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Bucky Barnes needs a place to stay. Tony Stark has that place.

Notes

Don't go getting spoiled. I don't usually update this frequently during the school year.

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

A broken arm is a *bitch*. Especially if you, like Tony, seem to be allergic to inaction. He does what he can with one arm- mostly laying out plans to send to R&D, tinkering and doing minor repairs, etc. etc. etc.- but he thinks he’s going to go stir-crazy. No one else is in the goddamn tower either. Clint is technically on vacation, hanging out in the country with his sister and her kids. Bruce is being the disgustingly-good person he is, vaccinating kids somewhere in India. Thor is up in god-land. And Steve and Natasha are being all buddy-buddy, chasing leads and, quite frankly, disturbing intel that suggests SHIELD has threads of HYDRA in it.

It’s the Fantastic Four’s turn to play hero-du-jour if anything comes up, so Tony is left sitting on his ass, allowed only to conduct Stark Industries business. Which can be interesting, but mostly ends up boring.

He can’t even *sign* things. It’s his right arm that’s broken, and that means his dominant hand is out of commission.

This does, however, result in Pepper letting him sign things digitally, *for once*. It’s much, much quicker than pen on paper, but Pep doesn’t like how informal it looks, to her highly-skilled eye. But oh well, needs must.

So all in all, he’s moping. And to make matters worse, JARVIS mocks him for it. Sassy kids. No respect these days.

He’s absolutely *delighted* when, three weeks into his quote-unquote ‘medical leave’, Steve swings by to visit. He’s wearing what Nat calls their ‘undercover’ clothes. Which basically constitutes normal street clothes and a baseball cap. Tony meets him at the elevator, but Steve is grim-faced and speaks rapidly, informing Tony that he won’t be able to stay long.

Behind him, shoulders hunched and head ducked in an attempt to hide, is a ratty omega who won’t look Tony in the eye. It takes only a moment for things to click into place, although he doesn’t know how it works out. Omega, blue eyes, sticking to Steve like cockleburr. Cut the hair and shave that stubby face, and you have one James Buchanan Barnes, straight from the history books and museum posters. The same James Buchanan Barnes who supposedly fell from a train and died in the Alps. Tony swallows. Okay. This is- probably not good.

Tony steps aside to let the other alpha in, and while Barnes seems reluctant to leave the confines of the elevator, the safety Steve must have promised him proves too alluring to resist. His eyes flick around, taking in every possible entrance and exit.

“Alright,” Tony says slowly. “Uh, coffee, anyone?”

Neither Steve nor Barnes wants coffee, but Tony makes himself a cup. He holds it in his good hand, the other one immobilized in the arm-sling, and takes a seat. Steve sits down across from Tony, but Barnes keeps flitting around the room, seemingly too nervous to stay still.

Steve explains, as best he can in the time he has, that his Bucky has been in the clutches of HYDRA for around seventy years. That he was apparently tortured, conditioned, and used. Steve tries to avoid explaining what exactly Bucky was used for, but Tony insists that honesty is key here, and Steve relents.

“We found him in one of the compounds we were investigating,” is how Steve begins, carefully.
“Alone?”

“Uh, somewhat. There had been people. He hadn’t been alone originally, but by the time we showed up, they were—” Steve swallows. “They were all dead.”

“Dead as in…”

“We think Bucky killed them. All of them.”

“Ah.”

Tony’s gaze flicks to where Bucky’s wedged himself into a corner. The omega’s gloved fingers stroke nervously across his hip, where Tony’s sure he must be used to carrying some kind of weapon.

“Nat recognized him. From her time in the Red Room.” All of Tony’s attention snaps back to Steve. “She says they called him the Winter Soldier.”

“Ah.”

Tony knows about the Winter Soldier, from his little extracurricular—well. Let’s politely call it ‘research’. His extracurricular research projects. Not illegal at all. Nope. Anyways, Tony liked to read about the various Big Bads that SHIELD had come up against in its history. Like going on Wikipedia and reading about serial killers. There hadn’t been much about this so-called Winter Soldier. Just, that he showed up every few years, and never, ever failed.

So Bucky Barnes is the Winter Soldier. Okay.

Steve leans in towards Tony.

“We’re still trying to figure out what happened to him. We think there was some sort of mind control involved. HYDRA had their hands on the tesseract for a little while in the beginning. Maybe they figured out how to set up something like Loki’s scepter. We just—don’t really know yet. But he needs somewhere safe. He can’t go to SHIELD. We don’t know how deep HYDRA goes.”

“And you want him to stay with me? A battered, abused, potentially mind-controlled omega to hang around an unfamiliar alpha? He’s really going to be okay with that?”

Steve has the good grace to look abashed.

“Well—”

“Oh my god. You haven’t even asked him?”

“Tony please. He needs somewhere safe. Someone safe. I trust you, and you take care of us so well. Bucky needs someone like that to take care of him.”

Tony sets the coffee mug down and scrubs his hand across his carefully-groomed goatee.

“Alright. Fine. He can stay.” Goddamn Rogers and his manipulations. Everyone thinks he’s all apple pie and blue-eyed innocence, but he knows how to get what he wants. It’s no secret that Tony’s protective instincts are dialed up to eleven. There’s a reason he insists on providing just about anything and everything for his little ragtag family. “Hey, Bucky?” Tony lifts his voice, and the omega flinches violently. Tony files that away. Alright. No raised voices. “Can I call you Bucky? Do you want to stay here with me while your pal Steve sorts things out?”
Best to leave it vague, at ‘things’. Bucky looks to Steve for guidance.

“I trust Tony. He’ll take care of you. You won’t have to go back to them.”

‘Them’ sounds ominous. Tony knows he means HYDRA, but ‘them’ just sounds so much more foreboding.

Bucky grimaces, but he nods. Okay, great. Then that’s settled.

Steve cocks his head to listen to something filtering in through his earpiece.

“I’ve gotta go. I’ll be back as soon as I can, but that might be- oh hell, weeks.”


Tony flicks a lazy salute, and Steve steps back into the elevator. He’s swallowed by the sliding doors within moments, leaving Tony alone with his new twitchy houseguest.

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Clint had needed special handling for a while post-Loki, so Tony wasn’t wholly inexperienced with traumatized omegas, but uh- yeah.

Tony hears Bucky let out a shaky breath somewhere behind him, but he doesn’t twist around to look at him again. Instead, Tony rocks up to his feet, broadly choreographing every movement as he walks to the kitchen, which is separated from the sitting area by a granite bartop. Tony opens the fridge. There’s, uh, not much? He usually likes to cook for himself- call it the control-freak in him- but with one hand, he’s not great at the prep work. So it’s usually takeout or delivery. Since the rest of the team is otherwise occupied.

There’s a carton of fried rice and some cold kung pao chicken, along with milk for cereal and some greek yogurt. Well, there are condiments and things for sandwiches too, but Tony decides Bucky needs proper feeding up.

He dumps the rice and chicken in a bowl and sets out utensils and water, and leaves it out on the countertop.

“I’m going to order some, uh, some hot food,” Tony announces, glancing at his unexpected guest. “But I figure you might be hungry. It’s a little spicy, but this should tide you over. How does italian sound? Like, real italian? I happen to know a place.”
Bucky still doesn’t talk, and Tony thinks he might need to figure out a way around that. All Bucky’s doing so far is staring, nodding, or shaking his head.

“Okay. Cool. Uh, help yourself. Look, see? It’s safe.” He takes a bite of the chicken and rice and, after swallowing thoroughly, sips at the water. Taste-test done, Tony pulls out his phone and flicks through the number, wandering off to lean in the doorway leading to the floor’s main hall. Bucky waits for a solid four minutes before peeling himself off the wall and approaching the food, but Tony only watches from the corner of his eye as he delivers his order to Mrs. Ninette “call me Nonnie” Sforza.

Bucky proves to be ravenous.

Fortunately, Tony ordered what he thought would be enough to provide food for lunch, dinner, and next day’s breakfast. Bucky eats like a man starved, and Tony is hit with the very uncomfortable thought that perhaps that was, in fact, the case. Although Tony tries to give the omega plenty of space, he hunches over his plate as though to protect it. He chews on his veal shanks slowly, watching as Bucky wolfs down the pasta and squid and bread salad and risotto. When Bucky finally slows down and stops, Tony eases himself closer.

“I’m going to put that in a tupperware, okay? You can finish it whenever you want. I just, uh, I got dessert too.”

Bucky watches his plate slide slowly away, eyes flicking between it and Tony, but Tony does exactly as promised, placing it and all the other leftovers where Bucky can find it later. Instead, Tony presents Bucky with a pastry box filled to the brim with sfogliatella, and two chocolate and coffee tartufos. One of them was meant to be Tony’s, but, you know. Tony prods the plate of frozen goodness a little closer to the omega.

Bucky catches on around then. Figures out Tony’s watching him eat. He slows down, the pastry crunching as he chews, sharp eyes keeping Tony well in sight. When he swallows, Tony gestures to the ice cream.

“Try- uh, try that. You know, before it melts,” he suggests. Bucky glances down at the tartufos, then back at Tony. His gloved hand gravitates slightly towards the discarded spoon. “It’s ice cream. Coffee and chocolate. There’s orange curd in the middle. I mean, that part’s supposed to be a surprise, but in the interest of full-disclosure, yeah. There’s orange curd.”

There are a grand total of two sfogliatella left, and a smear of melted ice cream and curd on a plate when Bucky finishes. Tony feels the warm curl of pride he never fails to get when his gifts are accepted. Clint likes his arrows? Warm fuzzies. Steve likes the new body armor? Warm fuzzies. Bruce’s stretchy-pants are received with enthusiasm? Warm, warm fuzzies.

He scratches behind his ear and clears his throat.

“Uh, I guess- I guess you’ll want to, uh have the grand tour. Come on, follow me.”

He’s long-since learned to swallow his height envy. 5’9” isn’t exactly a bad height. He’s not short, thank you very much, but he’s definitely smaller than a lot of the people he interacts with on a day to day basis. Looks like he can add another person to the list of ‘People who Loom Over Tony Stark’. Which he has. He does, in fact, have that list. He would tell JARVIS to update said list, but he’s already let Jay know via text that he should probably keep his voice to himself around the skittish omega.

“So that’s my, uh, that’s my kitchen. This is my floor, actually. That’s kinda how it works here. Each
person has their own floor, but we have a communal one for guests and pack gatherings. Uh, I think- I think you’re going to be situated here, on this floor, until things settle down. Not because I think I need to keep an eye on you.” Which he does. He does think that, but, uh, that’s not the priority. Bucky Barnes is, according to Steve and ‘legally’-obtained SHIELD documents, an expert killer and a very, very dangerous person, but what Tony currently has before him is a skittish, frightened man who needs a safe space. Tony’s inclined to go with his instinct on this one, and he thinks he can provide that safe space more easily if he sticks close to his guest. “Let me start over. Hi, I’m Tony, and you aren’t a prisoner here.”

Bucky stares at him, chewing on the inside of his cheek. His adam’s apple bobs as he swallows thickly, and the heavy scent of warycautiousonedge roll off him in waves. Tony purses his lips. He’s not sure how to do this, actually. With Clint, he at least had some sort of pack-bond- forged in the heat of battle- to start with. Bucky’s a horse of an entirely different color.

“You know what? Let’s just get you to your room. You can, uh, shower, and I’ll get you some clothes, and if you’re hungry after I’ll crack open that pasta. Deal?”

When Bucky is nicely-situated behind closed doors, given full privacy to go about his business, Tony lets out a huff of air.

Okay. He’s a big boy. He can adult. And adulting at the moment means playing the role of surrogate alpha to Cap’s non-dead, serial killer boytoy from the 40s.

“Fuck,” he groans, scrubbing a hand across his face. He needs a drink.

So he pours himself a drink. Whiskey, neat. He knocks it back, and pours himself another glass. This, he savors, like it’s meant to be savored.

Tony works out an alert system with JARVIS. He fits his earpiece on. If JARVIS needs his attention, he’ll vibrate Tony’s phone in their designated alert pattern, or speak directly into the earpiece, provided Bucky isn’t within earshot. Tony doesn’t fancy springing his AI onto the poor guy, not until he’s settled in, at least. JARVIS lets Tony know that he has taken the liberty of placing an order for clothes of various sizes for their guest. He estimates delivery within two hours. Tony settles down in an armchair looking out through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the bustling city below. With a flick of his finger, he opens a call with Pepper.

“What’s wrong?” is the first thing the beta demands. Tony laughs.

“Why does something have to be wrong? Can’t I just call the light of my life to see how she’s doing?”

“You can,” Pepper allows. “But you don’t. That’s not how our relationship works. So again, what’s wrong?”

Tony runs his tongue over his teeth, picking his words carefully, but he decides the truth would be best.

“I’m going to need a personal week- maybe more. So, uh, no events, no press conferences, no meetings.”

He hears Pepper blow out a breath through her nose. He knows it’s her nose because she has this tiny little whistle that happens when the sigh is particularly antagonized.

“Am I allowed to know why?”
“I think I need to keep this fairly close to my chest. I don’t want word getting out.” He pulls the phone from his face and swipes diagonally towards the bottom left corner. The audio clicks as JARVIS secures the line. “But, uh, unofficially, as my friend, I will tell you that one of the other Avengers brought in an omega. A really, really dangerous omega, who is actually probably in even more danger than he is dangerous. If that makes sense.”

“It doesn’t at the moment, but I’m sure I’ll decipher that eventually.”

“Steve. Steve brought me an omega.”

“His mate?”

“I don’t- I don’t think so? Just- a friend. A really, really good friend.”

“And you can’t help but invest yourself in anything with a sad face.”

“Pepper, that is slander. Slander and lies. I have a heart of stone.”

He taps on the reactor to prove his point, despite Pepper not having video to accompany the audio. Pepper sighs again, and Tony hears a rustling on the other end.

“I’ll cancel your appointments and make excuses. I’m CEO, not your PA anymore. Why can’t you do this yourself?” she gripes.

“Because you do it better.”

“You owe me. Earrings, in particular. With a matching necklace.”

“I’ll send you a check. I’m sure I’ll have wonderful taste.”

“Mm. Alright. Unofficially, as your friend, you’ll let me know if you need any help?”

Like fucking hell would he bring his tiny, beta friend into a fight with an out-of-control assassin, but, uh, Pepper doesn’t need to know that. Actually, she probably means ‘need any help’ as something more mundane and less dangerous, now that he thinks about it.

“Of course, Ms. Potts. Naturally.”

They say their goodbyes, and Tony ends the call. He rests his elbows on his knees, swishing a mouthful of whiskey around in his mouth before swallowing the smooth, liquid burn. He fidgets, leaning to the side to rest against the armrest, and bounces his leg. Yeah, he did, uh, he did really intend to give Bucky some privacy but- well. Tony isn’t exactly a hands-off alpha.

He gets up and sets the half-finished tumbler of whiskey on the bar, then slinks down the hall to Bucky’s door.

“Bucky?” he calls quietly, tapping the door with one finger. “I’m here to bother you. See what you need. Is the room okay? It’s just- uh- it’s just a guest room, for, you know, my guests.”

He doesn’t get any sort of response, which is, you know, expected. What he doesn’t expect, though, is the door opening just a hair, one blue eye peering through at him. Tony blinks and takes a step back. He holds up his hands in the universal ‘I am unarmed’ sign. Sign. Speaking of sign. Tony knows ASL. He learned for Clint.

/Do you need anything?/ he signs.
Bucky closes the door.

Well then. That doesn’t really answer his question, and he’s still left curious as to whether Bucky knows ASL too, but, uh, that can wait. Apparently Bucky needs some alone time.

That’s fine. Tony knows he can come across as clingy. He can back off, wait for Bucky to come to him. Or, you know, just provide housing and food and stay out of Bucky’s way. Whatever works.
They don’t interact the next day. Or most of the day after. Tony takes to leaving large quantities of delivered food outside Bucky’s door and then retreating, and collecting the scraped-clean dishes an hour or two later. It works, kind of, and JARVIS tells Tony that Bucky doesn’t seem to be in any sort of distress (privacy protocols bar JARVIS from revealing more than that without express permission from Bucky or an override code from Tony). Tony just can’t leave well enough alone. He’s been living on pre-cooked food for weeks now, and he’s itching to make something of his own. And, well, naturally that means he’s going to cook for Bucky. It’s just- he underestimates how difficult it is to cut or peel or press things with only one hand operational. And while yes, he could learn, he’s impatient.

Luckily, he has a guest hanging out just a few doors down. Extra hands, yay!

Tony knocks on the door. And then he knocks again, a few minutes later. And then he opens the door, because he hasn’t seen Bucky in two whole days and now he’s not answering the door and what if something happened to him.

The room is dark when Tony creeps in. The reactor casts a dim sort of glow through the fabric of his t-shirt. The first thing he notices is the strong scent of omega. The second thing noticed is the stifling warmth. Tony tugs at the shirt’s loose collar, sweeping his gaze around the room, over the haphazard pile of blankets and pillow shoved into one corner, over the closed curtains, over the- wait, that’s-

Bucky slams Tony against the wall, wrapping metal- metal! What?- fingers around the alpha’s throat. It would be a little more awesome if he could actually breathe. He crushes out a breathless yelp as the violent motion jostles his broken arm, and Tony immediately wraps his fingers around Bucky’s wrist. As Bucky presses in harder, eyes cold and flat, Tony comes to a split-second decision. He goes limp. Doesn’t pull. Doesn’t fight. Doesn’t push. If Bucky’s reacting to Tony’s invasion of his space, he’s hoping maybe the lack of aggression will get Bucky to, you know, put him down. If that’s not the case, then… well. He’s screwed.

His choice to remain passive pays off. The snarl drops from Bucky’s face in a blink-and-you-miss-it moment, and he drops Tony, scrambling back as though burned. Tony sucks in a lungful of air, supporting himself with the wall as Bucky prowls away, staring at his hands with what can only be described as loathing. The flesh hand trembles. The metal one remains motionless, locked in position as Bucky shakes his head like a dog shaking off water.

“Okay, that was- um. That was on me,” Tony rasps, flapping a hand. Bucky’s eyes snap up to the alpha when he speaks. “I shouldn’t have intruded. I just- uh. I wanted to know if you would help me cook lunch. I can’t really do much with one of my arms wrapped up like this.” He inches towards the light switch. “Do you mind if I- if I turn on the lights?”

Easy does it. Fuck, his throat hurts like a bitch. He knows there’ll be bruises before long, and he thanks his lucky stars he’s already asked Pepper to cancel all of his public showings. The faint blue of his reactor glints off of Bucky’s metal hand, but Bucky doesn’t do or say anything to discourage him from flipping the switch. Tony flinches as bright light washes the room, but Bucky takes the change stiffly, impassively.
“Are you still wearing those? Have you even, you know, showered yet?”

Bucky tilts his head, shoulders tight. He shakes his head minutely.

“Oh. Um. Okay. I can work with that. Do you mind if I- Look, there’s another omega on the team. His name is Clint, okay? Sometimes, when he’s in the mood to be pampered or needs, you know, special attention, he likes to take a nice, long soak. How does that sound?”

Christ, he hopes he isn’t patronizing. That seems like the farthest thing from what Bucky needs. Bucky shrugs one shoulder, throat clicking as he swallows again.

“How about you just- you just hang out here, and I’ll run you a bath. A hot one.” Since apparently Bucky doesn’t tolerate the cold. He’s wearing a fucking coat in his sweltering room. “And then you can get dressed and clean up. Alright?”

So yeah. A hot bath.

Tony feels Bucky’s eyes on his back as he navigates the shifted furniture to reach the attached bathroom suite. The omega’s been busy, it seems. The bed has been pulled from the wall and situated in the center of the room, to block a clear line of sight to where he’s set up what looks like a sort of nest. The rest of the room’s furniture has been rearranged to provide any intruder (like Tony, a small voice whispers in his head) obstacles, to give Bucky time to- something. Escape? Fight back? It’s not a great sign.

Tony flips on the bathroom light switch and starts filling the tub. Pleasantly-neutral toiletries are hidden away behind the mirror, and Tony sets shampoo and body soap on the shelf by the bath. He should see if Bucky likes the stuff geared towards omegas. The soaps that claim to mimic comfort scents or- or- whatever. He’ll see. Later.

He turns around to find Bucky completely buck-ass naked, hovering in the bathroom a few steps away from Tony. How he didn’t hear the omega come in is an absolute mystery to the alpha.

“Woah. Okay. Um.” Tony blinks. “So that happened.” He runs his fingers through the bathwater, checking the temperature. It’s on the pleasant side of too-hot. He twists the tap shut, halting the flow of water, and gestures to the tub. “Look, it’s just an offer, but, uh- look. Get in the bath.” It’s not like Tony hasn’t just seen everything. What’s a little nudity between friends? “Let me- take care of you.”

Bucky obeys wordlessly, mechanically, which is again, not great. But he settles into the bath. Unfortunately, that means he sits there, in the middle of a rather large tub, curled in on himself like he’s expecting the worst. Tony needs to take a moment. He rubs the bridge of his nose. Breathe in, breathe out. In, out. It’s not the time or place to pry. He’s just here to make Bucky feel safer.

“I’m just going to clean you, okay sweetpea? Nothing else. I’m just going to get you nice and clean. Lean back a little for me. See, there’s this neck-pillow back there. Just, y’know, relax. This is supposed to be a nice experience. Calming.”

It’s not calming when Tony does it. Other people putting their hands on him when he’s submerged in water is not a good thing. Tony tends to react very poorly indeed, to put things mildly, but Tony hopes Bucky doesn’t have the same associations Tony does. He really, really hopes not.

Tony uses his cupped hand to wet the omega’s knotted hair, and he carefully, meticulously washes away all the dirt and sweat and grime. He’ll tease out the tangles with a comb and some of Natasha’s conditioner-spray (while praying she doesn’t kill him for his theft) after Bucky’s all clean and cozy.
He does his best to avoid the bad-touch when he washes Bucky’s body, rubbing foamy soap into his skin until a grey-brown film is washed away. Bucky tenses anyways, every now and then. He seems to alternate between blank obedience and near-panicked resistance, but as Tony digs his thumb into the muscle on either side of Bucky’s spine, kneads the scarred flesh around the metal arm socket, wipes and dabs at Bucky’s face with a folded washcloth, the omega unwinds, just slightly, bit by bit, but it’s enough. By the time Tony gets down to Bucky’s feet- his personal least favorite part. He isn’t a fan of touching feet-, Bucky’s got his head tipped back, resting fully and completely in the tub.

The water needs to be changed twice before Tony’s done. He wants to break out his tool kit and detail the metal wonder serving as Bucky’s left arm, but that would involve leaving Bucky all alone, and the omega, wonder of wonders, is currently half-floating in the tub, eyes closed, a soft, raspy purr humming in his chest as Tony supports the metal arm, letting the rest of Bucky drift, boneless and comfortable. Tony can’t help the little smile on his face. There we go.

He drains the tub again and prods Bucky into standing up. Tony wraps a thick towel around the omega and drapes a smaller one over the other’s hair, tucking the edges and twisting like he’s learned to do when taking care of Natasha. He grins. The Winter Soldier doesn’t exactly look intimidating wrapped in towels.

Bucky’s scent shifts subtly from *warmsafecontent*, souring slightly with *cautiondangerwarning*, and Tony takes that as his cue to back off a little.

“I’ll be right back,” he promises. “To, you know, sort out your hair.” He figures a shave is out of the question, unless Bucky does it for himself. He doubts the omega is in the mood to let anyone hold a razor to his throat.

The spray-conditioner is nicked without fuss, though he breathes a silent apology to the beta he’s stealing from. When he returns, Bucky’s dropped the towels and is in the process of pulling his old, dirty clothes on again. Which, yeah, is smart when you have nothing, but Tony clucks his tongue, flapping a hand.

“Hey, none of that.” Bucky freezes, snapping his head up to stare at Tony, and just like that, all the alpha’s hard work is cast off. Bucky’s all tense again, throat fluttering as he swallows and swallows again. “No, look, it’s fine. Nothing’s wrong. It’s just, why don’t you put on some clean clothes, alright? I’ll have these washed and brought back to you, if you want.” The misery written in every line of the omega’s tightly-wound frame tugs at Tony’s heartstrings. “Where did you put the, uh, the clothes I sent you? Tony cranes his neck, peering around the maze of furniture. He thinks he can make out the leg of a pair of pants sticking out from Bucky’s nest, but when he tries to approach, to pick out the clothing, Bucky’s hand twists into the collar of his shirt, tugging him back carefully, without allowing any sort of argument. Tony rubs his throat where the cotton dug into his skin.

“Alright then. I’m not allowed near your nest?”

Bucky looks ready for a fight, but he holds his ground and stiffly shakes his head, eyes flicking down to Tony’s chin.

“That’s fine. You still need clothes, though. Go grab something. Something *clean.*”

Bucky chooses a too-big sweatshirt and stiff denim jeans. Tony has to work to convince him to open up a pack of underwear, but he manages, and- wonder of wonders- also manages to coax Bucky into leaving his room.

The omega is jittery, when Tony sits him down in a comfy chair. He *especially* Does Not Like Tony sliding around behind him with the intention of combing his hair. Tony compromises and sits on the
“Steve says you know Natasha,” he chatters, displaying the spray bottle for Bucky’s inspection. The omega remains stonefaced. Tony purses his lips and mists the spray over Bucky’s damp hair. “This is hers. She’s got that awesome curly hair and it tangles like a bitch. She’s, uh, she’s like a dragon with her hair products, though. You might have to help me watch my back when she comes home.”

He works the teeth of the comb into the edge of one knot, holding the hair above it to avoid tugging on Bucky’s scalp. He chatters aimlessly, spitting out whatever words come to mind until he’s finished, and Bucky’s hair is tangle-free and slightly lavender-scented. Bucky sits stock-still, his back ridged and eyes glassy, which, uh, is not ideal. Tony decided tea is in order. For Bucky. Not Tony. Tony isn’t a tea drinker. He doesn’t exactly know whether Bucky’s a tea drinker either, but Bruce swears by the calming power of tea, and Tony needs all the help he can get.

Before pressing the mug of tea into Bucky’s hands, Tony takes a sip. Bucky’s eyes linger suspiciously on his mouth as he swallows, but having seen Tony willingly drink the tea, Bucky apparently decides it’s safe, and he sullenly nurses warm liquid, clinging to the porcelain mug like a lifeline. There’s a fine tremor in his hands that Tony doesn’t like. It’s making him rethink his previous plan of giving Bucky the responsibility of chopping vegetables and slicing meat, but, uh, he’ll see.

“Alright Bucky-bear. The main plan for today was actually to cook lunch, which I had some trouble doing by myself. It’s, uh, I guess it’s dinner now. Pork loin. And some green stuff. And a starch. I was thinking bread, but maybe- maybe potatoes?” Or bread and potatoes. Both. Both is good.

They follow a recipe, straight from the world wide web. When Tony offers a knife to Bucky, hilt-first, the omega’s eyes flick between it and Tony’s face. His hands are loose fists at his sides.

“You’re, uh, you’re gonna need this.” He subtly wriggles his cast-bound arm, heavy in its sling. “I mean, unless you want to eat- what is this. Fennel. I think it’s fennel. Unless you want to eat fennel like an apple.” Of course there’s apple too. The recipe says apple. Like, a really specific type of apple. When Tony put in the order for groceries, though, he just picked a green apple. “We can eat the apple like an apple though. It just, you know, won’t be cooked.”

Bucky’s eyes linger on the knife, but he clenches his jaw. Um, okay. Tony compromises. Bucky holds things in place, and Tony operates the knife. Tony insists that Bucky use his metal hand. Tony’s right-handed, so that means he’s a little wobbly with his left-handed use of the knife. It would fucking suck to cut the omega by accident. Or at all.

“When everyone comes home, we’ll probably go back to our rotation. Wednesdays are pack meal nights. Steve, Clint, Nat, Bruce, and I all take turns taking charge of planning and cooking the meals, although, you know, we help each other out anyways. Thor- uh. Yeah. He’s not allowed on the roster for that anymore. I think our appliances confuse him.” It strikes Tony, then, that Bucky might not know who any of those people are. Yeah, the Avengers are pretty much household names, especially in North America, but, uh. Tony doesn’t exactly know the full details of Bucky’s situation. He’s flying blind. “Do you know them? Clint? Natasha? Natasha Romanov? Uh, Thor? The Hulk?”

Bucky gives little shakes of his head, not meeting Tony’s eyes. He stares instead at the bowl of clumsily-shopped fennel and apple, stroking his flesh fingers across the countertop.

Tony frowns.

“Do you know Steve?”
Of course he does. Why else would he follow Steve?

Bucky, however, shakes his head again, hunching his shoulders a little. His throat works as he swallows.

“That’s fine. That’s fine, Bucky-bear. You’re safe now, and they’re all gonna be nice to you or they’ll have me and Steve to answer to. Um. Just, quick question.” Because he would very much like to know whether Steve needs a chewing-out for forcing a traumatized omega somewhere he doesn’t want to go. “Why did you go with him? Why not, I don’t know. Run away? I can get you some paper, if you want to write.”

He’s met with another shake of the omega’s head, and Bucky clenches a fist, drawing it across the space in front of his body in one swift, shaky motion while the other remains stuck to the counter, tracing against it over and over and over. It takes Tony a moment for things to click, but inwardly he crows.

/SAFE/, is what he signed. Just one concept, but Tony can work with that.

“That’s right. Steve is safe. He’s a big marshmallow. You, my friend, have an excellent judge of character. That’s enough of that for now though. I’m fucking starving.”

Bucky wolfs down the majority of the food once it’s cooked, as predicted, and Tony’s pretty sure Bucky would have just kept on eating so long as something was in front of him. He wants to get to the bottom of that little quirk, preferably before Bucky gets the chance to eat himself sick, but baby steps. Baby steps. He does, however, extract a promise that Bucky will come share at least one meal a day with Tony. That should satisfy Tony’s need to see that Bucky is alright, and also force Bucky to socialize, even a little bit.

The omega retreats back to his room again, leaving Tony to clean up, which is fine. It’s easy enough. Scrape the scraps into the trash and pile everything into the dishwasher. Once upon a time Tony would break out in metaphorical hives just thinking about domestic chores, but being thrust into a team, a family, a pack- Well. You have to learn some things if you want to keep the peace.

The next day finds Tony again attentively bathing Bucky again.

“You know, you’re going to have to figure out how to wash up on your own, lazybones,” Tony chides without heat as he takes the q-tips he brought with him this time and cleans between the metal plates. Bucky bobs his fist in a ‘yes’ sign, but doesn’t elaborate. Doesn’t even bother opening his eyes. Tony huffs. “Well, at least I know the way into your good graces.”

As it turns out, Bucky is perfectly capable of washing himself, as Tony finds out when he shuffles into the kitchen for breakfast a few days later to find Bucky already there, hair damp and sweet-smelling (turns out, he likes the lavender and honeysuckle-scented things), silently searching through the fridge. Tony clears his throat, cocking his head, and Bucky jerks back, snapping a hand out to wrap around the hilt of a chef knife. He holds it with a steady hand, his eyes flat and dim again. Tony raises his hands.

“Good morning, sunshine,” he hums. “I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

Actually, that was exactly what Tony was trying to avoid. Spooking Bucky leads to physical violence, like strangulation or having his legs kicked out from under him (which was surprisingly painful for his cast-encased arm). And yeah, sure, Tony knows some self-defence. Natasha is a vicious taskmaster when it comes to training him and, yeah, even Bruce, because what if they’re
stuck without (in Tony’s case) a suit or as (in Bruce’s case) a human, and they’re still under attack? Tony, however, has decided the way he wants to play the game with Bucky is to provide no resistance or physical antagonizations. Bucky lapses? Tony weathers out the episode and does his best to soothe away the fear and self-loathing written in every inch of Bucky’s body language after. Besides. This is the goddamn Winter Soldier. Tony’s hand-to-hand combat skills and physical strength aren’t exactly- aren’t exactly on par with those of a super-soldier. He barely beats his fellow normal-human Bruce, every now and then. And that’s only because he lets him.

The knife flips in Bucky’s fingers so that he’s no longer holding it like you would a kitchen knife, but like you would hold a knife you’re prepared to attack someone with. Tony decides maybe breakfast can wait. He doesn’t want to abandon Bucky, though, so he just slowly backs away and goes to sit down in the attached living room. He flicks the TV on and sits down on the couch, kicking his feet up on the coffee table. Out of the corner of his eye, he watches Bucky, waiting, waiting for the omega to relax and come out of whatever mental state he keeps falling into. If Tony were any sort of psychologist, he might hazard a guess that Bucky’s having trouble shaking off his conditioning, but Tony isn’t a psychologist, or a psychiatrist, and he’s not prepared to play games with Bucky’s mind.

He just wishes he knew how to help, besides providing a refuge. He hasn’t brought up the possibility of taking Bucky to see someone qualified to help POWs and brainwashed, uh, assassins. Although it’s something he really wants to bring up. He just- He figures maybe it would be best to get as much of the story from Steve as possible before sending Bucky off to have someone poke around in his head.

Bucky doesn’t put the knife down, but he does resume his search for food. He pulls out a bowl of cut melon all mixed together and grabs a bag of artisanal bread, before coming to sit in the living area, on the floor across from Tony. He tears into the bread and fruit, the knife never out of reach, while keeping the alpha pinned with his flat, wary eyes.

It’s a bad episode. While Tony doesn’t actually end up attacked at any point, it takes Bucky until nearly 6 in the evening to relax and come back to himself. He won’t let Tony close, won’t let Tony do any of the tactile things he likes to do to soothe his packmates, so Tony instead brings his thickest, heaviest blanket, and offers it up. Bucky huddles under the blanket, pressed against the corner of the couch, while Tony pushes the envelope a little and sits down on the far end of the same couch, a ways away from Bucky.

