just like that little guy that used to run around our neighbourhood, doesn’t he? You were so good with him, so gentle and sweet, and you’d share your food with that mutt even when you didn’t have enough for yourself. I bet Lucky’s gonna love you just as much.” Bucky doesn’t respond—can’t, maybe, given that talking about his and Steve’s shared past can be a challenge on even his best days—but he scoots his bum a bit closer to Steve and his pats at Lucky become slightly more confident.

The last of the team joins them shortly thereafter. Loki, cradled in Thor’s arms, peers around at the team and then points a slightly shaky hand at the dog and murmurs, “What…” It’s the first time, at least as far as Clint is aware, that Loki has really acknowledged anyone but his brother, Jane, Tony or Bucky (sort of), and he’s entirely unprepared for the small rush of affection he feels for the boy and his fearful, excited tone. And like this, Clint truly realizes for the first time, Loki is a boy—a little boy just as enchanted by a puppy as the other two littles.

“That’s a puppy, little-bit. Our new puppy. Want to come meet him?”

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For Tony, Lucky’s unexpected entrance into their lives is sort of like coming out of a fog. He hadn’t entirely dissociated from his surroundings—he’s had a vague sense of what had gone on since the hearings, but he’d experienced much of it like he was watching it all happened to someone else. No matter how much he tried to focus on the here and now, the past, and the present outside of the mansion’s walls had been completely consuming.

The dog’s panting, bouncy arrival is a full-scale shock to his system. The little blonde ball of apparently inexhaustible energy lives life entirely in the immediate present, and he kind of forces everyone around him to do the same; Tony’s brain might be able to kinda mute or deaden input from most people, but when there’s a tiny, loud being sticking its tongue in your ear or attempting to tackle you, there’s no real option to disengage.

At first this comes as a relief. To Tony, sure, because it’s not like watching the news pour in or seeing that damned video on constant repeat has been fun, but especially, he can tell, for the people around him. His family watches he, Bucky and Loki with ill-disguised relief, encouraging them to try
out the dog toys Clint had brought home and to try to follow Lucky when he runs laps around the yard. Tony’s Big brain is still present enough to note that this is the first time he’s seen Loki attempt to walk around without Thor’s aid; it’s plainly difficult for the man, but based on the notes Jane and Bruce made when Loki first arrived, there has been at least some improvement in his balance and coordination.

By the time Lucky finally crashes, Tony is so exhausted that he ends up following the dog in short order, managing a solid few hours of sleep for the first time in days with Lucky curled into a ball next to his elbow. The problem is that when he wakes, the team is apparently determined to try to keep him as present as he’d managed to be last night. And that starts with their weird insistence on keeping him in his thick nighttime diapers that crinkle way too loud and make him waddle like a drunk penguin.

“Want regular diapers,” he tries. Then, while he’s asking for things, he decides to go all-out. “Or no diapers!” Phil chuckles and pats him on the tummy with one hand while the other continues rubbing creme onto his bum and legs. Tony squirms, the intimacy of being touched this way after being mentally absent for so long even more embarrassing than usual. And were Phil’s hands always so big?

“Sorry honey, but no. You still haven’t gotten much sleep in the last few days and I want you able to take naps wherever and whenever you can without worrying about leaks.” Tony suspects there’s more to that explanation, things Phil doesn’t want to explain to him outright, but he’s quickly distracted by the absence of the pacifier Phil always allows him to suck on when changing him. He reaches for one on the bedside table only to find his hand caught and guided away. “Nope, baby boy, no paci right now. Daddy hasn’t heard your voice much in days and I’ve missed it. Can you tell me something you’d like to eat for breakfast?”

And it just keeps going like this. After changing him, Phil insists on calling Steve in to carry Tony downstairs. While they prep and eat, he’s passed around between most members of the team (Bruce and Bucky are absent again, he notes with a feeling of guilty relief, as are Thor, Loki and, oddly enough, Clint), each of whom insists on Tony’s active participation in their conversation all while constantly touching him in gentle but unpredictable ways.

It’s exhausting. By the time breakfast has been cleared up and he’s cuddled up on the couch with Natasha, not even Lucky’s charming in to join them with all the grace of The Hulk in high heels is enough to make Tony want to smile. He wants so badly to let Extremis take over, just for a while, and Natasha seems to realize it because she tugs him in closer and encourages Lucky to crawl right up onto Tony’s chest, his soft fur tickling at Tony’s chin and his breath hot against his neck.

“I know this is hard. I know you don’t want to be here dealing with this, and no one blames you for that. I’m sure it might seem differently, but we’re not trying to make this harder.” Having his feelings acknowledged and even validated by someone as closed off as Natasha usually is just makes everything that much more overwhelming and he lets out a truly pathetic little whimper before clamping down on that. Hard. Because Tony is way too certain that if he starts crying now he will never ever stop. “Please talk to me, bunny. Let Mama in instead of going away where I can’t follow you, hmm?” And science gods but he doesn’t want to reply. Doesn’t want to do or say anything else when he’s this close to cracking apart. But this is as close as he’s ever heard Natasha come to pleading, and even in the face of his own grief and exhaustion it’s impossible not to be slightly awed by that.

“Hurts.” That one word is all he can manage, but his Mama squeezes him tightly anyway and presses a kiss to the tip of his ear like Tony has just done something really brave. His mind casts backward to something, maybe an actual memory or the fervent wish of a lonely kid: sitting with Maria in the
mansion, in a position not entirely unlike the one he’s in now, babbling away to her about his day while she smiled indulgently and made the occasional agreeable noise. He hopes it was real, that he ever had anything like this with at least one of his parents before they were gone. Before—

“I’m sure it does. Want to tell me and Lucky about any of the parts that hurt? I bet we can even convince Daddy Steve to get Sanders, too, and your special heavy blanket.” Quickly he shakes his head and buries his face in Lucky’s fur. “Alright. We can try again tomorrow, or this afternoon even. Because you do need to talk to someone, zajka. But if you can’t right now, I think Daddy Phil had plans to turn us into a little assembly line folding paper bats and pumpkins for the Halloween party. Then you’re going to meet up with Papa Bruce for some meditation, and then have some lunch and a nice nap.”

He knows why they’re doing it, but the lack of opportunity for input he’s being given about what sounds like a highly structured day is still annoying, not to mention intimidating—Tony’s really not sure he can stay out of his own head this long. But Natasha doesn’t even give him time to consider this probable impending failure; in seconds, she’s calling for Steve to come pick Tony up (do these people seriously think his legs no longer work or something?) and Phil is grabbing all kinds of coloured paper and other art supplies, and Lucky is running around their feet, barking and chasing errant pieces of glitter that fall from the crafting bag with glee.

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Thor has just gotten Loki changed and ready for the day when there’s a knock on their bedroom door. Well, he’s not sure bedroom is the correct word for it; there are chambers where he and Loki sleep, complete with a portable crib for the latter. But there’s also a mini version of the fully-sized kitchen downstairs, and a large sitting area complete with more magnificent furnishings and several rugs for Loki to crawl around on. His little brother starts in his arms, then makes what might be a happy sound when he finds Clint hovering in the doorway.

“Is something amiss, Friend Clint?” For while all of the team has found ways to assist Thor with Loki, most of them, particularly Clint and the Son of Coul, have been understandably distant from the boy himself. And to have the archer seeking them out when their other Younglings are so distressed is entirely unanticipated.

“No, I—I just thought you two might want some company this morning. I asked JARVIS how you usually make his bottle, and I think this should be right?” He holds out one of Loki’s own bottles, patterned with smiling dolphins, and it’s several moments before Thor can overcome his surprise enough to reach out and take it.

“You are of course most welcome here. Loki, do you want to say hi to Friend Clint? He’s come to visit you, just like Friend Tony the other day.” Loki stares at him for a long moment, as if gauging the truth in his words, and Thor’s heart aches at the fearful optimism he can see there as plain as day, the way Loki so desperately wants to believe he’s made a friend but is entirely ready to be disappointed.

“H-Hi.” Clint settles into their rooms with all the apparent ease of someone who has been there dozens of times before, even finding some kind of colourful animated television show featuring mermaids that has Loki instantly captivated. The archer offers some of his own commentary on the feature, and asks Loki a few questions about particular characters and settings he seems to be enjoying that the boy seems thrilled to answer to the best of his ability between sucks at his bottle. Thor has always known Clint to be skilled at making others comfortable—he suspects it’s a natural component of the man’s personality enhanced by his training, because this is a most desirable trait for a spy. But to see him bring his easy smiles and genuine, engaged questions to bear on the man who had once performed such violence on his mind is almost painful to witness. The second Loki’s bottle
is finished, before Thor has even managed to wipe his brother’s face, he asks,

“Luh?” The practices for naming pets on Midgard seem quite different from those on Asgard, so between that and Loki’s speech issues it takes Thor a moment to realize what his brother is asking for. Clint has no such difficulty, and there’s no mistaking the wide, easy grin he gives Loki in reply as anything but sincere.

“You want to visit with the puppy? Sure, lil’-bit. Last I heard they were planning to start making some decorations for the Halloween party today, so my bet is Lucky is down there making that as challenging as possible. Want to go down to them or have me bring him up to you?” Loki considers this with all the seriousness of someone deciding the fate of a kingdom before declaring in a slightly shaky voice,

“Down.” Thor picks him up instantly, just barely restraining himself from a celebratory roar or ode. For the first time in ages, maybe since Loki’s unexpected arrival, maybe even before that because his brother’s grim fate had always been a dark spot in Thor’s heart, he is truly hopeful.

Chapter End Notes

I know I should feel bad for all the angst (and I do, actually!) but I’ve been dying to get to Lucky for so long that writing this chapter was still kind of fun.

As always, thanks to all of you for your comments and kudos. They keep this story, and me, going.
Halloween and Other Hauntings

Chapter Summary

The Avengers finally get to celebrate Halloween together.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings for This Chapter: More graphic description of Tony's diaper usage than usual, and some distress on his part related to that (not because the team handles it badly, but because Howard was Howard.) As always, if you have questions you want to discuss before reading, let me know. If you want to skip that section, stop reading at "finds it hard and slightly distended" and pick up again after the section that ends "like a victory."

I think that's it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For a while, Tony manages to genuinely have fun preparing for the party. Loki and Thor join them shortly after breakfast, and Bucky and Bruce a while after that, and just like the night before with Lucky, it’s easier to be around the other littles (especially Bucky, the sight of whom makes Tony’s stomach ache a little bit right now) when they’re focused on something specific and concrete. And Phil definitely manages to keep them all busy; between folding paper bats and pumpkins, decorating a large banner that will hang in the living room, and planning their entertainment for the evening, several hours go by without Tony even really realizing they’ve passed. After that they take Lucky outside to play in the yard while Clint cooks lunch, a delicious and hearty soup that feels perfect after being outdoors in the chilly fall air.

In the face of all this activity, even going down for a nap doesn’t sound like a terrible idea. But of course, Tony isn’t fortunate enough to go twice in a row without nightmares, not after everything that’s happened recently.

He wakes with a start and a bitten-off cry. Lucky is curled against his stomach, and he can feel the soft, even breathing of someone behind him—Steve, probably, given how warm the other body feels. Typically Tony’s night-terror would have been enough to wake the other man, but he turns over cautiously to find the blonde still out like a light, mouth hanging open. Steve’s been so run-down and tense lately it’s not really that surprising, and Tony’s actually pretty grateful because the thought of being comforted when his skin is still crawling and his mind is still racing is too much to bear just now. So he slips out of bed and into the hallway, no real destination in mind beyond not here.

When he used to dream about his—about Howard this way, he’d comfort himself with the reminder that the man would never, could never, scream or be disappointed or irritated or anything else toward Tony ever again. And that had been one thing when he thought Howard had gotten himself and his wife killed in a stupid drunken car crash. But it was hardly okay to take comfort in the fact of the
man’s absence now that he’d died at Bucky—at HYDRA’s hands, now was it? What kind of a son could find any measure of relief in that?

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Steve wakes from a rare dream-free sleep to the disturbing feeling of a hot tongue nearly up his nose and groans.

“Lucky, come on. Go back to sleep.” He rolls over, trying to chase the last vestiges of drowsy non-awareness. Then the puppy starts whining and pawing at his back. “Lucky, shh! You’re going to wake—” Except that when he turns back over, there’s no baby in bed with them for Lucky to be waking. And that has Steve fully conscious far more effectively than even the most brutal army wake-up protocols.

It had taken them a long time, first when Tony was de-aged and then again when he was little, to get the boy to accept that bedtimes and nap times were not suggestions, nor opportunities to sneak away and complete work or play with the bots. And sometimes he still suspects that Tony’s compliance has more to do with the fact that sneaking is damn-nigh impossible around all the members of the team with biologically- or training-enhanced senses than it does a true acceptance of the fact that sleep time is for sleeping. But the point is, it’s been months now since Tony leaving bed has been an issue, and the empty, cool spot next to Steve feels far more ominous than it should. He stares back at Lucky, whose cocked head and uncharacteristic stillness seem to suggest he’s been waiting for Steve to catch the hell up.

“You’re a good boy, Lucky. Kinda freaky, but good.” He pats the little blonde head as he stands and tugs a shirt on.

“Sir’s nap time wanderings are against house rules but, on their own, they are not technically against health restrictions or other protocols that require me to immediately inform one of his caretakers.” At this unexpected explanation from JARVIS, Steve blinks. He hadn’t even thought of blaming the AI for his own lack of attention, why would he think—Lucky, who has bounded off the bed and is waiting at Steve’s feet, whines again, and Steve fights the sudden urge to laugh.

“JARVIS, are you…jealous of Lucky?” There’s a long pause, and then JARVIS insists in his flattest and most robotic-sounding tone,

“I’m not familiar with the emotion you’re referring to.” This time Steve can’t entirely contain his snort.

“Spare me the unfeeling machine act, please. You love Tony deeply and I think it matters very much to you what the rest of think of your ability to effectively care for him. Lucky can maybe help him in some different ways, but nothing and no one could ever replace you JARVIS, alright?” The AI doesn’t reply, and Steve hopes it’s a kindness and not his own selfish desire to find his baby immediately that leads him to abandon the conversation there in favour of following Lucky down the hallway. They pass several rooms he hasn’t even had time to look at yet since the renovation, including one that appears to have some kind of nameplate on the door, but the dog remains entirely focused on his intended target, a large room at the end of the hallway with its door propped open.

The moment he steps inside, Steve suspects pretty strongly where he is. The space, unlike the rest of the mansion, does not appear to have been touched at all during the renovations. While clean, it feels distinctly stale, an impression not at all helped by the bedroom set and mint-green linens that even Steve can tell are dated. There are three framed photographs on the dresser that instantly confirm where he’s found himself. The first, a wedding picture, shows a stunning young woman in a gown that looks so voluminous that he isn’t totally sure how she’s managing to stay upright, standing next to a young man in a suit who is managing to look both smug and stunned at his own good fortune as
he peers over at his new bride. In the next, the same woman, a little older and more tired-looking, holds a new baby against her chest. Her gaze is directed not at the camera but wholly at the child, as if he holds all the mysteries of the universe. The third image, which he expects to be of an older Tony, turns out to be of Steve.

Unable and unwilling to think on that, Steve scans the room in search of Lucky once more, finding the dog in the opposite corner of the room sitting next to an armchair that contains Steve’s little boy. Tony is frowning down at the puppy, hands on his hips.

“You told on me?” Lucky whines and paws at his leg by means of reply. “Not fair.”

“Sweetheart, Lucky was just worried about you. And you know you’re not supposed to get up from a nap or sleep without letting someone know. Wanna tell me what happened?” The baby, of course, immediately shakes his head so violently it moves his entire body, and then he winces. That has Steve crossing the room in several quick strides and perching on the footstool in front of the chair. “Tony, are you hurting? Talk to me, please.”

“Can’t.” While Tony sometimes refuses to engage with particular topics when little, his claiming to be unable to discuss something is entirely new, and Steve frowns.

“What do you mean you can’t, baby? You can tell Dada anything. Anything at all.”

“Stark Men’re made ‘f iron.” It’s been so damn long since he’s heard that ridiculous mantra fall from Tony’s lips, Big or little. Steve had almost been able to pretend Tony had cast aside Howard’s most enduring legacy, replacing it with all the lessons they’ve worked so hard to teach him (and each other) about emotional honesty and trust and affection. He’s spent the past several days pitying Howard, regretting how he met his end, but just now Steve hates the man more than he ever has.

“Oh sweetheart. My beautiful boy. Can Dada pick you up?” Tony shakes his head, wrapping his arms protectively around his stomach, and Steve’s protective instincts flare again. “Alright. Then I need you to look at me please, and pick poor Lucky up and give him a nice big cuddle while we chat, alright? He looks like he could use it.” When Tony has accomplished the second and is at least mostly meeting Steve’s gaze, he speaks again, praying he can manage to make these words count even though everything he’s said to Tony for the past few weeks has managed to come out entirely wrong. “You’re such a good boy, Tony. You’re brilliant and generous; you’re compassionate and loyal and you love with your whole heart. I know a lot of those traits are things your—Howard actively discouraged. I know he wanted to make you hard and cold, maybe to protect you from things that might hurt you. Maybe because he didn’t know how to teach you to be anything else, I really don’t know. But you are better and braver and wiser because you are not those things. And whatever you’ve been feeling about Howard in the last few days, it’s okay that it’s probably complicated. It’s okay to miss him and be sorry he was hurt and also to feel mad and sad that he hurt you, that he ever wanted you to be anything but who you are.”

“He’d hate me. He’d hate a lot of who I am now, but this—” Tony makes a hand-waving gesture at his body, currently clad in his diaper and a dragon-covered onesie. “Howard could never forgive me this. When I wet the bed for a while after being kidnapped it was—he’d hate me.” Steve’s not sure if he finds the content of what Tony’s saying or his delivery of the words more disturbing. The baby’s face, usually so expressive when in headspace, is edging near that horrible blankness of the past few days; only his hand, shaking slightly as he runs his fingers through Lucky’s fur, gives away any sense at all that Tony is impacted by his surety that his own Father would despise him were he alive.

“I don’t know if that’s true Tony. I—whatever he told you about our past, we really didn’t know each other that well. I hope what you believe isn’t true. I hope that with time and age he would have
matured, and learned to understand you better. But even if it is, that doesn’t change the fact that he was wrong. He was wrong then and he’d be just as wrong now.” Tony still doesn’t cry or otherwise respond directly, but when he glances down at Lucky and then back up at Steve, he sees a little more of his baby there, and he can’t help but smile. “There’s my beautiful boy. Now how about you bring Lucky back to bed with us so we can get you changed and ready for the party, hmm?” Reflexively, he reaches down and hoists the baby up and into his arms. Tony lets out a yelp and instantly starts squirming to get away. “Woah, woah careful or you’re going to fall or drop your puppy. Tell Dada what’s going on right now please, or I’m going to call Papa Bruce and ask him to bring his doctor things.” As he speeds down the hallway holding the baby, Steve wonders if maybe he shouldn’t just jump right to that regardless, but he wants to at least give Tony the chance to express whatever is causing him discomfort first.

“Tummy hurts,” Tony confesses. Steve sighs in relief, inclined to read that simply as a physical manifestation of how upsetting the past few days have been. But when he strips Tony down to his diaper and glides his hands over the boy’s abdomen, he finds it hard and slightly distended.

“When was the last time you went potty, sweetheart?” Instantly the baby’s face goes a tomato-red and he whines. So Steve’s definitely on the right track then. “I’m sorry you’re embarrassed but Dada needs an answer. You want to tell me or should I ask JARVIS?” When Tony has been silent for several more moments, the AI replies,

“I do not believe Sir has voided his bowels since before the team arrived at the mansion, Captain Rogers.” Steve winces. They’ve given the boy a fair amount of food since then, including several bottles filled with high-fibre nutritional supplements. No wonder he’s in pain.

“That’s a pretty long time, baby boy. I wish you’d said something sooner; you’ve probably been hurting for a while, huh? Okay, well you don’t want to be sick during the party I’m sure, so I’m going to have JARVIS call Papa Bruce so he can bring you some medicine. Can you be Dada’s brave boy and take it for me?”

“No no no no no no,” Tony chants in reply, scrambling up to the head of the bed and burrowing under the blankets. “Don’t want—can still use the potty Dada, please please I’ll be good.”

It takes Steve several moments to even decode this and recognize the source of Tony’s upset. And his first instinct is to tell him, honestly, that he’d had no intention of asking Tony to use his diaper for anything beyond wetting it as he always does. But despite all his verbal protestations, there’s something calmer about the boy’s body language now, and he’s actually called Steve Dada for the first time in this conversation. When his mind flickers back to what Tony had just told him about Howard’s response to his childhood bedwetting, his sense about what to do next grows a bit stronger. And if he’s way off, he reminds himself, Tony still has his safeword.

“I think for today you’re just going to use your diapers, sweetheart. It’ll be easier for Dada and Papa to keep track and make sure your tummy is feeling better, and you won’t have to worry about running to the potty multiple times while we let the medicine do its work.”

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As if Tony’s morning couldn’t get any more embarrassing, when Papa Bruce comes the first thing he does is ask Tony’s Dada to strip his jammies and diaper back off.

“Wha—Papa, why—”

“Your tummy is blocked up enough that I don’t think a laxative or a softener is going to cut it, little love. Papa’s going to need to give you a couple of suppositories.” Steve holds his hand and Bruce is nothing but gentle as he guides the waxy, bullet-shaped medication between Tony’s cheeks, but the
entire thing is still mortifying, and Tony’s brain can’t stop supplying him with snippets of exactly what Howard Stark would say about the position his ‘greatest creation’ has found himself in.

He still manages to hold it together, though, at least until the medication actually starts to work, which takes a while. Bruce has since crept back out of the room, leaving Steve and Tony alone which is something, he guesses (fewer witnesses), but the noises and textures his body manages to generate when his bowels finally start releasing are absolutely the last straw. He doesn’t even recognize the resulting wail as a sound he’s making, not until his Dada gathers him up in his arms.

“‘It’s okay sweetheart. You’re so good. My perfect baby boy, I am so proud of you.’ When Tony shakes his head, unable to accept being praised for something this gross, the other man’s voice grows firmer. “You are, Tony. You’re doing exactly what you’re supposed to do, and you’re letting Dada take care of you. I’m so pleased and proud and I love you so very, very much.” He sobs again as the diaper grows impossibly fuller. “Shh, I know. I know this is hard and scary, but you’re being so brave, aren’t you?”

“M-messy,” Tony sobs.

“Only for a minute, sweetheart. And as soon as your body is done doing what it needs to do, we’re going to get you all clean and fresh. There’s no mess you can make that’s too much that we can’t get you clean again. And you’re going to feel so much better when it’s done. ‘m so proud of you, baby, truly.” Lucky paws at their legs again and rests his head against Tony’s ankle in apparent agreement.

He cries for what feels like ages. He cries while Steve bathes him with all of his customary gentleness, cleaning every inch of Tony’s body without any hint of revulsion or distance. He cries when Steve picks him up, wraps him in a hooded towel featuring an elephant, and walks in small circles around the room, Lucky trailing behind. He keeps crying when he’s laid down gently on the bed and put into another diaper and then his Halloween onesie. He cries until his lungs ache, until his body sort of collapses on itself, unable to generate more tears.

Through it all, his Dada inexplicably tells him that he’s good, that he’s loved and wanted and brave. It’s everything Howard never would have said, especially not in the face of such unimaginable weakness on Tony’s part. It feels like a betrayal, and like a victory.

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“Okay, I’m calling it. Halloween is officially a commercial holiday designed solely to sell more Black Widow merchandise. Don’t @ me on this, people,” Clint announces to the living room as he hangs the last of the spider decorations. Next to him, Natasha smirks and gives the little paper monstrosity a fond pat. The rest of the team is mostly still distracted by admiring Loki’s costume. He’s dressed as the Sea-Witch Ursula, complete with tentacles, and the little boy is smiling more than he has since arriving as everyone (including Lucky, who is having a hell of a good time chasing the tentacles around the floor and pouncing on them) makes a huge fuss over him.

“It was sweet of you and Phil to help with his costume.” He should know better than to try to bullshit Natasha, but Clint still does his best to affect a neutral, even slightly confused, expression as he climbs down from the ladder. The effort earns him a snort. “Don’t bother with that. I know the signs of Coulson’s Pinterest when I see them. And they didn’t ask me for help with make-up; you’re the only other one here who could have pulled that off.” Somewhat embarrassed to have been caught caring for Loki, he says nothing and just enjoys the sight of his family in one room, together and relatively happy.

From there, the long awaited party really gets going. They start by carving up some pumpkins; though none of the littles are permitted to actually wield the carving equipment, all three are more than happy to dig their hands around in the bright orange ‘guts’ in search of seeds to roast. All of
them also seem thrilled to be permitted to choose what designs will appear on each of the pumpkins. Loki requests a shark while Tony begs to have an image of Lucky. Bucky initially tries to double-up on Tony’s request, claiming he had been thinking of asking for a Lucky pumpkin, too; it’s not uncommon for the boy to try to sacrifice his own desires to please his brother, and given the slightly awkward distance between them, he seems even more desperate to do something to reach out to Tony. But eventually, he’s prodded into admitting his desire for a pumpkin featuring the Hulk, a request the team hurriedly agrees to before Bruce can manage to voice the objections he would more than likely raise. They all watch as Steve sketches out the requested images with the same careful attention to detail he brings to everything; Natasha proceeds to make quick work of actually carving the scenes out, not with the tiny tools provided in the carving kit, but with a knife she appears to draw out of thin air.

While Clint gets the seeds seasoned and into the oven to toast, Phil gets the littles going with their next activity, which proves to be even more popular: choosing teams for a scavenger hunt. They all lobby to be selected by the kids, admittedly some of them more shamelessly than others.

“I’m just saying, someone with the codename Hawkeye is bound to come in pretty handy during something like a scavenger hunt, babies.”

“Don’t listen to him, Loki, he’s good with an arrow and everything but it took months, plus JARVIS’s help, for him to realize I’d stolen his favourite sweater. And really, if anyone here is a natural ally to someone as awesome as Ursula, it’s clearly me.”

“Oh please, you didn’t even hear me rock Poor Unfortunate Souls earlier.”

They wind up with Steve, and Tony on one team (well, technically Steve, Tony and Lucky—Tony had drawn the dog since the teams are uneven); Loki, Natasha and Thor on a second and Bucky, Bruce and Clint on the third, and immediately everyone splits up in search of the plastic pumpkins that Phil had hidden around the mansion earlier that afternoon. At first, Bucky seems weirdly reluctant to actually be involved in the game, suggesting highly improbable hiding places and moving with a slowness that, while probably better for his coordination issues, is highly uncharacteristic of the boy when he’s in headspace. When Bruce gently prompts him for his reasoning, Bucky isn’t the least bit embarrassed when he says, “Don’t wanna find any. Want Tony to win.” Clint has never totally understood the depth and intensity of Bucky’s protectiveness toward Tony, but that doesn’t mean he finds it any less cute (if also slightly bittersweet given the strain between the boys over the last couple of days.)

“Aww buddy. Wanna know a secret? We’re all going to get big caramel apples at the end of this, no matter which team ‘wins.’ The scavenger hunt is really just for fun. And I bet Tony would be a lot happier if he knew you enjoyed yourself. Because your little bro is a pretty cool guy, yeah?”

“Tony is best,” Bucky agrees fervently. And as if open affection toward Tony Stark is some kind of secret code, the boy warms to Clint almost immediately, slipping his metal hand into Clint’s and taking part in the search with far more enthusiasm. From the slightly choked sounds coming from a few steps behind them, Bruce is barely restraining a laugh.

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“No, sweetheart, remember our talk about how these pumpkins don’t go in our mouths?” Steve reminds the baby as he tries to work the little orange piece of plastic free of Tony’s lips. Lucky is equally unhelpful to the scavenger hunt venture, circling Steve’s feet and yipping in excitement.

They’re going to lose this scavenger hunt, and badly, and Steve could care less. It had been an agonizing hour or so that afternoon hearing Tony cry like his entire world was shattering apart, and it
had gone on long enough that Steve had started to doubt his decision to push the boy toward it the way he had. But the baby left behind in the aftermath, while tired and still hurting, is undeniably more settled now that he’s made it out the other side of his first major post-hearing breakdown, and all the proof Steve needs of that is the sweet, pliant little body that keeps pressing closer to his own.

“Dada.” Yeah, plus Tony keeps saying that. Nothing else needed, apparently, the word being treated like it’s its own complete sentence, as if anything and everything Tony could need to convey is covered by that title alone.

“You betcha, baby boy. Should we follow Lucky and see if maybe he’s on the trail of the next pumpkin we’re looking for?” He’s ninety percent sure the dog is in fact going to lead them back to the kitchen cupboard that he’s already learned houses his treats. But Tony is already babbling his assent and bouncing in anticipation, and while he’s not fool enough to think one much-needed cry is going to be enough to solve the multitude of problems his baby is facing at the moment, for right now Tony is mentally-present and safe and relatively happy in Steve’s arms.

Loki and Natasha, it transpires, are a frighteningly effective team. Loki’s talent for mischief combined with Natasha’s ability to predict others’ decisions and maneuver her body through tight and uncomfortable spaces means that basically every time Thor turns around, they’re finding yet another of the prized plastic pumpkins. Loki insists on holding onto the growing pile of orange treasures himself, and every couple of minutes Thor watches his brother grin down at the pumpkins with pride and satisfaction. Halloween, Thor has decided, is a most excellent Midgardian celebration. Once the team has reunited and celebrated his team’s victory, Thor is eager to witness the rest of the evening unfolding.

“What festivities shall we partake of next?” he asks, daring to give Loki’s side a little tickle while he peers around the room. The Son of Coul, whom Thor has learned is a master planner of all events from large scale missions to parties like this one, is of course the one to reply.

“Well we have prizes for all the participants, so I thought we could enjoy those and watch a movie. Then maybe work off some of the sugar by dancing with Natasha.”

If the mess left behind on faces and clothes is anything to go by, the Younglings (and most of the adults as well) greatly enjoy their caramel apples. The treats are accompanied by a short film featuring a small child’s noble attempt to locate a Great Pumpkin; it is a quest that proves sadly unsuccessful, but Thor knows better than most the pleasures that can still be derived from what seem to be the most dismal of failures. He’s still grinning to himself as he makes another attempt to clean even some of the candy and dried fruit juice coating Loki’s face.

Truth be told, Natasha is a little nervous when it’s finally her turn to lead their littles through an activity. She’s by no means a shy person, and it’s not as if she hasn’t danced with Tony dozens of times and enjoyed each and every one of them, but until now it’s been a private joy. Opening it up, not just to James and Loki, but to the other Bigs as well, feels like an unexpectedly vulnerable act.

She starts them out as simply as she can, with a hip opening stretch where they sit on the floor with the bottoms of their feet together and move from side, pretending to be in a rocking boat. All three boys are stiffer and quieter than they should be, particularly given the sugar-high she knows them to all be riding, so there’s nothing for it but to push past her fear of seeming foolish to the others and try to get the littles out of their heads.

“Where are we sailing to, boys?” The kids exchange nervous glances, and no one seems to want to speak first. “Well we have Ursula with us, she’d probably be a pretty good ocean guide, right?”
“Could go see dolphins?” Bucky offers.

“Yeah! And giant turtles!” Tony adds. Bucky beams, clearly pleased and relieved to have his suggestion accepted with such enthusiasm by his brother. With the imaginative play working out so well for them, Natasha decides to run with it, modifying the next step to have the boys stand and lean from side to side, pretending they’re following the animals on paddle boards.

It’s an extremely simple stretch, but she hadn’t quite planned for how severely challenged Loki’s balance can be. Natasha is trying to figure out how to ask Thor to assist his brother without making Loki feel singled out or embarrassed when Tony, perceptive even as far down as he is tonight, gets there first. He stumbles, losing his balance and nearly falling in a way she can tell instantly is feigned.

“Is hard to paddleboard by your own self. Dada, you help Bucky, and Papa help me? And Daddy Clint help Loki? Please?” It’s almost embarrassing how quickly they all rush to do the baby’s bidding, and it isn’t long before Tony’s machinations draw the entire team into participating in the dancing. By the end of it they’re sweating and laughing and some of them are hilariously sore for a group of extremely fit people. Natasha doesn’t want the evening to end, and she isn’t the only one. There’s disappointed whining from all three of the littles (and she’s pretty sure Clint as well) when bedtime is announced, though Loki is asleep before Thor makes it halfway up the stairs to take the boy to his crib, and the other two are not far behind.

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When Steve wakes the next morning to find Tony already halfway out of bed and scouring the room for pants, there’s a horrible moment where the only natural assumption seems to be that all the progress they made yesterday has somehow been rapidly undone. Had Tony had another nightmare that Steve had missed? Is this retrospective embarrassment about the day before? There are too many dispiriting possibilities, so he focuses on the more immediate problem of keeping his wayward charge in bed by hooking an arm around his waist and pulling gently but firmly back against Steve’s chest.

“Sweetheart it’s too early for little boys to be awake. C’mere.”

“Not little.” It’s not the reply Steve expected, but it takes only a glance at Tony’s face to realize he’s telling the absolute truth. There isn’t even a hint of the baby from the previous evening in his expression now. And that…that’s a whole different issue that Steve doesn’t quite know how to respond to just now. Fortunately, Tony doesn’t appear to require much assistance; the second Steve releases his hold on him, he’s flying about the room, crowing when he succeeds in finding his pants and a grey t-shirt. He becomes just slightly shyer, though, when he turns back to Steve. “Can you…diaper off, please?”

“You—ba—Tony.” Steve makes short work of removing the lightly soiled garment, then avoids watching too closely as Tony dresses himself. It’s silly, maybe, to be so concerned about the man’s privacy when Steve sees little Tony naked so often, but his mind is still reeling from the abrupt shift in headspaces, and it just feels different to watch a man he’s only had the chance to kiss a few times really himself for the day. Steve wants, he supposes, to earn the right to know the adult side of Tony that way rather than gaining access by default. He’s lost enough in his own rambling inner-musings that he doesn’t realize Tony has spoken to him until the other man walks over to nudge his shoulder lightly. “Sorry, Tony, what?”

“I said I figured out how we’re going to fix the Accords.”

Chapter End Notes
I know, I know. It's been ages. Again. Pregnancy is so much harder (and more wonderful and weird and all the things) than I expected. But it always feels wonderful to come back to this story, and your comments and kudos never fail to keep me motivated. So please keep letting me know what you think; what you liked, what you're excited for, one-shots you want to see in the timestamps verse, I'm here for all of it! And comment replies to the last chapter should be on their way shortly; I'm still catching up, but I love chatting with y'all.
Scheduling and Other Conflicts

Chapter Summary

Tony shares his thoughts on the Accords. Phil keeps working to save the world through the power of effective organization. Loki spearheads a decision about the team's immediate future.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings specific to this chapter that I can think of. As always, let me know if you come across something you think warrants one, or if you have any other questions or concerns.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is nothing, anywhere, that tastes quite as good as coffee the first morning after Tony has been in little headspace. And Bruce has recently turned him onto a Kenyan roast that’s perfectly low in acidity while still managing bright hints of citrus; he could devour it by the pot on a regular day, and given that he’s been without any caffeine at all for days now, he might even go for two.

So Tony can be forgiven, he thinks, for being distracted enough that he doesn’t realize anyone else is in the kitchen with him until he hears the clearing of a throat and Phil’s amused (if still perfectly deadpan, because he’ll always be Agent) voice.

“Would it be more efficient for me to just get you a straw?” Tony’s engineering brain sometimes kicks in a bit faster than the other parts of his mind first thing in the morning, and he immediately begins contemplating how to fashion a straw that’ll be both big enough to reach the bottom of the pot and capable of not warping or changing the taste of the coffee itself… “Joke, Tony. How about you sit, and I’ll refill your coffee and find you something to eat with it.”

He’s steered into an empty seat at the kitchen table, around which Bucky, Bruce and Clint are all gathered. Tony’s pretty sure the latter two smile at him, but most of his attention is focused on Bucky, who is clad in an Iron Man sleeper and pretty clearly still little. The encounter would probably be awkward enough on its own; he’s never been around Bucky when he’s been Big and the other man hasn’t. Add that to the already awkward way they’ve been with one another since the hearings, and Tony is really starting to wish he’d stayed in bed and let Steve fetch his coffee the way the other man had offered.

But the longer he stares at Bucky, who peers back at him wide-eyed and clutching Bruce’s hand like a lifeline, the more the knot of anxiety and hurt and other feelings so complex and varied Tony can’t even name them starts to slowly undo itself. Because while there’s still shades of the Soldier in Bucky as an adult, there’s absolutely no resemblance between the man from that video and the boy sitting in front of Tony now who is clearly preparing to run away or hide under the table.

“Hey buddy. Nice jammies.” And those four words are all it takes; in seconds, Bucky has extricated himself from Bruce’s grasp and is throwing himself bodily at Tony, who has no option but to catch
him. He feels the boy’s sobs before he hears them, but eventually he can make out the muffled and continuous repetition of ‘sorry’ and ‘hurt’ and ‘didn’t mean to’ Bucky is uttering against his chest, and Tony appreciates fully for the first time just how hard it is to be on the other side of this equation, to be the Big desperately trying to comfort a distraught little. It’s just as terrifying, in some ways almost moreso, as the role Tony himself usually plays in these scenarios. “Aww kid. Shh shh shh. You’re alright. It’s gonna be okay.”

“’m sorry, ’m sorry, please.” The kid is nearly hyperventilating, and some of Tony’s fear and desperation must come through because all three of the others begin moving to flank Bucky, preparing to take over if this proves too much for either of them. But now that he has Bucky in his arms, Tony finds himself oddly reluctant to let him be someone else’s responsibility. Not when they all know that the only one who can give Bucky what he’s really seeking right now is Tony himself.

“I know you are. I know. And I’m sorry too, James. I’m sorry you were hurt, and that you were used to harm others. I’m sorry you have to live with that; it’s not fair, is it? None of this is.” Bucky shakes his head in agreement, hiccuping slightly as his cries start to slow and de-intensify. “You’re doing so good, though, buddy. You’ve worked so hard to get well again, and to build a good life for yourself here with our family. And that’s the best way to stick it to ‘em, you know—it’s the very last thing HYDRA would have wanted for you, or me, or any of us. You’re doing real good, I promise. I’m going to try to follow your example the best I can; you just gotta give me some time if I’m not always as good at as you are, alright champ? Can you do that for me?”

“Anything,” Bucky vows, and while his voice is quieter and more tremulous than his adult self’s, it is no less lacking in conviction. Tony tightens his grip around the back of the boy’s neck for just a moment, trying to convey everything else he can’t manage to say quite yet. He has no idea if it comes through or not, but when Bruce and Clint gently urge Bucky out of Tony’s lap and up the stairs, the boy goes without a struggle.

This leaves Phil and Tony alone in the kitchen, and Tony knows, just knows, that if he lets Phil speak the other man will want to talk about what just happened, and Tony’ll sink back down into his own headspace, maybe to chase after his big brother or just to cry some more. It’s painfully tempting, but even more than he wants that particular source of comfort just now, he wants to strike back at all the forces still seeking to bring his family harm.

“The Accords. We need—I have thoughts.” Phil takes a long time, far too long as far as Tony is concerned, staring him up and down, evaluating Tony’s mental and physical welfare. It’s all he can to avoid squirming under the attention, and he has no doubt that Agent picks up on that too; finally, he grants Tony mercy in the form of returning to the half-prepared breakfast in the pan and Tony’s empty coffee mug.

“JARVIS, have everyone who is able and available meet us in the living room—after Tony clears his plate.”

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They come together slowly that morning, and somewhat warily. Steve takes an armchair nearest to the door and doesn’t look at anyone. Natasha doesn’t sit at all, but roots herself between the chair and the sectional couch in a protective stance. Clint, like usual, handles the stress by performing a kind of hyper-relaxation, sprawling across the couch with his feet in Tony’s lap and bouncing a ball for Lucky. Thor (and Loki, of course) is absent, but the call to Assemble had apparently been enough to bring Bucky up and out of his headspace. Both he and Bruce are present, and there’s little sign of the weepy boy who had clung to Tony not an hour before; the only sign of any lingering remnants of headspace is the way Bucky seems reluctant to let the scientist out of his sight.
“Alright. We have a lot to cover this morning. There are some matters other than the Accords I would like to cover. Is it alright with you if we start with those, Tony?” The other man freezes midway through a sip—well, more like a gulp—of coffee, but he’s off-balance enough that he doesn’t actually voice any objections. Phil nods to the nearest camera, and in seconds a series of chimes sounds through the room (excepting Tony’s phone, which apparently plays the Men in Black theme song when Phil messages him.) “What you’re all receiving now is a series of personalized schedules. I welcome your input and any modifications you’d like to make, obviously, but in light of everything that’s gone on recently, and my conversations with each of you during our meetings, I felt we would all benefit from a bit more structure to our time to ensure we’re each getting what we need to function effectively.”

Some of the schedules are, admittedly, going to be less controversial than others. Natasha’s, for instance, leaves her work agenda largely untouched, carving out specific time only for Avengers training, Accords-related discussion, PR meetings and time with the Littles. Clint’s is similar, though it also accounts for the increased amount of time he’s tended to want to devote to the PR projects and his outreach work and formally cuts down on the amount of time he spends within SHIELD HQ. Thor’s daily program, as it is currently so determined by Loki’s needs and general well-being, is by far the most flexible, though Phil has scheduled some blocks of time where the boy will be watched by other members of the team so that Thor can get some much needed rest. Bruce and Steve’s both account for their respective schooling and commitments to the team; Phil’s pretty proud of the balance he managed to achieve there, actually, and for the fact that Steve doesn’t seem angry about the fact that there are a couple hours of his week blocked off for individual therapy.

Tony’s and Bucky’s are by far the most heavily formalized. Phil is taking Barnes’ request to be made field-ready seriously, and has developed an intensive program designed to assess and improve his mental, physical and emotional readiness. He’s also increased the frequency of the man’s meetings with his mental health team, and scheduled him for a minimum of one session of ageplay in his little headspace per week—though in deference to Bucky’s status as a switch, he’s tried to leave some flexibility for Barnes to determine which of their playtimes that will be. It’s the most actively Phil has ever intervened in Barnes’ life, and it’s slightly nerve-wracking to watch the other man take this in, giving very little of his reaction away.

Tony is a lot easier to read, if only because he’s never masked being angry particularly well.

“Coulson, you have got to be kidding me.”

“Again, Tony, none of this is set in stone, and I want to hear what you think. But before you rail at me, remember that we told both you and James when you arrived here that us caring for you in the aftermath of what’s happened is going to be more intense than you’re used to. I’m glad and proud of you that you had a bit of a breakthrough with Steve yesterday, but you can’t possibly think that one good cry means everything is fixed. You have about three full-time jobs not to mention a host of ongoing and critical side-projects. Those things will take up all the time we let them, and working through the trauma from the hearings, not to mention the ongoing issues from Extremis, have to be priorities too. I’m making them priorities.”

“I need time to work with Loki, and consult some people I trust about his case.” This, Phil knows, is not Tony’s central objection to the schedule, but he knows better than to point that out, and easily taps a note into his phone.

“Alright. What else?”

“SI takes up more time than you’re giving me.”

“Pepper is keeping me apprised as to your workload there—per your explicit permission, Tony, so
do not go off and scream at her please—and we can adjust weekly as needed.” The longer Phil stays reasonable and explains his decisions, the angrier Tony is getting about what’s really bothering him. The tips of his ears and nose are reddening, and he’s put his coffee on the table in subconscious preparation for the large hand-gestures he tends to make when he’s really upset about something.

“I am not your fucking child all the time, Coulson. Using this bullshit from the hearings to try to treat me like I am—is—I’m not fucking doing this!” Tony lurches to his feet and at least three Avengers are nearly on their feet preparing to go after him. Phil shakes his head and leans further into the couch, crossing his ankles and giving every appearance of being unaffected by the other man’s outburst.

“I’m not under the impression that you’re little right now, Tony, nor does this schedule originate from any confusion on my part about the boundaries of your headspace. I’m your Daddy sometimes, yes, but I’m also your friend and your teammate and your handler. All of these roles, but especially that last one, mean I’m going to help you set and enforce reasonable goals and expectations. You don’t always have to like it, or me. Certainly Clint and Nat haven’t always in the past. But I always brought them home alive and relatively whole and I have no intention of doing any differently for you. Any of you.”

It comes out more like a vow than Phil had actually intended. This time he’s the one to break eye contact with Tony, with all of them, really, because this, ultimately, is the most meaningful and intimate way he’s capable of demonstrating care and affection. He organizes, he communicates, he develops rules and restrictions; he finds them, no matter where they are or what shape they’re in, and he brings them home.

“You're...using your superpower.” Throat tight at the unexpected invocation of his conversation with de-aged Tony so long ago, Phil can only nod. “It’s kind of annoying, you know. Sometimes I wish you’d go back to threatening to taser me.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” he promises.

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It gets easier, slightly, from there. Tony is still highly skeptical about the long and overly-frequent blocks of time reserved for either little time or therapy (and associated projects, like meditation), but with Phil uncharacteristically wearing all his emotions on his sleeve just now, it’s impossible to doubt him when he assures Tony that they can re-negotiate on anything that really doesn’t work. He makes similar plans with the others, jotting down alterations and corrections and promising to send out revised versions by that evening.

Tony’s already wrung out by the time that portion of the meeting is done. Bucky is apparently even moreso, because he drops down into headspace enough that he promptly falls asleep on Bruce’s shoulder. Judging by pulse of jealousy that goes through him at the sight, Tony’s own hold on his Big mindset is growing tenuous at best, which means some quick re-adjustments of his plans.

“There was a speech. I had a whole—thing. Mostly about the value of expertise, and about how our best way forward is to stop accepting the anti-intellectual, anti-specialist, anti—well, everything of the people we’re fighting. This whole thing has been on their terms, and that’s why we were losing for so long. But Peterson, if nothing else, bought us time and some bargaining power to change the conversation. So in honour of that, I’m giving everybody homework.” There are good-natured groans from nearly everyone in the room; Clint ‘mistakenly’ aims Lucky’s tennis ball so that it goes whizzing just past Tony’s head. “Watch it Ygritte or you’ll end up in detention, and not the sexy kind. I want a page or two from all of you about what you want from the Accords. If we accept that they’re going to exist, and that at least theoretically some kind of oversight is not the worst idea,
what’s your ideal version of what that should look like? Nothing is too big or too weird. I expect all of us to come at this pretty differently, and if we can start treating that like a strength instead of a hindrance then we can move on to Phase Two.”

“What’s Phase Two?” Bruce has that look on his face, the I’ll-follow-you-almost-anywhere-unless-you’re-not-wearing-pants-in-the-lab-again-Science-Bro look, and Tony is momentarily a bit distracted because he loves that expression. Clint clears his throat and exchanges smirks with Natasha, and he sticks his tongue out at them.

“We crowdsource. We consult with experts across every relevant field; academic, popular, other supes, anyone we think needs or deserves to be heard. And we get a draft of the damn thing written ourselves. We know from experience how annoying it is to have to claw back something already on paper; now it’s our turn to use that.”

“Do you really think Peterson bought us enough time to pull that off?” Clint asks. “If we wait too long public opinion could start to sway back the other way.” Tony sighs. This is his least favourite part of the plan, and the one he’d hoped to avoid bringing in the hope that inspiration would strike.

“No, his stunt at the hearings won’t give us that long, you’re right. But I think I can buy us some more time. I just have to give Pepper the heads up; she made me promise after 2008 that I’d never be brutally honest on camera again without warning her first.” A room full of blank stares meet this pronouncement. Well except Lucky, who has found the ball that sailed past Tony’s head and is proudly presenting it to him. He uses the excuse to reach down and scratch the puppy’s ears, helpfully avoiding looking directly at anyone, as he explains. “I’m going to hold a press conference formally requesting that the hearings be temporarily put on hold so I can seek psychological support. It’s still not a guarantee, and we gotta hope there aren’t any more ill-timed fuck ups on our community’s part, or HYDRA plans to make it appear that way. And I’ll have to run the language past Heather because there’s a very thin line between the kind of honesty people will appreciate and the potential for being read as seeking pity or something. But—”

“I’ll be there too,” a sleepy voice interrupts. And it’s Bucky, of course it is, because whether in Daddy, Big-Brother or friend mode, Bucky is viciously protective of Tony, and would never just conveniently sleep through the one part of this meeting Tony didn’t want him to overhear precisely because he knew this would be the result. He doesn’t even have time to muster a protest before the other man catches his gaze, holds it, and repeats himself in a voice that leaves no room for argument. “I’ll be there.”

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Whether because he’s mostly Big today or growing more confident in the others after how well the party had gone last night, Bucky consents to Clint’s plan to take Lucky for a walk without a hint of panic. It’s the first time Bruce has been without him in two days, and he feels oddly bereft.

The others all intend to spend the afternoon taking it easy, recovering from the intensity of the morning (well, the last few days, maybe even weeks if they’re being honest). Natasha, Thor and Loki are playing with a set of beautiful glass marbles that they unearthed from somewhere in the mansion. Loki cackles every time Natasha manages to knock Thor’s marbles out of the circle they’ve drawn, and Thor is so clearly delighted by this that he makes an increasing production out of his every failure. Steve and Phil are both reading on the couch, the former something called The Art of Fielding and the latter a Neil Gaiman book of all things. Every once in a while, one of them reaches out to touch the other— tiny things, just a brush of a hand across an ankle bone or a foot coming to rest momentarily against a hip. Bruce is content to just watch these quiet (and not so quiet) intimacies, at least until the faint scent of coffee proceeds Tony into the room.
The engineer surveys the room with a faint, if tired, smile, winking and giving Loki a wave when the boy excitedly babbles a greeting. He doesn’t join the little group, though, nor does he fold himself into the space Phil and Steve automatically make for him on the couch. Instead, he curls up on the thick carpet directly in front of Bruce’s chair.

“You said—before. The aftercare…thing. What would that look like, exactly? Because I’m not down but I’m having trouble staying totally up, too, and I don’t really know…” He trails off with a little shiver, and Bruce has to fight the urge to immediately smother the man, making a huge deal over what a big step this is and how proud he is. Because nothing would drive Tony away faster than that.

“Well first let’s grab you a sweater; something soft and warm, you’re kind of shaky.” Wordlessly, Steve strips off his green pullover and tosses it in their direction. Then, though he and Phil are both undoubtedly still listening, he goes back to his book, trusting Bruce to handle this without assistance. (Did he mention he really, really loves his team?) Tony slips it over his head and grins even as he rolls as his eyes at the way the thing dwarfs him. “Good. Now I’m going to make you some tea—not coffee, Tony, tea. When I come back you can pick if you want to stay on the floor or sit in my lap, but either way I was thinking about listening to a podcast, maybe the new Science Versus. We can share the wireless earbuds if you’re interested. Once that’s done, we’ll see where your headspace is at and you can be as little or Big as you need, alright?” Looking pleased, if stunned, to have his request met so easily, Tony nods, and Bruce grins to himself as he feels the other man’s eyes follow him out of the room.

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They’re halfway through packing up the kitchen for their return to the Tower the next morning when Loki suddenly and without any warning begins to sob. Alarmed, Thor reaches out to lift him into his arms, but this just makes the boy cry harder and flail dangerously on his chair. It’s a painful reminder of their earliest days together after Loki’s transformation, when he would scream and cry for hours on end and nothing Thor could do would bring him comfort. He’s been so much happier these past few days, bonding with the team and the new pet and celebrating Halloween, that the regression is all the more saddening and unexpected.

“Youngling, what ails you so?”

“Nooooooooo,” Loki wails. When this fails to clarify matters, he points to Friend Clint, who is in the midst of emptying the cupboards, and seems as stunned as the rest of them.

“You still hungry, little bit? There something you want me not to pack up?” Loki’s face reddens and he sobs harder, his next few attempts at speech incomprehensible. It’s deeply painful to watch his brother struggle this way; occasionally, like now, it leaves Thor so full of rage (at his Father, at Asgard, at anyone who could look at this and call it justice) that he can’t even bring himself to console Loki. Clint, however, doesn’t hesitate at all, handing off his burdens to the Son of Coul and kneeling before Loki as they all so often do with Tony. “Shh shh, s’okay buddy. But you gotta slow down a bit, let the words come when they’re ready. There’s no rush. No one’s going to do anything until you can tell us what’s goin’ on, alright?”

“No no no no,” Loki repeats. “No go.”

“You don’t—what, you don’t want to leave the mansion, Pumpkin King?” Clint asks. Loki nods furiously as Thor tries not to wince. The boy so rarely asks for anything, and the first time he does Thor shall have to refuse him? This is most dispiriting. Perhaps once they return to the Tower he can cook some of Loki’s favourite foods as a peace offering, or purchase him some new toys.

“Uh—can we make that two votes for not wanting to leave yet?” Tony shrugs as they all turn to stare
“Look, I know it’s kind of a pain in the ass, and there are some things we’ll have to go back for, but I just…the distance has been nice. There’s room for Lucky to play outside in the yard here, and we’re all on just a couple of floors, and I’ll have to get Rhodey to check in on the bots probably, because if I’m gone for more than a few days at a time they always think I’ve been kidnapped again—”

“I’ll make the alterations to the schedule,” the Son of Coul announces. “We’ll need to be in the tower for training and meetings, and if we’re looking at a potentially long term stay I should have more of all of our clothes shipped over—”

“And the glider,” Natasha adds. The rest of the team begins shouting out other suggestions (Thor makes sure to ask for Loki’s high chair, so they can avoid another incident like this morning’s), and while the Son of Coul makes a convincing act of being annoyed, he drops the farce the moment Tony begins to seem concerned that their demands are growing too numerous.

“We don’t have to. Maybe this was stupid—”

“I’m your handler, Stark. The downside is that means that sometimes you have to listen to me when you really don’t want to. The definite upside is that when there’s something you or anyone else on the team needs and you actually tell me, I’ll damn well make it happen when I can. Now, Clint, I’m going to assume the request for a motion-capture suit was a joke…”

Loki has lost the thread of the conversation, and is peering from person to person with a quizzical look as he attempts to determine if he should still be crying or not. Thor can’t entirely blame him; when the team really gets going like this, he still sometimes struggles to keep up even with the aid of the All-Speak.

“Stay?” Thor grins at his brother, leaning down to kiss his head.

“Yes, stay.” The boy nods decisively, and then cheerfully goes back to tearing his toast into tiny bite-sized pieces and watching the Avengers’ absurd packing list grow as if it’s a highly entertaining spectator sport.

Chapter End Notes

Well the update schedule is still extremely random, but at least these two chapters were a bit closer together?

Thanks so much to all of you for the pregnancy-related well-wishes, and the comments on last chapter. A couple years (!!!) into this verse and it’s still so much fun to share writing with all of you.
Wanting

Chapter Summary

Tony and Bucky meet the press and deal with the consequences. Clint and Natasha share homework.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: Tony's doing better, but still struggling in this chapter. This manifests itself in some ways that are both physical and emotional.

There's also an extended sexually explicit scene in this chapter (hence knocking the rating up to E.) If you need or want to skip it, stop reading at the section that ends "let me get a look at you, hmm?", and pick up again after the last section break (the paragraph beginning "Phil is knee-deep on equipment enhancement requests...")

As always, if you want more info or have questions/concerns before reading, just let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s hard to say whose performance at the press conference impresses Phil the most. Certainly Tony is far more familiar with this kind of song-and-dance than Bucky, and he uses every bit of that experience to his advantage, referring to each one of the reporters (especially those who are rudest) by their first names and exuding a careful mixture of candour and assertiveness about his and Barnes’ boundaries.

“Yes, I understand it must be frustrating that the press isn’t being granted access to our mental health staff, Katie, I’m sure you could have had a field day with my Rorschach tests alone. But there’s this annoying thing called personal privacy, see, and besides, my dreams are far more boring than people think. Last night, for instance, I was trapped in Bath and Body Works and they wouldn’t stop trying to force those little bottles of hand sanitizer on me—what, Kyle, you don’t want to hear the end?”

Bucky’s approach is far more subdued, but no less effective; he’s put in a lot of time with the PR team in the past few days, and Phil is again impressed by the guidance Heather and her staff have provided. Rather than swinging to an extreme, either prostrating himself before the public and begging their forgiveness or playing the robotic tin-soldier, Bucky is mostly just himself, the 40s Brooklyn charm turned slightly up, an echo of Steve Rogers without ever playing up their resemblance too heavily.

“I uh…well, I don’t know about all that—I’m not even an official member of the Avengers yet. But it seemed ta me that hidin’ away forever was more a way to feel sorry for myself than a way to make amends to Tony or anyone else. Gettin’ better is work, but it’s work I want to be doin’.”

Phil is fiercely proud to be seated between these men, and given that he spends most of his workday with spies, it’s laughably easy to tell the majority of the mainstream media representatives in
attendance are impressed by them, too. That doesn’t mean, however, that they’re taking it easy on either Bucky or Tony.

“But Mr. Stark, doesn’t your own admitted instability at the present ultimately support rather than challenge Congressman Peterson’s concerns about having so much power concentrated in the hands of a group of volatile enhanced individuals?”

“As we’ve all said, we’re not here today to comment specifically on Congressman Peterson. That said, I’d think it would be more concerning to the government and to the public to rush through these negotiations without ensuring the wellness and safety of all parties. I’d also think it would be reassuring to all involved, especially those voicing concern about our potential impact on the world, to know that our community takes mental health seriously. I mean, you can’t have it both ways, folks; when I came back from Afghanistan, how many of you wrote think-pieces about how I should really consider stepping away from Stark Industries to address the traumas produced by my captivity and torture? Sometimes actually putting in the work of doing that doesn’t just mean a bubble bath and a glass of wine, it means delaying things that are important.”

“And for those in the superhero community not as fortunate as yourselves, who may lack access to a fleet of highly-trained mental health professionals?” Phil vaguely recognizes the blonde who has delivered the sharply-worded question and struggles to recall her name—Evelry? Everwood? When he recalls a vague comment of Pepper’s about the woman having slept with Tony, it takes a surprising amount of effort to keep his features schooled. (And since when has he ever cared about Tony’s numerous past partners? Maybe he really needs to talk with the man about getting the romantic side of their own relationship going sooner rather than later…)

“That’s a great and important question, Ms. Everhart. Our organization, along with SHIELD, has tried to make it clear to the super-, meta- and inhumans we’re in contact with that in such a situation our resources would be at their disposal. But really, that’s a stopgap isn’t it? The Avengers can’t be all things to all people no matter how awesome our Twitter is.” Tony pauses just briefly for the laugh that follows, and, despite the rest of the team being directed to avoid the press conference, Phil is quite certain he sees Clint fist-pump from the northeast corner before darting away. “If the Accords are actually going to be something more than a state-sanctioned mechanism for regulating and punishing a minority population, then they will also have to provide clear, specific and effective measures for supporting that population.”

Phil knows instantly that Tony’s just delivered what will probably end up being one of the most quoted segments of the press conference, and he tells himself that his own smugness is a totally justified reaction of pride toward his asset and not a catty pleasure in the stunned look on Tony’s ex’s face. It makes little sense, then, that the man himself seems increasingly uncomfortable, squirming in his seat next to Phil and casting frequent looks at the clock as the session draws slowly to a close. When the room has finally emptied, it’s Bucky who puts together the signs first.

“Coulson, make sure the hallway in the back is clear.” The moment Phil has confirmation that it is, Barnes is sprinting with Tony in his arms toward what turns out to be the nearest restroom. Cursing himself for not picking up on the signs and getting Tony out of there way sooner and making arrangements by text for Clint to track down the nearest diaper bag, Phil is slow to catch up. By the time he makes it inside the washroom, Bucky and Tony are locked in the stall nearest the door, from which a loud thud suddenly echoes through the room.

“Stop that, manysh, you know you’re not allowed to hurt yourself. You made it here just fine. No one knows.”

“You were so much smarter than me; never shoulda let diapers be a part of this. I could’ve—I almost
—” There’s self-disgust practically dripping from Tony’s every word, and seconds later that same thudding noise from before is followed a growl from Bucky. And while he would normally leave this to the two of them, it’s not lost on Phil that the past couple of hours have been just as much an ordeal for Bucky as they were for Tony, and he isn’t willing to abandon either of them at this point.

“Tony, you are not going to like what happens if you keep that up, I assure you.” Silence is the only response he receives, and though Phil imagines the glare he’s getting right now is pretty vicious, he’ll take it over Tony smacking his head against the stall door. “Good. Now listen to me. You were amazing out there, but you’re still in severe mental and emotional distress, and it’s not that surprising that some of that is playing out physically. That’s not the fault of the age play, or the diapers, and you are not losing control of yourself, I swear it to you. Your body and your mind just need a little bit of extra help and support right now.” Clint signals his arrival with one of their coded knocks, and there’s a panicked yelp from the other side of the stall door. “It’s just Clint bringing some supplies; the room is secure, I swear it. Can the two of you come out here please?”

Clint makes no effort to hide his concern, nor his desire to remain with them, but he nonetheless departs the room after handing the bag to Phil without a word. Tony flushes when he sees it and would likely be following right after Clint without Bucky’s grip on his shoulders.

“I’m not—”

“This isn’t about your headspace, although I’ll remind you that you’re slated for either some little time or a session with the therapist this evening so you might want to consider it. I just thought you’d be more comfortable wearing a pull-up home.” Tony stares between Phil and the bag, furious and ashamed, before he unzips the latter, retrieves a pull-up and stomps back to the stall while Bucky stares after him, shoulders slumped.