It takes the course of a whole animated movie for Tony to slide his way slowly down the couch, bit by bit, until he can sit a few inches away from Bucky. He doesn’t reach out to touch. Just- sits there, until the movie ends and Bucky hides away in his room again. It doesn’t escape Tony’s attention, though, that Bucky takes the blanket with him.


Chapter End Notes

I’m really, very much hoping I don't make Bucky too pathetic.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Mmmmmmm I'm super self-conscious about writing ABO XD It's one thing to read it, another entirely to write it. Anyways, here's the next installment! As of the beginning of this chapter, Bucky's been with Tony for about a week. As of the end of the chapter, he's been with Tony for about three weeks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Exactly one week after Bucky showed up trailing behind Steve, he hits Tony with a confession out of nowhere. It’s not the good kind. It’s the kind that makes Tony see red and need a moment to calm down. He’s an alpha with an alpha’s temper, but that doesn’t mean he has to let it control him.

Tony’s sitting out on the balcony, tweaking his gauntlet stabilizers as best he can, when Bucky comes padding out and leans against the balcony’s railing. Tony glances up at him.

“What’s up, buttercup?”

Bucky doesn’t say anything for a good long while. He simply stares down at the city below, the wind pulling at his loose hair. Tony fights the urge to tie Bucky’s hair back for him. Instead, Tony glances down at the gauntlet clutched between his knees to stabilize it, and decides to move it to the table instead. He fiddles with his tools, fitting them one by one into their case, until Bucky turns abruptly to Tony again.

/I was not fed/ he signs, looking over Tony’s shoulder. Tony blinks, cocking his head. /When I- I don’t remember ever eating before I came here./

Tony sets his tool kit on the table, biting his tongue.

/I was given injections. Only injections. When I was awake./ Bucky pauses, clenching his jaw. /I can’t believe that I’m going to be fed again after I leave here. I don’t think I will be./

The alpha closes his eyes, rubbing at the bridge of his nose, right between his eyes. When he opens them again, Bucky is stroking his flesh fingers across the smooth railing, his metal ones tap tap tapping at his thigh.

“You don’t- Bucky, honey, you’re not going to be leaving. No one’s going to take you away. You’re always going to have access to food. Okay? Is this about, about your appetite? Because that’s kind of normal, for most other people in the pack. Thor eats, like, twice as much as you.” It’s only a slight exaggeration. “You don’t have to explain.”

Bucky’s hands are jerky as he signs /Do. I’m not right. Not good. You need to understand./

“Being hungry doesn’t make you a bad person, Buck.”

/I could hurt you./

“I could probably kick your ass too, just FYI. I mean, not like this, but with the suit on.” Bucky looks at him blankly. “Oh, uh. I’m Iron Man? No? Whatever. I put on a kickass suit of mechanized
armor and save the world on a fairly regular basis.” Bucky shakes his head, a grunt of distress escaping him.

/I could kill you. I see, in my head. All the ways I can kill you. I- can remember. Other people. In the base, and- and before, I think. Before./ Bucky seems to be working himself into a frenzy, flesh hand trembling as he continues to sign. /You don’t know what I am, what I’ve done. You’ll throw me out- give me back- I don’t know what I’ll do- If I’ll be allowed to eat- I don’t know-/ 

Tony decides that maybe enough is enough. He hauls himself to his feet and approaches Bucky, and Bucky ends up being so caught-up in his rant that he doesn’t notice Tony until the alpha’s already taking Bucky’s flesh wrist in hand, pressing it loosely to Bucky’s chest. The omega’s eyes focus to meet Tony’s then drop down to Tony’s chin as his jaw clenches again.

“A lot of things could kill me, okay? I fly around in a suit of armor fighting aliens and would-be conquerors. Any of them could kill me. A disease could kill me. Did you know a swan could actually kill me too? Yeah. That’s a very real possibility, I think. I mean, Cap’s probably gonna kill me too if he finds out I let you panic and think you’re going to get kicked out. You’re not going anywhere, okay? Not unless you want to. I’m a goddamn possessive son of a bitch, and until you decide otherwise, you’re stuck with me. Okay?”

Bucky swallows thickly and, much to Tony’s absolute shock, leans in, just a bit, before changing his mind and pulling back, away from Tony. Tony lets the omega’s wrist go without a fight. He comes to a split-second decision.

“Do you like ice cream? I want ice cream. Ice cream makes everything better.”

So Tony takes Bucky out for ice cream. Except Bucky doesn’t like ice cream. In fact, Bucky puts a spoonful of ice cream in his mouth and turns an interesting shade of green. He does, however, let Tony rub his back as the alpha tells him to put his head down between his knees and wait for the nausea to pass.

“Okay, so ice cream may have been a bad idea,” Tony allows, when the omega sits up again a few minutes later, still looking pale. “Maybe it’s the dairy. Some people just don’t like dairy. Maybe you’re one of those people. Or maybe it was the flavor. Pistachio can be sort of hit or miss. Um. Let’s try sorbet, and then we’ll call it quits.”

Bucky does like the raspberry sorbet. He also likes the blood orange sorbet. And the coconut. In fact, he likes each and every flavor the ice cream store has in stock. He eats a little slowly at first, still recovering from his ice cream mishap, but before long he just can’t resist food, and Tony’s heart aches after the admission he’d been given no more than an hour before. He’s going to prove to Bucky that food is not going to be in short supply. Just, no dairy?

Is Bucky fucking Barnes lactose intolerant? That would be- huh.

“Are you lactose intolerant?” he blurts. Bucky’s icy blue eyes flick to Tony, then back down again as he eats the sorbet of a spoon.

Leaving the spoon in his mouth so he has one hand free, Bucky signs /Don’t know./

Tony can’t help but smile at the adorable picture Bucky makes. He has to work to remember Bucky’s a world-class killer. According to Natasha and Steve. And he trusts them.

Not to mention the fact that Bucky has a knife or some other dangerous object at or around his throat at least once every other day.
It shouldn’t be as endearing as it is. Tony’s pretty sure the trauma of his superhero lifestyle might have crossed some wires.

“Okay, well, um. Maybe it was just the ice cream. I guess we’ll see. In the meantime—”

It’s strange, especially considering Bucky’s rapid consumption of the tartufos, but Tony isn’t really one to make assumptions, especially not after the revelation provided to him just hours before. He pulls out his phone and puts in an order for sorbet to be delivered to the tower. There. Another treat for the both of them.

Tony fully intends to take Bucky out to lunch as well, but Bucky starts getting a little twitchy, and yeah. Duh. Not exactly used to so many people, noises, sights, scents. So Tony adapts his plan, and places an order at the Indian place Bruce favors. They pick up the food on the way back to the tower, and Tony lets Bucky have first pick. Bucky prowls the room as Tony sets up their boxes of takeout, the omega checking every single window and door like he’s fallen into the habit of doing.

“Those are, uh. I know the windows seem like a security risk, you know? But trust me, this place is a fortress. It isn’t really glass. Transparent aluminum, and very, very much of a personal secret.” Tony taps the side of his nose. “I always liked the idea of it, even if was originally just fiction. All the windows were replaced after, y’know, the invasion. Nothing short of a nuclear blast is going to break through.”

Bucky pauses just long enough to fix Tony with a wary eye.

/Invasion?/

Christ, Bucky really is just a blank slate. Tony’s dying to interrogate him, to figure out what all he’s lost, and what all he remembers besides his ability to kill.

“A couple years back, a guy named Loki opened a portal into space. He let part of an army through, and that’s when my pack formed. We call ourselves the Avengers, and we protect the earth.”

At least, that’s the abbreviated version, the lighter version, the version that skips over detailing the extent of the damage and death caused. Damage. Oh! He has an idea.

Tony flicks his wrist twice in the one-handed gesture to activate his watch, and the timepiece expands and unfolds, wrapping around to provide him with the pared-down gauntlet, intended solely for use as a defense. Because really. If he were to run out into battle with nothing but his watch—repulsor to make up an offense-team? That wouldn’t go over well.

“I’m going to shoot the window, okay? Nothing to be scared of, I just- I want to show you that you’re safe here, okay? No one’s going to get in if we don’t want them to.”

He knows he’s repeating himself, but he’s— well. He babbles. He knows that. His pack indulges him, and he hopes Bucky’s willing to do the same.

He fires off two shots, and while the windows glow faintly for a few seconds where the blasts impact, they don’t so much as crack. Bucky’s eyebrows rise up to his hairline, and after examining Tony, he creeps forwards to inspect the ‘glass’. There’s a sort of grudging respect to him, now. Tony retracts the repulsor.

“So yeah. Um.” He gestures to the open boxes of food. “I ordered it in terms of spice. There’s white-person spice over here, and then the real spice on this end. I can’t— I think Clint and I are the only ones in this whole damn pack who can’t eat the really spicy things, but, you know. C’est la vie.”
Tony hoards one carton of the milder food for himself, but Bucky scarfs down a decent portion of everything else without batting an eye. Tony forces the omega to wait for at least an hour before their next little event, but they spend the rest of the evening on the training floor, mostly in the pool. He hasn’t been able to run any comprehensive tests on the metal arm, but Tony watches Bucky maneuver it through the water, and all the while, he makes plans. Maybe an automated ballast system combined with a lighter alloy, would that work? No, but there would have to be some sort of manual override. Would it be better to make the override neurological or physical?

One thing is for certain: Bucky loves the water. Loves it. Tony manages to procure floaties to buoy the arm, and Bucky just drifts through the heated, three-lap pool, while Tony watches, fully clothed, from the edge. There’s nothing really keeping him from joining Bucky in the pool, it’s just- Tony can’t shake the ingrained desire to keep an eye on his newest- albeit potentially-temporary- pack member. Not out of fear of what Bucky might do, but out of the fear that someone might do something to Bucky.

It’s ridiculous, he knows, considering that the Tower is probably the most secure building in New York.

Pepper calls him the next day, irritated about being denied access to the top floors, which, okay. Tony might feel a little bit bad about that, but Bucky can still be twitchy and violent when surprised, and Tony doesn’t want to risk Pepper being injured by thrusting her into what he thinks Bucky considers a safe, private space.

So he leaves Bucky wrapped up in a blanket on the couch, under JARVIS’s supervision, while he himself takes the elevator down to meet Pepper.

The beta has her arms crossed when Tony strides out to meet her, arm pinned across his own chest by the sling. Tony opens his good arm for a hug, but Pepper holds her ground.

“Hey, no. You can’t be mad at me. I’m being responsible,” Tony protests. He’s familiar with that body language, that expression. “I’m thinking ahead. My omega’s still, um. He’s a little twitchy. We went out for ice cream yesterday, and he’s still recovering from that, so, uh. Yeah.”

“So he’s your omega now? I thought he was Steve’s.”

“The omega. The. Anyways that’s not important. The point is, I don’t want to spring strangers on him right now. Trust me, Pep. I know what I’m doing.”

He hopes he does, at least.

Pepper adjusts her bracelet and pins Tony with her steel-blue eyes.

“Dinner in four days, at The Drop. You’ll be there at seven, got it? You can bring the omega, if he’s willing to go. I’ll reserve us a quiet corner. Don’t isolate yourself, Tony. Now.” She reaches out to brush her fingers through the air over Tony’s throat, and he realizes then that unlike when he had taken Bucky out for ice cream, now he hasn’t concealed the yellowing bruises. Ah. “What happened here?”

Tony rubs his hand over his throat, grimacing.

“There was a misunderstanding. Everything’s fine, don’t worry.”

Pepper doesn’t look convinced in the least.

“Your bleeding heart is going to get you killed someday,” she sighs, though there isn’t any real heat
“Hey, at least I’ve got a heart,” he snips back quietly. Pepper can’t help but smile.

“Yes, you do. Don’t pressure him, but I really would like to meet this omega, especially if you think he’s going to stay and join your pack.”

Strictly speaking, Pepper isn’t a part of Tony’s pack. She’s one of those ‘strong independent women’ (or men, or enbies, but those terms don’t really apply to her) who don’t particularly care to be a part of a traditional pack. That doesn’t make her any less important to Tony, though. She might not be pack, but she’s without a doubt family.

“I would never pressure him,” Tony denies vehemently, and Pepper checks the holographic display provided by her bracelet at a touch, designed by Tony. She must see some alert or reminder, because she shakes her head and purses her lips.

“Four days. The Drop. Seven. I’ll see you then.”

Pepper wraps him up in a careful hug, mindful of his sling-bound arm, and rubs her cheek over the bruises on his throat. Tony holds his chin up obligingly, and can’t help but grin at the stern look she sends his way before taking her leave. It’s a subtle, passive-aggressive threat, marking his injuries with her burnt-sugar-cayenne scent. A message to his- the mystery omega saying ‘I see what you did.’

It drives Bucky crazy, when Tony steps out of the elevator upstairs. Bucky watches him from where he’s still bundled up, twists his body around to keep Tony in sight as the alpha walks into the kitchen to refill his coffee mug.

When Tony sits down on the couch, respectfully as far away from Bucky as possible without switching to a different seat, it takes about six seconds for Bucky to a) catch wind of Pepper’s mark, and b) decide to act on it. Tony leans forward to set his mug on the coffee table and glances over when he hears rustling down the couch; he sees Bucky shuffling down the length of it to kneel beside Tony. Tony looks up at the scruffy omega, keeping himself relaxed and still. and Bucky’s eyes are curious and clear when he brings his flesh-and-blood hand up to wrap around Tony’s throat. Bucky doesn’t squeeze or put pressure on the delicate skin other than to tilt Tony’s head back to rest against the back of the couch. He runs his thumb across Tony’s jumping pulse, his eyes zeroing in on the healing bruises between his fingers. He adjusts his careful hold, leans down to nose behind Tony’s ear. Tony hears him breathe in.

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It’s been a little over a week since Bucky first showed up behind Steve, and the omega seems to finally be testing his boundaries, seeing what he can get away with. Either that, or he’s trying to familiarize himself with his host while remaining as in-control as possible. Either works, and neither is an action Tony feels like discouraging. He closes his eyes and relaxes. Is that a bad idea? Objectively yet. Subjectively? Tony feels pretty secure.

There’s no nuzzling or overt scent-swapping. The scent-glands in Bucky’s inner wrists and under his jawline never come into contact with Tony’s skin, but the weaker, just as natural scent of Bucky’s skin washes out Pepper’s scent-mark as the minutes tick past and Bucky’s hand remains firmly over Tony’s throat. They don’t mention it, after. Whatever Bucky was looking for, apparently he got it, and that’s the end of that.
Four days later, Tony has the last of his fading bruise covered with makeup. He pulls on a brown button-down shirt and a pair of obscenely-expensive jeans, and he doesn’t protest in the slightest when Bucky comes padding out in loose cargo pants and t-shirt. Tony provides a jacket, because while Bucky seems to prefer long sleeves and sweatshirts in the tower, outside it’s pretty damn warm for march the eight-fucking-teenth. He needs the option to shed a layer if he wants. Bucky pulls the jacket on and holds the edges together like it’s keeping him together too.

Dinner is nice. Bucky doesn’t say much, even though Pepper tries to use her limited knowledge of sign language to engage him. If Pepper recognizes Bucky, she doesn’t say, and Tony doesn’t really want to broach that topic yet, not until he has more answers. Besides, who actually thinks upon meeting someone that ‘hey! This person looks like that one dead dude in the history books. It must be him!’ No one, that’s who.

Bucky throws up the next day, though. JARVIS lets Tony know that Bucky is in distress early in the morning, which leads to Tony bolting through the halls and bursting into Bucky’s room to find him hiding in the bathroom, hunched over the toilet. Tony holds Bucky’s hair as the omega retches and empties his stomach. The other man’s forehead is warm and clammy.

“That’s it, there we go,” Tony mumbles. Food poisoning, probably. They made sure not to give Bucky any dairy the night before, so it has to be food poisoning. He’ll give the restaurant a call later, once he has Bucky situated. He leaves Bucky for a moment, just long enough to go collect a glass of cold water. Bucky greedily drinks it down, and after a few minutes of nothing, Tony helps the exhausted omega back to his nest. The mattress has been pulled from the bed, and now makes up the base of the nest. Tony attempts to change the nesting material, to bring new blankets and sheets, but Bucky fusses, unwilling to part with what he already has. Okay, later then.

When Bucky emerges to face the day an hour later, he’s looking much better. The color has returned to his cheeks, and his scent is honeysuckle-sweet. Tony resolves to keep an eye on the omega, to make sure he doesn’t relapse, but for the time being, Bucky seems to have gotten over his food poisoning.

Except the very next day, while Tony’s maneuvering the intricacies of omelet-making, Bucky throws up in the sink.

/“The smell/, is what he signs miserably, so Tony bins the eggs and cranks up the air.

He has suspicions after that. Eggs and milk-products are banned, due to their smell and taste. Most fish find their way onto the list Tony’s keeping of things Bucky can’t stomach. A few days later, Tony procures a massive assortment of blankets and pillows, and Bucky accepts them with suspicion, and then, when it becomes clear no payment is expected, unrestrained delight. The gifts are swiftly incorporated into Bucky’s increasingly-elaborate nest, and a happy side effect is that this allows Tony to steal the old blankets and send them off for a wash.

None of it is inherently damning, but Tony makes an appointment.

Just to be sure. Tony’s vision threatens to red out every time he lets himself think about the possibility, and what it means.

They roll up to the Omega’s Clinic four days later, Bucky hunched over defensively in his seat. He agreed to come. Tony isn’t forcing him, and he made sure to let Bucky know there would be no repercussions for saying no to the appointment. It was only, he thought Bucky should be checked out.

Technically, any OBGYN could suffice, but Bucky is a male omega, and probably constitutes a
‘special case’ given his past as a tool of HYDRA, so Tony makes the appointment at a specialist’s clinic.

Dr. Miran is an omega himself, which Tony thought might help put Bucky at ease. Bucky signs a consent form to allow Tony in the exam room despite not being mated or married, and Tony rubs his good hand in small circles between Bucky’s shoulder blades as they’re led back.

The nurse gives them privacy for Bucky to change into the paper gown, although Bucky puts his jacket back on afterwards, hiding his metal hand in his pocket. His flesh fingers stroke repetitively over the crinkly paper gown, and he’s looking at some point in the wall with his teeth ground together.

He refuses to sit in the examination chair, his breath sharpening and growing increasingly panicked, but Dr. Miran suggests laying paper down on the floor instead, and that works. Tony reads through some inane gossip column as he waits, to provide Bucky some sort of privacy while remaining to provide support as well. He looks up to find Bucky’s eyes on him, jaw still clenched tight. Dr. Miran asks questions, like ‘when was your last cycle’ and ‘have you engaged in sexual activities within the past two months’ and ‘have you noticed any X, Y, or Z’, but Bucky refuses to so much as sign, instead shaking his head, again and again. Dr. Miran takes it all in stride, bless him.

“Alright, Mr. Stark,” the good doctor announces, and Tony looks up, only to see that Dr. Miran is talking to Bucky, not him. “Everything’s looking good. I’ll have you provide a urine sample to confirm and rule out any protein or sugar where it shouldn’t be, but I’d put you at about nine weeks.”

“We aren’t married, or mated.” Tony corrects, while Bucky sits up from where he’s been lying on his back. “I’m just- I don’t know. I’m a friend. There was a consent form we signed to let me in here. Uh, nine weeks of what?”

Tony knows, but it would- he needs it said by a professional.

“My apologies; I shouldn’t have assumed. And I’d say you, Bucky, are pregnant.”

Bucky hunches his shoulders, hooking his fingers together behind his neck.

“Unless it isn’t wanted.” Bucky’s silence is deafening, and the omega closes his eyes. “You do have options, if-”

Bucky shakes his head violently, and Dr. Miran closes his mouth. He shares a long look with Tony, then turns and collects an orange bottle. He smooths a sticker over the side, and passes it off to Bucky.

“Nurse Gilbert will show you the way to the bathroom. I do need that urine sample.” With Bucky gone, Dr. Miran turns his attention fully on Tony. “Mr. Stark, do you know who the sire is?”

Tony scrapes his nails across his pant leg, focusing on his breathing.

“No,” he manages. “I don’t even know whether-” He swallows. This is not the time or place to have one of his outbursts of anger. “-whether it was consensual.”

Or whether Tony needs to fly off and save Bucky’s love-match or pound the skull of his rapist.

Dr. Miran nods, the comfort scents of calmwarmsafe washing over Tony. He prefers more tactile soothing methods, but this is a stranger, not a packmate, so Tony will take what the doctor is politely offering.
“Alright. I’m going to schedule Bucky for an ultrasound and blood panel tomorrow, to see if we can find a heartbeat. I know it’s not very pleasant, but I think it would be best for you to help Bucky work through his options. If he wants to keep the pup, wonderful. If not, it’s still early enough in the pregnancy that an abortion can be performed. Another possibility is putting the pup up for adoption when it’s born, or finding a family before the birth. We have resources he can look into if he wants to do so. Here. I have pamphlets for you, if they help.”

The folded paper pamphlets range from the typical ‘what to expect when you’re expecting’, to abortion information, to adoption societies. Tony accepts them all.

“I see how it is; make the alpha do all the hard work,” he gripes, but a weak grin belays exactly what he thinks of his own statement. Dr. Mira flashes his own rather lackluster smile, the kind given when everyone involved knows a joke was in poor taste.

Bucky returns, and once Dr. Miran leaves, he rips off the paper gown and pulls his clothes back on. Tony stops for coffee on the way home. He orders a mocha with double espresso for himself, and a hot chocolate for Bucky- both made with almond milk. Tony regrets his own order, finds the almond milk too sweet for his tastes, but he doesn’t want to set Bucky’s senses off again, so he sucks it up.

There’s a difficult conversation coming up. Tony doesn’t want to pry, but there are things he needs to know. Such as whether there’s a mate they need to rescue. Bucky shakes his head vehemently, a low, snarly growl escaping him at the thought, and that answers that question.

The omega is huddled in a blanket at the end of the couch, metal arm draped over his stomach. Tony sits on the coffee table. This puts him lower than Bucky, which Tony thinks- he thinks that’s a good thing, for this. He doesn’t want to influence the omega.

“Alright, so that’s- Anyways-” He breathes in, breathes out. “Were you- Was- Hmm. You went into heat, with HYDRA, and they let you be raped.”

Bucky bobs his fist for yes, his head nodding minutely as well.

/Forced heat/, he signs with one hand, the other still wrapped around his hot chocolate. /I-N-D-U-C-E-D/, he fingerspells. /B-R-E-E-D-I-N-G/

Tony rubs his temples a little too hard, taking that ounce of pain and focussing on it, rather than redding out. He’s not the right alpha to talk about assault of any kind with. Not because he denies it, or doesn’t want to bother listening. He just- he’s protective. Protective as fuck. He doesn’t typically have difficulty controlling his instincts, but the need to defend, protect, avenge? Yeah, those sneak up on him like a bitch.

“You’re safe here,” he says vehemently. “I will do everything I can to keep you safe, alright?”

Bucky studies him with those narrowed blue eyes of his.

“Alright. Good. Fuck.” In, out. “You don’t have to carry to term, Buck. You can-”

“No,” comes the raspy, ragged word, and Tony jerks his head up in surprise. Bucky has this steely look in his eye, and he curls in further around his stomach. “It’s mine. I’m- keeping it. ’S mine.”

His voice is rough and rusty from disuse, but Tony nods.

“Alright. Yours. In that case, what color do you want the pup’s room?”

This has the effect of catching Bucky completely off guard. He untenses for just a moment, before
the suspicion returns.

“It’s not yours,” Bucky warns, as though that’ll make any sort of difference.

“So? You’re going to have a pup, and I want to take care of you and, through you, your pup. So. Pup room. I’m thinking maybe yellow. Nice and gender-neutral.”

“Like sunshine,” Bucky allows cautiously. “Th’ only bit’a light outa that place.”

Tony doesn’t need to know what ‘that place’ is, not yet. What he knows is he has a pregnant omega in his pack, because yeah, no. Tony isn’t letting Bucky go anywhere unless Bucky specifically asks to leave.

“Like sunshine,” he agrees. Tony rubs at his facial hair. “Did you know?”

There’s this sort of myth around omegan pregnancies, that the omega knows first, within two or three days of conception. No one’s really been able to research this mythical sense, since most omegas can be protective and defensive just after their fertile periods, but still. It’s an old wive’s tale that persists. It would certainly explain why Bucky had gone all homicidal on the people in his base, if he’d thought he was protecting a developing embryo.

Buck shrugs, pressing the side of the hot chocolate cup against his cheek to feel the warmth.

“I knew I di’n want them touchin’ me again.”

Chapter End Notes

This is what happens when I try to write fluff. The beginning of angst finds its way in.

Also, if you like this, I’d ask you to go check out Measure of a Man (pre-winteriron) and the Stepping Stones Between the Stars series (frostiron). Those are my two labors of love.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The very next day, they go out to the clinic again. It takes Tony a good half hour to soothe Bucky enough to allow a needle in his skin, but it’s a necessity. They need to, first of all, test Bucky for STDs, and check his red blood cells, and screen for immunity to certain other diseases. Bucky keeps his eyes closed, his face turned up and away from the needle in his arm. Then comes the fun part- the ultrasound.

A nurse comes to prep Bucky for the imaging. Bucky pulls up his shirt when asked to, though he flinches almost violently when the gel is spread over his still-flat stomach.

“Oh, I know it’s cold, but seeing pup’s heartbeat is so worth it,” she banters, squeezing more of the gel out. She looks up at Tony, smiling. “Are you the sire?”

“Oh, no, I’m not,” he says, at the same exact time Bucky rasps, “Yeah, he is.”

Tony sends Bucky a sharp look, and Bucky glares up in response. He’s laying on a bed rather than in a chair. Dr. Miran made a note, apparently, that examination chairs are out of the question.

The nurse smiles.

“It looks like you two have some things to talk about, then,” she laughs brightly.

It’s a formality, to have Dr. Miran conduct the ultrasound. The chirpy nurse who spread the gel would easily run the machine, but Dr. Miran comes to take a seat, pulling on gloves. He spreads gel on the imaging head, and rolls what essentially looks like a condom over the top, and then they set to work.

“We’re just looking for a heartbeat, today. If we’re really lucky, we might see the whole fetus. Don’t worry if we don’t see anything, though. Sometimes they’re still too small to be picked up, at this stage. You’re definitely pregnant; the urine test confirmed,” he chats, sliding the sensor over Bucky’s stomach.

Bucky freezes at the touch, his eyes squeezing closed again as if by blocking out his vision he might negate the unfamiliar hands on him. Tony works his fingers between Bucky’s fisted one, rubbing his thumb over flesh and bone knuckles. Bucky adjusts his grip and squeezes down, holding on to Tony like a lifeline. Tony prays to whatever’s listening that Bucky doesn’t fracture his hand, because that seems to be a very real possibility, and Tony doesn’t know if he can handle losing the use of both hands.

“Hey look, Buck,” Tony prods, when a black, pulsing circle becomes visible. Something vaguely bean-shaped surrounds it, and if Tony squints and turns his head just so, the fuzzy image resolves itself into the blobby body and head of a developing fetus. “Look, we can see pup’s heart.”

The omega peels his eyes open, sucking in a swift breath through his nose when he locks on to the monitor. And then he stares. Just- stares.

“Week nine is when the pup graduates from embryo to fetus,” Dr. Miran explains, holding the sensor in place. “Right now, they’re probably less than an inch long.”
Tony can tell the moment Bucky shifts into defensive mode. If he had to guess, he’d say it’s because of the reminder that Bucky’s little Bean is just that: tiny. He hears the articulated plates of Bucky’s arm tick into calibration, and he squeezes Bucky’s hand.

“Hey, uh, Doc? Maybe stop touching him now,” Tony warns, and Dr. Miran, bless him, immediately withdraws.

The readout goes blank, and Bucky remains tensed. He takes the offered tissues and wipes off his stomach, eyes dark and cautious and never leaving the doctor. There’s the faint scent of distress or maybe fear in the air (Dr. Miran, though he doesn’t otherwise show it), and the bitter, harsh notes of aggression in Bucky’s honeysuckle scent.

Tony does what he can to defuse the situation.

“How do you think we can get a copy of that recording?” he asks. “Might be neat to make, uh, a baby book or something.”

Scrapbooking isn’t Tony’s thing. It’s Steve’s. However, if Bucky wants, he’s willing to make an exception until the Good Captain comes home to take over the honor. Oh fuck, it’s going to look awful, and Steve is going to make that pained face he makes when Tony screws up in a benign manner and he’s being too nice to say anything.

“Of course. Let me go make a copy.”

Dr. Miran ejects the memory card and carries it away to copy it over, and Tony flexes his fingers in Bucky’s unrelenting grip.

“You know, if you break my hand I can’t give you any more baths,” he warns.

Bucky’s lips twitch up at the joke, but he doesn’t relax his grip, even as he pulls down his shirt and wads the tissues up in his metal hand. Outside of the assertion that Tony is the sire, Bucky doesn’t speak much in front of other people, as far as Tony can tell.

Speaking of.

“You know, I can’t be listed on the birth certificate,” Tony tells Bucky. “That’s lying on a federal document. I can adopt, though. But that is a conversation for home.”

So home they go, with the memory card firmly in Tony’s wallet. He inserts it into the small array of input slots beside the fridge, and just like that, JARVIS has a perfectly-preserved, guaranteed never to be lost copy of the Bean’s heartbeat.

Bucky looks hopefully between Tony and the kitchen, and he knew introducing Bucky to almond milk would spoil him, but here he is anyways.

“Lazybones,” he gripes, but Tony obeys the unspoken command and makes two mugs of hot chocolate. One goes straight to Bucky. The other receives a generous splash of Bailey’s. He has a feeling he’s going to need the fortitude. “You know, we might have to keep an eye on your chocolate intake. I think it’s got caffeine in it. That’s bad for pups, right?”

Bucky holds the mug to his chest, looking for all the world like he’s prepared to fight Tony for his little cup of comfort. Maybe they can let this slide. Just this one thing.

Tony sighs and leans against the countertop.
“Alright. So. What was all that about?”

Bucky clenches his jaw, looking off to the side. His hair shades his face. Tony refuses to let the topic drop.

“I’m flattered, really. And without a shadow of a doubt, yes. I would help you raise your pup. I just—” Tony sets his mug down and runs his hand through his hair. “You’ve known me for three weeks, alright? And I don’t know how else to say this, but, uh, you’re completely dependent on me right now. I just—just want to be sure. That, you know, this isn’t just because I’m the only alpha you’ve been in prolonged contact with who hasn’t tried to rape, kill, or otherwise hurt you.”

So yeah. That’s his main concern. Bucky’s throat works around nothing as he swallows, and swallows again. He makes eye contact just briefly, just for a moment.

“You’re safe,” he rasps. “An’ you keep me safe. You c’n keep the pup safe too. I wanna raise—raise it. With you.”

Tony nods along, drinking deep from his spiked hot chocolate.

“Okay. I get that. And that’s fine. Survival instincts and all that. I’m not going to abandon you. You can bet on that, alright? I mean, you’re probably going to end up with a million things you don’t even need, all because I tend to go overboard as a provider.”

He’s just worried, because he really isn’t sure whether Bucky’s in the right place to be making a decision like ‘I want this alpha who’s giving me a home a sense of security to be the father of my child after knowing him for three weeks’.

“I’m not rejecting, alright? When the Bean comes, then you can decide whether you really want me as an adoptive sire, or whether you just want me to be the pack alpha, okay? No pressure until then, no hasty decisions.”

And hopefully by then, the amnesiac assassin would have learned to socialize with the general population more, to see that his pool of potential mates isn’t restricted just and only to Tony.

Bucky nods sullenly, but then his brows furrow. There’s the faintest hint of a half-remembered smirk on Bucky’s face as he glances at Tony again, there and gone again in an instant.

“Bean?”

“Well it looks like a bean!” Tony defends, and takes another sip of his cocoa. “JARVIS, put the Bean up on screen.”

JARVIS silently obliges, and a little loop of the fetus and its heart pumping shows up on the bigscreen. This, predictably, distracts Bucky, and the omega wanders off to stand in front of the TV, an unreadable look on his face as he guards his stomach from unseen enemies with a splayed silver hand. Tony wets his lips.

“I’m going to protect the Bean, okay? The Bean’s safe. You don’t need to offer me adoptive rights to be safe here. You’re pack, as long as you want to be. No matter what.”

“Thought three weeks wasn’t ‘nough time to make a choice like that,” Bucky grumbles.

“This is different. I think. I mean, you’re not contractually obligated to stay, and I’m not contractually obligated to keep you. I just— want to. I want to. Keep you, I mean.”
He’s a possessive bastard. Never let it be said otherwise.

He isn’t, however, so possessive that he keeps these recent revelations from Steve. Bucky has the floaties on his metal arm again- a truly hilarious sight, with the red star peeking out from over blown-up plastic- while Tony watches and keeps a helicopter-alpha eye on him from behind the glass observation window. If Bucky told Tony to fuck off, he definitely would, but the omega doesn’t seem to mind. Anyways, with Bucky’s permission, Tony is calling Steve.

The other alpha picks up after a few rings.

“Hey, Tony,” Steve greets. He sounds distracted over the line.

“Hey to you too, big guy. Um, hey, so. We have a little news. And you might—oh hell. Look, your boy’s expecting a pup.”

There is nothing but complete and utter silence from the phone for a moment, as Steve processes.

“Bucky’s pregnant.”

“Yes, pretty much.”

Another long minute of silence, and then, carefully—

“It’s not—You know I have to ask, Tony. Is it yours?”

Yeah, Tony knew that was coming. You bring an omega home alone with a bored alpha? Uh, historically not awesome, if it’s the wrong alpha. He can’t fault Steve for asking, despite the fact that it hurts a little. Steve has to be sure. Tony would be asking the same questions.

“No. It’s—” He breathes. In, out. In, out. No need to red out. “Bucky says they induced a heat, about nine weeks ago. Says it was some breeding program.” His voice shakes a little with the sheer rage boiling in his chest. “He says that’s why he killed them all. Because he didn’t want anyone else touching him.”

“Damnit.”

“Yeah.”

There’s a rustling on the other end, for a moment.

“Is he keeping it, or does he have a procedure scheduled?”

Steve is as pro-choice as they come, but he still avoids the ‘A’ word like the plague.

“He wants to keep it. I’m trying to convince him to paint the pup room yellow.”

“Not red and gold?”

“I’m not that narcissistic.”

Another rustling sound, and then what could be a door opening.

“Thanks for calling me, Tony. I mean, really. I appreciate being kept up to date. Only, Nat and I are about to chase a lead in D.C. We’ve got to go, and we might not be able to talk for a while.”

Um, that doesn’t sound great. Tony frowns, chewing on the inside of his cheek.
“Alright; be safe. You’ll call if you need help.”

It isn’t a question. It’s an order, the kind of order Tony tries not to make regarding field work, since he’s accepted that Steve leads there. But he has an unpleasant feeling growing in his chest.

“Of course.”

“Promise me. Steven Grant Rogers, promise me you’ll call if you need us.”

Us. The pack.

“I promise, Tony. I really do have to go. Nat says ‘Hi’.”

“Tell her ‘Hi’ back from me, alright?”

“Of course. I’ll call you when I can. Bye,” Steve says.

“Yeah, uh. Bye. Be safe,” he says again, and then the line goes dead.

Something isn’t right.

What is right, though, is Clint coming home.

In Tony’s defense, he thought he had another week left before the obnoxious bird returned. He doesn’t find the time to see Laura and her two kids often, so when he does have a chance to visit his sister, he stays for as long as possible.

However, due to this, Bucky isn’t given any sort of warning regarding their impending tower-mate.

Tony is first alerted to Clint’s presence by JARVIS. He’s napping in bed in the morning, in the one position he can comfortably sleep in at the moment as opposed to his usual belly-down starfishing, when JARVIS pipes up.

“Sir, Mr. Barton has entered the elevator. Shall I stall his arrival?”

Tony grimaces and flaps his good arm.

“Nah,” he mumbles. “His home too.”

It’s only a few moments later that he remembers, hey. He has a twitchy, defensive omega with some sort of super-military grade training on the loose.

Tony rolls out of bed in an instant, his feet thumping against the hardwood floor.

“Where is he now?” Tony demands, just as Clint’s, “Hey Tony, I’m home!” rings out.

“Fuck, nevermind.”

He sees Bucky ahead of him in the hall, although he pauses when he hears Tony behind him. The omega flinches violently, startling Clint as the other omega passes the mouth of the hall. A metal hand lashes out in a preemptive strike, but Tony manages to catch Bucky around the wrist. This, fortunately, causes Bucky to turn his attention on Tony, and he catches a glimpse of flat blue eyes before he’s lifted off his feet and slammed down onto his back. A harsh, wounded shout punches out of him as Bucky presses a knee down on Tony’s chest, and by extent shoving on his healing arm and crushing the reactor against his lungs. A flesh hand closes around his throat, while the metal one rears back in a fist. Abruptly, Bucky’s eyes clear again, and after a moment frozen in horror, he
scrambles back off of Tony.

“S-stand down,” he wheezes, entirely directed at Clint. His packmate doesn’t have much in the way of weaponry, having come from his civilian sister’s farm house, but his pocket knife is firmly in hand, and he looks ready to fight. “Bucky, ‘s fine. Don’t worry.”

Tony lets his head thunk back against the floor. He’s grown used to his upper arm being more of a dull ache, and infrequently at that. While it doesn’t feel so bad as to be rebroken, it’s a white-hot center of radiating agony.

Clint remains on-edge, despite the fact that Bucky’s made himself scarce. He kneels down by Tony, running his fingers through the alpha’s hair.

“Little round white pills, in the bedside table,” he directs, managing to keep his voice steady. “I need those, and- and a glass of water.”

He doesn’t like taking pain pills. They fuzz out his mind, make him feel like he’s looking at everything through a window rather than straight on, but he needs to put his pain behind him and move on to soothing Bucky, because this is the first time the omega’s done something more than bruise or startle, and he knows Bucky’s going to be spiralling down and wallowing in his self-loathing.

While Clint goes to fetch the pills prescribed to him for the fracture-pain, Tony works himself into sitting up with his back against the wall, gritting his teeth. He growls at noone in particular. It’s like swearing, sometimes. No real use, but it makes him feel better.

He takes two pills and chases them down with a swallow of water. Something a little stiffer would be nice, but Clint, unlike certain others of the team who let him get away with it, doesn’t like Tony mixing drugs and alcohol. Clint’s fingers find their way back into Tony’s hair, and Tony wraps his hand around the back of Clint’s neck, bringing his omega in to touch their foreheads together. It’s a gesture of affection he picked up first from Aunt Peggy, reserved for your closest pack members. Clint, Bruce, and usually also Natasha either don’t mind or actively enjoyed the little display. Steve can’t put his alpha instincts aside long enough to let himself be drawn in, and Thor- He’s completely undesignated. Pack isn’t something he fully understands, and Tony doesn’t force the issue.

“Who the fuck was that?” Clint growls, rubbing his temple against Tony’s before drawing back again. His blue eyes are stormy, and his peaches and cream scent is marred by defensive anger.

Tony opts to remain where his is while the painkillers kick in, but he says, “That’s Bucky. Steve brought him here, said he needs a safe place. Which is, you know, true. He’s a little- okay, long story short, I’m currently playing host to a pregnant Winter Soldier who has absolutely no memories from before ten weeks ago, as far as I’m aware, and he needs somewhere secure to figure his shit out. Hence, his being here.”

Clint goes very, very still, pinching the bridge of his nose. When he drops his hand again and sits back on his haunches, he lets out a sharp breath.

“Steve brought you the Winter Soldier. And left you to handle him alone, while injured.”

“Steve brought me his best friend from the forties, who happens to be pregnant and in need of a place to stay. He just, also happens to be a little dangerous,” Tony corrects, trying to assuage Clint’s concern, but the omega stares at Tony like he’s gone completely off the rocker.

“A little dangerous? A little? Fuck, Tony, have you seen his file? It’s empty. SHIELD has nothing
on him, except for a body count. And you’ve been *alone with him!*

“Hey, shh. It’s okay, everything’s fine.” Tony runs his fingers through the hair at the back of Clint’s head. “Everything’s alright. I get a little beat up all the time, and I’ve decided I’m keeping him, so, uh, you know. A little reflexive roughhousing now and again isn’t going to- It’ll be fine.”

Clint shuffles closer and situates himself under Tony’s functional arm, his fingers linked with Tony’s. Their relationship is- difficult to describe. They aren’t lovers- no, Natasha might try to castrate him if he made a genuine pass at Clint. Clint’s heats are spent mainly with his mate, with Tony there to bring them water, food, to wipe the fevered sweat off of Clint’s brow, and then to back off when Natasha’s glare turns murderous. And yet, there’s an emotional intimacy, a closeness that Tony tends to attribute to Clint being the only omega on the team paired with his overprotective nature- the latter trait being of great benefit after Loki.

“I’m more worried about him straining himself and hurting himself and the pup,” Tony muses after a moment, as the pain creeps away.

“Yeah, well I’m worried about *you.*”

“You know I can take care of myself.”

“I know you have a broken arm.”

“It’s *almost* healed.”

“So that’s why you needed your pain pills, huh?”

“Don’t be a brat.”

Clint huffs a laugh beside him, but he sobers quickly. He opens his mouth to speak again, but Tony beats him to the punch.

“So ground rules. He probably won’t talk to you by mouth, but he’s pretty fluent in ASL. I know you don’t like, uh, leaving them in at home, but you might want to keep your aids in, just to make sure you can hear him. Y’know, avoid a repeat of today. Tony shifts, and Clint rests his head on the alpha’s shoulder. “He’s pack now, as long as he wants to stay. He just needs someone to help him pull back together again.”

Like Tony had needed help coming back together after what he saw through the portal. Like Clint had needed help coming back together after Loki’s mind-fuck. Like Steve had needed help acclimatizing to a new world. Like Natasha needed help battling the guilt she hid so well. Like Bruce needed help coming to terms with the Hulk, and like Thor needed help recovering from Loki’s betrayal.

They all need and needed help.

Tony presses his lips against Clint’s hair for a moment, before pulling himself up to unsteady feet.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Clint warns, still sitting on the floor. Tony ruffles his fingers through Clint’s hair, which he knows Clint *hates,* and as predicted, he catches the sharp scent of annoyance and hears the omega hiss. “I’m coming with you.”

Clint rolls lithely up to his feet, but Tony waves his hand.

“Uh, no. I’m not going to freak him out with a stranger at the moment. Um, just- I need you to give
him some space. When he’s comfortable again, he’ll probably be bundled up in a blanket on the couch or in the pool. You can make a new friend then. Go unpack.”

Tony uses the Voice he doesn’t really like using, the tone that brooks no argument from the betas and omega below him on the pack pecking order. Tony doesn’t like the Voice. It doesn’t take away autonomy, doesn’t force actions or prevent them, but it’s a deterrent, or an incentive. Clint grits his teeth, but while he could easily override the order, he hangs back as Tony toddles off.

Bucky is nowhere to be found, which is- it’s pretty much expected. He checks the rec room, the small lap pool, the closets and his bar, the balcony, the goddamn roof. He even asks JARVIS to scan the rest of the tower, but this- oh. Huh. You know, he checked Bucky’s room, but he hadn’t checked the bathroom. The lights had all been off. He hadn’t really thought to go any further than opening the bedroom door.

He flips on the lights of the bedroom, navigates through the maze of furniture. He turns on the bathroom’s softer light setting, the one he has installed for the event that someone has to get up obscenely early or wakes up with a hangover or migraine and doesn’t very much want bright lights. Bucky tenses, where he’s sitting fully-clothed in the empty bathtub. His knees are drawn up to his chest, and he won’t look at Tony.

“Hey there, Sunshine,” he greets, stopping several feet away. The reactor casts its blue glow from Tony’s bare chest, and he settles down onto his haunches, bare feet cold against the floor. “Are you okay?”

The look Bucky sends him is sharp and utterly incredulous. Tony interprets it accordingly.

“I’m fine, see? The arm’s alright. I just needed a pill. It happens.”

At worst, he might have to wear the sling a little longer than his projected twelve weeks. Tony can live with that. It’s annoying, but, uh. Yeah. He can live with that.

Tony sits down, scoots a little closer. Bucky presses up against the far side of the tub, and Tony takes that as his cue to stop again. They sit in silence, and the sour-bitter scent of loathinghatredanger rolls off Bucky in waves. Tony has the funny feeling it’s not directed at him, but at the omega himself.

The seconds turn into minutes, but Tony is reluctant to let them shift to hours. Plus, his leg is falling asleep.

“Hey, how about I give you a shave, huh?” he blurts, before wincing, but Bucky is looking at him now, and there’s no pretending he didn’t hear. “How does that sound? Bath and a shave. You’re, uh-You don’t grow a beard very well. Not that it’s a bad thing! Just- I know it can be itchy, when it’s stuck in that sort of half-beard state.”

Tony doesn’t grow a full beard either, as he learned in the desert.

Bucky’s jaw clenches and unclenches, but he dips his head.

“Okay, cool. Um. Steve likes the straight razor, but I like, uh, I like safety razors. This isn’t revenge, by the way. I just- I think you’ll feel better after. I want to help you feel better.”

When Tony comes back from retrieving his shaving kit- the scentless cream exchanged for Clint’s faintly-spiced cream, Bucky is naked and in the bath again. Tony has to coax the omega out so he can fill the tub, not wanting to soak Bucky in too-hot or too-cold water by accident.

“We’re all a little fucked up,” Tony explains as Bucky settles into the water. “Clint actually stabbed
me, once."

He trains off after that, supporting Bucky’s head as the omega leans back to wet his hair.

“Y’can’t jus’ leave it at that,” Bucky ventures, his voice guarded and sullen. Tony grins.

“So when this guy Loki brought an army to invade Earth, a while back, he mind-controlled Clint. Clint swears up and down he wasn’t tortured or assaulted, but he says having all control stripped from him- He has triggers, now. I don’t know if you know this, but alphas can do this thing where an order or command has a little extra oomph. Sometimes, a little too much. I tone it down around Clint, if I have to use it, but before I figured out I needed to do that, I panicked, one day, and commanded Clint to settle down. He was obsessing, stuck in memories, and I couldn’t figure out what to do, so I grabbed his wrist and told him to settle down. He didn’t react well, and stabbed me with one of his arrows.”

Bucky’s eyes are wide and searching, scanning Tony for any hint of a lie.

“He got me in the thigh, and I needed stitches, but it wasn’t awful. He was pretty freaked out for a while, though, but I didn’t and don’t hold it against him. A mistake was made, and he reacted. I forgave him.”

_I forgive you_ goes unspoken.

Bucky has his bath. It becomes a little difficult, when Bucky wraps his metal fingers carefully around Tony’s wrist, but he ignores the thumb tracing over his pulse as best he can, and soldiers on.

When Bucky is wrapped up in towels and sitting on the closed toilet, he lets Tony apply the cream and shave his face smooth. He no longer holds Tony’s wrist, but his fingers never leave Tony’s upper arm. Tony doesn’t mind the touching, and Bucky’s flesh hand is warm on his bicep. Rinsing the razor every now and then is a little awkward, since Tony can’t exactly hold a bowl with his sling-bound hand, he has to reach around Bucky and use the bowl he left sitting on the back of the toilet.

“A nice, clean, fresh start,” Tony rambles, catching the last of Bucky’s scruff. “I’ll get you an electric razor, if you want. Um, you can look up tutorials, too. On styling. If you’re into that.”

He offers up a damp towel for Bucky to wipe his face with, and the omega does the deed with his metal hand, refusing still to release Tony’s bicep. Tony dries his own hand against his sleeping-sweatpants. He offers a smile. Bucky isn’t afraid to meet his eyes, at the moment, which Tony counts as a win. Hopefully his little story and physical care have prevented the train wreck that the morning could have been.

Clint helps make breakfast (brunch now) while Bucky loiters in the corners, eyes flicking between Tony and Clint as the pair work around each other in the kitchen. Clint complains loudly about the lack of scrambled eggs and french toast, but Tony puts his foot down on that one. Pancakes, bacon, fruit, yogurt for Clint and Tony and prenatal vitamins for Bucky. They even got the gummy kind. The first time Bucky had tried a gummy vitamin, his eyes had gone big and round as he struggled to figure out what he thought about the texture. Tony had laughed until tears streamed down his face, as the omega smacked his lips and tried to unstick the vitamin from his teeth like a cat chewing gum. Bucky doesn’t mind them, now a few days later.

Tony ensures they make enough to accomodate Bucky’s appetite- whether it’s entirely from the fear of being starved or the demands of pregnancy or both or neither, Tony doesn’t know, but he doesn’t mind providing. Clint and Bucky eat in silence, though Tony tries to draw them both into conversation. Clint is cautious due to the _incident_ that morning. Bucky is cautious because Clint is
They’ll manage. Of course they will. Tony’s just going to have to do some fancy dancing for a little while.

Chapter End Notes

So I’m trying to figure out how long I want this to extend. Do I end it after the birth and things settle down? Do I continue writing the trials and tribulations of raising the Bean in the Avengers’ pack? Do I give my favorite person Loki a redemption, bring him into the pack too?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Things go to shit in a spectacular manner not two days later.

It starts with a news report. A terrorist attack in D.C. A high speed car chase, a bomb exploding beneath a black SUV. There’s a cell-phone video of Steve fucking Rogers jumping out a window, and Tony makes a call. And another. He makes twelve calls to Natasha, another twenty eight to Steve. When Steve finally picks up the damn phone, Tony is well on his way to having some sort of breakdown while Clint and Bucky watch from opposite sides of the room- Clint cleaning his favorite bow, and Bucky distractedly looking through the online catalogues of pup clothes and furniture and other supplies that Tony demanded he browse.

Tony would put on the suit- arm be damned. He’d numb the fucking thing beforehand and suffer the damage later. He would go and give Steve on-sight backup, have his and Nat’s backs, but he has Bucky to think about, and while Clint is more than capable of providing the other omega protection, everything in Tony’s being screams for Tony to stay. That doesn't even matter, because there are things Tony can do without actually being there. Like intelligence. Supplies and gear. He could negotiate a team-up with the other super-groups in the area. He could do things.

“Hey, Tony,” Steve finally answers, sounding decidedly harried.

“Steve, what’s going-”

“Look, I can’t talk right now, alright? We’re fine, but we can’t talk.”

“What-”

Steve hangs up. Steve hangs up, goddamn him.

Tony blasts his phone with call after call, working himself up into a fury. Goddamn him. What the ever-loving fuck is he thinking?

He leaves a message. He leaves multiple messages. All of them livid.

“Goddamnit. Steven Grant Rogers, so help me fucking christ, you better not be locking me out of something big. We are pack, and that means, as you so helpfully remind us all the goddamn time, that we have eachothers’ backs. You need help, you let us know. You don’t go fucking off and doing your own thing. You ask for help.”

His voice goes all growly, and when he hangs up for the purpose of calling again, calloused fingers pluck his phone away.

“Give that back,” he snaps, reaching out for Clint, but the omega dances away.

“Nope!”

The phone is tossed to Bucky, who startles, eyes wide, but manages to catch the device.

Tony makes his way across the room towards Bucky, because he knows Bucky isn’t going to be a dick and keep his phone from him, but Clint waylays him, wrapping his arms around Tony and
holding him so that the alpha would need to physically break his hold to get away, and there is a very strict ‘no physical fights outside of sparring’ rule in the pack. They call it Rule Number One.

“Fuck you, Barton. Let me go.”

“I will once you calm down.”

Tony twists around in Clint’s hold, and the omega moves his hands up to stroke through Tony’s hair, framing the alpha’s face. Clint presses their foreheads together. Tony breathes. In, out. He forces himself to relax.

“He shouldn’t lock us out like this.”

“But right now, we have to trust him,” Clint reminds Tony. “Trust that he and Nat’ll come home safe.”

“They’d better,” he growls, leaning in to nestle his face into the crook of Clint’s neck. A bitten-off growl of irritation sounds from in front of Tony, behind Clint, and Tony shifts and glances up to see Bucky watching them with displeasure. Well tough. Tony plans to commit to Bucky and his care and aid, but he’s not going to neglect the rest of his pack bonds along the way. Tony hides his eyes against Clint’s shoulder again, and the omega holds him until finally, finally, the rage dissipates.

Of course, it comes back with a vengeance the very next day.

Tony ushers his omegas into the tower’s underbelly the moment JARVIS breaks his vow of silence to inform Tony that a remote targeting system has locked onto the building, and from there, from within Tony’s workshop, which has been designed to withstand the collapse of the goddamn city, they watch as the triskelion falls, as SHIELD’s files are dumped. And Tony knows Steve and Natasha have everything to do with it.

They watch as the three armed helicarriers crash and burn, and once JARVIS gives the all-clear, Tony growls deep in his chest, startling Clint, and grabs at a detached gauntlet.

“Get your bow, Legolas,” he snaps waspishly. “I’ve got some new arrows I was saving for your birthday, but now seems to be a good time. Let’s fuck shit up.”

At the Avengers Tower’s shooting range, Tony shows Bucky how to use the gauntlet, shows him how to aim, how to fire, while Clint sets a program to run a few lanes over.

It switches around after a little while to Bucky using a handgun- the kind Natasha favors. Tony shows Bucky how to bring up new targets, to set targets moving, to induce specific training programs, while he himself activates his watch-repulsor and blasts target after target, reducing the stands to glowing cherry-red rods of metal and plastic. There’s some property damage involved, but it’s fine, because it’s all Tony’s property. He’ll fix it, or replace it.

There’s a sort of relentless energy humming under his skin, driving him to distraction and anger. It stems from fear; he can admit that much. His pack is scattered, two of them probably in the heart of that disaster in D.C., and there’s nothing he can do without endangering his omegas- which is, you know. Clint’s in danger every time they go out into the field. They all are. It’s just- Clint especially Tony tries to keep safe. Everyone else is either an augmented human (Steve and Nat and Bruce) or a demigod. Clint is so painfully human, and he doesn’t even have Tony’s armor to protect him.

Tony’s breathing hard, his vision tinged red by the end of it, and it’s with deep satisfaction that he notes Clint only missed the bullseye on one of many, many targets- this one one of the erratically-moving targets. Bucky’s shots are all over the place, but always in tight groups of at least four, and
always in the heart, or the head of the human-shaped target papers. The Avengers don’t shoot to kill unless absolutely necessary, so if Bucky ever wants to go out into the field with them, they’ll have to work on that. But that won’t be an issue for at least another seven months.

“You keep that,” Tony demands, when Bucky tries to hand the gun back. Bucky stills for a moment, and he cocks his head. “Protect yourself, if you need to. Defense only. I’ll find you a holster, show you where to get bullets.”

A back-holster, probably. Definitely. There’s- uh. The Avengers have a special dispensation to conceal-carry. They try not to abuse it, but they’re high-risk targets, and there’s no getting around that. Bucky, given his past and current affiliations, is at the same risk. Clint, obviously, doesn’t approve of the decision, but Tony holds firm. Bucky, he’s sure, can protect himself in hand-to-hand combat, but Tony wants him to have a plan B.

Five days later, he comes to regret that decision.

JARVIS calls him up from the workshop, lets him know he’s needed at the bar. Tony comes running, of course, and when he arrives, he sees Bucky, reclining in a chair across the room. A gunshot cracks through the air, and a bottle shatters. Tony can see the evidence of Bucky’s target practice strewn over the shelves and dripping down the walls. His mouth thins. Bucky spares him a glance before taking aim and destroying another bottle.

“Do you have any idea how goddamn expensive that is?” Tony sighs, scrubbing his hand across his face. He’s not entirely sure what’s going on, but he hopes to high heaven he can save his liquor. He likes to drink. “Why are you wrecking my bar.”

Bucky makes a show of cocking the gun and shooting again, and just like that, aged scotch wets the floor.

“I ain’t allowed to drink,” Bucky growls, and oh, he’s in a mood. “You can’t either.”

“Aw, come on, Buck. I’m not the one who knocked you up,” he complains, trying to lighten the mood, but this has the exact opposite effect.

Bucky’s hand goes lax, and he shuts the fuck down. Tony wets his lips. Goddamnit.

“Alright, Sunshine. It’s me, Tony. I’m- Fucking hell, I’m sorry. That was my mistake. I’m sorry, Buck. I’m gonna come closer, alright?”

Bucky’s flat eyes track Tony across the room as the alpha creeps closer, but he doesn’t lift the gun held limply in his lap. So, a victory. Tony manages to wrap his fingers around the gun, his eyes on Bucky’s, and though there’s a moment of resistance, Bucky lets Tony pull the gun out of his hand. The alpha sets it on the stone floor and slide it away. Bucky’s breaths are shallow and slow, and the omega closes his eyes, a painful expression twisting on his face before he smooths out into careful blankness again. Tony cautiously links his fingers with Bucky’s.

“Budge up. Lemme sit with you.”

The chair isn’t exactly huge, but it’s large enough for two people to squeeze together, bracketed by the padded armrests. Tony settles in beside Bucky, draws Bucky in until the omega’s head rests on Tony’s shoulder. They end up half facing each other. Bucky remains utterly pliant, which is sweet when he becomes so as a result of relaxation or enjoyment. It’s not so sweet when he’s pliant due to some sort of trigger, or flashback, or anxiety attack. Tony isn’t sure which, if any, he’s dealing with.

“I’ll try to cut back on the alcohol, while you can’t have it with me, but no more shooting my stash.
Some of that’s really fucking hard to get ahold of,” he gripes, squeezing Bucky’s hand. Bucky’s fingers remain limp. They don’t squeeze back.

So Tony sits there, for a long while. Clint comes in at some point and seems entirely taken aback by the state of the bar, but Tony shakes his head and asks the omega to retrieve the duvet from Tony’s bed. Clint hands it off to Tony, then, when it becomes apparent that Tony’s one-handed state- where his one hand is also occupied- makes it difficult to adjust the blanket, Clint adjusts the duvet to wrap around Tony and Bucky’s shoulders, until they’re bundled up and warm. Too warm, in Tony’s case. He doesn’t like heat as much as Bucky does, but he deals.

Clint flits in and out, checking on his alpha every half hour or so as Tony murmurs nonsense and old stories to Bucky, trying to bring him up out of the catatonic state he’s found himself in. It was an awful lapse of judgment, on Tony’s part- referencing the conception of Bucky’s pup. It’s- Tony can understand why being abruptly reminded might- might screw things up. Finally, finally, Bucky shifts, turning his face inward, burrowing against Tony. He doesn’t make a sound, but Tony feels wet breaths against the collar of his t-shirt, and he lets out a small sigh of relief.

“Back with me, Sunshine?” he inquires softly, but Bucky doesn’t respond other than to squeeze Tony’s fingers.

That- it sort of alters Clint’s views on Bucky after that. The other omega brings a feast of takeout into the room, and no one says anything about how, even after Tony and Bucky peel themselves from the armchair, Bucky remains glued to Tony’s side for the rest of the evening. Clint makes more of an effort, after that. Signing at Bucky almost constantly, much to Bucky’s bewilderment. Showing the other omega how to play video games, how to play board games. Tony has to pull Clint back by the shirt-collar, when he catches Clint trying to coax a dubious Bucky up into the air vents, but, uh, at least they’re getting along? Tony’s still the only one Bucky verbally speaks to, but baby steps. It’s not like Bucky needs to be verbal.

In the meanwhile, Steve and Natasha try to come home. Try. Tony has them locked out. Oh, he’s already paid for hotel rooms ten minutes away from Avengers Tower by foot, and he knows the tower’s receptionist gave them their room keys, but yeah. If Steve and Natasha want to run around and do their own thing without considering the rest of the pack, then they should just cool down elsewhere for a while.

Clint isn’t too happy about this, since that means being separated from his mate for longer than necessary, but Tony lets the omega know he’s fully allowed to go bunk with Nat. No hard feelings.

He’s just being petty, and he knows it. Rule Number One is an important one, but Tony isn’t above showing his ire in other ways. He ignores Steve’s phone calls, in revenge for all the missed calls in D.C. Natasha he’ll answer to, but the moment Steve comes on the line, Tony hangs up. It’s unfortunate that Natasha’s caught up in the middle of the alphas’ pissing contest, but Tony’s irritated with her too, if only by association. She’s technically subordinate to Steve in the team hierarchy, but still. It’s the principle of the matter.

It takes three full days for Clint to convince Tony to let Steve and Natasha back in.

“Tough,” Tony growls, brushing past Clint on his way out into the living room. He needs to hold out, to not give in right away. He has an image to uphold, damnit.

Bucky is elsewhere- probably in the pool again, if Tony had to guess. So at least he isn’t here to
watch Tony’s inevitable caving.

Tony sprawls out in an armchair, his legs propped over one arm, and a berry-kale smoothie in his hand. He takes an obnoxiously-loud sip through the straw.

“How long are you planning on locking them out, anyways?”

“Until I’m not feeling quite so… vindictive. They made their bed.”

“And what about my bed, huh? It’s empty.”

There are those puppy-dog eyes, the ones he learned from Nat- the ones Tony can’t resist. He studiously examines a point above Clint’s head.

“Aww, sweetheart,” Tony simpers, glancing down and making the mistake of meeting Clint’s eyes. “If you start feeling lonely, you can come cuddle with me!”

“I’d rather have Natasha.”

“Ouch! You wound me, Clint. You really do.” He nurses his smoothie, glancing petulantly away from the omega once again.

“I have a few things to say to Steve, too,” Clint tacks on as an afterthought.

Tony gives him a stern glare, waving the smoothie around.

“Don’t yell at Steve. I’ll yell at Steve. We don’t all need to take turns yelling at Steve.”

“I never said I was going to yell at him. But that means you’re going to let them back in soon, right? Put on your big boy pants and be the better alpha.”

He just won’t stop wheedling. Tony groans, letting his head flop back over the other armrest.

“Yeah, fine. I’ll consider it. If! If you shut up. Let me have breakfast in peace, goddamnit.”

Steve and Natasha are allowed to return that very same day, towards the evening, while Clint is busy running laps. Natasha, Tony immediately directs away to go surprise her mate. Steve, blocks from escaping, placing himself in the doorway and fixing the blonde with the most put-upon glare he can muster. Steve lifts his chin stubbornly, not at all contrite- the bastard.

“You shouldn’t have locked us out,” Steve grumbles, his blue eyes sullen. “We’re pack. This is our home too.”

“Oh, you want to be pack now, is that it?” Tony jabs a finger into Steve’s chest and pushes him back. The only reason Steve shuffles back into the center of the room is because Steve himself allows it. Tony isn’t under any illusions regarding his baseline-human strength. “Well that’s funny. I figured after you, y’know, locked us out of that shitshow in Washington, you must’ve forgotten all your pretty speeches about pack.”

“I was protecting you,” Steve growls, planting his feet and holding his ground. “What were you going to do with a broken arm? I’m not going to pull you into a battle you could die in while you aren’t fit to fight.”

“Who said anything about fighting, huh? What about ground support? Supplies? Intel? Remind me, who exactly built the most advanced AI in this solar system? Hmm? Who makes your body-armor? Who’s been hacking into SHIELD since hacking was a fucking thing? I don’t have to fight to be
“useful,” he spits.

“You had Bucky to worry about. You didn’t need to have us on your mind too.”

Neither of them back down- Steve certain he had done the right thing, and Tony certain he hadn’t.

“News flash, Rogers, you’re always on my mind. You, Nat, Clint, Bruce, even fucking Thor. And I was helpless to do anything but cower in the basement while Bruce was all on his own out there, completely unaware of the danger he was in, and you were blowing up long-range murder-ships. This is my family, Steve. It’s not just some pack of convenience for me. You can’t- wait. Bucky. Stop.”

He can tell immediately that it’s the pregnant omega by the cold metal of one hand tucking its way up under his shirt and the stubble of a day rubbing over the back of his neck as Bucky awkwardly nuzzles him. A rough, calloused hand wraps around to grip at Tony’s front as Bucky presses up from behind, all honeysuckle-sweetness and happy-omega purrs.

“Goddamnit, Bucky. Bucky, no. Nooo. Bucky let me be angry! Fuck.” Tony can’t resist squirming around in Bucky’s hold, looping his good arm around Bucky’s waist. “Why are you so handsy all of a sudden?” he gripes. “Fine. Steve, we’re not finished with this.”

He shoots the bemused alpha his most scathing glare, although it seems to be entirely neutralized by Bucky’s interference. Why are his omegas so fucking manipulative? Clint with his whining, and Bucky with his weaponized purring. It isn’t fair. Tony is a weak, weak man.

“Go shower,” he snaps, catching Steve watching them with soft, happy eyes. “You’re making me sick with those goo-goo eyes, and the hotel smell isn’t making it any better.”

‘Mint and Pine’ seems to be the hotel-soap’s fragrance, and it’s going to give Tony a headache if Steve keeps wafting it all around.

“You’re a manipulative bastard,” Tony complains, once Steve is well and truly gone. Bucky huffs a satisfied breath where he has his face buried against Tony. The alpha rolls his eyes. “We weren’t actually going to fight, Sunshine. There was no need for drastics.”

He brings his one unbound hand up to pat awkwardly at Bucky’s head, and eventually, the omega releases him. Tony takes Bucky by the back of the neck and pulls him in to touch foreheads, before straightening again. He sighs, all vestiges of aggression draining out of him. He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Pizza? No. No pizza. That’s cheese. Damnit. What do you want for dinner?”

Time to move on. He has all but two of his pack back, and it’s time for a family dinner, tense though it may be.

“That noodle stuff. The italian we had. Early on.”

A grin splits Tony’s face. He knew Nonnie’s pasta had been a good idea.

“No ice cream this time,” he says in way of agreement.

“Those flaky things maybe?”

“Oh yeah. I’ll buy every single one she has.”
Tony has to bang on Clint and Natasha’s door to force them out of their cuddle-session (and seriously. Who in their right mind turns down reunion sex, huh? It’s insane, and yet Clint and Natasha genuinely choose to snuggle and nuzzle each other non-stop after long, separate missions), but he manages to have everyone sitting down in the common area with a plate or bowl (depending on preference) of Nonnie’s frankly amazing family recipes. If she hadn’t been so attached to her restaurant, Tony would definitely have offered her a spot as the Avengers’ personal chef.

Steve tries to sit down with Bucky, to eat side-by-side, but Bucky veers away from his usual spot and picks to sit side by side with Tony, taking advantage of the bubble of tension between the two alphas to keep Steve at bay. There’s an unfortunate conversation to be had regarding Bucky’s apparent lack of memories, but Tony isn’t going to bring it up in full view of the rest of the pack, not this first time. Everyone will know eventually, but Steve and Bucky deserve a little privacy for that.

The conversation is had with Bucky nowhere to be found (although Tony knows if he really tried, he’d find Bucky hiding in the guest room again), while Steve beats on a punching bag in the gym. It’s late, past midnight a few days after Steve and Natasha’s return to the tower, and Tony leans in the doorway, waiting for Steve to notice. The alpha remains oblivious, breathing hard as he strikes again, and again, and again- rapid and sure as a boxer. Two bags- both specifically designed to withstand Steve, Tony notes with exasperation- rest elsewhere, now damaged and awaiting repair.

A reinforced seam splits, and Steve abruptly stops, his sweat-damp shirt sticking to his chest as it rises and falls with every breath. The alpha runs his fingers through his hair, and when he turns around to drop the bag on the pile of ‘to be fixed’, he catches sight of Tony and freezes.

“Not exactly observant, are you?” Tony jabs, smirking. Steve is always the one getting onto him for being distracted. The other alpha flushes pink.

“I have other things on my mind tonight.”

“Like Bucky?”