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What do you want, Natasha decides that afternoon, is a much harder and more complicated question than what can you live with. Whether explicitly or not, the latter is the one has shaped the entirety of the conversations they’ve had so far about the Accords. It’s always been about the concessions they can claw back from various organizations and individuals, about how to make life the most bearable possible for the largest number of people.

And really, those kinds of determinations have shaped not just this aspect of Natasha’s personal and professional ventures, but almost the entirety of her life. Her childhood in the Red Room, her eventual defection to SHIELD and her numerous solo missions, she had never undertaken any of them with any grand notions about making the world, or herself, better. Her successes, if they could be called that, were never to be celebrated or even known by those beyond the cloistered walls of SHIELD, where she was just as much feared as she was anything else.

That had changed, by necessity, when she’d been forced to dump all of SHIELD’s secrets, including her own, onto the open web. Then she and Rhodes had been made the face of the President’s rescue from AIM, and she’d known then beyond any doubt that her life would never return to what it had once been. Even when she’d had the opportunity to try to force it back into that mold by keeping the circumstances of Phil’s death and subsequent revival from him, she’d barely hesitated before throwing it away. It had been a terrifying thing to come to terms with, realizing how deeply and completely she cared for her family, the lengths to which she would go to keep them safe and together and whole.

But right now that feels like nothing compared to attempting to complete Tony’s assigned ‘homework.’ The cursor on the snowy white document in front of her is taunting Natasha, and if this keeps up she may end up stabbing the damn thing. Certainly that would be less daunting than this
damn near Utopian project she’s been asked to undertake. Finally, in desperation (and because SHIELD is really going to get on her ass if she breaks another computer, co-director or not) she sends for Clint.

His arrival takes longer than it should have given that he’d been scheduled to be in HQ today, and realization hits her along with a wave of annoyance that he hadn’t invited her to come along.

“You went to the press conference.” He shrugs and nods, though his cheeky grin is far less smug than it would typically be when he gets one over on Coulson. “Something happened.”

“It’s being handled. And if you didn’t already know I was there, that’s not why you called me in here. What’s up, Boss?” She wants desperately to push, both because she wants to avoid actually dealing with the Accords and because she wants assurance that her teammates are truly faring as well as they’d seemed to on television. But Clint is unlikely to budge if he thinks her in need of help herself, so she gets up, closes the door, disengages most of the surveillance and security measures, and spins her computer screen round to face him.

“I have absolutely nothing to give Tony about the Accords. I’m finding this kind of…exercise difficult. Have you managed to get anywhere?” For a moment Clint’s expression betrays his surprise, and it’s true that however else they’ve helped one another in the past Natasha has rarely been this upfront about failing an assigned task. But he doesn’t comment, instead tugging his phone out of his back right pocket, opening an app and handing it to her. The screen is a bullet-point list:

- Support/training for parents of supes, metas, inhumans (SMI) (Kamala as a case study)
- Special/additional schooling for SMI kids integrated into ‘regular’ schools (talk to Tones about this?)
- Scale of projects/activities based on age, experience, other factors (use Spidey as a model)
- Mentorship programs (use Tones and Riri as example if I can get him to admit she even exists, overprotective bastard)

It’s not a long list, but there’s enough here that Natasha starts to recognize some patterns. Clint’s primary concern is with futurity, ensuring that whoever picks up the mantle when the Avengers are done has an easier time than they did. He wants, she realizes with a kind of bittersweet jolt, these children to actually be permitted to be children rather than having to seek out and nurture that part of themselves only after the fact the way Tony has been forced to.

He’s also heavily reliant on using people he knows as case studies. It makes sense. Clint abhors abstraction, has always preferred to ground conversations in the material and specific. He used to think (maybe still believes sometimes) that it’s a symptom of the learning disabilities and other challenges he’s faced. To Natasha, it’s what she’s always liked best about Clint, that he sees people first, always, even when abstracting them into numbers or a series of trends would save him pain and suffering.

“Who’s Riri?” He grins broadly, the way he almost always does when discussing any of the kids he works with.

“Riri Williams. Introduced herself to Tony by sending him a list of proposed improvements to his suit, complete with snarky schematics and a list of requested materials. Very possibly smarter than Tony, and he fuckin’ loves it. He’s letting her build her own version of the suit, calls it Ironheart, in the shop, and he’s helping her make a modified version of JARVIS for it. It stays there, of course; he won’t let her use it until she’s of age, and he’s putting some of the same restrictions on it as Spidey’s upgraded tech, though she insists she’s going to find and remove all the protocols without him even knowing.” Natasha can’t help but grin back at the mental picture this so clearly paints, because despite his reputation for narcissism (one that, yes, Natasha herself had once believed
wholeheartedly) Tony loves nothing more than people who can show him up. Natasha still dreads and waits with excitement for the day that he and Shuri, the Wakandan King’s sister, finally meet face-to-face.

“I assume she’s not on my radar because Tony asked you to keep her away from SHIELD?”

“Partly. She’s also got a bit of an anti-authority thing going; she tolerates me mainly because Tony led with stories about how many times a day Fury used to threaten to fire me.”

“He didn’t just threaten, you know. The paperwork is all in your file; at least two dozen separate times he tried to start the process before Maria or Phil stopped him.” They exchange grins, and for just a moment it feels like they’re junior agents again, trading gossip about their bosses and sharing their homework with one another. Damn but she’s missed him.

“Did that help at all?” he asks when she slips the phone back into his hand and lets her fingers linger on his for just a few moments longer than is strictly necessary.

“Maybe. I don’t have the kinds of connections you do, so when we talk about community it’s still a little harder for me to feel a part of that let alone try to speak for them.”

“So maybe try to work from a place a little closer to home, then.”

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Steve is re-reading an article on the history of the UN for the fourth time when JARVIS informs him of Tony’s request to access his room. He gives it without even a pause, though it certainly comes as a bit of a surprise; the other man is scheduled for either little time or therapy tonight, and Phil’s text had alluded to Tony having some issues immediately following the press conference. He’d fully expected one or more of them would have to drag Tony out of the mansion’s modified version of his workshop.

Tony sort of explodes his way into the large bedroom, wide-eyed and almost bubbling over with a quiet intensity that Steve finds himself instantly unable to look away from. He’s still working on formulating a neutral kind of greeting, the kind that’ll seek information without prying, when the other man stalks over, edging further into Steve’s body space than he would normally dare, close enough that Steve can see his chest heaving with the force of his breath.

“I want…I want to touch someone. But for my own sanity I need to be in total control of exactly how and when that happens. And it occurred to me that your particular needs at the moment might be just what I’m looking for. Wanna fool around, Cap?” The smirk he flashes then, just a hint of the arrogant playboy that Steve had both despised and been inappropriately attracted to from the get-go, is enough to punch the air from Steve’s lungs. “…no pressure, of course,” Tony adds, misinterpreting the silence and losing some of his cocksure bearing.

“No, I…yes, please. But Tony I still can’t—I don’t know if this’ll work. I don’t want to disappoint —” Tony’s finger, calloused but warm, presses lightly against his lips, and Steve obediently falls silent.

“Do you want a different safeword than our usual for this?” By now, several of them have had occasion to use ‘Suit’, and Steve can’t really imagine the impulse to say anything else in a moment of stress. He shakes his head. “Good. Take off your shirt, if you’re comfortable with that, and turn around. Wait for me” Without looking back, Tony struts off into the ensuite bathroom like he owns the place (which, Steve realizes with a weird kind of tingle near his midsection, he does).

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Steve is trembling under his fingers when Tony first places them on his shoulders, and for a moment he hesitates, because it’s more than possible that this is the worst time for him to be attempting to help someone also in a vulnerable frame of mind work through some of their issues. But then Steve moans—quietly, but enough that his Extremis-enhanced senses pick up on it—and leans back into Tony. And it’s such a heady fucking rush, the polar opposite of how he’d felt earlier and exactly what he’d come here seeking, that the last thing he could ever manage to do now is stop for short of anything but a safeword or some other outward show of distress.

“JARVIS, pull up and project visual SR4921, and then go on sentry mode. Lock down this room, and mute all incoming notifications except those you would deem emergency.” J says something in the affirmative, he’s pretty sure, but Tony already has eyes only for the detailed image of Steve’s torso that appears on a holoscreen in front of them. “I was going to set us up in front of a mirror originally, but I think part of the problem might be that a part of your brain still expects to see something else when you see your reflection. So we’re going to make a digital map instead.”

“What, like hand here, nose there kinda thing?”

“Nah, like ‘it makes Steve desperately hot to be touched here’ or ‘no-go zone here.’ It’s to help you get to know yourself, darling.” Steve cocks his head and stares at the diagram with far more interest. Tony decides this is the perfect opportunity to lean in and run a hot tongue up the side of Steve’s neck; the blonde responds with a startled, high-pitched whine. “Oh see now that’s lovely. Definitely going to plot that.” A second-long exchange with Extremis sees the side of digital-Steve’s neck turn from cool blue to Iron Man red. Curiously, this makes Steve moan again. (Medical kink getting activated by being observed? Maybe. Or maybe Steve has a thing for possessiveness, likes seeing himself painted in Tony’s colours? Definitely something to investigate later.)

Tony licks and nibbles his way around Steve’s neck, pausing when the little sounds Steve’s making turn decidedly less pleased once Tony reaches his spine. He nearly abandons the area altogether when, on impulse, he bites down with more force and is rewarded with Steve’s loudest moan yet. He highlights the area on the map and leaves a note (‘firm pressure only’)—Steve nods fervently in agreement.

“Lighter feels like—like water trickling down my spine—God, Tony, please, please.”

“So pretty, baby. So fucking gorgeous. Look down at your arms, see how they’re covered in goosebumps? You’re so sensitive here, darling. I could stay all day. Did you like being touched here before?” It’s a gamble, referencing Steve’s former body instead of trying to make him forget it, but Tony’s base impulses have served him pretty well so far. And he does, after all, have at least some experience with trying to integrate multiple versions of himself into a semi-coherent whole.

“D-dunno. When Buck and I…there was always so little time. Didn’t really—couldn’t explore.” It should make the slightly possessive part of Tony pleased to hear that, he thinks, and maybe it would have if Bucky were still just a shadow and a memory. But now it just makes him sad to think of these two gorgeous and fundamentally good guys having been forced to rush through lovemaking out of necessity and fear. He trails his way upward to nip at Steve’s right earlobe (not much of a response there, not a hot-spot for Steve) and asks,

“Tell me something you did know about your body then, Steve. What did you like?” Steve tries to obey the request, closing his eyes as he loses himself to another place, another time, another man. He frowns, brow furrowing, but just when Tony begins to regret asking and start forming plans to talk Steve down, he brightens and opens his eyes to smile at Tony.

“He used to pull pretty hard on my hair sometimes, when he was real close or I did somethin’ he really enjoyed.” Grinning, because he can definitely get behind the hint of roughness Steve seems to
enjoy bringing into the bedroom, he gives a yank at the blonde locks while biting at a tendon in Steve’s neck; Steve yelps, and not in a good way.

“S’good, Tony just—not so hard. Scalp feels more sensitive’n before or something. Sorry.”

“No sorries,” Tony soothes. “Parts of you are just different now—not better or worse, just different. I’d imagine that the serum probably heightens your overall sensitivity, which might sometimes feel great and other times not so much. We’re gonna figure out a balance that works for you.” He illustrates the point by slackening his grip on Steve’s hair slightly and sucking a mark onto the other side of the man’s neck.

“OH! Oh that’s—oh.”

Tony explores Steve just like that for over an hour. It’s not sex the way he’s used to; it’s cautious and halting and sometimes emotionally trying for both of them, but especially Steve who is coming to terms with the discontinuities and similarities between his body as it is now and the 90 pound asthmatic who had had rushed, fumbling sex with his best friend decades prior. But Tony is still achingly hard. Steve, who is panting and squirming beneath his touch despite Tony never having gone below his waist, doesn’t appear to have any complaints either.

“I think we should probably leave it here for today,” he says reluctantly, smiling into Steve’s hair when he lets out an indignant moan of protest. “I know, darling, but I don’t want to push you too hard too fast. And honestly I need to go, uh, take care of something. You can too, if you like.” He gestures to Steve’s tented jeans with an attempt at a rakish grin and moves to stand, only for Steve’s hand to dart out and clamp around his wrist.

“Stay? I can’t—I’m not ready, for myself, but I’d love to watch you.” Instantly Tony’s cock is about fifty percent harder, and his breath stutters in his chest in a way it hasn’t since the arc reactor was removed. The hand encircling his wrist loosens. “Tony? Is that okay? You don’t have to—”

“Yes. Just…fuck, yeah that’s okay Steve.” Tony sheds his jeans in record time, even with his fingers fumbling over the zip (and thank fuck he’d changed out of the damn pull-up from earlier because that is not a conversation he wants to have in this context, ever). Steve makes no attempt to disguise how his eyes rake over Tony, and the way he bites down on his bottom lip has Tony’s hand moving rapidly on his cock. It feels like he’s been hard for ages now, and while he’s usually capable of being quiet during sex, right now he’s tipping his head back and moaning. Steve’s hand doesn’t move from its loose grip on Tony’s wrist, and even while this makes jacking off a bit more of a challenge, he also wouldn’t give it up for anything.

“You look so gorgeous, Tony.” And damn if it isn’t a pleasant surprise that Rogers is willing to keep talking even if he’s not directly the focus right now. Showing off just a little, this time on purpose, Tony canters his hips and toys with the head of his leaking cock. “Tell me what you’re thinking about?”

“Licking every fucking inch of you,” Tony supplies instantly, hips and hand both moving furiously now. “Want to suck you so badly, Steve. Want to eat you out—something tells me you’d just fucking adore that, especially if I held your hips down a little bit so you couldn’t move away from me.” Steve makes another extravagantly loud noise and then, adorably, slaps his free hand over his own mouth. Tony is torn between the desire to laugh and the need to come as quickly as humanly possible. He settles for cocking his head at Steve while continuing to fuck vigorously into his own fist.

“We’re not at the tower. People could—could hear.” Steve isn’t wrong on this front. The size and scale of the mansion make it somewhat unlikely, but still far more possible that they’ll be overheard
than it would be at the Tower. But the hand Steve is using to cover his mouth keeps trying to creep
down towards his cock, and even though the other man isn’t giving in to the impulse, something tells
Tony this isn’t necessarily a problem.

“You like that, don’t you? Makes sense really. Being overheard before had actual, super shitty
ramifications. But now, if Bucky or Bruce or Natasha were to come by, they’d probably just want to
stick around for the show.” Steve actually squeaks at this, which. Damn. “You want that, darling?
Want your team to watch you lose control like this for me, be put on display for them? I can’t speak
for the others, but Bruce definitely has enough toppish tendencies that I’m almost positive he’d get
off on that hard. And really, even if exhibitionism isn’t strictly their thing, I’d dare anyone to watch
you this way and not want—want—ugh, Steve, I’m gonna—”

“Do it.” And Steve is suddenly looming over Tony, watching avidly as he shoots onto both of their
hands and across the bedding. Then Steve’s mouth is on his, and Tony’s brain goes blissfully and
entirely quiet.

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Phil is knee deep in equipment enhancement requests (and what a shock that virtually every
SHIELD agents are expressing a preference for Stark-made tech…) when the man himself enters the
makeshift office Phil has set up in the mansion. The Tony of a few hours ago had been awkward,
embarrassed and angry at his near-miss, so Coulson is prepared for a fight. He’s even strategized a
few more diffusion techniques to try out if necessary. But Tony is fiddling, not quite idly but at least
calmly, with some of the slime they’d made together long ago, all while using Extremis to toy with
the lights in the room, and he manages a tense little smile when they lock eyes. Phil’s initial impulse
is always to seek out intel, and especially given that Tony had disappeared as soon as they’d arrived
at the mansion and has been absent through the entire afternoon, he’s damn curious what could have
gone so far toward repairing the man’s mood. But Tony speaks first.

“I uh…has the Doc that’s been working with Bucky gone home yet?”

“No, he always sticks around in case you want to see him. Would—is that what you want, Tony?”
The lights flicker again, this time (Phil is fairly sure) unintentionally on Tony’s part.

“I…want is a strong word. But I’ll give it a shot.”

Chapter End Notes

It’s so great to be back to this story again. Updates will continue to be irregular, and
comment replies delayed, but I fully intend to finish this story out. Thanks to all of you
who are still reading it! You’re fantastic, and I treasure each and every one of your
comments and kudos.
Getting to Know You

Chapter Summary

Tony and Bucky both face new challenges. The team attempts a group date

Chapter Notes

Content Notes/Warnings: There are brief and vague references to Bucky's time with HYDRA and its aftermath. Bruce also discusses a previous age-play dynamic he was involved in in the past that was sexual in nature. There are no explicit details, and the age-play in this fic will remain 100% non-sexual, but if you want to avoid it, skip from the paragraph beginning "Hush, Clint..." and resume reading after the paragraph that ends "...so I sought out other littles when I could." Finally, the last portion of the chapter involves a group date. Everyone is big and it's not sexually explicit, but if you want to skip it, just stop reading after the scene between Steve and his instructor.

There's also no little/Big time in this chapter, so if you're in this strictly for the ageplay this might not be your fave...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Now, to be entirely fair, Tony does actually try to enter into the therapy in good faith. After Afghanistan he’d intentionally trolled every psychologist, psychiatrist and other mental health aide the army had tried to set him up with, both because he hadn’t been ready to talk about his captivity, and because even if he was the last person he’d do it with was someone connected to the US Government.

He has no such concerns now. Phil and Tony himself had carefully vetted the team that treats Bucky, and they’ve had absolutely no issues relating to either competence or privacy. Indeed, with all the attention those folks are facing in the aftermath of the press conference, Tony feels more sure than ever that they’ve chosen exactly the right people for the job.

Doctor Ajaypaul Nariani (Ajay to those who know him) has been nothing but kind and patient over the past six days while Tony has tried to open himself up to the process of therapy. It’s just that it isn’t working. The guy asks a question and Tony either shuts down entirely, huddling up in the corner in silence until their time is up, or makes some kind of glib joke. At first the Doc had insisted that Tony even being in the room was an important step, but after so long with no progress Tony can tell the other man is getting frustrated too.

They’re seated together in one of the mansion’s numerous guest rooms. Ajay, calm and loose limbed, is making conversation about a sports team he follows. Tony honestly couldn’t even tell you which one; he has passing knowledge of most major sports because it’s socially and politically useful, but he’s never much bothered with them outside the obligatory stuff. So he’s making periodic grunts and other noises signalling agreement or interest all while using the Extremis hub in his head to plan his next round of upgrades to Clint’s bows.
“Tony.” Ajay’s tone suggests this is not the first time he’s tried to capture Tony’s attention, which means he’s busted. Whoops.

“What’s up Doc?”

“I think we need to think about other treatment options.” And he shouldn’t feel disappointed, not when he’s also so relieved that neither of them are pretending this is actually working, but it’s also a little disheartening to know he’s so broken that even when he tries the shrink has still reached the point where he’s giving up. But Tony stands and gives a jaunty little salute, already stepping toward the door.

“Got it. Thanks for the attempt. And don’t be ashamed; you lasted way longer than the last one and you’re not crying. So I’m still impressed.” Ajay doesn’t lose his almost unnerving calm (which never ceases to remind Tony slightly of Phil), but he arches a brow.

“Have a seat. Our time isn’t up and we’re not through here, just switching tracks.” Ajay waits with unnerving patience, flipping through his notes and chewing idly on the end of a pen until Tony is seated again. “Now, Dr. Banner has mentioned you invented a technology you feel might be a useful therapeutic tool. I’ll admit I was hesitant; from what I understand, this—BARF, man, really?” Tony appreciates, at least, that Ajay is so unafraid of him that he’ll mock his acronyms, and he feels himself sink into the chair, body less prepared to make a run for it (or, more realistically, summon the armour) than it had been a few moments ago. “Given that trauma often works through constant reliving of particular scenes, there’s real risks to this tech, Tony. It could very well end up making things worse, encouraging you to linger in places that we’re actually trying to get your mind to avoid.”

“But the editing feature—”

“Could help disrupt those patterns, or it could lead to a kind of fantasy wish-fulfillment that might make reality more challenging to cope with. Like a Mirror of Erised kind of situation.” When Ajay realizes he’s compared Tony’s mental health to Harry Potter he looks flustered for the very first time, but Tony finds himself grinning at the reference and the way it makes him think of his family. “Uh, anyway. The point is, I did some thinking last night, and I’ve been trying excessively hard to treat you like a regular patient. It came from a good place, because while a lot of things about you and your situation are exceptional, many of them also aren’t, and making you feel like some kind of outlier all the time doesn’t seem—”

“Wait, are you saying I’m not special, Ajay?”

“Can it, Stark. You’re hilariously normal in far more ways than you realize.”

“Blasphemy!”

“But the editing feature—”

“BUT there are some instances where I have to recognize that you’re unique, and might require more specialized forms of care. So you’re going to have JARVIS send me every bit of information you have on BARF, I’m gonna do some reading, and then next week we’re going to try things your way.”

****

For a long time after the fucked up version of the serum HYDRA had given him, Bucky hadn’t been entirely sure he could sweat. With the Commandos, he’d sat in precarious positions for hours at a time waiting for the perfect shot; later, after his capture, he’d endured countless hours (fuck, years, decades more like) of torture with plenty of screams and the occasional tears, but little in the way of sweat. He’d thought his body simply incapable of it.
Well apparently whoever had designed the serum had never trained with Phillip J. Coulson.

“Your reaction times were a half a second slower across the board that round, Sergeant Barnes. Take five for water and a protein bar and then we’re running a new pattern.” Bucky, a seasoned veteran and former brainwashed-assassin, groans. And to make matters worse Coulson, standing there in his fancy suit and tapping notes into one of Tony’s holographic screens, twitches his lips in something very close to a smile. Smug bastard.

“You put the others through this before they got signed on to the team?” Coulson doesn’t look away from his screen.

“Natasha and Clint had passed standard SHIELD testing in order to be certified, a program which I helped design. The others—no, I didn’t have a hand in personally training them, but it’s probably a good idea to bring everyone in for assessments at some point.” He’s about to become pretty unpopular back at the mansion, Bucky thinks, then mentally shrugs. If he’s goin’ down he’s damn well taking the others with him. As he downs a bottle of water and a coconut-flavoured energy bar, he watches his new handler.

There’s an efficiency to Coulson that’s almost brutal. It reminds him a bit of Tony, actually, the way Phil can almost effortlessly move between reviewing footage of Bucky’s training to generating nearly a page full of notes about potential future modifications and other exercises to try (which includes a supply order he places in under a minute), to checking in on a map tracking what looks to be SHIELD agents on active missions. But where Tony is often frantic, struggling to keep up with the pace of his own mind and constantly at risk of allowing the rest of his body to be torn apart by his brain’s intensity, Coulson is relentlessly steady. Bucky never thought he’d want another handler, not after HYDRA. But something in him has always recognized and found comfort in the absolute stability that Coulson seems to exude.

In precisely four minutes and fifty eight seconds, Coulson slides most of the holoscreens to his left and gestures to a spot on the floor, illuminated by JARVIS. Bucky huffs, taking a last long swig from his bottle of water, and lines up. The combination obstacle course and skills training Coulson (with help from Tony, Bucky assumes) has designed is brutal, a mix of physical and digital objects that re-set themselves between rounds so that the course is never the same for two sets in a row. The last round had required a difficult balance between speed and accuracy; Bucky had needed to outrun a digital army behind him all while wielding a heavy rifle and using it to eliminate moving analog targets while avoiding those marked as civilians. Unless it’s going to end up being heavier on digital elements, the way the course has re-set itself for this go looks comparatively easy. Bucky has maybe a second to wonder if Coulson is taking it easy on him.

And then the room explodes with sound. A woman screams, demanding to know where her child has gone; multiple car horns and alarms blare; something (not an animal he recognizes, but definitely not human either—alien, maybe?) roars from above him. Bucky doesn’t realize that he’s now on a digitally-rendered street until the windows of the storefronts to his left and right explode in response, sending fake glass everywhere. He ducks it, all the while marvelling at how fucking devious Coulson is.

It’s a smart move, introducing noise. Bucky has operated mostly in the shadows for decades now, with noise only becoming a factor when missions went really sideways. But he remembers how fuckin’ loud the War had been, the way even his post-serum head would often ache by the end of a long day filled with gunfire and explosions and screaming. Officially joining the Avengers will mean re-entering that kind of chaos, only magnified a hundred times by the presence of magic and aliens and the blaring rock music Tony often uses to distract their enemies (though he’d insist it’s all due to his need to make dramatic entrances.)
The com device, which Coulson has insisted he wear since the first session though it’s gone entirely unused, suddenly comes to life in his right ear.

“Move toward the building in the Northwest corner. Do not engage any hostiles; they’re using unstable alien weaponry that your current body armour won’t offer enough protection against.” Bucky has little problem following these instructions for the first few ‘blocks’, moving lightly and almost silently on his feet and evading the occasional attacker with relative ease. Then he sees the HYDRA symbol on one of their coats.

Most days he actually thinks his brain is a pretty balanced place. Since that talk with Natasha in his and Steve’s shitty apartment all those months ago, he’s worked on not thinking of the Soldier as a separate entity from himself. The behaviours and traits that he learned while in HYDRA’s control belong to him now, and claiming them as his own, as things that makes him stronger, that’s been an important aspect of his recovery. But this is the closest he’s come to being directly confronted with a HYDRA agent since coming to live at the Tower. And he and Phil had discussed this, his shrink had signed off on it even, but Tony’s digital HYDRA agents are damn lifelike, and the Soldier wants revenge, wants to hear the breaking of bones and see the spilling of blood and—


“Handler,” he grunts, finger twitching on the trigger. The effort it’s taking not to fire is enormous.

“That’s right, James. Now head towards the Northwest corner, the tallest building, and await further instruction. Do not engage with any hostiles.” His teeth are grinding so painfully he swears he can hear it, even over the din of the ‘battle’ surrounding him. He wants, he wants so fucking badly to wipe every bit of HYDRA from this world that turning away from even a stupid fucking digital projection is taking far more effort than the most physically strenuous tasks he’s ever been set. His feet drag as he tries to walk, to run, it’s like his boots have had weights sewn into them. The Soldier doesn’t want to comply.

But then, finally, his left foot makes it off the ground. And then his right. Because this isn’t compliance. This is Bucky’s choice, listening to the voice in his ear—to to this man who is commanding, yes, but who explained his reasoning, who had repeated himself rather than threatening Bucky with discipline or a mind-wipe. He finally makes it to the damn building, awaiting Coulson’s next instruction or his rebuke for taking so long in the first place, but then the system shuts down, the noise and the projections and everything fading away as suddenly as they’d appeared. There’s only Phil’s voice in his ear.

“Excellent work, Sergeant Barnes.”

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As he scans Dr. Dolan’s notes on his annotated bibliography during their next meeting, Steve snorts when he reaches the last of her suggested readings. “‘Global Governance versus the Neoliberal Superhero: The Case Against Captain America.’ See, now, I just learned what neoliberalism is last week, and I’m still kinda shaky on it, so this feels slightly premature.” She grins and shrugs, unapologetic.

“It’s actually written by a friend of mine at Berkley. And she’s not actually arguing against you personally, though she does get a kick out of the fact that I know you, so much as challenging the notion that a nationalist icon Captain America is the most effective figurehead if what the Avengers are truly after is global threat management. It seemed relevant to our conversation about sovereignty, which I could tell from your proposal you’ve thought a lot about.” He beams, because that’s about as close to a compliment as he thinks Dr. Dolan is capable of, and it feels damn good. “There still seems
to be a fundamental tension in your source selection and your proposal, though, between an
attachment to individual liberties for superheroes and other enhanced folks and a commitment to
broader social and political accountability. Do you have a sense of how your argument is going to
balance that yet?” And hell, if he could answer that question Steve would basically be fixing most of
his life’s current problems, wouldn’t he? He’d be able to do Tony’s ‘homework’ about the Accords,
he and his therapist would have a lot less work to do during their sessions, and he wouldn’t be up
most nights worrying about passing this damn class.

“Uh…not really, no.”

“I mean, that’s fine at this stage in terms of the project. I didn’t ask for a thesis statement, just a sense
of what research you were pulling from and what questions you’ll be trying to answer in your final
paper. Can I give you a bit more advice, the kind that’ll probably complicate your life even further?”
Steve has faced down the barrel of Nazi guns and steered a plane into the Atlantic, so he nods. But if
pressed he couldn’t claim not to have hesitated just slightly, because he’s not entirely sure how much
more complication he can take. “Your first draft, it came back a lot to this idea that yours are the
safest hands. I get that you personally are a special case; if the lore is correct, the serum recognized
some kind of inherent morality in you the same way it responded to a deep-seeded evil in the Red
Skull. But not everyone has faced that kind of, I don’t know, semi-objective personality test. So
before you sit down to write the final draft, I’d suggest some reflection on why your hands. What do
superheroes offer that other lines of defense don’t?”

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It’s an extremely rare event these days that everyone in the house (save Loki) is together and no one
is in headspace. At first it’s just Natasha, Phil and Clint hanging out in the living room watching the
cooking shows Clint is not-so-secretly addicted to, but slowly the others start to trickle in. Steve
drops his backpack and nearly face plants next to the three of them on the couch; Bruce stumbles up
from the mansion’s lab clutching a human anatomy book (still working on his medical accreditation,
Clint guesses) and an ominously empty Erlenmeyer flask. Phil quickly pries the latter from his hand
before steering the scientist into an armchair. After putting Loki down in his crib for the night, Thor
returns to sprawl out on the floor, his head and chest on the overlarge pillow that serves as Lucky’s
bed; the dog in question huffs in outrage before apparently deciding to make the most of the situation
and curling up practically on top of the blonde. Then it’s Bucky, whose curious mix of tactical gear,
pyjamas and mussy hair suggests he hadn’t managed to change before falling asleep post-training.
Tony comes in last, eyes red-rimmed, but he the sight of the entire family is enough to pull a tired
smile from him. Clint grins back, and doesn’t even bother to hide his pleased surprise when the
engineer takes the spot next to him.

On his other side, Phil is surveying Tony with a thoughtful frown.

“Therapy go alrigh—mmf, mlfint, wha—” And okay, throwing his hand over Phil’s mouth might not
have been his best move, but Clint has always been one to work with the closest available tools.

“I love handler-you, you know that. But maybe could we just have tonight off? Just be together as
adults without trying to work through any of our issues and shit?” Far from seeming displeased, Phil
cocks an eyebrow in a way that Clint associates mostly with bedroom shenanigans. Which, hmm.
Worth moving his hand out of the way for.

“Like a date?” That gets the attention of pretty much everyone in the room, including Thor who
forgets about Lucky’s presence on his chest until after he’s already sat up and sent the dog tumbling
onto the pillow with an outraged yelp.

“Can this even be done with so many? I was under the impression that Midgardian ‘dates’ were
limited to two persons. Any more risks becoming a group…hang?” Hearing Thor say ‘group hang’ in the same tone as a teenager awkwardly trying to read in iambic pentameter for the first time is enough to send both Clint and Tony into fits of helpless giggles. Even Natasha’s tone is downright indulgent when she answers.

“Two people is typical, yes. But it mostly depends on context. If everyone involved is agreeing that time they’re spending together is romantic in nature, then it is. If this is a date I’ll want to change first.” This declaration gets nearly everyone in the room peering down at themselves in scrutiny, and in under a minute the room is emptied as everyone takes off for their own rooms. Clint spends way too long debating between two pairs of pants and wondering if there’s such a thing as ‘too silly for a date’ socks.

Half an hour later, they’ve regrouped, and damn if Clint’s team doesn’t clean up nice. Most of the men have changed into jeans and button downs (except for Thor, who has thrown on a sinfully tight black sweater); Natasha is wearing a clingy green, belted sweater dress that immediately has Clint thinking of his accusation that she’d be a Slytherin if they attended Hogwarts. But once everyone is back together, there’s a pretty long few seconds where they all just stare awkwardly at one another. Finally, Tony breaks the silence.

“Uh…so, how do we do this, exactly? I mean, I’ve done orgies before, but they didn’t usually come attached with a date.” Cue more awkward starting before Phil clear his throat.

“I’d propose that we spend some time one-on-one or in small groups with people on the team that we don’t know as well as we’d like. So ideally, people who haven’t been together romantically before, or been on one-on-one dates. Then we can get back together as a large group toward the end of the night?”

Steve nervously mutters something about being picked last in dodgeball, but he’s quickly joined by Bruce, who puts a gentle hand on Steve’s lower back in a show of calm confidence Clint really wouldn’t have expected. Intrigued, he decides he’ll join them, but watches first to see how everything shakes out. Phil makes a bee-line for Tony—nothing unexpected there, Clint knows damn well his boyfriend has been itching to get his hands on Stark for weeks now. Thor, Natasha and Bucky form another triad, and Clint grins as he watches Nat engineer a reason to put a hand on one of Thor’s absurdly bulging biceps in under a minute.

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“Nope, sorry, don’t believe it. I’d buy that you were disciplined in the Army Rangers, but I’m a hundred percent convinced it came from like, correcting your superior officer about how to best make a bed or something. No way were you caught streaking.” Phil just smirks in response. There’s still enough of Agent in the expression to make it funny, but the laugh lines at the side of his mouth are also far more pronounced than usual, and he’s crowding into Tony’s space just enough to annihilate any possibility of professional distance. This isn’t his handler, or his Daddy, or anyone but just Phil Coulson on a date, and even if it’s just hanging out in the mansion’s living room, it’s enough to leave Tony a bit heated.

“I meant to thank you, by the way, before everything else that went down.” A variation of replies, some pithy, some snarky, some overtly sexual, flit through Tony’s mind. But none of them seem quite right just now, when Phil is allowing so much of himself to be open and visible, so Tony just waits. “For the suit basket. It was by far one of the most ridiculous and thoughtful gifts I’ve ever received.”

“They all fit, then? I’ve seen you wear a couple since we got to the mansion, but if any of them need alterations—”
“They’re perfect, Tony. As soon as things calm down a little more maybe I can take you out somewhere wearing the kind of olive green one.” And of course Phil has zeroed in on the ensemble Tony had liked best, the one he’s been anxiously waiting every morning to see Phil striding into the kitchen wearing. He’d started to worry, lately, as one by one nearly every other suit from the basket had made an appearance, that he’d somehow gone wrong with that one, put his own tastes ahead of Coulson’s as Pepper had often found him guilty of when gift-giving.

And maybe his emotions are too close to the surface after his therapy session. Or maybe it’s still just a bit shocking (in a good way, in the best ways, but also in ways that sometimes leave him overwhelmed) to be dating people who already know Tony so well. Whatever the case, it takes Tony the length of several thudding heartbeats to collect himself enough to smile back at Phil and tell him, “I’d like that.”

****

“Err, so this might be prying, but when we all started playing, you mentioned that you’d done age play with others before?” Bruce would chuckle at the way Steve can somehow still have the ability to blush after all this time, after all the team has done together, but it’s damn charming and he certainly doesn’t want to discourage it. So he leans in enough give the other man a friendly bump on the shoulder.

“But alright, me first. Well, before the…Other Guy forced me to be a bit more cautious, I spent quite a lot of time in kink communities. Age play wasn’t something I went there looking for, my tastes ran in… well, other directions.”

“Leather pants! Leather pants!”

“Hush, Clint, unless you’d like me to demonstrate some of those talents right now.” It’s been a long time since Bruce has dared make a joke that risqué. He winces practically the second the words leave his mouth, but when he dares to look over at Clint, his expression betrays nothing but delight and (unless Bruce is mistaken, which is possible since he doesn’t know Clint overly well in this context) no small degree of interest. “Uh—right. During university I was spending a lot of time with this poly couple. They taught me a lot, actually, and I half lived at their place at several points; on top of all the great sex they practically kept me alive during my first graduate degree. I came over one day, earlier than they were expecting me, and found Ella curled up on the living room floor, colouring in a colouring book and cuddling with a doll. She was really embarrassed at first, asked me to leave, but eventually we talked things out. They told me they’d been experimenting with age-playing recently, and asked if I’d be interested in joining them.

She was a much older little than Tony, and their dynamic was explicitly sexual. I didn’t join in on those aspects, and I didn’t want to be a parent. It felt too…intimate, maybe, or like too much of a commitment to something that I was interested in but was pretty sure I didn’t fully understand. But I was her Uncle for several years; I’d play with her and feed her and do pretty much anything that
wasn’t sexual. After they had both moved across the country for work I found myself missing it, so I sought out other littles when I could.”

“But never as Papa?” Steve presses, then looks a little surprised at his own daring. “I—sorry, you’re just so good at it. It’s always seemed to come so naturally to you.” And god but the sweetness of Steve is overwhelming sometimes, especially now with the firelight casting a gentle glow onto his renewed blush. The sight raises a bizarrely contradictory set of responses in Bruce; he wants to shield Steve, wrap him in cotton wool and protect him from everything just about as much as he wants to push the other man’s limits, see what he’s like when all that politeness and caution and anxiety falls away.

“No, never as Papa. Until Tony, until all of you, really, I never thought of age play as a dynamic that could be so important to me.”

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When Natasha used to imagine how her life might play out, her mind had mainly conjured up missions. Wrongs she wanted to right, red she wanted to get out of her ledger, that was the most people like her tended to hope for. So she’s getting kind of used to living in a constant state of surprise and awe about the direction things have actually taken.

Which doesn’t mean it’s not particularly disconcerting to be sitting in the living room of Stark mansion discussing travel plans with the former Winter Soldier and a demigod.

“Disney World? Really? That’s the first place on Earth you’d visit if you could?” Thor shrugs, sending long strands of golden hair tumbling across his shoulders in a gentle wave. She wonders how Thor would look with it braided, or pulled back the way Bucky sometimes wears his own.

“I have heard much of its wonders. And while I know our Younglings shall never be able to be such in public, I have wondered if someday we might be able to take them there and allow those sides of them to shine through.” And yes, Natasha is still Natasha, so her first thought is that it’s a security and logistical nightmare. So many people, and even if they were to shut the parks down for a few hours, the risk of press or other forms of surveillance is so very high. Not to mention they haven’t even told the world that Loki is on-planet again, and what if he never recovers beyond where he is now, or what if he does and people want to see him punished… Perhaps sensing her hesitation (and when did she get so bad at hiding things from these people, anyway?), Thor’s hopeful look falls. “I know it to be near impossible. Forgive my foolishness.”

“It’s on my list too,” Bucky offers. It might be the first time he’s ever spoken directly to Thor when big, and the blonde’s enthusiastic smile is enough to knock the wind out of a lesser person. And he’s obviously done at least some research about Disney, because he immediately begins quizzing a bemused Barnes about what exactly a Fastpass is and whether or not Midgardian elephants really can fly or if the ‘mighty Dumbo’ is some kind of exception. Perhaps wanting to evade this line of questioning, or maybe just because he really wants to know, Bucky eventually turns his gaze to her, leaning in just a little closer for good measure.

“Where would you go, little spider?” And the answer is more than a little embarrassing, but she can’t bear to meet the honesty of either of these men with subterfuge, not tonight.

“Asgard.” Thor is too stunned to ask her to say more, and Bucky doesn’t make the request either, not in so many words. He does, however, press gently against her side so that she can feel his breath raising goosebumps across her neck. Several seconds later, Thor follows this up by raising a hand and pressing it against her cheek. And gods but the bizarre combination of the two of them, Thor’s guileless sincerity and Bucky’s ability to play her own game at least as well as Natasha does, it’s… stimulating, to say the least. “It just…I know everyone else seems to have had no trouble accepting
that there’s all these other worlds out there, and it’s not as if I don’t know it’s true. But until I can touch it, smell it, see it for myself…”

“We may not be welcome for some time,” Thor reminds her gently. “But one day, Mine Friend, I shall show my homeland to you. This I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

So, the bad news is it's been months! Again! The good news is that some of the immediate chaos of having a new baby (and a first baby at that) has passed, and I feel prepared to commit to a regular schedule again. After today, you can look for this fic to be updated every other Friday (so next update will be November 2.)

I know it's taking me ages to reply to comments these days, but they still mean the world to me. I love hearing what you liked, what you're looking forward to, what you might want to see in future chapters or one-shots. I love all of it! Thank you all for your continued patience and kindness.
Tony's Long Day

Chapter Summary

The chapter title pretty much covers it! Tony has a long, long day.

Chapter Notes

After so many long breaks it feels odd to be posting again so soon, but in the best kind of way! Hi!

Okay, several warnings/notes for this chapter: There's a fairly intense scene involving Tony interacting with the memory of Bucky murdering his parents via the BARF tech. The scene between Strange, Thor and Loki contains an extremely vague allusion to a fan theory involving Tony having a relationship with the Soul Stone. There's absolutely nothing spoilery about it, and again, it's super vague. (Essentially, it's me leaving myself room to write Infinity War into this verse some day LONG down the road if I want.) Finally, there's a mention of Tony using his safeword. It happened prior to the events of this story, was handled correctly and things are obviously fine still between he and the team, but still something I wanted to flag. If you need more information about any of this, feel free (as always) to get in contact with me.

Also, this doesn't really require a warning per se, but in case it isn't obvious from the title this is a particularly Tony-centric chapter (what can I say? the guy has a lot going on!), so if you're in it mainly for the others this might be one you'll want to skim.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While he’s of course grateful for Friend Tony’s assistance, Thor often struggles to fully understand the range of tests and activities he uses to aid Loki. This is hardly Tony’s fault; he always tries to keep Thor updated about what he’s doing and why, but as he has learned with Jane, the Allspeak only covers so much. Medical and scientific discourses are almost always outside of its range.

Today, however, is not one of those days. Because today they’re talking about what the Midgardians insist on referring to as magic, and this area is much more familiar to Thor. Indeed, he’s far more comfortable than Tony himself, who is rapidly becoming agitated.

“Strange, so help me if you go on about the Multiverse one more time—I’m trying to deal with this Loki. This one, from this universe, no others.”

“But how do you know he’s from the same universe you are?” Thor muses. Tony spins around to glare at him.

“Whose side are you on, man?” Without giving Thor a chance to respond to this curious inquiry, Tony whirls back around to face Strange. “I just need to know how much of what was done to him can be repaired by the methods I’ve already been using and how much can only be healed through magic.” He spits the last word like a virulent curse, and Thor wonders not for the first time how the
rift between science and magic came to be on this planet. Strange, in any case, appears unbothered by the antagonism. With a flourish of his cape that makes Tony snort, the Doctor sits on the floor in front of Loki and goes into what appears to be a deep trance, similar to when Friend Bruce practices meditation. But unlike those occasions, Thor can sense and occasionally see at least some of the forces Strange is manipulating with his mind.

It’s startling at first, even to someone familiar with the multitude of powers the universe has to offer. A series of what look like multi-coloured threads emerge, wrapped around Loki with varying degrees of tightness. Some strands Strange seems relatively disinterested in, pushing them to the side with an impatient gesture akin to swatting an insect. Others he lingers on, manipulating them with plucking and stretching gestures that, while meaningless to an observer, Thor can only assume yield great insight. Strange devotes by far the most of his attention to a purple cord. Unlike the others, which have clearly defined positions and boundaries, this one seems to exist less as a single strand and more as a sort of fog. It eludes Strange’s deft hands constantly, shifting and fading in and out; one second it is wrapped neatly near Loki’s head, floating above it almost like a crown, bright and shimmering, while the next finds it coiled around his brother’s narrow waist, dull and almost invisible. After several attempts the Doctor huffs, a rare show of frustration that draws a snicker from Tony.

Strange’s gaze turns to Friend Tony, but whatever admonishment that was undoubtedly his intent dies abruptly, leaving his mouth hanging half-open and his eyes wide in an unabashed stare. Before Thor is able to turn his own eyes to Tony, Strange does something that renders the traces of magic invisible once more. His body sinks into a pose resembling one of the positions Bruce uses during his yoga. But unlike Bruce, whose frequent role as an instructor in such situations means he is rarely quiet, Strange sinks into an encompassing stillness; even the steady rise and fall of his chest in breathing seems almost swallowed whole by it. Gradually, the solemn mood seems to envelop the room at large. Even Loki, who is prone to fussing and whining when boredom strikes, is motionless and silent. It reminds Thor of the way Midgardian films appear when paused, with the performers and the worlds around them suddenly and unnaturally frozen.

Thor couldn’t say how much time passes during Strange’s exploration. It feels both like seconds and hours that he’s gone, but when he returns to them it’s with a harsh breath that appears to jog everyone in the room into motion. Loki lets out a long, loud cry (alerting Thor to the fact that the time for his mid-day meal has probably long since passed); Tony jerks, all affectation of animosity absent as he comes to kneel at Strange’s side. There’s a muttered conversation between them, the result of which is Tony briefly leaving the room, returning with a bottle for Loki and a large glass of water for Strange. When the Doctor finishes drinking, with only slightly more grace than Loki, he climbs to his feet and begins to pack up the instruments and books he’d brought with him. Thor and Tony exchange confused glances.

“Err, going so soon, Doc?”

“Oh yes I think we’re quite done here,” Strange declares, rolling his eyes when Tony seizes hold of a heavy leather bound volume and attempts to hold it hostage. The attempt is short-lived, of course. In seconds, Strange has creates a portal above Tony so that he can reach down, seize the book and transport himself across the room before Tony has even registered what has happened.

“Seriously, Strange, what—”

“I can’t help you, Stark. Well that’s not strictly accurate, I absolutely could help you, but given that both potential options make it quite likely that your little band of vigilantes will want to eviscerate me for even suggesting them, I’m inclined to let you figure this out yourselves and avoid the potential for broken bones, however vanishingly small their chances are of actually succeeding.” Desperation of
the like Thor hasn’t known since he’d begged his Father not to strip him of his powers and banish him from Asgard all those ages ago grips him by the throat. If not for his hold on Loki, who is feeding from his bottle in Thor’s arms, he knows not what he might have done. But it’s Tony who actually speaks.

“Please, Strange. I will—how do wizards make promises to each other? I pledge my service? Anything you want or need from me, you’ll get it, no questions asked.” And Thor has never felt quite so torn, because Strange’s eyes are alight with a kind of hunger; this is no small promise Friend Tony is offering to grant, and though he’s doing it fully Big with no sign of the side of him that is Thor’s Youngling in sight, Thor is still tempted to attempt to refuse to permit such an exchange. Then Loki coughs, choking a little when the flow of juice becomes too quick, and Thor stares down at his brother, a man who is precious to him in any form but who would never have chosen this life for himself…

“I accept, Stark.” The two don’t shake hands or make any of the other Midgardian gestures that Thor has learned represent a formalized agreement, but there is nonetheless something final and grave in the way Strange’s declaration sounds. Then he turns to Thor. “Much of the damage to your brother is physiological. Stark’s notes indicate there’s already been some improvement in those areas, and I believe that with treatment, those wounds will continue to heal. The most problematic aspect is the damage that was done to his soul.” Again, Strange’s gaze falls on Tony, just for a moment, but with an intensity that has Thor stepping toward his friend much as he would to aid him in battle. “There are only two known ways to treat soul wounds this deep. The first…well, the first would involve direct interaction with the Soul Stone. It may some day come to that for—other reasons, but right now the preferable option is a healing spell.”

“You shall perform it today?” Thor remembers just in time that he is not a Prince in this land and adds what he hopes sounds like a questioning upward lilt to the end of the sentence, but it’s a very near miss.

“He needs something he doesn’t have,” Tony announces shrewdly. “He’d be way more smug otherwise. So what is it?” Strange doesn’t argue with this account, which is confirmation enough. But he does take care to empty his hands of the objects they had contained, presenting them palm side up in front of him in a gesture Thor recognizes. It is an ancient signal of submission, and a request for leniency. It is, in this context, not reassuring in the least.

“Not really what that’s the problem, it’s just a book. It’s the where that’s the problem. The volume was stolen long ago…by Asgard. And I reviewed millions of potential ways of retrieving it. Unfortunately for all of us, the best options all involved you, Stark.”

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“What’d you do today, Tony?” He and Ajay are in the Tower; the workshop at the mansion just isn’t equipped to handle the BARF tech, plus JARVIS had reported that the bots were starting to get anxious about him again anyway. He’s never had anyone but the team down here in ages, though, and even more than the prospect of literally opening up his brain to Ajay’s scrutiny, seeing the man in this space is unnerving.

“Argued with a demigod and a wizard about how and whether or not to stage a heist, mostly.” He answers without really thinking that he probably shouldn’t involve Ajay in matters of inter-galactic security, but the man laughs as if he’s assuming Tony is kidding, and he gracefully does not correct that assumption. (Stupid, Stark.) He loses thread of any conversation at all as he gets BARF booted and ready, but Ajay stops him before he can slip the glasses on.

“Woah woah, Tony, come on man. You really think that’s how this is going to go down? We’re not
just jumping into this. Have a seat, pull up a robot, let’s chat about this.” Apparently taking the joke as a summons, Dummy wheels himself over and comes to a less than graceful halt in between Tony and Ajay, retracting and releasing his claw in the mechanical equivalent of a wave. Ajay chuckles and gives the little traitor a pat while Tony settles himself uneasily on the edge of one of the work benches. “I’ve reviewed the materials you compiled for me, and I think I understand BARF as well as I can on a theoretical level. But I still think we should start by establishing some kind of baseline. Why don’t you bring up a memory of the two of us in session the other day, unaltered. Then demonstrate the editing feature.”

This seems like a harmless enough request, even Tony’s run-before-you-can-walk mentality can acknowledge. So he slips on the glasses, boots up the system and watches Ajay view the end of their sessions several days prior; he goes on to edit Ajay’s claim that Tony is not wholly exceptional into a monologue featuring an admittedly rough extended metaphor about Tony’s resemblance to ferrofluid (superfine magnetic particles that can form amazing shapes—he, Peter and Riri have been experimenting with the stuff lately.) This earns him an eye-roll, but Ajay never stops taking notes and staring at the projection with a fevered admiration Tony’s science-ing usually only earns from Bruce.

When it’s over, Ajay asks a few questions about how, precisely, the editing feature works (whether it’s only major changes like that that work, or if Tony could, say, change the colour of the furniture or the art on the walls.) Tony is so rarely invited to show off when he’s Big, except to the SI Board which really doesn’t count, that he gets pretty caught up in the conversation. After that it’s another relatively easy request—Ajay asks to see an ‘uncomplicatedly happy’ memory from the past six weeks; Tony gleefully queues up Clint’s recent pizza-eating competition with Lucky, editing around the subsequent joint vomiting session less to save the archer embarrassment and more because witnessing it once had really been enough. He doesn’t fully realize how loose and relaxed Ajay has managed to make him until he’s suddenly jarred out of that state.

“Alright. How about something similar from childhood, can we do that?” Tony doesn’t say anything, can’t say anything. He does wish abruptly and with surprising intensity for his slime, or for Sanders, but he pushes both those thoughts away as quickly and viciously as possible. Ajay puts his notebook down and surveys Tony for a long moment, then asks, “Is it the uncomplicated part or the happy part that’s causing the issue?” Both. Neither. And abruptly he’s so goddamn angry—at Ajay for asking, at his good ol’ Dad for making nothing uncomplicated or happy, at himself for being a goddamn cliché of a poor-little-rich-boy story, he’s furious at all of them. And while Tony can think pretty clearly under a lot of trying conditions, anger has never been one of them. (See also: giving his home address to a terrorist.)

Before Ajay can ask any more questions, and before Tony can even think about stopping himself, he brings up the memory of that night, the one he’s probably seen hundreds of times by now in his mind.

*His parents’ car makes impact with the tree. Howard is already out of the wreckage, crawling alongside it, when a tall figure disembarks his motorcycle and strides around to meet him. The Soldier is in no rush. He doesn’t need to be.*

“Tony. Tony, listen to me, you are not ready for this—” He uses Extremis to mute all incoming audio from his surroundings and Ajay’s panicked voice is silenced.

*The Soldier seizes Howard by the hair and pulls him upward into a kneeling pose. Howard recognizes him instantly, because of course he does, and Tony spares a moment wondering if he would have recognized even his own son as quickly as Captain America’s best friend. He says Bucky’s name, his rank. The Soldier responds with a sharp blow to Howard’s head using metal hand. (His old metal hand. Before Tony had fixed it, made it better.)*
He’s lining up another hit when Tony steps into the frame. The editing is sloppy. He enters the scene out of nowhere, and he hasn’t aged himself down to 17 as he should be at this moment. But no one in the scene registers this. The Soldier continues winding up what will be the fatal blow to Howard Stark, stopping abruptly when Tony casually shoots a low-grade EMP at the arm that causes it to short out and halt mid-motion. He turns to face Tony, that same haunted and broken expression from the real footage mixed with just a hint of surprise.

“You don’t have to do this, Bucky. Listen to me, Steve’s alive, he’s—well, it’s complicated, okay, but we can find Steve, and the two of us, we can help you. I can fix the arm, we can turn off the trigger words. You’ll be yourself again, and you’ll never take orders from anyone.” And it’s absurd how easily it works—in real life, Bucky had beaten Steve to a pulp even once he’d started to recognize him, and then he’d taken off for months after that before he’d allowed Steve to bring him in. But this is Tony’s fantasy, dammit, and he doesn’t want a long drawn-out talk, so fantasy-Bucky murmurs, “Steve?” as if it’s the only word that makes sense in the world. Tony nods, smiling warmly at his friend (his brother.) Neither of his parents says a word, nor does he speak to them, though he does sneak a quick glance at the image of his mother, injured but decidedly alive, before he wraps an arm around Bucky’s shoulders and turns to walk away.

He tears the glasses from his face and lets them fall to the floor of the shop while he takes several long, harsh breaths that feel like they’re rattling his bones.

“There were a lot of striking features in that scene, but do you want to take a guess at which one stood out the most for me?” He doesn’t answer, and for the first time when Ajay’s face comes into his line of vision, the man looks pissed. But he also hasn’t left, and he isn’t backing down, which in itself is pretty remarkable. A part of him understands now the way Bucky always speaks about Ajay, with an almost fearful kind of respect.

“My period inappropriate age-lines and facial hair?” he wheezes. Dummy whines and hurries away from them both (to the blender, most likely, God help them all.)

“The fact that the person you most wanted to save in that moment was James Barnes.” Tony says nothing in reply, because what can he possibly say? How could anyone justify that? He has absolutely nothing left to give this session, and Ajay sighs as he seems to realize the same thing. “We’ll pick up here in a couple of days. Tony, we’ve agreed on some pretty strict boundaries around what I tell your handler about our sessions and what I don’t, but I’m going to need your assurance you’re not going to be alone tonight.” Ajay appears deadly serious about this one, and the guy stayed the night on Bucky and Steve’s floor more than once at the beginning of Bucky’s treatments, so Tony has no doubt he’ll do the same if he can’t answer the right way.

“I’m going out for dinner with Bruce in a few hours.”

“And I can confirm that with Agent Coulson?” He stares at Ajay, nonplussed, and the man looks back with zero fear or repentance. “After what you just pulled, Stark, you’re lucky this is all I’m insisting on.”

“Ugh. Fine. I wasn’t strictly planning on meeting up with Bruce, but I’ll make plans that you can confirm in an hour or so, alright? This is going to seriously cut into my brooding time, I’ll have you know.” He at least earns a twitch of the lips for that one, and Ajay begins packing up his notebook and tablet with one last wary look at the BARF glasses, which look perfectly innocuous just lying on the workshop floor. They’re not, though, never have been; Tony’s long regarded the BARF tech as far more terrifying than anything Iron Man is capable of. From the way Ajay is regarding them now, he might well agree.
“You took a huge leap today, and even if I can understand and respect why you did, it might hit you harder than you’re imagining in the aftermath, Tony. You know exactly how much I’m paid to be on constant retainer for the Avengers. If you need me, if you even think you might need me, you call me, understand?”

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In what turns out to not have been Tony’s best move, he’s scheduled several of his most annoying tasks with SI immediately following therapy. The emotional whiplash involved in that transition leaves him feeling almost hungover in the aftermath. He wishes faintly that Pepper were here to notice, because she would, and she’d have had no qualms about sending him home. But she’s in Germany for a month, so he puts up with the inane questions about returning to weapons manufacturing and whether or not an open alignment between SHIELD and SI is really in the latter’s best interest for hours on end, until his head pounds from the dual effort of feigning attention and engaging in actual meaningful work with Extremis in his mind.

It’s an entirely pleasant surprise to find Bruce already in the car that he eventually calls to pick him up. Even if the other man appears slightly confused about his own presence in Tony’s towncar.

“Phil called to remind me we had plans tonight? Which seemed odd, because I have yet to ever forget having plans with you even on days when I forget basically everything else. But Phil was pretty damn insistent. So you wanna tell me what that’s about?”

“Uh, that’s because I told my shrink we did. I forgot he threatened to confirm that with Coulson—just lost track of time, honestly.” He uses his most breezy tone and takes a long swig of juice for good measure, only to remember that the ‘juice’ is actually the smoothy Dummy had made in the shop this morning. This means that on top of being hours old by now it could be laced with pretty much anything. He’s pondering whether or not it’s worth it to swallow the mystery drink, risking gastrointestinal distress but sparing himself the indignity of spitting it out, when Bruce puts a had on his arm. His touch, as it has been for weeks now, is just slightly firmer and more confident than the way most of the others approach Tony. It’s a struggle not to immediately just collapse into him.

“And why would your therapist be so concerned with your social life? Did something happen today, Tony?” This time he does kind of half-collapse into Bruce’s side, burying his face in the other man’s curls and inhaling. Bruce always smells like the strangest combination of natural and chemical substances; right now it’s essential oils and the lingering fumes from the acetone they both use to clean their glassware in the lab. The bizarre mixture is comforting beyond measure, and Tony doesn’t even try to hide it when he takes another whiff, nor does he move his face out of Bruce’s hair to speak.

“About fifteen major things happened today, and I just…I can’t talk about any of them right now, alright? Tony’s not here right now. Please leave a message. I won’t check it because it’s not 1993 and how is voicemail even still a thing, but we can both pretend.” His voice sounds petulant even to his own ear and Bruce chuckles, warm and deep and Tony just wants to sink into that sound like a soft pillow.

“I’ve got you love. We don’t have to talk about anything right now. Just let yourself keep dropping, we’ll be home soon. Your brother’s little today too, and there’s something I’ve been waiting to show the two of you for ages.” Tony hasn’t found his headspace this easily in, god he can’t even remember how long. Definitely since before the hearings or Extremis, but as soon as Bruce has said he knows there’s no denying that’s where he’s headed. And the prospect of seeing his brother, and a maybe surprise from his Papa, does absolutely nothing to impede the press of that slow, fuzzy place in his mind.
Tony maybe falls asleep on the way home, because the next thing he’s really aware of is his Papa stripping away Tony’s fancy work clothes and replacing them with a diaper and a super-soft green onesie printed with different kinds of rare plants. He doesn’t recognize the outfit, and he would definitely remember having worn this before, which must mean it’s new.

“Gotta stop buyin’ me things,” he mumbles. Because it’s true! His Daddies and Papa and Mama are always giving him new clothes and toys and treats, and he doesn’t want them to think he’s getting spoiled or greedy. But Papa just shakes his head and slides Sanders into Tony’s arms as he finishes doing up the snaps on the onesie.

“Hush now. How many things do you buy for everyone else, huh? This is the only time you let us give any of that back. Not to mention you look so cute in everything, don’t you?” When Tony mutters a disagreement into Sanders’ fur, Papa tickles him until he’s a writhing, giggling mess. After the weight of the day, it feels so good to be silly like this, and he’s entirely in favour of staying up here with Papa forever and ever. But Papa has other plans.

“Let’s go find your brother, little love. I think he and Daddy Steve are making a nice big Greek salad to have with our dinner tonight.” And Tony is admittedly a big fan of Greek salad, but…

“S’prise?”

"Food then surprise, baby boy. I doubt you’ve given yourself a chance to stop and eat all day, and it should help your head a little bit too.” Papa Bruce always knows the signs that Extremis is giving Tony a migraine, now, which is somehow both wonderful (because he doesn’t have to say it) and awful (because he can’t get away with hiding it, even when he wants to.)

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Despite his initial impatience, it’s all too easy to persuade Tony to be interested in a meal involving a giant bowl of vegetables and homemade pizza. But the second he’s wiped the sauce-covered faces of both littles, they’re pulling at Bruce’s sleeves and demanding to know when they get their surprise. So they round up the family, excepting Thor, whom Tony has worryingly alluded to being upset ‘not with Tony but near Tony’ (definitely something to bring up as soon as he’s Big again) and make their way upstairs, stopping in front of a room with a little plaque on the door that’s currently covered by a thin sheet of paper. Bruce’s stomach, already stuffed too full of pizza, flip-flops with anxiety. He’s been waiting what has felt like ages for the right time to reveal this to the littles, but now that the moment actually seems to be here, he’s worried he’s made a mistake.

“I think we should talk before we go in here,” he announces, and is met with a twinned set of groans. “Oh I know, I’m the meanest. It doesn’t have to be a long talk, alright? But I just need you both to know a couple of things. Tony, I want you to be assured that remember and respect your feelings about cribs and other baby furniture. I don’t think this gift is going to provoke the same feelings, or I wouldn’t have done it. But if I’m wrong, if either of you are uncomfortable for any reason, you aren’t going to hurt my feelings by saying no, okay?”