Tony peels away from the wall and examines the split seam of the bag in Steve’s hands. Maybe if he used metal loops, rather than wire thread…

“Yeah. I’m trying to figure out what I did wrong. He’s been avoiding me.”

“It’s not completely your fault, I don’t think.” Tony looks up into Steve’s baby blues. “Did you talk to him at all, when you first found him?”

Steve shrugs, saying, “He didn’t say anything at all. I mean, I did try to talk to him, ask him what had happened, how he was there, asked him if he knew me, but he didn’t- wouldn’t respond. I thought he was deaf, until Nat broke a lock behind us and he flinched.”

“Alright Steve. My buddy, my pal, my fellow pack alpha. He doesn’t- remember. Anything. Like, at all. I mean, that’s what he’s told me. He remembers being stuck in a room for a few weeks and then being injected with something to start his heat, but before that- He didn’t know who the Avengers were, Steve. Didn’t even know about Loki. He doesn’t remember you.”

The other alpha’s lips thin, and he pulls away from Tony to drop the punching bag in the pile. He rubs his thumb and forefinger against his closed eyes, then drop his hand.

“I thought-” The alpha sounds so impossibly small. “I thought I got him back. He doesn’t remember me?”

Tony approaches and rests his hand on Steve’s shoulder.
“He doesn’t remember anything, Steve. I mean, instincts are still there. I don’t think they’d be able to teach him how to fight like he does in the span of a handful of weeks. And,” he continues, gently. “And, he says he followed you because he, for whatever reason, still thinks you’re a safe person. Um. Just- give him time. And, uh. I’ve- I’ve been printing out pictures. Of the Bean. And writing down dates. Maybe- offer to start a scrapbook. A pup-book. There’s only been one ultrasound so far, but he wants more. Offer to help him make a book. That’d- I think that’d be a good start.”

“Tony, he doesn’t know me.” It’s nice to see, at least, that Steve trusts him enough to take his words at face value. “You’ve seen how he is. If I’m not his friend-”

“Then you have an opportunity to make a new one. Take it.”

Tony drags the sweaty Steve out of the gym and sits him down with the small physical folder he has of printouts of the heartbeat, the other medical results indicating pregnancy, a picture of Bucky- taken from one of the security cameras- surreptitiously looking at himself in the reflection of the window, shirt lifted, checking for a bump. Steve ruffles through these carefully, and Tony can see the wheels turning in his head. He looks up at Tony.

“Do you think he’d want to go with me? To pick out paper and a book?”

Tony grins. There we go.


Like might be a strong word, or it might be the right one. Bucky is definitely familiar with Clint now, but the pair get along fairly well, given how Bucky lets Clint pull him around with minimal resistance, so long as prior warning is given. In any case, maybe that familiar face will make Bucky more amenable to joining Steve on that little outing, complain though Clint might at the outset.

Tony would offer to be the buffer, instead of volunteering Clint, but he doesn’t want to foster true dependency. Bucky is his own adult.

Steve apparently brings up Tony’s suggestion sometime the next morning, because Bucky comes to Tony, asking whether the gun is well-enough concealed. Tony blinks at Bucky from over his coffee.

“Uh, I think so. It’s on your back, right?”

Bucky splays a hand over his lower back, feeling at the holster and gun. He turns around in a circle when directed, and Tony gives the thumbs up.

“Remember,” he warns. “You can only shoot at people if they shoot at you first. No preemptive shooting.”

The outing is one small step for Steve, and one giant leap for Steve-kind, because later- much later- Tony catches Steve showing Bucky the right way to fix a photograph in place while Bucky leans over the scrapbook he let Steve pick out. Tony slinks away as quietly as he can, with a smile on his face and determination in his heart.

SHIELD’s files are out there. They need to find what happened to Bucky Barnes.
So for those of you who don't read the SSBS series, I'm in a rough spot right now. I'll spare you the sob story, but it's getting better, in case you do read the SSBS series and want an update.

Otherwise, I have the weirdest fucking feeling of deja vu while I'm writing this, like I've written it before or something. I sincerely hope I haven't *read* it before. That would suck.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Natasha dumped SHIELD’s files, she dumped all of them. Every electronic record, and every scan of any and every physical document ever scanned for archiving. All of then. Since the founding.

There’s a lot of shit to sift through.

Tony assigns one of his younger AIs, FRIDAY, to help him sort through everything. She’s tasked with compiling and organizing a folder of any possible hidden, coded, or encrypted HYDRA documents and save them for further examination. In addition, Tony sets to her the task of compiling anything and everything mentioning the Winter Soldier or James Buchanan Barnes. JARVIS is there to help her out if she’s uncertain about anything, but she’s the most mature of his later AI programs. She can handle it.

“I’m on it, Boss,” she cheerfully announces when he gives her access to the wonders of the internet. Where she picked up ‘Boss’ from? Uh, Tony doesn’t know, but that’s all she’ll call him. Not ‘Sir’, not ‘Mr. Stark’. Boss.

He kind of likes it.

“Keep your sister out of trouble,” Tony demands, pointing at one of the security cameras.

“Typically, one is given more warning than this when one acquires a sibling,” comes JARVIS’s reply.

“You had warning. She’s four years old, Jay.”

“Four years, seven months, nineteen days, eight hours and nine point three eight minutes since I first came online,” FRIDAY helpfully informs them. Tony flicks a finger gun at the camera again.

“Don’t argue with daddy.”

Tony receives two updates daily, letting him know approximately what percentage of the files has been sifted through, as well as a list of documents of interest. Tony intends to look through them, but he is admittedly a little distracted. Bruce is coming home.

Bucky watches in bewilderment as Tony flits here and there, checking and rechecking that everything is perfect. With Bruce home, the bonded pack will be complete. All they’ll need is Thor to have their full family together again.

Is Bruce’s favorite tea- that white tea with some special flower- in stock? Has his floor been aired out and dusted? Is Natasha prepared to make dinner? What about the tea? Oh, he checked that already, didn’t he.

Steve sits him down outside with a blanket on the balcony and all but locks the door. He doesn’t actually lock the door, but he gives Tony a Look, one that brooks no argument, and Tony huffs and takes a seat. The day is sunny and warm, compared to the winter days. The April sun warms Tony’s bones.
“JARVIS, tell them if they want me to stop getting underfoot, someone better bring me a drink,” he drawls, flopping his good arm over his eyes. “I’m melting here.”

Clint is the one to bring him his drink- apple juice, with a little paper umbrella and a looping fun-straw. He offers it out with a playful smirk, and Tony glowers at him.

He takes the juice. He really must admit: there’s something intriguing about watching the juice swirl up through the loops of the straw.

“You know, I mean something more adult. Like coffee. Or whiskey. Or wine.”

“You promised Bucky you would go dry until the pup’s born,” Clint reminds Tony, and Tony groans theatrically. He remembers, though. He remembers without being reminded.

“Speaking of our newest addition, where is he?”

“Arguing with Nat, last I checked.”

Tony sits bolt upright and rolls out of the chair to his feet.

“What?” he hisses. That’s a recipe for disaster. It’s been exactly one week since Bucky’s last reflexive assault, and knowing he’s now arguing with their other resident assassin is not comforting in the least. “What are they arguing about?”

Tony makes his way to the glass door, but Clint catches him with a hand braced over the reactor.

“Hold your horses, cowboy. I don’t know. Russian isn’t one of my languages, but they didn’t seem aggressive, and Steve’s with them anyways. Bucky’s just helping Nat with the cooking.”

Bucky is slowly warming up to the idea of kitchen knives, so there’s a 50:50 chance he’s helping with the prep-work. The other possibility is that he’s playing taste-tester and helping with the actual cooking part. Tony can just imagine Steve sitting there at the countertop and watching with his gooey doe-eyes, maybe even offering to help. For a group of world-saving superheroes, three of which have been enhanced by some serum or another, one of whom is a deity, and all of whom have ample experience in bloody battle- well. They’re surprisingly domestic at times, is all.

Tony can catch sight of Natasha gesturing sharply with a wooden spoon, as he looks through the glass, but both Steve and Bucky have their backs to him; they all look fairly nonviolent, though, so Tony takes Clint’s word and settles back down in his chair, sipping petulantly at his apple juice.

Bruce shows up some time after Tony has been rescued from exile by Natasha, and the final touches are just being put on what basically amounts to a feast (if it were intended for six normal people instead of two normal people and four enhanced people) as Tony’s favorite science buddy walks out of the elevator. He’s obviously already deposited his meager luggage in his rooms, and Tony immediately flits over to Bruce with a grin on his face.

“Brucie!” he crows, hand gripping the back of Bruce’s neck. The other scientist indulges Tony, allowing for the touching of foreheads, and then an awkward hug- mindful of Tony’s healing humerus. Tony unabashedly nuzzles and rubs his jawline over Bruce’s pulse points, and when he finally pulls back- satisfied that his missing packmate once again smells of Tony, Bruce rolls his eyes.

“Alphas,” he grumbles affectionately, although the generalization isn’t quite accurate. After all, Steve doesn’t feel the need to scent-mark his packmates nearly as much as Tony does.
Tony blows him a kiss, then links his good arm with Bruce’s, steering him towards the rest of the pack. Bucky hovers in the kitchen area, guarded and cautious and not at all as open and comfortable as he had seemed to be earlier, but Tony isn’t worried. This is par for the course, and it’s been taking less and less time for Bucky to warm up to newcomers. Tony lets go of Bruce in favor of taking up residence by the omega’s side in a silent offer of stability.

“Bucky, Bruce. Bruce, Bucky. Oh!” Tony grins, his possessive nature nearly crowing in delight at the sudden thought popping into his head. “Bruce—Bruce, you can take over Bucky’s OBGYN appointments!”

“I’m not that kind of doctor,” Bruce reminds him, but Tony flaps a hand, bumping his shoulder against Bucky’s. The omega looks between them, somewhat bewildered.

“But you run off to play doctor anyways. You can do it; I believe in you,” Tony cajoles.

“I like Dr. Miran,” Bucky rasps, and Bruce sends Tony a look.

“See? Bucky doesn’t even want me as his doctor. You’re just thinking with your hindbrain.”

Guilty as charged, but Tony still thinks Bruce acting as OBGYN would work perfectly.

They sit down to roasted chicken and rice pilaf and everything else it takes to feed a pack of hungry superheroes. The conversation isn’t empty, and any laughter is honest, and Tony surveys his pack with a swell of pride. This is his. Bucky remains subdued and quiet, but when Tony catches his eye and lifts a brow in question, the small smile offered is genuine, and Tony finds himself satisfied.

Things settle a bit. With all the Avengers again under one roof, the team is back on active duty. Steve, Nat, and Clint are called out to handle a rather lackluster villain in a matador costume, but otherwise, things are fairly quiet. This gives Tony a chance to make another ultrasound appointment, because they’re at the point where a pup starts to resemble an actual pup rather than an legume. Bucky makes this request in full-view of Cap, and Steve, bless his star-spangled soul, hopefully asks if he can come along.

Bucky might react less than favorably. There might be some angry, hissing, spitting words, and the pregnant omega might stare down Captain America before storming away to hide again.

“The obstetrician says he’ll be a little, um, a little defensive until week eighteen. Or thereabouts,” Tony helplessly informs the reeling alpha. “He should tone down a bit then.”

Of course, the literature Tony’s been reading also says the defensive streak is probably going to come back with a vengeance in the weeks leading up to the birth. Tony rubs the creases between his eyes, sighing. He’s not looking forward to that part.

“So we’ve got another month of trying to keep our heads fully attached,” Steve mumbles, eyes wide.

“Yeah, pretty much. Ply him with sorbet and pastries. That’s all I have to say.”

Word gets around pretty quickly that Bucky should not be crossed, and for a different reason than first expected. He still has his blank, mechanical episodes, when he’s startled or soon after waking up, but the violence slowly decreases as the team figures out what to do and not do, how to help him, how to support him. They learn not to approach, when he’s in the middle of an episode. They learn not to touch him if he seems antsy. They learn to hold themselves in as non-threatening a manner as possible, when dull, blank eyes pin them down. When Bucky is fully lucid, he offers Bucky his ‘five senses’ exercise, to help with grounding. Clint brings Bucky a fidget cube to toy with, rather than rubbing bruises into his hip when he needs something to do with his hands. For whatever reason,
having Natasha stand vigil while he rests in a common area helps Bucky calm down—something Nat attributes to leftover instinct of their time together.

But that’s not the main reason he should not be crossed. That’s no different than the minefields each other member of the pack has pockmarked in their psyches.

In fact, people learn to stay out of Bucky’s way, because no one is really prepared to handle a hormonal omega. Clint is morbidly fascinated, desiring no pups of his own and yet as eager to watch the events unfold as he might be to watch a train wreck.

So Tony finds Bucky steered his way whenever he’s riled up, because Bucky likes him, and tucking the omega up under one arm while Bucky snuggles close and presses his face against Tony’s neck is, for whatever reason, a grounding experience.

Tony might be a sucker for a cuddly omega. Especially one whose a prickly as a cactus to most everyone else.

He books the appointment, and he drives Bucky to the clinic a few days later. Once again, he’s as tensed as a coiled spring, when the nurse’s hands are on him, and his flesh hand clings to Tony’s with enough force to really be painful, but Bucky puts up with this discomfort for the sake of seeing the Bean on the screen.

The Bean is still bean-like, but Tony can make out a distinct head, and tiny nubby hands and feet. Dr. Miran is otherwise occupied, which is part of Bucky’s problem, but the technician is very gentle and respectful of boundaries. They pause, holding the sensor in place for a moment.

“Mr. Barnes, your pup is looking absolutely perfect,” they praise. “We should be able to tell physical sex at this stage. Do you want to know, or would you like to wait?”

“Wait,” Bucky rasps, eyes glued to the screen as per usual. “I wanna wait.”

The technician nods their head and smiles. They do, however, lean over and make a note on Bucky’s file, once the machine has been turned off. Tony doesn’t peek. He doesn’t want to accidentally spoil the surprise.

Bucky and Steve pour over the scrapbook when they return home, the incident a few days prior apparently forgotten. Steve makes the artistic suggestion to place those little metal picture-corner-holders on the page, but instead of a picture of the pup showing sex, placing a question mark between the corners. Bucky doesn’t see the point, but he allows the addition.

Not two days later, Tony finally gets to lose the sling. Dr. Cho insists he wear a stabilizing wrap around his upper arm for another three weeks, but all Tony really cares about is that he’s free!

He returns from his visit with the Avengers’ part-time doctor, who’s now back from Seoul while the Avengers are on active duty again. Immediately, he throws his arms around Bruce in a hug that startles his science-buddy. His right hand comes up to ruffle Bruce’s hair in a way he knows irritates the beta, without actively pissing him off.

“I see you’re back in one piece,” Bruce remarks, and Tony flashes a grin, rolling his shoulder. The joint is stiff after being held more or less immobile for so long, and despite all of Dr. Cho’s unique, remarkable, and utterly revolutionary machinery, he’s still going to need some PT, but all in all, Tony’s feeling good. He gives Bruce his space again, lets him get back to whatever he’s poking at on his Starkpad.

“More or less. I have to wear a fucking wrap for a few more weeks—”
“Which you will wear,” Bruce interjects, eyes still on his tablet.

“Yeah, sure, whatever.”

No one would really know if he chooses not to wear it. Not if he makes sure to wear jackets or long sleeves.

“I’ll tell Pepper if you don’t. Or Bucky. Do you want Bucky’s sad-eyes?”

Bucky doesn’t do sad eyes often, and never on purpose. They just- happen. It’s a habit Tony swears Bucky picked up from his new pal Clint. Fucking Clint.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Bruce gives him a look that clearly says ‘Try me.’

Tony backs down.


“Gym floor, I think. He’s doing something or another with Natasha.”

A few weeks ago, that might have made Tony nervous. As things stand, he’s just happy Bucky’s graduated from lurking in shadows.

“‘Something or another’? Is that a technical term?” Tony teases, already on his way back into the elevator.

“Mm,” is all Bruce hums in response, engrossed in the puzzles laid out before him.

‘Something or another’ turns out to be self-defense lessons. Not that Bucky would normally need actual lessons. Tony has born the bruises to prove just how effective the omega can be in defending himself, and there’s a body-count to prove his skill. It’s just, he has a bump, now. And that bump isn’t exactly going to shrink over the next five months. Maneuverability is going to take a hit, more than it has already, and Natasha is taking her role as ‘second’ seriously.

Traditionalists might insist Clint be Bucky’s second for the pregnancy, seeing as he’s the only other omega in the pack, but Clint doesn’t have a mothering bone in his body. He likes kids well enough, so long as he can give them back to their parents.

Natasha, on the other hand, adores children, so she, by default and subtle insistence, has taken up the role of what in the caveman days was probably some sort of insurance policy against neglect, should the pack alpha decide they want nothing to do with the pregnant omega. A second would historically ensure their expectant pack-member had enough to eat, ample protection, and a helping hand when the pup (or pups) eventually came.

Tony isn’t neglecting Bucky in the least, but Natasha is fierce in her commitment nonetheless.

“Keep your stronger hand free whenever possible,” she lectures, holding Bucky by the metal wrist. The curve of his belly pushes slightly against the loose t-shirt he’s pulled on- barely noticeable at the moment, really, but Tony knows it’s there. “This will be your greatest aid in hand-to-hand combat, both in offense and in defense of your pup.”

Bucky looks to be concentrating, nodding along as though this is all revolutionary to hi. Tony knows for a fact, though, that Bucky’s already well-versed in how to protect the Bean. They’ve finally
gotten over the ‘what if I’m going to be kicked out’ fear, but Bucky prepares. He’s not one to be caught unawares. He did his research.

So this means he’s just indulging Natasha’s mother-henning.

“Sorry to cut class short, but let’s talk about me now,” Tony calls obnoxiously, waving his right arm in the air.

Natasha, well-versed with his bullshit, rolls her eyes, but she tucks a curl of red hair behind her ear and relaxes, releasing Bucky’s wrist. The omega slithers out of the boxing ring in favor of approaching Tony, and Tony grins.

“Hey sunshine,” Tony greets, though he wrinkles his nose and steps back when Bucky comes in for a hug. “You’re all sweaty.”

He does, however, cup the back of Bucky’s head and touch their foreheads together. He doesn’t even wipe at the sticky patch on his forehead afterwards, which he thinks he deserves credit for.

“Your sling’s gone,” Bucky mumbles, blue eyes fixed on Tony.

“Very astute, Sherlock. It is indeed gone.”

“Which means now you can focus on building back the muscle mass you lost,” Natasha observes, a gleam in her eyes that Tony does not like.

“Are you a trained physical therapist? Uh, no. I don’t think so. And you are a vicious taskmaster. So, uh, forgive me, for not subjecting myself to your tender mercies.”

She arches an eyebrow, and Tony thinks maybe it’s time to make a tactical retreat.

“Hey! I just remembered I’ve got a thing. It’s a very important thing. I should go do that thing.”

He doesn’t have a ‘thing’ to do, in all honesty. He does, however, track down Steve and Clint to greet them as well and check up on them, as he tends to do when his packmates haven’t asked for privacy. He attends his first board meeting in a while, and finds it just as boring as ever, but it only takes a handful of hours. Then it’s lunch with Pepper, a video call with Rhodey, and back to the tower.

They all sprawl out together for movie night- Steve’s pick this time- and Bucky tucks Tony under his flesh arm. Clint laughs at the alpha from across the room, but Tony merely burrows in deeper. He’s secure enough in his secondary gender to enjoy being the little spoon, or the side-by-side equivalent.

It’s only the next day that he finally, finally has a chance to sit down, and open up everything Friday’s flagged on the Winter Soldier.

He puts the lab on a level four lockdown. Entryways locked, even to people with access codes, windows optionally-tinted, but comms completely open and unrestricted. All someone needs to do to gain his attention is press the intercom button and speak, or give a message to JARVIS is the noise level in the workshop is too high to facilitate normal speech. But he hopes everyone buys his excuse of ‘top-secret Tony Stark business’ and leaves him the fuck alone. Because the digital file is large, and contains pictures, and videos, and Tony thinks he’s going to need coffee.

The coffee pot gurgles as it fills the room with the dark, rich aroma, and he opens the first file.

March 18, 1942.
It’s the oldest file they have on the Winter Soldier, but it isn’t, as Tony expected, the date of Bucky’s fall. No, instead, it’s photocopied images of a lab manual, in German. FRIDAY offers him the translation she put together, and Tony begins to read.

He learns many things, as he pursues the documents. The earlier ones are in German, then later in Serbian, and Russian. They’re briefly Chinese, and then English, and then Russian again. They remain Russian for a good, long while before switching back to English, to detail the breeding program.

Before that, though, he learns about the way Bucky had been cryogenically frozen and thawed exactly one thousand, eight hundred, and twenty three times. Far more often that the tiny SHIELD file had accounted for. He learns about the rigorous training, the number of languages Bucky’s apparently fluent in, including twelve versions of sign language. He learns about a chair, designed to administer a form of electrotorture or interfere with neurological pathways, depending on the intentions of the one behind the controls. He learns so much, so much that he feels sick.

And he encounters the looped footage of a traffic camera, of a snowy wooded road, and a car crash. Of Bucky taking the man behind the wheel and crushing his head against the car fixtures, and snapping the woman’s neck.

He sees the way his parents died.

Tony curls himself into a little ball on the couch, as JARVIS takes over and snaps the footage off. It’s not a dignified pose, but he’s running his fingers through his short hair, eyes closed as he tucks himself against the ratty cushions.

Fuck, Bucky killed his parents. Bucky killed his parents. That-it wasn’t exactly the can of worms Tony thought he was going to be opening. It had been an open-and-closed case. Howard had been drunk behind the wheel, had hit a patch of black ice. They’d never stood a chance against the laws of physics.

“Sir, shall I-”

“Level two, Jay,” he croaks, and JARVIS quiets himself, instead instituting everything that comes along with the level two lockdown. Tony doesn’t want- It’s four in the morning, and of the two people he wants to see right now, one isn’t touching down at the airport for another six hours, and the other hates being woken up at odd hours. He just has to wait until Pepper’s awake. He can do this.

It’s been three days since he first holed himself up in the lab, since he opened that file from March 18, 1942. He can admit he might need to clean up a little before inflicting himself on the general populace. With JARVIS’s help, a few hours later, he makes it up to his room without running into people. He showers, shaves, and dons new clothes, before sneaking back out again. He picks Rhodey up from the airport first, makes smalltalk, avoids Rhodey’s shrewd questions regarding the obviously-disheveled state Tony’s in, the bags under his eyes and tension in his shoulders, and swings by to pick Pepper up from her Manhattan apartment, now that he’s sure she’s up as well.

They sit down at a corner table in an expensive french bistro uptown, and Tony barely looks at the menu. Rhodey orders for him instead, and so Tony ends up with some sort of hot sandwich.

“So what’s the occasion?” Pepper inquires, brow furrowed.

Tony takes a massive bite of the sandwich to avoid speaking right away. He chews thoroughly, hardly even tasting the food, and washes it down with water. He takes another gulp of water, and
then rests his elbow on the table. The bitter, sour notes of stress and distress mar his typical toasted almonds and coconut scent.

“Bucky killed my parents,” he says. The calm, even tone of voice surprises even him. Both Rhodey and Pepper still, processing what he’s just told them.

“What do you mean, Tones?” Rhodey presses carefully, and Tony scrubs a hand through his hair.

“I was looking through the- the data-dump, trying to figure out what happened to him. There’s a video, December 16, 1991.” He ducks his head, takes another gulp of water. “It wasn’t an accident. He shot the wheels, and he walked up to the car, and he killed them.”

He speak quietly, to avoid his words carrying through the busy bistro, but Pepper and Rhodey hear him. Ice grips beneath his ribs for a moment, and his eyes widen.

“Oh fuck, wait- it’s- There was also this chair. That they used. HYDRA. It was some kind of electrotorture, to scramble his brain. It’s why he had no memories. He didn’t have a choice.”

Maybe some memories have come back to him. Tony doesn’t know. He hasn’t asked, and Bucky hasn’t really been anything but affectionate and needy with Tony, barring his violent, defensive outbursts, but- Tony doesn’t know. He hasn’t asked. Maybe he should have.

They sit in silence for a little while. Tony crams more of the sandwich in his mouth.

“So what are you going to do?”

It’s Pepper who speaks this time, gentle and insistent.

“I don’t know. It’s just- I know- I know he was being controlled, alright? It’s just- I cuddle with him. We cuddle, and I saw- I drive him to his OB appointments, and I hold his hand when we look at the pup, and I saw him kill my parents. I don’t know how to- how to reconcile that.”

He pokes at the few remaining bites of bread and filling, jaw clenched.

“Let’s break it down,” Rhodey states, leaning back in his chair. His own food has hardly been touched, and he’s obviously still exhausted from the plane ride, but he’s still- Tony can always rely on Rhodey. He feels shitty, dumping his mini-crisis on his friends first-thing in the morning, but there’s no one else he’d rather talk to, even in his pack. Not on this. “Are you going to kick him out?”

“What? No! Why the fuck would I kick him out?”

The thought hadn’t even crossed Tony’s mind. Abandon Bucky? After all the promises he’s made, and the attachment that’s grown? Fuck no. No.

“Because he killed your parents. That’s a pretty good reason.”

“I’ve seen what they did to him. I know more than he probably wants me to know about what he’s been through. It wasn’t his choice.”

“So you’re not mad at him. You don’t blame him.”

“You’re in shock,” Pepper adds. “You need time to process. When did you see the video?”

“I don’t know. A few hours ago?”
“You can’t expect yourself to be okay, then.”

“But I’m an alpha. I have to be okay for the pack,” he protests weakly. Rhodey lifts an eyebrow, utterly unimpressed.

“You know that’s bullshit,” he growls.

Tony shrinks in on himself a little. Yeah, he knows. It’s hard not to fall back on old conditioning when he’s stressed, though.

Pepper wraps her fingers around Tony’s hand, leaning towards him.

“I think you need to go be with your pack. They’ll give you a safe space to sort through this. Rhodey can go with you.” She has absolutely no shame in volunteering the other beta. “I have an appointment in an hour, but if you need me, I will cancel.”

“No, go save the world,” Tony jokes, the words thin.

“Failure to appease Commander Norton isn’t exactly world-ending,” Pepper reminds him, a small smile on her lips.

“I’ll be fine. You go be CEO.”

“Call me if he needs me,” she says, directing the words at Rhodey, who snaps a lazy salute.

“Excuse me. I think I should be offended that you don’t trust me to make a phone call.”

“You’d convince yourself I’m too busy for you, Tony. Rhodey’s more level-headed. Finish your food.”

She gives his hand a squeeze before letting go, and tucking into her own meal- a bagel with caviar cream-cheese, and fruit on the side to combat the salt.

Rhodey is the one behind the wheel when they return to the tower. He’s sleep-deprived, yes, but he firmly muscles the alpha out of his own car and into the passenger seat, stating that while he might not have had a good night’s rest, Tony looks like he hasn’t slept in a week, and he doesn’t plan on putting Tony back behind the wheel.

Tony stumbles into the elevator, exhaustion creeping up on him now, and JARVIS takes them up to his floor. The first thing to do, according to Rhodey, is tuck Tony away in bed to sleep before he tries to broach the topic of ‘hey! I think you killed my mom’. Which is, granted, a good plan, because Tony wakes up toward evening feeling a little more clear-headed. A little less like he’s falling apart.

Okay. Game plan. Uh- Okay. Maybe talk with Bucky privately, bring up the video. Tell Bucky he’s been secretly reading files of nonconsensually-gathered data, and that he stumbled over one mission that changed Tony’s life. Great. What could go wrong?

Tony decides to push his own problems back to the wayside for a little while. He hasn’t been to a regular therapist for a few years now (They’d both agreed he’d reached the point where he could graduate to self-management with extra counseling as-needed), but maybe he can call his old shrink and see if she’s willing to do some short-term counseling to help Tony deal with this. That’s not important at the moment. So long as Rhodey doesn’t find out he’s doing exactly what he told him not to do, he’ll be golden.

“Hey there, Anastasia,” Tony greets, when he finds Bucky pulling vegan pizza (Tony shudders at
the thought, but Bucky still can’t do dairy without gagging) out of the fridge of Tony’s kitchen. The omega’s been offered his own set of rooms, as well as the chance to move in with Steve or anyone else, but he’s chosen to stay firmly on Tony’s floor. “How’s it hanging?”

Bucky glances over at Tony, then back to the plastic ziplock bag, which he works open with a little smile.

“Missed you,” Bucky says, pulling free two slices. They find their way to a plate, and the rest of the pizza is sealed away and plopped back in the fridge. “What were you doin’ down there?”

Right to the point. Straight for the jugular. Tony swallows around the lump in his throat and leans his shoulder against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. Bucky picks up on the tension immediately, and his posture shifts fluidly into readiness for some unspoken threat. He puts his plate down, turns to face Tony fully with one metal hand loose against his stomach. Tony rubs his eyes.

“I’m not sure how to put this, without coming off as- as creepy and stalkerish, but, uh. I read your file. Files. There were a lot of them.”

Bucky nods minutely, leaning back as though rolling with some sort of punch. Tony flexes his fingers to feel the stretch and burn. He takes a breath, then another, and then continues.

“And I- know. I don’t know how much you remember now, but there’s a video of you- you killing my parents.”

The omega won’t look at him.

/Must leave?/ he signs, eyes on the countertop.

“No. No, Sunshine. You’re staying, for as long as you want. I just-” Tony breaks off and tap tap taps his fingers over the arc reactor. “Just thought you should know. That I know. You don’t have to have to be scared. I know, and I’m not- okay with it, yet, but you’re not gonna be punished for it, okay?”

Bucky’s scent is panicked, despite how rock-solid he looks on the exterior. He breathes in short, rapid bursts, which is- it’s not great, exactly. Tony makes the decision to muscle on, a little bit longer.

“I want to give the files to Steve. I think he’d like to understand too. But I won’t- I won’t do it without your permission. I invaded your privacy enough.”

/Show him/ Bucky signs roughly. /Let him know what he brought home./

Okay, so there’s that. Done. JARVIS will take care of it. Now it’s time to take care of Bucky.

Tony steps closer to the rigid supersoldier, his movements broad and slow. Bucky shakes his head in short bursts every now and then like he’s trying to dispel water from his ears, but he doesn’t stop Tony from touching him. The alpha wraps his arms around the taller man, draws him close. Bucky sucks in a ragged, shaky breath that is almost but not quite a sob, and while there are no tears, the shaking doesn’t stop for a good, long while.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last chapter I’ve got pre-written, and it’s edging into finals month for me at
school, and I'm working on moving into a new apartment, and and and. What this sums up to is an excuse for the upcoming spotty updates, and lack of schedule. Sorry :( I'm a completionist, though, so this isn't gonna be dropped.

Also, to those of you concerned about Sam: He's going to show up, I swear. He's in the outline and everything. Either this next chapter or the one after that, there's going to be a delightfully-awkward meet-the-family scene. I didn't forget about our beloved Falcon.

In regards to Bucky's mental health: He's remembering a lot, but he's hiding it and trying to dial up the cute-and-endearing-act to avoid being kicked out or abandoned or worse.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve reads what Tony gives him. Of course he does. He’s desperate for any scrap of information explaining how and why and who and what and when and any other little tiny thing he can think to ask. Bucky gave blanket-permission, so Tony sends him everything.

In the meantime, Tony sits down with Bucky, a mug of almond-milk hot chocolate in Bucky’s hands and the normal kind in Tony’s. They’re on the couch, a blanket wrapped around them to keep out the rest of the world, and Bucky remains passive and accepting as Tony carefully works Bucky over. He scent-marks over Bucky’s pulse, strokes his fingers down the omega’s arms, counts his ribs beneath the shirt, carefully, for the first time, splays a hand over the swell of the developing pup. Tony memorizes everything he can. This is his Bucky. The Bucky he’s been driving to the doctor. The Bucky he bought arm-floaties for. The Bucky who can’t stand the taste of milk. The Bucky who likes being given warm baths.

He’s a long ways away from reconciling the Bucky he saw on camera with the one in his arms, but he commits everything before him to memory. This is the same Bucky he saw yesterday, and the day before that, and the one before that.

Bucky watches Tony silently, his throat working to swallow around nothing every now and again. Tony set his mug down before beginning his tactile explorations, and now he plucks Bucky’s mug away too. The half-consumed hot chocolate finds its way onto a side table, and Tony carefully adjusts the both of them to he’s curled up around and over Bucky, as much as he can be while being shorter than the omega and being careful of his bump. Bucky splays metal fingers between Tony’s shoulder blades, and Tony shamelessly buries his nose against the omega’s neck.

Bucky’s honeysuckle scent tints each breath as they rest and make a point of strengthening their pack-bond. It’s newer than the pack bonds he shares with the Avengers, but Tony is no less invested in maintaining it to the best of his abilities. The strain and shock of recent realizations have frayed the tenuous link. Conscious effort is going to need to go into repairing what they have, but Tony’s willing to put in the work.

They remain pressed together, soaking in the warmth and comfort of tactile affection, and as the afternoon sun filters in through the windows, Bucky dozes. His scruffy face looks impossibly younger without the lines and tension of ever-present wariness and borderline-fear. A still-unfamiliar jolt of shock zings through him as his brain brings up the image of Bucky crushing Howard’s head, and Tony swallows. He puts the thought from his mind. Focus on the now. The now, the present, that’s what’s important. Tony brushes his thumb over Bucky’s lip, and the omega’s eyes slit open to watch Tony, but the alpha offers a smile and strokes a hand through Bucky’s hair as he untangles himself.

“You keep napping,” he murmurs. As nice as it might be to just laze away the day, Tony is an adult with adult things to take care of. He has the money and infrastructure to weasel out of obligations more often than not, but that doesn’t mean he gets to escape everything all the time.

Especially not after dropping a bombshell on Steve via JARVIS.

“Where’s the good Captain?” Tony asks when he’s safely behind elevator doors.
“Captain Rogers is currently in his studio perusing the files sent to him,” JARVIS replies crisply.

“Should we let him know you’re on your way, Boss?”

Tony’s brows beadle together.

“Since when do you have access to the elevator, Fri?”

“I’d like to remain online,” is what Tony receives in response. Her voice is unexpectedly plaintive.

“Uh, sure. I don’t see why not.”

It doesn’t really answer his question, but his AIs are smart. Tony doesn’t really have any idea how she managed to escape her restricted parameters- maybe she figured out how to piggyback on JARVIS’s connections- but he’ll find out, shore up defenses, and then open up connections of her own for FRIDAY to use. Both JARVIS and FRIDAY have complex ‘minds’, for lack of a better word. He’s known for years that JARVIS is self-aware, and it looks like FRIDAY is too, and if she doesn’t want to go back in a digital box until needed again, Tony won’t force her.

“Well- okay. Yeah. Let Steve know I’m heading down.”

He’ll figure out tasks for her, so she doesn’t encroach on JARVIS’s territory. Not that Tony thinks JARVIS would lash out at his sister, but still. Maybe FRIDAY will take some sort of interest in Bucky’s pup. It would be nice to have someone like her dedicated to watching over the Bean. Yeah, that could work. Naturally he won’t limit his youngest AI to only child-care, but maybe, if she agrees, that could be her primary duty- in the Tower, at least.

He leans heavily against the elevator wall, scrubbing a hand across his face. Bucky’s pup. Bucky. He frowns at his hand as he holds it before his eyes. The offending appendage trembles, and not just ever-so-slightly. He holds up the other hand and finds it to be shaking too.

“Sir, shall I provide a rhythm to breathe with?” JARVIS inquires, voice modulated to show his concern.

“What- why-” Oh. Okay, he’s- He might be hyperventilating a little. When did that happen?

Tony sits carefully on the floor of the elevator, pressing one hand tightly against the arc reactor while the other fists against his knee. Okay. Okak. Okay. Christ, what gives? he thinks almost hysterically. Theoretically this is why his former-therapist and Rhodey and Pepper all say he shouldn’t bottle things up just to be a ‘good alpha’. Pushing things away to deal with later just compounds the problem, until it rears its ugly head without warning.

He should be better than this.

He gestures for the elevator door to open, knowing that JARVIS has manually kept him securely enclosed to avoid forcing his hand, but he needs to talk to Steve. He needs to talk to Steve, and then he needs to see- see- He needs his family.

First Steve. Steve is family. He needs to talk to Steve.

Tony hoists himself back off the floor and forces himself out the door. Steve catches him by the shoulders as Tony all but- no. He stumbles. He trips over his own feet and stumbles into Steve’s studio. Steve catches him, keeps him from spilling onto the ground

“Tony, Tony look at me,” Steve urges. No one really thinks of Steve ‘Hitler-punching’ Rogers as
capable of being gentle and nurturing. Hell, in their own pack it’s generally accepted that Tony, as home-alpha, is the one you go to when you need a hug or to unpack your troubles. But Steve is Steve, and while his pack-role is that of protector in battle, he’s a good alpha, and a better person. Not perfect, but good.

“I’m- lookin’- at you,” Tony wheezes.

Steve sucks in an exaggerated breath, and lets it out, bobbing his head slightly in time. Tony takes the hint and struggles to follow suit. Breathe in, breathe out. In, out. Slower, deeper, breathe. It’s a two-steps forward, one step back sort of thing. Tony keeps slipping back into hyperventilating, but the general trend is in the direction of steady, even breaths.

It’s only when Tony’s back to breathing again that he realizes he’s light-headed, but he pushes Steve away to stand on his own two feet.

“How much did you read?” Tony rasps, hands fisting at his sides. Steve swallows.

“All of it. I mean, everything I- JARVIS helped me with the languages I don’t know.”


“I did,” Steve acknowledges.

“Did you know? When you brought him here? Did you know what he did?”

“No, Tony, I-”


Under normal circumstances, most people don’t notice their own scent. It’s commonplace, ever-there, hardly something to pay much attention to other than ensuring they, and therefore it, remains clean. Tony, however, is all-too-aware of the cues pouring off him in waves, burying his almonds-and-toasted-coconut base-scent in confused jumbles of acrid panic and bitter distress.

Thank fucking christ he saved his little meltdown until Bucky wouldn’t notice.

Bucky.

Rather than rise to the bait of Tony’s aggressive posturing, Steve tucks his shoulders in, does what he can to make himself seem smaller, as if that’s even possible for someone built like a Roman statue.

“No. I wouldn’t keep something like that from you, Tony. I didn’t know.”

All the fight rushes out of him, leaving Tony feeling hollow and cold. He trusts Steve. He believes Steve.

Tony nods minutely, rocking back onto his heels before settling out again. Steve doesn’t mention the fine tremors dancing their way through the other alpha’s body.

“How about,” Steve ventures after a long, tense, silent minute, “we go find everyone else. Bruce. Clint and Nat. I saw Rhodey a few hours ago. We’ll go get him. That sound nice?”

“Don’t patronize me,” Tony snaps, but the fire’s gone out of him.

He doesn’t let Steve go round up the pack. He’s a grown man; if he wants his family, he’ll find them himself. Which he does. It’s just better this way, rather than having Steve do all the work. This way,
it feels more like Tony’s idea, Tony’s choice.

They go to the common floor, laden with pillows and blankets. The cushions are pulled off the couch and arranged to ring a makeshift nest, and one by one each member of Tony’s pack huddles in around him. Bruce does this awesome hand-massage thing, while Tony lays across Natasha’s lap, his hair being carefully brushed and teased by Clint. Steve rests propped up against a pile of cushions, sketchbook abandoned for the moment while he simply watches the rest of his pack interact.

Rhodey finds his way to them before long, and with a put-upon ‘god damnit Tony’ he takes off his shoes and joins the group. Last to wander in is Bucky, who seems so goddamn uncertain. After one bare moment, Tony waves the pregnant omega over. He twists up to press a kiss to the omega’s neck, then diverts Clint’s attention to Bucky, who certainly has much more hair to play with.

Tony sits up and shifts around to pull an unusually-compliant Natasha against his side, and he nuzzles against her red, red hair, eyes never leaving the two omegas not far away. There’s something indescribably soothing about having his family around him. It’s going to take him a helluva lot longer to come to terms with what he now knows, but in his personal opinion, he thinks it’s best to reinforce the mental image of Bucky-the-pack-member, and use that to wash away the image of Bucky-the-parent-killer.

The crisis is averted, for the moment. Hopefully he won’t have another breakdown, but who the fuck knows. A mind is a messy thing.

They don’t break the nest apart until late the next day. Everyone sleeps burrowed in the blankets and pillows and cushions. Clint and Natasha naturally gravitate towards each other, while Steve and Bruce remain more isolated. Tony goes to sleep in his own little corner and wakes up with Bucky’s back pressed against his, the both of them curled up in opposite directions. Steve is missing from their huddle, off to go on his pre-dawn run, while Clint and Natasha are sickeningly-adorable together— not that he’ll ever say that where either of them can hear him. He isn’t quite thick-headed enough to risk the wrath of either of them.

Bruce settles carefully back down into the nest, a mug of steaming, fragrant tea clasped in one hand.

“Good morning,” the beta murmurs.

Tony doesn’t bother stifling his yawn. Bruce simply sips his tea.

“What time’s it?” he mumbles, nestling himself deeper into his pocket of warmth.

“4:30.”

“In the morning? Why are you awake you absolute madman?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Rhodey growls sleepily from his spot cuddled up around an armful of pillows.

They take the oh-so-subtle hint.

/Feeling better/? Bruce signs with one hand.

/Little bit/ Tony replies back.

He could do with a few more hours of sleep in the safety of the pack’s temporary nest, but he’s feeling a little less… like he’s going to shake apart. A little more grounded. He shifts around quietly to face Bucky’s back. There’s no way the hair-trigger assassin isn’t awake yet, but he does a convincing job of pretending to be asleep. Tony brushes long hair from the back of Bucky’s neck
and presses his lips to warm skin. Honeysuckle-sweetness greets his senses. That’s what *his* Bucky smells like. He bets the Bucky from the video didn’t smell like honeysuckle.

He needs to make that therapy appointment. He needs to handle this, and obviously his preferred method of ignoring a problem until it blows up isn’t a viable one. He needs a neutral party, but more than that, he needs his family.

Tony kicks Rhody fully awake, and braves the irate swearing to badger the beta into cuddling up. He throws one of his own arms over Bucky, while Rhody pulls a blanket securely over all three. Rhody has Tony’s back, and Tony has his Bucky, and everything is going to be fine.

Really. It *is*.

If he keeps telling himself that, maybe it’ll be true.

He dozes comfortably between the two men until nature calls the pregnant omega away to the bathroom. Increased blood-flow to the kidneys and all that jazz. Clint takes the opportunity to get up as well, but he’s more motivated by food than anything. Natasha quickly comes to join him for a quick sausage and potato hash, and english muffins.

“You better be making enough for all of us,” Rhody grumbles, his face smashed between Tony’s shoulder-blades.

“Like hell,” Clint cheerfully chirps back. “You can pry these spuds from my cold, dead fingers.”

“Don’t tempt him,” Tony warns, but he takes that as his cue to get up. There’s plenty of chopped potatoes in the freezer. He’ll make the damn hash if Clint’s going to be a child about it.

Natasha, however, has already pulled out a bigger pan. Tony grabs the chopped potatoes in their ziplock bag, and Nat pops them in the microwave to thaw while the pan heats up. They’ll make several batches to accommodate for everyone’s appetite.

Bucky returns while Clint and Natasha are in the middle of arguing over whether to saute the onions before or after the potatoes have had a chance to cook, and Tony’s gone back to the nest. Bruce is gone, presumably off to finish a project in his lab. Tony’s going to make a point of bringing him a heaping plate of breakfast.

When Bucky joins Tony and Rhody in the mess of blankets and pillows, Rhody is on his phone, texting with (tattling to) Pepper. Tony has a video playing on his StarkPad. Some guy doing flips in his red-and-blue pajamas. It’s a shitty cell-phone video, but what interests Tony is the rope-like projections shooting out from these little canisters on the person’s wrists. They can’t actually be rope—too thin to hold up the person’s weight. Some kind of polymer maybe?

He’s dying to get his hands on those canisters, *and* the person who made them. He’s settle for a sample of the mystery-rope-stuff, but apparently it dissolves into nothingness within an hour or two.

Another job for FRIDAY, then. Find the pajama-person.

An incoming call derails Tony’s plans for a lazy morning, though, and he sighs.

“Alright guys, rain-check on breakfast. Eyepatch wants a word with me.”

Rhodey leans his full weight on Tony, which is completely unfair.

“Let him wait. Don’t you guys have an official hotline hooked up in here?”
“Yeah, but… what if it’s an emergency?”

“Then he’d call the hotline. Hot. Line.”

/Stay and eat/ Bucky signs at him. Clint deposits a bowl of breakfast hash in his lap, rapping Tony lightly on the head with a spoon for good measure.

“Eat your breakfast, old man. Then if you behave you can go play with the other kids.”

“You’re not my real mom,” Tony whines, playing up the angsty-teen voice, but he takes the spoon and digs in. The faster he eats, the quicker he can talk to Fury, and the quicker he can talk to Fury, the sooner he can get the whole conversation over with.

Rhodey keeps him down for another hour, though, using his superior height and Tony’s unwillingness to struggle against him. By the time Tony manages to get up, Steve is back and freshly showered, and Clint has turned the TV on to stream cartoons.

When Tony passes Steve, he pats the supersoldier’s delightful bicep in greeting.

“I’ll talk to you later, Wonderboy. Gotta go make a call.”

He’s pretty much gotten what he needed to say and hear out of his system earlier. He’s not sure what he would have done, had it come to light that Steve had kept something like that from him. Tony likes to think he would have been reasonable. Wouldn’t have gone berserk. Would have been betrayed, but wouldn’t have betrayed in turn. He’s not sure, though.

But Steve didn’t know, and Tony trusts Steve with his everything, the way he trusts everyone else in his ragtag family.

He knows he’s thinking himself in a circle. Tony can be- he obsesses. A lot. About many things. He gets an idea in his head, and it just won’t let itself be pulled out. He doesn’t have time for this, though. It’s settled. Done with. He needs to call Fury.

He sits through three rings before Fury picks up the line.

Tony’s favorite pirate (also the only ‘pirate’ Tony knows) growls “Stark” in greeting.

“Nicky-boo. My favorite jolly old saint. What’s so urgent that you called my personal number? That’s, um. You sort of interrupted a pack-bonding exercise.”

Not so much an exercise as a laze-about, but semantics.

The grizzled old beta, as it turns out, wants something from Tony. A specific something.

An AI.

Which- no. He doesn’t simply want an AI like a smart search engine, or a self-driving car. He wants a fully-fleshed, fully-sentient AI like JARVIS. No.

“No. No way. You can’t expect-”

“We’re building SAFE from the ground up, Stark. We can’t risk HYDRA wormining its way in again, and-”
“Nope.”

Tony likes to think of himself as a mature adult, despite what Pepper might grumble at him after he’s spent a whole meeting playing games on his phone. This, though? It’s a lapse.

He hangs up without warning, taking childish delight in pushing Fury’s buttons.

But no way is Nick getting a hold of Tony’s babies. Tony can just see a newborn AI being twisted and manipulated, being impressed with all the wrong morals. Rather than a protector, Tony fears handing an AI over to Fury would turn it into a weapon.

Not necessarily by Fury himself. Maybe by Fury himself, but Tony thinks the beta has good intentions this time. JARVIS has been keeping Tony posted about Fury’s recovery. His near-fatal clash with HYDRA around the time of Steve and Natasha bringing down Project Insight had been a sort of wake-up call, from what Tony hears. Almost immediately after being discharged from intensive care, he and the alpha Maria Hill had launched themselves into figuring out what exactly went wrong, and how to prevent it. Tony’s been prepared to provide backing. He’s just been waiting to be asked, not wanting to step on Fury’s toes. Really, Tony might know a bit about the whole saving-the-world thing, but building an independent, internationally-recognized security organization? Yeah, Tony will leave that to people with experience in that whole bureaucratic shebang.

It’s just- not everyone is as trusted as Fury. Yeah, in the beginning the lying sonuvabitch couldn’t seem to string two truths together when talking to Tony and the other Avengers, but that’s- changed. There’s a sort of mutualistic relationship between the former director of SHIELD and the Avengers. Neither is directly affiliated with the other anymore, but they’ve pulled each other’s ass out of the fire often enough to have developed a definite respect. Tony can’t say the same about every person in the world. He can’t say the same about the World Security Council, or the heads of governments who will all want a custom-made AI from Tony Stark if word gets around that he’s got digital brains up for sale. And Tony refuses to give his near-living creations away to be abused.

But when he complains to Rhodey and Bruce while Steve and Bucky are doing laps in the pool, they don’t quite share his views. So while the dynamic duo of World War 2 splashes around, Tony throws ideas back and forth with his two science-bros.

So he makes another call. Later. After he handles SI business and decides what conditions will need to be met for Tony to create another AI. So like, two days later, he makes an in-person call. So not a call. A visit.

He strolls into Fury’s temporary home-base, one of the fallen SHIELD’s smaller buildings. The hand-picked staff bustles about, laying the groundwork for something new, something big. Something hopefully uncorrupted. Tony slips past security with ease, which clues him into the fact that Fury’s been expecting him. God dammit. Why can’t he ever pull one over on the wily old beta? Anyways, he slips past security and strolls right into Fury’s office, where Maria Hill is leaning over the back of Nick’s chair, reading some kind of report with him rather than finding her own copy.

“Hey there, Nicky. Mary-Mary Miss Contrary.”

Hill doesn’t bother to hide her eye-roll. She’s a professional and one stoic motherfucker when it suits her, but she’s made her ‘Dealing with Stark’ policy to just roll with his antics unless he’s a danger to her interests, her morals, or her own unconventional pack.

“I’ll take that as my cue to leave,” she announces, stepping away from Nick with one squeeze to the beta’s shoulder.
“Hill,” Fury calls as she heads out the door. The alpha stops and turns to face Fury, back straight as she stands at attention.

“Sir?”

“Check on Long’s team in person. I want their report by tomorrow.”

“Yes sir,” she replies. She closes the door behind her, leaving Tony alone with Nick. The other man leans back in his chair, folding his hands over his stomach.

“So what brings you here, Stark?”

As if Fury doesn’t already know. Always with his fingers in all the pies.

“Negotiations. You want one of my babies. I can create one for you. But! There are conditions. Things I won’t budge on. If any of those conditions won’t fly, we don’t have a deal.”

He pulls up a chair and sprawls out, manspreading like a champ. Fury gestures for him to say his piece.

“No one touches their code but me, and all essential hardware remains in my custody. And if you want one of my AIs, they think. They learn. If I’m going to raise a mind from infancy, I’m going to teach it right from wrong.”

To be perfectly honest, JARVIS could bring the world to its knees before anyone had the chance to notice. But JARVIS has strict ethics protocols, some programmed and some learned.

So they negotiate.

It’s nighttime when Tony leaves again. And they have a tentative agreement.

Tony could easily hide away in his lab and craft HENRY from the ground up. He could happily lose himself in the creation of his Helpfully Excellent New Robot Youngster. But alas, he’s surrounded by packmembers who insist on the importance of trivial things like food. And sleep. And while most of them might put up with his self-destructive quirks from time to time, there’s a line they all draw. Some unspoken line that they won’t tell him about, but they all enforce nonetheless. Apparently his recent, uh.

HENRY comes together one piece at a time, but he comes up for meals. He comes up for sleep. He comes up for movie night. The workshop remains open to allow people to come and go, and he attends Stark Industries business. When Bucky comes down and rests his metal hand on the back of Tony’s neck, Tony doesn’t think before leaning back in his seat, looking up at Bucky. The omega shifts his touch around to cup over Tony’s throat.

“Hey Sunshine,” Tony greets, utterly unworried. “How’s it hanging?”

He twists an arm up to rest the back of his hand over Bucky’s small bump. The pup’s about the size of a navel orange at the moment, according to the plethora of books and blogs Tony’s been soaking up. Bucky’s flesh hand meets Tony’s, holding it over his stomach.

“I want a bath,” Bucky rumbles, and Tony grins despite the little twinge of guilt.

“You’re fully capable of washing yourself.”

He might- he might have been avoiding Bucky. Just a little bit. Not, like, running out of the room
when Bucky’s there, or ignoring the omega. They interact. They cuddle. They eat together. But Tony might have been a little distant the past few days. Which makes, uh. Makes sense. But didn’t he make a promise to himself not to neglect the omega? Especially now. When Bucky needs assurance. Being forced to relive-relive that-that. Having Tony bring up what he’d done under HYDRA-Apparently Bucky has been hiding out in his room, when Tony isn’t present. Bruce sedately said it’s like Bucky’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for the team to send him away.

Tony pushed his rolly chair away from the workstation, and Bucky lets him go. The alpha stretches as he stands, and plants his hands on his hips.

“All right. I could probably-probably use a break. Lead the way, Snowflake.”

Bucky wraps his hand around Tony’s, which is-weird. It’s, uh, it’s nice? Tony adjusts his own grip, and they slip into the elevator. He feels kinda-kinda like a kid? Like some elementary schooler. Holding hands? Uh, like Nat would say. For children.

But yeah. It’s nice, so Tony doesn’t break the grip. Bucky’s the one who lets go, but only to strip. Tony’s seen Bucky’s naked ass often enough that he could probably 3-D model it if he wanted, so he isn’t going to be shy now. The omega turns the tub on, lets it fill, and Tony frowns when he checks the temperature.

“Hot water’s bad for you right now, isn’t it?”

He reaches to turn the temperature down, but Bucky waves him away.

“Lemme have this. FRIDAY says it’s fine.”

“Since when does FRIDAY have access to your bathroom?”

Fucking hell. FRIDAY’s just going to take over the world, isn’t she?

“Gave ‘er permission. She likes th’, uh, th’ pup.”

“And she’s an expert on prenatal care, huh?”

“JARVIS has allowed me access to all databanks he can unlock,” FRIDAY pipes up. “Relevant studies and references indicate Mr. Barnes will be safe bathing in temperatures up to his resting body temperature, which is on average 104.3 Fahrenheit. Li’l brother or sister’s gonna be fine.”

Tony freezes.

“Little what?”

“Little brother or sister,” FRIDAY replies cheerily, enunciating clearly this time. “Recent behaviors indicate that you plan on co-parenting the pup, and given Mr. Barnes’s approval of this intention, and I am your daughter, logic dictates that I will have another sibling in approximately twenty five weeks.”

He might zone out a little. Caught in the thoughts of- Daughter? Sibling? He snaps to attention when Bucky wriggles his fingers right in front of Tony’s face. The omega’s shoulders are tight, his eyes wary and cautious. Like he’s waiting for Tony to- to what? Snap?

He takes a moment to find his voice, and says, “Um. I might need to, uh- Let’s move on. The water’s fine, apparently. Go ahead and- Bath, right? You want a bath. Time for a bath. Get in the tub.”
That thought needs processing time. Yeah. Of course he’s been fucking reading up on pup care. He’s going to be housing an infant in a few months. It just- it hasn’t really occurred to him to consider it *parenting*. Jesus Christ.

Despite the fact that Bucky most definitely has better balance than Tony’s ever laid claim to, the alpha insists on helping Bucky into the water. After that, it’s a familiar routine. Bucky’s metal arm rests on the edge of the tub, and he just sort of drifts- relaxing pliantly beneath Tony’s hands. Tony’s careful with the scarring around the left shoulder. Bucky won’t let Tony run any in-depth tests yet, so he doesn’t know how exactly the tech is mounted to Bucky’s body, but the joining of metal to skin is sensitive at best, and painful at worst. Tony would much rather keep his touch light and gentle and risk any awkwardness that sensation might cause- and yeah, there have been incidents- than be firm and cause Bucky any more pain.

He’s thorough, despite the fact that Bucky almost definitely showered just that morning after his daily swim. From the tips of Bucky’s toes to the ends of his fingers, the notches of his spine to the ends of his hair. Tony is fastidious.

“I was thinking about, uh, about drawing up plans. For the arm. Upgrades maybe. Or just a new one.”

He traces his finger over the red star, and Bucky’s eyes open in slits to watch Tony.

“Like maybe some sort of ballast system. So you don’t have to tread water to stay afloat. You can just lay back and drift along if we find some way to get this thing the be about the density of flesh and bone.”

Bucky’s eyes are fully open, and the elevens between his eyes are deep and sharp. Tony strokes his thumb over the tensed skin, smoothing out the wrinkles of confusion.

“What do you think? Or d’you think it might hinder you too much? Would a whole new arm be better? I could make this six times lighter and twice as strong.” He could do that. It would have to wait until after the pup was born, because, uh, non-essential major surgery isn’t exactly a great risk to take when expecting. But he’s getting ahead of himself. Bucky would have to consent to basic scans first.

“What th’fuck’s wrong with you?” Bucky finally says.

Tony tilts the omega’s head back, wetting his hair fully. He squeezes a dollop of Bucky’s preferred shampoo into his hands and starts at the roots, the way he’s learned Bucky likes. Clint prefers a general rub down of his short hair, but Bucky likes due attention paid to his scalp. Hedonistic little shit.

“Many things. It depends on who you ask,” Tony pipes back conversationally. “Nat wrote an essay on the topic.”


Bucky’s left arm lifts, the plates shifting as he braces the elbow on the edge of the tub and clenches his fist. His fingers relax again after a few moments, and he lets his hand fall back to crack against the tub. And, uh. It does crack. There’s a fracture in the frame. The casual display of force has Tony flinching, traffic footage of a car crash that wasn’t an accident flashing before his eyes. He tightens his fingers in Bucky’s hair, though he catches himself almost immediately and lets go. Tony doesn’t want- he’s not going to-
Tony breathes. In, out.

“See, that’s what’s s’posed to happen. You’re s’posed to be scared a’me. Not- not giving me things.”

Tony takes another breath, and scratches his fingers lightly against Bucky’s scalp.

“I’ll give you things if I want. Do you want me to be scared of you?”

Because to be perfectly honest, Tony is trying so fucking hard not to be afraid. He doesn’t want to be afraid. He wants Bucky. He wants his packmate, his omega. He wants to separate Bucky from HYDRA’s pawn. On some level, they’re the same man. On another, they’re completely different. Free will is the deciding factor here. Free will, and what Bucky chooses to do with that will.

The omega turns his soapy head, staring blankly up at the ceiling.

“I want to stay.”

The bathroom is steamy. The lights are soft. Tony feels suddenly, abruptly, inexplicably tired.

“Then you’re gonna stay.”

“Simple ‘s that?”

“Yeah. Simple as that. I mean, yeah. We’ve got a lot of landmines to dance around, and there’re probably gonna be some days when I’m not gonna be able to look at you without seeing the- the clip. But. Uh- What was I saying?”

His mind sort of just blanked out immediately at the mention of that video. He frowns, thinking.

“Yeah. It’s not always easy, but I’m keeping you. Got it? I’m a fucking possessive bastard.”

The words might be rough, but his voice is soft. His mouth twitches up when Bucky looks at him again.

“Are we going to have touchy-feeling conversations every time you want a bath?” he teases in an effort to lighten the mood.

“It wasn’t the plan. I really did just wanna bath,” Bucky defends. “Y’r the one who had t’ offer me a new fucking arm.”

“How about you get the bath, and the arm. Here, lean back.”

“Fuck off.”

Buck lets Tony wash the soap out of his hair. Tony follows the same protocol with the conditioner. They continue in silence for a little while, until Bucky lets Tony wrap the towel around him while the tub drains. Bucky sits down on the closed toilet while Tony takes the blowdryer from its charge port. He flicks on the warm air, takes Bucky’s comb, and before long the omega is comfortable and dry. When Bucky’s dressed and alert, Tony nuzzles his packmate’s cheek. Bucky’s lips seek out his own, but Tony has morals. He does. He’s not going to take advantage of Bucky’s dependence.

“You don’t have to do that,” Tony murmurs. “Okay? It’s fine.”

Irritation flares up, evidenced in the tight set of Bucky’s jaw, but honest-to-god. Tony’s not going to make Bucky feel like he needs to offer some sort of payment. Or an apology. Or anything.
So Tony leaves Bucky to his own devices and vanishes back into the lab.

Chapter End Notes

Finals are done! I was gifted a weighted blanket! Things are alright!

So here's the next chapter. This is only a 3rd of the events I wanted to happen in this chapter, but things sort of expanded. Eventually, we're going to get a chapter from Bucky's POV, but for now it's just Tony going on and on about how he doesn't want to coerce Bucky while Bucky is getting real tired of Tony's shit.

Anyways, the aftermath of Tony's revelation, featuring pack-comfort and cuddling!

You guys have no idea how much I'm mocked by my friends for this XD (In a friendly, good, playful way of course). I made the mistake of letting them know I was writing an ABO M-Preg fic, and one of them has vowed to print it out and bring it to hand out at a signing if I ever finish and publish a book. My friends are awesome XD
Chapter 8

Alright, so I promised Sam would be here, but this chapter is almost twice as long as my usual chapters. I just can't fit Sam's appearance in quite yet. But enjoy the references!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony manages to collect a sample of the ropey webbing left behind by the onesie guy before too long. It’s pure luck, actually. He just- just happens to see a tendril waving in the wind, and he cuts about an inch-long sample. It’s surprisingly difficult to actually cut the stuff. It’s as strong as steel, he realizes later as he runs tests on the webbing. Just, as flexible as thin fishing line too. What the hell is this stuff? He slides the sample back into its preservation tube. The tube is the only thing keeping the polymer from dissolving like it would out in the concrete jungle.

Half a week later, Natasha approaches Tony in the workshop at three in the morning. It’s the first fucking night since the incident that someone (typically Rhodey until the beta had needed to actually go home and take relieve his house-sitter) hasn’t come to collect him and bully him into bed if he stays up past three, and to be frank it’s pretty damn refreshing. He appreciates the care. He really does. It’s just that he’s also an adult, and he can make his own poor life choices thank you very much, and as counter-intuitive as it sounds, he needs the benders, the sleepless nights of creation and dickering around to stay sane.

He’s burning his fingers on the fine wiring of Clint’s quiver while Slipknot morphs into Metallica around him, one song fading into another as the speakers thrum with rumbling volume, when JARVIS turns the music down to what normal people might consider an acceptable level. He looks up and grins as one of his two favorite redheads saunters in.

“Hey there, hot stuff,” he greets.

He holds out one hand to grab at her, and she lets him take her own hand. Of course, Natasha wouldn’t be Natasha without some kind of ulterior motive. A vice-like grip clamps down around his wrist, and she inspects the thin red welts on his skin with tight lips.

“I thought you promised Steve you’d wear gloves when wiring.”

“They get in the way,” Tony complains.

“Don’t bullshit me. I know for a fact you have protective gloves so thin it’s a miracle they don’t rip like tissue paper.”

“It’s not a miracle, it’s science.”

“Right.”

An affronted noise catches in Tony’s throat when Nat pushes his tools and the deconstructed quiver off to the side so she can sit on the workbench. Tony looks up at her from his seat, fond exasperation on his face as she buries her nimble fingers in his hair.

“So what brings you down here at- JARVIS, what time is it?”
“The current time is 3:17 AM.”

“Right. At 3:17 AM?”

Natasha rubs the tension from his scalp, and Tony rests his head fully in her hands.

“I’ve been talking to Bucky.”

“Yeah?”

“He’s agreed to see a therapist.”

That has Tony’s head jerking up, but Natasha keeps her hold in his hair- tight, but not tight enough to hurt. Grounding.

“What? Why?”

“Easy, Tony. Think about it. He’s been held captive and tortured for almost a century. He’s been forced to do things he blames himself for. Even if we ignore that, he’s going through a pregnancy resulting from rape. We all know he wants the pup, but that’s hard.” Her thumb strokes across his brow. “It’ll be good for him to talk with something detached from the situation.”

“And he chose this himself? No one’s pressuring him?”

Forcing the brainwashed POW/assassin to see a shrink isn’t the brightest of ideas. No one likes having their head screwed with without their consent, and sometimes not even then.

“We’ve been talking about it on and off,” Natasha admits. “But yes. The end decision was all him. You need to go tell him you approve, though.”

“He doesn’t exactly need my permission to see a doctor,” he protests, but Natasha clucks her tongue at him.

“He found out you’re paying for his medical treatments out of pocket.”

“What, and he feels guilty?”

“Just let him know you’re fine with it.”

Tony pays for his own insurance and medical treatment, because he can easily afford it. Everyone else is subsidized by the World Security Council, though Tony still covers the co-pay to satisfy his need to provide. Bucky, however, technically doesn’t exist. No documents, no backing, no insurance, no aid, and no one is ready to alert the world to Bucky’s existence yet. There’s still so much potential for everything to go wrong.

So Tony is footing the bills and relying on doctor-patient confidentiality to keep them safe.

“We’re going to start with Dr. Harris first, and see how it goes.”

Dr. Harris being Clint’s old shrink from the post-Loki mess. Tony trusts the beta as far as he trusts any doctor. Not much. But Clint trusts them, and he trusts Clint.

“Make sure Bucky knows he can switch therapists if he wants.”
Natasha’s soft smile turns sharp, showing far too many teeth.

“Why don’t you tell him yourself?”

Tony won’t meet her eyes as he says, “I’m being a dick, I know.”

“No, you’re being a human being. One who watched his omega murder his parents.”

“I don’t recall giving you access to that footage.”

“JARVIS likes me, genius. You may have pulled Bucky’s files from the dump, дорогой, but you know better than to hide things from me.”

Bucky’s files aren’t the only ones Tony pulled. While FRIDAY was combing through the internet for information on the Winter Soldier, JARVIS had been tasked with pulling any and all sensitive information whose reveal would kill innocents and good people. Deep cover cases, protected persons lists, and so on. Tony has a specific isolated drive dedicated to these records, and he’s been working with Fury and WSC and other international intelligence organizations to find who needs what information to keep their people safe. So far, Tony hasn’t had to actually take the fall for his pack’s actions, but he is trying to be proactive and lessen the negatives.

He and Natasha have had words over this. He and Steve had also had words, but Natasha’s the one who made the executive to turn SHIELD’s databases inside out.

“I didn’t want to force his hand,” Tony explains. “But I also didn’t hide anything from you.”

If he had, in fact, chosen to hide Bucky’s files from the team, JARVIS would have viciously defended the locked-down files.

Natasha leaves him with a kiss on the forehead and a sharp-eyed look that promises retribution if he leaves Bucky hanging. Tony drags himself from the lab just after sunrise to find Bucky and Clint eating breakfast together. He squints in the light and makes a beeline for the stove, where Bruce is piling waffles onto a plate.

“Thank you Brucie-bear,” Tony moans around the mouthful of plain waffle he’s shoved into his mouth like a heathen. No butter, no syrup, no honey or jam or powdered sugar. He just picks up a waffle and chomps at the corner.

“I always knew you were a freak,” Clint coos.

“You’ve seen me do worse.”

Tony feels Bucky’s eyes burning a hole in his back as he holds the waffle in one hand and pours a cup of coffee with the other. Bruce forces Tony to take a plate and sit down, and he sets his plate down in the narrow space between Clint and Bucky’s spots on the counter. He wraps his hands around Clint’s chair and pulls, forcing enough space between the two omegas that he can push his own chair in between and sit down.

“Is that what we’re doing? Really? This is how it’s gonna be?” Clint sighs.

“That’s how it’s been, baby,” Tony chirps back, nudging Clint’s plate and cup over. He wraps an arm around Bucky, and the omega leans willingly into Tony’s half-embrace. “Good morning, Sunshine. How’s it shaking? Shakin’ like bacon?”

“You say the weirdest shit,” Bucky mumbles.
“I resent that.”