He gives both of them a long moment to process this. Ever since the mention of cribs Tony’s body language has shifted from the mixture of anticipation and lazy contentment that so often characterizes his little headspace to a more cautious, wary bearing. The mere suggestion of introducing a crib several months ago caused the man to use his safeword for the first and only time, so this shift is not entirely surprising. Bucky, as he so often does, seems to be basing his reactions heavily on his brother’s, eyes darting rapidly between Tony, Bruce and the door and giving little away.

Disclaimers made, there seems to be no reason to draw this out further, so Bruce peels the paper off the plaque to reveal a nameplate reading ‘Bucky, Tony and Loki’ engraved in a childish font called Bubblegum Sans. Then he opens the door and allows the littles to make their way inside at their own
pace. The clear focal point of the room is a large set of bunk beds tucked into one corner. They’re custom-made and far larger than average size so that each bunk can accommodate a full-sized mattress. The beds themselves are made up with thick, heavy quilts; the one on the bottom bunk (Bucky’s, since he can’t be trusted to get up and down a ladder in headspace) is a soothing solid shade of lavender, while the one on the top features a space theme. A strand of multi-coloured lights that look like stars is also wrapped around its rails. (Space is a new obsession of Tony’s; after being triggered by the mere mention of it for so long after the portal, Tony is taking an unholy amount of glee in all things space-related, and they’re all thrilled to embrace what feels like such a tangible marker of his recovery.)

The rest of the room is made up as a nursery. It had been challenging to strike a balance given the disparity between Tony and Bucky’s respective ages, but Bruce thinks he and Natasha managed to do a fairly good job with the design. There’s shelves with a range of books, a few baskets with toys and extra blankets, and a grey dresser with multi-coloured drawers filled with clothes for each of the littles. (It’s also long and low enough to function as a changing table, though Bruce has chosen not to make that too clear for fear of embarrassing Tony.) The rug, too, is grey, and made to look like a hopscotch pattern has been drawn on top with chalk. The walls are fairly plain, blue with pops of bright coloured accents throughout, but there’s a feature wall covered in cork so that the littles can easily display their artwork, posters, or any other decorations they’d like. The opposite corner features a large play-tent which is stuffed full of yet more pillows and blankets. (So sue him, he wants his babies to be comfortable.)

Most of Tony’s objections to the idea of things like a high chair or a crib had seemed to centre around a deep disdain for the idea of being alone. And to be fair, the man had spent most of his actual childhood that way, so it made all kinds of sense once he’d explained it that Tony didn’t want anything that might replicate those experiences while in headspace. But some part of Bruce had never been able to let go of the idea of giving Tony a nursery, a space he could feel ownership over and which could act as a physical marker and celebration of his little side. It hadn’t been until long after Bucky had entered the picture, though, that Bruce had figured out a possible solution.

“We thought this way if you two wanted time or a space of your own to play you could have it, but you’d also still have each other,” he explains, gently resting a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “The beds are wide enough that both of you will be able to fit if you want to take a nap together, and even if you each use your own beds you’re still with each other. I also found a Pack-n-play that can fit in that corner over there so Loki can join you guys, but I’ll wait until Thor is here to bring that out.” All the Bigs in the room watch avidly as the boys examine the room (holding hands all the while, which Bruce manages to mentally ‘aww’ over even despite his nerves.) When they complete their circuit, the two littles exchange glances, nod at one another, and then wrap their arms around Bruce and Natasha in tight hugs while quietly professing their thanks. They’re not quite displaying the enthusiasm Bruce had hoped for, though, and he has a few seconds to register feeling faintly disappointed before he realizes he’s being slowly edged out of the room, along with the rest of the ‘adults.’

“What—”

“Me and Bucky gotta ‘splore our room! Out! Grown ups come back later!” Tony declares, giving Bruce another impatient little nudge. Before long, all of the team’s Bigs are on the other side of the door. Bucky gives them all a thoroughly unapologetic grin before closing it in their faces; several seconds later, they can hear a squeal and a giggle from inside the room, and then a slightly ominous crash, and another giggle.

Chapter End Notes
Your kudos and comments continue to make my days. Keep letting me know what you're enjoying, what you're looking forward to, what you want to see in one-shot form, anything at all!
The Little Guy(s)

Chapter Summary

The team debates the merits of staging a heist on Asgard. Steve and Tony have breakthroughs in their respective projects while Natasha hunts for information.

Chapter Notes

Things I debated while writing this chapter: Are politics a taggable/warnable thing? Where I landed: In 2018? Probably. So warning that this chapter is framed by excerpts from Steve's ongoing essay draft, and as such delves into the political debates about superheroes that, while obviously fictional, also sometimes have a disturbing relevance in the current moment. There's also a bit of unprofessional swearing on Ajay's part, because treating Tony Stark is a special kind of challenge even for someone as seasoned and skilled as he is.

As you might have guessed from that description this is a slightly more plotty chapter, and no ageplay happens just BTW. I don't think there's anything else that requires content warnings/notes, but as always, feel free to let me know if you disagree or want further information about anything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is not to say there are no critiques of interventions from enhanced humans. Some of these positions (Calan (2009); Lee (2011); Ross (2008)) are relatively easy to dismiss because they are rooted not in evidence but in blatant bigotry and fear-mongering. Others, however, must be treated with more consideration...

“Okay, I’m going to reiterate the rules for the third, and hopefully last, time,” Phil announces. To anyone less familiar with him, Coulson would still be succeeding at giving off the impression of complete calm; to those really inexperienced with the man, he might even appear a bit bored. But the last thing Natasha is is unfamiliar with Phil Coulson, and she knows damn well how close he is to snapping. So she aims a kick at Clint and silences the rest of them with her deadliest glare. (It even, she notes with satisfaction, seems to work on Strange, whose cape gives a little shiver and immediately stops harassing Tony.) “We’re going to speak one at a time. We’re going to be calm, and remember that everyone here has the same goal. And no one is going to harm Doctor Strange, who is assisting us of his own free will and does not deserved to be punished because some of you don’t like what he’s saying. The next person who breaks any of these terms will be asked to leave, and will be responsible for cleaning Lucky’s pen for a period of no less than one month.”

Silence meets this threat, which is a decidedly serious one. Natasha can maybe admit, in the privacy of her own head, that she cares for the furry ball of boundless energy that is Lucky. But there’s no way in hell she would want to be stuck cleaning up after the dog for that long.

“I just, no one has clearly explained why it has to be Tony.” Steve is gritting the words out, but he’s
at least sitting next to Bucky now instead of looming over Strange. (His earlier attempts at intimidation had been highly uncharacteristic of Cap, and Natasha is relieved to see him abandon them. Even if it had been slightly fun to watch the doctor squirm.)

“As I’ve said, I can’t give you any more information. Stark’s reactions have to be genuine and unplanned or they are always unsuccessful. Much like my continued repetition of this information.” Next to Natasha Bruce makes a noise that sounds far closer to the Hulk than she’s comfortable with. She doesn’t dare look to see if there’s any hint of green about his skin or eyes, she just says the first thing that comes to mind.

“We’re asking the wrong questions.” This knocks Strange off balance enough to at least get him to look at her with interest instead of continuing to snark at the others, so Natasha pulls a page from Tony’s playbook and continues thinking out loud. “Work with the intel we have instead of what we don’t. We know that we’re talking about some kind of magic to do with the soul.” She turns to Thor, who has been uncharacteristically silent throughout this conversation. “When Loki cast the original spell he told you that it—it recognized the arc reactor as part of his soul, right?” Thor nods slowly. “So we already have some evidence that there seems to be a kind of…affiliation between Tony and, err, soul magic.”

“But I removed the arc without any negative side-effects,” Tony protests.

“I would speculate that the arc represented a wound that had been healed prior to the injection of Extremis.” Phil says this almost apologetically, but Natasha doesn’t blame Tony for the way he curls in on himself like he’s trying to disappear. The intimacies they usually share with one another have already been had-fought for, and remain a struggle some days. To now be talking of souls and damage to them…it would undoubtedly feel less invasive for Tony to cut into his chest again right in front of them.

If the stakes were any lower than what they are Natasha would give anything to spare him this. As it is, all she can manage is to keep her tone as business-like as possible, to pretend like they’re not deconstructing Tony in front of everyone.

“If Coulson is correct, then Tony managed to heal that damage without the aid of a spell. Why can’t we hope for similar results with Loki?” Strange’s eyes are practically sparkling with approval now, and his teeth are bared in a smile that somehow manages to make him more disconcerting. After Thor had requested this meeting Natasha had read everything she could find on Stephen Strange, and while it hadn’t been much, she had come away with a sense of the man as the ultimate opportunist. Serving as caretaker for the time stone was a burden, yes, but Natasha doesn’t blame Tony for the way he curls in on himself like he’s trying to disappear. The intimacies they usually share with one another have already been had-fought for, and remain a struggle some days. To now be talking of souls and damage to them…it would undoubtedly feel less invasive for Tony to cut into his chest again right in front of them.

Regardless, it’s in their interest to remain on his good side for as long as it suits them, so Natasha is content to continue playing by Strange’s rules for now.

“I can’t speculate about the nature or severity of the damage to Stark—not without further exploration that I have been repeatedly informed is unwelcome.” A single arm emerges from the Tony-ball in the corner long enough for Tony to flip Strange off and then curl back in on himself. “I can say that the soul wounds inflicted upon Mr. Odinson are among the worst I have ever witnessed. There are traces of multiple sites of damage—not just the most recent injuries inflicted by the Asgardians, but numerous others. There’s a strain I am quite certain is Titan in origin—”

“Thanos.” It’s the first word Thor has spoken in this conversation, and it’s less a word than a growl
barely recognizable as language. In his arms Loki, who has been napping for close to an hour, makes a quiet whimpering noise.

“Thanos,” Strange confirms with a severe nod. “Some of the other damage is perhaps even older than that. Their cumulative effects… I do not believe they could be healed by anything less than a direct magical assault. And for that, we need—”

“The book.” Steve stands and begins circling the room, Lucky following several steps behind him. The temptation to start humming Man With a Plan is overwhelming, and Natasha’s not even American for goodness sake. “Okay, this doesn’t need to be a rush. Loki is still healing right now, just slower than we would like. So for now we keep on with the treatments we know are working. Thor gives us all the background we can get about Asgard; that gives Tony the time and intel he needs to make weapons that’ll help us there. And—”

“No.” Tony has unwound himself again, but this time it looks to be a more permanent arrangement, because he’s on his feet and leaving the mansion’s sitting area. He returns with a large stack of paper that he tosses on the coffee table. Steve glances down at them and then gives a derisive snort.

“I don’t give a damn about the Accords right now, Tony.”

“Well you should. Because once these are passed this kind of an operation could take months, maybe even years, to plan. And before you try to convince me that this means the Accords are somehow a bad idea, things that could end up starting inter-galactic wars should actually be answerable to someone. But on top of how long it would take… well, no one is going to approve it for the sake of Loki. Loki is not Bucky. He doesn’t have the pre-existing good will to be able to rebuild his public image, not now and not for a long damn time to come. And he just doesn’t have that kind of time. The extent of the soul damage…” He trails off, unwilling to state it outright even if Loki does appear to be sleeping, but the implication is clear: Loki can only survive with his soul in tatters for so long.

Tony has played his trump card, and he knows it. Because while there’s very few reasons any of them would be inclined to knowingly allow him to risk his safety more than his job as Iron Man already requires, sparing the life of Thor’s only brother is certainly one of them. The demigod in question makes another low noise; this time, the sound definitely is not derived from any known language, and yet Natasha would wager that it’s the best possible expression of how all of them feel at this moment.

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Put simply, the cost of conflicts involving enhanced humans tend to be high. Damage incurred during the Battle of Manhattan was recently estimated to cost over a hundred and sixty billion dollars to repair (Zakarin (2013)). Given the near-certain destruction of entire cities or even countries that is typically already a risk when such interventions are called for, however, the negative financial implications of enhanced warfare is far from the most pressing price citizens and enhanced humans themselves are asked to pay. Recent discussions of mental health amongst the superhero population, for example…

“Fine. But I have conditions.” Thor’s series of discontented noises had been taken as the unofficial ending of the meeting. Strange has since departed, and Tony had let his guard down, believing that the discussion was over. He’s midway through a bite of vermicelli, which he’d liberated from Phil’s plate with a flirty waggle of his eyebrows, and he’d been considering how best to convince the team that their upcoming heist requires a marathon of the Ocean’s movies. So of course, this is when Steve, master tactician, strikes.

No one else looks scared of this pronouncement, which as far as Tony is concerned, they absolutely should. It’s easy to forget sometimes that Steve’s fame is not just the product of excellent PR or his
frankly ridiculous good looks (although neither of those things hurt.) Serious military people (like Rhodey, who can still barely restrain himself from calling Steve Sir every time they talk) respect the hell out of the guy, still speak his name in awed whispers and endlessly dissect his strategy notes and battle plans from neatly eighty years ago. Because Steve is genuine and brave and if given half a chance he’d cut off his arm before even mildly inconveniencing people he loves, but he is light years from stupid—especially when it comes to choosing the precise moment to attack a target with devastating precision. And from the way his gaze hasn’t strayed from Tony in close to a minute, there’s little doubt as to who that target currently is.

“I think that ship has sailed, Cap. The wizard went home, there’s delicious food in tiny cartons, and I think Lucky needs to go out.” Tony stands and their dog, his best furry ally in the war against Talks (except when the little brat finds members of the team to rat Tony out when he’s really upset), makes to follow him from the living room, tail wagging.

“Sit. Down.” It’s unclear if Steve is addressing Lucky or Tony himself, but that tone triggers an almost instinctual urge to comply in both of them; Tony finds himself longing for the days when Cap Voice would trigger anger or resistance instead even as his ass makes contact with the couch cushion. He doesn’t even have time to try to muster a show of snark before Steve goes in for the kill. “I’m not okaying this mission until Ajay does.” Then, without even pausing, he raises a hand in the air to stall any of the fifteen arguments Tony is already mustering. “It’s the same thing we’ve asked of Bucky, and that we will be asking of any enhanced human who has undergone major trauma under the Accords. So why should the rules be different because it’s you, Tony?”

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*Enhanced humans are often capable of using their powers to avoid or manipulate the many regulatory bodies and procedures designed to enforce boundaries. Indeed, Forge (2008) has argued that Tony Stark’s infamous claim that the *Iron Man* project had “privatized world peace” did not go far enough; superheroes, Forge contends, represent “nothing less than a fundamental deconstruction of the concept of national and international borders” (62). The question this naturally raises, however, is what function borders actually play in the contemporary political landscape. In a context where corporations and ultra-powerful shadow organizations already manipulate or “selectively enforce” (Luíz (2006)) their existence, whom do borders ultimately serve?*

Natasha is midway through reviewing her seventh after-action report of the morning, and she can already feel a headache coming on. The new batch of agents are wordy as hell, and clearly trying to impress everyone by overemphasizing their achievements and downplaying those of their peers. She wants to shoot at least three of them on sight, and she’s seriously considering looking into what it would take to instate tarring and feathering for this last guy when the clicking of thin heels is immediately followed by a packaging landing on her desk with a loud, dull thud.

“If that’s more paperwork, Hill, I swear I’m going to quit and mean it this time,” she threatens without bothering to look up. “After securing the beautiful civilian single-handedly and earning the accolades of the entire town—is this a prank? Am I being punked right now?”

“No, Damien just has a flair for the dramatic combined with what I’ve taken to calling a Bond complex. And to answer your question, does it technically count as paperwork if it’s written on parchment?” This, at least, gets Natasha’s attention, and she damn near throws the AAR in her haste to open the large folder in front of her. Hill has flagged several pages with post-its, and for a moment Natasha is distracted by the cultural clash embodied by seeing post-its on thick, creamy parchment. “What did you want to go over the World Council’s agreement with Odin for anyway? The Asgardians are long-winded as hell—there’s several poems in there, it’s like Tolkien hooked up with a corporate lawyer. There are already some well-written summaries of the most salient details on the server.”
“For the revisions of the Accords. It’s basically the only current precedent we have for a document like this, and Stark’s legal team thinks some sections of it might be useful.” The best lies aren’t lies at all, and Natasha is certain that Tony’s legal team will indeed salivate over this document…once the Avengers are done with it.

She spends the afternoon scouring the heavy pile of parchment. Hill certainly wasn’t kidding about the writing style; Thor’s periodic breaks into long strings of formal titles combined with iambic pentameter seem practically concise by comparison. Far more annoying, though, is the way she can see the trace of HYDRA’s influence all over the documents. The bastards had basically been SHIELD at this point, and even the most assertive of Earth’s ‘demands’ are little more than thinly-veiled dares for Asgard to break the terms. In hindsight they were damn lucky that Odin, whatever else the man is, actually seems committed to maintaining the peace.

“Let’s try to keep it that way,” she mutters to herself as she reaches for another page. She doesn’t quite know what she’s looking for, but she prays she’ll recognize it when she finds it.

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Even if one accepts, however, that current governmental and intergovernmental organizations are deeply flawed, guilty of leaving the many behind in favour of enriching the lives of the few, one is still left with Anna de Souza’s question: “why superheroes?”

Well, it’s not like anyone else seems to be standing up
Who else do we have?
Because the goddamn Nazis are somehow still a thing and

The very last thing Steve wants to do the morning after the team’s negotiations about Loki and Asgard (which had dragged long into the night and ended only when Lucky had clamped his jaws around the edge of Tony’s pant leg in an apparent attempt to spirit the team off to bed one member at a time) is keep working on his essay. Right now he hates everything about the Accords, and most things about being a so-called ‘superhero.’ And he certainly doesn’t know how to construct an argument about how and why their hands are the best and safest for protecting the world while he’s in the middle of fantasizing about walking away from all of it. That’s when the tablet computer in front of him is abruptly exchanged for a plate stacked high with toast, bacon and poached eggs. And a side of Bucky giving him his most no-nonsense glare.

“Don’t even try it, punk. Your metabolism runs faster than mine and I’m fuckin’ starving.” They eat mostly in silence, both of them too hungry to stop and make conversation, though Steve does use the fact of his best friend’s distraction to try to get a decent look at him. Bucky still bears physical traces of everything he’s been through in the past few weeks. The serum prevents the more obvious signs, like the way Bucky used to get heavy bags under his eyes or blink for just a little too long when he was exhausted. But there’s still a way that fatigue becomes visible on the man if it goes on long enough, his movements taking on an almost mechanical quality that is both slower and more precise than Bucky naturally is. (Steve wonders, sometimes, if that’s a sign that the serum is having to take over and run things more than usual, or if it’s the Soldier. He’s never dared to ask.)

“How’s school going?” Bucky asks, at the same time that Steve has just worked up the nerve to say,

“So I hear you and Bruce have a date coming up?” They stare at each other, nonplussed, for several seconds. Then Bucky snorts.

“Alright, I’ll play. Yeah, he uh—we’ve been spending a lot of time together lately. He really gets it, you know? What it is to be…made into something, someone, else, to have your very worst qualities on display for the world. But if we’re gossiping like dames I’m changing my question. How are things with Stark? You might as well have worn a flashing sign the other morning sayin’ you’d slept
with the guy. Does that mean—are things—better, with him? Than it was when we tried, I mean?"

There are notes of jealousy and insecurity in Bucky's voice that Steve might have called out if hearing about Bruce hadn't brought up such similar feelings in him. For so long they'd only had each other, and he wouldn't trade what they have now to go back, but that doesn't make it any less bizarre to face sharing this man in a new, intimate way.

“Not, better, really, just different. Tony uh...he's helping me try to figure out why I'm having such a hard time with sex in this body. It’s...I enjoy it sometimes, and I guess maybe in some ways it’s easier to try to figure that out with someone who didn’t know me when—”

“When you were a scrawny little punk?” Bucky grins, and even if the same bittersweet longing for a different time and place briefly haunts that expression, it’s no less sincere for all of that. “Don’t worry Stevie, for you scrawny was a state of mind as much as anything else. You’ll always be that little punk to me.”

And the end of the paragraph he’s been trying to write for several weeks hits Steve like one of Natasha’s most vicious kicks to the chin, the kind that can leave even Steve dizzy for several hours. He feels like an asshole as he makes a lunging grab for his tablet, because he hasn’t really been alone with Bucky in weeks and they have so much to talk about that it’s almost absurd to think of doing anything else, but holy shit, he knows now, he knows the answer and he needs to get it on the page before he lets doubt or anything else creep in and cloud his judgement.

He gets the words down in a jumbled rush, or at least a version of them. There's no citations, he’ll have to put some real thought into how to manage his desire to use the first person and the need to maintain an academic tone, and he’s about ninety percent sure he’s still using some of the fancy terms wrong, but it’s there, the thing he’s been trying to articulate for weeks is just there on the screen, feeling so natural and obvious that he can't believe he didn't see it the whole time. (Just like Bucky, he thinks giddily. Like he should have always known that nothing so inconsequential as a hundred pounds of muscle and the sudden absence of asthma and a dozen other potentially life-threatening conditions could really change what was at the heart of this thing between them.)

“Thank you thank you thank you thank you,” he’s chanting, laughing as Bucky curses and quickly adjusts his bearing to catch Steve and hold him close.

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For me, the reply to that question is perhaps counter-intuitive, because it requires dismissing entirely the ‘super’ part of the equation. Superheroes and other enhanced humans are uniquely suited for a role in global protection and governance not because of their abilities, but in spite of them. Politics, the kind that takes place in scripted debates and news conferences, and the form that only happens in darkened back rooms, both have always been the realm of the privileged: the powerful, the educated, the wealthy, the charismatic. Enhanced humans might then make a convincing and ultimately successful case to be included under those terms. We might make space for ourselves at that table. But this would be a grave mistake. The majority of enhanced humans that I know were not born powerful; they grew up scared, angry, wounded, lonely, marginalized. Many of them had their powers inflicted upon them without their full knowledge or consent. Others, like me, elected to receive them not out of a will to dominate or punish, but because we knew what it was to have those forces enacted upon us, and we wanted to try to make a world where our children and their children wouldn't have to. We were, and are (to be slightly sexist in my phrasing in the service of accurately quoting a man I was deeply fond of), “the little guys.” And politics has never been shaped by the little guys, but maybe it’s past time that it should be.

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“Nope.”

“Is this the point where I remind you that technically I’m your boss?”

“Not unless you want to add ‘interfering with a trained medical professional in charge of performing impartial evaluations’ to your list of charges.”

“…so we’re back to buddy?” By this point, Ajay looks as if he’s only a few short steps away from throwing something at Tony’s head. Since the nearest item to the other man is both heavy and ugly (a paperweight that Obie had left down here at some point, which Tony keeps in case he ever feels the need to go all Hulk smash on something), further antagonizing the guy does not seem like his best move. “Okay, you’re right, you’re in charge. What would I have to do? I can bring something up on BARF, some really juicy stuff—”

“Fucking Christ, Tony, I’m not the paparazzi, do you get that? I’m not here to get the juiciest story I can for my entertainment or anyone else’s. I’m not interested in shock value or bringing up harmful shit just for the sake of it. That’s not what we’re doing here.” If seeing Ajay look slightly angry the other day was a shock, hearing him spit curses like this is downright stunning, and Tony spares a moment to admire his ability to alienate anyone even as his own anger builds.

“Then what the hell are we doing here? I have—this mission, the one I need clearance for, it isn’t an option. I respect what you do, I’ve seen the value of it with Bucky and Steve, but right now I don’t have the luxury of waiting to be deemed well. So I need you to just tell me what hoops I have to jump through to get where I need to be in as short a time as possible, man. Please.” The bots, responsive as ever to the various signs of Tony in distress, begin making their way over, eventually forming a line between he and Ajay. The effect would be more intimidating if Dummy wasn’t wearing his Dunce hat, facing the wrong way, and making whirring noises that Tony’s pretty sure are attempts at the opening strains of a Queen song. But it’s pretty damn endearing all the same. And to his credit, Ajay doesn’t so much as blink.

“I need to see progress. Not—you don’t need to be a hundred percent well. I don’t think anyone really is, to tell you the truth. But I can’t send you out for what Coulson has informed me will be a particularly challenging mission until I’m sure that we’re getting somewhere, that you aren’t just spinning your wheels with me. What you showed me the other day, the manipulated memory with Barnes, it was telling and it was difficult, but you weren’t doing it because you were really ready to share that with me. You did it because you were pissed off and you wanted to shock and distract me, and you haven’t been able to talk about it since. Until we can get at some of the things behind that memory—the reason your interest was in saving James Barnes and not really your parents, for example, let alone anything from your actual childhood—I can’t clear you…I just can’t. I’m truly sorry.”

All of the options that are easier go through Tony’s mind first, and he isn’t even ashamed of that. He considers manufacturing a reason to fire Ajay, replacing him with someone far less competent who would be happy to sign off on whatever Tony asked them to. He strongly debates the merits of faking some kind of breakthrough. At the lowest point in the mental gymnastics routine that goes on in his head, he even considers threatening or bribing Ajay. Even men as good as this generally have some kind of price. But then he remembers what it had been to lie to Steve and the others about something as comparatively trivial as his migraines, and when he tries to imagine how much worse that would be…well, there’s no real choice in it at all.

“What has Barnes told you, about—about the thing that he and I—that we do?” Bucky isn’t nearly as ashamed of his headspace as Tony has always been of his own, so it’s a reasonably good bet that Ajay knows already. And it’s only the most minute change that gives it away, a shift in the pattern of
Ajay’s usually even breathing, something so minor that did Tony would likely have missed it if he didn’t spend the majority of his time with far more accomplished liars. “Yeah, okay. So you know. What you want…I can’t give it to you like I am now. Not yet, and maybe not for a very long time. Time that, I’ll stress again, we don’t have. But if I’m…you know. Then maybe I can.”

Chapter End Notes

There's now a page in my bullet journal where I've copied out by hand some of the most heartening and uplifting things people have said in comments on this and the previous fic. That's how much your comments and kudos mean to me. So feel free to keep them coming--reflections on specific moments you liked, questions, requests, I love it all! Thank you for sticking with me for over two years and 250,000 words!

And if you're interested in something completely different, keep an eye out for a new D/s AU (well sort of? It's a kind of MCU D/s AU mash-up, I guess...) that I'll be posting next Friday.
Holding On/Letting Go

Chapter Summary

Phil joins little Tony in his therapy session with Ajay; meanwhile, the schedule for the Accords debates is drastically shifted after a well-intentioned mistake on the part Clint's 'ducklings.'

Chapter Notes

You guys! We're finally at this chapter! I've been dying to get here for ages!

Okay, content warnings: a good portion of this chapter involves little Tony in therapy discussing his parents. There are no graphic descriptions of anything physical, but it's definitely implied that Howard was, at the very least, deeply emotionally abusive. Tony also expresses a lot of shame and self-hatred about himself in relation to his feelings that he's failed his father. We also get background on his phobia about being handed things.

Another character, Ms. Marvel (who, for those of you who aren't familiar with the comics, is a Muslim, Pakistani-American teenager who is also an inhuman) also reflects briefly on the intersections of race and gender-based prejudices, as well as anti-inhuman sentiments, that are shaping her experience of the world. That one can easily be redacted (just skip over the paragraph beginning "I'm so tired"); the Tony stuff is pretty central to the chapter and would be a lot harder to read around.

But, as always, if you have questions/concerns that you want to clarify before reading, feel free to let me know.

He hadn’t expected it to be easy; that just wasn’t an adjective he ever got much of an opportunity to apply to his team. But Coulson hadn’t anticipated how much the dread and guilt threatening to overtake him as he walked to the workshop with Tony gripping his hand until his knuckles were white would feel eerily similar to how it had felt to lead a four-year-old version of the same man into another impossibly hard situation. And like then, he couldn’t help but remind him,

"You don’t have to do this, Tony." The answering smile, for all that it was more knowing and jaded than it had been when Tony had physically been a child, did nothing to dull the resemblance either. It was the same mixture of fear and grim acceptance that still made Phil want to weep and scream in equal measures. But this time, at least, he would be able to stay with his brave, frightened child.

For some reason, Phil is surprised to find Ajay sitting on a stool next to You, projecting his usual air of unthreatening calm. (And who is the child here, anyway? Had Phil really expected the man to somehow appear larger or more ominous simply because he was about to lead Phil’s little through something so trying?) He’s distracted from his self-recrimination when he feels his arm being tugged into an awkward position and realizes that Tony has shifted to hide himself behind Phil, perhaps allowing himself the childish conceit that if he can’t see Ajay, the reverse will also be true.
“Tony,” he begins in a coaxing tone, but Ajay shakes his head.

“It’s fine if he wants to stay there for now. It’s completely normal for little guys to take a minute to warm up to new people. Dummy and—it’s Butterfingers, right? They moved the couch out from the corner and put it down just over there for us. So why don’t you two get settled; I’ll stay here for now and when you’re ready we’ll talk a bit about what to expect from today.” After a grateful smile (because damn Ajay looks to be good at this already, no hint of awkwardness at all when faced with a version of Tony so different from the one he’s interacted with in the past), Phil does as he’s been directed and turns his attention to his little. It’s a process getting his boy to slowly creep out from behind him, and even once he’s finally seated next to Phil he steadfastly refuses to release his grip on Coulson’s hand. This makes unzipping the bag he’s brought down with them a challenge, but he still manages to unearth several of Tony’s most trustworthy coping aids.

His weighted blanket is first, and its soft, heavy presence proves to be alluring enough that Tony abandons Phil’s hand halfway through the latter’s awkward attempts to one-handedly wrap him in it. After that he wastes no time, using his newfound freedom to get his boy good and surrounded. First he removes the lid from a container of bright yellow floam the team had made together that morning and places the container next to his boy’s right hand. Then comes Sanders, whom he plops right into Tony’s lap. Several snacks, cut into bite-sized pieces, go on the rickety table that’s been placed next to the couch, as do two sippy cups, one filled with apple juice and the other with a green shake. (Tony had flatly refused to take a bottle in front of Ajay, a limit Phil has no real problem with.) Last comes a package of crayons and a small stack of paper, which had been Ajay’s request. Phil dithers for a moment before placing those on the arm of the couch for now. Ajay surveys the unpacking and Tony’s cautious inspections of the objects with an indulgent kind of smile.

“Looks like your Daddy is prepared for just about anything, huh bud?” Tony nods, brushing his fingers through Sanders’ fur; it’s starting to look a bit grimy, Phil notes with dismay. Sanders’ bath time is never fun for anyone. “Is your stuffy a sloth? That’s really unique. Does it have a name?”

“Sanders,” comes the soft reply.

“Sanders. That’s a great name. Sanders looks like he might be a little bit scared, do you mind if I talk him through how our session is going to go today?” Ajay had mentioned that he would be consulting therapists familiar both with working with actual children and with littles in headspace, but Phil had never expected this level of competence out of him so soon. With his feelings projected onto the sloth, Tony cops to his anxiety easily, nodding and cuddling Sanders closer under the guise of comforting him. “Well Sanders, I thought maybe we could start with a little game.”

“But…BARF?” Tony interrupts. “We hafta, there’s things you said we had to. Um.”

“There are. But we have to set realistic goals for our work together, and I think expecting Sanders to feel comfortable opening up and sharing some pretty difficult things with me when we’ve only just met one another probably wouldn’t be very fair,” Ajay says firmly. Then he immediately softens his expression and pulls out a small cloth bag that looks familiar to Phil. “The last time I was at the mansion these caught my eye, and when I found out I’d be playing with you today I asked Natasha if I could borrow them.”

With little care for what looks to be at least a moderately expensive pair of slacks, Ajay slides off the stool and seats himself in a cross-legged position on the workshop floor, shaking the little bag out to reveal a set of beautiful marbles Phil now recalls Loki, Natasha and Thor entertaining themselves with. Next to him, Tony stirs in interest but doesn’t make any move to leave the couch.

“Where I’m from these are called Kancha, and so is the game you play with them. You, the chalk?” There is, if Phil isn’t mistaken, a bit of bot-drama where the other two (who have been circling Ajay
suspiciously the entire time) beep with what sounds like anger at You, who zooms over and uses his claw to hand Ajay a stick of white chalk that he uses to draw a circle on the concrete floor in front of him. (Not quite able to turn his naturally suspicious mind off, Phil wonders for a moment if Tony really keeps chalk down here, or if Ajay had planned that little move out in advance.) “Have you played this before, Tony?”

“No. The marbles—I mean, kancha?” Ajay nods with an approving smile. “They weren’t for playing. Howar—they were kept in a glass bowl in a display cabinet.”

“That’s a shame. They’re beautiful, of course, but toys are meant to be played with, I think. Would you like me to show you how the game works? You can stay right there with your Daddy while you decide if it’s something you’re interested in.”

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With a line of chagrined looking teenagers standing in front of him, shooting glances at one another and shuffling awkwardly from foot-to-foot, Clint had never felt quite so old. And Clint does not enjoy feeling old. He’s young and in his prime, dammit! A bunch of super soldiers and geniuses and spies live with him and date him, not to mention he’s friggin’ superhero. When he realizes he’s compound this by standing in front of Peter, Kamala and Riri with his arms crossed over his chest, he barely restrains a groan.

“One of you talk. And do it quickly.”

“I don’t get the problem. There was a situation and we handled it.” And of course it’s Riri jumping in first, fists clenched and eyes blazing. She punctuates the statement by impatiently swiping at a still-bleeding gash on her cheek the same way one would brush away crumbs or bits of sauce after a meal.

“It’s just, we know Mr. Stark has a lot on his plate right now. We wanted to help.” Now it’s Peter, and it’s equally unsurprising that he’s the one going for a gentle approach, attempting to smooth the sharp edges of Riri’s defiant rage. Next to Peter, Kamala remains uncharacteristically silent, staring unblinkingly at a spot on the wall behind Clint’s head.

“Okay, sure, let’s go with both of those things being true. You’re worried about Tony, and so when something came you guys decided to handle it yourselves rather than call us, even when it was clear that this was not a minor situation, and definitely fell under the heading of ‘call for backup like yesterday.’” With a flick of his wrist that’s more than slightly dramatic (he swears the holoscreens were practically made for drama, no matter what Tony claims their purpose is), he pulls up footage of the teens’ outing.

He can sort of understand how the job probably seemed like a manageable one at first. The kids were under strict orders to call them the second they ever saw the Hydra symbol on anyone they were fighting, yes. But Hydra hadn’t sent that many people, and the crew they had sent had (quite intentionally, as it turned out) not been close to their strongest fighters. They’d fought their way through the bowels of a foreclosed department store, and by the time they made it to street level Riri had already taken three of them out with a single well-aimed blast from her gauntlet. Kamala had used an embiggened hand to bring her fist down in front of another group of the thugs, leaving a massive dent in the road and sidewalk; they’d been so concerned with avoiding what they assumed was her attempt to squash them that Peter had webbed up four more of them in seconds.

A couple of the more skilled ones, using what looked like modified Chitauri tech, had been the most troublesome. They’d used their fellow soldiers as distractions, staying out of the fray altogether unless engagement became unavoidable. They’d instead spent the bulk of the battle shooting off the tech seemingly at random, taking hunks out of buildings, street signs, anything that got in the way.
“They weren’t even trying to aim for us,” Peter breathes. For the first time, Riri forgets to be angry, and actually sways a little on her feet. Kamala has her face in her hands before the footage even finishes playing. Now that they’re starting to understand how badly they were played, the fight seems to be leaving all of them rapidly. And Clint’s never been one to belabour a point, not when his career has featured its fair share of screw-ups, so he stops the footage after about another minute or so.

The room is utterly silent.

“I want to give you three credit,” he finally says softly, “for the things that went right. Most importantly, you kept each other and all the pedestrians in the area safe. Kamala, it was really smart to embiggen your hand like that to lift those tourists up and away from the danger. And I know you were all sincerely trying to help—”

“Don’t. Just…don’t.” Kamala’s usually chipper and exuberant voice is a rasping mess, and she still hasn’t taken her face out of her hands. “Just tell us what they were actually after.” Peter places a careful hand on her shoulder, but she brushes it away.

“Well, time and public sympathy are both on our side right now when it comes to the Accords. And there are a lot of people, HYDRA included, who don’t want that. So the best we can figure is they had no real goal at all except to cause damage to public property and create as much mayhem as they could. Their endgame was exactly what they got: attention, fear, and renewed pressure to push through some version of the Accords sooner rather than the later. They figured, rightly, that people would assume the damage to property came from the supes and metas.” At this point, Clint almost doesn’t want to tell them the next part, but they’re going to damn well find out anyway, so he pulls another image up on the holoscreen: a news story from CNN, confirming that the hearings are now scheduled to resume Monday at 2:00

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Tony is midway through lining up what would likely have been another flawless shot (he’s taken to Kancha swimmingly, and his little self is warming up to Ajay rapidly) when he brings a hand to his temple with a wince. Far too used to the signs that Extremis is exerting pressure on Tony’s consciousness Coulson barely restrains himself from cursing.

“Honey, I know it’s hard to focus, but this is really important. Ajay and I need you to stay here with us, okay?” He watches proudly as his boy closes his eyes and sucks in several long, deep breaths. “That’s great, Tony. You’re doing so well.”

“I can’t…we do something else? I can’t focus on the game.”

“Of course, buddy,” Ajay agrees easily, gathering up the marbles and helping Tony to his feet. Tony’s pull-up gives a pretty tell-tale wrinkle, but if the therapist hears it, he gives absolutely nothing away. Phil’s respect for the man rises another notch. “I thought maybe we could draw together, you and me. Would that be okay?” Tony’s gaze falls on the BARF headwear next to them. He doesn’t say anything, but he’s usually eager-to-please in his headspace, so the delay is evidence enough that he’s close to resisting, maybe even coming up out of headspace a bit.

“Honey, there’s a reason you wanted to do this when you were little,” Phil reminds him. “So right now unless you have to safeword I need you to be my good little man and do as the grown ups are telling you, alright?” Tony, who never fails to respond with disproportionate guilt to being chastised when he’s little, nods and peers over at Ajay.

“Sorry.”
“Thank you, Tony.” The two settle themselves at one of the workbenches, and Coulson brings the crayons. He also brings one of Tony’s sippy cups and his container of grapes, the latter of which Tony immediately slides over to Ajay. “Aww, thanks. You’re really good at sharing, aren’t you?”

“Not always,” Tony confesses with the severe air of someone about to admit to murder. “Still don’t like it when people who aren’t team hand me things. Makes it hard to share sometimes.” Phil just barely avoids sucking in a breath. Between the fact that Tony spends most of his time at the Tower or the mansion these days, and the way that the team has long since made a habit of intercepting things being directed to Tony in public, he’d almost forgotten this was really an issue. He certainly hadn’t expected his boy to offer that kind of information to Ajay.

“I don’t think having boundaries about what feels good or safe makes you a bad sharer, buddy. But do you want to talk about why being handed things is hard?” Tony shakes his head quickly. “That’s okay. Maybe you can draw about it. Because I’d like you to draw a picture about your fa—your birth parents.” That distinction is not one Phil, nor anyone else (to the best of his knowledge, anyway) has ever bothered to make when discussing Howard and Maria Stark. But as soon as Ajay adjusts his wording mid-sentence, Tony’s posture shifts, his shoulders settling down away from his ears as his body sinks into the stool. And Phil knows that even if they get nothing else out of today, he’ll always be grateful to Ajay for recognizing that Tony might need explicit permission to differentiate between the family he’d chosen and the one he hadn’t.

Without another word, Tony seizes the package of crayons and gets to work. There’s going to be a lot of red in the image, that’s clear almost immediately, but it’s not the warm colour of the armour. It’s the colour of fire, of blood gushing from a newly-opened wound, and Tony keeps using the little sharpener at the back of the crayon box to leave deep gashes of it all across the page. Ajay watches with thinly-veiled concern as the red slowly coats half of the page, Tony pressing so hard the crayon is nearly a nub in his hand when he’s finished. On the other side, he draws two large stick figures and one small one. They’re standing next to one another but there’s a good inch or so between each one of them. The one that Phil assumes represents Maria is given a sparkling blue dress and matching shoes. Howard is drawn with a black pair of pants and coat that are likely meant to be a suit or a tuxedo. Tony also puts a long brown line in Howard’s hand; Phil’s first foolish thought is a wand like in Harry Potter, but he discards that theory almost immediately. He’s certain Tony would never want to associate one of his favourite books with Howard Stark. Tony is dressed to match his father. All three of the Stark’s faces are dominated by unnaturally large smiles. Tony completes the image by drawing a rectangle around the stick people, and that’s when realization hits Phil: other than the weird not-wand, Tony has basically re-created the large family portrait that used to dominate the entrance hall of Stark Mansion.

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Medical has come for Riri, and Peter is slinking home to face his Aunt, whose wrath Clint is sure far surpasses anything he could have come up with. He expects Kamala to take advantage of their departures and make her own excuses. But she’s still rooted to the spot, staring at the place where the holoscreens had been nearly half an hour ago.

“Kiddo, I know I came down hard on you—”

“I’m so tired.” Over the past several months Clint has heard this girl angry, depressed, scared, even mildly flirtatious (though he tries not to think too hard about the crush she’s pretty clearly nursing for one of his other ‘ducklings,’ as Nat calls them.) He has never once heard her sound beaten. But there’s something very near to defeat in every line of her body now, and he immediately despises it. “There’s no part of me that isn’t hated right now. Muslim, girl, metahuman, I just wanted to feel good about something.”
“I definitely haven’t been in your shoes. And honestly I don’t know how you didn’t go all super villain ages ago. But I’m glad you didn’t. You and the others…you’re the good part of a lot of my days. Working with you guys has been what’s kept me sane and stopped me from blowing shit up —” Kamala shoots him an incredulous look. “Hey now, it stops me from blowing some shit up. Which, really, is pretty good given my track record.”

“I thought…I mean, doesn’t being an Avenger—isn’t that enough? I thought once I was doing the real work I wouldn’t feel like this anymore.”

“Nope,” he says baldly, no more willing to sugar coat the truth for her than Phil ever had for Clint himself. “The stakes get higher; the successes feel bigger, but so do the fuck-ups and the lows. People that you love, sometimes huge groups of people, they’ll hurt and suffer and you won’t always be able to do anything to stop it. On the worst days you might even cause it. Honestly, it’s a bullshit gig you picked, kiddo.” She laughs wetly at that, and he puts a hand out to her, praying that he doesn’t somehow manage to screw this up in the home stretch. “Now c’mon. I’m going to buy you some absolutely terrible tacos in the cafeteria; seriously, they’re one of the worst things you could ever imagine putting in your mouth, I’m pretty sure their entire purpose is unofficial hazing. But you’ll need the energy, because then we’re hitting the range.”

Kamala’s eyes widen past the size of quarters and all of a sudden she’s bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Like, the RANGE range? Will you shoot arrows? Will I shoot arrows? And while we walk, can you confirm or deny a few fan theories about the Avengers ship wars? IS STONY A THING?”

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After Tony sets down his crayon on the workshop table with a soundless noise that is somehow deafening, Phil tries to give his boy (and Ajay, who looks a bit overwhelmed himself) a moment to regroup. First he takes Tony down the hall for a much-needed change of his pull-up; then he holds his baby in his lap while he slowly sucks down the shake from his sippy cup, blushing all the while and stealing frequent glances over at Ajay, who does an excellent job of occupying himself helping Dummy create his own drawing. But finally, there’s just no more getting around it. As if by silent agreement, the three of them gather back together around the bench where Tony’s drawing still rests.

“You don’t have to tell me about everything if you don’t want, but I think there’s a lot to cover here, buddy. Do you want to tell me or should I ask questions?” Tony holds a hand out with two fingers extended, and Ajay nods. “Questions, got it. Okay, let’s talk about this side first.” He points to the framed image of Tony and his parents. “This looks like a picture of another picture, is that right?”

“Portrait,” Tony mumbles in agreement. “Used to be—mansion. Dunno where Papa Bruce put it—”

“You don’t need to worry about that right now honey,” Phil assures him. He knows Bruce would never have gotten rid of the damn thing, even if he’d been sorely tempted.

“And what made you think about that portrait when I asked about what your childhood was like?” Tony takes far longer to answer this question, alternating between stroking Sanders’ fur and visibly fighting the urge to suck his thumb.

“My—he—the night before the painter came, he got really drunk. He came into my room. I was working on something stupid; Mr. Jarvis had gotten me this handheld gaming thing; it ran on a 9 volt battery, and you played—football, I think?—with coloured rectangles representing the players. I thought maybe I could make it better, use magnets and mini LEDs to…well, it doesn’t matter. It was dumb. And a waste of time. D—he hated wasted time.” Tony doesn’t, or maybe can’t, describe precisely what Howard had done with the toy, but his silence speaks volumes. “When I said it wasn’t
fair, that it was a present, he told me, he said 'the day you’re given something precious is the day you should start preparing to lose it."

Realization hits Phil with a wash of cold that he can only compare to the icy void feeling of Loki’s spear penetrating his chest. Tony had never been afraid of being handed things; he’d been terrified of the inevitable moment when he’d be forced to let them go.

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“What you doin’, Stevie?” Steve supposes, now that he can imagine the scene from the outside, that he must look a tad ridiculous. He’s surrounded by several huge stacks of paper that are spilling off his desk and onto the floor; one laptop and two Stark Tablets are also around somewhere, though he’s slightly concerned he might actually have ended up sitting on one and is too afraid to check.

“Well, Tony and Phil are busy with Ajay; Clint’s with the kids, and Nat’s putting out fires at SHIELD largely caused by said kids. And our guidelines for the revisions to the Accords need to be to the legal people ASAP so that it can be circulated amongst the committee in advance of Monday. Tony was in the middle of combining all our ‘homework’ into one document, but then the Loki stuff happened, and…” Steve waves a hand at the disorganized mess that surrounds him. “I don’t want him having to rush to deal with this when he’s done, so even though I’ll never be as good at this stuff as the others, I figured I’d try to help.”

Even though their relationship has recovered immensely since their (well, Steve’s, really) breakthrough in the kitchen the other morning, he still half expects the other man to laugh, or insist that Steve should never be anywhere near paperwork as important as this. Instead, Bucky squares his shoulders and nods, looking every inch the Sergeant and right-hand man that he had once been, and unearths a second chair from under the piles of documents.

“Coulda called me for help earlier, punk. And speaking of using all your available troops, JARVIS, you got any suggestions for a system for sorting and collecting this data?”

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“He was wrong to teach you that, Tony.” While Tony had still been lost in his memories, Ajay had taken a kneeling stance in front of him. It strikes Phil again just now naturally the man has adopted so many of the practices the team uses with Tony in his headspace; whomever he’d spoken to about how to handle littles had been very, very good.

“He was just…he was sad. He missed Daddy St—Cap, I mean.”

“Mmm hmm. I’m sure he did. But that doesn’t make it okay to hurt someone else, to project those feelings of isolation and disappointment and fear onto them. Especially when that person is your son. You didn’t get the Father you deserved, Tony, and that’s not your fault.” And that’s where Tony absolutely loses it; his face goes from its usual pale to a bright, almost incandescent red, and then he starts to scream.

“I WAS S’POSED TO BE HIS LEGACY! He called me his greatest creation but I was always dis’pointing him and playing with stupid toys and even now I need, I need, all these dumb things to feel okay!” A ball of brown cloth suddenly goes flying across Phil’s field of vision, and it takes his overtrained senses a disturbingly long time to realize and accept that Tony has just pitched Sanders across the room. The baby cries when the damn thing is lost even for a matter of seconds, which is usually Sanders can manage to be ‘missing’ given that JARVIS has a special protocol devoted just to keeping track of the sloth’s whereabouts.

Phil knows better than most that touching someone in acute emotional distress like this isn’t typically the best plan; that goes double when that someone happens to have the Iron Man armour imbedded
in his bones. But Tony has hold of his weighted blanket now and looks to be seconds from tearing at some of the seams, and if he actually succeeds at wrecking any of his little things he’s going to be devastated. So Phil makes a grab for the floam, then circles his arms around Tony’s waist from behind.

“You hold this,” he entreats Tony, tugging the blanket from his hands and replacing it with the yellow substance. “You hold this and I’ll hold you. And I won’t let go. Not ever.” Tony doesn’t quite hug back; his whole body stiffens in Phil’s grasp and a long shudder runs down the length of his spine. He doesn’t cry; in a way, Tony seems to be almost past tears just now, the rage and hurt and shame that’s collected over forty years too profound to allow itself to be released that easily. But eventually Tony’s hands start working the floam, and he allows himself to half-collapse backward into Phil’s chest while Coulson murmurs a steady stream of reassurance and love.

“You’ve been very brave and very honest today, Tony. I’m really proud of you, and I know your Daddy is too.” Phil had almost forgotten Ajay was in the room at this point, and he can’t even bring himself to look away from his boy just now to give the other man the courtesy of eye contact. But he listens and holds Tony as the doctor continues speaking. “I’m going to leave you in his very capable hands for right now. We don’t need to go any further today. I’ll be in contact soon.”

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[Avengers Secure Server]
To: Agent Phil Coulson
CC: Tony Stark
Re: Tony Stark Mission Clearance

I am clearing Tony for active duty with the Avengers as of today. I would, however, like to see little Tony again soon. While I think it extremely important that he continue to work on processing his experiences and feelings as an adult, I saw clear evidence today of just how beneficial his headspace is to his wellness. My hope is that by spending more time together with Tony in little headspace, we’ll be able to build a foundation of trust and openness that will then shape our interactions when he is Big as well.

I want to thank both of you again for your candour and your willingness to commit to Tony’s treatment enough to expose a very private aspect of your lives to me. Please feel free to contact me at any point if either of you need to talk.

Chapter End Notes

Your comments and kudos continue to nourish my soul and make writing this verse a joy.

And a special shout-out to my American pals for whom this might be a difficult and fraught weekend. I'm thinking of all of you: those spending time with family, chosen and otherwise; those spending the holiday alone, by choice or necessity; those working (and especially those working retail and service positions); those Indigenous folks for whom this holiday marks not a celebration but a legacy of ongoing violence. You're all in my thoughts and my heart.
We Got This (We Got This, Right?)

Chapter Summary

As Tony prepares for Asgard (and exhibits several changed behaviours that flummox his AI), Steve, Bucky and Phil take charge of the Accords.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings for this chapter that I can think of off-hand, except for a brief allusion Tony makes to a portion of the history of Asgard as it's represented in Thor: Ragnarok. This story is in no way turning into an AU of that film (it's so untouchably good I wouldn't even try, TBH); Tony is mainly throwing out informed suspicions to try to get Odin a little off-balance.

For those of you who mentioned concern that all this plotiness would get in the way of the age-play and romance stuff, this is probably the most plotty of the chapters (and there's definitely nothing in the way of age-play), but stick with me. Without spoiling anything, the ageplay is actually pretty important to some of this plotty stuff. *wanders off whistling*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Tony and Phil step back inside the mansion after what feels like it's been the world’s longest day, it’s the silence that alarms Tony most. The absence of noise is a rare enough commodity with the entire team in the Tower; in the mansion, where they’re compressed into what is (relatively) so much less square footage, cacophony is basically the expected baseline for twenty out of twenty-four hours.

It would make sense, though, given what he'd learned from checking in with the Extremis hub on the ride home, that perhaps no one is here at all. Nat’s undoubtedly at SHIELD, Clint is probably rounding up the kids, Thor’ll be putting Loki down for his afternoon nap…he stops his mental checklist halfway through when he nearly trips on a set of long, muscular legs on his way inside his office.

His office, which is currently decorated with a dog and two super soldiers. Bucky, the one he’d nearly fallen over, is sprawled across the floor on his stomach while Steve sits hunched over a desk, scribbling on an honest-to-god legal pad and where did he even find one of those—

“Yes, Captain, I believe those aims are quite complimentary and would benefit from being presented together. Be aware, though, that the age range specified by Agent Barton does differ significantly from that proposed by Agent Romanov. Based on analysis of past programs similar to this, it seems Agent Barton’s suggestion is more likely to be accepted.”

“I liked that article the child development guy sent in, though, Stevie, the one who said that having no support for supes and metas and inhumans until they hit puberty could mean too many changes at once.”
“Right. That one was good,” Steve agrees. “Uh, go with Clint’s, then, JARVIS, but flag it with a note to add a modification suggesting age appropriate units on genetic diversity from K-6 please.”

Tony probably could have watched this go on all night, both because he’s in shock and because watching these two guys team up with his AI is kind of mind-numbingly hot. Lucky, however, gives him away, abandoning his post at Steve’s feet to yelp and make a running leap at Tony. Steve and Bucky both drop the papers in their hands as if they’ve been caught doing something illicit.

“You know, J, I fully expected you to try to take over the world one day, but I never would have suspected that you’d be teaming up with the Brooklyn Boys here.”

“Well, you have only explicitly forbid me from enacting such plots with Agent Romanov, Sir. I had assumed this meant the other members of the team were deemed suitable companions for domination and conquest. My sincerest apologies.”

“Tony, he was, we were—” Steve rushes to explain.

“I figured out what you’re up to call on my own Cap. I’ll go make some coffee and then you can catch me up on the finer details.” Steve nods, and is already in process of turning back to his adorable little pen and paper when Bucky declares,

“Nope,” popping the ‘p’ and grinning a cheeky little grin up at Tony. Said grin is extremely distracting, and it takes longer than it should have for Tony to realize what the other man has actually said.

“Excuse me?”

“I said nope. We got this, Stark.” At this, Tony has to refrain from ruining the whole playful vibe they have going by snorting. Because he loves these guys, he really does, but they’re also from the forties and still say things like swell and grand, so they’re not exactly the ideal crew for compiling a document this complex, even if it is going to be translated into more official language by Tony’s team of lawyers and writers. When Phil strides into the room several seconds after this rather ridiculous proclamation, then, Tony expects his full support. Instead, Coulson takes a quick scan of the working document that Steve, Bucky and JARVIS have generated, nods, and then glances over at Tony like he’d forgotten he was even there.

“You’re scheduled for mandatory downtime after therapy, Tony. Your choice not to be little doesn’t effect that in the slightest. I just heated up the leftovers from last night’s salmon. I would suggest you eat and then take Lucky outside to play. And if you start to go back into headspace at any point you’ll call us immediately or JARVIS will. Got it?” The thought of just…leaving the Accords in someone else’s hands now, when the new deadline has just been sprung on them and so much is riding on this and,

“Steve doesn’t even like the Accords.” He doesn’t fully realize he’s switched from an internal to an external rant until his babbled protest causes Steve to turn around, his entire face sort of crumpled.

“You’re scheduled for mandatory downtime after therapy, Tony. Your choice not to be little doesn’t effect that in the slightest. I just heated up the leftovers from last night’s salmon. I would suggest you eat and then take Lucky outside to play. And if you start to go back into headspace at any point you’ll call us immediately or JARVIS will. Got it?” The thought of just…leaving the Accords in someone else’s hands now, when the new deadline has just been sprung on them and so much is riding on this and,

“You said something about leftovers, Coulson? I have a sudden and in-no-way-relevant-to-the-obvious-need-Tony-and-Stevie-have-to-clear-some-things-up desire for a shit ton of fish. Remind me where the kitchen is, wouldja? I think I conveniently forget.” Bucky takes Coulson’s arm with more of that same cheeky smile he’d thrown at Tony earlier, and actually whistles as he shuts the door behind him.

“I didn’t know you still thought that. About me. Or the Accords. I guess with everything going on…” Steve sighs, running a hand through his hair and dropping his pen, which falls with a spatter
onto the lined yellow paper. “I still forget sometimes that just because you’re really good at pretending things are okay doesn’t mean they are. I’m sorry. I’ve owed you a conversation about this for a long time, since before the hearings, really. And I’m not making excuses, I promise I’m not, but I needed help. My skull’s pretty thick, y’know, and it took a combination of the whole team, and Ajay, and Dr. Dolan, to help me see how much I was...oversimplifying things. Making the world try to fit my narrative instead of the other way around. I’m sorry.”

Tony’s emotions are too close to the surface after therapy. That’s what he’s going with, anyway, that’s why hearing this man with whom he’s been unfavourably compared his entire life apologize leaves him gripping the doorhandle to keep himself upright.

“You’re...not up for this right now, I don’t think,” Steve continues, sounding almost disappointed. And in what universe is Captain America not just apologizing to him, but somehow wishing he could continue to prostrate himself at Tony’s feet and beg for forgiveness? “Phil’s right, you’re dead on your feet. For now...can it be enough that I’m sorry I was a stubborn bastard? And can you trust me to make things right by helping out with this? JARVIS is here to make sure I don’t make any huge mistakes, and of course we’ll send the document out to the team for any final comments or changes before we pass it on to the staff. But it would mean a lot to me to take the lead on this for a while. If that’s okay with you.”

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The next several days stretch JARVIS’s servers (already running on reduced capacity at the mansion) to their absolute limits. He plays a more active role with compiling and revising the Accords than he ever has in a project headed by someone other than Sir; on top of the constant data processing and knowledge translation this involves, working so closely Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes and Agent Coulson also requires that JARVIS adjust several of his own protocols to better suit their respective styles of learning, retaining and presenting information. He’s been their ally in caring for Sir for what feels like ages now, but this is the first time he’s really been treated as a member of the team on his own merit for such an extended period of time. It’s...satisfying, yes, that’s the word. To be used to his fullest potential.

None of this is to say that he abandons his primary aim of monitoring and caring for his creator, of course. And Sir does display several behaviours that are significant deviations from his usual standards. When enough of them occur in close enough proximity to justify the suspicion of a pattern, JARVIS begins to track them in a secure file.

1. Sir begins to seek out opportunities to share a bed most evenings. This would potentially be an indicator of some level of pre-2008 behavioural regression, except for the fact that the company he seeks is often platonic. The night of his first therapy session with Agent Coulson and Dr. Nariani, he slips into Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes’ bed before they themselves return to it; the next evening he joins Agents Coulson and Barton (who are shortly thereafter joined by Agent Romanov as well; she often chooses to sleep on her own, but makes an exception for this); then it’s Doctor Banner for the next two nights.

2. Sir’s online searches become...oddly focused. When not working on alterations to the Accords, Sir spends several long blocks of time devoted to age-play related queries. This would not be abnormal behaviour from anyone else in the mansion. The others frequently seek out new information, ideas for props or scenes or new crafts to try with the littles; Agent Coulson’s Pinterest is particularly comprehensive by this point. But Sir has never once elected to perform this kind of research. Until recently, age-play and all related concepts (a list comprising over 207 terms) have been blocked from all of Sir’s search engines, databases and records. Now, though, Sir seeks out information on weighted items similar to his blanket and mitts, white noise machines shaped like turtles, clothes that will make him appear more overtly young than Sir typically prefers. He never actually places any of the orders, but saves them as a long string of bookmarks on his private server.
3. Some of Sir’s little items, which are usually hidden carefully away when he’s not in headspace, begin making appearances around the mansion. With increasing frequency, Sir will tuck himself under his weighted blanket while reading on the couch, or leave his stuffed sloth on his bedside table rather than packing it away under the bed or in a closet.

4. As the time draws near for Sir to depart for Asgard, he and Agent Romanov begin having extended conversations. Since the arrival of the glider this is not all that unusual, but the fact that they take great care to hide the contents of those discussions from everyone, even JARVIS…that is new.

In the past, deviations and surprises like this from Sir have led both to disaster and to creations that have forever changed and (in JARVIS’s opinion) bettered the world. It’s too early to know how, if at all, any of the factors he’s tracking are connected, nor if they are to be celebrated or carefully managed. But JARVIS does know that he wishes he did not have to permit Sir to leave for Asgard just yet (for the sake of a complete data set, of course. Regardless of what Captain Rogers says, JARVIS is not worried. He is not capable of such emotions.)

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“JARVIS, finish the final checks on the suit. Pay special attention to all the modifications we made based on the Mark VII’s breakdown in deep space. Make sure that the artificial convection currents can adjust for a range of rapid temperature shifts, and—”

“The Bifrost isn’t like that.” Jane Foster’s voice is soft but as confident and decisive as ever when discussing matters of science, even when it comes from behind the mob of bots; she does, however, laugh when Butterfingers (who is as big a fan of Jane as You is of Rhodey) begins a bizarre kind of celebratory dance at the sight of her. “It isn’t a vacuum. You won’t struggle to breathe, or experience any swelling. It’s not quite as smooth as the conjectures about how teleportation would feel; I got nauseous the first couple of times. But I imagine it’s more akin to how it would feel to have traveled exclusively by horse your entire life and then hop into a sports car going two hundred miles an hour.”

It’s not nearly as embarrassing to see her now as he’d imagined it would be. Maybe that’s because despite the fact that she’s seen Tony in headspace she’s still speaking to him like a scientist and an equal. Maybe it’s because it’s nearly impossible to be uncomfortable in Jane Foster's presence no matter who you are. The latter would certainly make sense; in a way, that’s the very reason she’s here. Though Loki has made great strides toward forming bonds with the rest of the team, she’s the only one he's willing to stay with while Thor is off-planet.

Tony doesn’t (can't) explain in so many words why he’s devoting considerable time and resources to space-proofing Iron Man, but he decides after a moment that he can show her. With a growing frown, Jane reviews the holoscreen Tony slid toward her, filled with all the data JARVIS had managed to gather from the MARK VII before it had gone offline. When she finishes, she releases a long breath and closes the screen with a sharp gesture. She does not offer words of pity, or ask questions about his experience, or try again to convince him of all the reasons the journey to Asgard will be nothing like his previous forays into space. When she finally speaks, it isn’t to Tony at all.