But he might be a little, uh. A little tired. A little loopy. He’s not exactly as young as he once was. All-nighters are getting rougher and rougher, but he’s a stubborn bastard.

“I’m fine. Slept pretty well. ‘Cept I gotta piss all the fuckin’ time.”

“Dude!” Clint whines.

“You laugh at fart jokes, Clint,” Bruce points out. “You don’t have the high ground.”

Tony ignores both Clint and Bruce.

“Good luck on your trip to the shrink today,” Tony murmurs as he leans into Bucky’s space. “Clint liked Dr. Harris. I hope you do too, but there’s nothing wrong with asking to see someone else.”

He combs his fingers through Bucky’s hair, then lets his hand drop away and grabs for the coffee again.

Bucky siddles closer, on the side-edge of his seat as he places himself more fully in Tony’s space. Tony meets him halfway, and they finish up breakfast pressed close together. Natasha wanders in a few minutes later, followed not long after by Steve.

“I’ll be out of the Tower today,” Steve says casually as he piles up on waffles and bacon.

“Anything exciting?” Tony asks.

“No, just meeting a friend.”

“He’s going on a date,” Natasha stage-whispers.

Steve’s cheeks color a splotchy red, and Tony perks up.


“Stevie ain’t a virgin,” Bucky huffs, but the small, mirthful smile is fleeting, sinking quickly into confusion and frustration as whatever memory he’d been privy to slips away. They all know better than to press by now, but this is the first time a specific memory of Steve has made itself known. Steve looks so goddamn hopeful, but he restrains himself too. Tony points at the blonde with his fork. Moving on.

“You know all about my sexcapades. We’ll be discussing this later, Steve. I want details. Back to the date. Who is it?”


“Uh huh. So why does Little Miss Muffet think you’re going on a date?”

Natasha sips at her own cream-laden coffee, her eyes wide and innocent.

“I don’t have a clue.”

Tony turns eagerly to Natasha.

“Who is it? Who’s Capsicle dating?”
Steve groans, hand over his face. Bucky’s hand seeks out Tony’s beneath the countertop, and Tony obligingly turns his hand palm-up. Metal fingers lace between Tony’s.

“What do I get in return if I tell you?”

“A bottle of DIVA.”

“Rubies?”

“Done.”

Natasha takes a few long seconds to think, but she smirks.

“No.”

“What’s DIVA?” Bucky mumbles, leaning into Tony.

“Fancy vodka that comes with a pretty bracelet. Nat, name your price.”

“I’m still right here,” Steve protests.

“I think I’ll let things play out on their own,” Natasha decides, and Tony makes a disappointed noise, but Natasha refuses to be baited further, and Cap is tight-lipped on the whole matter. JARVIS prompts Natasha and Bucky when it’s getting close to time to leave for the omega’s appointment, and Tony takes his leave to go shower. When he comes out wrapped in a towel, Bucky’s looming in the doorway like a goddamn Weeping Angel. Tony pauses for about two seconds before moving on. He slips past the omega and into his room.

“Alright sweetpea, maybe knock next time,” Tony hums as he pulls out a well-worn t-shirt. Bucky’s eyes linger on the bare reactor before fabric hides it from view. “You might not have a problem showing me your junk, but not everyone is quite so open.”

Obviously Tony doesn’t mind. He drops his towel and shimmies on boxers and jeans.

“I want.” Bucky grimaces, tugging on the hem of his own shirt.

“What do you want, Mama Mia? Wanting things is good.”

The omega’s eyes flick up to Tony, then off to a point on the wall.

“I want you t’ come with me ‘n Natalia. To th’ doctor.”

“Why’s that?”

Tony mentally rearranges his day. Can he play hookie? He’s got a meeting with R&D in an hour, but those are his people, his younglings. They’ll understand, right? Uh- He’s supposed to review a parachute deployment system for the Air Force, but he can bring the specs with him on his tablet. Okay. Yeah. This could work.

Bucky shrugs, eyes back on Tony.

“Do I gotta say it?”

There’s something sullen and pleading in his voice.

“No. No, yeah. Ask Nat if she can wait ten more minutes for me, alright? I’ll meet you by the
Bucky is just barely comfortable with Dr. Miran now. A whole new doctor for a whole new purpose could theoretically be unsettling, and Bucky still seems to take more comfort in Tony than anyone else in the pack. Despite his recent avoidance. Fuck.

Tony scrubs a hand over his face and breathes. Just- breathes. In, out. Everything’s going to be fine. He’s fine. Bucky’s fine. Everything is fine.

Natasha slides in behind the steering wheel of her favorite Tesla. Out of all of Tony’s cars, that’s the one she prefers to drive when it’s available. Tony and Bucky sit in the back, and Bucky remains pressed up against the door opposite Tony for the first five minutes of the ride. Eventually, Tony silently holds out an arm, and Bucky creeps across the seat. Rather than nestling into the open arms, Bucky grabs hold of Tony and holds him close. Tony huffs in irritation, but he lets the situation remain. He’s come to terms with the fact that he’s almost guaranteed to always be the little-spoon. Maybe once Bucky’s too big to play big-spoon Tony will have his chance. The alpha rests his cheek on Bucky’s shoulder.

Dr. Harris practices from a little office in the suburbs, and Nat parks neatly beneath a tree.

“You’re cleaning off the bird shit,” Tony warns as she unlocks the car. They all step out, and Tony flicks out his sunglasses, perching the shades on his nose.

The session goes pretty well. There are NDs to sign and consent forms to fill out and all that new patient bullshit. Natasha goes off on a coffee run while Tony sits in with Bucky. They all understand that Tony won’t be present at most of the actual sessions, although for safety reasons, JARVIS will be present in phone-form to constantly scan audio and alert the Avenger present outside the room if something starts to go horribly wrong. No records will be made, but no one wants to see the doctor dead or injured from accidentally triggering the Winter Soldier. Therapy with a civilian doctor has the potential for terrible, terrible things when the patient has been mind-fucked like Bucky, but if Bucky wants medical treatment, they won’t deny him. They’ll just take precautions. Oodles and oodles of precautions.

Natasha returns with coffee (and hot chocolate) shortly after they wrap up. Tony greedily takes his latte while Bucky snags his modified hot chocolate. Natasha hands off some concoction for Dr. Harris (and how does she know what the other beta prefers anyways? Fucking creepy), then returns Tony’s credit card.

“When did you get this?” he sighs, sliding the card into his wallet. ‘How’ isn’t really a question Tony feels the need to ask anymore. Natasha has sticky fingers, and that’s that.

“Bucky lifted it while you were cuddling in the car.”

With betrayal in his eyes, he turns to the omega, who’s mid-sip of the hot chocolate.

“Et tu?”

“Natalia said you wouldn’ mind,” Bucky mumbles, tensing up. Not good. Tony runs a hand through his own cropped hair.

“I don’t mind. Really. I’m just teasing, Sunshine. C’mere.” Tony pulls Bucky into an awkward half-hug, and he glares at Natasha when he hears the click of her phone’s camera. Turning the volume down would silence the digital noise, and Tony knows that Nat knows this. Nothing without a purpose, right?
With the next month’s worth of appointments booked—two each week—they return to the Tower. Tony wheedles a clear, explicit answer out of Bucky, and Bucky insists he likes Dr. Harris so far, and yes, Tony, he knows he can change his mind at any time. Tony gently bumps their foreheads together and promises to be back for a movie later, and then it’s off to R&D with him.

Nothing explodes, which is both disappointing and according to plan, seeing as they’re just going over preliminary budgeting for the next quarter. Margaret from accounting runs a tight ship.

Bruce picks the movie, and he chooses Howl’s Moving Castle. Miyazaki films are gorgeous, and Bruce likes comparing the movie to the book. Tony’s never read the book version, but Bruce says the two versions are essentially completely different stories written with the same characters, and both are great. Tony will take his word for it.

Steve slinks in after midnight, and Bucky, who had hitherto been dozing against Tony, snaps to attention. Tony soothes a hand through his hair, and Bucky turns to press his face against Tony’s palm, before glancing at Steve.

“How was th’ date?” Bucky rumbles, and Steve pouts. Pouts. Tony’s never seen Captain America pout before. Maybe it’s a thing only Bucky can prompt?

“It wasn’t a date,” the other alpha sighs, and Tony grins.

“When do we get to meet them?”

“Who says you get to meet him?”

“Oh, him?” Clint pushes, delighted.

“Well Nat apparently already knows him, so don’t you think the rest of the pack should too?” Tony teases.

They’re one big family, despite their disagreements. And while Natasha and Bruce stay out of it, Tony and Clint are all-too-happy to play the part of obnoxious, nosey family-member.

“Look, I’ll bring him ‘round when I’m good ‘n ready, okay?”

“Oooh, your Brooklyn’s showing, Capsicle. He must be something else,” Tony crows, delighted.

“Don’t flip your wig, Stark.”

Steve’s exasperation is painfully apparent, but Tony just wants to poke him with the proverbial stick. Bucky elbows him, though, and that shuts Tony right up. The silver-haired Sophie and her beau Howl ride off on an airship onscreen, though Tony isn’t really paying attention anymore. Bruce tells JARVIS to shut the TV off once the screen fades to black, and Steve makes a strategic escape to the communal kitchen in search of food to fuel his supersoldier metabolism. Bucky unfurls himself from Tony’s side and pads into the kitchen after Steve, and Tony can’t help the small smile on his face when the omega carefully, warily decides to inform Steve how the therapy appointment went. Steve absolutely hangs off of Bucky’s every word, but he’s usually pretty good about letting Bucky set the pace for their interactions. Tony rocks up to his feet, scratching absently at his neck.

“I’m gonna head back down to the lab for a few hours, if anyone needs me,” Tony announces. Steve’s eyes cut over to him as he puts on his best ‘Captain America Disapproves’ face.

“Shouldn’t you get some sleep?”
“Sleep is for the weak, baby. I have coffee to keep me company.” Coffee and energy drinks of various kinds. And smoothies. Smoothies are good. “I saw that, Clint. Sign that to my face you coward.”

The archer grins and flails his hands in a meaningless mimicry of sign. Tony looks to the heavens as if praying to a god he doesn’t really believe in for patience, before addressing the good Captain again.

“Look, I’ll take a nap in a few hours. JARVIS will tattle on me if I don’t. Right J?”

“Of course, Sir.”


“Never shoulda let you read those books,” Bucky grumbles.

“Wait, what books?” Clint demands in entertained delight. “Is Tony reading parenting books? Oh my god, is Tony reading Dr. Spock?”

“Alright I’m out.”

Tony beats a hasty retreat. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with preparing for the pup. And Tony-fuck, he’d rather Bucky just shoot him before he ends up like Howard. He’s not doing that to any kid. He’d rather follow Jarvis’s example, would rather read the books geared towards expecting mothers and search through pastel blogs. He is not going to be Howard. Hence the books. Clint can go suck it.

Dum-E whirs up to him the moment he enters the lab. Tony flaps him away.

“Hey, it’s way past your bedtime little sir.”

The other two bots beep in greeting from their charging stations before returning to sleep-mode, but Dum-E is the fucking troublemaker. Tony gives up shooing his oldest creation away and pats the metal arm instead. Dum-E follows him around like a lost puppy until he really does put his foot down and send the bot off to charge. Dum-E gets loopy when he goes too long without a full charge, and a loopy Dum-E means a torn-up lab.

Tony curls up around a partially-formed helmet- the successor to his current suit. Mark XLIII isn’t finished yet, but Tony’s getting pretty damn close. There’s some finicky soldering to fix in place, and sparks fly, glinting off Tony’s safety goggles.

One hour becomes two becomes three. Tony takes a nap on the couch, and immediately throws himself into reviewing SI prototypes ready to move on into focus-testing. He manages to move from the table-top projection display to the smart-watch before FRIDAY pipes up between blasting songs.

“Hey Boss? I think I’ve got a positive on Pajama Sam.”

That brings Tony up short. A slow, wide smile spreads on his face.

“Pajama Sam?”

“Analysis of your speech patterns indicates a fondness for nicknames and pop-culture references.”

“Sweetheart, I’m not sure how topical that is anymore. When was Pajama Sam a thing?”
JARVIS picks up the slack.

“Pajama Sam’s first release occurred in 1996. The most recent instalment occurred in 2003.”

“Is this relevant, Boss?”

“Hey, you’re the one who brought up a kid’s computer game!”

“Look, that may be relevant. Your acrobat lives in Queens. His name is Peter Parker, and he’s fifteen years old.”

Tony blinks.

“Fifteen? He’s a kid?”

“A teenager. He attends Midtown School of Science and Technology, and he has one living relative.”

“Well alright then.”

Tony emerges from his den of creation just long enough to shower and groom his hair and beard. He pulls on a suit, matches the cufflinks to the tie pin, and swings by the penthouse kitchen for sweet, sweet coffee. Well, bitter, bitter coffee. Black coffee. Nectar of the gods. Except Thor hates coffee. Go figure.

He turns around and nearly jumps out of his skin to find Bucky leff than a yard away. His heart pounds behind the reactor, and Bucky frowns. Whether he has super-ears like Steve or just sees the reflexive terror momentarily flash across Tony’s face, it doesn’t matter. The omega flinches away, taking a step back to give Tony his space.

“Hey, no sweetpea. It’s not you. Okay? Would you believe it’s not you, it’s me? No? I just- I don’t like surprises.” He shrugs and hides behind a mouthful of coffee. When he swallows, he adds, “Bad experiences, you know?”

He still feels a little shaky from the sudden burst of adrenaline, the fight or flight response with no outlet, but he offers a smile. He swirls the coffee around the travel mug.

“Did you sleep well?”

Tony braces his hip against the countertop and makes a grabby hand at the omega. Bucky comes to join him, and he lets Tony smooth a hand over his curved stomach through the ratty old t-shirt and hang on- is that? That is one-fucking-hundred percent Tony’s favorite Iron Maiden shirt. The same one he’s had for at least two decades. The one Rhodey caught for him when it was thrown into the crowd at a concert. It’s like, two sizes too big for Tony, but it’s comfortable. He lifts an eyebrow, and Bucky ventures a sly smirk.

“Slept alright. ‘s gettin’ hard t’ find a good way t’ lay down. Can’t imagine what it’s gonna be like at the end. ‘M gonna be a whale.”

“A gorgeous whale,” Tony corrects. “Like, the kind of manatee people thought was a mermaid.”

“Bullshit. I’ve seen manatees on th’ Netflix. They don’ look like girls.”

“‘The Netflix’? Did you seriously just call it ‘the Netflix’?”

“FRIDAY said y’ might like that,” Bucky murmurs, the smirk slipping into an easy, crooked smile.
Tony’s heart does a weird little flip-flop in his chest that may or may not be related to the recent scare.

He really had intended to just head out, swing by and see if he could catch Peter and his guardian before the teen left for school, but now he thinks maybe staying for breakfast wouldn’t hurt. Tony makes a vague hand-gesture.


“You sure are somethin’ else,” Bucky murmurs, and Tony isn’t quite sure what to make of that. So, uh, instead of dealing with that little phrase and all it’s unspoken meaning, he sets the coffee down with a clack and pulls out the blender, the mixing bowls, and the waffle iron. He tries, he honestly does try to force the pregnant omega to sit down, but Bucky isn’t just Bucky. He’s the goddamn Winter Soldier, and Tony might be absurdly fit for a man of his age, but Bucky’s got him beat for sure. He plants his feet and grins at Tony when the alpha tries to push him towards the chair.

“What are you even made of? Vibranium?” he complains, giving Bucky’s shoulders another half-hearted shove. Bucky doesn’t move an inch, but when Tony makes a noise of disgust and stalks back to the fridge, Bucky follows along close behind. Today is apparently a ‘Tony Doesn’t Get Personal Space’ day. Okay. He can work with that. Just- no more surprises.

There’s some small-talk. Plans for the day, what’s for dinner, did Tony know Bruce mixes cannabis with his tea sometimes. Tony did not know that last one, actually, but he supposes it’s hard to hide things from a guy who’s been trained (to put it euphemistically) in the art of noticing things for seventy years. Natasha and Clint probably know too. Hell, Clint is probably the supplier. They’re talking around an issue, Tony knows, but he’s not sure what it is. He’s content to let Bucky circle and carefully bring it up, which he eventually does, when the first batch of waffles are cooking in the iron and they’re both holding yellow, fruity smoothies. Bucky’s flesh fingers stroke repetitively over the hem of his shirt. It’s a tell that Tony’s learned means Bucky is anxious. His face is perfectly neutral, his body language relaxed, but the little run of fingers over any textured surface is a big, big clue for anyone who knows about it.

“Stevie wants t’ take me t’ get a haircut,” Bucky tacks on casually. “Says I deserve th’ full treatment.”

“Oh course he says that. Mr. Ration-Time is a hedonist at heart.”

Tony would have pictured Steve as an essentialist. Quick showers, sturdy clothes, no indulgence. Not true, actually. Now that he’s in a position to enjoy himself, and now that he’s absolutely certain Tony enjoys providing for the pack, that he’s not taking advantage of the wealthy alpha, he likes to let loose. Steve might actually have more bath products than Tony, and that’s saying something. The blonde alpha gave up on trimming his own hair a few months into their association. Instead, he likes to visit Tony’s personal stylist and have his hair washed, dried, and cut each month. It’s an enjoyable experience for Steve, a way to be pampered that doesn’t piss off his jumped-up alpha instincts.

“Y’don’t think I need a haircut, do you?”

Tony glances at Bucky. The omega’s sharp, glacial blue eyes are locked on him. Tony takes a slow sip of thick smoothie.

“I think that’s up to you.” He has a pretty good idea of what’s going on, but he’s not going to call Bucky out just yet. “Do you like having long hair?” Bucky doesn’t respond, but his fingers clench in his shirt. Bullseye. “C’mon Sunshine. You have a preference about your own body, right?” He
pokes and prods with his words, but he keeps his tone gentle, neutral.

“I will comply with handler preference,” Bucky recites stiffly, automatically. There we go. Tony opens the waffle iron and fishes out two deep, fluffy gold waffles. They drop onto a plate, and he pours batter into the iron for the next pair.

“Who’s your handler?”

Bucky tilts his head, jaw clenched tight.

“Who’s your handler, Bucky? Do you have one?”

“I do not,” the omega grinds out after a full thirty seconds of what might be internal conflict, and what might simply be a reluctance to speak. Tony debates whether it’s a good idea to touch him. Physical comfort versus respecting space. He angles himself towards Bucky, leaving his body language open and welcoming, just in case. “I do not.” Bucky sounds much less certain this time.

Tony decides to step in.

“That’s right. You’re in our pack, and this pack doesn’t have handlers. We have family, and family respects the word ‘no’. You’re allowed to say ‘no’, Sunshine. We won’t be mad. Steve definitely won’t be mad. There are no consequences for having a preference.”

The omega’s been doing so, so well. He’s integrating into the pack like a champ, bonding easily with Natasha and Clint. He’s comfortable around Bruce, and growing closer with Steve. It’s good. It’s great. It’s also possibly just an act. A survival tactic. They all want Bucky to be alright. They want him to heal and recover like they’re all in the process of doing regarding their own traumas. It wouldn’t surprise Tony if Bucky picked up on that and decided to put on a front in a misguided effort to keep everyone happy. Tony isn’t sure whether he’s supposed to poke holes in that illusion or not, whether it’s bad or good.

“You’re allowed to say no,” he repeats. Bucky is silent.

Another round of waffles comes and goes, and Tony covers them in foil before sticking them in the warmer drawer of the oven. Tony knows for a fact that the omega is ravenous. He eats like a man starved at every opportunity, but he isn’t making any sort of move to so much as drink his smoothie, despite the fact that he’s been craving pineapple like no one’s business.

Tony makes it through the entire bowl of batter, ending up with a mountain of waffles. He pulls out the fake butter and real syrup and sets the bigger pile of waffles on the bar for Bucky. Tony’s comparatively small stack is quickly doused in margarine and syrup, but he refuses to take a bite until Bucky joins him. The omega reluctantly joins Tony, but much to the alpha’s relief, he immediately tucks into the waffles the moment he gets that first taste. Tony still gets waves of fury remembering Bucky’s admission that HYDRA wouldn’t feed him, would only inject him with nutrients.

When he next checks the clock, it’s obviously too late to catch Peter Parker, unless Tony wants to be the creepy old stranger who stakes out the school waiting for minors to wander out. Yeah, no thank you. He needs to take some time to dab flour off the black of his suit, but more importantly he needs to ensure Bucky’s really okay. He bumps his shoulder against the omega’s.

“Let’s go tell Steve to wait on the whole haircut thing. Maybe you can look at some pictures, decide what you want, and then revisit the idea. I like your hair long, but I’d like it shorter too. Baby steps, Bucky-boo. Your body belongs to you. You call the shots now.”

Tony provides moral support when Bucky tells Steve to table the haircut idea. Tony hangs back in
the doorway, his presence obviously some sort of comfort, while Bucky himself delivers the news. It’s such a little thing, not wanting a haircut, but Bucky straightens his spine and tenses like he’s ready to bravely face some sort of punishment, and Tony and Steve share a look.

“That’s alright, Buck,” Steve insists lightly. “Say, have you been out to Central Park yet? It’s startin’ to get real nice out there.”

And just like that, the tension melts away. Bucky remains wary, and experience shows he’ll remain so for a few hours, but Bucky willingly says goodbye to Tony and walks off with Steve, off to explore the great outdoors in sweatpants and a stolen shirt. Tony doesn’t know why Bucky stole his shirt, but he does know he could easily get used to seeing the omega parade around in Tony’s things. Something warm and natural blooms in his chest at the mental image. He shakes his head clear and wanders away to clean up his suit. Nothing too damaging, just some flour and one dribble of half-dried waffle batter, but it’s nothing he can’t handle.

Okay, maybe it’s a little more than he can handle with damp washcloths. He gets the flour up alright, but the waffle batter comes off and leaves behind a little pale shadow that looks like something decidedly not of the waffle batter variety, and yikes. He’s not going to a teenagers apartment looking like he just cleaned up from a quicky. And then the damp spots dry and it turns out the flour was just moved around, and Tony decides fuck it. He pulls on a charcoal polo shirt, matches the pants with a blazer, and there. Done. The cufflinks would have been a nice touch, but they don’t really go with the whole ‘business casual’ look he’s got going on.

He’s cleaned up and presentable again in no time at all, but there’s still a few hours to kill. He actually goes to his office, which gets him an odd look from the lovely beta acting as his secretary. Tony never uses the office. He’s pretty sure Pepper just uses the bookshelves as extensions for her own collection. The various fiddly little desk decorations are all gag gifts from Rhodey, who very well knows Tony is a human disaster when he fidgets. Tony definitely doesn’t water the plants. Those- maybe Sinclair takes care of those, when they’re not busy with secretarial things. He swats at a big, broad leaf to see the plant shake and hear the leaves rustle.

“Please don’t abuse Cynthia, Mr. Stark,” Sinclair calls from their desk outside the office.

“You named it?”

“Of course I did.”

Right. Because who wouldn’t name their plants?

Tony lounges back in his ergonomic leather chair, and pulls up his email. He replies to the long chain of correspondence he has with Mrs. Keener, verifying their summer plans. Harley’s coming to stay with Tony for his summer break, and Tony can’t begin to describe how excited he is to see the bright-eyed young alpha. Phone calls would honestly be more efficient, but Tony has learned that Mrs. Keener has some sort of anxiety regarding phone calls, so they stick to emails when possible. Video chats for whatever reason are fine, but those aren’t really a spontaneous thing. Those need to be scheduled.

He can’t wait for Harley to meet the rest of his pack. It’s either going to be awesome or a dumpster fire.

With a flick of his wrist, he spreads out a choice selection of video clips. He twirls the holographic display. That costume is a tragedy. No protection whatsoever. It really is just a red-and-blue onesie. And what’s with the goggles? Another flick of the finger, and Happy’s on the line.
“What can I do for you, Boss?”

“It’s you!” Tony shouts, sitting bolt upright. “Fuck, I knew she had to have learned it somewhere.”

“Boss?”

Tony grins, running his fingers through his hair.

“You haven’t met her yet. I’ve got a new AI, FRIDAY. She calls me Boss and I couldn’t fucking figure out why. Anyways that’s not relevant. I need a ride to Queens.”

“Sure thing. I’ll be out front in ten.”

Tony hops up to his feet as the call disconnects. He waves goodbye to Sinclaire and slips into the elevator. JARVIS, ever-helpful, predicts what exactly Tony intends to do next, and on the way down the phone rings, rings, and is answered.

“Hello?” Steve replies.

“Look, honeybuns, I know for a fact that my name shows up superimposed on my face whenever I call you. You know exactly who’s calling you, oh ancient one,” Tony sighs. Steve likes to play up the whole ‘I’m a clueless relic’ routine just to rile him up. He can just about hear the smug smile on the other alpha’s face.

“So I guess you’re calling for me and not Buck, right?”

“Why’s it so hard to believe I just want to hear your voice?” Tony leans against the elevator wall. “So, uh. How is Bucky?”

Steve’s laughter is deep and honest.

“You sure do know how to make a fella feel special. He’s makin’ me eat vegan ice cream.”

Tony hears muffled protest through the phone. Happy opens the Audi’s door for him, and Tony slides into the back seat.

“I hear dissent among the ranks.”

“Buck says he’s not makin’ me do anything.”

“No one’s made you do anything since you jumped out of a plane with no parachute.”

“That was decades ago.”

“Steve, you did it again like three years ago.”

“Did I? You know old age impacts memory.”

“Dear god. The last thing I need is a senile Steve Rogers.”

Another chuckle from over the line, the sound of a phone changing hands, and Bucky’s on the line. Tony’s already sent the spiderling’s address to Happy, so he’s free to chat.

“Hey there Sunshine,” Tony greets. Is this creepy? God, he’s so fucking clingy. Icy doubt washes through him. “How, uh- so vegan ice cream? What’s wrong with sorbet?”
“They don’ got pistachio sorbet.”

“Pistachio. You absolute heathen. Anyways, I, uh- I just wanted to check on you.”

Yeah, clingy doesn’t begin to cover it. The call was a mistake. It was definitely a mistake. Christ on a cracker, what was he thinking?

“We’re doin’ fine. You oughta come out with us next time.”

“And butt in on supersoldier bonding time? Not sure if that would be a good idea, hot stuff.”

“You ain’t butting in if we invite you.”

“Maybe. I’ll think about it.” He doesn’t want to get in the way. “We need to get you a phone. How have I not done that yet?”

“Didn’ need one.”

“Everyone needs a phone in the Age of Information. I’ll find a phone for you.”

There’s a little more chatter before Tony makes his excuses and says goodbye to Steve and Bucky. He hangs up and scrubs a hand across his face with a grimace. He needs to stop being so- so- so.

“Everything alright, Boss?” Happy asks, glancing at tony in the rear view mirror.

“Yeah. Yeah, everything’s fine. ETA?”

“If traffic stays like this, we’ll arrive at about three. Sound good?”

“Perfect, actually.”

Happy pulls into a parallel parking spot about a half hour later. Tony pays for parking, and he takes the steps up two at a time to the directory beside the front door. Tony locates the ‘Parker’ label, and presses the button.

“Parker residence,” comes a woman’s voice over the intercom after a few seconds of waiting.

“Hey, how are you Ms. Parker.” He thinks she’s Ms. Parker. Peter only has one living relative. Unless this is the nanny. “I’m Tony Stark. I’m here to talk about Peter.”

“Yeah, that’s really funny pal.”

With a click, the intercom goes silent. Well. Okay. Pretty much expected. He buzzes the button again. There’s no response. Okay. Um. Maybe he can wait here for Peter to come home- no that’s creepy. That’s so, so creepy.

He’s caught waffling back and forth, considering his options, when the front door opens and an unimpressed woman’s face comes into view. Her eyes widen immediately.

“Oh. Oh my god. I- You’re really Tony Stark. I thought- well. You’re here for Peter?”

“Yes ma’am. Good things only, I swear. I wanted to pop by and talk to him about the internship he applied for. He said he’d be out of school at three. How are you today, Ms. Parker?”

“Misses,” she corrects faintly. “Call me May.”
Misses ‘Call me May’ Parker shows Tony up seven flights of stairs- the elevator has been temporarily broken for the past four years- to her well-maintained apartment.

“Date loaf? Homemade,” she offers while Tony wanders around. The apartment certainly does smell like, um. Like date loaf, but underneath that is the scent of mountain rain- May- and something that prickles at Tony’s nose. Not- he’s not sure if it’s good or bad. Just different.

“Sure, why not. I’ll have a slice if you come sit down with me.”

They end up on the couch, a respectful distance between them, but Tony rests an arm over the back of the couch, his body angled towards May’s. He takes a bite of the date loaf, and it’s a point of personal pride that he doesn’t make a face.

“This is delicious,” he insists. Maybe if he eats it really, really slowly, he won’t have to finish the slice before Peter gets home.

“So the internship. What exactly- I didn’t know you took interns. I mean, everyone knows Stark Industries takes interns, but you personally- Do you usually visit interns’ families personally?”

“Not really. His application stood out, though. I’m thinking I’d like to take him under my wing and get him involved under the September Foundation grant. He shows a lot of promise.”

Tony carefully nudges the conversation away from Peter, to May herself. He wants Peter’s aunt- because May isn’t his mom, apparently. She’s the aunt- to be comfortable, relaxed. She’s gorgeous and sharp-witted once she gets over the shock of Tony Stark showing up on her doorstep. The sound of a key turning in the lock interrupts their light-hearted baseball argument. May is a Yankees fan. Yankees! Tony firmly stands by his position that the Mets are where it’s at. May laughs with genuine delight as Tony rants, but Tony quiets up and turns to watch as Peter Parker walks in.

“Hey, May,” the kid says, tossing his keys in a bowl.

“Mmm. Hey. How was school today?” She’s still smiling.

“Okay. This crazy car parked outside-”

At that exact moment, Peter catches sight of Tony. He freezes, eyes wide.

“Oh, hey there, Mr. Parker,” Tony greets, toasting the kid with his remaining date loaf. There’s just one bite left.

“Um.” Peter pulls his earphones out and winds them up in a ball. “What- What are you doing-? Hey! Uh, I’m- I’m- I’m Peter.”

“Tony.”

He sees the kid’s eyes flick between May and Tony, trying to get a read on the situation.

“What are- what are you doing here?”

“It’s about time we met.” Tony makes a vague hand gesture. “You’ve been getting my emails, right?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Quick on the uptake. Tony likes that.
“Right?”

“Regarding the…”

May tucks her hair behind one ear and playfully accuses, “You didn’t tell me about the internship. And the grant!”

“About- yeah.”

“The September Foundation,” Tony helpfully supplies.

“Right.”

“Yeah, remember when you applied?”

"Yeah."

“I approved, so now we’re in business.”

“You didn’t tell me anything. What’s up with that? You keeping secrets from me now?” May demands, propping her elbow up on the back of the couch.

“Well, I just, I just- I just know how much you love surprises, so I thought I would let you know- wh- Anyways what did I apply for, again?”

“That’s what I’m here to hash out,” Tony replies.


“It’s so hard for me to believe she’s someone’s Aunt,” Tony announces, glancing at May. May laughs again.

“Yeah, well, we come in all shapes and sizes, you know?”

“This walnut date loaf is exceptional.” Tony pops the last chunk in his mouth. If he holds it just so, he can keep it hidden without it touching his tongue.

Peter doesn’t seem too thrilled with where this is going.

“Let me just stop you there. Please.”

“Yeah?”

“Is this grant, like- does it have money involved or whatever? Like, a paid internship? No?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

Peter perks up a little.

“It’s pretty well funded.”

“Wow.”

“Look who you’re talking to! Hey, uh, can I have five minutes with him?”
May waves Tony away.

“Sure.”

Tony picks himself up off the couch, and he follows the young omega to his room. As soon as the door shuts, Tony bolts the door and leans over the trash can. He spits out the chunk of date loaf and grimaces.

“As walnut date loaves go, that wasn’t bad.” Upon looking up, he immediately spots a whole table of dinosaur-age electronics. “Oooh, what do we have here? Retro tech, huh?” Tony gravitates towards the old hardware. It looks like Peter’s gotten the computer to actually function. “Thrift store? Salvation Army?”

“Uh, the garbage, actually.”

“You’re a dumpster diver.”

Well everyone needs a hobby. Peter gestures towards the table.

“Yeah, I was- Anyways, look, um, I definitely did not apply for your grant.”

“Ah-ah!” Tony holds up a finger, silencing the kid. Peter zeroes in on the finger, confused, before Tony lets the hand drop and holds up his phone instead. “Me first.”

“Okay.”

He pulls up the favored video.

“So quick question of the rhetorical variety.” The phone is held upright, and a projected video plays before the screen. “That’s you right?” It pauses on a closeup of the masked, goggled face.

Peter’s eyes widen. Okay, so he’s a terrible liar. Good thing he wears a mask.

“Um, no. No. What do you- what do you mean?”

“Yeah. Look at you go!” Tony’s let’s his excitement show. The video progresses. “Wow! Nice catch. Three thousand pounds, forty miles an hour?” He whistles and flicks the phone around, closing the projection. “That’s not easy. You got mad skills.”

“That’s all- That’s all on Youtube though, right? I mean, that’s where you found that? Because you know that’s all fake. It’s all done on the computer.”

“Mm-mm.”

Peter paces nervously around Tony to fiddle with the bits and bobs on his antiques table, while the alpha takes in the room. Oh, hello.

“It’s like the video. What is it?”

Tony takes hold of a thick dowel rod and prods at the ceiling panel.

“Yeah yeah yeah yeah. Oh, you mean like those UFOs over Phoenix?”

“Exactly.”

The panel flips up, and the red-and-blue onesie falls down, tied to a rope.
“Oh? What have we here?”

Peter lunges and snatches the dangling onesie, shoving it into the open closet before he turns back to Tony. Christ, the kid is really bad at lying. He’s a perfect match for that ‘act unnaturally natural’ trope.

“Uh, that’s a-”

Tony nods and tilts his head, looking down at the kid. He’s not going to go for the intimidation tactics, not going play the big bad alpha looming over a teenage omega. That’s not how it’s going to go down. Tony slides his hands into his pockets.

“So you’re the spider-ling. Crime-fighting spider. You’re Spider-Boy?”

Peter sighs, folding his arms. He looks down and mumbles, “S-Spider-Man.”

Tony’s mouth quirks up into a smirk.

“It's not a onesie,” Peter protests. Tony slides around the omega and picks up the suit. He gives Peter a look. “I don't believe this. I was actually having a real good day today you know, Mr. Stark. Didn't miss my train, this perfectly good DVD player was just sitting there and… Algebra test. Nailed it!” Peter makes a little punching motion, then sits heavily on the bed. He kicks out his legs and rubs his eyes.

“Who else knows? Anybody?”

“Nobody.”

“Not even your… unusually attractive aunt?”

“No. No, no. No, no. If she knew, she would freak out. And when she freaks out, I freak out. There’s a lot of freaking out.”

Tony drapes the onesie over his arm and pulls out his little sample of webbing.

“You know what I think is really cool? This webbing. That tensile strength is off the charts.” He tosses it towards Peter, and lightning fast, the kid’s hand strikes up to catch the vial. “Who manufactured that?”

“I did.” Peter tosses the vial into his hamper.

“Climbing the walls, how you doing that? Cohesive gloves?”

“It's a long story. I was uh…”

Tony grabs the goggle. What good are goggles if they restrict vision. He holds them up to his eyes.

“Lordy! Can you even see in these?”

Peter reaches out and yanks the outfit from Tony’s grasp. He turns the fabric over in his hands, glaring down at it. “Yes. Yes, I can! I can. I can-I can see in those. Okay? It's just that… when whatever happened, happened… it's like my senses have been dialled to 11. There's way too much input, so… they just kinda help me focus.”
Tony nods along. Okay, so they’ll need to check his vision. Reflexes, muscle capacity, respiration. There’s gotta be something special about his lungs to go swinging around at heights like that.

“You're in dire need of an upgrade. Systemic, top to bottom. 100-point restoration. That's why I'm here.” Peter looks sharply up at Tony, suspicion evident in his big eyes. “Look. Why you doing this? I gotta know. What's your MO? What gets you outta that twin bed in the morning?”

Tony shifts his weight from foot to foot. Because here’s the kicker. Tony isn’t going to support someone on a power kick. He’s not going to stick his neck out for someone whose reasons he doesn’t agree with.

“But-” Peter lets the onesie rest in his lap. Instead, he picks at a hangnail, not meeting Tony’s eyes. “Because I’ve been me my whole life, and I've had these powers for 6 months.”

“Mm-Hm.”

“I read books, I build computers… And- And yeah.” Peter looks up earnestly. “I would love to play football. But I couldn't then so I shouldn't now.”

Tony nods along. “Sure, because you're different.”

“Exactly. But I can't tell anybody that, so I'm not. When you can do the things that I can, but you don't- and then the bad things happen- they happen because of you.”

Tony knows the kid isn’t really talking about Tony. He knows Peter doesn’t mean him. But he-Fuck. Alright. Yeah, he gets it. Turning a blind eye on problems you don’t want to deal with, even when you can solve them- not great. Not a great feeling.

“So you wanna look out for the little guy. You wanna do your part? Make the world a better place, all that, right?”

Peter nods emphatically. “Yeah. Yeah just looking out… for the little guy. That's-That's what it is.”

Tony steps over to Peter and looks down at his stretched-out leg. He gestures. “I'm gonna sit here, so you move the leg.”

Peter startles, but moves. Tony sits down on the cleared space. He rests his hands on his knees and looks at Peter.

“You’re an idiot,” is how he begins. “But the good kind of idiot. You’re the hero kind of idiot, right? So here’s what’s going to happen. Or, here’s what I want to happen. I’ll give you my personal email, alright? We set up a time for you to come by the tower. I take your measurements, we run some physical tests, and I make you a suit. Because you’re going to get hurt running around in your pajamas. That’s not okay.” The omega’s mouth gapes in shock. “You’re going to be an idiot whether or not I help you. This way, with proper equipment and training, being an idiot gets to be a little less dangerous. One stipulation. Okay, a lot of stipulations. The main one for now is you tell your hot aunt.”

“Mr. Stark, no-” Peter protests.

“Ah ah ah! No, I’m talking. You tell your Aunt May, because you’re what, sixteen?”

“Fifteen.”

“You’re fifteen, and vigilante bullshit is dangerous. It’s not going to happen, let me tell you right
now, but imagine if you die, alright? You’re saving a little girl from a bad man and the bad man has a
gun and shoots you. Or you don’t even die. You’re hurt and need to go to the hospital. And May
comes for you. She’s scared, she’s hurt, and she doesn’t know why you lied to her. She’s hurting
because she never got the chance to support you.”

Peter is absolutely silent, looking down at his hands again.

“That’s not the kind of surprise she’s going to like. So you have two months to tell your aunt what’s
going on. You do that, and we move on from there. Kapish? Let’s be clear that I’m not blackmailing
you here. Okay? If you wanna keep doing what you’re doing, I don’t think I can stop you. And I
won’t try, unless your life’s in danger. But I want to train you, and equip you, and put something
more protective than flannel in your hands. And for that to happen, you’re going to tell Aunt Hottie.”

“Can- can- can you not call her ‘Aunt Hottie’? Please?”

Tony grins.

“I make no promises, but I will try. You got a phone?”

Peter sighs and pulls out a Stark-phone. Tony plugs in his contact information, name, phone, and
email. He takes a selfie for the contact photo, much to Peter’s incredulity, before passing the phone
back.

“So we’re good?”

Tony holds out a hand. Is it appropriate to handshake with the teenager you’re planning on
equipping with a murder-suit? Hugs are definitely out. Stranger danger and all that. Peter takes the
hand, and Tony delivers one firm shake. There.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re, uh. We’re good. Just- don’t tell May. Let- let me do that, okay?”

“Sure thing, kid. Call me if you need moral support. So what’s the story in the meantime?”

“What? Weren’t- didn’t you-”

“Hey, it’s your secret. You’re in charge of the cover story.”

Peter runs his hands through his hair, frowning deeply.

“Um. You- You have a research and- and- and development department, right? I’m, um-”

A pause stretches thin.

“Job shadowing?” Tony supplies.

“Yeah! Yeah, job shadowing. While you figure out what to do with me.”

“Good idea, squirt.”

They’re way past five minutes now, so Tony thinks maybe it’s time to leave. Tony jumps up to his
feet, rocking onto his heels before settling down flat. He unlocks the door and opens it wide.

“So yeah,” he announces, letting his voice carry out of the room as he hovers in the doorway. “Shoot
me a text or something, and we’ll work out a time. Sound good?”

Peter blinks, then shakes himself into action.
“Oh. Oh! Yeah, of course. Yeah, I’ll text you, Mr. Stark. You can count on me.”

Chapter End Notes

Look, I know MCU Peter was born 2001, but we’re fudging this. It’s sketchy enough that Tony lets Peter go off crimefighting without telling May when he’s like 16. If he was 13? I’m not writing that. He’s 15 here. Still not great, IMO, but I just don’t like the idea of an adult helping a minor do life-threatening things without their non-abusive, non-neglectful guardian’s consent, even in the name of protecting their family via ignorance.

Also, I love love love the scene in Civil War where Tony meets Peter. Enjoy this fucking transcription of the scene XD The chapter was already like 7200 words before adding the Peter scene, so the majority of it is original anyways.

Tony's going to get all the kids. All of them. There's Peter. And Harley. And Bucky's kid. And a pair of others who need a home, that they find later on. I was thinking about this as I drove home from my glamorous job making smoothies for slightly over minimum wage, and I'm wondering if I can give Tony too many kids XD I like Dad Tony.

I googled 'Most Expensive Vodka'. The bottles are amazing. Fuck. If I had a million dollars lying around and actually enjoyed anything stronger than mead, I'd buy Diva just to say that I have a bottle of liquor draped in actual jewels. Did you know there are vodka bottles encrusted with Swarovski Crystals? How excessive and awesome is that?
Peter texts Tony before the alpha’s even out of the building.

-So I can do monday, tuesday, thursday after 4-

Then immediately after:

-sunday any time-

And again:

-sorry for blasting you with messages-

And again:

-but this is real right?- 

Happy opens the car door for Tony, and he slides in.

“Success, Boss?” the forehead of security asks as he gets back behind the wheel.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think it, uh. I think it went well.”

He taps across the keyboard and sends a message of his own.

-Yes the offer is real. Don’t worry about it, squirt. I’m not available this Tuesday or Thursday, but if you swing by any other afternoon, I’ll have the front desk let you up barring Avengers or SI emergencies.-

He has JARVIS filter Peter’s messages out. He’ll read them later- that very evening probably- but he gets the feeling the kid’s going to keep texting and texting and texting. Which isn’t strictly a bad thing! Enthusiasm is great and all. It’s just that Tony didn’t design his phone to double as a vibrator, and he doesn’t want to put it on silent.

Tony spreads out a hologram of his upcoming schedule as Happy drives him home. Pepper has joint access to it, and she somehow bribes JARVIS into locking the events she decides are important so that Tony can’t move them around or schedule anything over them. Those events are stop-sign red. There’s a charity auction in five days that he won’t be able to worm his way out of. Technically he doesn’t need to bring a date, but schmoozing with his fellow ‘I’m too rich for boundaries’ folk is always less harrowing when drunk or with company, and he’s promised to lay off the booze until Sunshine Jr. comes along.

Maybe he can get Bruce to come. It’s not exactly Bruce’s scene, but Bruce is his buddy, his pal. Maybe Steve. It’s been a while since the gossip rags have published anything along the lines of ‘Shocking depravity in Tony Stark’s tower! Has he seduced noble alpha Captain America into his harem?’

Tony might have framed that particular front page and hung it in his workshop. He moves it around every now and then to keep Steve on his toes. The other alpha’s face turns an interesting shade of pink whenever he catches sight of it’s photoshopped, barely-decent image.
So definitely Steve.

He would-okay, so honestly, Tony would prefer to take Bucky. But that would have Bucky’s face splashed over the cover of magazines and heading blogs, and that could be a disaster of epic proportions. Especially if the crowd of people in glitzy outfits unsettles Bucky enough to have him fall back on old habits.

“Hey, Happy?”

“Yeah?”

The beta in the front seat glances at Tony in the rear view mirror.

“How d’you feel about going up with me and boxing?”

“Are we talking physical boxing, or am I being roped into helping you pack boxes?”

“Physical boxing.” He closes the schedule and pockets his phone. “I need a good partner.”

Clint is the only other unenhanced person on the team, and he’s a slippery bastard when they spar. Tony could box with Steve, but the big blonde pulls his punches, afraid of hurting Tony without the suit, and it’s irritating.

“I’d love to, Boss, but I’m not exactly dressed for it.”

“Come on, Happyfeet. I know you keep clean gym clothes in the trunk. Please?

A long, put-upon sigh escapes the beta, but Tony can see his mouth quirk up in a smile.

“Yeah, sure. But we’ve gotta be done by seven. Tonight’s my pack’s bowling night.”

Happy pack is composed of two other betas and an alpha One of the betas, Loraine, is the mother of a baby boy who hasn’t reached the age of presentation yet, sired by Daniela, the pack alpha. Bowling night is an important affair, from what Tony can tell. Whoever wins the monthly event receives some prize that Happy won’t divulge, while the loser is responsible for picking up the tab.

“I wouldn’t dream of cutting into bowling night. Daniela would have my head on a plate. One round, and you can swan off to the misses-es.” All three of them.

Tony grabs Happy’s gym bag when they park, despite the beta’s protests. They take the elevator upstairs, and Tony tosses the bag at Happy when they reach Tony’s floor.

“Go change. I’ll meet you in the gym.”

He sequesters himself in his room and shucks off his own clothes in favor of pulling on a tank top and well-fitting sweatpants. By the time he finds Happy in the gym, JARVIS is in the process of lifting the boxing rings from the floor. The posts slide up from their concealed holes, and a section of the floor rises to elevate the whole ring. Tony and Happy hook the ropes in place while the flooring of the ring folds away to reveal canvas-covered wood. Happy already has their gloves and headgear ready, and Tony eagerly takes his share.

“Do I need to be careful of your arm?” Happy asks.

Tony makes a face.

“No, it’s fine.”
“What would JARVIS tell me if I asked him?”

“I would hypothetically recommend avoiding stressing Sir’s right arm. If I were asked, of course.”

“Right. So contact only. No real force today, Boss. Okay?”

Tony rolls his eyes.

“You’re all such fucking worrywarts. Yeah, sure. Fine. Contact only.”

So much for not pulling punches. Whatever. He gets to spar with a friend, so there’s always that bonus.

Tony picks a playlist to blast through the speakers, and they warm up. Stretches, a little jogging—
Tony’s pleasantly flushed by the time they actually step into the ring.

JARVIS referees their sparring match. Although she says nothing, Tony is 100% certain that
FRIDAY watches curiously as well. It’s going pretty well. It’s fun, and they’re both getting a nice
workout, and his arm doesn’t so much as twinge, and then Bucky walks in.

He’s relaxed and smiling when Tony spares him a glance. In and of itself, Bucky showing up isn’t a
problem. Tony assumes he’s been enjoying his day out on the town with Steve, although the omega
is still wearing his stolen shirt. The issue comes when Happy lands a punch on the side of Tony’s
head.

It isn’t even painful. It’s just a dull thump, and Tony braces and dodges away, ready to keep going.
And then suddenly a furious, dead-eyed omega has Happy by the throat, and the beta is thrown
out of the ring. The music cuts off abruptly.

Bucky vaults over the ropes and stalks towards where Happy is rolling over, trying to push himself
up, and Tony slithers through the ropes and sprints. Even barefoot, Bucky has this walk. A murder-
strut that means nothing good.

“JARVIS where the fuck is Steve!”

“Captain Rogers is on his way.”

Tony pushes himself into Bucky’s space, bodily blocking the pregnant omega from reaching Happy.
Bucky’s face remains blank and harshly empty, but the Tony-shaped roadblock at least has him
pausing. Bucky tenses when Happy tries to stand up, and Tony flaps a hand behind himself,
signalling the beta to stay down.

“Hey there Sunshine. Hey. Look at me, yeah? Deep breaths.”

Bucky’s hand snakes around Tony’s waist, and in a motion too quick for even him to follow the
omega has their positions reversed, placing himself between Happy and Tony. He doesn’t move
closer to the wide-eyed beta, though, so that’s—that’s a good thing. Tony shucks off his boxing
gloves and tentatively strokes his fingers over Bucky’s shoulder, then smooths his palm over to
follow, and he then grips loosely around Bucky’s bicep. The muscle is tight and tense beneath his
hand.

Tony hears Steve slip in, and he’s grateful the blonde has enough sense not to startle Bucky. They
aren’t dealing with the Winter Soldier. At least, not fully. Happy would have been dead within
seconds if that were the case, rather than tossed out onto the floor. But Bucky isn’t talking, and he
isn’t moving, and his eyes won’t leave Happy’s form. Tony tries to slip around Bucky, to put himself
back within the omega’s line of sight, but Bucky honest to god *growls* and pushes Tony back in place.


Happy swallows and moves his hand in a jerky wave.

“Hey there.”

“See? Happy is a friend. Not a threat. Okay? We were sparring, is all.”

Bucky slides to the left, pulling Tony with him, and Tony sees why almost instantly. Steve is walking quietly closer, and Bucky wants to keep both perceived threats firmly within sight. While also using himself as a body-shield. While pregnant.

Fantastic.

“Hey Steve?” Tony calls softly. “Why don’t you take Happy and go somewhere else.”

“Tony, I don’t—”

“Abupup! No talkback. You do what I say.”

Tony, Steve growls, and Bucky tenses again, baring his teeth.

Tony wraps his fingers around the back of Bucky’s neck, scruffing the omega. Even with the alpha’s above-average physical fitness, Tony’s strength compared to Bucky’s is about the same as a piece of balsa wood compared to oak. Bucky could rip away in a heartbeat and snap Tony’s wrist for good measure, but Tony squeezes the tense flesh anyways. It’s almost universally a soothing gesture for omegas- or at least, it’s supposed to be. Clint says being scruffed just makes him sleepy, and Bucky doesn’t really respond at all other than to shift onto the balls of his feet, like a snake coiled to strike.

“Get. Happy. Out,” Tony hisses. The *last* thing they need is an alpha showdown. He tries to draw Bucky around, to take the omega’s unwavering attention and shift it to himself, but the supersoldier resists and twists around in Tony’s hands to follow Steve and Happy with his eyes as the blonde alpha helps Tony’s friend out the door. “Lockdown level two on the gym, Jay.”

The door seals behind Steve. Bucky doesn’t relax in the slightest. In fact, all he does is reach around to pull the gun from his back-holster, and fuck. They’re so goddamn lucky the omega didn’t just shoot Happy. He remembers those paper targets in the shooting range. Bucky wouldn’t have missed.

The handgun is cocked, and Bucky twists, braces his metal hand on Tony’s shoulder, pushes him down to his knees. For just a brief moment, Tony’s heart freezes, and the grainy image of a car crash flits before his eyes, and he wonders if he’s just made a *terrible* mistake, but then Bucky is stalking away, pacing the perimeter of the large room, running- oh.

Oh. Running a security check.

Why? Tony isn’t sure.

He rises back up to his feet, and Bucky snaps something in monotone russian. Tony’s itching to ask JARVIS for a translation, but he doesn’t want to risk adding another variable to this unstable equation. They’ve graduated from reflexively assaulting Tony to reflexively protecting him, but the situation still isn’t ideal.

Tony approaches Bucky, and Bucky barks what Tony assumes to be orders at him again. When
Tony doesn’t react, Bucky growls in irritation and closes the distance between them. His fingers wrap up in Tony’s shirt, and he hauls the alpha back to the center of the room. Tony lets himself be manhandled, and he activates his implants to summon a suit.

Only a few minutes later the freight elevator opens. Typically it’s meant to unload and move equipment, but it works as a non-emergency transport of Tony’s armor as well. JARVIS maneuvers the suit out, while Bucky watches mistrustfully.

It’s Bucky’s first real interaction with Tony’s armor, and Tony isn’t even really inside it. Which sucks, because Tony’s proud of his creation, and he really wishes the introduction didn’t have to be like this.

“Alright Sunshine. Meet my alter-ego.”

Tony takes Bucky’s hand in his own. The flesh-and-blood fingers tighten mechanically around Tony’s as the alpha guides Bucky to where JARVIS has set the armor at rest. Tony lets go of Bucky to press his fingers against the manual release, and the faceplate snaps up to reveal the padded interior.

“That’s usually me in there, but JARVIS can take over if he needs to.”

FRIDAY could probably do the same with a little guidance.

“I’ve gone up against aliens and monsters and monstrous people and experiments-gone-wrong and so much other shit in armor like this. So maybe- maybe give me the gun, sweetpea. Okay? We’ll be safe. I promise. Just—” He brushes his fingers against the cool metal of the weapon in Bucky’s hand. “Let’s put the safety on and go huddle up in your nest. Yeah?”

It takes a good hour and a half for Tony to talk Bucky into handing over the gun. It’s another fifteen minutes to cajole the omega into the freight elevator. Almost as soon as the doors close, Bucky crowds Tony against the wall, bracketing him between his elbows. Tony tries to squirm out of his confinement, but metal fingers wrap around the reactor casing through Tony’s tank top, and the alpha freezes. He can’t really hear anything above the roaring in his ears, and breathing is bizarrely difficult, but all Bucky does is hold him in place. Tony’s throat works as he tries to swallow around the lump in his throat, and he raises a hand to brush Bucky’s touch away. Bucky’s grip tightens in response, and Tony reflexively bares his teeth, a growl ripping from his throat as he digs his own fingers into the unyielding metal of Bucky’s wrist.

Rather than respond with violence- thank fuck for that mercy- Bucky tilts his head like some dead-eyed raptor and pushes. Just slightly, but Tony decides he’s had enough.

He snaps his other hand up to push at Bucky’s elbow and twists the metal arm downward. Bucky follows through, letting Tony break his grip, and he slithers away and faces Tony again, rocking up onto the balls of his feet almost- almost something. Tony isn’t really in a great place to get a read on the situation.

“How about you don’t do that again, huh? We ask before touching people’s implants. You don’t get a free pass just because your brain’s all scrambled.” Tony leans back against the wall again, rubbing his thumb and forefinger against his closed eyes. “You’re lucky I like you.”

Anyone else, save for Pepper and Rhodey, would probably have been smacked with a toned-down repulsor (for non-hostiles) or a full blast from the suit standing sentinel in the corner.

The elevator opens into the back hall of the penthouse, and Tony strides out. He needs a drink. Fuck
that-he needs several.

But instead he rummages through the fridge and pours himself a glass of lemonade.

Bucky tags along behind him, moving as fluidly as a snow leopard, and Tony hears the thud of the armor joining them. The gun is tucked away inside the armor, out of reach, but Tony is under absolutely no illusions as to his safety. Bucky seems fairly-stable? More or less? Beyond that heart-stopping moment in the gym and being a brat about the reactor, Bucky seems more or less content to fixate on Tony. And his safety apparently.

Tony sits down at the breakfast bar, but Bucky grabs the collar of his shirt and drags him off, down the hall. Tony manages to hang onto his lemonade, and Bucky pushes him into his room.

The guest bedroom-no longer really ‘guest room’ but ‘Bucky’s room’ instead-is just as dark and warm as ever. One of the AIs lifts the lights to a low glow, just enough that Tony can see as Bucky maneuvers them through the maze of displaced furniture to the nest piled up in the corner. The blankets and sheets are changed every few days, as per the terms Tony’s managed to negotiate for, but what has Tony raising an eyebrow as Bucky situates them both in the nest is evidence of theft.

“How many of these did you take?” Tony asks, amused as he lifts the shirt—this one a tailored blue button-down—from the tangle of nesting material. It’s Tony’s, one he remembers wearing a few days ago, and he can still smell faint traces of his favored cologne on the material.

Bucky reaches out and takes the fabric back, holding it close to his chest. They’re somewhere between ‘Winter Soldier Out for Blood’ and ‘Bucky Barnes needs a Cuddle. Tony isn’t sure where exactly on that spectrum they currently are. Tony himself is somewhere between ‘Tony Has This Under Control’ and ‘Tony Stark Needs an Adult’.

“I spend a small fortune on nesting material, and you pick my dirty laundry. Awesome. Same rules go for this stuff, okay? It gets washed twice a week. And you leave my socks and underwear alone. That’s off-limits.”

He wishes he had his phone. He’s not a fan of feeling disconnected, and he wants to know how Happy’s holding up.

Maybe he should throw more effort into those neural implants. Or the contact-HUD. Or both. Both is good.

Tony assumes JARVIS is keeping the rest of the pack updated, so he grabs one of the weighted blankets and scoots over towards Bucky, hauling the heavy blanket with him. He settles himself right alongside the omega and wraps them up together in the blanket.

It’s a waiting game from there. The whole ‘wrapped up in a blanket’ thing is more for Tony’s benefit than Bucky’s. According to past experience, it doesn’t really affect how long it takes Bucky to slip back out of Soldier Mode. But Tony likes the heavy feel of the weighted blanket, and Bucky apparently wants to keep Tony in his nest.

Progress. Tony thinks that’s progress. Considering how adamant Bucky had been that Tony go nowhere near the nest at first.

Tony’s starting to nod off, lulled by the warmth of the room and the honeysuckle-sweetness of Bucky next to him. His head is resting against Bucky’s shoulder, his eyes closed, when the omega fidgets. The soft clink of metal on metal rouses Tony to full awareness, though he keeps his cheek against Bucky’s flesh shoulder.
“Whatcha got there?” Tony murmurs. Bucky’s twisting something around in his hands beneath the blanket.

“Knife,” Bucky rasps back, and okay. Yeah. Tony’s up. He’s definitely up.

He lifts up the blankets, and sure enough, Bucky’s twirling a sleek black throwing knife between his hands. It’s one of the trick-blades Tony’s been toying with for Clint, fiddling with the design and not quite happy with it yet. The other omega prefers bows in the field, but he’s a slut for projectiles. There’s an entire wall in Clint and Natasha’s apartment dedicated for destruction via dart, throwing knife, and any of the other fiddly bits the mated pair have collected over the years. Clint likes to draw bulls-eyes and pin up pictures of people on his shit-list. Natasha likes to throw things to make designs.

There’s a reason no one should play darts with them.

But more to the point.

“What do you have that? How do you have that?”

Last Tony checked it had been sealed away in a box, hidden out of Clint’s reach with the rest of the prototype designs. This one has a hilt that glows when thrown. It leaves an awesome afterburn trail through a dark room, but he’s decided against offering that one to Clint regardless. No need to encourage risky behavior.

“Found it.”

“Did you take the whole box or just that one?”

Tony hears Bucky’s throat click as he swallows.

“Jus’ one.”

They’re talking about a knife like it’s a stolen cookie or something. Great. Awesome.

“Well, okay. I don’t like that one. Lemme know if you want a better one.”

Or six. Tony can make multiple. He drops his head back onto Bucky’s shoulder, and the omega tenses. No violence seems imminent, so Tony doesn’t see the problem.

He can feel JARVIS judging him, though. So fucking sue him.

Tony emerges from the dark, warm room shortly after midnight, and it’s just to find food. And coffee. He feels Bucky’s eyes on his back on the way out, but he’d wrapped Bucky up in the weighted blanket and promised to return with dinner and snacks. The moment the door shuts behind him, JARVIS pipes up.

“Sir, while rest is to be encouraged, might I express my displeasure in your choice of location?”

“Why?”

Tony knows why, but honestly.

“Sergeant Barnes’s recent behavior towards Mr. Hogan indicate that your lack of caution may be inadvisable.”

“Relax, Jay. Nothing happened. ‘Sides. You had full control of the armor. I trust you.”
“Your trust is apparent.”

JARVIS sounds sour.

“Don’t be jealous. Daddy loves you too.”

The slip of the tongue and all it implies is lost upon Tony, his attention focused largely on operating the coffee machine. Someone has brought his things up from the gym, so Tony takes hold of his phone and swipes through the messages while the aroma of dark coffee perfumes the air.

-I’m fine. No need to send the cavalry,- he types into the group message the pack has. -Crisis averted.-

Almost immediately Clint replies, -You’re a fucking idiot.-

Which, okay, yeah. Really feeling the love.

Bruce seems to agree with the sentiment, though his words are decidedly more mild. Steve and Natasha are suspiciously silent. Happy is probably asleep when Tony checks on him, so the text message goes unanswered, but the night-owl of Happy’s pack- Moira- assures Tony that while Happy seemed shaken, he’s being taken care of and is otherwise unharmed.

Tony returns to Bucky’s nest juggling two mugs and several tupperwares of cold leftovers. The hot chocolate he passes off to Bucky, while he keeps the coffee for himself. The food it laid out at the edge of the nest. Bucky eats silently, efficiently, until all the glass containers are empty. It’s tempting to stay, to curl up in Bucky’s nest with him and sleep, but there are things that need doing. Like procuring a phone for Bucky. And figuring out which materials might be best for the Spiderling’s suit. Important things.

So he retrieves the gun from the armor, though there’s a moment where he has to stare down the JARVIS-controlled suit to get what he wants. Tony tries to pass it off to Bucky, though the omega just looks between it and the alpha above him with tight-lipped incredulity. He settles for laying it down on the pillows- safety on, of course. He gets ready to leave, but- Okay, there’s something about the way Bucky’s watching him- that dull, tired look in his eyes-

“I’m, uh. I’m heading down to the lab. You’re welcome to join me.”

And that’s how he ends up with a pregnant supersoldier conked out on his couch, weighted blanket tucked firmly around him. Tony wears wireless headphones to blare music rather than shaking the whole lab with the noise, and his gaze keeps slipping back to Bucky again and again and again. The omega’s still wearing his band shirt, and metal fingers are tangled in his long brown hair while he sleeps, mouth slightly open. Something warm and sparkling heats beneath Tony’s ribs.

He himself falls asleep hunched over a workbench near dawn, and by the time noon rolls around and Tony rouses himself, Bucky is gone.

Tony peels away the printed schematic that’s stuck to his cheek, and he checks the time. Okay. So. He’ll need to shower, since he’s still coated in old sweat from boxing. Gross. Shower, then eating, then check on the pack. Well, check on them in person. He checks on them via text and notification first thing. Bucky is sharing some quality time with Steve, according to the other alpha. That’s good. That’s very good.

It’s less good when Tony wanders into his kitchen, fresh from the shower, to find Steve and Natasha- of course it’s them- hanging out, eating his food, lying in wait.
“Those are mine,” he grumbles when he sees the open carton of blackberries. Natasha pops another plump berry into her mouth and smiles sweetly around the mouthful. She swallows.

“You can buy more.”

She pushes the carton towards him though, and Tony reaches in to take a berry of his own. The juice stains the tips of his fingers purple. He regards the pair of them suspiciously.

“So what’s up?”

Steve puts on his best ‘Captain America is Concerned’ face. Tony grimaces.

“We’re just a little worried. Bucky let me know you let your guard down last night.”

“And?”

Natasha tucks a curl of scarlet hair behind her ear.

“And we want to ensure you know just how dangerous it is to sleep on the Winter Soldier’s shoulder.”

Of all the responses they might have expected, Tony bracing a hand on the countertop and laughing—laughing—obviously isn’t something they considered. He presses a hand against the reactor and looks up at his teammates with crinkled, mirthful eyes.

“Bucky tattled on me? Are you serious?”

“Tony, this is a real concern.”

“The concerning thing is that one of my friends was tossed across a room. I’m taking that very seriously. Okay? Okay. I wasn’t the one in danger, so why are you staging an intervention?”

The smile is still firmly Tony’s face, but he’s not exactly taking things lightly. He just doesn’t see the big deal with his own actions. Bucky was threatening Happy, but seemed prepared to protect Tony. Ergo, Tony was not in danger.

They’re motivated by fear, mainly. Which, okay. Yeah. He understands. Tony’s getting on up there in years. Forty five isn’t exactly old, but he’s had a rough life. A liver that’s been abused. A magnet in his chest. Remnants of palladium poisoning. Clint is only five years younger, but he’s probably set to live several decades longer. Tony’s arguably the most fragile of the bunch, for all that he tosses himself bodily into harm’s way.

So yeah. They’re worried. He gets that. He can hold his own in hand-to-hand combat, but he’s only human. Bucky’s a little more than that.

“Trust me. Okay? JARVIS was on standby, and I had a suit within ten feet of me. He didn’t stab me or shoot me or otherwise assault me. I’m fine. Happy’s pack says he’s alright. The situation wasn’t great, and obviously we’re all going to try and prevent another one and create contingency plans just in case, but just—”

He isn’t sure where he’s going with that. Telling Nat and Steve not to worry is sort of useless. And yeah, there are things to worry about. But Tony doesn’t want to treat Bucky like some dangerous animal.

It takes a little more coaxing, but Tony manages to convince both Steve and Natasha— the two
pragmatists of the pack- that sleeping on Bucky’s shoulder is within the agreed upon ‘Acceptable Level of Risk’ they’ve actually had negotiations about.

In other news, Tony makes the executive decision not to place Happy and Bucky in a room together until the both of them feel comfortable with each other again. In other other news, Bucky is hiding and doesn’t want to be found.

FRIDAY is the one who gives Tony updates. That Bucky is within the tower. That Bucky is unharmed. That Bucky took the weighted blanket with him. She won’t tell Tony precisely where the omega is hiding, and Tony doesn’t ask JARVIS. Bucky will show up eventually.

That knowledge doesn’t stop him from worrying. He’s distracted, and antsy, and fuck. He’s imprinted hard. The kid isn’t his, and Bucky isn’t his mate, but every fiber of his being is pushing and pulling at him to find the omega and situate him somewhere warm and safe, as if Bucky were a delicate orchid rather than a crown of thorns.

Clint, the bastard, laughs at Tony.

“You better not be a bitch in front of Peter,” Tony growls, aggressively slamming the top slice of bread back onto his sandwich. The tomatoes slipped out of place and needed repositioning.

“Who’s Peter?” Clint asks, still grinning like a loon. The pack is all gathered, hanging out on the balcony. FRIDAY has relayed an invitation to Bucky, wherever he is, but so far it’s just the Avengers.

That draws Tony up short. Oh. Huh. Yeah, he had intended to tell everyone about Peter the day before, but, uh. Yeah. Things happened. He pulls out his phone and flicks out the projection of Spider-Man as seen by cell-phones and security cameras.

“Peter’s my new intern. He’s a teenager who needs someone to make sure he doesn’t die being an idiot,” Tony explains.

“You’re adopting another kid?” Bruce asks, lips quirked up slightly. He’s playing chess with Natasha at the moment. It’s usually entertaining to watch, but Tony is a little distracted.

“Bucky’s pup isn’t even born yet. No adoptions have taken place,” Tony protests. Natasha glances up from the board to her shorter alpha.

“Harley,” she points out.

“I didn’t adopt him.”

Steve leans back against the railing and crosses his arms.

“You’re listed as his secondary emergency contact on his school forms,” the blonde points out. Tony blusters, but Steve talks right over him. “And he’s staying here for the summer. You might as well have informal joint custody.”

The pack hasn’t exactly met Harley in person yet, but they’ve definitely heard an earful. When Tony pack-bonds, he bonds hard and fast, and it’s led to some shitty situations in his lifetime. What he’s got going on now, though? It’s good. It’s so, so good.

There’s a little more merciless ribbing, which Tony bears with sullen grace, and then everything is interrupted by a call to assemble. Natasha swiftly places Bruce in checkmate, leaving the other beta staring in disbelief at the board, and then they’re off.
“JARVIS, let Bucky know about safe-room protocols. And, uh.” The armor folds around Tony, and he kicks off the balcony. “If he tries to leave, maybe try to dissuade him.”