“JARVIS, bring up that projection of Tony’s post-Extremis lung capacity, please? I think we might want to adjust the oxygen supply levels.”

Bruce joins them after a few hours, apparently with the initial aim of convincing Tony and Jane to join the others upstairs for a meal. Naturally, he instead ends up roped into a spirited argument about the most effective balance between enhanced propulsion and environmental protections that ends up lasting the bulk of the evening.

The three of them might stagger upstairs in the wee hours of the morning, earning themselves
disapproving glares from several members of the team, but even Captain America’s Stern Glare is worth the fact that Tony can finally think about the journeys to and from Asgard without feeling on the verge of panic.

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He’d requested that the team not overwhelm he and Thor with a host of long, extended goodbyes, and true to their word only Steve and Phil are present when they make their way into the kitchen later that morning. Ever the handler, Phil focuses on ensuring the departing members of his team get what they need; within seconds of their entrance, he hands Tony a coffee and slides six of Thor’s favourite flavour of pop-tarts into the industrial-sized toaster Tony had made for the team. And Steve is entirely in Team Captain mode, pushing aside what Tony is sure is a tremendous amount of anxiety and regret about this plan to give him a reassuring smile.

“You signed off on the documents for Monday, yes?”

“Yessir, Captain Sir.”

“Good. And you’re okay with me being the one to go in and speak on our behalf? There’s still time to change things around, I’m sure Phil or Nat or—”

“In the end these documents were as much your baby as mine. I trust you, Cap.”

“Good. Then I’ll see you for dinner in two days, Iron Man, Thor—Clint is making that pea-shoot risotto with haddock and has requested that I gently remind the two of you that being late is not an option.” Even as emotionally stunted as Tony can be, he recognizes that plea for what it is (come home, be safe); it’s a relief when Thor is the one to reply, clapping a heavy hand to Steve’s shoulder.

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Jane ends up being right, of course; the journey to Asgard is nothing like Tony’s other misadventures in space. He even manages not to throw up, and makes a mental promise to brag about that to her at his earliest opportunity. That’s about when his rational mental processes skid to a halt.

His first, ridiculous, thought upon seeing Asgard for the first time is that he really should have brought his sunglasses like he’d wanted to. The way the place shimmers and shines in the light borders on painful to look at directly. But in true Tony Stark fashion he does it anyway, takes it all in as hungrily as he can without even blinking more than is necessary. The architecture is towering, but not in the same way as the Tower or the other sights dotting the New York skyline. New York is harsh and brash and deliberately asynchronous. It’s grand old brownstones minutes from post-modern glass and concrete scrapers, which brush up against the sharp points and battlements of Gothic churches with careless, irreverent joy. It maps its short history onto its buildings only to deliberately reject all but the chaos of the present.

Asgard is smooth, simple lines arranged in almost effortless harmony. The buildings appear as eternal and natural as the water that surrounds them, as if they never needed to be constructed at all because they were always already here. It is somehow both the humblest and the most egotistical display of wealth and age and power Tony has ever witnessed; this is a people that has seen millennia come and go, who believe with utter certainty that they have reached the pinnacle of existence and have only now to maintain their course.

The golden wings that frame Thor’s helmet have always seemed out of place on Earth, like someone attempting medieval cosplay that has gone horribly awry. But watching Thor step beside him, seeing the sun bounce off those wings just as it does the gleaming structures surrounding them, Tony truly understands for the first time that this man is not, could never be, human.
“Do you like it?” Thor asks. Even his voice, no longer struggling to be contained by the comparatively primitive acoustics of Earth, is different here. Slower and more melodic, the vowel sounds rounder and the consonants softened.

“I…I don’t know,” he says honestly. There’s no denying Asgard is beautiful, and Tony has dozens, maybe even hundreds, of questions he wishes he could ask about the Bifrost, about Asgard’s animals and people and technologies. But there’s also something unsettling about the place, and Tony’s not sure if he’s projecting because of everything he and Natasha have pieced together or if he can actually sense it somehow. Either way, it’s kind of creepy.

“I know precisely what you mean. Friend Tony, my Father…he will know, within minutes, that we have arrived. I know our friends had hopes of glorious and daring escapades resulting in the secret retrieval of the volume the good doctor requires. But in truth—”

“The Prince of Asgard can’t just show up and have people not know about it, yeah I know buddy. I’d be kind of disappointed in the Asgardian intelligence community if you could pull that off, to be honest.” Far from seeming relieved as Tony had hoped, Thor frowns, peering back toward the other end of the Bifrost where his sentry friend still stands. If Tony’s not very careful with his next words, this mission is going to be over before it begins. “But you know what? I’ve honestly never been that good at stealth; I don’t even have a stealth suit. I am pretty damn good at diplomacy though.”

“Was it not you, Friend Tony, who referred to the American Congress as ‘assclowns?’ Or have I mistaken this term for some great compliment on Midgard?” Once, Tony might have been convinced by Thor’s efforts to feign naivety, but he’s long since learned that Thor’s brother is not the only one with a mischievous streak and a trollish sense of humour.

“Watch it, Point Break. But fine. I can be good at diplomacy when it suits me, better? So c’mon. I assume the biggest and shiniest building is where we’re heading, yeah?” Thor still shows sign of movement, so Tony threads his arm through Thor’s, trying not to let his ego take a hit at the feel of the other man’s bulging muscles pressing against his own. “C’mon buddy. It’s about time someone on the team gets a chance to do the meet the parent gig. And sure, if you were smart you would have chosen Steve. He definitely seems like the kind of guy you bring home to Ma and Pa, but—”

“I will be nothing but proud to walk into the throne room with you upon my arm,” Thor interrupts. And the fucking sincerity of this man, it never fails to dismantle every single one of Tony’s defenses. Always has, ever since that first morning when he’d been little and Thor had spoken to him of bad ghosts and the limits of normalcy.

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“Captain Rogers. It is an honour, of course, but I’ll admit that this committee was expecting to hear from Mr. Stark.” Peterson, Phil notes with satisfaction bordering on glee, sounds scared. He’s already walking on perilously thin ice, the famed shortness of American political memories not quite short enough for his sins to have been entirely wiped away by the recent battle in Midtown. The congressman and his PR team have likely spent weeks preparing carefully-worded critiques of everything from Tony’s character to his mental stability. That kind of opposition-research is easy to do for someone like Tony Stark, who in so many ways displays his flaws, both real and perceived, more loudly and openly than his best qualities.

But Captain America? Born on the actual fourth of July, earnest down to the tips of his toes Steve Rogers? He’d be the first to tell you that he’s just as flawed and human as Tony or anyone else, but no one has ever been interested in acknowledging that. For a battered and divided nation, finding Cap alive had been like the rebirth of its most precious and self-affirming mythos. Trying to tear him down will register like a personal assault on nearly every person who has ever identified as
American, and from the way they’re scrambling, Peterson and his people damn well know it.

His team requests a recess. Said request is immediately denied, and Phil vows to get JARVIS to show him how to make a gif out of the face Petersen makes. It’s going to be a good day.

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“My son.” As Odin rises from his throne to greet his Thor, Tony takes the opportunity to observe in uncharacteristic silence. The man is dressed in full armour despite clearly being long past his battle years, a decision Tony can’t help but find pretentious. But he grips Thor tightly when they embrace, and the abundance of laugh and smile lines on his face speak to a man at least more expressive and genuine than Tony’s own birth-father had been. Of course, then the guy follows the hug up with, “I could, of course, have you detained indefinitely for the unlawful removal of your brother from this realm.”

“You could,” Thor agrees calmly. “But were that your intention we would never have been permitted entry. The guards would have met us on the Bifrost.” Odin nods in acknowledgement, releases his son and turns his gaze to Tony, who absently wonders whether Fury, too, would like a gold eye patch for days when the black just isn’t fancy enough. He could use some of the same technology from Bucky’s arm, maybe… “And you are Thor’s Youngling. I suppose he has asked you to accompany him in an attempt to stay my hand.” It’s the tone that does it. Odin speaks to Tony (or about Tony, really) indulgently but dismissively, the way one would speak to a young child attempting feats far beyond their abilities.

“Can’t imagine why he would think that would work given what you allowed to be done to your own son. Your highness, Sir.” Thor stops just short of burying his face in his hands, shooting Tony and pleading and despairing look but Odin doesn’t visibly react to the slight beyond a slight tightening of his jaw.

“You will do what you feel you must, as you have always done, Father. We are not here to attempt to persuade you otherwise. We do, however—”

“Where does one kingdom get so much gold, anyway?”

And fucking hell Tony loves Natasha, because that definitely gets him a reaction. Odin’s…staff-thing scrapes loudly across the marble floor as the King whirls around to truly give Tony his full attention for the first time. Tony affects bored disinterest, peering around the throne room idly as if the question had just been a bit of stream of consciousness rambling that he doesn’t even care if he gets a reply to. There’s a long, fraught moment of silence, and then Odin clears his throat.

“I will have the cooks prepare a great feast in your honour this evening, my son, and we shall discuss how to put this business behind us. Come, I shall show you and your charge to your rooms.”

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“Now Captain Rogers, I know the language in the Accords documents is likely quite confusing, especially for a man much more used to plain-speaking. If you like we can leave the legalese to the professionals and discuss just the broad strokes?”

Phil is starting to wish he’d taken Clint up on the offer of popcorn. Peterson’s hastily chosen strategy is apparently to subtly undermine Steve through a seeming show of compassion, reminding the world that Rogers is out of his own time and seemingly out of his depth with these hearings. Benevolent age-ism of a sort. The hilarious thing is that if Steve were the man that he had been years, maybe even weeks ago, it would have worked. He would have either folded or come out swinging, attempting to mask shame and fear and hurt with aggression; the latter would have been particularly disastrous now that Steve was no longer a 95 pound asthmatic.
Today, though, Steve just gives Peterson his most placid smile and makes as show of looking down at the towering stack of pages in front of him with wide eyes, as if he’s slightly intimidated.

“Oh no, I’ll do my best to keep up, Congressman.”

Petersen spends a fruitless hour and a half or so spinning his wheels, quizzing Steve (who after the past few days is now as intimately familiar with the Accords as anyone) on some of the document’s finer and least significant points; Steve answers every question perfectly, and even manages to work the word ‘shucks’ into one of his replies, which is going to cost Phil money in the pool, dammit. (Even he’d thought there were limits to what the guy could pull off.)

After lunch, a member of Peterson’s own party gently suggests that they turn questions over to other members of the committee, but the man is almost vibrating with barely contained glee. Fuck. Coulson knows, as surely as Tony had realized it weeks before, that they’re about to get hit with something bad.

“I’ve just received access to a document that puts into question Captain Rogers’ motives here today, as well as his commitment to the Accords project at large. I ask this committee’s permission to introduce it into the record in full?”

“If it’s from the Avengers Twitter, Clint probably did it,” Steve offers. But his eyes find Phil’s across the chamber, and he squares his shoulders with the same grim determination he heads into battle with. He knows too.

“No it’s not from anyone’s social media, Captain. It’s a paper you wrote and submitted for grade arguing against the very existence of the Accords, and indeed any regulation of the super-, meta-, enhanced and in-human populations.”

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“I’m wearing robes and they’re not even flattering. This is my worst nightmare.” Tony spins around in front of the floor to ceiling mirror, trying to will this observation to be incorrect somehow, but there’s nothing for it. The flowing garment which is more velvet than anything else can’t be called anything but a robe. It’s high necked, belted at the top of the ribcage like a woman’s dress, and bunches oddly at the hip and chest on top of being at least three inches too long. This unflattering portrait is only made more humiliating by the tall, golden wall of muscle standing behind him in full magnificent armour, clearly trying very hard not to laugh.

“You did insult my father within seconds of meeting him, Friend Stark. This is the man that raised Loki, think you that he would have no means of returning the favour? But if you truly cannot abide it, you can wear your Midgardian apparel and I shall simply—”

“Nah. I’ll figure out how to rock this. Maybe Steve put some scissors or safety pins in that ridiculous bag I know he gave you—” Ever eager-to-please, Thor begins rifling through the duffle bag that Steve had pressed into his arms before their departure. He emerges not with anything Tony could conceivably use to alter these godforsaken robes, but,

“BAGELS! Oh yes, I’d forgotten. Friend Steve was concerned that the Asgardian diet would not agree with you. He packed several gluten-free items, as well as,” there’s more rattling from inside the bag, “apples and your favoured dried blueberries and,” yet more rattling, had Steve packed the whole damn kitchen, “POP TARTS! Most excellent. Shall we, err, pre-game this feast?”

This time it’s not totally clear whether Thor knows that he’s absolutely butchering the meaning of pre-gaming or not, but it also doesn’t entirely matter. Tony is still helpless with giggles, forgetting entirely about the robe until he nearly trips over the damn thing to collapse in Thor’s arms.
They do, in fact, end up eating a lot of the food Steve had packed, and Tony uses the repulsers on the suit to at least make the robes short enough that they aren’t a falling hazard. They still have a bit of time before the meal, so Thor gives him a guided tour of the castle, pointing out favoured childhood haunts that make Tony have to fight off more laughter (“right there is where Loki turned into a snake—”), but also some genuinely amazing relics and art that lead Tony to speculate out loud whether they should turn this trip into a heist.

Shortly after Thor shoes the guards away and assures them Tony has no plans to steal a millennium-old necklace that reportedly makes the wearer invisible (which, come on!), a series of bells ring out. They’re soft, not the heavy gong-ing things of Earth, but their meaning is apparently no less clear for their subtlety. All at once Thor’s warm and easy grin is replaced with a solemn bearing and a quiet sigh.

“It is time.” Tony turns to depart the room, but a heavy had falls on his forearm and gently turns him back around to face Thor. “I am trying not to inquire overmuch as to your intentions for fear of disrupting them somehow. But please assure me that you will be safe. Loki would not want his health to come at the expense of your wellness, nor would I.”

“No worries, big guy. We got this.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, plotty stuff is hard to write. This chapter was a particular challenge for me, and still a little choppier than I might have liked, but I hope it made for a good read! As always, your comments and kudos are so very much appreciated. I love hearing from you. Keep your questions, squees, requests, and other responses coming! <3
Rivers and Other Truths

Chapter Summary

Worlds apart, Steve and Tony are both tested. Bruce, meanwhile, receives an unexpected invitation.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: Should I warn for extensive speechifying? I mean, it's Cap in a dramatic situation, of course there's speeches!

There's a sexually charged conversation between Bruce, Phil and Clint in this chapter. Nothing explicit happens, but if you want to avoid it, skip the entire section that begins "Adrenaline and no small amount of lust."

Nothing else I can think of, but as always, let me know if you have questions or concerns before or after reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two courses into the feast, Tony is faced with a disturbing realization: he’s not going to be able to make fun of Steve for his over-preparedness for a solid month at least. So far the Asgardian meal, while perfectly cooked and elegantly served (on sparkling golden platters, of course), has been heavy on the carbs and red meat to the exclusion of most everything else. Combined with a series of rich gravies and sauces, it’s enough to challenge even Tony’s post-Extremis digestive system. He’s wholeheartedly grateful that he’s not really eating for sustenance so much as a social nicety.

“Ah, the Sæhrímnir!” Okay, Tony’s mostly eating as a social nicety; occasionally, Thor becomes excited to share a dish he particularly enjoys with Tony, and it would probably be easier for Tony to revolutionize another branch of chemistry or engineering than it would be to resist the force that is Thor’s genuine enthusiasm. So it is with good grace that he allows the other man to scoop a helping of something that looks similar to pork onto his plate. “This should please your interest in sustainability, my friend: here on Asgard we partake of the Sæhrímnir each evening that the royal family is present in the Hall.” The last thing Tony wants to do when the big guy is throwing words like sustainability around is point out that he might be using it wrong, but he’s not really seeing the link here.

“Err, are there a lot of them around or something?” Thor shakes his head as he covers the meat in a sauce that smells somewhat like apple, but with a hint of an otherworldly spice.

“Nay, ’tis the same animal for each meal. The royal cook slaughters and prepares the beast each eve, and it is then regenerated the following morn to await the next royal banquet.” And that…Tony hates magic, will always hate magic, but if they could harness whatever force is being used to replicate the same genetic material while ensuring that the product maintains an identical level of chemical energy each time…Christ, they could put a huge dent in world hunger and reduce the immense carbon footprint involved in large-scale animal husbandry in one swoop! And if they could duplicate the
process with plant matter as well as livestock, make healthy options not just available but universally affordable...he doesn’t realize he’s started talking out loud until Thor chuckles, deep and warm, next to him. “I shall make inquiries if you wish, my friend, though I should warn you that Andrímnir is often reluctant to share his secrets. For now, perhaps you should taste the dish so you are not dooming Midgardsians to a lifetime of substandard cuisine?”

For what is apparently a continuously re-animated product of an unspecified animal, the damn thing is actually pretty good. The sauce is as close to a fruit or vegetable as has been served thus far, and Tony is so busy savouring the last remnants of it that he doesn’t realize a bit has escaped until Thor leans over to wipe it tenderly from his lips. For just a moment it’s easy to pretend that they’re back home, that this is just another night Tony gets to spend enjoying food with his family, something he had never really been capable of (especially post-Afghanistan) until The Avengers had wandered into his life and refused to leave.

Naturally, that’s when Odin decides it’s time to chat, setting down a large goblet of mead and clearing his throat with an unmistakable air of authority.

“My Son, I had hoped that when you returned to your homeland you would bring with you both your brother, ready to face the justice he has long evaded, and a host of apologies for your disobedience. Yet you arrive with neither, and I find my patience wearing thin.”

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While the material is decidedly less disturbing, the way Peterson insists on reading every single world of Steve’s essay into the record has a distinct resemblance to his re-airing of the Winter Soldier footage. The more self-righteous and misguided the argument, the more Peterson lingers; after a paragraph that Steve spends declaring all attempts to regulate super-, meta- and in-human peoples inherently anti-American, the Congressman makes a production of pausing and gathering himself, as if it is bringing him severe pain to utter the words aloud.

Steve is stoic throughout it all. He listens to every word without any indication of impatience, eyes trained on Peterson who meets his steady gaze with barely-contained triumph on multiple occasions. He never attempts to interrupt or defend himself, and he remains unnaturally still in a way that practically screams out ‘military training’ in a way that Steve’s bearing rarely does these days. The only sign of nerves that he succumbs to when Peterson is finally, finally finished, is to wipe his palms on his dress slacks before he rises to his feet. (Steve rarely sweats without severe exertion, so it’s probably muscle memory more than anything else, but it still makes Phil wish he could embrace the other man.)

That desire to comfort, to handle, makes it almost painful to look at Steve directly, so Phil studies the rest of the chamber instead. There’s a range of expressions on the faces of the audience members. The most predictable of the bunch are Peterson’s allies and lackeys, who sneer at Steve with thinly-veiled contempt. Others appear simply stunned, as if the foundations of their world have been irreparably damaged. The worst are those that stare at Steve with varying degrees of pity, compassion and dismissal. They now believe Captain America to be a well-intentioned but ultimately naive and out-of-touch relic, a symbol not of the country as it is or could be, but as it was in a past just as irrelevant and inaccessible as a world without electricity or the Internet.

“Well, I guess the first thing I should mention is that I very nearly failed that paper.” This admission, Phil knows, costs Steve far more than he lets on. Steve’s schooling had been the first thing he’d done for and as Steve Rogers rather than Captain America since he’d come out of the ice. And to say he gave it his all was rather an understatement. Steve attended each and every lecture and seminar unless prevented by Avengers business (he’d once run into his English class at a dead sprint, still sporting the Cap stealth suit, because he hadn’t wanted to make himself late changing). He submitted
every assignment without complaint or requests for extensions he undoubtedly would have been
granted by most instructors, and completed, whenever possible, all supplementary or extra-credit
readings and assignments. The only thing that was nearly as common as a member of the team
having to pull Bruce or Tony from the labs or shop was someone needing to find Steve in whatever
study nook he’d hidden himself in so they could pry textbooks and notebooks from his hands and
usher him to bed.

“While your candour is appreciated, Captain Rogers, your grade is irrele-”

“Apologies, Congressman, but I wasn’t quite finished.” Steve never raises his voice to chastise
Peterson, and the effect is all the more powerful for it; the only noise in the chamber now is the
snickers coming from the Congressman’s more openly petty enemies. “As I was saying, I nearly
failed that paper. And when I first saw the grade I admit I was pretty angry. Started wondering if all
those rants I’ve been hearing about ivy-tower elites being out of touch with the real world maybe had
at least a kernel of truth behind them. I’d fought Hydra, the Chitauri, the Mandarin, a dozen others
hell-bent on destroying the world. I’d lost friends and teammates, my entire life. How could someone
else’s expertise even begin to compare?

Turns out I was the one who was arrogant. As Captain America, for a lot of folks I embody the
ideals that represent the best of this country. But if that’s true then I am also symbolic of the worst of
what our nation has become: so used to being powerful that I forgot what it was to be small. I’d
forgotten what it was to need help without condescension, and the chance to speak without being
silenced by voices stronger and louder than mine, who maybe thought they were helping but were
actually just perpetrating a kinder form of violence.

I used to believe that there was only one form of justice, and that it meant standing up for what you
believed in, no matter the odds or the consequences. That when the mob and the press and the whole
world told you to move it was your job to plant yourself like a tree beside the river of truth and tell
the whole world no, you move.” Steve smiles, then, something sad and longing and bittersweet.
Even though Phil knows where this is going, and that it’s right and he will be proud to call himself
Steve’s friend and handler when it’s over, he also knows more than most that Steve and the many
who had worshipped the uncomplicated ideals he once represented, there will always be something
worth mourning in the loss of those simplified values, even if they were only ever a fiction.

“To some degree I suppose I’ll always believe that. As Captain America and as Steve Rogers I’ll
never turn away from a battle I think is worth fighting. But I have learned that there isn’t just one
river or one truth, and that to pretend otherwise is just as likely to turn you into the bully as it is
anything else. So I came to believe in the Accords not because any of what you say about super-
meta- and enhanced peoples is true, Congressman Peterson, but because turning away from
regulation and accountability might in fact make it true.” Then Steve smiles again, but this time it’s a
mischevious little grin that would seem to be far more suited to Tony Stark if one didn’t know what
an absolute shit Steve can be when he wants to. “Maybe I should even thank you, Sir, for helping me
realize that the real nightmare scenario was a world where you are well and truly correct about
anything. Now, should I say more on this topic? I’d be happy to read the final project I submitted
into the record; it’s 35 pages long including footnotes and endnotes, and it received an A+. No? Shall
we move on to actually discussing the Accords, then?”

Phil’s phone buzzes at his hip; the vibration pattern is specific to the Avenger’s group chat, which is
the only reason he bothers taking it out to peer at the screen as he joins most of the room in standing
to applaud Steve.

Clint: Tony is gonna be so pissed he missed this. Dibs on being the one to show him the footage.
THAT MEANS YOU, NATASHA! I WAS WITHIN SITE OF CAP AND I CALLED IT! STANDARD
**DIBS RULES APPLY!**

Clint: Also, Boss, I may have accidentally sent out a fairly explicit tweet about Cap from the official account instead of my private one. Big oops.

Phil musters a glare at the nearest camera, though he suspects the effect is ruined by the ear-to-ear smile on his face.

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Tony goes into the evening with the intent to bide his time. True he’s never placed patience very high on the list of admirable virtues, but he can still usually appreciate the importance of appropriate timing. And to be entirely fair to himself, he makes it about twenty minutes into the conversation between Thor and Odin. That’s about when he realizes that on some level, Thor is still afraid of his father.

He doesn’t cower or stammer or betray any of the obvious signs, of course. The guy is, after all, a battle-tested Prince. But once the two talk for long enough Tony starts to recognize the patterns; just when Thor has good ol’ Dad on the ropes, right when Odin is within a breath of being forced to admit to any mistakes or wrongdoing, Thor retreats, changing his line of attack and allowing his father room to regroup. And it makes sense, really. Tony can’t imagine that Odin’s tendency toward retributive justice is new, and he knows intimately the types of traces growing up in a near-constant state of fear can leave behind. It doesn’t matter that Thor is younger and more powerful than his father, not to mention right. In some ways that probably makes it harder. And maybe if permitted they’d go in circles forever, or perhaps Thor would finally manage to work himself up to calling Odin out. But the same part of Tony who will always regret having chosen to fight with Howard during their last encounter can’t quite bring himself to force Thor to reach that point, not when he’s so very used to playing the bad guy himself.

“It was Soul Magic, what was done to Loki, wasn’t it?” he interrupts, toying with the dangling edge of his frayed robe.

“Don’t speak of what you don’t understand, Youngling,” Odin spits. Several others seated at the table stir, but to Tony’s surprise the discontent seems directed at the King more than himself. (Huh. Thor had said they valued Younglings here, that what happened to Loki had been an exception. But it was still surprising to see actual evidence supporting that.) Seconds later, Odin seems to register the shift in the room’s atmosphere as well, and his face takes on a far more kindly expression. “My apologies, young one. I’m sure you are quite ignorant as to what you are accusing us of, and that should not be cause for anger.”

“Oh you’re right, I don’t understand much of anything when it comes to magic, your Kingli-ness. I actually tend to find the whole thing to be ridiculous; if Thor still can’t summon my coffee with his giant hammer without breaking the mug, what’s the point, you know? But this thing happened when we met with another wizard guy. Every time he talked about what happened to Loki he looked almost ill. And this guy, I gotta tell you, not a lot seems to spook him. I think he and that Cloak probably get up to some pretty freaky—” Thor elbows him in the side, hard, and Tony barely restrains a yelp. “Anyway, the point is, dude doesn’t scare easy, and he seems to know the ins-and-outs of this whole magic thing better than most Midgardians, so if it’s enough to upset him that’s something I’m going to take notice of. So my colleague and I started wondering…where could we find information about Soul Magic, and why everyone was freaking out about it?”

The question, posed as innocently as if Tony were in fact a child, is met with the sound of heavy wood scraping across stone as Odin abruptly rises to his feet, triggering everyone else in the room to stand as well.
“We shall speak privately,” Odin offers in that horrible, faux-gentle voice. He raises a hand to halt Thor’s immediate move to follow them, but there is no hint of fear or discomfort in Thor now as he calmly declares,

“I will be not be separated from my family.” There is little doubt in anyone’s mind that the Prince is not referring to his father.

They adjourn to a sitting room with a surface area greater than that of the penthouse. It is also one of the least ornamented rooms he’s seen in all of Asgard. It couldn’t be called simple, of course, but compared to the rest of the palace there’s a noticeable absence of artifacts and decorations dotting the walls and surfaces of this space. And while most of the furniture in the palace is designed primarily to comfort and appease those in power, the chairs here look to be high-backed and firmer, even the one in the centre of the circular room that Odin immediately settles himself upon. This, Tony knows with the instinct borne of decades worth of wheeling and dealing in back rooms with the world’s most powerful people, is where the real action happens.

“Explain why you keep speaking of Soul Magic, and do so quickly.”

“Well it turned out that your people handed us everything we needed to know, or at least infer, about Soul Magic. It was buried in that novel-length document that accompanied the original treaty. I don’t know if you thought no one would ever read it or if it’s just a standard rider that Asgard puts on all of its agreements that no one ever bothered to take out. But the effect is the same. The use of Soul Magic against a joint prisoner of war is a direct violation of Asgard’s agreement with Midgard in which its use as a mechanism of punishment is strictly prohibited. In fact, there’s a whole paragraph about how violence against the soul is considered the most repugnant possible act, a stain on the very humanity of the caster.” Odin’s jaw works silently for several long moments.

“You could never prove—”

“Beyond the testimony of Stephen Vincent Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, you mean? Actually I could. Again, your own documentation was a huge help on this front, I should really thank you. One of the numerous Appendices—Thor, buddy, I’ll never call you long-winded again, by the way, these guys make you look Hemingway-esque—outlined the procedures for identifying and prosecuting improper uses of Soul Magic. It involved some kind of galactic council, didn’t it?” Odin is actually squirming in his seat now, but Tony barely notices that because the man’s son is staring at Tony like he might just push him up against the curved wall and…Tony actually loses his train of thought for several delicious minutes until the King’s quiet, furious voice breaks the silence and draws his attention back to the matter at hand.

“What. Do you want.” Tony claps his hands and doesn’t even bother restraining his smarmiest smirk. Because this fucking guy deserves it.

“Well there’s a book we need to borrow to heal the damage inflicted on your son. The damage that’s killing him, by the way.” For the first time, Odin’s expression betrays something like regret or concern, and damn if it isn’t almost a relief to know there’s a father in there somewhere who can at least muster up enough affection for his child to care if he lives or dies. “Other than that, we’ll need an official pardon stating that Loki has paid for his crimes in full. We won’t be releasing it on Midgard just yet, but when we do, if Asgard is asked for comment you will of course confirm whatever account we offer and assure all the relevant parties that Loki poses no threat.”

“You dare—”

“You’re damn right I dare. I might not understand the intricacies of magic, and I don’t ever want to. Your secrets are safe on that front, old man, believe me. But one thing I can recognize from a mile
away is the sign of a father who has fucked up. You broke that kid, and I know that you probably hoped that your whole tough-love shtick would fix him like you think it did Thor. But it can’t and it won’t. He is too hurt and too tired to learn whatever fucked up lesson you and everyone else involved in this was trying to teach him. So let him go. Please, just…let him go.”

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Adrenaline and no small amount of lust from watching and re-watching the footage of Steve’s testimony is enough to carry Bruce through the afternoon and into the early evening with relative ease. The others are out or occupied with their own pursuits, so he eats a simple dinner of roasted acorn squash paired with a rice pilaf that he could practically make in his sleep at this point. The spices are perfectly wintery, and he clears his plate while perusing a new issue of *Trends in Biochemical Sciences*. His mind still wanders, usually to worry obsessively about Tony and Thor, but he doesn’t allow himself the luxury of lingering on those thoughts for long. They bring the Hulk too close to the forefront of his mind, and he just doesn’t feel up for spending the night in the mansion’s version of the Playroom.

He’s drying the last of his dishes when JARVIS relays a request for entry from Phil Coulson and Clint Barton. This isn’t a formality any of them typically bother to observe in the mansion where space is so much more compressed than the Tower, so he’s instantly on guard. And he is not put at ease by the way that usually exuberant and loud Clint trails almost shyly behind his partner, looking everywhere but at Bruce. Phil, for his part, peers back at Clint a couple of times but doesn’t appear so much concerned as mildly exasperated.

“Clint wanted to speak with you, Bruce, if you happen to have some time to spare this evening.” At this, Clint actually ducks fully behind Coulson and makes some kind of squeaking sound. Now that it’s clear this probably isn’t a dire matter, just one that’s turning Clint rather endearingly anxious, Bruce can’t help but have a bit of fun with it.

“I never thought of Clint as the type to need a mouthpiece.”

“Funny, me neither. And Barton I can almost guarantee you that Bruce isn’t going to be willing to do this if you can’t even talk about it, so…” Muttering something about the vents, Clint slowly makes his way from behind their handler to seat himself on the edge of the island.

“I uh…I was wondering if maybe you’d want to bring the leather pants and play with us sometime.” Bruce blinks. Then again. And again after that. Not because the jumble of words is difficult to decipher (after spending so much time with people in various headspaces, not to mention Thor’s odd diction and syntax, he’s pretty used to translating what sounds like gibberish into something comprehensive). Not even because the request is coming entirely out of left field. He’d recognized the undercurrents between he and Clint during the group date for what they were.

But, well, maybe he hadn’t totally believed that any member of the team but Tony had moved past their fear of the Hulk enough to truly find Bruce to be a sexually viable candidate. Clint in particular was already in a stable primary relationship beyond the poly structure that was gradually coming together, what on Earth did he really need Bruce for badly enough to seek him out like this? Coulson certainly gave off enough Dommish vibes of his own that Bruce is pretty certain he’d be able to take Clint in hand.

“Bruce, I know you tend to need time to process, but I think Clint might hyperventilate if you don’t say, well, something,” Phil offers softly. And indeed, when Bruce’s eyes fall back on the blonde he’s looking distinctly uneasy. “I’m sorry, Clint. I’ve never quite been able to master thinking aloud the way Tony has. I’m interested, of course I am, but we’re going to need to walk this back a little bit so I can keep up,
Alright? I assume by the reference to the leather pants that it’s not a vanilla encounter that you’re interested in.”

“Bruuuuuuce don’t make me spell it out! You’re bossy and hot and I’d like to investigate that further. Bedroom?” Both Phil and Bruce snort this time.

“You’ve seen how I operate with Tony, Clint. You honestly think I’m going to agree to a kink scene with you with zero negotiation? No sense of your limits, your interests, your experience, nothing?”

“Maaa-ybe?” Clint flutters his (admittedly pretty) long lashes and angles himself so that Bruce can’t possibly miss the bulge of his biceps under his clingy shirt, or the way his cock is rapidly taking in interest in their discussion. The testing is oddly reassuring. Whatever else about this conversation has come as a surprise to Bruce, at least he’d had Clint pegged exactly right: he’s a Brat. After a brief glance in Coulson’s direction—the man is looming near the entryway, likely keeping an eye and an ear out for other members of the house, but he appears otherwise unbothered by the conversation—Bruce takes several steps forward. He’s not forcing his way into Clint’s body space just yet, but he’s closer than he would naturally stand, and situated between Clint’s sprawling legs.

“Try again.” Clint shudders. It’s slight, but enough to be noticeable at this distance.

“I. Um.” It’s tempting as hell to keep pushing, to see just how flustered he can get Clint, but Bruce isn’t going to be that cruel just yet, not without a better sense of what the archer is looking for.

“How about we take a few steps back here, hmm? I’m definitely not saying no, Clint, please understand that. I am saying not tonight. Instead how about the three of us take a bottle of wine upstairs and have a chat, alright?”

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Odin sends one of his aides off with orders to have the paperwork pardoning Loki almost immediately. Tony allows himself to get his hopes up that they may even be getting the hell out of this realm tonight, even lets himself fantasize about the way Steve would smile at them if Tony turned up early for once. But when Thor asks about it, the King smirks, his first show of anything but weariness, anger and defeat in close to an hour.

“I’m afraid not quite yet, my son. After the…events of Loki’s punishment and escape, I made a promise to your dear mother that I would make no further decisions about his care and treatment without seeking her counsel. If you wish to leave Asgard with that volume, you will first have to convince her that yours is the best way forward. And I will warn you that she cares not for power or status. The threats you made to me tonight, Stark, would do little but irritate her and she is…not a woman you wish to cross.” With that ominous warning, Odin sweeps from the room and through a door Tony assumes will take him through to his private chambers without re-entering the hall. He resists the urge, just barely, to bang his head against the wall. Thor, however, looks downright cheerful.

“My mother is most reasonable. I predict that we shall be departing for Midgard by morning at the latest.”

Tony can’t quite get Odin’s smirk out of his head though, even as Thor leads them jovially back into the banquet hall, whistling a tune that Tony recognizes as the melody from a flute number the band had played earlier in the evening. At first it appears like that’s just paranoia on Tony’s part. Mother and Son enjoy a long, energetic dance that Tony’s pretty happy to sit out (it involves a lot of spinning), after which Frigga kisses Thor’s cheek and smiles warmly at him. But every time Thor tries to direct her attention to Tony as well, or lead all three of them from the room, the Queen finds a reason to depart their company. Thor waits patiently the first few times with no indication of unease,
but Tony is a society kid. He knows when he’s being avoided. So he’s entirely unsurprised when Frigga makes her exit from the meal early, barely managing a stiff nod in Tony’s direction before she glides from the room.

Unable to silence the sarcastic inner-voice that would usually be monologuing to JARVIS or the bots by now entirely, Tony takes stock: The Queen of Asgard is now the only thing standing between he, Thor, and their objective. Only she seems to sort of despise Tony. And every bit of intel he’d brought with him had been aimed at Odin, not his wife.

If Strange had been playing some kind of sadistic long game by convincing them that Tony was necessary to this mission, he must be laughing his ass off by now.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know in MCU-verse that comics-canon speech of Steve's was sort of given to Peggy, but I really fell in love with the idea of Steve kind or returning to it and revising it, and that lost a lot of power when it was someone else's words.

Let me know what you thought, of that or anything else in this kind of weird chapter. <3
Show and Tell

Chapter Summary

Frigga can't avoid Tony forever, though their conversation takes a direction he did not expect. Meanwhile on Midgard, Jane attempts to comfort Loki while Bruce, Clint and Phil spend some time together.

Chapter Notes

The only warnings I can think of for this chapter are related to explicit sexual content in the Bruce/Phil/Clint storyline. If you want to skip those, skip the sections that begin "When Clint, Phil and Phil arrive in Bruce's suite" and "After he had finally managed to comply with Bruce's orders..."

One of those scenes (the first one) also contains an allusion to the fact that Bruce and Clint were both abused as children. Nothing lengthy or detailed, but still worth skipping if that’s a trigger for you.

As always, if you have questions or concerns, or need more information before deciding whether to read, just let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony wakes to a morning that comes too soon, in a bed that isn’t his own, and with a heavy arm draped across his middle. The latter is the only item on the list that is remotely comforting. The room they are sharing is huge, of course, and it’s probably one of his favourite places in the castle. The bulk of the wall across from them is taken up by a massive mural of a group of armoured women on winged white horses; Tony thinks they might be unicorns, actually, but that’s somehow less remarkable than the fierceness and fearlessness of the women themselves. Thor had confessed the evening prior, blushing all the while, that this had been his childhood bedroom, and that he’d requested that particular painting out of a kind of hero-worship toward the Valkries. They had apparently been Asgard’s most feared warriors, and he truly could imagine why; the one on the far left reminded Tony vaguely of Pepper, actually, and he entertained himself for a moment with the thought of trying to bring her home a unicorn as a souvenir from his trip.

But even the charms of Thor’s childhood and the visual of Pep riding a unicorn to the next SI board meeting could only distract Tony for so long. In a feat of both flexibility and sneakiness (both of which Tony owed to training with Natasha), he managed to ease out from under the demigod’s grip and slide out of bed without waking him. One of the castle’s innumerable servants had at some point dropped off more clothes for Tony to wear, but he just wasn’t up for another day of fighting with ill-fitting robes or whatever other trolling Odin was going to attempt. He dressed in his favourite black jeans and a worn Black Sabbath shirt, snagged a granola bar from the duffle bag, and crept out of the room.

Frigga probably would have been nearly impossible to locate if not for an anecdote from Thor the
previous day that had mentioned her favourite gardens. As it was, the journey still involved a number of wrong turns and a highly suspicious groundskeeper who trailed after him most of the way. But eventually he found the spot again.

He could see why Frigga liked it. The flowers, an unfamiliar genus that must have been specific to Asgard, were a vibrant shade of almost neon-green. Where most of the decor in Asgard was muted, designed to compliment the gold without ever threatening to overwhelm it, this particular colour refused to blend in or fade to the background. And unlike so much of the foliage around here that seemed like it was arranged by a ruler, the cup-shaped bulbs grew in chaotic patterns that seemed impossible to make sense of. The Queen was tending to them, pouring water from a jewelled pitcher and laughing as she found a group of them that had somehow grown tangled together, their stems hopelessly and almost impossibly intertwined given how close to the ground they grew. Tony wasn’t sure she registered his presence at first, but after abandoning her attempts to separate the plants, she spoke.

“When I agreed to marry Odin, my only condition was that I bring cuttings of these flowers with me to plant near the palace. The gardeners nearly rebelled. The crescello typically grow only on the outskirts of the realm; they are considered a nuisance, no better than a weed. Even their name, ‘bello—to wage war’ and ‘crescere—to grow.’ Their very existence is considered insubordinate and antagonistic. But I’ve always loved them.”

“In my experience,” Tony offers, unsure if it’s comforting or awkward that Frigga still isn’t looking at him, “any growth that means anything usually involves fighting someone or something. The trick is usually picking the right battles.” Frigga makes a non-committal humming noise, then turns to face him for the first time and pats the ground next to her. Tony would rather keep the advantage of standing, really, but for once he tries to be agreeable and go where he’s bid.

“You are Thor’s Youngling, or so he says.”

“Yeah, so?”

“You are Thor’s Youngling, and yet you despise that part of yourself.” The shock is probably as plain as the goatee on Tony’s face, and Frigga smiles sadly after barely glancing at him. “Thor didn’t tell you then. I am gifted with…some call it sight, some just woman’s intuition. In truth I would require neither to realize this about you. Every time Odin refers to you that way you flush with rage, and with shame.”

“Because he thinks it makes me less. Less brave, less intelligent, less capable, just…less.”

“I couldn’t speak to whether or not that’s true. I certainly hope not. But that’s not really why it makes you so angry; you’re afraid he’s right.” Tony can’t deny this, not immediately, and he doesn’t insult Frigga by trying. She allows the silence to speak for itself, nods, and then turns her attention back to her flowers. “I love my son. But if I permit your team to heal and then, I assume, attempt to convince him to remain a Youngling at least some of the time, you would be his primary example. How could you possibly teach Loki to love and accept and learn from that part of himself when you believe such horrible things about yours?” She shakes her head, sending long golden curls cascading across her
shoulders, and stands. “Bring me my son, Mr. Stark. Heal him here on Asgard, exactly as you
planned, and then I shall spirit both he and I away where we will never be found.”

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When Clint and Phil arrive in Bruce’s suite, it’s almost immediately obvious that the former’s nerves
have taken a different direction than the previous night. Instead of hiding behind Phil, shy and quiet,
Clint strolls into the room with his head high and his chest out, smile taking on the appearance of
something like a sneer. If anything, the falseness of this display of confidence only shines a spotlight
on the thinly-concealed anxiety underneath, and Bruce and Phil exchange amused glances.

“You know, of all the people I ever thought I’d have a nooner with, I don’t think I ever would have
guessed you’d be at the top of the list, Doc.”

“You’re welcome to come back this evening if you prefer.” The threat behind the words is subtle,
but more than apparent enough to someone with Clint’s training and skillset. Clint, huffs out a breath,
and looks down at his feet.

“Sorry, Sir.” Fighting another exasperated smile (a Brat but a sensitive one, at least when it comes to
verbal reprimands—this will definitely be interesting), Bruce makes his way across the room. The
archer has on the jacket from his SHIELD tac suit despite the fact that Bruce is pretty sure he didn’t
need to go in this morning. Which means he must have felt on some level like he needed to bring
armour to their scene. Bruce undoes it slowly, letting the soft rasp of the zipper fill the quiet of the
room.

“You’re fine,” he soothes as the zipper comes free and he begins tugging the sleeves down Clint’s
musclel arms. “You know how this is going to go, remember? What’s the plan?” Phil nods in
approval as he crosses the room to take a seat on a plush armchair Bruce had dragged into the
bedroom just that morning. He’s dressed down in a tighter pair of jeans than he would normally
wear, which lets Bruce see the stirrings of interest already happening in the region of Coulson’s
groin.

“Uh, well I’m hoping sex of some kind is in short order, because otherwise I really—” Without any
warning, Bruce fists his hand into Clint’s short hair and gives a pull. It’s not harsh enough to be
overly painful, but it’s definitely enough to get Clint off balance enough that he stops snarking in
might work for me. And learning how…” Holy fuck, Clint Barton is actually blushing; they’ve
barely started and Bruce’s cock is already straining at the leather of his pants. He almost feels guilty
when he gives Clint’s hair another tug.

“How what?”

“How I might want to submit. You won’t do anything I flagged as a hard or soft limit on the contract
we made, and if anything feels wrong or bad for me in any way I will use my safeword immediately.
Sir.” By the time Clint finishes the list he sounds far more confident, and even while the flush still
stains his cheeks he finally meets Bruce’s eyes again.

“Good boy. Strip off for me and kneel on the rug in front of the fireplace.” Without waiting to watch
and see if his commands are followed, Bruce briefly redirects his stare to Coulson. Really, watching
Phil’s face is just as informative as watching Clint himself anyway. Phil’s attention is focused entirely
on his partner, tracking Clint’s progress across the room. The rueful but unsurprised smile that
follows several seconds later is enough of an indication that Clint is struggling, either with the
command or with being ignored, most likely both. And gods Bruce is grateful to be involved, but
also so damn curious why Clint had wanted Bruce to be the one to teach him all of this when
Coulson looks like he could absolutely devour him right now. Clint had been surprisingly tight
lipped about it during negotiations, though, and the last thing Bruce had wanted was to say or do anything to really upset either man when he doesn’t know them very well in this capacity.

“I can’t…you’re gonna have to use something to make me. Sir.”

Clint is still on his feet when Bruce stalks slowly toward him, not even having to play at taking his time. The sight is certainly one worth savouring. Clint is a solid wall of toned and deadly muscle. Bruce could spend ages lingering on just his overdeveloped back and shoulder muscles alone; Clint’s decades of training with archery have rendered that whole region such a fucking pleasure to behold that Bruce wishes he had any of Steve’s talent for drawing. His skin, while perfectly tanned and a beautiful compliment to his sandy blonde hair, is littered with scars. The placement and patterning of most of it suggests that they’re souveniers from his work with SHIELD and the Avengers, but a few of the more faded and less professional-looking ones (like a mark near his left shoulder blade looks distinctly like a cigarette burn) offer hints at the type of childhood Clint had experienced. The sight, the resemblance to the types of scars Bruce’s own body had collected before he’d been the Hulk, sends a surge of protectiveness through him that nearly takes him out of the scene. But then Clint turns to look at him, eyes blazing with a conflicted mixture of desire and resistance, and Bruce is right back in the correct headspace again. He forces his way right into Clint’s personal space this time without hesitation, letting the leather of the pants Clint has been obsessing about for weeks rub up against the back of his naked thighs and ass.

“No, I don’t think so. We can play at those games another time if you’d like. But for today you have to make the choice to put yourself in my hands, Clint. You came to me. You asked for this, for me to show you what it would be like. Show me you meant that. Prove me to me that you’re ready for this.”

There’s a fraught moment of silence where Clint turns back to face the fireplace, but doesn’t move. Bruce decides that before his next scene with anyone in the mansion he’s going to have a full-length mirror put in here, because not being able to see the other man’s face is torturous. But then Clint makes a growling noise, somehow both fierce and helpless, and sinks smoothly to his knees.

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Steve’s hand is still elevated from knocking on the door to Thor’s room when said door is flung open and he is met by a harassed and exhausted looking Jane. She holds her index finger to her lip, glances behind her, and then steps into the hallway, shutting the door behind her.

“I just got Loki down. He’s been sobbing on and off most of the day.” With her standing closer, Steve can see the traces of at least two kinds of food in Jane’s hair, and the numerous stains on a shirt with a llama on it that he’s pretty sure is one of her favourites.

“Oh Jane you should have called or told JARVIS to send for someone. We could have—”

“No, you couldn’t,” she cuts in. “Almost everyone else has tried already, but Loki’s sort of… regressed, when it comes to you all. Without Thor here to ground him and make him feel safe, he doesn’t want to see anyone. I think it’s possible that he might even think Thor being gone is somehow the team’s fault, but his language skills…they’re deteriorating, I think. It’s hard to get much out of him.”

Just like that, the almost euphoric wave Steve has been riding since the hearings comes to a crashing halt. He’d heard and understood what the others had said about the impact of Soul Magic, knew that it was possible Loki might die if the damage wasn’t treated. But this is the first real evidence (at least that he’s aware of) that that process might already be under way. He’s surprised, too, by the strength of his reaction. He would always have pitied Thor the loss of his brother, of course, but it isn’t until this moment that it really hits Steve how fond he’s become of Loki. The man might not be entirely
himself now, but Steve has seen the sweetness and enthusiasm Loki is capable of, now, and doesn’t believe anything could make those traits simply vanish.

For the first time since he has known her, Jane looks as small as she actually is. Steve doesn’t know the exact rules of the agreement that she’s come to with Thor or if it’ll be welcome, but he’s also starting to suspect that Jane will never be comfortable asking the team for help without first being given proof that she won’t be turned away. So without preamble, Steve gathers her into his arms. She goes without a struggle, heaving one long breath into his chest.

“He’ll be alright. Tony and Thor will be back soon.” He thinks he feel Jane shake her head. “I know. I know you’re nervous, we all are, and from the sounds of it that Odin fella is a real piece of work. But those two? I would never bet against ‘em. Now, in the meantime if we can’t take care of Loki then we’re going to take care of you. So place your order.”

“What?”

“Between the ridiculous amount of food in this house and the wide array of delivery options New York offers, I can and will make sure you get anything at all that you feel like eating. So like I said. Place your order.”

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Thor wakes in his childhood bedchambers. He has grown accustomed enough to the bedding on Midgard that his old coverings feel wrong against his skin somehow, overly sumptuous and too warm and just…wrong. When he truly becomes aware enough to realize that he is alone in said bed, his morning becomes infinitely worse.

His first suspicion is his father, and Thor dresses himself in such a blind rage that he realizes several hours later that his tunic is backwards and he had neglected to put on under-clothes entirely. But when he storms into the throne room with the previously clear Asgardian sky rolling ominously with thunder, no one dares laugh or point this out. Even his Father doesn’t attempt to ignore his presence, halting the conversation he’s having with one of the groundskeepers and standing. (He moves even slower than he used to, now, and some part of Thor’s brain spares a moment of sadness for this, even as his whole being sings with rage.)

“Where is he.”

“I do not have him.” Before he knows he’s even moving, Thor is pressing into his Father’s space and just barely restraining himself from grabbing him by the throat. “I speak the truth, Odinson. Control yourself and I shall tell you all I know.” The most control Thor can muster involves taking a single step backward from Odin and lowering his hands to his sides to ball them in fists, but it is enough to satisfy the older man. “Agnar has informed me that your Youngling spoke with your mother this morning. She departed his company shortly after they spoke, but he remains in the gardens, near the cresello. You should, mayhaps, teach him not to wander if it upsets you so. Learn from my errors with your brother; do not be overly permissive.”

“That,” Thor snaps, “was not your mistake with Loki. That you think so is only more evidence that he should never return here.”

He finds Tony exactly where his Father had indicated. He’s seated on the ground, playing idly with the petals of Thor’s mother’s favourite flower, and he spares just a moment to wish that they were here under different circumstances, that he could simply watch this man he loves come to know the pieces of Asgard that Thor himself loves best.

“You departed our chambers early this morning. I know I promised to permit you the space you
require to accomplish our aims, but—"

“I wanted to talk to your mother. I thought she would tell me things she might be inclined to hide from you, to save face or whatever.”

“And did she?” The petal Tony has between his fingers is nearly torn from the rest of the plant as Tony’s exploratory grip grows more focused and violent.

“She thinks…she said…she won’t give us the book because she doesn’t want Loki to be a bad Youngling. Like I am.”

Thor has always associated anger with red, and with heat. It sets him alight, burns him from the inside out until he finds some way to extinguish it. It had been that way even this morning with his Father. But now it has no colour at all. It is white, so searing that it can’t burn Thor, can’t hurt him at all because there is nothing left in him but that rage. His hammer is on the ground behind him, not even in his line of sight, but sparks fly from his fingertips anyway. He is one with the lightning as he has never been before.

“You are NOT a bad Youngling, mine Tony.”

“I am, though. She said I was…that I was ashamed, that it made me angry when Odin treated me like being a Youngling was a bad thing because I was afraid he was right. And she’s right. For so long I’ve hated that I need this from you guys. I hate that there’s any part of me that chooses to be so helpless and small; I wear a diaper for fuck’s sake. Do you know I was jealous of Loki? I thought he was so goddamn lucky to be able to get this and not have to ask for it, not have to choose it and live with knowing that he made that choice. He was dying, and I was jealous.” Tony’s self-loathing has almost a physical presence, just as powerful in every way as Thor’s anger from seconds before. He hates it, wants to force it away and shield his child and his lover both, but when he takes a step toward Tony the other man shakes his head. “I’ve been…I’ve been working on it, you know, these past few weeks? Trying to get better and learn how to just accept this about myself. But I have so fucking far to go, and I can’t even begin to explain any of it to her anyway. I’m so fucking sorry, Thor. I’ll find a way to get that goddamn book, I swear it, I’ll, I…well, I don’t know exactly what I’m going to do. The security around here is almost completely invisible, which is usually a sign that it’s phenomenally advanced, and judging from how quickly you found me I can only assume your Dad has people watching me. But I won’t let him die, Thor, I won’t, I—”

The answer comes to Thor with the kind of perfect clarity he never expects from the world anymore, not since he grew up enough to realize how complex and nuanced it was. This time he doesn’t heed Tony’s quiet signs of protest, instead coming to rest behind him and wrap his arms around his waist. It has narrowed slightly with all that’s gone on recently, and Thor makes an internal vow to get that weight back on Tony at the earliest possible opportunity.

“My Mother is wrong. And she should never have said such things to you. I will understand if you wish never to see her again, and I am certain you could devise a way to procure what we need. But ordinarily my mother…she is good, and kind, and she would adore you if she truly knew you. If you are willing, I believe there is a way we could still attain what we need and depart Asgard on good terms with her.” Tony’s posture loses some of its stiffness and he allows the muscles at his neck to loosen enough that his head comes to rest upon Thor’s chest.

“Tell me.”

“We could allow her to meet you when you are in your headspace.”

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After he had finally manage to comply with Bruce’s orders and kneel, Clint had expected any number of things. Intricate rope or leather bondage, perhaps, or some of the implements he was positive Bruce had for causing pain. Or hell, Clint was on his knees, maybe Bruce would want to start by having Clint suck him off. It certainly wouldn’t be a hardship, even the hard line of it in the guy’s clinging leather pants (which looked even better than they had in Clint’s imagination) was enough to make his mouth water.

Instead Bruce just…stood there. For what felt like hours he stood behind Clint, hand resting in his hair while he murmured gentle praises about how good Clint looks, how pretty he was when he knelt, what a good boy he was for following Bruce’s instructions. This was decidedly not what Clint had signed up for.

“Are we just going to sit here all day? Sir?” He expects Bruce’s hand to tighten in his hair again, and fuck at least that would be something, but there’s nothing but patience and maybe a hint of a smile in Bruce’s voice when he answers.

“We will if it pleases me, Clint. You’re not in charge here, remember? You gave that over to me, you’re in my hands.” Humiliatingly, and out of what feels like nowhere, Clint’s eyes are suddenly burning and he’s perilously close to tears. Bruce shifts his weight so that he can pull Clint’s head in to rest against his thigh. The scent of the leather is so much stronger from this close, and he adjusts his positioning slightly just to hear the noise it makes against him. “I know you’re scared, and anxious, and excited. So many things you can barely contain yourself, hmm? I’m going to take care of you Clint, and I have no intention of trying to stomp out the part of you that needs to push back, to find the boundaries and dance along their edges. But you’re not going to be able to enjoy anything if you’re this wound up. So we’re going to stay here, just like this, until I decide you’re ready to move on.”

And even though Clint is the world’s least patient person, even though just sitting here like this should just get harder and more irritating the longer it goes on, he feels it as his body starts to relax. He sinks closer to floor, his stance widening slightly so that he can put more of his weight onto his thighs and ankles. His head bows of its own accord, not hiding from Bruce the way he had been before, but just because it feels right to let his neck stretch and elongate. Bruce makes a pleased noise, fingers scratching lightly at Clint’s scalp.

“Good, Clint. That’s so good. Now we can get started. Come up on the bed for me, lie at a diagonal and position those two long pillows under you so that you can see Phil.”

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Tony has never been particularly good at getting into his headspace on command. He doesn’t think he would have been able to accomplish it at all, except for the fact that Frigga’s words this morning had already made that part of him desperate to prove himself, to show everyone that he could be a good boy for his Daddies and Mama and Papa. And Steve, being Steve, had prepared for this eventuality during his packing too, which meant that less than half an hour after he and Thor had finished talking, Tony was in a diaper, a onesie, and a pair of stretchy pants (more like leggings, really) patterned with images of Thor’s hammer. The demigod in question was beaming at Tony while he handed him what looked like a solid brick of silver.

In response to what must be a thoroughly confused look on Tony’s face, Thor pinches off a corner of the bar, which despite being a solid somehow comes apart as easily as if it were clay or dough. The scientific part of Tony’s brain wants to interrogate Thor about the chemical and physical properties of this thing, to know how its molecules can possibly rearrange themselves like this. The little part of his mind, though, is gleefully imagining everything he can do with a toy that’s somehow like blocks and play-dough rolled into one, and wondering if maybe Daddy will let him take the toy home to show Bucky.
“I am going to retrieve my mother as we agreed. I shall not be gone long,” Daddy tells him, brushing a kiss into his hair. Tony mumbles something that might not even be a word in reply while he gets to work building a space craft that combines elements of the Millennium Falcon and the quinjet.

It’s a little harder to be brave, though, when Daddy comes back with his mom. She doesn’t like Tony, she thinks he’s bad and not a good role model for her son, and he wants to shrink away into something very small to hide from her.

“What are you making, Youngling?” Daddy asks as he sits back down on the floor behind Tony, bracketing him with his long legs.

“Ship,” he mumbles. Asgard is so much more advanced than Earth in so many ways, Frigga probably thinks he’s being dumb playing at understanding much at all about space travel. When she, too, sits on the floor and peers at the half-built portions of his creation, it takes everything he has not to throw himself on top of it to shield his creation from her gaze.

“Your…your Daddy used to have a recurring dream of turning the Bifrost into an overlarge slide.” Frigga’s voice is softer than it had been this morning, less sharp around the edges. For the first time he can hear traces of Daddy in its tones, even if hers doesn’t boom quite the way Thor’s does.

“Really?”

“Most assuredly, Youngling. I can show you, if you wish.” And then Frigga reaches out, takes a piece of the silver not-block thing for herself, and begins shaping it into a slide that she connects to the door of his ship. Tony forgets all about his discomfort as he ponders his Daddy’s obvious genius. How cool would it be to travel through dimensions by slide? When Frigga begins lining the slide with bits of the mystery-substance that she has shaped into rectangles, Tony peers over at her in question. “They are pillows. I always felt the drawback of my son’s plan was that one would surely bang against the edges of a slide on the way down.”

Tony is rarely lonely the way he was as a child, these days. When he’s little there’s always someone willing to play with him, and they never say mean things or make him feel bad (at least not on purpose.) But when he gets into more imaginative play he usually has to take the lead, and his Daddies, Mama, and Papa laugh and encourage him, but rarely contribute much of their own. Bucky tries, and they have a lot of fun together, but sometimes Bucky needs quieter kinds of play, or he wants to repeat the same games over and over again. Frigga, though, proves to have a weird and wonderful imagination of her own, following up their pillow-lined slide by suggesting a time-travel coat made of bubbles. He’s almost disappointed when a servant ducks in to inform them that dinner will soon be served in the main hall.

“I’m afraid I won’t be in attendance.” The man, who had been halfway out the door already, turns back around to stare nervously at Frigga.

“W-what shall I tell the King?”

“You may tell him that I wish to dine with my grandson this evening, and that as Tony is likely to be more comfortable with a smaller group, we shall take our meal here. There is no need for Odin to join us.”

Chapter End Notes
Fun fact: the bit about Frigga having some level of Sight wasn't just a convenient plot-point. It was drawn from her traditional representation in myth.

Also, have I mentioned lately that y'all rock? I danced around my house like a dork after getting your feedback on the last chapter. I hope this one lives up to the many hopes and expectations you all voiced! (And apologies if there are more errors in this chapter than usual. The editing/revision had to happen pretty quickly if I wanted to post today.)
Rewards and Punishments

Chapter Summary

Bruce, Phil and Clint continue their scene, though it takes a direction no one quite expected. Steve spends some quality time with his original best guy. And two much beloved members of the team finally return home.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: The beginning of this chapter is the most extended smutty sequence I have ever written. So if you are sex-repulsed or just otherwise uninterested in that portion of the story, skip down until the first section break. Specific potential triggers in that scene include orgasm delay and a slight hint of objectification. Everyone is risk-aware and consenting the entire time.

There's also a scene that confirms a theory a couple of you have mentioned before during part one of this story, that Bucky's relationship with clothes is complicated and rooted in some of his self-loathing issues. If you need that redacted or have questions, just let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clint was starting to think this whole kinky sex thing was a huge mistake. Now, admittedly, a neutral observer might think otherwise, given the way he was writhing and moaning on the bed and all, but that was the whole damn problem. Bruce was driving him fucking insane, and didn’t seem inclined to let up any time soon.

At first he’d just been relieved to be out of the kneeling pose, given the way it had started to really mess with his head. Bruce’s gentle praise combined with his almost impersonal inspection of Clint’s body had been boredom-inducing at first, but the moment Bruce had framed it as an order, as his right, it had become something else entirely. Something hot as hell, but also pretty damn terrifying. So yeah, Clint had been relieved (mostly) when they’d moved things along to the bed and Bruce had started putting his hands all over him.

Except then Bruce had started talking. Or, more specifically, he’d made Clint start talking…to Phil, whom he’d set Clint up to have a perfect view of and vice versa.

“Phil has a nice angle, but we want to make sure to give him a good show, don’t we? You’re going to tell him what I’m doing and how it makes you feel. If you stop talking, I stop touching.”

Now Clint had never had any problem with dirty talk. Hell, he suspected out of the entire team the only person more likely to run their mouth during sex than Clint was probably Tony. Clint loved pushing his partners closer to the edge with just his words, enjoyed the power and the intimacy that came with knowing exactly which buttons to press and when. It was, he supposed, another way he saw better from a distance, existing simultaneously in the moment and around and outside of it.
But this…this was not that. This was nothing but the moment, and Bruce had made that clear the first time Clint had manipulated his instructions by not only indicating what Bruce was doing but what Clint wished he’d do next.

“He’s kissing my neck, Phil. Want that mouth on my cock, I bet—hey!” he’d yelped, because Bruce had gone from laying a line of hot, wet kisses down his neck to nipping at a tendon, and then stopping altogether. Instinct had Clint reaching for Bruce’s head, hand finding his way into the other man’s thick curls as he tried to make the demands with his body that were forbidden with his mouth. In seconds, Bruce had broken Clint’s grip on his hair and pinned his wrists to the bed. Which…before today Clint would have classified non-Hulkified Bruce as probably the weakest, physically, of any of the team. But the guy had made defeating Clint’s overtrained reflexes with two rapid, powerful twists of his arms look downright effortless. Phil’s eyebrows shot up and his mouth fell open slightly; he slid closer to the edge of his seat, and Clint had to close his eyes as a jolt of lust shot through him. People who could actually manage to surprise him, truly surprise him, were Coulson’s oldest and most consistent turn-on, and Clint had never before been in the position of just watching that happen without doing anything about it. He had twisted in Bruce’s grip before he’d known he was doing it, and then let out a guttural moan when he found the hold completely unbreakable. There was a disarming kind of gentleness in Bruce’s tone as he leaned down and put his lips to Clint’s ear. His stubble prickled against Clint’s neck in a way that would have tickled if Clint hadn’t been so turned on that everything was just a hazy mess of sensation.

“Just describe what I’m doing now, Clint. Nothing more. And keep your eyes open.”

Which brought them here. When he’d received Clint’s babbled assurances that he wouldn’t move, Bruce had worked his way down from Clint’s neck to toy with his nipples. They weren’t typically sensitive, but Bruce had been lingering there with seemingly endless patience, a tormenting symphony of hands and suction and teeth until Clint’s hips were arching off the bed in search of friction, any friction.

“He’s—he’s, Phil, my nipples, fuck, they’re…fuck, it never feels like this, what the fuck. Need—please, Bruce, Sir, need more, I—please.” Just like before, it all stopped. This time, Bruce didn’t even look at Clint, addressing himself to Phil instead with a sardonic smirk that Clint would never have thought him capable of before today. His cock gives another frustrated twitch, beginning to leak droplets of precome.

“You have to work on him for a while but he gets pretty sensitive here, doesn’t he? Is he as reactive everywhere else?” Looking at Phil feels like Clint might actually spontaneously combust or something, but he also can’t force himself to close his eyes. Not just because Bruce had forbid him to, but because there’s something kind of remarkable happening with his partner. He’s still staring at Bruce with that slightly slack-jawed expression, and when Bruce speaks to him, Coulson’s hand moves to knead at his cock. He’s seen Phil in almost every conceivable situation, but Clint has never seen Coulson this…this open, this driven by sheer need. But then maybe it’s not that surprising; Phil is more dominant than anything else, and certainly moreso than Clint himself, but like this, Bruce is something almost beyond that. He’s not performing dominance, not putting it on like a costume or a temporary show. Bruce fucking exudes it in every note of his voice and every line of his body, and it’s damn near impossible not to want to bend in response.

“Y-yes. I’ve never…with his nipples, like that, but he’s one of the most responsive partners I’ve ever had.” Bruce smiles, expression opening into something warmer and more patient when he looks at Phil.

“You could get undressed yourself, you know. I’m sure Clint wouldn’t mind, would you?” He follows the question up with a pinch of Clint’s nipple that borders on harsh, and the combination of
that and being talked about rather than to when he’s in the same room, like he’s just an object Phil and Bruce are observing, it’s the hottest goddamn thing that’s ever happened to Clint and he can barely fucking stand it. His hips pump into the air again, and he nearly screams when his cock makes the briefest of contact with Bruce’s hip. Bruce permits him one more glorious thrust, then moves backward several horrible inches, surveying Clint again with that impersonal gaze. “Clint. Colour.”

“Green, sir, greeeeeeeennn, but I-I’m—”

“Shh. I know exactly what you are Clint.” The absolute truth of that triggers another shudder that racks Clint’s entire frame. Bruce seems to know every damn thing there is to know about Clint, there’s no other explanation for the way he’s reduced him to this so easily. The urge to push, to dance at the edges of the boundaries as Bruce had said, hits and Clint manages what he hopes is a playful and defiant little smile.

“Gonna get past second base sometime today, Sir?”

“Well seeing as I’m betting I could have you coming in less than a minute just from this, Clint, I’m not sure I need to. What do you think, Phil? Does he deserve more?” And oh fuck fuck fuck, Phil has taken Bruce’s advice and undressed, and he’s stroking himself with an impatience Clint has never seen before. His grip on his cock is hard but sloppy, fingers tripping over the head and periodically sliding onto his thighs; the motion of his hips, usually as tightly controlled as the rest of Coulson, is an almost frenzied staccato with no discernible rhythm. Bruce has to repeat the question before Coulson even seems to recognize that he’s being spoken to.

“Yesss,” Phil hisses. “Make him come, Bruce, please. Want to hear him scream for you.”

“He makes a compelling case. I’d like to hear you scream for me too,” Bruce agrees, reaching over to flick almost idly at one of Clint’s sore nipples. “I didn’t want to use any props today. Wanted to show you that kink doesn’t actually need any of that to function. But if we do this again I want to put some something on these. They’re so puffy and raw just from my lips and my fingers, imagine what they’d look like after being clamped. Phil, *don’t* come yet.” Coulson groans from the corner, but obeys the directive, moving his hands to his sides and balling them into tight fists. “Alright, here’s how this is going to go. Phil is going to join us over here, and go back to getting himself off while he watches you writhe and cry and moan for me. While he does that I’m going to keep touching you. If you can manage to hold off until after Coulson comes all over you, I’ll let you come. And it’ll be good, Clint. I promise I’ll make it so good that screaming won’t even be something you’ll have to think about. But if at any point I think you’re not going to make it, or if you mouth off to me again, I’ll ensure that your orgasm is the very last thing that happens today.”

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Steve has just managed to get food into Jane, and give her another quick cuddle. With JARVIS monitoring Loki he even thinks he might be able to persuade her to try to get a quick nap of her own in, and he’s feeling pretty damn good about himself. Naturally, this is when JARVIS informs Steve of an incoming call from Ajay.

“Dr. Nariani? I thought we didn’t have another session until next week?”

“What? Uh, no, we don’t, you’re right. Not until next Wednesday, I think.” Ajay is usually unflappable (basically a requirement for putting up with the lot of them, really), so Steve is peering around the room for his shield before the man even begins speaking again. “I did, however, have a session with James today. And he asked me not to call you, or anyone, but I think he really needs someone…uh, Big.”

“He went into headspace during a session?” The only thing preventing Steve from already being on
his feet is the fact that he wants to give Jane, who was half asleep on his shoulder, a moment to
gather herself while Steve arms himself with all the information he can get about what he’s walking into.

“Yes. He’s…I can’t violate patient confidentiality, Steve, but this last week has been a lot for him. I
know it has been for all of you, but now he can’t seem to keep this more vulnerable side of himself at
bay any longer, and I can’t in good conscience just—”

“Of course you can’t,” he soothes, trying to put Ajay’s mind at rest about what he knows must have
been a difficult decision. It’s the least Steve can do for the guy, really. “Just tell me where he is and
I’ll take care of the rest, alright?” Ajay gives him instructions, and (at Steve’s urging) promises to
return home immediately instead of lingering about the mansion as he often does after sessions in
case another member of the team should have need of him. By the time he’s hung up, Jane is far
more alert, smiling almost fondly at Steve as she reties a gold and purple scarf around her neck that
Steve is pretty sure came from Asgard.

“It never stops, huh?”

“I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if it did, really,” he confesses, half because it’s true and
half to make her smile, which it does. Then a whine sounds from near Steve’s feet and he beams.
“Lucky! You should—Loki really likes the dog, and vice versa. Even if he isn’t willing to see the
rest of us right now, I’d bet money he’d be happy to see Lucky.” Jane chews her lip, glancing back
and forth between Steve and Lucky.

“Are…are you sure? Loki’s not—violent or anything, he can’t be in the state he’s in, but he’s still a
lot to handle. He screams and he cries and—”

“Lucky’ll leave if anything gets to be too much for him. But he’s pretty even-tempered as far as dogs
go. He’s already seen his share of super-powered tantrums and came out none the worse for wear.”
She still appears hesitant, and maybe Steve shouldn’t be pushing quite so hard, but he wants to get to
Bucky quickly almost as badly as he doesn’t want to leave Jane completely on her own to manage a
volatile demigod. “Please, Jane. It’ll make me feel better.” To complete the picture of supplication, he
sticks out his bottom lip, cautiously pleased when she laughs a second time.

“Oh great. Now Captain America is pouting at me. My life is a constant sideshow of utter insanity.”

“You get used to it!” he calls over his shoulder, already taking the stairs three at a time.

He finds Bucky right where Ajay had said he’d left him: huddled in the nursery in Tony’s bunk. His
eyes are red-rimmed and, while Steve can’t see any actual tears at the moment, Bucky is still sniffling
and making soft whining sounds every few seconds. When he looks over and sees Steve, he scowls
and crosses his arms over his chest.

“I TOLD him not ta’—”

“I know you did, little boy, and that’s one of a few things you and I are going to have a chat about.
Ajay called me because he knows the rules in our house. He knows that little guys aren’t supposed to
be on their own when they’re in their heads. He edges closer to the bunk beds, and sighs
fondly as Bucky abandons his outraged pose in order to hide under Tony’s blankets. After
attempting to coax Bucky out are unsuccessful, Steve shrugs and sits on the bed, right on top of the
Bucky-shaped lump. He’s still holding most of his own weight where he’s bracing his arms on the
edge of the bedframe, but it’s enough to startle the Bucky-lump into squeaking. “Oh no, Tony must
have forgotten to make his bed again. Better get these lumpy sheets down to the laundry.” Then he
gathers up the bedding, Bucky and all, and throws it over shoulder. The sheets would likely tear if
left to hold up a super-soldier for long, but as Steve had predicted, Bucky’s hands free themselves from the linens enough to grab at Steve’s sides. When his boy speaks, there’s a hint of reluctant laughter in his voice.

“Nooo, don’t needa go in the washin’ machine!” Steve ‘drops’ his bundle carefully onto a portion of the floor heavily padded with a children’s playmat and grins as Bucky emerges, disheveled and graceless.

“Oh, my little guy is in there after all, is he?” Bucky sticks his tongue out but finally awards Steve with a watery smile. It’s gutting and adorable in about equal measure. “How about we get you changed into something cozier? That shirt looks real uncomfortable, Buck.” The sweater is old and even Steve, who is hardly an expert with this kinda thing, can tell it fits Bucky all wrong, pulling at his shoulders where he’s broadest and hanging awkwardly around Bucky’s narrow waist. Not to mention that the fabric has been worn so thin that it’s practically no protection at all from the bite of the winter air.

“Don’t need. ‘m bad, and my clothes should…I’m bad.” And right there is all the information Steve needs to confirm a long-held suspicion about Bucky’s wardrobe. He crouches down to kneel next to his little.

“Well let’s start with you aren’t bad.” Bucky is gearing up to argue, Steve knows the signs, so he presses forward. “And even if you had made some kind of mistake, we do not use clothes to punish in this house, James Barnes. No matter what has happened you deserve to have clothes that fit and are comfortable and weather-appropriate. You and I are going through your closet this week and gettin’ rid of everything you got that’s like this—where the heck are you finding this stuff anyway?”

“Thrift stores. Dumpsters. Once I fought off this racoon for a scarf and—” It’s not good parenting to just silence your kid, Steve knows this. Hell, most of his time as a Big is spent trying to convince recalcitrant littles to say anything at all. None of that stops him from pressing a hand to Bucky’s mouth, horrified.

“Don’t…don’t tell me anymore. It’s all going, okay? In the garbage, or maybe a decontamination bin, or a cleansing fire of some kind. If you don’t like any of the things Tony has already gotten you that’s fine, you can pick out anything else you like. But there will be no more dumpsters or, or, racoon scarves. Christ, Buck.”

He gets his boy changed into the softest pair of pyjamas he can find. He thinks they might be from Bruce, because they follow the same food-theme as the watermelon footy PJs of a few weeks ago, except this set has dancing vegetables all over them. Despite his muttered protests, the second Bucky is swathed in the fleecy fabric he wiggles and turns and finds every excuse to force the pajamas to rub up against his skin. Steve takes advantage of his distraction to carry him to the rocking chair that made its way here from the Tower. Even with how oversized the thing is two super-soldiers are a tight fit, but really that’s just a great excuse to hold Bucky tighter anyway. His breath is hot against Steve’s neck, head pillowed on his shoulder, and how had he not realized before now how badly he needed this? How had he managed to forget that his role as a caretaker fulfills as many of Steve’s own deep-seeded needs as it does those of his littles?

“Alright little boy. We’re all warm and cosy. Think you can talk to me about what happened today?”

“The trials, Asgard…I can’t protect anyone I love anymore. I can’t…I just watch, and wait, and I hate this, Steve! I hate it!” Bucky’s grip turns tight, bordering on violent. His fingers press into Steve’s skin, his nails clawing scratches that would definitely be bleeding if Steve didn’t have the serum. But none of that really even registers in comparison to hearing Bucky tell him he loves him.
It’s not that Steve doesn’t know, of course he does. But for all of the work the team has put into working on their communication, it’s still a word that’s rare for most of them to actually vocalize. Usually it’s fine that they show each other by actions, like how Natasha makes hot chocolate and Tony builds enhancements to their gear. Every once in a while, though, it feels pretty swell to hear it aloud.

“I love you too, ya know.” Bucky’s grip loosens again as his eyes find Steve’s, and they exchange what can only be called dopey grins for several glorious seconds. Not wanting to give Bucky time to work himself back up again, though, Steve presses forward. “I can only imagine how hard this last week has been on you, and I’m sorry I didn’t check in more. But I’m incredibly proud of you Buck. You reached out to Ajay, and you let yourself go into your headspace when you needed it. I think you’ve earned one of the rewards on your chart.”

They’ve adapted a version of Tony’s sticker chart for little Bucky’s use as well; he’d been resistant at first, but both the boys struggled with accepting praise and positive reinforcement, so the team had been pretty insistent. Plus they’d shamelessly used Bucky’s affection for his little brother; Tony had begged and pleaded, and said he’d already come up with some joint rewards he wanted to share with his brother. Bucky had never had a chance, really.

“But..but punishment? Broke rule?” And that…well, that’s true. This was the first time either of the boys had tried to conceal being in their headspace from the team, and Steve can’t exactly just let that go. He hums in consideration, rubbing gentle circles into Bucky’s back so he doesn’t interpret the silence poorly.

“You did. Now, making one bad decision doesn’t cancel out the good, so you’re still getting that reward. But you’re right that there need to be consequences. The big rules are there to keep us all safe and happy, and we can’t keep you safe if you hide things like that from us. So here’s what we’re gonna do. For the next 48 hours, you’re not to leave my sight.” Bucky blinks owlishly, all the inscrutability of his Big-self’s expressions absent while he visibly tries to work out how this could possibly be a punishment. “It’ll be harder than you might think, Buck. If you want to work out, or read, or watch TV, you’ll need to ask me and we’ll do it together instead of you just going off on your own. I think it’ll help you remember that when you’re little there are other people in charge, people who want to help you and care for you.”

He still doesn’t really get it yet, Steve knows, but that doesn’t make the moment when Bucky nods and sweetly lays his head back down on Steve’s shoulder any less perfect.

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Clint…well, wakes isn’t the right word, because he’s not really sleeping, but he comes back to a fuller kind of consciousness when a warm cloth begins to rub against his abdomen. His skin still feels kind of raw, like his every nerve is exposed, and instinctively he tries to jump and move away from the touch, but Bruce places a firm hand on his chest.

“Shh, it’s alight, Clint. I’m just getting you cleaned up before this all dries and the stickiness goes from hot to downright unpleasant, okay?” Next to Clint, Phil stirs and then sits up so fast it makes the bed tip in his direction.

“I can help.” His voice, Clint notes in a kind of distant amazement, is slurred. Phil never sounds anything less than fully present and aware; even when he’s drunk, or has just woken up, or has been awake for 27 hours, Phil Coulson always sounds exactly the same. Clint’s sex-drunk brain can’t quite put together a guess at the significance of this development, but he’s pretty sure it means something.

“Lie back down. Right now.” Bruce hasn’t stopped his gentle, methodical cleaning of Clint’s torso,
but that doesn’t leave the impression that his attention is at all divided or his conviction any less firm. He’s regarding Coulson with a steadiness that’s about as far from possible from the bumbling, shy scientist Clint had once thought him to be. Phil stares back, and then (because Clint’s mind isn’t blown enough already, apparently) drops his gaze. “Phil. I have him, alright? I promise I’ll take good care of Clint. It’s okay for you to just focus on yourself right now, enjoy your subspace.”

“I’m not—”

“You are. You weren’t down as far as Clint, sure, and I know subbing isn’t usually your preference. But you would agree you weren’t the dominant partner in this encounter, right? You submitted to me, followed my instructions, tried to be good for me?”

“I-I…” There is nothing but amazement, maybe even a little bit of awe, in Phil’s face; he doesn’t need to reply at all for all three of them to know what Bruce has said is true. Just like earlier Bruce’s firm expression turns gentler as he surveys Phil, and he reaches out to put his free hand on Coulson’s cheek. Phil’s eyes close and he leans into the touch, almost nuzzling at Bruce’s hand. If there was ever a moment to feel jealous Clint supposes this might be it, watching Bruce help his partner to realize and accept the fact of his unprecedented turn at submission. But all he feels right now is gratitude to Bruce for giving both of them this, leading them deftly and oh-so-capably through an experience that could easily have turned disastrous. Tears sting at his eyes, and he doesn’t even try to wipe them away.

“You’re okay. It’s going to be alright. This doesn’t have to be something we do all the time. It might not be something you ever want again. But since for today you both gave me the honour of your trust and your submission, you need to let me handle this part now, okay? Let me clean you both up and get you some food and something to drink, so that you can come up nice and slowly without any drop, okay? Can you let me do that for you?”

“Yes Sir.” It takes Bruce a moment to register Phil’s use of the honorific, and then the softness leaves his expression just as quickly as it had come, leaving behind nothing but a naked hunger so ferocious that just witnessing it makes Clint’s spent cock twitch against his thigh.

Yeah, they’re definitely going to try this again.

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Despite how enjoyable it’s been to lavish attention and praise and affection on Bucky for a day, Steve joins the rest of his team for dinner with a heavy feeling of dread he can’t quite shake. The dinnertime deadline for Tony and Thor’s return had been guesswork, they all knew that, but their empty chairs still serve as a sad and anxious reminder. To make matters worse, Bucky insists on sitting next to Tony’s empty spot and putting plates down for his brother and Thor ‘just in case,’ which damn near splits Steve’s heart in two.

Steve distracts them both at least somewhat by feeding the boy. It wasn’t usually something they did with Bucky, who already looks at his child-friendly dishes and cutlery with the same confused air that Steve himself gets when Bruce and Tony go off on science-rants. But he’s pushing his boy today, just a little, and it’s been paying off thus far. So he holds a fork full of fish and rice up to his little, and smiles encouragingly when Bucky frowns.

“It’s alright, Bucky. Just open up for me, and if you don’t like it we can stop, alright?” Bucky clears more than half his plate this way, and even permits Bruce to feed him ice cream (though not his favourite peanut butter swirl, because he’s saving it to have with his brother.)

By silent agreement they trickle into the living room and put on a movie they’ve all seen probably a dozen times before; no one says much, but it comforts Steve as it always does to be surrounded by
the people he loves. The sun slowly sets, cloaking the room in darkness, and he’s considering when to try to get Bucky off to bed so he can check on Jane and Loki once more when a booming noise sounds from around the back of the house. Hope surges in Steve’s gut, though he does as he’s supposed to when he’s the one in primary charge of a little and remains in the mansion while the rest of the team takes off for the yard at a run.

When they return, Steve’s heart nearly stops in his chest, because Thor is carrying Tony, who is completely unconscious in his arms. But the demigod is also beaming, bright and more golden than the sun. His body and the air of confidence that surrounds him fill the room the same way they do immediately after a battle, and Steve feels himself calm even as Bucky whimpers and fights harder against Steve’s grip on his waist.

“Your brother is most fine, Youngling. He warned me this may happen; most of Extremis’s functions were not active on Asgard, and combined with a lack of proper rest, he felt his re-entrance into Midgard and the sudden re-integration of Extremis might cause him to, err, I believe he said ‘power down’ temporarily. He expected to awaken within a few hours.”

“Mission status?” Coulson asks, and thank god someone knows how to stay focused in moments like this, because Steve can barely think through the haze of relief and hope and love (alivealivealive) that fills him as he looks at his partners and teammates. Even in sleep Tony curls into Thor’s chest, making a quiet protesting noise when he is held out to Steve. But once the transfer is made, and Tony’s head rests above Steve’s heart like usual, he sinks right back down into that bone-deep slumber. Bucky reaches out to grip his brother’s foot, as if he’s reassuring himself his brother is truly there, then lets out a breath so long it sounds like he’s been holding it all day. Steve stares fondly at both of his boys, unfathomably grateful that he gets to have them like this.

With his arms now free, Thor opens the duffle bag Steve had packed and retrieve a thick, heavy leather-bound volume and places it on the coffee table.

“I believe it is time we called the Sorcerer.”

Chapter End Notes

They're hoooome! And I wrote some smut! (Which is hella nervewracking, holy crap.) And for those of you wondering about Natasha, she’s not forgotten. We’ll hear about what she was up to next chapter.

Thank you so much for the amazing feedback on last chapter. Your comments and kudos continue to give me life, and make writing this series a continued joy even 275,000+ words in. You're the best readers anyone could ask for.
Chapter Summary

Tony, Bucky and Loki all wish they could have stayed in bed today.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings: Bucky struggles hard with the punishment Steve set last chapter, and they have a conversation about managing punishments with Bucky's Switch status.

Loki has a magical procedure (the soul healing spell) performed on him this chapter. It saves his life, but he isn't in a position to give informed consent ahead of time. If that's a trigger for you it might be worth skipping this chapter. Over the next few chapters Loki will go on to have a rough time, but not with the healing spell. And unlike his home planet, no one will be doing anything harmful or non-consensual to or with Loki at any point.

As always, let me know if you have questions or concerns you want to discuss before reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Can’t stop won’t stop watching Cap absolutely destroy Peterson #Inhumane #AvengersFTW

@CaptainAmerica publicly and masterfully demonstrated the real value of education. As a teacher, I have never been prouder! #CriticalThinking #HigherEd #BooksNotBombs #NoOneRiver

I never understood my mom’s love for @CaptainAmerica...until the other day. Nothing but respect for #MyCaptain #SorryMom

ping -t -n 4294967295 -f -i 225 -r 3 target Tony Stark

ping -t -n 4294967295 -f -i 225 -r 3 target Tony Stark

Dummy, what have I told you about Pinging Sir. You know where he is. He simply requires...recharging. Allow him to rest.

Tony, make fun of me all you want for leaving a message like it’s 1995, but just call me back, alright? All Steve will tell me is that you’re doing deep-cover work, and as the person who witnessed the aftermath of you trying to pass yourself off as Larry Stark, Howard’s fictitious nephew, I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how alarming that thought is. It’s not...this isn’t me phoning as the CEO of SI, okay? Just call me back and tell me you’re alright.

Dear Mr. Stark,

Shall I assume that you would like the PR team to release an official statement claiming the tweet about Captain Rogers’...assets was the work of a clever hacker? Are there any specific points you
Coming to is not quite the sudden assault of information it was only a few months ago, but it’s still not what Tony would call easy. After several days of silence from Extremis, the hub in his brain is congested with information, all of which it deems of vital importance. He does his best to summon the mental dam he and Bruce have worked so long and hard on, but the data is a relentless wave, crashing up against his barriers and threatening to pull Tony under. It’s a seductive threat; Extremis wouldn’t be half as effective if some part of Tony didn’t desperately want to just immerse himself in it.

“Talk. Someone—need—” Natasha’s is perhaps the last voice he expects to answer his plea (he’d expected Steve, maybe, or Phil), but her husky tone is far from unwelcome. As is the way she goes about trying to distract him.

“Yesterday I watched Bruce top Clint. Well Clint and Phil, actually, which wasn’t the plan, but it ended up being desperately hot to witness.” Eager to help, Extremis offers Tony the feed (he doesn’t usually record the bedrooms, that must be how Natasha watched the scene), but he adds a plank to the dam. He doesn’t want the footage. He wants to hear it from Nat, wants to be here with her even if it means accessing the information slower and less directly.

“You—why, just watched?”

“I wasn’t sure…it’s been a long time since I’ve been with anyone but some permutation of the two of them. And it’s been even longer since I’ve seen Clint really go down for someone. Since Loki he hasn’t…anyway. I’ve been informed that I can be a bit protective of Clint when he’s in other people’s hands, and I didn’t want to end up challenging Bruce and either ruining their scene or triggering a Hulk-out.”

“Think next time maybe you’ll—oww, fuck, ow.” Two small hands are suddenly on either side of Tony’s head. Natasha gently manipulates his ears, first, something he’s only ever had masseurs bother with (had she trained in massage therapy for SHIELD, maybe?)

“Shh, you’re alright. Nice big breath in for me, Tony.” When he does as she’s instructed, she moves down to the juncture where shoulder meets neck, rubbing in gentle circles that become more insistent as she works her way upward. “Good. That’s good, stay relaxed. Stay with me. And yes, to answer your question, I might join them next time. Besides having witnessed how competent Bruce is for myself, nothing could have been a bigger vote of confidence than watching Phil end up going down for him when he didn’t even intend to do it. I’ve never seen Coulson sub for anyone.” Her index fingers begin tracing a path that starts on either side of the bridge of his nose, tracing across his brow bone and ending at his temples. The combination of that and picturing the scene Natasha has just described is fucking heaven, and the tension bleeds from Tony’s neck and shoulders, the waves of data in his mind slowing slightly. When his grasp on Extremis is strong enough that he feels confident opening his eyes, he peers up to find Natasha smiling crookedly down at him.

“Thor said you were magnificent.” He tries to shake his head, because Thor is Thor and he probably made it out to sound like something out of a heroic quest. Natasha simply increases the pressure on his temples. “No one else could have done what you did, Tony. Some of us could have played one
part or the other, sure. But no one else could have gone toe-to-toe with Odin, played on his greed and his lust for power without ever stepping over the line and triggering a war Earth couldn’t possibly have won, only to turn around and be so soft and sweet for Frigga. I want you to really hear me say that, Tony, and repeat it back to me.” Ugh. Bruce’s active listening bullshit is infecting even Natasha now, this is nightmare, this is—“Now.”

“Only…only I could have done this.”

“Again.”

“Natasha!”

“Again. Like you mean it, Stark. Or so help me you aren’t getting out of this bed.”

“Only I could have done this.” She nods, her left hand leaving his temple to card through his hair instead. She even scratches her long nails lightly against his scalp, which is easily one of Tony’s top five favourite sensations, and he groans in reply. He’d give nearly anything to stay here with her fingers in his hair and her voice in his ear, but—“Loki. Is Strange, did you guys—”

“We called him. Wong said he should be here within the next couple of hours.”

“Tell him to meet us at the Tower instead.” He wants to leave the mansion even less than he wants to get up. The house has somehow gone from a painful reminder of all that went wrong with Tony’s childhood to a symbol of all the things a home is supposed to be: love and comfort and intimacy. But the Tower is better equipped, both for the immediate necessity of saving Loki’s life and for the unknown future that will follow. So Tony rises slowly to his feet, and Natasha allows it, though she braces him with one arm as he finds his balance.

“Tell me what to do.”

****

Steve wakes out of the first truly deep sleep he’s had in days far more abruptly than he would have liked, as a heavy, wiggling body comes perilously close to kneeing him in the groin.

“Oof!”

There’s a mumble that sounds faintly like an apology, but Bucky’s contrition is not enough to even slow him down. The boy finally succeeds in levering one leg above and over Steve (this time nearly catching him in the nose with a knee), a change in position that results in Bucky dangling halfway off the edge of the bed, unaware or uncaring of the fact that one wrong move will land him face-first on the floor. It never becomes less incredible to Steve, these moments where the very material effect of headspace is so clear. Both the Winter Soldier and James Barnes (with the aid of the intensive physical therapy he’d needed after resurfacing) have incredible control over nearly every aspect of their bodies. As a sniper, Bucky had learned to be still and silent, to regulate even the slightest movements or sounds. HYDRA had built on what had already been there, honing Bucky’s natural grace and control and turning him into a body simultaneously powerful and seemingly without substance. To this day, he is the only one who can consistently sneak up on Natasha.

In headspace, though, Bucky is clumsy and accident-prone. No one is entirely clear if it’s because the boy couldn’t maintain the same focus on his body that his adult self did, or whether little-Bucky is just too impatient to be bothered with ‘boring’ things like trying to stay upright. The effect on his caretakers is often an odd mix of amusement and alarm, and this morning is no different. Even if it results in the odd bump or bruise here and there, Steve can’t help but be grateful that Bucky has an outlet that allows him to let go like this.
Well, mostly grateful, he mentally qualifies as he catches his boy by one ankle and tugs him, protesting all the way, to the centre of the bed.

“Where do you think you’re going, exactly?”

“TONY!” Right. Steve probably should have guessed that one. “Leggo!”

While he would probably have made Bucky ask politely, Steve would normally have let him run off to wherever he wanted to be at this point. He was an older little than Tony, and while they never permitted any of the boys to be alone in their headspaces, they did tend to give Bucky a bit more space and independence to run between rooms or abandon the company of one caretaker for another as he chose. The latter they had actively encouraged, in fact, given that it had taken Bucky so long at the beginning to reach out to any of the Bigs except Steve.

But today was not a regular day, and even though he knew he was about to make himself wildly unpopular, Steve intended to begin as he meant to go on.

“Buck, you’re not to be out of my sight right now. That means you don’t get to just take off.” Bucky stops wriggling and gapes at him, coming to grips for the first time since Steve had set the punishment with what it actually means.

“But…but…” Apparently there are no words for this injustice, so Steve takes the opportunity to press a kiss to his boy’s forehead.

“I know it’s tough my little star. I know. And it’s not forever, just for a coupla days, to help you remember that it’s okay to need things and ask for things from your caretakers.” Bucky blinks in open confusion at the nickname, and Steve gestures with a smile to his metal arm. The idea had come from You, actually, who so many months ago had made a painting of the star on Bucky’s arm and single-handedly (err, armedly) turned that image into something positive for Bucky. So positive, in fact, that Bucky had asked for the star to make an appearance on the new arm Tony had fabricated for him.

“Yes please. Wanna—your star. I like that.” Bucky confesses his pleasure shyly, avoiding Steve’s gaze and blush, which is gutting but not enough to make those whispered words anything but beautiful to Steve. He gathers Bucky up in his arms and hugs him, tighter than he would dare hug Tony or anyone else who didn’t have super-soldier serum in their veins.

“My sweet boy. My little star. Thank you for telling me that.” The moment lasts just over five seconds. Then Bucky bellows,

“TONY!” right into Steve’s ear.

****

For all the work that actually retrieving the book had entailed, it feels as if the spell Strange needs to use should be similarly complex. Tony prepares himself and the team on the journey back to the Tower for an hours-long procedure. Strange might need to take breaks, he tells them; he may need to eject them all from the room if some portions of the procedure are too difficult to witness. He may even have to stretch the healing out over several days so as not to overwhelm Loki’s system.

But Stephen Strange (or, as Tony has taken to calling him in his head, Troll Supreme) takes about two minutes to review the book. He then spends several minutes practicing a gesture that looks like an odd mash-up of a punch and an upward flick; the combination, Tony reflects aloud, appears as if someone is really aggressively turning on a light switch. Strange rolls his eyes, but then makes a thoughtful kind of humming noise and peers back at the text.
“I suppose in the most pedestrian sense that’s what this spell accomplishes, yes. The human soul is not like a regular organ that just fulfills its specific function. At its most basic, the soul is energy. When it is corrupted or wounded, that energy becomes malicious. It attacks the body, the mind, everything that makes a person human. It consumes it all, until there is nothing left. When the soul is whole…well, let’s just say I believe it to be no coincidence yours once had a particular affinity with the arc reactor. Regardless of whether or not that device represented and literally helped contain a wound, it is also the only form of power I have seen come close to matching soul energy.”

Before Tony can really take in the fact that Stephen Strange might actually be complimenting him (if he chooses to take the comparison between the soul and arc reactor tech as a compliment, which coming from a sorcerer it probably is, even though all this talk of souls still freaks Tony the hell out), the guy mutters a few times in something that sounds like Latin, nods and then turns to Thor.

“I am ready.”

Loki, it transpires, won’t be screaming or in pain, because the first step of the procedure is that Strange puts him into some kind of enchanted sleep.

“It is far easier. To be awake when soul damage is inflicted or healed…well, it would be a shame for him to have made it this far only to go insane during our attempts to reverse the damage.” Strange’s explanation is offered with all the empathy of a stone, but no one wastes energy getting upset; the most that anyone manages is a ‘no kidding’ that probably comes from Clint’s direction. But it’s a definite relief to not have to look into Loki’s eyes as it happens.

After all that build up, all that anticipation, the spell takes less than five minutes to perform. This isn’t to say that it appears easy. Perfectly coiffed Strange is sweating two minutes in, wrestling with an invisible force that clearly plans on putting up a fight before it is ejected from Loki’s system. Sometimes Tony thinks he can actually see hints of it; about three minutes in he could swear he catches a hint of something purple coiled around Strange’s hand. It’s faint, sort of like seeing something out of his peripheral vision even though he’s staring at the scene straight on, and when Tony blinks it’s gone. (Probably just his eyes filling in what they expect to see based on Strange’s movements.)

Next to him, Thor maintains a white-knuckled grip on mjolnir. The previous clear skies roll ominously with thunder.

“Uh, we might want to consider getting Thor outta here—” Loki jerks once, twice. The third and last convulsion coincides with a flash of sheet lightning that illuminates the entire penthouse. Bruce rises to his feet and begins to strip off his clothes, preparing to welcome the Hulk who is the only one of them who can reliably take Thor down.

“There is…no need for the…floor show, Doctor Banner,” Strange interrupts, breathing harshly and bent double at the waist. “It is done.”

****

“Steve, this stopped being funny like four hours ago. Just leave me the hell alone.” Bucky is running one of the training modules that Phil had set up for him—or at least he’s trying to. Now, to be fair to Steve it's not like the guy is actively interrupting Bucky’s workout or something. Short of ensuring that Bucky stops for water and a power bar every once in a while Steve has been perfectly happy to sit his ass in the corner, hunched silently over a sketchbook. There’s something even kind of meditative about Stevie when he gets in the zone like this; a guy like Bucky, used to observing details, could make a meal on the ritualistic manner in which he handles his pencils alone (the ones in active use in a cup next to him, the others carefully slotted into their proper place a shiny metal case.)
So no, Steve’s not being intrusive through any particular behaviour, more just in the fact of him being here at all. To make matters worse, he takes his time finishing up a section of the drawing, blowing the bits of wood shavings and lead off the page before finally standing and surveying Bucky with that annoying, endless calm. (Sometimes he misses the way little Stevie Rogers had always flown off the handle. It had been stupid and imminently impractical, sure, but predictable.)

“I don’t recall saying I’d be with you for 48 hours only if you were little.” The intensity of Bucky’s frustration only rises, and he debates practicing some of the knife throwing techniques Natasha had taught him on his friend. He’s so busy deciding which blade to use that he doesn’t realize Steve has moved until a heavy kettle-ball is pressed into his hands. He immediately launches it as hard as he can at Steve, who picks it out of the air like it weighs nothing despite the fact that Tony had heavily reinforced these ones to account for Steve and Bucky’s strength. During recovery, they’d been the damn bane of his existence. “Keep huckin’ it like that and you’re going to throw your back out.” Steve walks the damn ball back across the gym, placing it on the floor in front of Bucky this time, and then presses a hand on his lower back, guiding him into a deep squat. “Good. Three sets, alternating single-arm swings, while we talk, alright? Exercise sometimes helps keep you steady when you’re upset. Or is that gonna be too much for you?” The taunt has the exact effect Steve intends, damn him, and before Bucky knows it he’s lifting the ball with his right arm and swinging it back between his legs.

“I could do this all day.” Steve smiles, that goofy-ass grin reserved specifically for when Bucky references their shared past, all the while making gentle corrections to Bucky’s form.

“I think all of us, including me, are still figuring out what it means to care for you as a Switch. Both sides of you are equally wonderful and important, and I would never want to make you feel like any of us are pushing you toward one role more than the other. That’s not what this is, alright?”

“And yet,” Bucky huffs as he swings his hips forward, propelling the ball out in front of him, “I’m being babysat.”

“You’re relying too much on your arms. Remember what Ella said—this is a core workout as much as anything else. And you are not being babysat. But I set a punishment, Buck, and I worry that if I end it now just because your headspace has shifted that it might set a pattern and you’ll start prematurely forcing yourself to be Big to get out of facing consequences when you’re little. Can you honestly tell me that’s not a risk here? I grew up with you, mind, I’ve seen the lengths you’ve gone to slither outta fessin’ up. And…and I know HYDRA probably made that so much worse.” Steve rarely brings up Bucky’s time as the Soldier, preferring to let Bucky take the lead, and the shock of it is enough to offset the burst of instinctive rage that shoots through him from head to toe. “We don’t, I’m not tryn’a…all I’m saying is that I know they gave you real cause to fear making mistakes or doing anything they perceived as wrong. And I just don’t want you forcin’ that little boy out because some part of you is worried the same thing might happen to him. That’s all.”

For several long minutes, Bucky completes the sets Steve had called for in silence. Then he switches to an alternating swing, passing the ball from hand to hand right at the top. Other than reminding Bucky to exhale into the swing, Steve says nothing more, permitting Bucky the time he needs to sort through the thorny mess in his head. His damn brain isn’t particularly cooperative, though, and even if the docs say it’s not his fault, another fuckin’ souvenir HYDRA left behind, it’s no less infuriating for all that. He doesn’t know how long he’s been thinking, swinging the kettle ball the entire time, until Steve leans over and gently takes it out of his hand—which are shaking, just like his arms.

“I don’t…I’m still capable, Stevie. ‘m not broken.” It comes out more like a question than Bucky intends, and he stays in the squatted position he’d been in, letting his head hang so he doesn’t have to look his friend in the eye.
“Of course you are. Buck, of course you are. You are one of the strongest and most capable fellas I know, always have been.”

“Then why—why can’t I fix all this shit? Why…Tony, and you, everyone, I want, I gotta do something.”

“You are,” Steve soothes, spreading his palms across Bucky’s trembling thighs and pressing until he collapses the rest of the way to the floor. Steve quickly follows, seating himself behind Bucky and wrapping his arms around his waist. The hold is a mix of a brace and a restraint; it’s perfect. “I get it, alright? When we saw somethin’ wrong in our time, we took action. It was fast and it was usually over quick and we got to talk away feeling accomplished and proud. But the world is so much bigger and more complicated than that now, Buck. You are doing things that directly benefit everyone in this Tower. You’re getting your mind and your body well. You stood up in front of the entire world and told them what HYDRA made you do, took ownership and responsibility for things that weren’t even your fault. You’re training with Phil to join the team. You’re doing a helluva lot, Buck. But you can’t do everything. You all taught me that, with everything that’s gone on with the Accords. And now I’m reminding you. You can’t do everything, can’t protect everyone. And sometimes you gotta let us protect you.”

Steve’s grip at his waist tightens, and the tears that start to sting Bucky’s eyes are the only warning he gets that his headspace is far closer to the surface than he’d realized. (Dammit, Stevie, you gotta be right about everything?) Suddenly nothing else matters—not even the fact that Tony is upstairs with Thor and Jane, waiting on a volatile and unstable demigod to wake. All that matters is that Bucky set things right.

“Sorry Daddy. ‘m sorry, ‘m sorry, I shouldn’t have tried to hide that I was little. Won’t do it again, promise. ‘m I still your little star?” Steve makes a surprised, almost hurt kind of a noise, and then spins Bucky around so they’re facing one another and tugs him into his lap.

“Oh Buck. Aww buddy. Of course you’re my perfect little star. Of course you are. Shh shh shh, Daddy’s got you.”

****

Strange had estimated a twelve hour period of unconsciousness following the spell. Whatever else Loki might be now, he is still clearly Tony’s ally against Dr. Douchebag, because he wakes after only ten.

Despite having tried to prepare for just about anything, Tony is still not quite fast enough to prevent the chaos that follows. Loki takes one look at himself—at the IV lines Jane had been forced to insert to keep him hydrated toward the end, at the thick diaper that he’d already wet in his sleep, and the overlarge shirt of Thor’s that’s on top of it—and he jerks out of bed and to his feet. Or he tries to. Either from atrophy of the muscles or residual damage from the soul magic (Strange had warned that some of the secondary effects might not be erased when the soul damage was healed), he immediately loses his balance and hits the floor before any of the three of them can get to him. Then he bursts into tears.

It’s a hideous re-creation of Loki’s last wake-up in the Tower. Except that this time, the man sobs only for a moment or two, then stops just as abruptly, looking mortified and confused by his own outburst. Though it’s plainly a struggle for him, Thor is following Jane and Tony’s multiple reminders to take things slowly. He crosses the room and kneels down in front of his brother, holding out a hand. Ignoring the implied offer, Loki makes several more attempts to get to his feet under his own power. None are quite as disastrous as the first, but he’s still forced to concede and accept his brother’s assistance. Eventually, after some careful and mostly silent negotiation (Jane pushes the
pole from which the IV bags hang while Tony impatiently pushes small tables and other obstacles out of their way), the four of them all make their way onto the penthouse couch.

“How fare you, brother? I know you must have many questions, and we will endeavour to answer all of them. I know not what you remember of these past months—”

“I remember it all.” Loki’s voice is a harsh, rasping thing, painful to hear. Thor bows his head.

“Then I am sure that in addition to questions you must have much anger, Loki, and fear. Friend Tony…what was done to him was certainly not done with the same malice of spirit, but he does know something of what it is to make this sudden—err, transition. We are all here to help you, and...”

“You wish to help me, brother? Get out.”

Chapter End Notes

Somehow (like always with my writing) it took several thousand words longer than I had planned, but Loki's awake! Shit's getting real, team!

Thank you all again for your amazing kudos and feedback on this story. It means so much, and I'd love to keep hearing what you're enjoying, what you're hoping to see, anything at all, really!
Steve studies for his finals and wraps up a few loose ends. Loki struggles to heal and imagine what might come next.

Other than the fact that Loki obviously has some lingering traumas (physical, emotional, etc.), I don't think there are any additional content warnings for this chapter. As always, if you disagree or have any questions/concerns, don't hesitate to ask!

“Thank you for making the time to meet with me today, Steve. I know life has been…rather hectic since the last time I saw you.” Today is the first time Steve has seen Dr. Dolan in anything but a perfectly tailored suit jacket and skirt; somehow, though, the effect of her jeans, button down and sweater-vest are no less intimidating. (She was kind of like Pepper that way, he mused. Both women used clothes as strategically as Clint used his bow or Bucky his guns, but they also didn’t need those ‘extras’ to walk out of a situation with exactly what they’d gone in aiming for.)

“I assume you mean finals, and yes they are definitely going to crush my spirit. Who holds exams on a Saturday?” Dr. Dolan suddenly goes from standing, looming over her desk in search of something, to taking a stiff and overly formal seat on her armchair. He realizes what’s coming just a second before it does, but it doesn’t make the effect any less humiliating or hilarious.

“So. You have a test.” Her approximation of his stage-voice from those horrible PSAs is disturbingly accurate.

“Oh god please don’t tell me they screen any of those at the college level—”

“You worked hard all year, and now it’s time to prove it.”

“Dr. Dolan stooodddd.” She seems tempted to keep going, but the urge to laugh eventually wins out. Her full-bodied laugh, complete with a couple of snort-like nosies that he will later promise her he never heard, is horribly charming. Enough so that he almost forgets that she must have called him here for a reason, especially since it isn’t exactly her regular business hours.

“I wanted to touch base with you sooner after the hearings, but I didn’t want anything to seem too suspicious. I am, however, truly sorry that your first paper ended up being released in such a public venue. That was an absolute violation of University Policy, and you would be well within your rights to ask for a formal sanction or other disciplinary measures.” Dr. Dolan, Steve has learned over the course of the semester, takes policy seriously. She’d kicked people out of her lectures on more than one occasion for everything from texting to saying inappropriate things during large-group discussions. She’d been firm about deadlines, and reminded everyone constantly that if they willfully attempted to plagiarize or cheat in any form, she would fully support any punitive measures the
University wished to take. She tempered that harshness with a willingness to support students who truly wanted to learn in basically any way she could, but that didn’t mean the irony of having his privacy so grossly violated hadn’t struck him a few times during the course of the hearings.

And she did sound sincerely sorry. It was just a shame for her act that in this case, for once, Steve happened to have more information than she thought, rather than less.

“Y’know, I double-checked with JAR—a friend familiar with Tony Stark’s…shall we say technological overreaching? After the hearings, I asked if Tony had gone through and fortified the security of all university-based digital security. He had; the man is utterly predictable, though if he ever finds out I told you that, then I’ll definitely be asking for sanctions. Because man can he pout.”

“You’re wandering, Steve.”

“I suppose I am. The point is, if Tony Stark had recently secured your firewalls, there was no way some low-level staffer for Peterson broke through. Absolutely no way. Which means you wanted it to be found.” For a civilian, she did an impressive job of trying to keep her expression void of any reaction at all. But Steve was no longer as unfamiliar with deception as he once had been, and compared to professionals like Natasha, it was almost laughably easy to confirm he was right. “Now, at first I went through a whole outraged betrayal phase. Phil had to talk me down from storming in here and giving what I’m told was a pretty impressive speech about integrity and the right to make mistakes and the role of professors in correcting those errors with compassion rather than scorn.”

“Sounds like a good speech.”

“It really was. Clint thinks I should start blogging. Anyway, about three hours in I realized that if you had really wanted to embarrass me publicly, tanking the hearings in the process, you wouldn’t have stopped me at my first draft. You had every opportunity to let me keep going as I was, to build up the worst and most simplistic of the ideas I had rather than tearing them down and making them into something better.”

“Maybe I’m playing a long game but I’m just really really bad at it?” Dr. Dolan offers.

“Or you put the first draft, and only the first draft, somewhere deliberately unsecured, somewhere you knew they would find it. Maybe you even sent it yourself form some kind of untraceable address; Peterson’s crew isn’t the brightest so you might have needed to wave it directly in front of their faces like that and spell out exactly what it was in order to get them to pay attention. Whatever the exact method, you handed them just enough to convince them it would bury me, while actually giving me a chance to show off all my shiny new critical thinking skills.”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you mean, Captain Rogers. As I said, it was a regrettable violation of student privacy, nothing more.” The small smile she breaks her veneer of professionalism to give Steve is the only confirmation he’ll get, and the only one he really needs, to know that he’s right. He says nothing else beyond wishing her a pleasant break, though as he joins Bucky (who at least had been transparent in his stalking of Steve today) at the campus gates, he makes a mental promise to have SHIELD or Tony or someone check that the college and Dr. Dolan specifically aren’t facing any undue pressure from politicians. He’s not willing to be the poster-child for much these days, but he’ll come out swinging for public education if he has to.

“What’s a sonnet?” Bucky greets him with a note-card. The team has been endearingly over the top the last few days in their attempts to help Steve cram for his finals. It’s not unusual for him to be quizzed over breakfast, or when he’s just gotten out of the shower, or from the vents above his bedroom (Clint, of course.)
“Uh…14 line poem using a formal rhyme scheme.”

“And the difference between English and Italian?”

“Italian is an octet and sestet while an English is…damn it I know this. Oh! It’s three quatrains and one couplet.”

“Gold star to little Stevie Rogers with the newspaper in his shoes.” They exchange a smile so long and sweet that for a heartbeat or so Steve thinks Bucky may end up leaning in for a kiss despite them being on the streets with plenty of daylight left. But instead Bucky presses his lips against Steve’s ear and whispers, quietly and seductively,

“What’s the unit for measuring poetry?”

“I’m going to push you into traffic,” Steve announces, rolling his eyes and shoving Bucky off of him and into a nearby bush while the other man howls with laughter.

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“Whoever made these *swina bqlir* contraptions deserves to have their eyes roasted long over the eternal—” thud “flame” thudthud “of Aderbain.” Tony has had many a poor entrance into rooms before (mostly due to his own drunken errors in judgement), but having a crumpled-up disposable diaper (please have been dry please have been dry) sail just inches from his head is among the worst. And it’s definitely enough to temper any amusement he might have had at Loki’s otherworldly cursing.

He finds the man in question lying on the floor of his and Thor’s apartments. He’s naked from the waist down, and sporting what looks like a nasty case of diaper rash that has spread from his buttocks to his thighs. All manner of diapering equipment is scattered across the floor next to him, but Loki currently appears to be foregoing another attempt at addressing his current condition in favour of banging his head against the floor. It’s tempting to act as the team would for Tony in just such a situation, starting with forbidding even a small act of self-harm like that, but he knows damn well if he pushes Loki too far too fast the situation will only deteriorate further.

“Is it the tapes? They drive Nat crazy too; half the time she catches her nail on one of them and rips it right off.” Loki glares, clearly considering whether Tony will be a worthy object to re-direct his anger and frustration onto. At this point, Tony would almost welcome it; after a few moments consideration, though, the other man sighs and flops backward

“Yes, the thrice-damned adhesives are frustrating, but is is the entire garment. They never sit correctly and half the time they leak or become overly loose or—or warped, somehow.”

“I know Jane knows how to deal with them, how come you didn’t ask her?”

“A very good question!” Jane calls from the kitchen, her frustration clear in her tone. Loki rolls his eyes, but Tony crosses his arms and does his best impression of disapproving Steve (his own little self’s worst nightmare).

“Loki, we had an agreement.”

“Jane, you wanna go after Point Break and make sure he doesn’t try to convince Clint to teach him how to sneak back in through the vents? Those broad shoulders of his, he’d probably end up getting stuck, or his hair would tangle, it’d be a logistical nightmare getting him out.” Jane’s tiny hands found her hips, a posture Tony had privately taken to calling the Foster Power Pose, and she’d narrowed her eyes.
“Tony, I know you think you need to handle everything alone—”

“It’s not that. Really,” he’d insisted as his skeptical expression only deepened. “Look, I just…Loki saw things about me within seconds of meeting me, things it took even me ages to work out. We have an…understanding. And right now I think he needs that connection more than a familial one. Not forever, just for right now.”

“I’ll be back in exactly two hours. If you try to convince me otherwise, or use JARVIS to forbid me access, it’ll be the last time I leave the two of you alone. Understand?”

He’d agreed, mostly because he’d been genuine in his recognition that there was no way he could take on all of Loki’s issues himself. Also because Jane’s size had absolutely no effect on her scariness. Seriously, Tony would take on either of the super soldiers before messing with Jane on a bad day.

As soon as she’d exited Thor’s floor, Loki had deflated. The anger and annoyance that had been propping him up and giving him strength had rapidly extinguished. He’d wrapped his arms around himself in a semblance of a self-hug, drawing in a long, shuddering breath. Tony had been silent at first, giving Loki the space to start their conversation on whatever terms he might choose, but it became clear after several minutes that Loki had no sense of how or where to begin. So Tony started with the material concerns, the ones with relatively simple answers.

“You want something to eat or drink? The IV and the feeding tube ensured you had all the nutrients you needed to survive, but they’re not the same.”

“Is there anymore of the red soup Clint made? With the…the pasta and meat?” Loki’s voice sounded raw and painful, but it was the most coherent the man had sounded since his abrupt return to Earth. Tony had been so busy feeling relieved by that that it took several seconds for the content of what Loki had actually said to register.

“The red…oh! The hamburger soup! Yeah, he made a big batch and froze a bunch of it. I’m going to get you some water. I’d like you to drink it for me, slowly, while I have someone bring down some soup from the penthouse.” Loki had made a hell of a face when he’d been presented with a sippy-cup, but Tony had been firm and no-nonsense. “Your muscles have almost all experienced varying degrees of atrophy from disuse, and Strange also said some of the physical damage from the magic might stick around for a while. Until we figure out the extent of all of that, we’re taking things slowly and carefully.”

The lidded cup was definitely a good call, Tony had realized after only a few seconds of watching Loki’s arms shake holding up the light piece of plastic.

“I’m probably going to need to feed you” he’d said, trying for that same neutral tone as he re-entered the living room with a steaming bowl of soup. His own stomach rumbled in reply to the smell, though not because he was particularly hungry. It was just a reflexive response to Clint’s cooking, which was always the best. “That gonna be okay?”

“It shall have to be,” Loki had conceded, letting the sippy cup fall to the floor with a disgruntled sigh. And so Tony had done just that, feeding Thor’s brother one spoonful after another of soup until he began to turn his head away. He’d changed Loki afterward, too, feeling oddly grateful for his own experience in this arena since it meant that he could perform this extremely intimate task with no outward signs of awkwardness or embarrassment. By that point Loki already appeared exhausted, so there had been no choice to dive in before the other man’s body decided to completely shut down and return to sleep.
“We both know that what you did to me was in no way identical to what was done to you. You did it without my consent, yeah, but ultimately, even while you were in the grips of what sounds like some pretty intense mind and soul control, you performed that spell from a place of kindness. And I’m not Asgardian, but I do have some sense of what a profound violation Soul Magic is. I’m sorry that happened to you, Loki.” The little version of Loki, the one Tony had grown to know and love over the past months, would already have been crying. The adult version had tilted his head high, meeting Tony’s gaze steadily with eyes only slightly brighter than normal.

“Thank you, Stark.”

“Tony, please. I can’t do this if…please.”

“Tony then.”

“All of that said… I do know something of what it is to have all of your most vulnerable sides exposed to people you have complicated, conflicting feelings about. And I want you to know that if you don’t want to stay here with us I will come down on your side. It won’t be easy, and we’ll need to pull some pretty serious strings to keep your existence here secret, but I’d do it.”

“But you don’t think I should.” It hadn’t been a question. Loki wasn’t surprised; he’d just sounded kind of… resigned. As if all of it was already a foregone conclusion, one that he had little choice but to accept.

“No, I don’t. And if and when you want to hear all my arguments in favour then you let me know. But I think right now you probably just need some time to process what happened, yeah?” And this, at last, had surprised Loki, whose hold on himself became just slightly looser.

“Yes. But I don’t, I’m so absurdly weak. It isn’t as if you can just leave me to my own devices.”

“You’ll need some help, yeah. Okay, how about we agree that Jane or I—just Jane and I for now—will be on this floor with you at all times. For the most part we’ll give you space, with the agreement that you’ll ask us when you need help with stuff like eating and changing and moving around. We’ll also use that time to draw up some plans about your physical recovery—a lot of what we were already doing is probably still going to be necessary, but we can modify it depending on how the soul healing has impacted you. But in exchange you gotta actually let us know when you need things. You’d been hurt for a long time even before this last time on Asgard, Loki. It’s going to take time to figure out your body as it is now, and that’s not weakness. It’s biology. Can you promise me that, in exchange for me keeping the rest of the team off your back for now?”

“I am aware of our agreement, St—Tony. I just…I had believed I would be much further along by now. I grow tired of these indignities. I know not how much more I can bear.”

“You’re pushing too hard, Loki,” comes Jane’s voice from the entryway. The frustration has largely emptied out of it now, and her expression is gentle and compassionate. Something in Loki responds as it always does to that side of Jane, and he stares up at her like… well, Tony tries not to think like a child, but just now there’s no other way to describe the man just now than as a child looking to a comforting maternal figure for guidance and reassurance. “Tony and I aren’t coddling you or something when we say that your injuries, combined with the mental and emotional trauma and the atrophy of many of your muscles will take time to heal.”

“She’s right,” Tony agrees. “And I think maybe it’s time we talk about some of the other ways we might make that process easier for you.” Loki keeps staring not at Tony but at Jane, who smiles encouragingly and sits down on the floor next to him, adjusting his diaper with smooth, competent movements. “If you were little at least some of the time, it might not feel so hard. You’d have people
helping not just because you’re injured, but because kids get help from their…their parents.”
Showcasing the mood swings that have become typical of his recovery, Loki goes from gazing
adoringly at Jane to batting at her hands and growling as he tries to gather the energy and muscle
coordination required to move away from them both.

“Thor is not supposed to be my parent! He is my foolhardy, war-hungry oaf of a brother whose
musculature attempts to compensate for his utter lack of common sense!” Tony helps the other man
sit up, then finds a container of his own floam that he’d brought up to help with these angry episodes.
Immediately Loki takes the little ball and begins pushing and punching at it.

“People don’t always fit into our lives the way we planned,” he opines, softening his voice and his
posture as much as he can to try to form a counterpoint to Loki’s sharp edges and simmering
frustration. “Steve…in another world, one where he didn’t steer his plane into the ocean, he might
have been an actual parental figure, or at least a really loved Uncle to me. Maybe he even coulda
made Howard into an actual father.” His voice trembles for a second just, and Jane’s sharp eyes find
his, a silent offer to take over if this becomes too much. He shakes his head, takes a long breath, and
then continues. “You didn’t get the Father you deserved either, Loki. It’s okay to be pissed about
that, and to wish that Thor had always just been able to be your stupid big brother that you played
pranks on and outsmarted at every turn. And it’s also okay to stay mad about that while also
accepting him in a different role that gives both of you something you might really need. Just like
Steve is now my…my parent and my partner and my friend.” Loki’s hands slow down their frantic
motions with the floam, and he inches back towards Jane who reaches out to run a careful hand
through his hair.

“Even if I wished…the others…things are not as they were. I am back to being the man who took
Coulson’s life, Barton’s mind and will. They could never…”

“Your mind wasn’t exactly your own either, Loki,” Jane reminds him. (And thank Christ, because
Tony has had about all the Talking he can handle just now.) Loki’s hands make a kind of kneading
motion that Jane seems to recognize after a pause, because she takes the floam away and replaces it
with Aslan, his stuffed cat. Loki stares down at the thing and then grips it tightly, more strength in his
hands than Tony has seen thus far. Absently, his little-brain wishes for Sanders. “It won’t always be
easy, because of your history and because this kind of thing just isn’t. But I know these people a lot
better than I used to. And they will put the work in if you think this even might be something you
want. And no matter what you choose, you need to let your brother see you, sæti.” The Asgardian
endearment, which JARVIS thoughtfully and silently translates for Tony via Extremis (sweetie, cutie),
draws a choking noise from Loki, who attempts to throw himself into Jane’s arms. It’s
awkward given that only half his muscles actually cooperate with the effort, but she seems more than
willing to pull him in the rest of the way.

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To: James Rhodes (warmachine@airforce.us.gov), Peter Parker (thekid@starkindustries.com),
Luke Cage (harlemhero@gmail.com), Jessica Jones (aliasinvestigations@mac.com), X-Men
(xmenjointaccount@gmail.com), Riri Williams (riri.williams@elude.com), Lunella Lafayette
(moongirl@zoho.com), Pepper Potts (virginiapotts@starkindustries.com) and 37 others…

From: Kamala Khan (kamalacan@outlook.com)

Subject: Secular Holiday Gift for the Avengers (SUPER SECRET! TONY, IF YOU ARE HACKING
ME, DON’T READ THIS! RHODEY TOLD ME ABOUT YOUR ELF ON THE SHELF
NIGHTMARES! I WILL SEND 100 OF THEM TO YOUR HOUSE!)

Hi everyone,
I have an awesome idea for a holiday/thanks-for-saving-our-collective-butts-with-the-Accords gift for the Avengers in mind. We can continue to discuss it over email like digital savages if you all prefer. OR we could finally set up an epic superhero group chat, which will not only be more efficient but also a literal dream come true for some of us (*cough*me*cough*).

Warm squeebs,
Kamala

PS: “The Kid?” Peter, really?
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Even Steve takes a break from his round-the-clock studying to attend the Family Meeting that Tony calls. And it’s not that Tony isn’t glad they all came, or that he wishes he himself weren’t there. Witnessing the incandescent joy in Thor’s expression when he sees his brother for the first time in a week, and the cautious but visible smile Loki manages in return, would have been worth the price of admission all on its own. Plus it isn’t just Thor who seems pleased to see Loki. Pretty much everybody expresses what seems to be genuine relief that the other man is recovering and choosing to spend time outside of Thor’s floor.

Tony wants to be there for that, he really does. He wants to participate in the negotiations they all need to have about how an ageplay dynamic with Loki might work; there are parts of it about how it will intersect with Loki’s ongoing treatments that only he, Jane and Bruce are capable of leading discussions on. Even the parts that don’t directly depend on him are crucial. At one point Loki asks point-blank how Clint and Phil can manage to be in the same room as him, and demands to know why they hadn’t taken advantage of his previously weakened state to do him harm. He also seeks confirmation that Jane will be present fairly often, a question that brings everyone up short. True, Tony can no longer imagine going back to Jane’s extremely infrequent visits to the Tower. She’s become so imbedded into the very infrastructure of their lives in such a short period of time that Steve appears nearly as devastated by Thor at the mere mention of her absence.

But the longer the conversation goes on, topics and moods often shifting violently—one second they’re laughing at the memory of pre-healing Loki attempting to convince Lucky to change his name to Loki II, and the next Loki is screaming at Thor about how he can’t expect to be a good parent when he won’t admit to stealing Loki’s favoured flute when they were children—the more the pure adrenaline that has been keeping Tony going since before his departure for Asgard runs out. He starts to cut in and out of awareness of the exact details of the conversation, but conceals that fact family well until Bruce asks a question about Loki’s most recent scans that is too complex and detailed for Tony to effectively bullshit his way through answering.

“Uh.”

“Uh?” Bruce echoes, bemused. Most of the others are caught up in a side conversation (Tony thinks it has something to do with who would have parental authority over Loki when he was little, since he's not yet willing to extend that to the team as whole), but both Bruce and Bucky narrow their eyes and stare at Tony with more focused intent. Shit. “Guys,” Bruce tries to interrupt, but his soft tone is immediately overwhelmed by the din.

“SHUT IT,” Bucky barks. He stands, and despite the fact that several others in the room are both taller and broader than Bucky is, he suddenly appears massive, a vengeful metal-armed presence looming over everyone. This does certainly grind conversation to a halt, which Tony’s pounding head is thankful for even if it does mean all eyes in the room are suddenly on the three of them.

“Since none of you seem to remember, Tony has been going nonstop for weeks now. Even most of his recent little time has been about getting clearance to go to Asgard. So while I take him upstairs to
rest before he falls down, I’d suggest that one of the topics on your damn agenda should probably be makin’ sure Loki’s needs don’t get met completely at the expense of your other friend and little.” With that, Tony is hoisted unceremoniously into Bucky’s arms. It would have made for quite the dramatic exit, but Bucky halts halfway out of the room and spins on his heel. “Loki I hope you know that wasn’t directed at you. I want you to get everything you need, I just…” Then Bucky trails off, because his addressee is smirking at him.

“Don’t ruin it. That was the most I’ve ever liked you, Barnes.”

It will occur to Tony later that he might have at least put up a brief show of resistance to being carted off into the night without even a token mention of his own autonomy. He’s not little right now, after all, and he doesn’t usually permit people to just haul him around when he’s not in headspace. But god the promise of bed is a tempting one, and Bucky’s outrage on his behalf (even if mostly unnecessary) somehow has the same soothing effect that gentle reassurances might from someone else.

He does, at least, manage to grumble when Bucky manhandles him out of his clothes without even asking. Tony is left lying on top of the covers in nothing but a pair of boxers, fighting the urge to just roll over and fall asleep face-first in the pillow. Which, he reminds himself sternly, he won’t do.

“‘m not…” He can’t even get his complaint out (a true first for Tony Stark), but Bucky knows him well enough by now to take what ends up being a solid guess.

“Hush, sugar. I don’t care if you’re little or Big or somewhere in between. This ain’t about that, alright? I missed you. Thought I was gonna go insane worryin’ about you and Stevie all week. You saved Loki’s life, Tony, and then you and Jane made sure he had the space and time he needed to think. Let them take it from here, and let me take you. Just for a while.”

“But this won’t…it…he…” It won’t be easy, Tony’s muddled brain is trying to explain. Loki probably still feels in a way like he’s coming to this major decision not entirely of his own volition. And he’s right; Tony had made sure the other man had all the space and room he could, but it’s not as if Loki is free to stroll out the door and pursue ageplay with a different set of partners. And his return to Asgard is almost certainly out of the question, possibly forever. Bucky hums in agreement and lifts Tony’s hips, sliding on a pair of thick flannel pyjama pants that Tony doesn’t remember buying.

“Nothin’ with us is ever simple. ‘spect we’d get bored if it was. Now go to sleep, Tony.”

“You’ll stay?” Bucky freezes for a moment with his back to Tony, but when he turns back toward the bed he’s smiling. It’s cautious, maybe even a bit shy, but he definitely doesn’t appear put off by the invite to spend the night with Tony while they’re both Big, even though they’ve never done so without Steve or someone else present. Tony lets out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

“A guy’d have to be a fool to say no to an offer like that. Course I’ll stay, babe.”

Chapter End Notes

If it feels like we're starting to near the end...well, that's sort of true. My outline keeps shifting so I don't have an exact chapter count, but we are starting to move toward wrapping things up. But this will likely be longer than part one of the series, so we still have a bit of a ways to go.
Thank you, as always, for your wonderful kudos and comments. You are kind, generous and insightful readers, and I love sharing writing with you.
Chapter Summary

At Bucky's request, he and his brother meet with Ajay. Loki attempts to make a decision about the offer Thor and the team have made him.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: Nothing major in this chapter. Bucky sets a boundary regarding Tony's use of their shared toys (which obviously is not a bad thing, but he does struggle with some guilt about it.)

Loki is having trouble processing his memories of everything that happened while he was soul-damaged. This includes brief flashbacks to the moment where he was forced into being a youngling, an allusion to his being tortured with heat while in prison on Asgard (something we've gotten hints about before), as well as a flashback to Coulson's death. If you want to skip this, just avoid the italicized section.

This isn't a warning, but just to avoid confusion: Bucky realizes as part of his conversation with Ajay that he'd like to be called James when he's in headspace. His mental address of himself after that point reflects that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s been ages since Bucky and Tony have played—just played. They’ve been little together recently, of course, but those interactions have so often had an agenda: saving Loki, or getting both of them through the immediate aftermath of the hearings, or treating the side-effects of Extremis.

That’s still kind of true today, too. Ajay is due to arrive any minute, and even though that meeting was Bucky’s idea, he’s starting to regret it now as he and his baby brother play with their favourite light-up blocks. Just a couple of minutes ago Tony had had the brilliant idea of blowing some of Bruce’s super-hard-to-pop bubbles onto their castle, and they’re both kinda mesmerized as they watch them land and change shades based on whichever illuminated block they happen to land on. Tony is babbling happily about how the blue of the current bubble looks exactly like Steve’s—Daddy’s shield. (Bucky will never quite manage a nickname as young as Dada, which is what Tony calls Steve, but his most recent time in headspace has at least allowed Bucky to get past the mental hurdle that had been referring to any of them by parental monickers. The dopey way Steve grins whenever he says it doesn’t hurt nothin’ either.)

Always punctual, JARVIS announces Ajay’s arrival at precisely one o’clock. Unable to help himself, Bucky curls himself around his brother, protecting him from the invader; Tony tenses just a little, but seems otherwise unbothered by the new presence. The therapist, Bucky sees as Ajay strides into the penthouse living room, has dressed down from his usual pressed slacks and button-down shirts. His light-washed jeans are patched at the left knee (for real patched, not the fashionable kind of tearing that Bucky does not quite understand the point of), and he’s paired it with a soft-looking
black sweater that Bucky’s fingers ache to touch. It’s an ensemble, the Soldier part of his brain rushes to inform him, designed to put Bucky and Tony at ease, to set a different tone from their sessions when they’re all adults.

Ajay has worked with Bucky much longer than he has with Tony, though, and he knows how to appease the Soldier just as effectively as he does the rest of Bucky. Hell, he might be more familiar with the Soldier than with the other facets of Bucky’s collage of a psyche, given how intensely they’d worked together when Bucky was at his worst. He stands next to Bucky and Tony, but not within touching range, and spreads his arms open wide for Bucky’s inspection. They used to do this physically, Bucky frisking the other man for weapons and recording devices and anything else the Soldier deemed suspicious. Now a visual examination tends to be enough, though given that his brother is with him Bucky devote a couple extra minutes to seeking out even the smallest visual indicators that Ajay has somehow been compromised. As usual, the guy doesn’t even have his phone in the room, per his and Bucky’s agreement.

“32557038,” Ajay rattles off next. It’s Bucky’s serial number from his time in the army, and a closely guarded national secret because the 32 (accurately) indicates that he had been drafted into service. After his ‘death’ and the canonization of Steve’s legend that had come shortly after, the powers that be had decided that Captain America’s pal having to be drafted didn’t suit their story. Instead, Bucky had retroactively received a 12 prefix, designating him as having volunteered post Pearl Harbour. (Personally, Bucky will never be ashamed of wanting to be home to keep Steve alive instead of fighting a War on another continent, but it does make for a handy confirmation of identity when necessary.)

Finally, when Bucky has performed the last of his checks (a body scan from JARVIS that announces all of Ajay’s identifying features to match those on record for Dr. Ajaypaul Nariani), he sits back on his heels, unsure of exactly how to proceed. The confirmation of Ajay’s identity had brought him up out of headspace slightly, but he has much less control over it than Tony does most days. And he’s supposed to be little, that’s half the point of today, since Tony still hasn’t been able to manage a session with Ajay while Big. It’s scary, though, to be so incredibly vulnerable in front of someone outside their immediate family. True, he’d slipped the other day and Ajay had done nothing worse than tattle on him to Steve, but now Bucky knows it’s coming, has to make the choice to allow his senses to dull, his mind to stop plotting escape routes and assassination scenarios.

Violating their usual unspoken agreement to not enter one another’s body spaces, Ajay sticks his hand out.

“Hi James. I’m Ajay. I know we technically met the other day, but you ran out before I had the chance to really introduce myself or anything.”

“Nice ta’ meet you,” Bucky replies, unable to force his hand up from where it’s still circled protectively around Tony. Ajay betrays no signs of offense, retreating back into his own space and smiling.

“Do you prefer James or another name?” Bucky doesn’t mind bein’ Bucky most of the time. He’s made his peace with the fact that it’s a bit of a goofy nickname, and he likes that it connects him in a material way to a past that still sometimes slips out of his grasp. But he’s come to like James sometimes too, and while Tony seems to have a preternatural sense of when he’d prefer to go by what name, it’s one of the first times he has ever been explicitly asked. He likes that Ajay isn’t assuming anything based on their conversations when he’s Big. It makes the introduction thing into something less cheesy and more meaningful.

“Um…James is good, Sir.”
“Ajay is fine, James.” Ajay pairs the correction with a gentle kind of smile, an expression warmer and slightly more personal than the way he would look at grown-up Bucky during a session, and James thinks with a weird kind of satisfaction that he’s not the only one exposing himself in a new way here. “I wanted to thank you, James, for asking for this meeting. I know you and Tony are never usually without your caretakers, and you’re demonstrating a lot of trust by asking to be alone with me so the three of us can talk about some of your concerns regarding the new…err, introduction to your family. Your caretakers are very proud of and impressed with you, and so am I if you’ll permit me to say so.” Without forcing James to reply or contribute to an awkward silence, Ajay then turns his attention Tony. “It’s good to see you again too, buddy. What are you guys building?”

“Bubble tower,” Tony grunts, tongue hanging out of the corner of his mouth in consideration as he handles a block. “I think this is as wet as we should get the blocks, though. The lights might get fried if too much of Papa Bruce’s soap gets in ‘em.” And now he’s frowning, which pretty much makes James forget all about Ajay because he does not like it at all when Tony is unhappy.

“We can play somethin’ else. Anything you want,” he offers, rubbing his hand up and down Tony’s back. His brother is wearing a thick fleece sleeper today, because he’d woken up with a chill, and Bruce had insisted Tony stay wrapped up—he’d even tasked James with keeping watch that Tony didn’t slip out of his jammies and into something lighter, which made James puff his chest out with pride. Even with the reactor out, colds can be dangerous for Tony and James likes that they trust him enough to help out with keeping Tony well and safe.

“Actually,” Ajay interrupts as James is midway through steering his brother toward their toy box, “James, I’d like you to pick what game you two are going to play next.” Now, to be fair, Tony doesn’t seem in any way upset or disappointed by this. He shrugs and looks expectantly between James and the toybox, probably trying to predict what James will choose, because Tony’s genius brain never totally shuts off. But that doesn’t mean that the instruction doesn’t make protective anger bubble in the pit of Bucky’s stomach. Ajay is nice and all, but he better not plan on bein’ mean to Tony.

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Loki has grown to hate his brother’s kitchen timer. It’s an odd device to have an adversarial relationship with, true, and there are probably more significant violations against both taste and decency to be found on Thor’s floor, but regardless, Loki has an especial hatred toward the timer. It’s blue, a spinning bird sitting on top of it, cheerfully ticking away and then chirping when time is up. And twice daily, Thor or Jane (sometimes both if they seem to suspect Loki is going to be difficult) retrieves it from the kitchen, sits down next to Loki and places it between them. Today it’s Jane, and she tries to temper what she knows will be an unwelcome intrusion with a cup of hot chocolate that he already knows will be the perfect, not-too-hot temperature. Jane’s annoyingly wonderful that way, never neglecting details like the fact that Loki’s torture means he’ll never see steam rising off of something as innocuous as tea or soup without flinching.

“You want to do this with just us today, or should I call Azra?” It had been Jane, too, who had realized before anyone else that Loki’s negative experiences with Ajay, the therapist who treats most of the Tower’s other inhabitants, were doomed because Loki had developed a severe distrust of men he did not know. Azra is patient and kind but never condescending, and Loki does genuinely…well, not despise her. But his skin already feels like it’s crawling just from the anticipation of what he has to do now, and the thought of delaying long enough to take the measures they must to protect Loki’s identity feels like it may push him over the edge.

“Just us.” He wants to hold Jane’s hand, or maybe find the ridiculous stuffed cat that Thor has forbidden him to hide away or burn. He does neither.
“Okay. Just five minutes today, alright? Then we’ll have some lunch.” Where they set the timer, Loki has learned, is always an implicit assessment of his mental state. Five minutes is on the low end, which means that Jane has correctly realized that Loki’s already on edge. Physical therapy had been awful; he’d pissed himself twice, and fallen no less than four times, which meant he was back to using a walker for the weekend. Even though it had come accompanied by so many violations to his mind and body, the whole thing had made him wish for the informal PT he’d done with Stark before the healing, full of brightly coloured balance toys and puzzles with funny pictures and Thor’s booming, encouraging voice cheering them on. (And gods how he hated that he wished for any of that, his brother’s approval most of all.)

Jane spun the timer, and its mechanical clicking filled the room disproportionately, as if it were much louder and more powerful than it truly was. Loki wished he could wait it out, pretend to be doing as he’d been taught while actually plotting a prank on Thor or involving the dishwasher and a gang of snakes, but by now it was almost a reflex that had been trained into him, to allow the muddled mess of memories and impressions and echoes that he spent most of his time forcing back to spring forward.

He closed his eyes, trying not to rock back with the force of the muddled mass of memories that sprang forward in response to the timer’s ticking invitation, unpacking themselves from the tight corner of his brain Loki had to force them into most of the time in order to be able to function. They were particularly snarled today, sense impressions and memories and scenes that perhaps had no basis in truth all tangled together, unwilling to permit themselves to be sorted into any kind of discernible order.

* He was throwing Stark out a window...they were in this very Tower, he was almost sure of it. Stark’s threats about avenging, about the doomed fate of the invasion, they felt almost like a warning, as if he was sincere in his attempts to convince Loki to abandon his efforts before it was too late. Thanos’ hold on him had been too strong, then, his cruel conviction pushing away the bulk of Loki’s doubts and concerns. But as Stark had fallen (to his death, or so Loki had allowed himself to assume), his own consciousness had pressed to the forefront just enough that he’d cast a spell, one that would temporarily de-age Stark if he managed to live past this day. *
* He was on Asgard. The guards they’d left him with this time enjoyed the irony of torturing a Frost Giant with heat. For the first time, he begged for his brother during the treatment, and they laughed, reminding Loki that his great golden brother would never have anything to do with him again. *
* He was warm, but not in the same way as on Asgard at all. This was comfort and security like Loki had never known, even though nothing seemed particularly special about the scene at all. Loki was seated on a thick rug in front of the television, which was playing a program about sea animals. He flapped his arms, apparently attempting to demonstrate what made a particular species remarkable; his brother laughed, encouraging Loki’s babbled monologue. *

Loki was murdering Phil Coulson.

It had been the closest he’d come to breaking away from Thanos’s magic, to healing himself. For while Loki had always appreciated mischief, and had admittedly let his resentment of Thor twist that into something uglier in the years immediately preceding the invasion, he’d never truly wanted this, the intimacy of killing a man whose dry wit and bravery Loki actually enjoyed.

Instead, he’d felt his face twist into a horrible smile.
* They were going to make him into a Youngling. There was no reasonable or even legal way to force
the condition on another; unlike the embodied adjustment involved in the spell he’d placed on Stark, to be a Youngling was a choice, typically an honoured and revered one.

*Loki had been weak, too many months trapped in the Asgardian dungeons rendering the chance of any physical efforts at resistance all but impossible. But then he had never been the one of Odin’s children inclined toward brute force, and Loki’s magic had always responded effectively in moments of true desperation. If they were about to do what Loki was certain they were, they would remove the bindings around his mouth; it would only be for seconds, but if he timed it just right…*

He’d looked at his Father. Had realized that Odin knew something Loki didn’t, that he wanted and even expected Loki to successfully resist. But why…

*There were pumpkins. Horrible, gaudy plastic pumpkins, and Loki clutched them to his chest, filled with pride.*

He didn’t hear it when the timer actually chimed. It took Jane’s announcing, “Time’s up, Loki. Now we’re going to work on putting it away, just like you practiced with Azra, alright?” to break through.

This was, of course, the far more challenging part of the entire blasted exercise. Letting his disordered, chaotic thoughts and memories overwhelm him was easy; they were always there at the edges of Loki’s mind, beckoning to be relived and sorted into some kind of discernible order. For the first few days after the healing, Loki had had little choice but to allow them free reign over his psyche, too weak and confused and embarrassed to stop them.

Stark, he vaguely recalled, had understood better than most. He’d tried to convince Loki to allow Banner to lead them both through some kind of meditation exercise, but his memories of the memories of the Hulk laying waste to Loki during the siege were far too raw and recent. Whatever connection he’d had with Banner during his forced stint as a Youngling felt too tenuous and far away by comparison.

Azra had finally decided to treat Loki based on theories about repressed memories. It wasn’t a perfect system, given that Loki hadn’t so much repressed these memories as he had had his consciousness and his soul (he shuddered) manipulated almost beyond repair. But the general principal, that Loki needed to set strict times to allow himself to work through the snarling mess and then focus the rest of his time on re-learning how to be in the present, he’d grudgingly admitted that it made a certain kind of sense. (He still hated the damn timer.)

“You spend a couple of minutes video-journalling anything you want to about what came up today with JARVIS, alright? Is there anything you want to tell Thor or myself about?” She asked every time, and Loki always said no. Today he hesitated; of all of what he tended to remember during these sessions, the scenes from his time as a Youngling were in many ways the most haunting. He wants to ask if Thor’s affection had truly been as sincere as it seemed in Loki’s memory. Had that been love, or just pity? Ultimately, though, Loki was not entirely sure how he would cope if it turned out to the latter. Or even worse, if Thor didn’t even remember that day, which had so clearly meant something to Loki. “Loki?”

“Hungry,” he grunts. “Lunch?” Jane smiles, a sad sort of half-smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. It reminds Loki oddly and painfully of his Mother.

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Though James is still extremely annoyed at Ajay for denying Tony the right to pick their next game,
he can’t entirely deny his excitement at finally unpacking the set of wooden toys Steve had bought them a few weeks ago. They’re simple in design: one is a bright red barn with doors that open to reveal a set of wooden farm animals, while another box contains a train track. James can already imagine how much fun it’ll be to set the tracks up and push the trains along the latter; the set looks to come with different kinds of environments and people, even a bright blue bridge the train can drive under.

“I could make it bigger!” Tony declares, scrutinizing the pieces with a familiar glint in his eyes. “Maybe add a motor, or—”

“NO!” James says, or rather shouts, the word before he even realizes he’s thinking it, snatching the toys away for good measure. His first instinct when it finally does sink in is to apologize to Tony, and to immediately offer to let him modify the train in any way he wishes. James even manages to force his hand to release its death grip on the toys, but before he can speak but Ajay does first, standing far closer than he’d been the last time James had looked.

“It’s alright, James. I mean screaming isn’t great, but saying no to your brother when you don’t want him to do something is okay. It’s actually something most of your caretakers mentioned as a goal for you; not just saying no specifically, but separating your wants and needs from Tony’s and treating them as equally valuable. They’d really like to see that from you. Can you explain what was so upsetting about Tony’s offer?”

“Uh, I…Daddy got ‘em for me. And they’re simple. Sometimes I like just…simple.” Tony and Ajay both nod as if this makes perfect sense, which just makes James feel worse.

“Me too, y’know,” Tony says, his voice sounding just slightly older than usual for when he’s in headspace. “Most of the time it’s my job to always be thinkin’ about how to fix things and make ‘em better. I’m not always good at turning it off. But that doesn’t mean it’s not fun to let things be. How about you set up the tracks and I’ll get the other pieces unpacked?”

Eyes brimming with grateful tears (it’s never not amazing, if annoying, to James how easily he cries in headspace), James turns his attention to laying the tracks out in a simple loop. Ajay watches for a few more moments, breaking the silence when Tony has placed a couple of trees in the middle of the loop near one end. The trees and the wooden train operators are roughly the same size, and the silliness of the scale makes James giggle when Tony points it out.

“You can keep playing, boys, but is it okay if we talk a little more while you do?” One day, James vows, he and his brother really will get to just play. But he knows how important this particular conversation is, he’s the one who asked for it, so he devotes at least some of his attention to something other than his mental debate over where the bridge should go. “I mentioned that your caretakers have provided me with a list of goals, things they’d like to work on with you. But I’d like to talk with both of you first about your goals. What things could you and your caretakers can do that might make you feel more secure during this transition in your lives and maybe help with some of the things I know you both already struggle with?”

Tony had put up a hell of a fight about even having this session in the first place, so James decides to be gracious and go first. (It’s the big-brother thing to do anyway, and he prides himself on being a good big-brother, today’s outburst about the toys excepted.)

“Um, I’d like to maybe try to go back to the mansion one or two times a month? I love the Tower too, but the mansion has our nur—our room, for just us kids. And everyone is closer together, and it was just…nice. I liked it.” Ajay nods thoughtfully, writing this contribution down without commenting on it. They both look at Tony, who is staring resolutely down at the train in his hands.
“Dunno. Can’t think of anything.” Before either Ajay or James can try to drag more information out of him, another voice sounds through the room.

“Sir—Tony.” It’s JARVIS, James realizes after a beat. It’s not that he ever really forgets the AI is there, but JARVIS so rarely involves himself in conversations without being explicitly invited that it’s still kind of a shock. “You requested that I…creatively manage the protocols established by yourself and your caretakers after Extremis regarding secrets. When I agreed, you assured me that you simply needed to find the right time to bring up the research and browsing you’ve been doing. I don’t wish to force your hand, but I do not wish to damage their trust in either of us. So you may either discuss this with Ajay and your brother now or I can inform Captain Rogers at his earliest convenience. Which would you prefer?”

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“If, if I were to acquiesce to this request of yours…what would it be like?” Thor is changing his brother when Loki asks; there’s a tension there, perhaps, between this context and the highly formal language Loki is using, but perhaps that’s the point. It’s possible Loki wishes to distance himself from the physical assistance he still requires. Or perhaps it’s a distraction from the pain of it—the skin of Loki’s bottom and thighs are still red and angry; one patch even drips blood when Thor wipes it.

“We would negotiate many aspects of how you wanted your time in headspace to be spent, Loki. Mean you something in particular?”

“I…you know that I would be older than I was…before. Just because I still require these blasted garments does not mean I care to be as—as helpless and foolish as I was then.”

Even if he can hardly blame Loki for being angry about being forced into the condition he’d been in, the disdain in his voice still stings Thor slightly. He’d had some of the best times of his life caring for Loki these past months, and returning to something resembling their usual dynamic has not been as smooth and easy as Thor wished that it might be.

“I thought you neither helpless nor foolish, Loki. But nor would I hope to replicate that time simply for the sake of it; you would find whatever age worked for you.”

“And I could wear what I want?”

“You’ll wear the diapers as long as it is medically necessary for you to do so. Beyond that, yes. Perhaps we could purchase some items together if those from…before are not to your tastes now.” Thor will likely keep some of the numerous marine-themed apparel Loki had demanded hidden away in some corner of his floor if his brother rejects them, but there’s no need to share this with anyone.

“And Jane? She’ll—are you intending for her to remain here? You do seem decidedly less surly with her present than without.” Thor nearly rolls his eyes at that one. Not because Jane doesn’t have a positive effect on his mood, but because Loki so obviously wants Jane around for his own comfort, not Thor’s, and cannot just admit to it.

“She does need to return to New Mexico for at least a matter of weeks fairly soon, but she will remain in the Tower until you have made your decision, and be present should you wish her to be during any initial experiments with ageplay.” Loki’s angry skin finally moisturized to Thor’s satisfaction, he makes short work of taping the diaper at his hips. Loki takes it from there, sliding his loose pants back up and coming to sit with his legs crossed in front of him.

“Would I be…required to call you something…different?”
This is the question that takes Thor the longest to parse, and to craft a response to. During his previous time as a Youngling Loki had come incredibly close to referring to Thor as Daddy numerous times. At first, Thor had expected something else, something closer to what they would have used on Asgard, but he’d come to treasure those near-misses of Daddy all the more because of their distance from the more formal ‘Father’ Odin preferred. It was evidence that Loki had been accepting not just Thor but Midgard; if Thor were truthful, he coveted that title far more fiercely than he’d ever yearned for any others, including ‘King.’ But his brother was not ready for this knowledge. He would likely be frightened by it, or use it as a weapon the next time they quarreled.

“You may call me whatever you desire, Loki. And we may continue to discuss any concerns you have…but I must know. Is this…are you saying yes?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry there was a bit of a blip in the updating schedule! Those of you who follow my rants on Tumblr know it's been a bananas couple of weeks.

And thank you, as always, for your amazing comments and kudos. Each and every one matters, and gets me excited about writing this fic and being in this fandom.
Bucky and Tony continue their session with Ajay while Loki contemplates his response to Thor. Natasha faces challenges at work.

No major content notes in this chapter, except for the fact that Tony and Bucky are both little and Big (specifically in romantic/sexual contexts) in this chapter. These things do not and will never happen at the same time (the ageplay will always remain non-sexual), but if reading them moving between both headspaces in close proximity is an issue for you, it might be worth giving this one a miss.

“Tony? What’s he talkin’ about?” James wouldn’t say he was afraid, not while his brother was still within reach and seemed well enough. But JARVIS’s mention of the secrets protocol was definitely alarming. Tony had re-programmed the AI after the fallout from Extremis, permitting JARVIS to use his better judgement if Tony appeared to be keeping things from the team that risked his health or wellness. (The terms were very broad, and left JARVIS with unprecedented freedom to interpret as he saw fit, which James knew meant a lot to all of them.) Hearing it actually being used for what he was pretty sure was the first time did make James wish that Daddy had come with them after all, but he was the big brother. And that meant he needed to be brave, especially if Tony had been hiding something scary or bad. So he reached over to the bag their caretakers had packed, located Sanders, and hurried to press the sloth into his brother’s hands. Tony squeezed both the stuffy’s paw and James’ hand tightly.

“Um. I.”

“No one here is judging or rushing you, Tony. If JARVIS is intervening then I think it’s important that we follow his advice about how to proceed, but you can take your time deciding which of the options he gave you feels best, okay? In the meantime, take some deep belly-breaths for me, please.” Ajay seemed as calm and capable as he always did during their individual sessions, and James felt the knot in his own tummy loosen slightly as he watched his brother do as he’d been instructed. “Good, Tony, that’s really good. And James, that was really smart of you to get your brother’s toy for him. You’re both doing great.”

“Not long before I left for Asgard, I started try’na…I don’t know. Be better, at bein’ little.” James opened his mouth to protest, because his brother was excellent at being little and he hated the idea that Tony thought otherwise. But Ajay caught his eye and shook his head.

“Alright. What does that look like to you, Tony? Being ‘better’ at it?” It was kinda funny, James mused, to watch Ajay doctor someone else. He noticed things he didn’t when it was his own psyche under the microscope, like how Ajay made sure to reproduce Tony’s own words when he asked
questions. Tony fiddled with Sanders, hands staying busy the way they always did when he was thinkin’ about something important.

“Less ashamed, I guess? It was just dumb stuff. I tried to leave some of my toys and other stuff out even when I wasn’t little, and I looked on some of the sites my—my caretakers shop on for me. Tried to imagine other things I might want someday.”

“That doesn’t sound dumb at all, Tony. Those sound like some huge steps, steps your family would be tremendously proud of and want to support you in taking. Why not share it with them?” Tony shrugs.

“Didn’t know if it would work. Didn’t wanna disappoint ‘em.” James bites his lip. It was getting downright painful not to argue with Tony or reassure him that he could never disappoint any of their family, especially with something like this. Ajay was frowning a little too.

“I think a few things about that, Tony. Do you want to hear them now, or would you prefer to finish sharing anything else before I respond?” This time Tony looked right at James, pleading, so he felt absolutely no guilt about stepping in.

“Tell us what you think please, Mr—Ajay.”

“Alright. Well the first thing for you to remember is that when you’re little, it isn’t your job to manage your caretaker’s feelings. They are the adults and you are the child. Unless you have done something directly and knowingly harmful, their reactions are not your responsibility.” Tony made a skeptical little noise, so James dug back through the bag next to them, found a sippy cup of water, and stuck the spout hastily in his brother’s mouth. The corner of Ajay’s mouth lifted just slightly.

“While in general I try to avoid putting words in other people’s mouths, I also feel that it’s really important that you understand that your honest, sincere efforts to embrace your headspace could never disappoint your caretakers, Tony.” Unable to reply, Tony gives a loud and pointed suck at the spout of his cup while he pouts in James’ direction.

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The session, James comes to realize fairly quickly, is far more of a marathon than a sprint. After that initial exchange comes to a relative standstill, with Tony listening to Ajay but not really hearing him, Ajay gives both Tony and James more time to play with their train set and have a snack. This backfires, though, because once given a break Tony is highly reluctant to delve back into any conversation.

James rarely feels smart these days, especially given how often he’s surrounded by actual geniuses. But when he gets the idea to have Daddy bring Lucky up to the penthouse, he can’t help but feel smug. All the parts of Tony that want to close off and separate himself from his present never stand a chance against the dog, and today is no different. In seconds, the mutt has leaped onto Tony’s lap and the baby is giggling as Lucky attempts to coat the entirety of his face in a layer of drool. Ajay smiles at James, almost like he might be a little proud, and that makes James’ tummy go all warm and gooey.

“Dogs are pretty great, huh buddy?” Ajay offers, kneeling down to scratch Lucky between the ears. “They need a lot of care though, don’t they?”

“Yeah! We gotta walk Lucky, and keep helpin’ him learn where to go to the bathroom. And we hadda stop leaving food around, even for a second, ‘cause Lucky always finds it, and it’s not so good for his tummy.”

“But you like doing those things for Lucky?” Tony looks scandalized by the very concept that he
wouldn’t, and he glares suspiciously at Ajay.

“Yeah.”

“How come?”

“Cause I love him!”

“Any other reason? Does he owe you anything in exchange for all of that work you put in?”

“Of course not.”

“How come?” Ajay presses. Tony wraps his arms defensively around the dog’s neck, as if shielding him from the words.

“Because he didn’t ask to come here, or make us do any of it.”

“That’s exactly right. Your family chose to bring Lucky into it, didn’t they? And it makes you feel good to care for him. Not all that dissimilar to how your caretakers probably feel about you.” If Tony were Big, he would have recognized a long time ago where Ajay was going with this line of questioning. But he’s down deep now, and he’d walked right into the trap Ajay has set for him without thinking twice. He puts his hands on his hips, glaring in outrage, but Ajay presses his advantage while he has it. “Your caretakers were not forced into this dynamic with you, Tony. They chose it, willingly, and every one of them I’ve had a chance to speak to about the age play has expressed nothing but gratitude and happiness that you all made that choice together. I know, or at least suspect, some of the reasons that it’s hard for you to believe, but when you put work and time and energy into accepting them and your headspace that’s a tremendous compliment. They will be thrilled. So if you’d let me, I would really like to focus on helping you with that goal you’ve set for yourself; maybe we can brainstorm some strategies for conveying that to your family, too.” Tony doesn’t agree, but he doesn’t shoot the idea down either, so Ajay gives him a moment to take this in and turns his attention back to James. “While your brother thinks about that, can you and I talk a bit more about some of your others aims for yourself? Your Daddy mentioned something about clothes, but I’m not entirely sure I understand what’s up there.”

James tries not to groan. Definitely a marathon.

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Of all the myriad of responses Thor could might have expected to his inquiry, Loki knows with certainty that his request for the presence of Clint Barton was not one of them. Loki himself had been the one to pull away from all but his brother, Stark, and Jane after his healing, and Thor’s lack of attempts to prevent that had told Loki all he needed to know; his brother was afraid, likely that the rest of the team would feel differently about Loki when he was not in an enforced, permanently childish mindset.

“Agent Barton, Sirs.”

“Thanks for the intro, Jay. You know, I wonder if just my name is grand enough. We should consider entrance music,” Barton opines, striding into the living room with the easy grin Loki remembers having taken great comfort in before. Ignoring Thor’s offered hand, Loki rises to greet their guest; he wobbles, balance still far more challenging than it has any right to be, but eventually comes to a relatively stable stance. (The blasted diaper makes a distinctive rustling noise, but he refuses to display any outward signs of embarrassment.)

“Thank you for coming,” Loki says stiffly. Barton nods, but directs his questioning gaze to Thor, not
Loki himself, which just cements Loki’s decision about what to do next. “I have been instructed to explore the rest of the Tower as a less formal method for re-strengthening my muscles. I shall have the horrid walker,” he gestures to the monstrosity in the corner with his lip curling in distaste, “but I am also required to be supervised for such ‘excursions,’ lest I take a fall and somehow remain unnoticed by the godlike robot and the 8000 or so Midgardians who work in the building.” Barton blinks.

“Uh…okay. I mean, your snark is kind of awesome, but I’m not totally sure what—hold up, you want me to take you?”

“Yes.” Loki’s reply is simple, not offering any explanation or justification. The power between himself and all the members of the team who witnessed him after the Soul Damage is already permanently imbalanced; Loki will not be begging them for anything.

Though they’re going no further than a few levels down, Thor insists on packing a bag for Loki. It’s so overfull that it pulls at the seams of the zipper. It’s full of food and pain medication and water and all the hells know what else, but eventually (after Thor takes Loki into another room to change him), he and Barton are on their way.

Barton chooses one of the undeveloped floors of the Tower. This means the space is wide open, which the Midgardian healers would probably advise against because they want Loki honing his fine motor control by walking and steering around obstacles. But the layout gives Loki less to have to actively concentrate on, which can only be a blessing at this point.

“Have the docs said how long they think you’ll need the walker?” It’s the first either Barton or Loki have spoken since departing Thor’s floor, and the other man is carefully not looking in Loki’s direction when he says it, focusing instead on examining the uncovered vents above his head.

“As with much pertaining to my recovery, they are uncertain. They re-assess daily, and on particularly good days I am permitted to move without it. But it is…slow going.” Barton nods, and they lapse back into silence for a while while Loki makes cautious, wobbling loops around the room.

It’s decidedly odd to see Barton this withdrawn and cautious. He’d been the first to warm to Loki when he’d been spell-damaged, and he had always been able to fill even the most awkward silences with playful, engaging chatter. He’d been particularly good at responding to Loki’s interests, constantly finding television programs and books and toys focused on real and fictional ocean-life. (Loki still thinks longingly sometimes of one of the soft mermaid dolls Barton had purchased for him. It came with a removable, reversible blue tail that could be turned into a dress, and had a smile that reminded him of Frigga in her youth.)

“If you came here for some kind of big emotional chat, I don’t think that’s something I’m really ready for that yet, man.”

“Nor I,” Loki agrees readily. Barton’s surprise is evident, and he looks directly at Loki for the first time. “I know not what I would say; my memories are still difficult to parse and comprehend at this stage. But my brother has requested a reply about his offer, and before I told him anything I needed to know if it was even possible for us to be in the same space. If not, I would just as soon not waste anyone’s time, or raise Thor’s hopes—though no one believes me when I say it, he is overly fragile in many ways.”

“I’ve seen that dude’s reaction to what happens to Bambi’s mother; I totally believe you,” Barton grins. Loki is unfamiliar with the reference, but it’s rather relieving to realize that these people truly know his brother, not just the facade of warrior and king he puts on as needed. “And it’s…I’m glad, that you’re worried about hurting him. That’s—that’s good.”
Neither of them says much more after that. Loki does laps until his legs begin to tremble, then plops onto his padded bottom with a disgruntled sigh. A few seconds later, Barton comes to a far more graceful seated position next to him, opens the stuffed bag Thor had packed and pulls out two individually wrapped packages of orange, fish-shaped crackers. He tosses one to Loki with a smile that’s almost friendly, and Loki thinks, for the first time since the healing, that maybe he really could do this.

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Like most of the team, Bruce does an extremely poor job of distracting himself for the several hours that the littles spend with Ajay. Tony and Bucky have never been without at least one member of the team while in headspace before, and regardless of how much they trust Ajay, none of them bother trying to pretend that they are anything but terrified by the prospect. They handle the stress in their own ways. Most of the team seems inclined to avoid the Tower; Phil and Natasha go in to SHIELD, while Steve makes his way to the campus library. Thor and Jane of course stay put to care for Loki. Clint is somehow MIA. Bruce spends most of the morning taking inspiration from Steve and devoting himself to his studies; given how long he’s been treating the Avengers, his MD sometimes feels like an annoying formality at this point, but he reminds himself that this will make him better, quicker, and more skilled at keeping his teammates alive and well.

Bruce makes it all the way until dinner time, which is exactly two hours after the boys’ appointment was scheduled to end, before making his way to the floor Bucky and Steve share. He finds the former laying face down on the couch, and tries to sound calm as he kneels down next to the unmoving pile of super-soldier.

“Bud?”

“Not little,” Bucky grunts, face muffled by the pillow he’s still face planted in. “Just tired. And hungry. So goddamn hungry.”

“Err—why aren’t you eating then?”

“Because the kitchen is really far away. And therapy is at least as exhausting as training with Phil, which is really fuckin’ sayin’ something because I was pretty sure several of my internal organs were making a bid for freedom after my last session with Coulson.” Bucky definitely isn’t little, just… hangry, Bruce realizes with a relieved laugh he just barely manages to contain.

He leaves Bucky in his pouty heap long enough to throw together a quick bowl of quinoa, roasted vegetables and leftover chicken he finds in the fridge, then returns and waves the bowl under his nose until Bucky sits up. He practically inhales the food, so there’s no use in trying to get him to talk during the meal, but when Bucky leans back against the couch with a satisfied sigh, Bruce can’t keep his questions back anymore.

“Are you alright? I mean, I know we’re all going to debrief with Ajay later, and you don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to, but I just—”

“You were worried,” Bucky mercifully supplies. Seeing no point in denying this when there’s so much evidence against him, Bruce nods tightly. “It went fine. It was hard, really hard…but we got somewhere good, I think. I’m…you know my feelings about Loki being here to stay weren’t…easy, or simple, but I think this might actually be really good for all of us.” This leaves Bruce with even more questions, but before he can consider whether it’s worth pressing any further, Bucky’s lips take on a decidedly not-little quirk, and he pulls Bruce over to him by the tie and presses a hint of a kiss to the side of his lips. “Speaking of good things, I had fun the other night, you know. And I heard a rumour or two that I’m pretty interested in tracking down more firsthand intel about.” The switch from concern over Bucky and Tony as his littles to a far more adult interest in the other side of
Bucky happens almost shamefully fast, a fact which Bruce chooses to attribute entirely to the way Bucky doesn’t stop wiggling atop him. It’s several seconds before Bruce can even reconstruct their conversation enough to reply to what Bucky has just said.

“Rumour?” Bucky nuzzles his neck, a hint of teeth against Bruce’s tendon as he comes to fully straddle him.

“Oh yeah. Now, to be fair Stevie could barely get it out without practically hyperventilating, but he was definitely under the impression from Tony that you were some kind of bossy sex god. And neither Barton or Coulson can talk about you in that context without blushing, and I didn’t think Phil was even capable of blushing.” Another nip, this time at Bruce’s earlobe, and it was beyond his power at this point to stop himself from meeting Bucky’s advances. He tightened his grip on Bucky’s narrow hips and thrust up with his own, growling when this caused the other man to tip his head back and moan.

“Pretty boy. Fuck you’re gorgeous. Squirming on top of me like that, don’t even know what you’re asking for, Christ, Bucky. It was all I could do to keep my hands off you the other night.”

“So don’t,” Bucky murmurs, licking around the shell of Bruce’s ear and biting down on the lobe. “Never asked you to. Dinner was swell, I like spending time with you that way and it was fuckin’ brilliant of you to cook instead of having us go out. But I was pretty disappointed when you left me at the door with just that cocktease of a kiss.”

Bruce loses track of time for a while after that while he and Bucky exchange increasingly heated kisses and touches and words. (God the words. Bucky has a hell of a mouth on him.) At one point, JARVIS attempts to say something, but Bruce mutes the AI with a strict instruction to not interrupt except in cases of world-threatening emergency.

Which is how he and Bucky end up being surprised by Steve and Tony half stumbling out of the elevator, locked in what looks to be a passionate embrace of their own. He freezes, awareness of their amply-negotiated polyamorous relationship temporarily going out the window in the face of being confronted for the first time with another couple exchanging intimacies. (The fact that Steve is involved is definitely a factor too; from what Bucky has said, the two of them have had unexpected issues with physical and romantic intimacy since the War.) Tony, though, just smirks when he breaks his kiss with Steve long enough to realize they aren’t alone.

“Well this could certainly be interesting.”

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While it’s not as formalized as the type of formulas that someone like Tony would use, Natasha still has a system for predicting the thoughts and actions of others, particularly those closest to her. And according to her system, Phil and Clint are almost certainly having sex right now. They’ve been anxious about Tony and Bucky all day, and are likely to want a distraction. Add to that the way that their highly successful experiment with Phil has added new energy and dimension to their sex life, and the fact that Coulson is waiting for news on a particularly tense mission going on in Spain, and Natasha isn’t just sure they’re having sex. She can predict the very position they’re likely to be in with a fairly high degree of certainty.

The damned situation in Spain is why she herself is merely thinking about this in SHIELD headquarters rather than taking on a more active, participatory role. They’d spent months getting an under-cover agent in to investigate what appeared to be a wide-reaching shadow alliance between prison systems around the world and multi-national pharmaceutical companies. The latter, against strict federal and international laws to the contrary, had been quietly testing products aiming to produce enhanced peoples without the knowledge or consent of the prisoners themselves. Such
programs were hardly new; they were how the world had ended up with Luke Cage. But one of the unintended effects of how well the Accords hearings had ended up going was a renewed interest in enhancements from wealthy members of the population. (With the risk of being imprisoned or otherwise persecute seeming fairly low, enhancements were being pitched as the ‘new cosmetic surgery,’ which made Natasha’s fingers itch for her sharpest blades.) Since those same people were, of course, entirely unwilling to have potentially fatal experiments performed on them, this meant an increase in demand for vulnerable test subjects.

The agent had been getting close, damn close, to the inner circle, but he’d been made before he could get to any of the central members of the group. The afternoon had been a race against time to get him safely out of the country, and the whole thing had brought Natasha a new level of respect for Coulson’s years of handling both she and Clint. Handling the guilt and fear of having an agent she’d sent out in immediate danger was far more taxing than being the agent actually in the field.

“Park is wheels up as of 2300.” Her head had been resting face-first on her desk, which is not exactly a posture Natasha would have wanted Gonzalez to discover her in. But when she peels herself off the desk to squint at the man standing at the threshold to her office, she finds that he looks at least as exhausted as she feels. “He’ll lay low in one of the nicer safe houses for a few months and probably be way better rested than the rest of us by the time he returns. This as a win, Romanov. So why are you still here?”

“Doesn’t feel like a win. It was too close, we nearly lost him and we didn’t even manage to make contact with any of the high-ranking members of the prison.” Gonzalez’s expression goes through a series of complicated permutations; after a good fifteen seconds or so, he seems to settle with a smile that could have been called gentle on someone else. On him, it comes across like a kind of barbed compassion. He steps into Natasha’s office fully, shutting the door behind him.

“You’re aware that it was Coulson who initially pushed for the TAHITI project.” She nods, unable to think of any sensible reason to not confirm something all the higher-ups at SHIELD know by now. “Do you know what prompted his obsession with the idea?”

“…no.” It’s annoying to have to confess ignorance to this man, with whom her relationship has thus far been…murky, clouded with suspicion and vague antagonism. But he doesn’t acknowledge it as a victory, at least not as openly as he might have even a week ago. And when he speaks again, he keeps his back to Natasha, pretending to peer out the frosted glass of her office window.

“It was after that mess in Budapest. Your target was missing, no one could make contact with either you or Barton…you know Coulson almost got suspended?”

“He—what?”

“Oh yeah. The man didn’t sleep more than an hour here or there for the entire time the two of you were missing. Fury had him tranqued against his will on the sixth day, and when he woke up to learn that you’d dragged Barton in half-dead the night before, he scared one junior handler and two nurses into quitting and then trashed Fury’s office.”

Somehow this knowledge changes both everything and nothing about how Natasha understands Phil Coulson. Aside from perhaps his very recent foray into sexual submission, Natasha has never seen the man truly out of control the way that Gonzalez is describing. And she hadn’t known him well enough, then, to recognize the signs that hers and Clint’s near misses in Budapest had apparently been such a source of distress; by that point, Phil had been handling Clint close to two years, but she’d been with Coulson and SHIELD for only a matter of months. By the time Natasha had actually been conscious enough to register his presence with them in Medical, Coulson had seemed nothing less than his usual competent, unshakeable self.
“I’m telling you this, Co-Director, with full knowledge that Coulson may find a creative and torturous way to punish me for it, so that you understand. It will always feel this way, or at least it should. Almost losing someone you sent into the field and promised, to the best of your ability, to keep safe…well, the only thing worse is when you do lose them, one way or the other.”

Gonzalez, she remembers with a wrenched feeling in her gut, had been on the front lines when the extent of HYDRA’s infiltration of SHIELD had been revealed. He’d lost agents on both sides. People he’d known his entire career, young recruits he had mentored, they’d died not just in the high profile battle at HQ, but in the countless, nameless places where the reverberations had spread, where men and women all wearing SHIELD colours had suddenly turned out to be on opposing sides. Some of them were gone because Natasha herself had dumped SHIELD’s entire databases online, exposing not only HYDRA operatives but legitimate members of SHIELD who were deep undercover or in the midst of stealth missions.

“There was no time. Sorting through the data, it could have taken weeks or even months, and—” Gonzalez’s grizzled mouth tightens, and he swallows visibly. She nearly asks who it is he’s thinking of, which loss had been the deepest cut. (There was rumours that his own partner had turned out to be a member of HYDRA, but to the best of her knowledge no one has dared ask about the exact circumstances of Berry’s death. No one wants to ask the man he’d supposedly loved whether he’d died a hero or a traitor.)

“I know.”

They’ll probably never be friends. Maybe before the Avengers had come into her life, turned it upside down and made her long for purpose and motivation beyond what SHIELD could offer her, maybe then things would have been different. But just as Natasha had a long memory for the red in her ledger, she also remembered with perfect clarity those kindnesses she had had no reason or right to expect which had nonetheless been given to her. Gonzalez will always have a place on that list.

As she finally begins packing her briefcase, she allows herself a tired smile at the thought that even though she will undoubtedly be too late for the sex portion of the evening, she’ll be able to crawl into bed with Phil and Clint, soaking in their affection and trust and love.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry again for the unpredictability of my posting schedule lately, but we’re finally back on track and should be able to stick to the every other Friday routine for the foreseeable future. Thank you for sticking with me and this verse; your comments and kudos remain a singular delight.
Inside/Out

Chapter Summary

Steve, Bucky, Tony and Bruce enjoy one another's company. The inhabitants of the Tower learn they will soon be enjoying unexpected company.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings: The first half(!) of this chapter is explicitly sexual material. It involves minor Dom/sub overtones as well as light humiliation kink. All of it is consensual. If you want to skip it, just start reading after the first section break.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While Tony’s heated observation had suggested spontaneity, what follows in reality is a solid fifteen minutes of discussion. Safewords are exchanged, hard limits noted, aftercare plans made, it’s the kind of careful negotiation that has characterized their relationship all the way through. So Tony knows how important this stuff is, he does. But he has also had a hard on for what feels like fifty-seven hours or so, and Bruce is showing no signs of slowing down. Tony goes on the offensive, pressing against Steve from behind and tracing teasing fingers up the inner seams of the other man’s jeans. (Thank all the science gods that Steve has taken to wearing clothes that actually fit him. Makes the whole seduction thing way easier than when Tony had been forced to grab handfuls of pleats before getting to the real deal.)

Steve tips his head back against Tony’s chest and moans luxuriously. The conversation in the room draws to an immediate halt, both Bucky and Bruce’s heads snapping around with a speed that would be comical if the combined force of their clear interest didn’t feel so excessively hot.

“Now that we have their attention. Steve, is it okay with you if I project the map, get this show on the road?” Steve, predictably, blushes, but he also chews on his lip in that way Tony has long since learned means he’s hot for an idea, just not certain he should be. Tony forgoes putting on a show for the others for just a moment, leaning down to nuzzle at Steve’s neck and murmur gently into his ear.

“If it actually makes you uncomfortable in a bad way then by all means say no. That’s pretty much what safewords are made for. But if it feels bad in that squirmy, embarrassed but turned-on way, remember how we talked about the fact that humiliation doesn’t have to be a strictly negative thing in bed. It’s okay to want them to see you opened up and pulled apart.” Steve makes a strangled kind of whimpering noise that makes Tony want to do all sorts of depraved things to him, but now Bruce and Bucky are staring at them expectantly. Tony connects with Extremis, and in seconds the keys to Steve Rogers’ body and mind are projected for all to see.

They’ve added to it extensively since their first time together. The projection of Steve’s body is a haze of colour, capturing hot-spots and no-go zones and everything in between, often with commentary from Tony himself. Bucky is frozen, staring at the thing as if mesmerized; Bruce is far quicker to observe and understand, and when he turns his gaze back on Tony and Steve the predatory hunger there is enough to prod Steve into making that whimpering noise again. Tony,
truthfully, is not far behind.

“Do you have these for everyone on the team?” Bruce demands. The words are harsh, bitten off with enough roughness that they could easily be mistaken for anger. But Tony has seen all there is of Bruce and Hulk’s rage, and this isn’t that. This is Bruce as turned-on as Tony has ever seen him, restraining himself by the thinnest sliver of self-discipline. Tony’s own restraint is fraying, and he lands a bite to the side of Steve’s neck before responding.

“No. Steve needed a way to…reconnect with himself, so this was actually designed primarily for him, not as a manual for the rest of us. Though I won’t deny that it’ll probably come in handy that way.”

“If the others consent, I want one for all of us. Including you. This is…fucking hell, Tony. Are we done talking here? Anyone have any other major concerns?” The other occupants of the room shake their heads. “Good. Well since Tony and Steve have offered us this—who did you call it, Tony, a manual? Since they’ve given us this as a solid foundation I say the three of us maybe work on Steve for a while, reward him for being so good and open for us. Any complaints? I thought not.”

They stumble down the hallway, a mass of kisses and shedding clothes and there’s more than one collision with walls and end tables and a painting that Tony is distantly sure Pepper is going to be pissed about. By the time they actually reach the penthouse bedroom they’ve managed to strip Steve entirely, while the rest of them are in varying degrees of undress. (Tony will never, not if he lives to be as old as Thor, get over the sight that is a naked Steve Rogers in his bed. His 1,000 thread count sheets always seem suddenly pitiful and inadequate to the task of hosting a body that goddamn perfect.)

“Christ you’re pretty,” he informs Steve, seeing no reason to limit his interior monologue when he knows damn well that it’s talking, more than just about anything else, that gets Steve hot.

“Always has been.” Bucky has taken up residence on Steve’s left side, staring down at his longtime friend and lover. “Less delicate now, but that’s just gonna make tossin’ you around hotter, isn’t it Stevie?” The look the two super soldiers exchange then is disproportionately meaningful given the rather benign statement Bucky has just made, and Tony realizes with a start that this might be the first time these two have been together since the disastrous, aborted attempted Steve had told him about on their date. When Bucky leans down to kiss Steve, the latter surges up to meet him. For a moment there is nothing at all submissive about Steve, because this is not about those kinds of games. This is a long-awaited reunion between two men who have loved each other since they were children, who fought long and hard to get back to this place. The kiss, all teeth and tongues, still manages to be oddly gentle in its ferocity; there might even be a couple of tear tracks on Steve’s cheek, though Tony will go to his grave pretending never to have seen them.

Tony is so busy devouring the scene in front of him that the hand that brushes against his ribcage makes him jump. Bruce doesn’t draw away as he once might have, though; his touch is gentle but insistent as his hand slides up and around Tony’s side to rest above where the arc reactor had once been, just like the very first time they’d been together like this. His heart thuds a quicker staccato rhythm in reply.

“You did a good thing here, Tony. From what Bucky described on our date Steve’s dysphoria sounded pretty severe; you gave Steve back to himself, and to Bucky.” Bruce tweaks idly at one of Tony’s nipples; it could almost seem like an accident except for the fact that Bruce never does anything accidentally. The very beat of Bruce's heart is deliberate, a pace he cultivates and controls with careful practice and constant embodied awareness. “I’d like to pretend that the selfless reasons behind it are the most compelling to me Tony. But that would be a lie.”
A second ghosting, blasé hand trails down from Tony’s chest to his groin, brushing knuckles against his cock. He gasps and pitches forward—or tries to. Bruce’s other hand on his chest is strong, and he presses Tony backward against him with seemingly no effort at all.

“I want to know you like that. I want to know all of them in that kind of depth, have it all at my fingertips. I’d learn it all anyway, eventually, but this is so,” another brush, this time hard enough that Tony’s hips buck, “immediate. And thorough. I like the idea of all of us adding to it, so that in no time at all no one will have any…” the hand actually cups Tony through his boxers for the first time, “…secrets.”

“Nngh.” It takes Tony a moment to realize the noise hasn’t come from himself, but rather from Steve, who is watching he and Bruce with wide eyes while Bucky kisses his way down the wide expanse of Steve’s chest. When the other man realizes they’ve regained Bruce and Tony’s attention, he looks over and grins wickedly.

“Now, this fancy list of yours Stark, it say anything about how much our Stevie loves sucking cock?”

“Mmm, interesting question.” Steve, Tony has learned in recent weeks, does have…well, not a medical kink exactly, he isn’t interested in open-up-and-say-ah kind of play and he didn’t react at all to the sight of Tony in a white lab coat. But he does get off hard on Tony observing him, making notes and comments about his reactions as if he’s a particularly interesting specimen gifted to Tony for study. “He’s responded extremely positively to the suggestion. Wanna tell him about that one, Steve?”

“Oh god Tony, Buck—pleeeease.”

“Oh, you want me to tell them? Well, I mentioned briefly to Steve that his body’s tendency towards hyper-stimulation in sexual situations might mean he’d enjoy testing the limits of its enhanced capabilities, and—.”

“English, Stark,” Bucky grunts, then dips his tongue into Steve’s navel to stop him from complaining.

“The serum has made Steve…sensitive. Incredibly so. It’s standard for the nerves around specific regions of the body to become more sensitive during sex, but Steve, it’s like his whole damn body turns into an erogenous zone. Pain, pleasure, he feels it all so intensely that he always seems to be about a second away from flying to pieces under my hands.” Bruce growls in Tony’s ear, already aware of the potential contained in that kind of sensitivity, and Tony shamelessly pushes back against him. “So one night, when we’d just barely gotten started, I simply mentioned to Steve that he might find it pleasurable to take advantage of, shall we say the overabundance of potential that this whole eight person relationship thing offers, and take it in his mouth and his ass at once.”

“And how exactly did you respond to that proposal, Steve? I imagine it was a bit shocking.” Bruce’s voice, his fucking voice. It’s always been a touchstone for Tony, but the way he’s using it now, sounding compassionate and even sympathetic to Steve’s ‘delicate sensibilities’ while clearly angling for just the slightest touch of humiliation, fuck it’s artwork. Tony finally stops biting his lip long enough to moan, and Bruce rewards the noise by pulling Tony’s cock out of his boxers, at fucking last, and resting his hand around it. Not squeezing or pulling, just holding the damn thing.

“I—it—I—Bucky!” Barnes is supplementing his oral exploration of Steve, mirroring Bruce’s own grip on Tony, and Steve looks about ten seconds away from shooting.

“Oh I ain’t helpin’ ya, Stevie. You got yourself into this mess just like you always have, lettin’ these
mad scientist types fiddle with ya. So you tell ‘em what they want to know.”

“I came!” Steve wails. “He—he said that, and I, I just couldn’t, Bucky please!”

“Untouched?” Bruce is fucking merciless. Tony’s hips buck, trying to turn that teasing fucking hold into anything resembling actual friction; Steve isn’t faring much better, the guy can barely seem to comprehend speech, let alone make it himself. When he’s silent for too long, Bucky flicks at the head of Steve’s dick, just once. It drips pre-come in reply.

“Yes. Yes. Please, Bruce, Tony, anyone. Need.”

“Yeah you’re all need right now, ain’t you, Stevie?” Bucky agrees. He’s gotten naked sometime in the course of the proceedings too, and Tony takes a moment to fervently appreciate the sight of his two super-soldiers next to one another. Steve is all golden, unmarked skin, while Bucky’s body is paler, the lingering remnants of what he went through as the Soldier occasionally blotting its landscape. Sex appears to perform an odd kind of reversal of their postures, too; where Bucky is usually constantly aware, seeking out potential threats the way he was trained, sex makes him into something lax and fluid. Steve, meanwhile, who has cultivated an unthreatening calm otherwise, always looks like his body is struggling to contain him during sex, like at any moment everything he feels might be too much for his skin to contain. The two of them are, as they have always been, two halves of the same whole, and Tony’s glad that Bruce’s grip on his cock tightens ever so slightly, because it gives him an excuse for the way he gasps. “I’d like to say I’d be patient enough to try somethin’ like that with you tonight, but I wouldn’t last two seconds in your ass right now. And you should really dance with the one who brung ya, anyway. So how about you ask Tony real nice if you can have somethin’ to fill your mouth up, and I’ll see if I can tempt Bruce into the same. We can put on a nice show for ‘em, you oughta be good at that.”

Neither Tony nor Bruce require much in the way of persuasion, though Tony does distantly register that there’s a bit of toppish-competition going on at the beginning of the blowjob Bucky gives Bruce. In sharp contrast to the easy moans Tony couldn’t begin to hold back from Steve, Bruce is silent for the first couple of minutes, until something Barnes does makes him curse and start fucking Bucky’s face. Steve’s gaze follows Tony’s, and he whimpers piteously around Tony’s cock.

“Oh, you want that too, darlin’?” he coos. Steve swirls his tongue around the head of Tony’s dick, playing with just a hint of teeth while his hand comes up to toy with Tony’s balls. “Oh fuck that’s good.” Then, without warning, Steve fucking swallows. Tony’s cock hits the back of his throat, and he waits for a choking noise that never comes. (No gag reflex. Holy fucking—)

“Oh now that’s gorgeous, Steve,” Bruce murmurs. There’s no hint of teasing condescension in his voice now, nothing but genuine admiration as he goes on plowing Barnes’ face. Tony gives up his own struggle against his hips and presses even further into Steve’s fucking sauna of a mouth and throat. “Think you can get Tony to come for you before your friend here can manage an orgasm from me? If you can I bet I can talk him into taking your ass after this, regardless of his concerns about longevity.”

With this as incentive, Steve doubles down on his efforts, grabbing Tony by the hips and forcing him all the way forward until his nose is buried in Tony’s pubic hair. Tony decides that this is absolutely how he is going to die.

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Phil wakes in a position that would be the envy of many: firmly pillowed between a naked and deeply sleeping Natasha Romanov, and an equally nude, snoring Clint Barton. No matter how many times the three of them have made their way back to one another over the years, the reality of being freely offered something so few could even imagine—these two guarded, broken people stripped of
every defense, even consciousness—is always going to leave him stunned. He doesn’t know how long he watches them, though he does faintly register the sunlight beginning to creep through the shades, painting Natasha’s copper hair and porcelain skin with warm golden stripes. Phil isn’t fully aware of much until JARVIS announces an incoming call. He doesn’t bother sighing at the way this instantly wakes the overtrained agents next to him, or question JARVIS’s decision to put the contact through. He’s known the AI for long enough that if JARVIS has deemed this wake-up worthy, it simply is.

“Are you keeping him locked up in there or something?” During the few occasions they’ve had contact, which have been almost exclusively high-stress, high-stakes situations, James Rhodes has never sounded half as agitated as he does now, not even bothering to greet Phil before throwing out this rather odd accusation.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant-Colonel, I’m going to need more information.”

“Tony. I been trying to track down his fool ass ever since the first Accords hearings. First JARVIS tells me he’s at the mansion and isn’t accepting calls, which we gotta her back to at some point because Tones fuckin’ hates that place and why you would take him there of all places—anyway. Ever since he’n I have been playing phone tag. And given that this man once called me during a date he was still on to complain how boring the girl was, I start to get pretty suspicious when I can’t make contact with him for that long. So then I called Pepper, tried to find out what the deal was.”

Phil winces. He loves Pepper, he does, but she has developed a very deliberate ignorance of most things relating to what they get up to in the Tower, and he can’t imagine the vague replies she would have been able to offer Rhodes were much comfort.

“I imagine she was less helpful than you expected.”

“She was, in fact. Again, not entirely comforting. I get that they broke up under some shitty circumstances, but Pepper and Tony loved each other long before they were any more than friends, and it doesn’t make a whole lotta sense to me that the initial awkwardness hasn’t worked itself out by now.”

“I’m afraid if you want insight into the status of their relationship—”

“Still talking. Now, the longer this phone tag thing went on, the more I started thinkin’ about other things. Like when Tones was sick from the palladium, for example. SHIELD, which included half of his future-teammate, knew it. And instead of telling people who could have helped, y’all put a needle in his neck, locked him in his house and told him not to come out again until he cured himself.”

It’s a bit galling to be called to task for something that feels like it happened a lifetime ago, but the rational part of Phil, the part that seeks out the same kind of patterns that Rhodes is basing his analysis off of now, can hardly blame him for returning to that particular period in Tony’s life. Discounting his PTSD-ridden daze after New York, it had probably been the lowest Tony had ever been, and SHIELD had…well, they’d done precisely as Rhodes had described, hadn’t they?

Deciding that this confirmation was going to require fuel, Phil abandons his plan to travel down to one of the conference rooms on his own floor; instead, he marches toward the kitchen and begins pouring water into the reservoir of the coffee pot. As if the thing is some kind of beacon, Clint and Natasha stumble and stride respectively into the room less than a minute later.

“You are…not incorrect that SHIELD greatly mishandled Tony in the early days,” he concedes, shaking his head when both Nat and Clint make visual inquiries. “But we have all come a long way since then.”
“And how on Earth would I know that?” Rhodes barks. “In the last few months my best friend had some kind of major health episode, then watched footage of his parents’ brutal murder, at the hands of one of his friends with whom he’s ‘come a long way’, on live television. He then proceeded to disappear, after confirming to anyone who hadn’t already caught on that, yeah, he’s pretty messed up about it. These are the kinds of situations where Tony would always call me, Coulson. And as you all are the only variable that has really changed in that time, I’m running out of convincing options besides you being the problem.” Before Phil can even begin to muster a protest that is both truthful and avoids outing anyone, Rhodes adds briskly, “I’ll be touching down on the armour landing pad at 1100.” A danish, which had been hanging halfway out of Clint’s mouth, falls to the floor, leaving behind a spatter of bright red jam. T

“I knew the sex was too good to last,” the archer opines, staring mournfully at his breakfast. “Well, between the fact that we are all currently or soon to be sleeping with his best friend, and age playing with him, and housing an intergalactic terrorist that we permitted Tony to leave the planet to aid, I’d say Rhodes is going to murder us all. It’s been nice knowing everyone.”

Natasha says nothing, but retrieves the vodka she keeps hidden in a compartment in the fridge only accessible with her thumbprint.

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“You have got to be fucking joking. Holy Jesus, Nat is drunk enough that she’s going right past micro expressions to full-on expressions. You’re not joking. Okay, I need to call Rhodey now and —”

“That’ll only make him more concerned,” Natasha declares from her perch on the penthouse kitchen island. She wobbles a little, but waves an imperious, shooing hand at Phil when he offers her water. “Come on, Tony, think strategically. If you thought any one of us was being held hostage, and then the only time we returned your numerous calls was when we told you not to come? You’d bust through the walls, probably in the Mark 64—” Tony is momentarily both impressed and a little frightened at the extent of Natasha’s knowledge of his suits, though he probably shouldn’t be. A brief stint posing as an SI lawyer and then as his PA had been enough for her to access his systems and understand the failsafes built into the suits. (It’s a painful reminder, too, that his break-up with Pep had been for the best. Toward the end he’d been hiding the suits from her out of shame and guilt; these people know the suits intimately, because they understand that, for better and worse, there is no separating Tony from Iron Man now.)

“67 has better shock absorption. Plus 64, while probably my current favourite, is a bit of a diva.” Tony lets himself be distracted for just a few moments longer by contemplating the various tics of the suits, but Rhodey’s arrival is too near to permit himself much of a release. “Okay. So we need to do a hardline sweep of the Tower for little stuff, J, anything even remotely related. Obviously Thor will need to be alerted and he and Loki will have to remain on their floor at all times. And it’s probably best that we keep the romantic stuff on the QT as well.” Tony doesn’t wait for J to start compiling the list; he can see his blanket and one of his lesser-used stuffies (an avocado with little arms and legs and a smile that shouldn’t be so endearing given that it’s anthroporphic food) on the couch, and he makes a grab for both all while wishing he was ensconced in bed with two super soldiers and his science bro as he had been mere hours ago.

To add insult to injury, Bruce seizes the avocado.

“Hold on.” Nothing good has ever come from Bruce telling Tony to hold on in that particular voice. Nothing. Pride long since abandoned, Tony plugs his ears. However, this results in his heavy weighted blanket falling to the floor. Bruce quickly grabs for that too.
“Sir.” JARVIS is speaking to him via Extremis, which is just so damn unfair! “Recall the conversation you just had with Dr. Nariani.”

“That was about being more open about it with the team, not with Rhodey!” Tony doesn’t realize his fatal mistake, that he responded to JARVIS out loud instead of via the Extremis hub, until every eye in the room is suddenly on him. He wishes he hadn’t dropped the damn blanket so that he could throw it over his own head. Then they all do that silent conversation thing, where they negotiate through glances and frowns and nods who is going to be talking next. Bucky, who normally looks just as mystified during those exchanges as Tony usually feels, apparently wins (or loses.) He presses his way calmly into Tony’s space and pulls his fingers from his ears.

“Why not Rhodey? He’s to you what Steve has always been to me, except without the sex, yeah?” Tony nods, unable to force himself to lie to a man he’s been through so much with. A man who just held him and kissed and touched Tony so sweetly mere hours ago. “Why have you been avoiding his calls then?”

“What would I say?” Tony shrugs, pretending it doesn’t hurt at all to acknowledge out loud that he has barely spoken to his best friend in over a year. “Can’t tell him a thing about Loki, or the age play, or the fact that we’re in some kind of—what, love octagon? Didn’t want him getting pulled in too many directions over the Accords. Didn’t want to let him know how messed up I was after Extremis, couldn’t manage to tell him how much worse the hearings were.” He can almost feel how sadly Barnes is looking at him, and it grates. The guy is lucky enough to still have his best friend, to love him and share all his secrets. He could never understand. “People grow apart sometimes. S’not a big deal.”

“You still hack the Air Force’s databases. Monitor all his missions. I’ve seen the upgrades you have planned for his suit.” Just how many people have access to Tony’s private servers, anyway? Now, to be fair, he might have actually given it to Coulson voluntarily at some point, it’s hard to remember, but he hadn’t known Phil would be keeping an eye on stuff like that. Rhodey is Tony’s to protect, not anyone else’s. “Doesn’t sound to me like you’ve grown apart. Sounds like you’re scared. You know…you know we didn’t want to pull you away from him, from any of your friends, right?”

“Just like you didn’t want to pull Thor away from me?” Jane looks as deceptively un-intimidating as ever, clad in an overlarge minions shirt and a pair of bright green sweats. When the team turns almost as one to stare at her, she waves a gluten-free bagel in the air. “Got hungry. Thor is somehow under the impression that he should try to singlehandedly balance out all the uneaten carbs by those currently on Keto and other low carb diets, so we’re out of everything.” Drunk Natasha giggles, and Jane blinks several times, then appears to decide she’s imagined the noise.

“I’ll have JARVIS rush the next food shipment,” Tony promises.

“Listen, none of you did anything wrong, okay? You don’t deliberately isolate one another from the rest of the world. You understand each other in such an—an elemental way, of course you find that comforting. Of course you rarely want to step outside your bubble.”

“How do you and Thor make it work?” Coulson asks, leaning forward in his seat.

“Well, it mostly involved both of us having to work to accept that I didn’t want to be all the way in the bubble. I love being here, don’t get me wrong, and especially these past few weeks…I think I’d like to be around more than I have been. But I like having something outside him, outside all of you. Something that’s just mine. It means that if I lose him, or any of you, my whole world won’t actually be ending, it’ll just feel like it is for a while. It’s how I stay sane, and keep a part of myself from being swallowed whole by the immensity that is Thor, and all of you.” Tony’s never heard Jane speak this much at one time (except on matters of science), and he’s happily stunned by how
grounded and secure she is for someone so young. He also suspects that he hears a bit of Pepper’s influence in there, and entertains a moment of sheer terror at the trouble those two could manage to get up to if they have in fact joined forces. Natasha nods approvingly and blows her a kiss.

“Err, so…what does that mean for us, exactly?” Clint asks, shrugging when Jane rolls her eyes. “What? We clearly have not been doing the best job here. Help us, Foster, you’re our only hope.”

“You’re lucky that I worship Leia as the one true General.” Clint salutes and then solicitously leaps up to put cream cheese on her bagel. The corner of Jane’s lips twitch. “Well, there’s a difference between recognizing that some people in your life are always going to be on the periphery and shutting them out altogether. I’m not saying you need to let him in on all of this, but give the guy something. Let him know you’re still his friend, Tony. That just because you might not need him in all the ways you used to doesn’t mean he doesn’t matter to you. And if you really want my advice, as the woman you adopted as ‘Aunt’ last time you were little? Rhodey might make a pretty great Uncle.” With that bombshell dropped, she seizes her breakfast from Clint, grabs a refrigerated granola bar and a bottle of juice for good measure, and then strides out of the kitchen to general applause from Clint, Natasha and Bucky.

Chapter End Notes

Oh gosh. Team, writing sex is still terrifying for me, and yet somehow it took 2,500 words of this chapter. Go easy on me in the comments!

Also (and I want to preface this by noting that I have not seen Endgame yet, so no spoiler worries!) I just wanted to take an extra second to send out some love and gratitude to the MCU fandom as we near the end of this phase of the journey on film. I'd existed on the periphery of fandoms before but never involved myself directly as a producer until entering the Marvel fandom, and I've found y'all endlessly supportive, kind and thoughtful. Thank you.

I’m on my way to see the movie now, so expect comment replies later this evening. (And no spoilers from me, never worry!)
Growing/Pains

Chapter Summary

Tony reconnects with Rhodey while struggling with how much of his life he should share. Clint and Bucky both face new challenges.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: There's a brief but explicit mention of Tony's past relationships being abusive, which is something I've hinted at in previous parts of this series without explicitly addressing. If you want to skip it, avoid the paragraph beginning "You've barely been out of the Tower..."

Steve also pushes Bucky slightly about his issues with clothes. This is something Bucky has previously agreed to, but it's still a pretty difficult thing for him to start actively working through. Those scenes will be harder to skip, but if this is a trigger for anyone just let me know and I can provide a redacted version.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Per his agreement with the team, Tony meets Rhodey on the landing pad alone. His only concession to their obvious anxiety about the situation is that he’s greeting the cool winter air with a thick, puffy coat of Steve’s that nearly comes down to Tony’s knees and makes him look like the Stay Puft Man—a reference Steve himself didn’t even get when Tony made it, so Ghostbusters is definitely getting bumped up the list for movie night, democracy be damned.

With his usual military precision, Rhodey touches down precisely when he said he would, down to the minute. Tony performs his usual sweep of the armour as it’s removed from his best friend, frowning when he notes several bullet-shaped dents and one gouge near the left shoulder that definitely had not been there the last time War Machine had been in the Tower. That sends Tony’s gaze toward the corresponding spot on Rhodey himself, because anything with enough force to damage the armour like that is no joke. There’s no visible sign of injury, but Rhodey pulls him in for a hug with his right arm, and even the suspicion is enough to make Tony seethe. He hates it when people try to hurt his platypus. Maybe now that Tony has had Extremis in system for a while he can talk Rhodey into stocking War Machine with some of the virus, enough to get him out of anything too dire. And if he’s still being stubborn about that then Tony is just going to have to spend some quality time in the shop making sure that nothing can even penetrate the airspace near the armour—some kind of repulsor-based missile defense shield, maybe…

“If you don’t stop mentally engineering and hug me back right now I’m gonna push you off this roof. And given that I don’t think the armour would actually be able to body-con over that monstrosity you’re wearing, that threat should carry a little more weight than usual.” Damn Steve, damn all of them and their obsession with keeping Tony warm. It was going to ruin Tony’s rep and get him fake-murdered.
Once he actually had a grip on Rhodey, Tony held on longer than he really intended. Maybe he’d grown too used to casual touch given its abundance around the Tower. Maybe he’d just missed his best friend. But eventually, the other man pushed him backward slightly.

“C’mon, it’s freezing out here and I don’t have quite the same insulation as you in this flight suit.”

"Shop?" Tony proposes hopefully, eyeing War Machine once more as it sinks into the platform.

“Try again. Lunch. That pretentious pub near the Garden, the one with truffle fries and all the crazy homemade ketchups.” Said pub is both louder and further from the Tower than Rhodey would usually choose when he’s just arrived; he doesn’t want to be overheard, Tony realizes sadly. It wasn’t that he hadn’t believed Phil, but it takes seeing Rhodey taking those kinds of precautions to truly drive home how much these past few months have eroded the trust between his best friend and the team. Tony is damn well going to fix that, even if he has to sit on Rhodey while wearing the Iron Man armour and make him listen.

“Oh just because they come over and write the day’s menu on a little chalkboard doesn’t make it pretentious now does it Honey Bear? Just lemme go change jackets real quick and—Rhodey, no, you are not making me go out like this—”

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It tends to surprise young kids when he encounters them, but Steve Rogers loves video games. He so rarely gets to use his enhanced reflexes for anything fun, and moving his little character around a digital food truck, slicing and cooking and serving meals while battling a merciless clock? It’s delightful. And Steve hasn’t had the time for this or really any other kind of leisure in weeks, so he’s enjoying it even more than usual. Or it would be, if the man who was supposed to be aiding Steve’s little chef character was actually focusing on the game at all.

“Look, all I’m saying is it took you weeks to be really sure that I was following you to class, and Tones is brilliant, but he isn’t nearly as street-wise as you and I, Stevie. He’d never know.”

“I need three more fish in the fryer please.” Bucky grunts and sends his avatar, a raccoon in a chef’s hat, off to do Steve’s bidding. Within ten seconds, the little digital fish are on fire while Bucky ignores them to make his latest appeal.

“You know how hard he’s been working lately, to feel better about the things he needs. One wrong word from Rhodes could undo all of that.” Steve puts his Switch controller down with a sad sigh. He really wanted to get more than a single star on this round, but Bucky is starting to make sense, which means Steve needs to get them both out of here before any further damage can be done.

“The very worst thing we could do right now if Rhodes thinks we’re cutting Tony off from his existing friends is show up to spy on them. You know that. So get up.”

“Sex?” Bucky proposes hopefully, waggling his eyebrows.

“You know, my ego would like to think that sex with me would be enough to distract you right now, but I’m not totally confident that that’s the case. So no, no sex. We’re going out. Go get dressed while I call Natasha to make a couple of arrangements.”

It’s less than ninety minutes after that when Steve and Bucky walk into the major department store that has been entirely emptied of people excepting a couple of staff members. A part of Steve still feels awful about doing this, but he’s learned from experience that it isn’t a kindness to himself, other shoppers, or store employees for members of the Avengers to just waltz into a shopping centre unannounced, especially if there’s more than one of them. The mob of paparazzi, well-meaning and
excited fans and…well, less well-meaning folks who want to hurl hate and obscenities at the team can grow shockingly fast, rendering an enclosed space like this store functionally unusable in under thirty minutes.

When Bucky clues into their destination, he tenses in his seat next to Steve and turns off the music he’d been singing along to moments before. Steve parks in the stall he’d been directed to by Natasha, hands the keys off to the security guard awaiting them, and takes Bucky’s hand in his own. Ever since finally managing to be sexual with Buck again, Steve has been touching the other man basically nonstop; fortunately, Bucky doesn’t seem bothered by this development. Even now, he strokes his thumb over Steve’s and smiles faintly.

“We talked about this and you agreed, Buck. Won’t it be nice to have some decent clothes? Stuff that fits, and doesn’t have holes and questionable stains and isn’t being searched for somewhere by a pissed of racoon?” Steve keeps them moving toward the door as he talks, as much to minimize their exposure as anything, but when they reach the threshold of the store, Bucky plants his feet and stares up at sign with a worried crease between his eyebrows. His palm starts sweating slightly in Steve’s own, which is a real feat given that even Hydra’s inferior version of the serum usually minimizes sweating. “You’ve punished yourself for more than long enough for things that weren’t your fault, Buck. It’s time to let that go now. If you can’t believe that you deserve nice things, can you at least accept that I believe it?”

“Punk,” Bucky mutters.

“You bet,” Steve agrees easily. “Will it help to make a plan? Decide what we’re looking for and how much of everything we’re going to get?”

They agree on five sweaters, ten shirts, ten pairs of pants, and assorted socks and underwear, as well as a high-quality winter coat and several pairs of shoes. (It’s less than Steve would have chosen if he were doing this on his own, but given that the entire point is to emphasize Bucky’s agency, there’s only so far he’s willing to push.) The list helps, but it’s far from easy for Bucky to accept the process; he spends at least the first half an hour removing three quarters of what Steve puts into the cart for him to try, protesting that it’s too expensive or unnecessary.

Most of the employees have remained at a respectful distance except when their help is explicitly requested, but when Bucky and Steve get into a minor tug-of-war over a green pullover that Steve knows damn well Bucky already loves, an older woman cautiously steps toward them. Her smile is gentle, but something in her bearing also screams military to Steve. It’s an oddly comforting combination.

“Oh that would look just lovely with your colouring, dear, and it’s on sale too.” Steve is pretty sure said sale is entirely fictional, but the guilt he feels over accepting an unearned discount just can’t compare with the warm feeling in his stomach as he watches Bucky look down at the sweater with undisguised longing. “Can I make a suggestion?”

“Please,” Steve begs, because he can see Bucky now eyeing a thick wool scarf in the basket and he’s just not ready to go another round over totally necessary winter-wear.

“Why don’t you two take what you’ve picked up already to the change rooms. I have a pretty good eye for sizes, and a decent enough idea of what you’re looking for based on what’s already here, so I can grab some more items for you to consider.” Steve doesn’t even feel guilty for agreeing to that proposition without checking with Bucky first. It’s a bit of a maze to find the change rooms in the centre of the store, but it’s with a distinct feeling of relief that he sits down on one of the leather couches and waits for Bucky to try on his first outfit.
Close to five minutes later, a soft, “Steve?” sounds from the still occupied change room. Steve leaps to his feet, tries the handle, finds it unlocked, and steps inside to find Bucky clad in a form-fitting pair of boot-cut jeans and a maroon v-neck. The other man’s eyes are also screwed shut, and Steve’s gut aches at the evidence of how much Bucky fears accepting this, how worried he is to let himself be considered someone worthy of comfort and pleasure again.

“You look gorgeous,” Steve informs him, striding close enough that he can wrap one arm around Bucky’s waist. With the other hand, he traces patterns across Bucky’s back and chest, pressing the gentle fabric against his skin. Bucky leans backward into the touch, body unwilling to deny itself any longer even if his mind has a bit more of a fight to put up. “You deserve this. You deserve to feel comfortable and happy and handsome, Buck. Alright? Can you open your eyes so you can see that, and see me lookin’ at you, and start trying to believe that I’m right?”

Bucky is decidedly not in his little headspace right now, but there’s something vaguely child-like about the slow way he lets his eyes creep open like a kid trying to sneak a glance at something without letting their parents know they’re awake. He doesn’t seem to look directly at himself at all, but his eyes find Steve’s in the mirror, so Steve tries like hell to pour every ounce of love and support and affection he’s felt for this man over their decades of life together. “You look gorgeous,” Steve repeats, dropping a kiss onto the side of Bucky’s neck.

“Thank you,” Bucky whispers back, smoothing the lines of his sweater and smiling just a little.

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Clint is in a distinctly poor frame of mind when he makes his way into Natasha’s office. Rhodes’ visit has them all a bit on edge, not because the guy is correct and they actually want to isolate Tony from his friends, but because no one’s totally sure what Tony is going to end up telling him and how that will impact them all. And maybe Clint’s just gotten a bit spoiled, because it’s not as if his childhood or early adulthood could be called anything resembling calm or stable, but he just wants to go more than a few days hanging out with his family without any bad guys or magic or interplanetary travel or other bullshit getting in the way.

“Oh, this time I seriously didn’t do anything. Scout’s honour. Swear on my Twitter account.”

“Well since you were never actually in the Scouts I guess I’m glad I have your Twitter as collateral. And you should really try to mask your guilty conscience a bit better, by the way; not every occasion involving you being asked to come up here is a reprimand.” This gentle teasing would be a lot more reassuring if he and Natasha were actually alone, but Clint’s usual chair is currently being occupied by a tall guy in a suit that Clint doesn’t recognize. He strongly considers just turning around and leaving, and Natasha seems to realize it judging from the way she gets up under the guise of shaking Clint’s hand to block his easiest exit. The vent would still be an option, but probably an overdramatic one this early on.

Suit Guy stands, too, and sticks his hand out. He doesn’t shake Clint’s hand like he’s trying to break the bones, which mostly rules out junior SHIELD agent. And he doesn’t look down his nose at Clint with the mix of pity and condescension that most admin-types take on.

“Agent Barton. My name is Damian Collins; I’m a member of the United Nations’ committee in charge of implementing the global components of the Accords.”

“Is there some kind of problem with my signature or something? Because I’m pretty sure Tony’s lawyers will straight up murder me if I do anything but refer you to them.”

“No, not at all. I wanted to speak with you about taking a position with the UN.” Clint very nearly laughs, and does glare at Natasha, because the only sensible interpretation of this
request is that it’s some kind of elaborate joke on her part. And while he would normally applaud her using her new position to prank Clint, or anyone, he’s just not in the mood today.

“President of the Universe election finally went through?” Collins, too, looks over at Natasha, though with a grin that seems far too genuine for him to be a member of any kind of governmental agency.

“You were right, Co-Director.”

“He’s not joking. Clint. Almost all of the suggestions you made about educating and supporting young supes, metas and inhuman were ratified. When the UN reached out to those populations for input about who they’d like to see in charge of those programs, your name was basically the only one that came up. Well, the Parker kid also suggested Tony, but the UN doesn’t want to risk being called assclowns at some point, and they’ve decided they’re slightly less at risk of that if it’s you and not Stark.”

Now that this whole thing might not be a joke, Clint is acutely aware of the stain on his shirt left behind by the soup he had for lunch. He angles himself to mask it the best he can as he sits down.

“Uh, I’m still officially contracted through SHIELD. And historically we haven’t had the best luck with inter-governmental relations.” However justified Fury’s actions during the Battle of New York and Steve and Tasha’s during the takedown of HYDRA, both remain a bit of a stain on SHIELD’s reputation with other agencies. It’s been a massive pain in the ass, especially for operatives in the field who have been cut out of mission-critical intel out of little more than spite.

“We’re willing for this to be a cross-appointed position; SHIELD already has relationships with more of these individuals than anyone else even knew existed, so there doesn’t seem to be any reason to start again from scratch.”

“And what would it involve? I uh—I don’t have much in the way of formal education.” It takes more than it should for Clint to admit it, but Collins doesn’t even blink at the news.

“From what I hear you’d be doing a lot of what you already have been, just on a larger scale. You’d be a liaison between these populations, their families, and all governmental and educational organizations. You’d have all the resources you need to advocate for them. We’d also really like you to take the lead on designing a scalable set of activities for those of them wishing to use their powers to support their communities; it would soothe a lot of folks who are concerned about the potential for these kids to be turned into little more than child soldiers.” Clint doesn’t know if Natasha hinted that this was the button to press or if the innocuous-looking guy came up with that angle on his own, but it definitely works. More than anything else that’s what he’s been fighting for all this time, for these super, meta, and enhanced kids not to lose their childhoods to their abilities. This job might give him the power to affect actual, real change at a level he never dreamed he’d be allowed to operate on.

Clint knows without asking, though, what the other side of the coin is. He’ll no longer be splitting his time, still taking the occasional mission through SHIELD when he’s bored or when a particular job strikes his interest. This post and his work with the Avengers will be more than a full time gig. He’ll still be a SHIELD agent in name, because Natasha won’t want to miss out on the chance to repair some of the relationships she had a hand in damaging when the agency fell, but this move would effectively spell the end of his time as an active agent of SHIELD.

Even if his time spent here has already greatly decreased over the past year or so, the thought of being done altogether leaves Clint oddly emotional. Long before the Avengers, SHIELD had been the first place Clint had ever felt safe. Phil had brought him in, half-feral and hungry and nearly incapable of trust, and he’d turned Clint into someone who knew what it was to have someone to
answer to, someone who truly cared if he lived or died and what kind of shape he came home in. Years later, Clint had done the same for Natasha, turning her death sentence into a chance at a future that extended beyond hours or days. Together the three of them had built something special, something that never should have worked except for the fact that all of their damaged parts had miraculously kind of fit, enough at least that the wounds stopped growing and were given a chance to breathe. Maybe they hadn’t truly started to heal until the Avengers had come together, but they never would have had a chance, none of them, without SHIELD.

He looks back at Natasha, seeking her out not as his superior or even as his teammate, but as one of the two people alive who has always had his back. She stares back, steady and with her lips upturned in a sly little smirk, the one she used to shoot him whenever they’d gotten away with something that really should have blown up in their faces. He answers back with his own shit-eating grin, even if the sentiment is tempered slightly by the way his eyes are burning.

“I’m sure the junior agents will be thrilled to have a go at your records on the range without you constantly one-upping yourself whenever Tony upgrades your tech.” Even if Clint weren’t an expert at translating Natasha-to-regular-human, he’d know what she was telling him: It's okay, you can go. I still have your six and you'll always have mine.

“Oh I’ll still break in and fuck with them. Just think of all the new ways I can mess with them: Clint Barton, World Police. Collins, can I get a badge to that effect?”

“…is it too late for me to give him back?”

“Sorry Collins, you break it you buy it! Now, let’s talk about my entrance music.”

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Even if Tony can recognize the signs that he’s being eased into something from a mile away, he still manages to enjoy hearing tales of Rhodey’s sisters’ latest misadventures, and they spent a good ten minutes ragging on a new CO who has been driving Rhodey up the wall about proposed enhancements to War Machine.

“You’d think they’d have learned from that disaster with Hammer. What does he want to install, the Ex Wife Two?” Rhodey chuckles appreciatively, takes a last sip of his beer and then sets the stein down with a heavy sigh.

“So now you’re caught up with everything going on with me—”

“Except whatever damaged my baby’s shoulder plate enough to leave you wincing every time you pick up your glass.”

“I have not been. You’re just nosey, Stark. Now stop avoiding the damn issue. What the hell’s been going on with you that you’ve been duckin’ me for months, man? Because I got all kinds of ideas floating around my head, and most of them end in me having to figure out how to punch Captain America without breaking my hand. So if it turns out he’s not the one I should be punching, I’d really like to know that now.” Tony steals Rhodey’s last fry and the container of balsamic ketchup, leaning back in his chair and trying to remember how to at least fake nonchalance. (When the hell did it get so hard to put his game face on, anyway?)

“The last guy that came at Cap full-on didn’t just bust his hand up, he broke a couple bones in his arm. So you’ll be highly relieved to know that you won’t be needing to punch Cap, or anyone else for that matter. I’ve just been busy, platypus. Been a lot going on.” That bit of deflection earns Tony nothing but a blank stare, a Mama Rhodes Original look that Rhodey has been slowly perfecting over the years. Even recognizing the bit of manipulation for what it is, Tony still flinches. And then
he goes in with the easiest bit of the news. “I also might have been slightly distracted. I started dating again.”

It says something about Tony’s life when the safest bit of his personal life to share involves an eight person polyamorous relationship, but he’s long since learned not to pause for too long on those kind of assessments. Normal is boring anyway.

To his surprise, Rhodey doesn’t seem to relax all that much at the news. He sights up straight in his seat, staring distantly at the wall in an expression Tony recognizes from college. Rhodey, who nearly everyone manages to forget is a genius in his own right, is putting the pieces together a bit too fast.

“You’ve barely been out of the Tower except to go to the mansion in months, so it has to be one of them.” Rhodey spits the word ‘them’ in a tone he usually reserves for talking about the Patriots, and begins edging towards the end of the booth to get out. That’s when Tony realizes his biggest mistake. The only other occasions on which he’s combined avoided Rhodey with active romantic relationships have been when said relationships were unhealthy, bordering on outright abusive. (Fuck you, Ty Stone! And you, Sunset Bain!) He lunges across the table to make a grab for Rhodey, managing to get a solid grasp on his arm while sending a container of buffalo ketchup to the floor with a splatter. “Let me go. This is un. Fucking. Believable. Supposed to be a bunch of heroes and can’t leave ‘em alone with my best friend for five damn minutes without—they took you to the mansion, Tones!”

And of course Rhodey, who knows Tony’s past better than anyone alive, would seize onto that detail as a sign that something is horribly awry. Tony does—well, did, hate the mansion more than just about anywhere else in the world. He’s pretty sure there had even been a drunken limerick to that effect that he’d added on to throughout their college years.

“The mansion has been gutted, Rhodey. You wouldn’t recognize it. I barely recognize it.” That, at least, gets Rhodey’s attention. He sits back down at the booth with a heavy thud (and this time he does wince, dammit, maybe Tony can get Bruce to look at his shoulder if this conversation actually goes well).

“Explain. Convince me that I’m wrong.”

Tony does his best. He talks for nearly half an hour, almost uninterrupted. He speaks about Bucky’s bravery and all the work he’s been doing to recover and find his purpose in the new century. He rambles about Bruce, his brilliance and his kindness and how he’s getting certified as an MD just so he can take better care of the Avengers. He talks about how often Clint manages to make him laugh, and his surprising skill as a cook, and about how much comfort Phil’s role as a handler has brought Tony. He speaks about Natasha’s quiet methods of support and the actual magical properties of her hot chocolate, and how Thor’s sincerity and excitement about the world after so many years of existing in it makes Tony see everything with new eyes.

“You’re not sayin’ much about Rogers,” Rhodey observes. He’s relaxed back into his seat and finally agreed to order himself a second beer, but he’s also clearly still on the lookout for any warning signs. “You two not gettin’ on?”

“No, we’re, he’s—Steve’s.” The only thing that could make Tony’s stammering school-kid routine worse would be blushing, so naturally that’s what he does. Rhodey laughs.

“Aa. So that’s how it is. You and Rogers, huh?”

“Oh. I mean, yes. Kind of.”
“Kind of? How does one ‘kind of’ date Captain America? He’s not like, afraid to come out or something, is he? I can talk to him about how much the regs have changed—”

“No, it’s not—Steve’s not gay panicking or something. He’s been with Barnes since the 40s. I just… I’m not just seeing him. We’re sort of all, together. It’s a thing. An octagon type thing.” Rhodey’s eyes shoot up to his hairline, and when the waitress comes around again he orders himself a tequila flight.

Rhodey drinks until he’s skirting the boundary between drunk and sauced, asking and then demanding that Tony not answer increasingly hilarious questions about everything from whether Bruce has ever Hulked out in intimate settings to what Black Widow is like on a date. Once he’s assured himself that the team isn’t using Tony for sex or money or some combination thereof, Rhodey is plainly relieved to think that the distance between them has been nothing more sinister than Tony getting a bit too caught up in his new partners and temporarily neglecting an old friend.

Given what Jane had said to them about the Avengers’ bubble, Tony supposes that reading of things is not too far off. But it still feels like a profoundly dishonest representation of who and what these people are to him. Because while they are his partners and his already or soon-to-be lovers, they are also so much more than that. It hadn’t been the romantic or sexual sides of them that had saved Tony’s life; they’d been his…his family first.

Every time he opens his mouth to say that to Rhodey, though, or to at least suggest they had back to the car so they can speak about that element of Tony’s life in privacy, something stops him.

*I’m just your babysitter.*

When you need your diaper changed just let me know, and I’ll get you a bottle.

Rhodey had put up with Tony when he’d been little more than an actual kid. He’d steered him home from drunken frat parties and kept his too-long bangs out of his face when he puked and he’d taken Tony home for Thanksgivings and Christmases when it became obvious that Tony’s own family had very little interest in him. He’d endured Tony at his most immature and obnoxious, but he’s never hidden the fact that he has very little patience for that side of Tony, the one that wants to reject responsibility and duty in favour of comfort and fun and pleasure. How could he possibly understand everything the ageplay has done for Tony? Was it really worth risking everything they’d built over decades together to find out?

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the one week delay getting this out to y’all. I hope the content, which included a couple of moments some of you have been requesting for ages, made up for it!

Thank you, as always, for your kudos and questions and comments. I treasure every bit of feedback I get, and it truly makes me just as excited to return to this verse as I was several hundred thousand words ago. You're the best!
Belonging

Chapter Summary

Rhodey observes the team and tries to comprehend the changes he's seeing in his best friend. Steve and Natasha go on a date.

Chapter Notes

Spoilery Content Notes: Bucky (or rather, James) accidentally outs himself as a little to Rhodey in this chapter. This effectively ends up outing Tony, who would never let his brother be the only one on the proverbial hot seat. Rhodey has questions, and this isn't an area about which he is remotely well-informed, but he is never cruel or unkind to either of them.

The team also remotely monitors Rhodes' ensuing conversation with Tony, which some of you definitely might find intrusive. JARVIS doesn't give them the feed, he just updates them in general terms, but that still might be too much for some of you.

If you need a redacted version of the chapter for either of those reasons, just let me know as it proved a little too tricky for me to give directions about how to read around either of these areas.

Morning in Stark...no, Avengers Tower, usually starts around 8:00. Rhodey's body is basically programmed after so many years of service to be up and ready earlier than that, so he’s usually sipping coffee on the penthouse couch when the rest of the Tower starts to come alive.

Most of the team tends to appear already holding mugs, so they all seem to start out on their own individual levels. But everyone except Coulson makes their way into the penthouse still in pyjamas and with mussed up hair and sleepy eyes. If Tony isn’t already up, someone turns on his coffee pot and asks JARVIS for a report on when the genius went to sleep. As long as it was earlier than about 3 in the morning, someone (usually Rogers, though Coulson also seems fond of this job) goes in to wake him. By the time Tony stumbles his way out of his bedroom, the rest of the team has ensured that there’s something in the works for breakfast. It’s always light; like Rhodey, the Avengers have obviously realized that trying to get anything too substantial into Tones first thing is a losing battle.

There’s some light chatter while everyone loads up their plates and refills their coffees (and teas—Banner and Romanov are both partial to tea), and then they settle in the living room. While everyone else finishes their breakfast, Coulson, who eats with the same efficiency he does everything else, takes out a leather-bound dayplanner and begins running through the team’s day. Some of them, like Rogers and Barton, appear to have pretty variable schedules. Others, like Romanov and Coulson himself, tend to stick to a fairly similar daily routine, though both are occasionally upended by major developments at SHIELD. Thor’s itinerary, when he shows up for these meals at all, is comparatively vague and unclear, but as no one but Rhodey seems surprised by this, he doesn’t
choose to start questioning the godly dude with the bulging muscles who controls lightning.

Tony’s schedule is by far the most baffling at all, for a number of reasons. The first is its very existence; never, in all the time Rhodes has known this man, has the way Tony spends his time approached anything near predictable. In college, Rhody had considered himself highly fortunate if Tony showed up for classes or other scheduled events one time in every five or so. At first Rhodes had tried to drag Tony off to the more important of his engagements, but even finding him often proved a fruitless endeavor. So he had accepted, for the sake of his own sanity, that Tony would simply appear when and where he wanted, like some kind of rich white genie.

As they’d grown, he had also come to recognize and…well, not accept, but reluctantly acknowledge that Tony would always keep some level of distance between himself and the people who cared about him. Not out of malice or spite, nor as some kind of attention-seeking ploy (all of which Rhody had suspected at one point or another.) No, Tony simply had never learned how to trust and rely on another human being completely. He was too much the product of a toxic and distant environment that had treated him not as a child or even really a person, but as a carrier for weighty expectations. Some part of Rhody had hoped that maybe the one good thing to come out of Howard and Maria Stark’s untimely deaths might be the collapse of that unbroachable distance that had been Tony’s armour long before Iron Man, but if anything Tony had seemed to withdraw a little further into himself after that. And so Rhody had been faced with a choice: he could let that gap between Tony and the rest of the world drive him away, as it already had so many of Tony’s peers and ill-fated love interests, or he could simply learn to embrace Tony exactly how he was. Despite Rhody’s drunken, rambling attempts to convince him of the virtues of being a member of a team, that simply wasn’t Tony.

Which was the second reason the Avengers turning into the Brady Bunch and all but filling out one of those family calendars every morning was so damn remarkable. It shouldn’t have worked for any of them, from what Rhodes knew of how damaged and broken they were, but Tony Stark? Committing to being in a specific place at a particular time, and then actually showing up there? Letting other people hold him accountable to those commitments, whether they were directly involved in whatever Tony had planned or not? And that wasn’t even touching the fact that Tony started the majority of his days with meditation, for fuck’s sake, because Rhody’s brain could only accommodate so much before exploding entirely.

This was way bigger than his best friend getting hung up on his new boyfriends and girlfriend. This was a damn seismic shift in everything Rhodes understood about his best friend. And he damn well wasn’t leaving the Tower until he understood what the hell had happened here.

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Thor has cried as a direct result of his brother on a number of occasions. Most of them have been related to deaths and the faking thereof, and by comparison what he’s facing with Loki now should feel easy.

It did not feel the slightest bit easy. The day had brought more tearful, raging diaper changes, and then another challenging rehabilitation session that Loki was certain was evidence he would never recover. Thor himself could see the progress the healers spoke of, but Loki did not wish to hear this, nor any other encouragement. He had closed himself in his bedroom nearly an hour prior, and while Thor could easily force his way inside, it felt nothing short of cruel to remove that freedom from his brother as well.

The truth was, too, that Thor also needed a moment to feel his frustrations in private. He had not lied when he’d told Loki that he wished to be the one to aid him in his recovery. Thor was endlessly grateful for all that had been done by so many to secure Loki’s life and his wellness. But Thor also
missed his family. Loki rarely wanted to be in the company of others, and Jane’s departure meant that Thor was relegated to his own floor the vast majority of the time. Rhodes’ arrival had only exacerbated this; Tony, the only other person whose company Loki enjoyed, had little time to spare to watch over Loki while his friend was so near. Plus Thor could not even speak of his brother’s presence around the Colonel (whom Tony did not wish to have to force to lie to his fellow warriors), so he spent even Loki’s naps on his own level of the Tower. He longed for time with his family, to train and dine and simply pass time playing those excellent video games with Clint or visiting Tony’s metal companions in the workshop.

For a moment, when Phil Coulson stepped out of the elevator and onto Thor’s floors, Thor’s sleep-deprived mind wondered if he had somehow summoned the man there. Suspected spell-casting aside, there the man stood, peering around the room and then at Thor with those eyes that always saw much more than those of the average Midgardian. Thor fought the urge to hide his face in shame, certain that his failings as a caretaker and his desire to escape his brother for even a matter of hours would be far too easily detected by a man with the son of Coul’s powers.

Whatever Coulson saw, he kindly did not voice to Thor. Instead, he strode into the kitchen and began unpacking a bag full of items Thor hadn’t seen hanging from his arm.

“When we started all of this with Tony, we didn’t just leap in, remember?” A container Thor definitely recognizes to be sprinkles is set down on the counter next to a large bag of flour, and he fights the urge to be distracted by the promise of Coulson’s baking, which is another thing truly unparalleled about the man.

“I…yes, that is correct, I suppose.”

“We took our time. We let him ease in to the headspace instead of asking him to jump into it all at once. And I think we’ve all been forgetting that just because Loki was forced into something resembling little headspace for a while, it was also nothing like that at all. He had no choice, no control over it.” Butter, eggs, and cookie cutters emerged from the bag as well, neatly lined up in stark contrast to the chaos of the rest of the floor. “I know that Rhodes’ arrival has made things challenging in a number of ways, including the fact that it is delaying Loki’s opportunity to experiment with entering headspace voluntarily. I thought, though, that maybe we might look at it as a bonus. This could be a chance to start helping ease Loki down, get him somewhere near the right frame of mind. So I thought he and I might do some baking this evening.”

Coulson’s tablet is the last thing he unearths from his bag. He props it open on the counter, revealing images of delectable-looking sugar cookies rolled in multi-coloured sprinkles.

“While we’re doing that, I thought you might be interested in joining the others for movie night. Well it’s not technically a movie, they’re binge-watch a TV show, but the process will be pretty much identical down to the heaving piles of junk food.” Thor wants. He has rarely been so tempted by anything. But then his brother’s head appears, cautiously poking out from around the corner, and Thor’s stomach drops. Loki won’t want to do this. He’d never be comfortable being alone with Coulson for hours, that episode where he snuck off with Clint notwithstanding.

Phil’s glance falls briefly on Loki, Thor is sure of it, but then he goes right back to organizing his ingredients. When he speaks, it’s as if he was never interrupted and has not even noticed Loki’s presence.

“The nice thing about baking is that we don’t even have to talk if he doesn’t want to. I could just read off the ingredients, maybe put a podcast or something on if it gets too quiet.” Loki takes several cautious, wobbling steps into the kitchen (sans walker today, which is another good sign even if Loki can’t see it.) Thor fights back a grin and follows Coulson’s lead.
“But certainly the two of you would be able to eat these marvelous delicacies you will produce? For testing purposes and such?”

“Oh definitely. Probably at least half a dozen. As you say, testing is an integral part of baking.”

“The sprinkles had better be rainbow. The chocolate ones are foul,” Loki declares to neither man in particular, then plops himself onto the floor. Minutes later, once he’s assured himself that his brother is not about to have a sudden and violent change of heart, Thor nearly tears off to his bedroom to change for movie night.

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Steve was in an expensive, well-fitted suit, at a fancy restaurant, and seated across from a beautiful woman. None of these three things were conditions he would have imagined for himself before the serum, back when he’d been small and poor and sickly. But the fact that said woman had been talking about another man for going on ten minutes straight? Yeah, shrimpy Steve had been used to that. Sure, back then it had been Bucky the gals couldn’t get outta their heads, but otherwise his current situation was eerily similar.

“And he just won’t leave. I can barely get two seconds alone with Tony these days, which would be annoying at the best of times let alone with Rhodes constantly staring at me like he knows all the worst things I’ve ever done. How does he even do that anyway? I’ve spent most of my career working for Nick Fury, the Master of the Soul-Destroying stare. How can Rhodes possibly—”

“Because while you and Fury were close, it was still primarily a professional relationship. You want Rhodes’ approval on a purely personal level, because he is dear to someone you care for. The stakes are entirely different.” Natasha’s forkful of asparagus spear stops halfway to her mouth as she considers Steve’s words, and he grins. “What? You told me one day I was going to have to explain your feelings to you. This felt like an opportunity I might never get again.” And then, both because Steve is still hungry and because he wants to see Natasha smile, he leans over and bites the vegetable off her still-dangling fork. He gets the grin he was aiming at, though it’s more rueful than he had imagined.

“I’ve spent our entire evening ranting about this. Steve, I’m sorry. I’ve looked forward to tonight for a long time, and then I spent it—” There’s a string of Russian curses that Steve doesn’t understand but which sound vicious, and then he watches as the Natasha he’s come to know and love starts falling away. She tips her head to the side, exposing the pale curve of her long neck. Then she draws her wrap tighter around her shoulders in a way that ultimately draws more attention to the deep v of her satin dress. This is Natasha as a seductress, a spy able to use her own body as a weapon. Steve stands abruptly, banging his knees on the table and rattling its contents.

“Come on.”

“Steve, what—”

“Clint has gotten me addicted to that Ninja Warrior show, and there’s a gym nearby. Let’s buy the nearest cheap workout clothes we can find and then go give it a try.” Natasha stares at Steve like she’s never seen him before, and then she tips her had back and laughs, a throaty, delighted sound that does way more for Steve’s libido than her most overt displays of sexuality. (Though honestly, it’s not like his libido needs a lot of help these days. Ever since Tony had begun working him through some of his issues with his new body, Steve’s mind is pretty constantly focused on fantasizing about all the members of his team. It’s starting to be a problem.)

They end up making a bit of a spectacle out of themselves in the end. Neither of them thinks to give Heather a call to warn her what they’re planning to do, and the gym is framed by a wall of windows
that looks out onto a busy street. Which means that it’s under an hour before the place is flooded with onlookers taking video on cell phones and erupting into increasingly raucous applause every time one of them does something particularly outrageous. The other gym-goers are amazingly good sports about it, though, especially once Natasha deftly starts pulling them into hers and Steve’s workout, having them introduce themselves to the hundreds of cameras pointed out them and inviting them to show off their best moves. By the end of the session, even Steve has broken a sweat, and even though cameras are still flashing and at least one person has proposed marriage to both he and Natasha, he also feels kind of like a regular guy, a part of the city in a way he hasn’t been since he’d come out of the ice.

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It’s been nearly a week since Rhodey has arrived, and Tony has just started to put his guard down. He’d been on tenterhooks there for the first little while, certain that so much as looking at one of his teammates the wrong way would give everything he was keeping back away. It hadn’t helped that Rhodey had been on such high alert for those first few days, either; the guy hadn’t even tried to disguise the fact that he was monitoring all of them, and he took great delight in making Steve and Bucky call him ‘Colonel’ and other small acts of trolling. On one hand, Tony had never been so proud of his Honey Bear because he knew damn well that Rhodey, like most Americans from their generation, had adored Steve as a kid. But it was also nearly impossible to relax when Rhodey was prowling around the place like a predator waiting to pounce on anyone who so much as breathed the wrong way near Tony.

And it’s not like Rhodes has totally let his guard down. Just this afternoon he’d grilled Tony for close to half an hour about Steve and Natasha’s upcoming date.

“It’s not just that you let him go around with the others because you think you don’t deserve him, right? Because if that’s what he’s tellin’ you, Tones…”

“So do they like, come back here and report back to all of you? How does this work? And you’re really not jealous at all?”

It turns out love-octagons are not exactly easy to explain to people outside of them, but Tony tries his best to keep Jane’s warning about the bubble in mind and answers even Rhodey’s most outrageous questions to the best of his abilities. And it’s finally paying off. Tonight, he, Rhodey and most of the team are settling in to binge Jane the Virgin (Clint’s choice, and he does not want comments on it thank you very much) and mainline junk food. Rhodey is drinking and joking with Clint and he appears at ease for the first time since his arrival.

Thor exchanges an uneasy glance with Tony and then rises to his feet.

“Bucky? Fare you well?” There had been nothing for Barnes to collide with on his way down, and
it’s not like the super-soldier is particularly easy to injure, but he still isn’t moving. And then Tony hears it.

A sniffle.

Bucky never cries. Even when he wants to, during sad movies or at the mention of long-lost friends, it’s just something his body pretty much refuses to do after decades of training designed to repress and punish overt shows of emotion. Bucky never so much as wells up.

But James does.

“JARVIS, call Bruce. Right now.” Tony’s heart is thudding painfully in his chest, but he’s never once ignored his brother when he’s in distress and he sure as hell isn’t about to start now. Rhodey, who has no idea what he’s going on but isn’t anywhere near foolish enough to miss the sudden shift in the atmosphere of the room, reaches out to grab Tony’s arm on his way by, but Tony dodges and shakes his head. He comes to kneel beside Bucky, who peers out at him tearfully, face still half-hidden by hair.

“Want Daddy,” he sniffs.

“I know, bud. And I don’t blame you. But Bruce is on his way, alright? He gives pretty good snuggles, and I bet he can patch up anything that might be sore.”

“I didn’t mean to—I just—I never fall ‘cept when I’m—I’m—” Little Tony’s mind fills in. It’s not like he’d been pissed at Bucky—James—anyway, but the explanation made a lot of sense. In his adult headspace Bucky is almost unnerving graceful, so it’s not all that surprising that his mind has come to associate falling and other minor calamities with being little.

And, frankly, this has probably been building for a while. Tony’s control over his own headspace is rigid enough that he hasn’t come close to slipping while Rhodey’s been in the Tower, but he’s definitely missed it. Bucky’s ability to regulate his shifts between Big and little is far more tenuous at the best of times, and Rhodey’s presence has clearly pushed him to his limits.

“It’s okay, James. You didn’t do anything wrong, you hear me? Pa—Bruce is on his way, and soon Steve’ll be home soon too.” While James takes another shaky inhalation, Tony sneaks a glance at the rest of the team. Most of them look almost frozen in place, unsure of what to do and attempting to follow Tony’s lead. The way Thor’s mouth is hanging fully open, a half-chewed mouthful of Nerds inside of it, would be funny if the situation were any different.

Eventually, though, Bruce arrives, and his appearance seems to get the team back into action. Thor strides over to explain what’s happened in a whisper. Clint gets off the couch and joins Tony and James on the ground, offering James a gummy worm and quietly reassuring him that he’s being ‘like, hella brave, kiddo.’ Clint reaches out to clasp Tony on the shoulder as well, then jerks his hand backward and leaves it awkwardly hanging in midair. They’re saved from the lingering discomfort of the moment by Bruce, who puts a Captain America bandaid on Bucky’s skinned knee and gently convinces him to join Bruce on his own floor. Clint and Thor plainly want to stay with Tony, but he silently shakes his head and they get the message just fine. Thor, though, doesn’t stop himself from pressing a kiss to Tony’s forehead before he goes, and he reminds JARVIS audibly that they’ll be just a floor away if they’re needed.

When Tony finally forces himself to turn around and look at his best friend, Rhodey is exactly where he’d been when Tony had last looked: standing in the middle of living room, staring at the spot on the floor where Barnes had been like it holds the secrets of the universe.
“Is he stable?” Rhodey’s voice is harsh and clipped, the way it hasn’t been since…hell, maybe since Tony’s disastrous birthday party in Malibu. Tony can hear the hurt in it, and the fear, and god what he’d give to be in little headspace with Bucky, to have his Daddies or Papa or Mama sort this out for him. “If you’ve been lying to everyone and he’s still in active psychological distress you can’t just hide it, Tones—”

“It’s not that. Rhodey I swear it’s…it’s not that.”

“Then what the hell is it? What just happened?”

Tony knows without having to ask that James wouldn’t be upset if Tony omitted certain facts from the story to make it sound as if the ageplay is his alone. This is the guy who once chastised a stair, complete with finger-wagging, for allowing Tony to stub his toe on it; he’d do anything to protect his brother from embarrassment or hurt. Which is, of course, precisely why Tony can’t convince himself to save face at James’ expense.

That decision is the easy one to make. What’s harder to decide is what to say next, how to go about explaining something Tony is equal parts grateful for and ashamed of. (Maybe less equal these days, he’s really working on the shame thing, but it’s a process and not a binary state.)

“Tones.”

“Just gimme a second here, Honey Bear. I, this is…okay, can you try to look a little less like you’re about to march into battle? This is hard enough as it is and I need to feel like I’m talking to my friend and not the Colonel.” Rhodey makes a show of raising his hands in the universal ‘surrender’ gesture, and then sits back down on the couch, patting the spot next to him. Tony sinks gratefully down into it, trying to remember all of Bruce’s relaxation tactics from their meditation sessions. (Long spine; focus on your breathing; scan your body.) “You heard what Barnes said, yeah? Who he asked for?”

Rhodey nods, his expression impassive. “He needs a thing, sometimes. To be able to…to accept the kinds of care he needs to feel okay after everything that’s happened to him, he needs a different headspace. He needs to feel…small, and safe, and like he doesn’t need to be in control.”

“I mean, I’m a soldier Tones. I’ve seen people cope in all kinds of ways. Shouldn’t they be keeping that kinda stuff in the bedroom, though? The whole Daddy thing? If they’re doing it often enough that Barnes is confusing the contexts—”

“It’s not about sex. I mean it can be, for some people, but it isn’t for Barnes.” Tony takes a long, deep breath and stares down at his hands. “Or for me.”

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“JARVIS, on a scale of one to ten how pissed is Tony going to be if we spy on this conversation? I feel like I’m gonna lose my mind down here.” Clint isn’t proud of the request, okay? He gets that listening in on his partner and his partner’s friend during a private conversation is creepy and invasive, and it’s not something he would normally even consider. But Tony is also his little, damn it, and if the conversation between he and Rhodes goes where Clint suspects it’s going to, he doesn’t want that part of Tony remotely at risk of being harmed, even unintentionally, by his closest and oldest friend.

Next to him, Thor rattles through Clint’s cupboards and emerges with a box of Gushers. The guy is such a stress eater.

“I would not feel comfortable projecting the penthouse feed without better cause, Agent Barton. However, I am willing to provide general updates, if this feels to you like an adequate compromise.” Clint nods tightly, half grateful and half irritated by JARVIS’s increasing willingness to exercise his
own judgement and agency. Then he steals the blue Gusher from Thor’s palm and pops it in his mouth. “Sir has chosen to share not just Sergeant Barnes’ involvement in ageplay, but his own as well. Colonel Rhodes appears to be taking the news relatively well, though it is plainly coming as quite a shock; he was silent for 23.7 seconds after Sir’s disclosure. The Colonel has asked several questions seeking clarification, which Sir is answering with 20 percent more candour and at least 34 percent less snark than usual. I believe they are both trying their best, Agent Barton.”

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“Is this why you and Pepper broke up?” In Tony’s imaginary versions of this conversation, he’s anticipated most of what Rhody has asked so far. This one, though, throws him for a bit of a loop, mainly because he’s not entirely sure what the answer is. He wishes he could flop all over Rhody like he usually does, but he’s not entirely sure how his friend would take any kind of contact just now. And Tony definitely doesn’t want to risk being rejected.

“No. I mean, sort of. I—not directly. Ugh. Pep and I broke up because my life sort of…consumed hers. She was my assistant, my friend, my CEO, my girlfriend, my everything. And the more she became to me, the more I watched it drain her. Especially because I was never able to give her much back, not the things she needed anyway. With them, with the team, they’d already seen me…unimaginably vulnerable, all the bullshit stripped away. And they wanted that part of me, but they also wanted the part that’s Iron Man. For probably the first time, they didn’t need me to choose one or the other.”

Rhody winces at that. Tony had mainly meant Pepper (who had wanted all of Tony’s softer intimacies without any of the risk and fear involved in his life as Iron Man) and Howard (who had only ever been interested in nurturing the strong, unyielding parts of his son), but when he opens his mouth to try to backtrack, Rhody shakes his head.

“That’s why you didn’t tell me, right? Because I was so hard on you there, before Iron Man, and then again when you were dying?”

“I…not consciously, honestly. I was just…fuck, I’ve felt so ashamed of needing something like this Rhody, I had no intention of every telling anyone when I was half focused on trying to make that part of me disappear.”

“You’re an idiot,” Rhody informs him. “Look, man, it’ll take me some time to take all this in, but that doesn’t mean I’m judging or something. You’re healthier and happier than I’ve seen you in…I don’t know, ever, probably. I don’t much care what it takes to get you there as long as you aren’t hurting yourself or someone else.” Tony knows that’s probably the best response he could have hoped for, and definitely kinder than Rhody was obligated to be. Some part of him, though, is left feeling oddly bereft. Then Rhody clears his throat, and adds very quickly, “And maybe next time I see something cute, I could send it over here? I do have excellent taste in toys.”

Having been present for several trips where Rhody has been shopping for his nieces and nephews, Tony can definitely attest to the fact that that’s true. He imagines Rhody spending hours scouring a toy store (the guy is extremely picky about his toy selection process) and choosing something special just for Tony. The thought makes him feel warm and kind of glowy all over.

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“Update, JARVIS?” Bruce makes that a request in a whisper, because James is fast asleep in the bed next to him. The boy had sobbed for nearly an hour, the shock of his sudden drop into headspace combined with the stress of Steve’s absence and his unintentional revelation of their ageplay to Rhodes rendering him almost inconsolable. But Bruce had pulled out all the tricks he’d learned at the mansion. He’d given James a bath, applied a new band-aid, and dressed him in his favourite
watermelon footed pyjamas. While the circumstances of his boy’s drop into headspace had been far from ideal, Bruce was left feeling immensely grateful for the warm, trusting body pressed tightly against his own. It had felt good to be able to care for someone when he couldn’t do so for Tony.

“I…believe Sir and Colonel Rhodes have concluded with the topic for this evening. They are currently watching re-runs of Doctor Who and fighting over a package of Goodies candies. Are there any messages you would like me to pass on to either of them?” There’s a lot JARVIS isn’t saying about how or if things were resolved, but Bruce is already skating a delicate line here as far as personal privacy goes, so he decides to follow the AI’s lead.

“Just…just tell Tony that if he needs anything at all to please let us know. Otherwise we’ll stay out of their way tonight and see both he and Rhodes tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

We're nearing the end of things here, folks. And I'm already missing this verse baha. Thank you so much for the kudos, comments and questions that always make writing this series such a complete joy. You are a wonderful group of readers.
Preparations

Chapter Summary

We begin by catching up on Loki and Phil's baking adventures, and then learn the outcome of Rhodey and Tony's conversation.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: Loki's sensory problems are unexpectedly triggered in this chapter. Coulson supports him through it and things end up fine, but if it's something you want to skip, avoid the first section of this chapter.

I can't think of any other potential areas of concern in the chapter, but as always drop me a line if you have questions or would like tags/notes to be added.

Roughly half an hour into his and Phil’s baking adventure, Loki is curled up in a ball in the corner of the kitchen. The god of mischief’s hair is covered in almond flour and egg yolk, and he’s sobbing quietly into his arms. This is roughly when Phil starts to believe he might really be in over his head.

Fortunately (or perhaps unfortunately, depending on how this goes), Coulson also has decades of experience with being thrown into situations that no one could truly prepare for. So he tries to wipe his hands on an already saturated washcloth, gives it up as a bad job, and walks over to kneel in front of Loki. Snot and tears are mixing with the flour to form a kind of paste, and Phil despairs at the idea that giving Loki a bath is not going to be an option at this juncture.

The mystery of all of this is that things had started out pretty well. Loki had braved his brother’s departure fine, and had seemed happy enough to have a task to focus on to help draw attention away from the awkwardness of being alone with Phil as an adult. They’d reviewed several cookie recipes together, finally settling on a simple snickerdoodle and a peanut butter and jelly thumbprint. Loki had taken Phil at his word that he wasn’t required to talk much, but Coulson had kept up a gentle prattle, describing what they were doing and what their next steps would be. Just as he would have done with Tony or James when they were in headspace, Phil given Loki the child-friendly jobs like mixing ingredients or sifting flour, and Loki had taken to them with gusto, even managing to snicker quietly at himself after an overzealous stir had sent a wave of white sugar and flour everywhere.

Then, out of nowhere, Loki had stuck his hands in the bowl (almost certainly intending to keep up the time honoured tradition of stealing a bit of raw batter to eat for himself.) Phil had turned away to face the stove, permitting the (potential) little the fiction that he was sneaking something past a caretaker. By the time Phil had looked back, the bowl had been flung across the room, smacking loudly against the tile backsplash, and Loki had been frantically shaking his dough-covered hands in the air and making panicked, grunting noises. Before Phil could even sort out what had happened, the boy had taken off, stumbling as quickly as his wobbling legs would carry him. Which brought them here.
“You still don’t have to talk to me, Loki, I’m not going back on my word. But I’m going to need you to nod or shake your head while I talk to you, is that something you can do for me?” The movement is barely visible, but Loki makes a motion just definitive enough to be recognizable as a nod. “Great. Are you hurt or in any way in pain?” Shake. “Alright. That’s good, that’s really good. Do you want me to call Thor?” There’s a longer pause before the response this time. Loki is really thinking about it. But then he shakes his head again. “Okay. Then I won’t. But we’ll need to sort this through together then. Did…did you remember something? Is that what scared you?” Shake.

Phil throws out several other interpretations of the situation, all of which garner a negative response from Loki. Frustrated, he pieces the scene back together in his mind. Loki had been fine when Coulson had turned away. He’d stuck his hand in the bowl…and then what? Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the man make another of those shaking motions with his hand, and it finally clicks.

“Did you not like the texture of the dough?” Loki blinks, frowning in confusion. “What I mean by that is did something about it not feel good on your hand? You seem like you’re trying to get it off, and I had just added the wet and dry ingredients together, so I’m wondering if maybe it felt bad to you somehow. Like you just wanted it off of you as quickly as possible, and that’s why you threw the bowl?”

Loki’s eyes go almost comically wide, and he nods frantically. Grinning at the small victory that doesn’t feel small at all, Coulson leaves, retrieves and wets a clean cloth, and then kneels back down on the kitchen floor. Telegraphing his movements widely so that Loki can refuse if he wishes, he takes one of the other man’s hands in his own and presses the cloth down in wide, gentle circles, removing every trace of batter. Loki watches him warily at first, but by the time Phil slides the cloth between each of his fingers to get at any lingering bits of the mixture, Loki’s eyes are closed and his head is tilted back. The other hand doesn’t truthfully have much on it, but Coulson washes it with the same gentle care.

As he does, both his Daddy-brain and his hyper-organized planner-brain are running wild. Tony and James both have a couple of sensory triggers themselves, though nothing this severe. They could get all three of the boys some sensory-focused toys, maybe even set up a whole room dedicated to that purpose. It could be a way for the boys to get ongoing support with what appears to be a shared challenge, while re-creating something like the camaraderie that Tony and James had so enjoyed about the nursery in the mansion. Phil has the room halfway mapped out and is planning a visit to some of his favourite Pinterest pages before he looks down at the smaller hands in his own and realizes with a start that the bulk of the reservations he had about including Loki in their family are already gone. His instincts had recognized Loki for what he was before Phil’s brain had fully caught up: he’s the man who took Phil’s life, yes. That will always be a part of their story. But he’s also a man who has been deeply wounded, broken at the very level of his soul, and is trying to do better, be better, by putting an almost unimaginable faith in the people surrounding him. And this time, Loki is making that choice all on his own.

Unable to help himself, he gives Loki’s hands a gentle squeeze, smiling when the other man meets his eyes.

“Alright. What do you say I give the kitchen a quick clean and then we try that recipe again, hmm?”

“I thought—” When Loki realizes he’s speaking he stops, clapping a hand over his mouth as an actual child might do, and Phil can’t quite hold back his chuckle.

“What, that a little mess would be the end of it? No way. I’ll get this sorted, and then we can either get you some gloves or just make sure you don’t touch the dough once the wet ingredients are added. We got this, buddy.”
Steve wakes up with a gloriously crowded bed and a face-splitting grin. Natasha is on the opposite side of the mattress, clad in one of Steve’s t-shirts and a pair of red lace panties. When they’d initially returned to his rooms he’d intended to investigate all aspects of Natasha including that underwear a lot more thoroughly, but they’d done little more than some slight necking when someone else had come barreling, full-speed, into their room yelling,

“DADDY DADDY DADDY!”

James had been closely followed by an apologetic Bruce, who had briefly explained the events of the evening while James clung to Steve for dear life.

“I tried to explain that you might want the rest of the evening to yourselves, but as soon as JARVIS announced that you were back in the Tower—”

“You did exactly the right thing, Bruce. Thank you for taking care of him.” Bruce had departed, still blushing (how the guy could go from awkward, shuffling scientist to super Dominant sex god would always be a mystery to Steve) shortly thereafter. James remained affixed like glue, his arms wrapped tightly around Steve’s neck and his face buried against Steve’s shoulder. “My little star. You were so good and so brave for Bruce. I’m so proud of you.” From the corner of his eye, Steve had watched with only a hint of selfish regret as Natasha smoothed out the lines of her dress, slid an errant curl back in place behind her ear, and began look for her heels. “I know it might not be the night we planned but you could always stay if you wanted? And if that’s alright with James, of course.”

Having two Bigs to snuggle instead of one had turned out to be more than alright with James, who was now sprawled out contentedly between Steve and Natasha, hogging most of the comforter. Steve leaned down and pressed a kiss into his boy’s hair, just because he could, because he’d somehow gotten lucky enough to have all of this and he was going to hold on to every blissful second.

It might have been seconds or minutes later that JARVIS announced,

“Colonel Rhodes wishes to speak with you before he departs, Captain.” Neither James nor Natasha so much as twitch at the noise, which is rather miraculous given what light sleepers both are. It also makes convincing himself to get out of bed to meet Rhodes all the more challenging. When he makes his way into the kitchen, the man is already there, dressed in uniform and standing over Steve’s coffee pot.

Rhodes knows, now, about all of it. The closest Steve has come to that kind of outside scrutiny is Jane, who has never truly been on the outside, and it’s oddly nervewracking. He could give a damn what any stranger of the street would say, but this isn’t a stranger. This is Tony’s oldest friend, and if there’s going to be judgement or disgust in his expression, Steve doesn’t want to see it. He gathers mugs and gives the cream in the fridge a sniff, mainly for something to do with his hands. (Though it turns out to be good that he tested the cream first. With how much time they all spend moving between floors, sometimes the perishables in their individual fridges don’t get used, and his coffee cream appears to be a victim of that trend this week.)

“If you want cream I’ll need to pop upstairs—”

“Black is fine. You get used to drinking it pretty much any way in the service—but then you’d know that, I guess.”

“You do what you have to, that’s for sure,” Steve agrees. “After the serum my caloric requirements
went through the roof but there wasn’t all that much available to meet it. I ate so many K-rations in a
day that just the sight of the box made me want to heave after a while.” When he’s not interrogating
the team the way he has spent much of the past week or so doing, Rhodes turns out to be easy to talk
to, and they trade stories about the many indignities of war most of the way through their first cups of
coffee. When Rhodes returns from refilling their mugs and slides Steve’s across the table towards
him, the renewed stiffness in his posture is all the indication Steve needs that they’re about to arrive
at the real purpose of the man’s visit.

“I’ve known Tones forever. I’ve been there for the vast majority of the events that have shifted his
life: his parents dying, his capture in Afghanistan, him nearly dying on multiple occasions, I’ve pretty
much seen it all. And I’ve never seen him so changed by anything as he has been by knowing the lot
of you.”

“The ageplay doesn’t—he’s still Tony,” Steve rushes to explain, wincing as the coffee he swallowed
too quickly sears the lining of his throat. Rhodes shakes his head.

“Not what I mean. It’s not about that, man, or I guess maybe it is but not—it’s not just that. He’s
never really let anyone in, not even me. Until you. And I need you to know that, because I need you
to understand just how badly it’ll break him if this goes wrong and y’all walk out the door one day.
Especially you.”

Steve doesn’t bother asking why he’s being singled out. He knows all too well, now, that he has
been a near-constant presence in Tony’s life long before coming out of the ice. Captain America had
been disciplinarian and role model and golden child in Tony’s household, and they have learned how
to manage that past, but there is simply no use in pretending that they had ever been able to start with
a truly clean slate.

“None of us have any intention of going anywhere. He’s…he’s not the only one who’s been
changed by all of this. I had nothing in this century, nothing at all. Not until I met him.”

Rhodes takes a long swallow of his own coffee. His free hand comes up to rub at the back of his
neck; it’s the first indicator Steve has really seen that this conversation is making the other man as
anxious as it’s making him, and it’s honestly kind of a relief.

“As for the ageplay specifically…listen, I only know what I saw, and what Tones told me, which is
honestly not a lot. But I also don’t have to understand it to tell you this much: if you ever hurt Tony
as a grown-ass man, you and I might have words, but that’ll pretty much be the end of it. Tony has
been pissing people off for as long as I can remember and I have long since stopped trying to manage
his relationships for him. But if I ever find out that you’ve harmed him in any way when he’s—little,
or whatever, we’ll be having a lot more than words, Captain. You feel me?”

“Yessir.” Rhodes studies Steve unapologetically for close to a minute, seeking out any sign of a lie.
Then he nods and stands. Steve’s military training has him instantly on his feet too; Rhodes is, after
all, a Colonel. They shake hands, and Rhodes turns toward the elevator. Steve is clearing their mugs
from the table when the man turns back around and adds,

“I want pictures.”

“I…I’m sorry, what?”

“Of him, when he’s…you know. As long as he’s cool with it, I’d like the occasional picture. I
practically raised him through his teenage years, and I spent at least half that time wishing I’d gotten
to him sooner. It’d be nice to see him…nevermind, ’s stupid.”
“As long as Tony gives me permission I’ll email a folder full tomorrow.” The smile Rhodes answers with is a complicated thing. It’s undoubtedly sincere, but there’s something just a little bit wistful and sad about it too. (Steve decides then and there that he’s going to make this Uncle thing work even if he has to sit on both Rhodes and Tony.)

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As it often does, watching War Machine take to the air and fly away from the Tower gives Tony mixed feelings. Even despite the numerous complications it had caused, it had been amazing to have his friend here for so long. He fit here so well, a strong enough personality that he could get along with the team without being swallowed up or changed by them. And his visit had reminded Tony, too, that there was more to him than just his relationship with the Avengers. He loved them all to a ridiculous degree, of course, and he wasn’t unhappy with the way the contours of his life had shifted and changed to accommodate them. There were parts of him, though, that didn’t belong to his family, like the way he and Rhodey could geek out over engineering together for hours or the semi-coordinated dance moves they’d made up in their dorm and could still remember.

Being reminded of those things had felt good, and right, and both Tony and Rhodey had committed to not letting it go so long between visits again. But it still came as a bone-deep relief to feel a pair of arms that turned out to be Bruce’s slide around his waist. Bruce smells like his cinnamon soap, and his skin is still slightly heated from his recent shower. Tony lets his head loll lazily back against the other man’s chest.

“Mmm. Hey you.”

“Hey back. Rhodey get off alright? Everything go okay last night?”

“JARVIS already told me that all of you are dirty dirty spies, Banner, no use feigning ignorance now.” Bruce’s hands curl into fists, and then his fingers start dancing their way across Tony’s hips, unerringly hitting every single spot that’s the most ticklish. He laughs and wiggles and finally begs for mercy when it becomes too much. He’s breathless and flushed when he turns around to face Bruce, and he leans up to kiss him without any further thought. Bruce returns it easily, his tongue stroking its way into Tony’s mouth almost lazily, like they have all the time in the world. And they do, Tony realizes almost giddily.

That giddiness ends up lasting through most of the next several days. Steve finishes his last exam the next afternoon, and the team throws a huge party complete with food and dorky decorations. Steve protests that he’s only finished a semester, it’s not like he’s graduating, but he shuts up when Bucky shoves nearly an entire piece of cake in his mouth. Thor and Loki are in attendance, too, and while the latter is quiet he’s also closer to little headspace than Tony has seen him since the healing spell. Which gives Tony an idea.

He waits until the next day to approach Steve. Tony is nervous and halfway down himself by the time he actually makes it to Steve’s floor; he finds Steve on the couch playing Stardew Valley, some kind of farming sim that the rest of the team is obsessed with. For a couple of minutes, Tony just watches Steve’s little character plant seeds and battle weird monsters in caves and flirty awkwardly with townspeople. The graphic are terrible but in a kind of delightful way, and it will never not be entertaining to watch Steve play video games. Eventually, though, once he’s put his character to bed, Steve puts his controller down and faces Tony directly.

“You just visiting for fun, or do you need something?”

“I. Um. Can we talk about some things? Do you have time?” Steve cocks his head and surveys Tony in that guileless, open way that’s a million times less subtle than when any of the spies in the Tower try it, and yet somehow just as effective. He easily finds what he’s looking for, and his smile softens
in that way it only does when Tony is little or nearing headspace.

“I always have time for you, sweetheart. You want some juice or something?”

“Yes please,” Tony agrees quickly. His mouth feels suddenly dry. Steve brings back some kind of blueberry-aci mix that actually tastes pretty good, and it’s only the fact that it’s in a sippy cup that stops Tony from downing it in a single gulp. “Um, so first, Ajay talked to you guys, right? He said he was going to draw something up for the team about the conversation he had with me’n James.”

“He did,” Steve agrees. “Just the broad strokes, though. You wanna fill in some of the details for me?”

“Um. I’ve been tryn’a work on feeling better about being little. Some of that is my own stuff to deal with, but I…there’s a couple things I thought of that might help.” Steve nods encouragingly, reaching out to pull Tony fully into his lap the second Tony’s juice is finished. Tony rests his head in its familiar place above Steve’s heart and lets the comforting tha-thump work its usual magic. “Um. This first one’s gonna sound kinda weird, but I just…it would help if you guys stop reminding me about the safeword all the time.”

“…okay, you’re right that I wasn’t expecting that one. Can you talk to me about why that’s something you’d like?”

“Um, so right when Loki first got here I felt…kinda jealous. Not the way I sometimes felt about James at first, not just because you guys loved him too, but because of the way he’d come to his headspace. He didn’t have to feel silly or ashamed of being little, he just was, and I wanted that sometimes. I know what happened to him was awful, and it was terrible of me to think it, but I just…it’s never been simple for me, wanting and needing these things. I just wanted it to be simple. I didn’t want to have to be aware all the time that this was a choice I was making.”

“So you…you want us to not give you a choice? Tony, I don’t know if I could just—” When Tony dares sneak a peak, Steve’s face is pinched and tight the way it usually only gets when he’s heard a joke he regards as cruel, or when anyone mentions the Dodgers being in LA. Tony hates that face, and hates himself for communicating this so poorly. (See, Ajay? This is why you don’t tell people things you want and need!)

“Not like that. If I actually do safeword I expect all of you to respect it just like always. I just. I want to be able to push back sometimes, like a kid, without constantly being reminded that I’m ultimately the one in control of all of this.”

“…oh.” Like the sun peeking out from behind a patch of clouds, Steve’s expression clears, and he pulls Tony tighter against him. “That makes sense. You’re almost rigidly well-behaved in your headspace. If this is something that would make you feel more secure testing boundaries a little bit then I’d be all for it—though I’m warning you now that Phil will absolutely want to review some of your hard and soft limits for headspace before he agrees to something like that. And before you ask, I don’t plan on stopping him.” Tony makes a face for the sake of it, but he’d already been anticipating that reaction from Coulson, honestly, and maybe reviewing things now that they’ve been playing for a while wouldn’t be the worst thing anyway. “What else?”

"I know I normally let you guys choose all the stuff for when I’m little, but I…I sorta looked around some places and found some stuff. I was going to just buy it, but JARVIS, um, said you guys might not want me paying for it. Which, now that I’m saying it it sounds greedy and stupid and I’m gonna get you for this, J—"

“Hey. Hey. Stop wiggling and listen to me for a second. JARVIS was a hundred percent right! You
provide almost everything for us when you’re Big, we really enjoy getting the chance to give
something back. And even if that wasn’t true, babies don’t buy their own things, sweetheart.”
Despite the endearment, Steve’s tone is a firmer one than he’d usually use with Tony, and almost
instantly it feels like Tony has gone from skating around the edges of his headspace to feeling it
encompass him. He must make that stupid purring sound the others all love, because Steve chuckles.
“Sweet boy. Want to show me the things you want?”

“We don’t have to get all of it—”

“Dada’s the one who will decide that. Just—gimme one sec.” Steve has to get up to retrieve a tablet,
causing Tony to grumble, but he returns with a huge bowl of market-fresh fruit as well, so Tony
elects to forgo his indignation in favour of diving in with both hands. He shows Steve the cloth
diapers first, because they’re the things he’s most nervous about.

“I know it’s sorta weird, but disposables are just…not awesome for the planet. And they make these
ones in big sizes in some cute prints, and I just thought—”

“Oh my gosh Tony. Oh my—is that a skunk patterned one? Oh that’s adorable, and the one with
unicorns too. You’re going to look so cute with a puffy little cloth butt—DOES THAT HAVE
PUPPIES?”

His Dada’s unbridled and clearly sincere enthusiasm is enough to wipe away the majority of Tony’s
anxieties, and they spend a highly enjoyable couple of hours putting together carts full of everything
that had been on Tony’s wish lists, plus many items that hadn’t. (Steve doesn’t want to put the orders
through until he gives the others a chance to take a look too, but Tony feels like there’s going to be
barely anything left in any online storefronts once they’re done with them, so he can’t really see what
else the rest of their family could possibly want to add.)

“Wait, what’s with the decorations you saved here? Are we throwing a party?” Tony realizes with a
start that he’d forgotten what he’d originally come down here to discuss.

“Oh yeah! I had some ideas about Loki’s first day as a little…”

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Thor wakes up early the morning of the celebration they’re throwing. He isn’t quite aware just how
early until he stumbles into the kitchen and finds it fully cloaked in darkness. The clock reads 3:48,
and he’s entirely certain that he will never manage to successfully return to sleep.

After a check to ensure that Loki’s rest remains undisturbed, Thor makes his way into one of his
floor’s spare bedrooms and digs through a deep closet, emerging with a heavy box full of everything
Loki had accumulated prior to being healed. After the spell Thor had shoved all of it into the first
open and unused space he could find, determined to not give his brother another reason to be
angered or embarrassed. He has the unexpected luxury of time on his hands now, however, so he
sorts through each item with love and care, stopping frequently to recall stolen moments of childish
laughter and Loki’s warm, trusting body pressed against his own.

The wheels of Loki’s walker announce his arrival before he’s actually visible to Thor, but it still
comes as somewhat of a shock that so much time has apparently passed. Thor has packed away most
of the items he’d found, wishing to avoid overwhelming his brother, but he’s left out several items of
clothing as well as Loki’s stuffed cat. The other man regards the small collection with a mostly
impassive expression, which Thor counts as a victory at this point.

“Before you try to convince me to wear any of that, or take me down to see the others, there’s
something I need to tell you.” Launching the nearest object at Loki to ensure he’s actually physically
present is basically a reflex by now, though Thor still feels a little guilty about throwing Aslan at his brother. Loki simply laughs and settles the stuffed animal on his own shoulder. It perches there regally as it so often did before, and Thor cannot defeat the urge to beam at the sight. “Not that. I…back home, on Asgard, I…permitted what was done to me.”

“You—you what?”

“Now, to be fair I did not think even Father’s associates would resort to anything as vile as soul magic. But I realized that Father had engineered an opportunity for my potential escape. He’d wanted to ensure that he could both avoid further responsibility for my ‘rehabilitation’ and the potential that I might find somewhere more sympathetic. I believe I was to be tragically killed in the struggle, actually, though I admit that’s mere suspicion at this point.” Sparks flicker from the tips of Thor’s fingers, but his brother simply rolls his eyes at the sight. “Oh put the light show away. What I’m trying to tell you is that I allowed it to happen because I…I think some part of me knew you would find me and care for whatever was left of me. So regardless of whether this mad experiment of yours actually works today, I suppose I wished to…express my gratitude. For proving me correct.”

Thor still struggles, sometimes, with words. When he can, he blames it on the limitations of the All Speak, but the truth is that he is simply neither as learned nor as wise as many of those he surrounds himself with. He has nothing to offer in return for this admission, certainly nothing that could match the faith and trust Loki has just demonstrated. Thor does, however, seize his brother in the tightest hug he can manage, swinging him around the room heedless of the aggrieved yowls his brother makes in return.

Chapter End Notes

Did I mention you’re the best readers anyone could ever ask for? Because you are. You’re all generous and kind and brilliant, and you comments and kudos continue to bring me so much joy. Thanks for hanging out in this small corner of fandom with me.
Sink or Swim

Chapter Summary

The team celebrates Loki’s first willing foray into little headspace with a long-awaited party.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: Nothing major in this chapter! Brief mention is made of Tony's ongoing issues with water and Loki's sensory problems, but honestly this one is pretty much all fluff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Time to get ready, sweetheart.”

Tony doesn’t acknowledge that Steve has spoken, nor does he even slow the rapid, fluid movements of his hands as he tears apart the inner circuitry of a piece of SHIELD tech. Natasha had brought the thing (which Steve is pretty sure is supposed to visualize heat signatures) home several days ago, pleading tiredly for Tony to make it even halfway as effective as his own tech. Tony had of course agreed, but hadn’t seemed to find it urgent enough to bump it up his always-lengthy list of ongoing projects…at least not until about an hour ago, when he’d suddenly departed for the shop as if the world depended on it. Even now, Tony’s usual tunnel-visioned focus seemed fractured; though he still wasn’t responding directly to Steve’s instruction, he kept turning his gaze over his shoulder as if to confirm that Steve was still there.

He was testing, Steve realized with a grin. Since their conversation and subsequent shopping spree a few days earlier, the opportunity to give Tony the room he had requested to push up against the grown-ups hadn’t really come up, they’d all been too busy planning for the party, and Tony had needed to catch up on a few things for SI before he could commit to spending some significant time in headspace. But the time had finally come, and Steve’s boy was seeking out reassurance that his caretakers would do as he’d requested; now that he understood why Tony wanted it, Steve had no problem at all providing. He straightened to his full height, walked over to the workbench to crowd slightly into Tony’s personal space, and glanced toward the ceiling.

“JARVIS, save and close all open projects and cut power to all workshop tools.” Tony squawked, hands closing protectively around the wrench in his left hand. (That was all the reassurance Steve needed to know that he’d read this right; only a Tony halfway to headspace would convince himself that he could stop Steve from taking something from him by force if he wished—of course, Steve never actually would, but adult Tony never bothered pretending that any of his victories over Steve would be physical.) He was careful to stay away from the harsh tones that belonged to Captain America, but neither was his voice as gentle as he usually made it when dealing with little Tony. “Baby boy, I know you don’t want to start out this day that you worked and planned so hard for by having to write lines. Put the wrench down, please, and let’s go get you changed for the party.”
Tony’s expression remains that of a crabby toddler contemplating how much defiance the situation warrants, but the rest of him has already made its decision. His hand creeps lower to the bench, and eventually deposits the tool with a soft clang. The second it does, he glances up at Steve again, this time with a hopeful little tilt to his lips. (God but Steve loves this boy.) Steve responds with the extravagant praise his baby is clearly seeking, then takes Tony’s hand in his own and leads him up to the penthouse.

The others, who had been just as excited about Tony’s requests as Steve himself was, have been hard at work in their absence. There’s a pair of swimming trunks, pink and patterned with different coloured sail boats, alongside a matching towel. Next to it lies a cloth diaper, this one yellow and covered in fanciful sea monsters that look like a cross between octopuses and whales. Tony eyes the latter with no small amount of hesitation, then whirls around to bury his face against Steve’s chest with a quiet whine.

“Shh, sweetheart. You’re going to look adorable, and there’s nothing to be ashamed of or worried about. And you helped me pick this one, remember? It’s made specifically for swimming, so that you can just enjoy being in the water without being scared of having an accident.” Tony makes another quiet noise of protest against his chest, so Steve adjusts his grip, encouraging the baby to wrap his legs around Steve’s waist so he can lift him up and deposit him on the bed with a dramatic flourish that wrings a giggle from the baby.

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“Tell me again.” It’s the fourth time that morning that Loki has made this demand of his brother, and some distant part of his brain informs him that this is probably both maddening and unnecessary. But the Midgardian mind-healers have helped Loki realize that he finds unknown or frightening situations much more manageable when he knows precisely what is coming, and Thor brother has taken this feedback to heart. He has become very skilled at announcing and explaining anything he wishes to do, whether it’s as simple as cooking the two of them lunch or as complex as helping Loki make it through another round of his recuperative exercises. That he does so with seemingly endless patience is still occasionally a surprise, but every passing day Loki’s mind seems to accept it further; sometime he goes hours without expecting Thor, or one of his brother’s teammates, to turn on him.

“First we shall attend a celebratory gathering.” Thor’s hands are gentle as he lifts Loki’s behind into the air and exchanges his soiled (though just barely, thank the gods) diaper for another. The material feels…odd. “Be at ease. They have asked that some of the details remain a surprise, but they have told us to be prepared to be near water. This garment is designed to aid that purpose.” Loki wiggles again, attempting to decide if the strangeness of the texture is likely to be a…what had the Son of Coul called it? A sensory trigger? Eventually he decides that it is strange but tolerable.

“And after that?”

“Then we shall dine together. Nothing new or difficult for you to eat, and I am told several of your favourite Midgardian delicacies shall be present.” Undoubtedly that means macaroni and cheese will be provided. Loki loves nothing on Midgard quite as much as he adores the squishy orange pasta; he would choose it over the finest Asgardian specialties without even a hint of hesitation. “Following that we shall all retire to our own floors for a nap, and then partake of a film together in the evening.” All of this is aligned with what Thor has already told him previously, so it seems unlikely that there’s something his brother is forgetting, unless it is a malicious omission. And quite simply, Loki does not have the energy nor the will to attempt to believe Thor capable of that. Not any more. After he slides a pair of slippery shorts (swimming trunks, his brother calls them) over Loki’s the diaper, Thor helps him sit up. But then Thor stands, hoisting Loki with him and settling him on a hip. Once Loki is over the initial shock of being moved this way, it’s…well, honestly it is kind of pleasant. He’s grateful to have increasingly strong control over his muscles and movements these days, but it’s painstaking,
exhausting work, and by the end of most days his body aches more than during Loki’s initial transition into adulthood. (Perhaps consenting to being carried during their negotiations hadn’t been a mistake.) Thor nonetheless spends several long moments peering down at Loki as if waiting a protest or complaint, so with an annoyed huff, Loki leans his head against his shoulder.

Thor beams, and hums a song their mother used to sing as he carries both Loki and several heavy bags over to the elevator. They exit onto a floor Loki is intimately familiar with; it is where the bulk of his recovery work with mind and body healers takes place, and he reflexively glares at several of his least favourite rooms. Today, though, Thor doesn’t stop in the room where Loki’s physio-therapy is held, nor does he linger near the office that sometimes houses Loki’s therapist. They walk straight down the long hallway, stopping at a door that has always been locked during Loki’s other explorations.

When he opens it, Loki’s eyes struggle to adjust to the sight that greets them: there’s a large indoor body of water, but it is unlike any Loki has ever seen on Midgard. It is filled with water that is deep purple and glittering, for one. Someone has created some kind of illusion with the lighting that makes it appear as if various sea-dwelling creatures are swimming around its depths. Mermaids feature most prominently, though Loki also catches sight of a few outlines that look like sharks or whales. Floating on top of the water are a series of inflated objects all fitting the theme as well—a tube that has a long mermaid tail coming off one end, a giant shell with iridescent handles that look like pearls, and a pink one that looks like a jellyfish, complete with tentacles that hang down into the water. Stark—no, Tony, for he is undoubtedly Tony like this, is seated on the latter, cackling as he’s pushed around the water by the Captain.

“Dada careful, it’s gonna sting you!” From where she’s seated, lounging on the pool deck with her feet dipped into the water, Romanov laughs throatily.

“Wouldn’t that be embarrassing, Rogers? After all this, getting taken down by an inflatable jellyfish?” Rogers growls something Loki doesn’t quite catch in return, but soon he has Tony using a plastic gun to shoot jets of water at Romanov while she runs and duck around the deck attempting to avoid them. Barnes, Coulson, Barton and Banner are sprawled across lounge chairs and mostly avoiding the fray, though they do occasionally stick out an arm or a leg to slow Romanov down.

The little drama gives Loki a few very needed moments to take in what he’s saying without being observed, which he desperately needs. Thor and Tony have both been careful to avoid even oblique references to the things Loki had enjoyed prior to being healed, but he’s never quite managed to shake his child-self’s enchantment with the Midgardian oceans and their real and fictional inhabitants. Perhaps Tony had picked up on that, or perhaps the team had simply decided to go with what they knew since they hardly had much information on Loki as a willing Youngling. Either way, it was touching, and the excitement he felt taking it all in was enough to edge out the embarrassment and shame that he’d been expecting to feel. He considers trying to jump down from Thor’s arms, but they’re proving to still be rather comfortable, so Loki points at the glittering surface of the water instead.

“In?”

By then the others have to be aware of their presence, but except for a little wave that Tony directs Loki’s way from atop his jellyfish throne, the team mostly gives Thor and Loki space. It turns out that the water, while beautiful to look at it, is slightly frightening when they reach the point where Loki can no longer see the bottom of the pool. He claws his way up his Thor like an indignant cat, even using his long blonde hair as leverage, until someone pushes the oyster shell float toward them. Loki dives for it without thinking, and it wobbles dangerously until Thor reaches out to stabilize it.
Loki fully intends to remain there, entirely still, until this horrible experiment is over with. But then he sees one of the mermaid projections swim underneath his float, and knowing it’s a simple effect of light and shadow does nothing in that moment to make it less thrilling. After double-checking to assure himself that Thor still has a solid grip on the float, Loki creeps over to one side to peer over the edge of the shell and into the water. Then, because his—his—whatever Thor is to him right now clearly does not seem to appreciate the greatness of the sight, he jabs a finger down toward the water. Thor casts his gaze down obediently and smiles.

“Yes, what magnificent sea creatures we are surrounded by, my Younglings!” he booms, with the same degree of enthusiasm he once would have used to announce his victory in an epic battle. The sound of Thor caring so much about something the adult portion of Loki’s brain recognizes as rather foolish warms Loki right down to the tips of his toes, which he wiggles in delight.

When Tony successfully completes his battle with Romanov, he paddles his way over to Loki and Thor, arms dangling off the sides of the jellyfish while his legs hang down below. Feeling bold, Loki darts a hand back into the water to poke at one of the tentacles. It catches on Tony’s foot and makes him giggle.

“Do you like it?” Tony asks, gesturing around at their fantastical setting in almost lackadaisical way, as if it isn’t one of the kindest things anyone has ever done for Loki.

“It’s…it’s really nice.” The assessment isn’t much, doesn’t say half of what Loki wishes he might, but it seems to be enough for Tony. Seconds later, the boy is thoroughly distracted by Barnes entering the water.

“Daddy!” he declares happily. Loki has never seen the man in what the team refers to as Big headspace, but Tony’s assessment is apparently correct; Barnes stands taller now, and more guarded. Loki wonders with some degree of discomfort what it must be like to have access to both ends of the spectrum like that; even while he may never fully accept that he is drawn solely to the position of a Youngling in these games of theirs, the thought of moving between the two makes him feel vaguely uncomfortable, as if he’d be unfairly accessing hidden secrets he was never meant to know. Barnes, however, does not seem to be feeling any such strain. His smile as he wades over to kiss Tony on the top of his head is wide and warm.

“Hey sugar. And hello Loki.” Loki nods back, unsure how to deal with Barnes without the slight tension of competition that always seems to exist between them when they’re both little with Tony. “Whaddya say, boys, want to hold onto each other’s floats so Stevie and Thor and I can pull you around the pool like a train?” Tony squeals his excitement, and soon they’re weaving through the glittering water like an absurd centipede. When Barnes criticizes Rogers’ technique, the result is a series of races that eventually draws the entire team in. Tony has JARVIS program the mermaid-shaped shadows to appear at random points in the pool, and different members of the Avengers alternate so that one person pulls one float and one Youngling apiece toward wherever the mermaid is hiding. Loki has always loved games, and the ones they play here lack the gravity of the battle-training exercises that were common in Asgard. He finds himself relaxing, laughing, even accompanying Tony’s “hyah” sounds that are apparently used to spur horses on in Midgardian chariots.

After that Loki insists on trying to re-learn how to swim. It doesn’t go particularly well; he has more control over his body these days than he used to, but his limbs are still weak and occasionally inclined to flop out of his control. Thor has to rescue him from drowning more than once, to Loki’s utter humiliation.

By this point, Tony is lying on one of the lounge chairs (or more precisely, he is lying atop Barton
who is sprawled across one of the chairs.) When Loki makes another attempt at keeping himself floating only to immediately end up sinking toward the bottom of the pool, the boy leans up on his elbows.

“For a long time my Daddies and Papa and Mama had to help me in the bath. I was really scared of the water and I could only let them fill it a couple inches at first. I still don’t like it when I get splashed in the face. Takes time, sometimes.” The snarling, frustrated part of Loki is inclined to snap that everything in his life is taking too much time these days. Healing is agonizingly slow and he wishes it over. But he has cared for Tony Stark since nearly their first meeting, and he can’t quite bear to meet this small confidence with rage.

“Try again another day?” he half asks, half demands of his brother instead. Swimming is something he really does want to master again, especially if these sea-themed lights Tony has created can be used again…

“Of course, little one.”

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By the time they emerge from the pool, both Loki and Tony are glassy-eyed and close to nodding off. Getting food into them thus proves to be more of a struggle than anyone had really anticipated; Loki rallies a bit when he realizes that macaroni and cheese is on the menu, but Tony is stubbornly insistent that he isn’t hungry, and he turns his head in the opposite direction of anyone coming at him with a spoon or fork full of food.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it), Bucky has plenty of experience dealing with stubborn little punks who don’t want to eat. Balancing Tony carefully at his hip, he manages to pour some of the tomato soup into a bottle, screws the cap on, and makes his way to the couch. Getting Tony adjusted from the koala impression he’s doing and into a posture suitable for nursing takes a minute and involves some grumbling from the baby, but instinct takes over and Tony begins to suck the second the nipple is pressed to his lips. Once he’s confident that Tony isn’t going to immediately fall asleep and choke on his lunch, Bucky chances a look around the room.

Loki is in Thor’s lap, gleefully demolishing the mac and cheese. When Thor’s own stomach grumbles, the boy even allows Clint to take over feeding him. Natasha occasionally makes silly faces at them both; when Clint realities by flinging a cheesy noodle at her Loki freezes in fear, but visibly relaxes again when she just laughs and picks it out of her hair. Coulson largely stays out of the fray, though he does wipe Loki’s face with a special cloth that Bucky doesn’t recognize when the boy is finished. He also brings out a huge tupperware container full of cookies he and Loki made the other night. They turn out to be delicious, and Loki can’t quite contain his pride as they team sincerely and effusively praises their efforts.

It’s a shallow form of headspace the boy seems to be in; Bucky has been around Tony who often struggles with the same to recognize the signs. Loki will be totally at ease one minute and then tense and embarrassed another, seeking Thor out and rejecting him in pretty much equal measures. It’s certainly nothing like the all-encompassing way that little headspace had been forced on Loki by the soul magic. But it’s better, too, because the boy is trying. He’s choosing to be there with them, with Thor especially, and Bucky would wager good money that none of them have seen the God of Thunder quite as content as he is now.

And Steve, well, Steve is a huge damn sap. So he’s standing in the corner, barely touching his own food as he stares around the room with poorly disguised wonder and affection. Even once in a while his eyes fall on Tony and Bucky and his expression becomes even more tender, to the point where it’s hard for the hardened and bitter parts of Bucky to even witness. When that’s the case he seeks
out Bruce, who is so much more contained, who understands better than anyone else in the Tower why sometimes Bucky doesn't know what to do with the naked sentimentality that colours so many of their interactions with one another.

Loki isn’t quite ready for the puppy pile that napping when one or more of the Tower’s inhabitants are little usually involves, so he and Thor depart for their own floor after lunch wraps up. The rest of them make their way to Tony’s overlarge bed. Even though sex colours none of their interactions when a little is in headspace, it’s undeniably clear that the increased intimacy between them all has changed how they come together. Rather than sticking to the usual arrangements of pairs or triads, they all flop carelessly onto the mattress without seeming to care who ends up touching who. Bucky ensures that he stays next to Tony, simply because it’s been a while since he was Big when Tony was little and he likes holding his little guy, but he doesn’t mind at all when Nat and Bruce close around them like parentheses, nor does it feel at all strange to have Coulson curled protectively around all of them up near their heads.

The Soldier reminds Bucky that to care this much for this many is a liability. Bucky cannot and does not wish to deny that this is true. But as he feels his boy’s breath start to even out and remembers how far they’ve all come, as he thinks too of the boy upstairs who had come to them traumatized and broken and is now allowing them to help him piece himself back together, he reminds the Soldier that there is strength in this too.

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While Loki had undoubtedly enjoyed their afternoon together, it turns out that he’s in a bit of sensory overload even after taking a nap. He doesn’t tell anyone this, maybe doesn’t have the language, but Phil figures it out when the boy makes it two minutes into the latest Pixar offering only to hide his head under a collection of pillows, whimpering.

The others want to quiz Phil about the ins and outs of what he knows of Loki’s sensory problems. While this is fair (he’d never meant to keep it from them in the first place, just hadn’t gotten around to mentioning it), it’s also not going to be a particularly fun way for either of the boys to spend the evening, so Phil provides only the most necessary information and then redirects the conversation.

“What if we read something together instead? Would that be okay, Loki? We could turn the lights way down and get nice and cozy and listen to a story.” The second Loki gives an affirmative nod, Tony wriggles down from his perch atop Bruce’s lap and waddles off (goddamn those cloth diapers are cute, Phil thinks for at least the tenth time that day), returning with a red-covered and well-worn book. Phil swallows past the lump that forms in his throat, remembering another little boy with whom he’d started and never finished the series. “Harry Potter, huh kiddo?” For just a second, Tony’s gaze is older and just a little too knowing as he smiles at Phil. “’s a good book. But we gotta start at the beginning. Bucky and Loki haven’t heard it before.” No one’s arguing with this logic, not that they were all that inclined to do so in the first place, but just as they all get settled, Tony nudges Phil’s side.

“Wet, Daddy.” He could have whispered so that no one but the super soldiers would have heard him. Tony could even have just taken Phil’s hand and dragged him into the bedroom without saying anything; he’s done each of those things numerous times before. Tony has also more than once avoided saying anything at all, relying on the team’s constant vigilance about checking him. Not today. Today their boy is brave, even if he’s flushed down to the roots of his hair, and Phil loves him with a wrenching ferocity that leaves him breathless in its wake for just a moment. Then he holds out a hand and helps Tony to his feet.

“Well we better go get you changed then, huh champ? We have a lot of story to get through.”
I know the chapter was a little shorter than usual, but I hope those of you who have been anxiously-awaiting some little Tony and Loki time really enjoyed it!

As always, your comments and kudos delight, challenge, and inspire me. Thank you for being the best readers a gal could ask for. (Comment replies to last chapter might be delayed to tonight, but they're coming, I promise!)
The Twelve Days [Before] Christmas

Chapter Summary

In which the Avengers prepare for the holidays, with the help of an unexpected vacation from most of their usual duties.

Chapter Notes

Content Notes: There's a brief but sexually explicit scene in the section labeled 'Ten.' The section called 'Nine' involves Tony and Bucky both dealing with the December 16 anniversary of Tony's parents' deaths. And in 'Five,' Tony a nightmare that closely resembles the vision he has in Age of Ultron. If any of these hit triggers they should be fairly easy to read around because of the structure of this particular chapter. I don't think (as always, please correct me if needed) there are other warnings required for this chapter. It's mostly a lot of teeth-rotting fluff.

Twelve

When Clint enters the penthouse sniffling and then proceeds to stumble due to his inability to adequately see through reddened, puffy eyes that are leaking fat teardrops, the Tower understandably overreacts. Phil is the first to his feet, not even noticing the book he had been reading seconds before tumbling to the floor. He’s mission ready in seconds, mind putting together a list of the most likely scenarios and plotting deployment of SHIELD agents and Avengers to respond. To everyone’s surprise, the next one of them to visibly react is Loki. He stumbles to his feet and positions himself in front of Thor. Said God of Thunder alternates between staring lovingly at his brother and worriedly at his teammate, a contrast which means his expression goes through a somewhat comical series of contortions. Both Steve and Bucky lunge for Tony, who had been absorbed with putting together a 3-D puzzle on the floor at their feet and hadn’t yet noticed Clint’s odd demeanor. Lucky runs circles around everyone, barking in celebration at Clint’s arrival and ignorant to any of the other undercurrents in the room.

Then Natasha steps off the elevator after Clint, takes one look at the lot of them, and begins to snicker. This stops pretty much everyone in their tracks, and only increases her mirth. The laughter shakes her small frame, even as Clint whirls around to glare and stick his finger out.

“Shuddit.”

“Natasha, what—”

“I said shuddit, Nat. I’ll tell it.” Clint sniffs again, and Natasha is in actual peals of laughter, bent double at the waist and leaning against the wall for support. “It’s just…the ducklings.”

This causes Tony to snap visibly out of his little headspace. He elbows Steve, who had won the race to pick him up, and has his hands on his hips before his feet even touch the carpet.
“What did you do to my Riri. I told you if anything happened to her—”

“I didn’t do anything!” Clint protests. “She’s fine, they’re all fine.”

“Then what actually happened? Report, Specialist.” It’s rare that Coulson resorts to these kind of formalities and power plays within the walls of the Tower. For the most part they’re just unnecessary, not to mention the fact that several members of the team are more inclined to listen to Phil than they are Agent. But Clint seems like he might be genuinely a bit hurt by Tony’s accusation, and things could unravel quickly if this goes much further. Clint flops onto the couch next to Coulson and then asks JARVIS to project a document from his email on the nearest holoscreen.

The result is initially rather underwhelming. It’s a calendar—the administrator in Coulson notices immediately how well-organized the thing is, colour-coded and accompanied by additional notes that don’t tip the scale into becoming too detailed and overwhelming. (Not Clint’s, then. The guy was still prone to scribbling information on his hands and arms if no one was there to stop him.)

The notes aren’t immediately sensical, though. They mostly seemed to just be lists of Clint’s ‘ducklings’ (as well as some other supes, metas and Inhumans that Phil was familiar with.) Usually four or five names were attached to each day, but there was no discernible pattern to how and when and how frequently each name appeared. Clint brought up another screen, a video this time, and Kamala Khan’s grinning face fills the living room.

“Happy Holidays, Avengers!” She grunts, appeared to aim a kick at someone offscreen (a someone who, from the indignant squawk from the background, Phil was almost certainly Peter Parker.) “We all wanted to do something to show you how much we appreciate what you’ve all done for our community this year. You didn’t have to lift the rest of us up with you, it probably would have been easier for you to turn your backs on a lot of us when things got hard. But you didn’t. Now, initially we talked about trying to buy something, but a lot of us are working on pretty low incomes since we don’t have jobs and our parents have grounded us for all eternity—okay that last one might just be me. Also a surprising number of superheroes are into Marie Kondo, and they didn’t want to get anything that might not spark joy or whatever…”

“I really hope you plan on editing this before you send it,” Peter shouts, still offscreen. “They’re used to my works of vlogging art which, not to brag or anything, but the official Avengers PR team has used—”

“Oh put a web in it, would you? Anyway, the point is, we quickly realized that there was no way we were going to agree on any kind of an object to give you. Then one day a few of us were talking about how busy you guys all are, and we realized that probably one of the best gifts we could possibly give you all was time. Now again, we can’t really afford to send you all anywhere, but to celebrate the season, we’ve decided to give you all a team-wide break from the superhoing side of your gigs.”

“Tell them about the calendar!”

“Clearly building to that!” Kamala rolls her eyes in that way only teenagers are totally capable of. “As you’ll see in the attached file, or should I say work of art, we’ve all coordinated to make sue that the city is 100% covered for patrols and any minor incidents. Obviously if the world is ending we might have to interrupt the stay-cation, but short of that, we have it under control for the next three weeks. Even Jessica agreed to be on rotation, and honestly you guys she’s pretty scary, so enjoy this, okay? And thanks again for everything!”

“Mr. Stark, maybe we can hang out in the lab—” The video cuts off just as Peter is making a clear bid for an invite to Stark Tower. Clint swaps back to the calendar with another flick of his hand and
sniffles again.

“They are pure and precious cinnamon rolls and I love them.”

“It is really incredible,” Phil agrees, fondly ruffling his lover’s hair. “So many of the people they manage to rope into this are vehemently anti-team; SHIELD has approached several of these people with no success.”

“Do not try to recruit the cinnamon rolls!” Tony and Clint shout at Phil in unison. Natasha starts cackling again, and Phil starts to wonder about the wisdom of surrounding himself with this group of clearly unstable, beautiful, infuriating and wonderful people. (He’ll certainly never be bored.)

Eleven

Jane returns to the Tower the next day. Thor had been aware that she’d spent time with the team in his and Tony’s absence, but it’s not until every one of the Avengers insists on being there to greet her that he realizes how fond they have become of her. Thor himself didn’t think his affection for Jane could possibly increase further, but as he watches her press a kiss to Loki’s forehead and then return a warm embrace from their Captain, the strength of his love for her would be enough to cover the sky in sheet lightning if he called on its power now.

Ten

Phil had plans for this date. It had been a tantalizing possibility at the edge of his consciousness for so long, taunting him when he was in the shower or struggling to concentrate at work or watching Tony step out with other members of the team. He’d wanted to let Tony be the one that was wooed for once, wowing him with exceptional food and conversation and maybe a flight in Lola.

It takes under a minute for these plans to crumble into dust. When Phil steps into the penthouse wearing the suit from the basket that Tony had clearly favoured, the other man takes one long, heated look at Coulson and then lunges, colliding with Phil in a clash of teeth and tongue that leaves Phil capable of doing little more than hanging on for the ride at first.

“We…we should—“ he finally manages to protest as Tony abandons Phil’s mouth in favour of pressing kisses down the column of his neck. Tony growls like a discontented lion and loosens Coulson’s tie.

“Wanted this, wanted you, the longest, don’t you know that? When everything happened and we thought you were gone, I thought I’d missed my chance. Not missing it again.”

And well, how is Phil supposed to argue with that? How is he even supposed to conceive of the fact that out of a team full of some of the world’s most beautiful and powerful beings, Tony had somehow wanted him before he’d desired any of the others? He wishes fervently that he had the strength of Steve or Thor, that he could carry Tony’s weight enough to haul him to the bedroom like a caveman. He settles for fisting one hand in the other man’s hair while reaching down to loop his fingers into Tony’s belt loop with the other, pulling him in as close as he can manage.

“Wanted you for that long too, you know,” Phil tells him, punctuated by both of their harsh, choppy breathing. “And fuck you’re gorgeous, but it’s not just that, never been just that. Need you to know __”

“I know. S’okay, Phil, I swear I know. None of you are like the rest…don’t just want me for the flash and the show.” Coulson expresses his approval by unbuckling Tony’s slim leather belt; it hits the floor almost soundlessly, or maybe Coulson’s attention is just too focused elsewhere to hear it.
Even if Phil is letting the majority of his plans be torn entirely asunder, that doesn’t mean that he’s going to let Tony rush this whole thing. When they do finally make it into the penthouse bedroom, Coulson maneuvers them so that Tony, long since naked, is on his hands and knees. Tony is clearly expecting Coulson to fuck him, is chanting his approval of that plan and babbling about not needing preparation. (Which, even if Phil were planning to go right to that, like hell he’d take Tony with that kind of violence.) When he feels the wet press of Coulson’s tongue along his crack instead, Tony jerks and shudders, barely maintaining his position.

“Oh God Phil I’ll never make it. I’m telling you, you people have ruined my stamina—” He toys with the rim of Tony’s hole, watching the muscle twitch and tremble. Then he backs off long enough to say,

“We have all night Tony, and I have every intention of getting you off more than once. Might as well just accept it, hmm?”

Nine

Tony had every intention of spending December 16 alone, the way he always did. But when he learns that Bucky, too, has locked himself on his floor and is denying all visitors including Steve, he issues an invitation/command for the other man to join him in the workshop.

There are no big emotional talks; few words pass between them at all. The death of the Starks is too raw on this particular year for either of them to do more than exist in its shadow. But Tony abandons his half-finished project in favour of performing some unplanned upgrades to Bucky’s arm. It’s soothing, and it feels like the ultimate fuck-you to HYDRA to keep fixing the man they’d failed to break.

Eight

Pepper visits the Tower on a social call for the first time since her breakup with Tony eight days before Christmas. At first they’re all stiff and nervous, attempting to be on their best behaviour in a way that just makes all of them seem unnatural and almost business-like in their interactions.

Then Jane has the brilliant idea of opening a bottle, which turns into several bottles, of wine. Tony still isn’t partaking, but it loosens the rest of them up enough to make conversation flow more naturally. Before he knows it, Coulson and Pep are exchanging cookie recipes and she’s making private jokes with Jane that make a pretty flush rise to both of their cheeks, and when Pep looks over to see Steve’s arm slung lazily around Tony’s shoulders, there is nothing remotely bitter or sad in her smile.

“You make a nice couple,” she opines.

“It’s the height difference,” Jane, who may in fact be far drunker than Tony had realized until just now, opines with a serious nod. “They fit like Lego.” Pepper sighs rather more dramatically than she ever would if she were sober and leans into Jane.

"I wish I had Lego."

"We have a lot of Lego!" Clint offers helpfully. Natasha swats him on the ass.

"Metaphor, Barton. And Pepper, you know Happy totally has the hots for you, right?"

"...SERIOUSLY?" Pepper and Tony shout in unison. Jane, who has never even met Happy, nods decisively and steals a crown Clint had fashioned out of discarded tissue paper and settles it onto her
head.

Seven

There’s a minor incident involving stolen Chituari tech in Harlem the next day. The majority of the team is still sleeping off their hangovers, but Tony and Clint hack the SHIELD feeds to watch Luke Cage, Scott Lang and Kamala handle it with ease.

“You did good with them,” Tony mutters, still a little embarrassed over his outburst a few days prior. Clint squeezes his hand. (Things kind of quickly devolve into making out from there, but for once that is not Tony’s fault, dammit.)

Six

Loki wakes up one hundred percent dry for the first time the assault on his soul. It’s the smallest of victories, but he has grown accustomed to celebrating these as they come and attempting not to compare his life now to how it was before.

He hasn’t used his walker in a record four days in a row either, and he’s relatively steady as he pads down the short hallway to the room at the end of the hall where Jane and his brother sleep. Thor, as usual, is sprawled on top of all the covers, one huge arm draped across Jane’s waist while the other hands off the bed. Loki hasn’t been little since the party, but the familiar sight makes it easier than he expects to creep toward the bed and tug on one of his brother’s arms. Thor cracks a single blue eye open, and Loki falters. He could just call Thor ‘Daddy. He wants to, even, but that word won’t come, not yet.

“Is aught amiss?”

“Little Mermaid and juice in my special cup. Please,” he tacks on at the end. Thor grins and hoists him up into the bed, depositing Loki between himself and Jane. Loki’s shirt has ridden up, and his br—Daddy (he can call him that in his mind, at least) nuzzles his bare stomach with his beard. It tickles—

“Aww baby, s’okay, I’ll protect you” she says, her voice gravelly from sleep and her hair a disheveled mess that she seems in no hurry to correct. Jane is nothing like Frigga, too young for her aged weariness and too uncompromising for her careful maneuvering, but something in her reminds Loki of his mother anyway. Perhaps she is how Frigga might have been if her choices had been different, if there had been no Odin and no courtly manipulations, if she’d permitted herself to grow wild and free as the weeds she had always loved.

The thought, that in loving Jane as he already knows he will one day he is not turning entirely away from his parents and especially his mother, but instead toward the best of them, it settles something in Loki. He sinks a little deeper into the simplified version of the world that exists only when he permits himself to be young and, before he can think better of it, presses a sloppy little kiss onto Jane’s shoulder. Her eyebrows rise nearly to her hairline in surprise, but she doesn’t chastise Loki or seem bothered by the awkward attempt at affection. Instead she leans down and whispers into his ear.

“I bet between the two of us we can pin Thor down and tickle him. You probably know all the good spots, right sæti?” It feels good, the prospect of conspiring over something so silly, and Loki does in fact know that Thor’s weakest spots (tickling the webbing between his big toe and the one next to it is enough to have him in hysterics in seconds.) Yes, this he can do.
“Mama?”

When Natasha had gone to sleep, no one in the Tower except Loki had been little. But the word, even if it hadn’t been spoken in a tremulous little voice, is enough to trigger a wake up response as instant and complete as if the Avengers alarm had assembled. She sits up in her bed, reflexively tugs the strap of her nightgown, which had slid down her arm in sleep back up, and glances quickly at her phone on the bedside table. 3:19 am.

Tony is standing in her doorway. He’s lit only by the distant illumination of the motion-activated lighting in the hallway behind him, but she can see enough of him to be certain those are tear tracks on his cheeks. He also has Sanders in a death grip in his right hand. (Nightmare, almost certainly.)

As far as she’s aware, it’s the first time Tony has ever come to any of them for comfort in the night after going to sleep Big, which makes an already stunning run of events that much more impossible to take in. She’d never imagined herself as any child’s first choice, certainly not in a Tower populated by the likes of Captain America and Phil Coulson (who yes, she does think is just as much a hero as Steve.) Natasha had spent nearly the whole of her life being made and remade by others interested only in refining her abilities to hurt and use and destroy. Children, not blinded by the promise of sex or greed or power, had often been the only ones who had seen Natasha for what she was. They feared her; they ran from her; they huddled against their parents and pretended she wasn’t there, like the monsters who hid in their closets.

Somewhere along the way, though, that had changed. It had started with another little boy, very much like the one who stood before her now, who had accepted her offerings of toys and clothes and hot chocolate and whose only negative feeling about Natasha was that he hadn’t been sure about a girl buying his underwear. Then she’d gone to war for that boy, and for the man that had taken his place, leaving aside the last vestiges of her privacy to stand side-by-side with Rhodey as a public symbol who had saved the President. Truthfully, Natasha cared as little for the leaders of nations as she ever had. But in the wake of that choice, she’d not only become Tony’s Mama, she’d become someone that other children, strangers she met on the street or had never interacted with at all, admired and looked to comfort—the kind of person who could soothe fears rather than being the source of them.

“What’s wrong, bunny? You have a bad dream?” Tony shuffles his feet, eyes on the floor, and nods. She lifts up the blanket and pats the empty spot next to her in invitation, and soon he’s clambering up and half into her lap. Her hand finds his hair, freeing a few strands that had become stuck to his forehead with sweat. “Want to tell me about it?” For a few long moments the only audible sound in the room is the uneven rasps of Tony’s breathing.

“Th-Thanos. Everyone was—it was all my fault. We have to, need to prepare. Need more suits, need a suit around the whole world. He’s coming.”

And what Natasha would give to be able to assure her child that he’s wrong, that the ugliness he saw could never touch them. He is right, though, of course he is. Thanos had wanted the Tesseract too badly for the 2012 attacks to be the end of his search. She thinks uneasily, too, of Strange’s cryptic words about Tony somehow being tied to soul magic; Thanos will come for him, too, she’s sure of it. Which means he’ll be coming for all of them, because she might never have imagined herself with a child, but now the very prospect of a future without him is utterly conceivable. She would not survive it.

For now, since she cannot tell him that he’s wrong, she offers what she can, one of the last things she’s held back from Tony.
“Did you know that Sanders has a secret?” she whispers into his hair. He blinks and peers up at her, eyes wide and frightened but trusting, too. “Inside he has a heart for each and every one of us—well, actually, not Bucky or Loki come to think of it, so we’ll have to add a couple. And it’s hard, terrifying, actually, for him to have so many hearts, because they make him vulnerable. But they make him strong, too. All those hearts, all that…all that love.” She stumbles over the word, but there’s no point denying it further, not here in the dark while her little clings to her as if Natasha is truly capable of preventing the oncoming storm. And while she can’t give him that, she can hold him tight and meet his fear and sorrow with all the hope and optimism she has, because he and the team are the ones that put it there in the first place. “Thanos doesn’t have that, Tony. He will never have that. And that’s why we’ll win.”

Four

“We are gathered here today on a most momentous occasion—"

“Tony stop.”

“—a glorious victory for fashion, and for the city’s under-dressed racoon population.”

“You TOLD them, Stevie?”

“For too long the glorious bod of one James Buchanan Barnes has remain hidden—”

“Oh you too, Barton?”

“—concealed under ill-fitting and occasionally straight up stanky clothes that did zero for his glorious ass. But tonight we say NO MORE!”

Of all the absurd things that have happened to Bucky since becoming friends with these people, which is frankly a lot, this one might be the worst. They’ve gathered in a Stark Industries parking lot, circling a dumpster into which Steve has just finished emptying the last of Bucky’s old clothes. He’s wearing his new winter coat, which is a damn good thing given that it’s freezing and now starting to snow, the kind of wet, heavy flakes that always end up looking somehow fake. After Tony has poured what seems like an excessive amount of…well, some kind of accelerant over the clothes (which he wastes no time informing Bucky is because he wants to avoid the possibility that Bucky might try to salvage anything) they all take several backs while Bucky does the honours of lighting a match and tossing it into the bin.

The fire burns bright and hot, lighting up the parkade and illuminating the laughing faces of the people he loves best. Even Loki is there, wearing the same masking technology that Natasha had so effectively used to help take down SHIELD. Steve’s arms slide around his waist, heavy and solid, and Bucky lets his head loll lazily back against his best guy and watches the last substantial symbol of his self-hatred slowly consumed into ash. Once the flames die down to flickers, even his coat is not enough to make Bucky feel totally warm anymore, but just as he’s considering attempting to move out of the comfort of Steve’s grip, Phil steps forward. There’s something draped over his left arm that Bucky hadn’t noticed before, and he’s smiling in that wide open way that Coulson rarely manages even in the privacy of the Tower.

“Now that you’ve made some room in your wardrobe, there’s something we wanted to give you.”

Bucky unfurls the clothing Phil hands him, initially a little disappointed to find a black t-shirt. The front is taken up entirely by the Avenger’s team logo. The back contains the symbols of each individual member: Cap’s star, Thor’s hammer, Tony’s helmet, Nat’s spider, Clint’s bow…and a red star, identical to the one on the metal of Bucky’s left arm.
“You are officially cleared for active duty beginning 7 January. Welcome to the team, Avenger.”

Bucky isn’t Steve. He’d been drafted into service, and then forced to carry out HYDRA’s agenda for the decades that had followed, all without anyone ever asking or caring if he wanted to be there. (He hadn’t. Maybe it made him a coward, but he’d never wanted it.) The only time he’s ever willingly stepped into any kind of battle has been to protect the people he loves; at first that had just meant helping Steve out of whatever mess he’d gotten into. Now it means that he would willingly and wholeheartedly follow any one of the people around him into any struggle they deem worth fighting. Not because he truly thinks the world is really worth saving most days, but because he will do absolutely anything to protect what they’ve found and built together. That’s the fight worth choosing.

Three

After several years of failed attempts, Clint finally sneaks his way onto the 39th floor of Avengers Tower three days before Christmas. He returns covered in a mysterious orange paste and carrying what Phil thinks (he only gets a quick glance before Tony whisks the thing off somewhere) might be a sentient troll doll.

No matter how much any of them try, Clint vows never to talk about what happened or what the 39th floor of the Tower contains.

Two

Though Tony had done his best to abide by Steve’s wishes and avoid guessing where exactly Steve intended to take them for the date he’d organized, he’s not wholly surprised when they wind up back at the Richard Rogers theatre. Steve’s reaction to the play is just as encompassing and sincere as it had been the first time, and this time Tony doesn’t even pretend that he doesn’t spend way more time watching his date than he does the stage. (Sorry not sorry, Lin-Manuel!)

Afterward, with his eyes still red-rimmed and his arms weighted down with yet more Hamilton merch, Steve leads them back to the diner they’d visited that first night. Tony remember fondly how nervous he’d felt, the way every glance, every touch felt like an exhilarating risk. They were freer with both those things this time around, squeezing into the same side of a tiny booth and trading food and kisses and light, teasing touches.

“You asked me that first time,” Steve says once he’s demolished four burgers and numerous refills of fries, “about Eliza. Why I connected with her.”

“And you told me I wasn’t ready for the answer,” Tony grins, recalling his simultaneous frustration and fond amusement.

“You weren’t!” Steve laughs. “But maybe I wasn’t ready to say it either.” Then Steve straightens up in his seat and takes a deep breath like he’s steeling himself for one of his famous Cap speeches. But it’s not Cap sitting next to Tony, it’s Steve Rogers, a man who is nervous enough about whatever he has to say that he keeps running his palms up and down his own thighs to wipe away non-existent sweat, and Tony loves him so utterly that he already misses this moment before it’s even happened. “I… I guess I’ve done a lot that I should feel proud of in my life. And I’m glad and grateful that I could give what I could; all I ever really wanted was to help, and the serum gave me the chance to do that. But if something happened to me tomorrow, by far the thing I’d be proudest of is having had the chance to love you. The entire team, yes, but Tony it was you that brought us back together. It was you that gave us a home and made us a family. You’re brilliant and you’re generous and you’re kind, and if I never got to do anything else to help the world but remind you of that, I would be entirely and completely content.”
Two things happen later that same evening. The first is that Tony and Steve are politely asked never to return to the diner. The second is that Tony makes a massive and anonymous donation to Graham Windham, the family services organization that had once been Eliza Hamilton’s orphanage.

One

With so many of their usual commitments and pressures removed, there hadn’t been much need for the tight scheduling that usually helped ensure the littles (especially Tony, whose plate tended to be fullest) got enough time in headspace. All three boys had floated in and out of their headspaces as it suited them; Tony often at least tried to be little if Loki was, simply because it seemed to make the other man more comfortable in his role. And Bucky, whose control over the shifts in his headspace has always been the most tenuous, sometimes transitions back and forth between little and Big multiple times in the course of a single day.

By entirely unwarranted consensus, though, all three wake up little on Christmas Eve. This changes some of their plans (Die Hard is definitely not child-friendly viewing material and there’s no way Steve or Phil will budge on that one), but that hardly feels like a loss as the boys wrap a huge tree in twinkling lights and tinsel and homemade decorations. Thor, in an attempt to educate Loki about Midgadian holiday traditions, dresses up in a Santa costume that JARVIS had located in one of the deep storage vaults. The fake beard is yellowed with age, and the velvet jumpsuit struggles to contain Thor’s thick frame, but when he sits down to tell an often incorrect but highly entertaining version of the Christmas story, all three boys form a circle at his feet wearing their new Christmas pajamas and listen in enchanted silence. Afterward Loki insists on leaving cookies and orange juice out for Santa’s elephants (seriously, Thor really had been fuzzy on some of the details), and then the littles are herded off to bed. Loki still isn’t ready to join the team snuggle pile in Tony’s bed, but he consents to sharing one of the penthouse level’s guest beds with Thor and Jane so that they will all wake up on the same floor.

Clint decides that he will not permit the last thought he has going to sleep on Christmas Eve to be anything too cheesy. He may be cuddled up between two of his boys, getting drooled on by one of them while the other keeps sleep-humming Christmas carols, but he’s still Hawkeye, dammit. He has a reputation to uphold.

“Don’t shoot Santa when he breaks in during the night, Natasha or we’re going to have some awkward questions to answer in the morning.”

“Shut up and go to sleep, Clint.”

The End

Chapter End Notes

Don’t panic, there’s still an Epilogue! This chapter was a delight to write, though, because I got to fulfill so many standing reader requests all at once: Bucky in better clothes, Tony coming to the team after a nightmare, someone finding about Sanders' hearts, so many of the things y'all have asked for over the years finally fit. Hooray!

I'll save most of my sappy notes for after the next chapter, but I love y'all. Thank you for your wonderful comments and kudos, and please keep ’em coming here in the home
stretch, wouldja?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!