It isn’t likely that Bucky will actually try to go anywhere. He hasn’t wanted to leave the tower without company since coming to stay, but this is the first full-team call-out since then as well. Tony considers JARVIS enough to contain Bucky if there’s a Winter Soldier episode, and after more than one attack on the tower and JARVIS’s role in preventing catastrophe, the rest of the team believes so as well. But having him out on the street, alone, when it’s just been intimately proven that Bucky can and will attack a civilian, is not a recipe for success. They’ll talk to Bucky later, negotiate a buddy system, figure out how to keep him and everyone else safe without essentially jailing him, but now is not the best time, and Bucky is still hiding.

There’s a crisis in Newark, New Jersey— an overzealous grad student created some sort of mutant rat. Like, a really, really big rat. Clydesdale-sized rats. Plural. They, uh. They don’t breed persay, but they clone themselves, split into two, into four, into eight. The grad student is a blubbering mess, terrified and ashamed, and Bruce tries to talk him into calmness while Tony rounds up tranquilizers from as many zoos and animal hospitals as he can reach. The rest of the team focuses on containment. The aim is to tranquae them, contain them, and let animal specialists euthanize them if no one can figure out how to stop the multiplication.

A few hours into rounding up the exponentially-multiplying giant sabertooth rats, a guy with metal wings arrives at the scene. Tony recognizes him from the video coverage of the Washington mess, and ties him into their coms immediately.

Later, when the rats are all out cold and waiting to be transported to a secure facility, Tony learns the guy’s name is Sam. Or Falcon, as he introduced himself in the field. It’s late, and everyone’s tired, and so Tony offers to let Sam stay the night in the Tower, and have him driven back home in the morning, if he doesn’t much feel like flying. Sam takes him up on the offer, and once he’s nice and situated in a guest room on the common floor, Tony heads back to his own space. There’s going to be a team meal- pizza. Lots and lots of pizza, with a mountain of vegan pizza for Bucky- but Tony wants to see his- the omega, see that he’s doing alright.

Bucky swoops in on him the moment the elevator door opens to his floor. Tony isn’t exactly pinned. Bucky’s left him plenty of space to wriggle away, but the metal arm is braced on the wall by Tony’s head, and Bucky’s eyes are searching Tony’s face, mouth tight as he looks for something.

“You should be scared’a me,” he mutters, before he whirls and stalks away. Tony blinks, and pushes off the wall.

“I risk my neck running around after ROUS’s, and this is the welcome I get?” Tony teases, but Bucky’s isn’t amused. Maybe he just doesn’t know what an ROUS is.

“I coulda hurt your friend!”

Bucky’s facing Tony again, eyes wild. Tony’s only human. He’s tired, and sore, and god fucking dammit he just wants to shower and eat and sleep. But Bucky needs him, apparently, so Tony pulls up his big boy pants and does what needs doing, because he’d rather be shot than fail his family.

“You scared him, alright? He’s shaken, and a little bruised, but he’s fine. JARVIS told you that, right?”

“FRIDAY did.” Bucky mumbles.

“There, see? We know better now. We’ll warn you if there’s sparring going on in the gym.”
And maybe they’ll do some controlled introductions, acclimatize Bucky to everyday things that seem to trigger him. It’d be so fucking nice to have SHIELD to go to, to say, hey! We need help deprogramming the Winter Soldier, but uh, SHIELD was HYDRA, and that’s a no-go.

Tony creeps closer, and Bucky holds his ground. When Tony’s only a few inches way, he stops, waits a moment, and then gingerly wraps his fingers around the metal wrist. Bucky doesn’t resist as Tony brings the hand up, guides Bucky into gripping the back of the alpha’s neck, and then Tony mirrors the gesture, brings their foreheads together.

“I trust you, Sunshine. Yeah? Okay? Beyond that, we’ll keep you safe, and we’ll make sure the people around you stay safe. You’re living with Earth’s Mightiest Heroes, according to some.”

Bucky doesn’t say a word, just squeezes gently against the nape of Tony’s neck. “We ordered pizza, alright? We got some vegan crap for you too. Come join us? I mean, I should shower first, but after that? Come eat with us. Please?”

Their foreheads still brushing together, Bucky nods tightly.

It’s a bandaid over a gunshot wound, a piece of scotch tape holding up a falling wall, but it’s good enough for now.

For now.

Chapter End Notes

So! Organic Chemistry starts tomorrow. Hooray... I really need to pass this time to stay on track for graduation, so updates will definitely not be regular. Sorry about that!

So Sam is here! Hooray! Tony's sort of glossing over Sam for the moment, since he doesn't know Sam and isn't really interested in knowing him yet, but I'm excited to write the next chapter. Tony's going to find Sam and lot more interesting afterwards XD

Peter is an awkward texter. So! The running tally of Tony's kids is Harley, Peter, and Bucky's unborn pup. Three kids so far. Three more to go. And maybe more after that.

Also here I mention transgender people. It’s a lot more complicated in this universe than in ours, because you’ve got genders and then secondary genders. Essentially, people are designated male, female, or hermaphrodite at birth. Male and female people are people with one specific set of genitals, and hermaphroditic people have both sets (I've sort of been waftling back and forth on whether to use intersex or hermaphrodite, but since I dont want to do any injustice to the real identity of intersex, I'm going for the biology term rather than the social one). Hermaphroditic people are either going to present as a female alpha or a male omega when they reach about 5 or 6 years old, which is when everyone’s secondary gender presents through a stabilization of scent (no heats or ruts for the kiddies, please and thank you).

Transgender people in this universe tend not to be trans in terms of their A/B/O genders, but mainly trans in terms of whether they’re called man, woman, nonbinary, or any of the other specific terms. There are people who are trans-omega or trans-alpha or trans-beta, and they, like primary-gender trans folk, may pursue medical or legal transition, but they’re a much smaller fraction of the population than people who are trans regarding their primary gender.

In terms of who’s capable of being pregnant, male and female omegas can be pregnant.
Female betas can be pregnant. Female alphas can be pregnant with some intense medical intervention and fertility treatments (eggs for whatever reason don’t attach to the uterine lining without help, and fertility cycles tend to be very spaced out and difficult to predict), but it’s difficult and risky for them to carry to term. In terms of who’s able to get others pregnant—male and female alphas can both be fathers. Male betas can be fathers. Male omegas can’t be fathers without medical intervention (sperm count is way, way too low, and sperm isn’t very mobile). So for a while it was thought that female alphas just couldn’t get pregnant and male omegas couldn’t sire children, but modern medicine proved it’s possible, just extremely difficult.

Bucky Barnes and the Winter Soldier aren’t different people in this fic. The Winter Soldier is sort of an altered mindstate rather than a separate personality. So rather having two programs in one body, Bucky is the sole program, with a Winter Soldier backup program which can be shoved to the forefront by perceived threats or the trigger words. But they don’t know about the trigger words yet. Not sure if they’ll even be touched upon in this particular fic. Maybe in the sequel.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

As a warning: It's very very early in the morning after a shitty shift at work, and I'm posting this chapter on an impulse, so, uh, it might not be completely coherent? If it makes no sense it'll definitely be fixed Wednesday after my O-Chem final.

Also! I've got 43 comments in my inbox waiting to be read and responded to, and I'm gonna get on that as soon as I can! I try to answer almost all of them if there's something to reply to, so I'm not ignoring you, and your comments probably didn't get lost!

Bucky follows Tony into his bedroom, though he hangs back, doesn’t follow Tony into the bathroom. He’s still standing rigidly by the foot of the bed when Tony comes out clean and dressed. Tony broadly choreographs his motions as he reaches out to comb his fingers through Bucky’s hair, nails scratching into the scalp. Bucky leans into Tony’s touch.

“Food, and then you can go back to the dark and brooding act. Sound good, Batman?” Bucky’s head nods in his hand, and Tony tacks on, “Any time you wanna tap out, you go right ahead.”

They arrive to find the team plus Sam spread out around the living area, mostly ignoring the actual dining table custom-made and reinforced to handle exuberant super-strength. Instead, Sam and Steve are each holding a plate, both leaning beside each other against a wall. Clint and Natasha are sharing from a single plate, while Bruce puts himself somewhat out of the action by sitting cross-legged on the couch. Tony hands Bucky a stack of boxes of his fancy-schmancy vegan-cheese pizza loaded with chicken and bacon (Tony loves the irony), and claims a box of supreme for himself. Tony sits at the breakfast bar like the civilized human being he is, and so it begins.

Dinner is loud. Clint makes Princess Bride references while Tony eggs him along, and before the night is through they’re all crowded together, watching Buttercup’s epic journey. Tony’s tucked himself under Bucky’s arm, and he absentely strokes Bucky’s hand while providing a running commentary of the movie. The movie ends, and Natasha hauls her mate away to their floor, while Bruce yawns and announces he’s going to bed as well. Steve volunteers to make sure Sam has everything he needs for the night, and that leaves Tony and Bucky. They part ways at Bucky’s door.

“Thanks for joining us, sweetpea,” Tony makes sure to tell him. “Post-mission pack-bonding is really important to us.”

Bucky doesn’t really say anything back. Just stares at Tony, lets his eyes trail down to Tony’s mouth, then back up to the alpha’s eyes. A faint smile quirks at the omega’s lips.

“G’night, Tony,” Bucky rasps, and then the door closes.

Tony sleeps alright, though morning comes with him shooting straight out of bed, heart pounding and the taste of phantom blood in his mouth. He takes deep, shaky breaths, running trembling hands through his hair. Okay. Alright.

“JARVIS, status report on all Avengers,” he croaks.
Bruce- dead. Steve- dead. Nat- dead, her body shielding Clint, who is also- also- also dead. Buck- Bucky. Bucky with an infant in his arms, the both of them pale and stiff. Scarlet drip drip dripping.

Fuck.

“All packmates are within the Tower, and none display signs of distress. Agents Barton and Romanov are sleeping soundly. Dr. Banner has begun his morning yoga routine. Captain Rogers is awake, but has not yet left his room.”

“Bucky?”

“Sergeant Barnes is sleeping.”

Tony nods, swallows. Okay. Okay, he’s fine. They’re fine. Everyone is fine.

Dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt, Tony takes the elevator down to Steve’s floor. It’s- easier, sometimes. Somehow. It’s easier to go to the other alpha when he’s ripped from sleep by a nightmare. Less of the war that comes from pitting the urge to protect and provide against the need for- for comfort.

So Tony goes down to Steve’s floor. It’s immediately below Tony’s penthouse. Just like all the others, it was first decorated with Steve’s own interests and tastes in mind. Steve has expanded on the original design since then, adding his own murals and personal touches, but Tony likes to think he got the basic concept alright.

When the elevator opens silently, Tony hears someone rattling around in the kitchen, so he doesn’t even think. Just gravitates towards the sound.


He’s confronted with Sam. Or more specifically, Sam’s naked chest. And legs. Really just Sam in a pair of briefs. The beta blinks at Tony owlishly, a splotchy blush spreading up his neck, and hang on, are those- those are fucking hickies on his shoulder.

“Am I interrupting something?”

“Uh, no. No, uh- Steve’s in the- he’s in the shower. I’m making breakfast,” Sam explains, holding up a box of cereal.

There’s a strange sort of delight taking hold of Tony. The empty, gnawing despair of the nightmare still sits curled behind the reactor, but Tony isn’t exactly unfamiliar with pretending it’s not there, and this is far more interesting. Suddenly Sam is no longer ‘that guy from DC using the prototype Stark tech’. He’s ‘Sam the SO of Steve Rogers’.

“A shower before his morning run? How about that.”

Tony leans up against the wall, crossing his arms. He’s not trying to make Sam uncomfortable, but this is too good an opportunity to miss. Steve’s ‘not-a-date’? In his tower?

Fuck, he wishes he’d known that last night!

“Why don’t you go put on some pants and have breakfast upstairs. I make a mean cinnamon bun.”

“I don’t know; I should probably…”

“Aww, c’mon Sam! JARVIS’ll let Steve know where you went. He can come have an omelet too.”
Which is how Tony comes to have a distinctly unnerved-looking Sam Wilson hanging out in his kitchen while a sleep-mussed Bucky keeps the beta pinned with a manufactured blank stare, the kind he fixes on Clint sometimes when he wants to freak the other omega out. Tony’s crisping up some bacon while the hashbrowns fry and the cinnamon buns (Tony admits it. He didn’t do much to make them other than take the pre-rolled dough out of its packaging and stick them in the oven) bake. For good measure, he’d sent Bucky to retrieve supplies from the common floor as well once the omega shuffled out of his room, since an invitation has been extended to all members of the pack as well.

“So how long has that been going on?” Tony asks, smirking as he gestures with a fork towards Sam. The beta rubs the back of his neck, over an honest-to-god bite mark—yeah, Tony noticed that real quick. It isn’t placed right to be a bonding mark, but still. A bite!-and leans back in his chair. The initial embarrassment of being caught nearly naked has faded somewhat, leaving Sam a delightful sort of snappy wit.

“A few months. I was jogging in DC and he lapped me like an asshole. Twelve times. Dick had the gall to mock me. On your left,” Sam mimics, but there’s something warm and fond in his words. Despite the language, it doesn’t sound like anything but affection. “We’ve been meeting in Philly.”

Tony flips a hashbrown, humming to himself. Bucky pushes off the wall he’s been leaning on, and Sam watches him warily as the omega prowls towards Tony. He’s definitely giving off a ‘DANGER DANGER’ vibe, but it’s different from an actual episode. Tony hides a grin. Bucky’s being territorial. About Steve.

Bucky situates himself in Tony’s space and uses his metal hand to pluck a crackling piece of bacon from the pan.

“Aww, c’mon Bucky!” Tony moans in dismay. “I’m gonna be cleaning grease from the joints for hours!”

Bucky’s only response is to blow on the bacon until the fat stops popping, and crunch down. Tony transfers the surviving bacon to a paper-lined bowl, and starts on another batch. With the new raw meat heating up in the pans, Tony washes his hands and pulls the cinnamon buns out of the oven. He crowds them all on the stone bartop in front of Sam, and pushes the melty icing his way.

“Go ahead and make yourself useful, Big Bird. JARVIS? What’s the latest on Jolly Green Giant and the Wonder Twins?”

“I’m right here,” Bruce murmurs as he slips into the kitchen. Which is good. Tony popped open enough pre-packaged wads of cinnamon bun dough to feed everyone, and the eight pounds of bacon sitting on the counter are just begging for super-people to crunch down on them.

There’s a blush creeping up Sam’s neck, though he manages to keep an excellent poker face now that he isn’t half-naked. Bruce eyes the bites trailing over the back of Sam’s neck, and Tony grins when Bruce looks to him curiously.

Natasha and Clint show up not much later. Clint’s hair is a wild bird’s nest, while Natasha is as impeccable as ever. Tony waits until Sam has a mouthful of sticky cinnamon bun before he asks, “So how is Cap in bed? Is he really all sweet and innocent like people think? I bet he’s wild.”

Sam promptly chokes, and Clint thumps him on the back, mumbling, “No shit?” in a tone of interest. JARVIS is running interference, keeping Steve occupied and out of the way so the rest of the pack can get a read on Sam.

“Obviously he gets a little toothy,” Clint manages around his own breakfast, and Sam digs the heels
of his palms into his eyes.

“Oh right! You know they make collars for that? Bite guards?”

“I know,” Sam mumbles.

“Be nice, boys,” Natasha admonishes, but the majority of her attention is ostensibly focused on slicing a peach and pulling the slices away from the pit.

Bucky wolfs down whatever’s put in front of him, but he manages to keep an icy eye on the new beta while Clint and Tony continue to needle Sam about his hitherto secret relationship with the good Captain. Tony especially takes pleasure in trying to turn the whole affair into a sit-com ‘meet the family’ awkward scenario, with Bruce stepping in every now and again if he feels they’re going too far.

Despite his initial flustered responses, Sam figures out how to take everything into stride, and then it’s the three of them- Sam, Clint, and Tony- egging each other on. For every prying, baiting question, Sam has a delightfully stinging, sarcastic response. Tony leans back against the fridge, a grin on his face.

“I like you,” he announces. “I really do.”

And just like that, the rest of the pack follows behind their home alpha, and just like that, Sam is accepted. The beta seems unsteady with the swift turnabout, from relentless teasing to engulfing warmth. Tony pushes the bacon towards Sam, and leans in to place more food on Bucky’s plate. The omega is less willing to just accept Sam, but he puts up with Tony feeding him, urging him to eat.

“You can let Steve go,” Tony tells JARVIS, and moments later the elevator dings, unleashing a frazzled, irate alpha.

“Why?” Steve demands, glaring at Tony. Bucky leans closer to Tony, but a soothing hand has the omega relaxing just slightly.

“Why what?”

“Why did you have JARVIS lock me in the elevator for a half hour?”

And yeah, that’s a growl, but Tony just laughs.

“I did no such thing,” the AI denies, and Steve turns his angry eyes up at the ceiling, despite the fact that Tony’s told him many, many times that JARVIS isn’t actually in the ceiling. “That was FRIDAY’s idea.”

“Snitch,” FRIDAY grumbles, as much as a program can grumble.

“Just to clarify, interference does not mean imprisonment,” Tony admonishes, though more than anything he’s amused. “Usually.”

Tony is faced with the brunt of Steve’s patented ‘Captain America Disapproves’ face, and he relents.

“Alright, fine. We won’t do it again, alright? Unless we have very good reason.” When Steve opens his mouth to protest, Tony adds, “Reasons that do not include heckling your boyfriend. When were you going to tell us about him anyways?” Tony gestures to where Sam is sandwiched between Clint
and Natasha, the three of them sitting at the counter bar.

“We hadn’t discussed it,” Steve says slowly.

“Well it’s pretty damn lucky this whole-” He pauses and gestures vaguely before resuming. “-happened. You. Sam. Do you- you- do you want a room, here? Or will you just share with Steve when you visit?”

“It’s a four hour drive if the traffic’s good. Not exactly a day trip, and I have a job,” Sam protests, then glances at Cap. “Not that I wouldn’t want to come visit. It’s just-”

“There’s a reason we meet in Philly,” Steve finishes.

“Just use the wings,” Tony suggests.

“They don’t technically belong to me. I mean, I’ve gotta get Air Force permission to use them. Not exactly sure how I’d convince the Brass to let me use them just for funsies.”

“So I’ll make you your own. Property of Sam- I forgot your last name. Whatever. Property of Sam. You need an upgrade anyways.”

“No way, man! You can’t just- Those wings cost, like, two million dollars.”

“Two million well spent, then. C’mon, it’ll be fun! You get some wings, you fly up here whenever you want, and you and Cap can make like bunnies and-”

Steve honest to god **growls** at Tony, and Bucky rumbles right back, tucking closer to Tony. Steve has the nerve to look embarrassed, once Bucky puts himself in the mix.

“I’m not making a move on your man, so chill. Honestly. Look, you-” He points at Sam. “-are going to be measured for wings before you leave. I’ve still got the specs for the original model, so it’ll be easy peasy. New wings within two weeks. Sound good?”

“Can I have wings too?” Clint asks hopefully.

Natasha shuts him down.

“No.”

And that’s that.

The kitchen is cleaned after breakfast, and Tony ushers Sam down into the lab. Naturally, Steve comes along to keep an eye on them, and Bucky sticks to Tony’s side like an overprotective cockleburr. Tony maneuvers around everyone, pulls up the specs for Sam’s current wings, and goes from there.

By the time he has to leave for a meeting with Stark Industries’ PR department regarding a minor, relatively benign information leak, things are looking pretty much squared away. From what he’s learned over the portion of breakfast not spent harassing Sam, Bruce has a video call scheduled with Dr. Cho, who’s attending a conference Bruce couldn’t find time to go to, and Clint and Natasha are going on a date. Which could either be a genuine date, or code for their spy-twin business. SHIELD might be gone, but the two of them still have contacts that they like to keep up with.

That leaves Steve and Sam with Bucky, which is perfectly fine, according to all involved. So Tony catches up with Pepper, has lunch with her. He picks up the newly-tailored tux for the upcoming
charity benefit, impulse buys donuts for the pack, and returns to the tower.

He returns to find Sam alone in the common area. According to FRIDAY, Steve and Bucky are having some one-on-one time while Bucky calls his therapist.

“Panic attack,” Sam explains, taking a donut when Tony pushes the box towards him. “He’s fine. We talked him down, and Steve has him on the line with his therapist for an emergency counseling session.”

“My didn’t anyone call me? I woulda come right back. Fucking christ on a cracker.”

He focuses on the way Sam eats. The way he nibbles stray dollops of frosting from the site of the donut before biting into the actual thing. Alright. At least he hasn’t failed this proto-packmember. Sam eats the donut, and he enjoys it. Tony did something right.

“Stop staring at me. ‘S weird,” Sam complains around his mouthful. Tony grimaces and looks elsewhere.

“Mr. Barnes specifically asked we not interrupt your day,” JARVIS explains.

“But he probably wouldn’t mind seeing you now that you’re back.”

And that one’s FRIDAY, nudging Tony along, and he gets the hint. He closes the donut box, picks it up, and accepts Sam’s ‘good luck’ with grace.

Steve and Bucky are in Tony’s personal space, on the couch of Tony’s living room. It rankles, having another alpha in his territory without giving permission, but this is Steve, and Steve is fine. Bucky is pressed to one side of the long couch, while Steve occupies the other end.

“There’s my favorite dynamic duo,” Tony calls by way of announcing his presence. Steve turns to look as Tony and offer him an apologetic smile, but Tony waves off the unspoken ‘sorry’ in favor of sitting down right next to Bucky. He doesn’t miss the flash of hurt on Steve’s face when Bucky immediately unwinds into Tony’s side, but that’s a topic for later. “Sugar helps.” After a panic session. Sugar helps.

He opens the box of donuts again and coaxes Bucky into selecting one- a neon sprinkle-covered monstrosity- before pushing the box down the sofa for Steve to take his pick. The blonde grabs one of the maple-frosted ones, exactly as predicted.

“So do we wanna have a touchy-feely heart-to-heart?” Tony pipes up, when Steve is on his third donut, and Bucky’s on his fourth. Tony’s still nibbling on his first, because come the fuck on. He’s not a spring chicken. Steve and Bucky might have a miracle metabolism, but Tony most certainly does not.

“Tony, don’t push,” Steve admonishes, but Bucky shifts where Tony’s got him tucked under one arm.

“Jus’ hit me. Y’know? All these fuckin’ changes, and none a’them were my choice.” Bucky’s metal hand smooths over the tight swell of his stomach. “Needed a reminder that it’s all my choice goin’ forward.”

Ah. Right. Nonconsensual body modification. Rape pregnancy.

Fuck.
Bucky brushes off any attempts at discussing things further. That’s that, and Tony’s gonna push, and Steve’s apparently going to keep his mouth shut, and Tony respects that.

Fine. It’s fine.

Bucky, with an infant in his arms. The both of them pale and-

Nope. Nope, not dealing with that. Fuck off, nightmare.

He compartmentalizes the flash of brutal fantasy away, locks it tightly in a box.

Tony squeezes his arm around the real Bucky’s shoulders, strokes his hand over the hard swell of his stomach.

Safe and sound. Everyone is fine. He shouldn’t make it about himself.

The logical course of action is to withdraw from the situation and make a hasty exit.

“Don’t you fucking worry about messing up my day if you need me,” he admonishes gently, pulling strands of hair from Bucky’s messy bun- an action which earns him a heatless glare. “If I can help, call me. JARVIS will put you through. ‘Kay? Good. Great. Hey, I’m gonna go start on loverboy’s wings so he and Cap can fondue in peace.” Steve chokes on his own spit, and Tony grins, pressing on. “Come hang out with us later. If you want. Not you Steve,” he adds, glaring. “Don’t like you in my lab.”

That’s a lie, and Steve knows it. The other alpha smiles indulgently, his face still a blotchy red from the ‘fondue’ thing. Steve is by no means a prude, but for whatever glorious reason, reminding him of that incident decades ago is still embarrassing.

He can’t resist scenting Bucky before he rises up to his feet, but the omega doesn’t seem to mind at all. Instead, Bucky fists his hand in Tony’s shirt to yank him back down, and aggressively nuzzles Tony’s jaw and throat.

“Possessive bastard,” Tony complains, but hey, he’s not one to talk.

Sam raises an eyebrow when Tony comes to him covered in Bucky’s scent, but doesn’t say a thing. Instead he grabs his wings, and follows Tony down to the lab. The beta leaves around hour six, and by hour twenty seven Tony has a new set of wings ready to go- way earlier than his two-week estimate, but hey, that’s what an obsessive creation-binge will do for you. It’s with disappointment that he learns Sam left for home half a day ago. Steve promises to convince Sam to stop by the tower again before too long, so Tony can observe a shakedown of the new equipment, and then it’s sleep, shower, business. Monday, Peter swings by- heh- and Tony carefully keeps him out of the team’s way. No need to overwhelm the kid yet. There are basic tests, and Tony takes Peter’s measurements for a suit, and the pair of them go over ideas. Peter’s more than a little starstruck, but he contributes a fuckton. The kid tinkers with a holographic rendition of a prototype suit, placing digital pins in places he wants to revisit, and Tony just sits back after a little while and lets Peter do his thing.

Kid’s got a brain in his head, that’s for sure.

He calls Happy to drive the kid home around eight, and that’s that. Peter’s due to start his “internship” at the end of May, and Tony will have the first edition of the spider suit ready, provided he tells the person May his secrets by the end of the month May.

There’s dinner with the Pack, and a half hour spent with Bucky while the omega grumbles and holds tissues to his nose to stop a spontaneous nosebleed while Steve panics in the background. Natasha,
as Bucky’s Second, keeps Steve out of the way, and then everything is right as rain. Steve tries to corner him the next day, to pursue what brought Tony to his quarters early in the morning a few days ago (Tony really only ever does that after nightmares), but Tony brushes him off, sticks on a smile and insists that he’s fine, and then it’s off to the charity dinner.

He buries himself in the lab afterwards, because he has an idea.

A retro-framing unit, maybe. Something to help with the memories. It might help Bucky. It might help *him*.

Maybe it’ll help a lot of people.

That’s the dream.
I'll be honest with you guys. I got sucked into DBH hell, despite having never played it and only watching like three episodes of a playthrough. I've been frantically putting together an outline for a fanfic for that, so I might have gotten distracted. My current two major works are going to take publishing precedence, but that's the explanation for the lateness of this chapter. Future delays will be caused by biochemistry and intro to microbiology.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday sees Tony driving up to the Keener house shortly before sunrise. He’d spent the night in Nashville after a fucking fourteen hour drive, because he had the brilliant idea to start Harley’s summer with a roadtrip. Now his ass is sore and he’s relying on the large cup of coffee to pep him up, but it’s all so fucking worth it when the house’s front door opens and a bright-eyed twelve year old barrels into him.

“Tony! I missed you!”

Harley’s voice is muffled from where his face is mashed against Tony’s chest, and Tony snorts.

“Heya, squirt.” The little alpha- not as little as Tony might like. It’s only been a few months, but the kid’s like a fucking bean sprout- looks up at Tony with a sullen glare. “Oh I’m sorry. Does that offend your delicate sensibilities?”

Harley shoves Tony’s chest, but Tony crushes Harley closer in retaliation.

“There is no escape, Harley. We’re connected.”

“I’ll spit on your shirt,” Harley warns, and Tony makes a show of suddenly holding the kid at arm’s length.

“Ugh. Jesus, don’t make me rethink this.”

There’s absolutely no realy weight behind the threat and Harley tugs Tony inside.

Susan Keener smiles, little Molly sleepy in her arms. Suzy hoists her five-year-old daughter up a little higher, settles her more securely on her hip.

“Look, Moll. Say hi to Mr. Stark,” she urges.

The kid’s doe brown eyes are drowsy when she turns to look, but the innocent, toothy grin she gives is full of light. “Hi miss’r Stark,” she mumbles, voice sleep-slurred. “I’m here to say ‘bye’ to Harley.”

“And then she’s going right back to bed,” Suzy adds.

“But’m not sleepy,” Molly whines, and immediately betrays herself with a yawn.

“You tell her, pipsqueak.”
Molly would probably be out like a light before Tony even left the building.

The paint on the wall is fresh, the glass of the windows fairly new. Suzy hadn’t accepted Tony’s offer of a new home, a better, more updated home, but she’d agreed to let him help renovate. Tony had been subjected to a solid hour and a half of Molly screeching about the fairies painted on her bedroom walls, but he can’t say it wasn’t worth it.

There’s some more smalltalk, promises from Tony to ensure Harley videochats at least twice a week. Tony promises, cross his heart and hope to die, that he’ll fly her up to New York any time she likes. She says she’ll just drive if she needs to, no need for a plane just for her.

Harley says goodbye to his mother, and then it’s just Tony and a kid. Harley rides shotgun, and he overrides Tony’s choice in music (modern, kid-friendly pop) in favor of hard 80s rock. At a stop sign, Tony catches sight of Harley’s expression—smug, just daring Tony to say something.

Tony says nothing, grinning as he pulls out of the neighborhood.

It’s a full day of driving. Six pit stops. Twelve rounds of Eye-Spy and the License Plate Game. They have breakfast, lunch, and dinner on the road, and there’s a snack waiting for the two of them in the Tower. Tony pulls into the underground garage, rolls smoothly into his personal area, and parks.

“My foot’s numb,” Harley gripes.

“I told you not to sit like that, squirt.” He flicks the keys off to the side, where they hit the magnet embedded in the wall to sit with all his other keys. “Walk it off. Come on, chop chop.”

Tony pops the trunk and pulls out Harley’s suitcase. It’s not much, by Tony’s standards, but maybe by a normal person’s standards it’s plenty. What would he know? No one’s ever accused him of being normal.

“I’m not a baby,” the tired preteen insists. “I can carry my own bag.”

“Your foot’s numb,” Tony counters.

“I can walk it off.”

He can’t help the grin splitting his face as Harley half-stomps, half-stumbles over and takes the suitcase handle. Harley starts off in the direction of the elevator after a moment’s search, and Tony watches him go, then pads away in a different direction.

“Put your stuff in the elevator and then come with me. I’ve got something to show you.”

Right on cue, the elevator glides open, and Harley maneuvers his suitcase inside, slinging his backpack on top for good measure, and then he follows on Tony’s heels like a floppy-haired puppy.

“Oh my god,” Harley gasps, when the lab door slides open. Technically the wall and door are transparent, but Tony felt like being dramatic. Hence the darkened glass, and Harley’s astonishment. “Oh my god!”

The young alpha bolts into the lab, his day’s exhaustion immediately forgotten.

“Are these your robots? Who’s who?”

U reaches up for a high-five, and Harley eagerly complies. Dum-E demands the same treatment.

Somewhere along the way, while Tony tries to show Harley around the lab, the young alpha locates
a label maker. Tony has the feeling he’s going to find labels on things that really don’t need labels for a long, long time.

Natasha has to come down and pry them out of the lab, and she does so by luring them with promises of burritos. There’s the inevitable moment of confusion when Harley notices Natasha’s complete lack of scent, but to his credit, Harley doesn’t say a word about it. The two alphas make silent eye contact, but when Tony only smiles, Harley takes the hint. It’s something to be accepted, not questioned.

True to Natasha’s promise, there’s essentially a burrito bar set up on the kitchen counter, apparently set up by Clint and Steve together.

“You must be Harley,” Bruce greets, the first one to address the kid. Harley looks up at the beta through his long, dark lashes. “My name is Bruce.”

“Tony sent me some of your papers,” Harley announces, and of anything the kid could have said, Bruce obviously wasn’t expecting that. “And the Hulk is awesome.”

That draws a smile from the beta. Bruce takes off his glasses to clean the lenses on his shirt, and looks over to Tony.

“Are you sure you don’t share genes?” He fixes the glasses back on his face, turning his attention again to Harley. “That’s close to what Tony said when we first met.”

Things progress from there. They actually sit around the table tonight, and Steve vacates his usual spot beside Tony to let Harley take his place. Bucky, silent and pensive, occupies Tony’s other side, and Harley can’t stop glancing at the omega. Eventually, the little alpha freezes as something supposedly clicks, then punches Tony in the arm.

“You didn’t tell me you have a mate!” Harley exclaims indignantly. Bucky, the bastard, smirks.

It’s a common misconception nowadays, so Tony just rolls his eyes and swallows his mouthful of burrito.

“Bucky isn’t my mate.”

“Yet,” Bucky rumbles, and Tony doesn’t feel bad at all elbowing the omega, though it sort of backfires when Bucky guards himself with his metal arm.

“Fucking ow,” Tony complains. Steve has the gall to look scandalized, opens his mouth probably to say something along the lines of ‘think of the children!’, but Tony cuts him off. “Don’t you dare. I learned words from you last month, Spangles. That’s an achievement. And you!” He jabs a finger at Harley. “Stop that.”

“I haven’t done anything!”

“You’re considering a conspiracy, squirt. Don’t try to hide it.”

Harley denies everything, but lo and behold, shortly after dinner Tony catches sight of the little alpha boldly taking Bucky by the wrist, and Tony supposes it’s either a testament to Bucky’s true nature, or to the maternal hormones soaking his cells, but rather than go into terminator mode (a possibility that had Tony and Natasha watching the pair like a hawk), Bucky just lets Harley tug him away, out of sight of the rest of the pack. Tony shares a look with Natasha.

“I’ve got it,” Tony sighs, peeling himself out of his chair. Clint’s purring, Natasha’s hands in his hair,
and Tony doesn’t have the heart to disturb either of them.

When Bucky doesn’t want to be found, he just can’t be found, which is why it takes Tony a little longer than desired to find them. Turns out, Harley and Bucky are hanging out on the roof, their legs dangling over the edge.

“Jesus christ,” he mutters. “Hey, uh. Guys?” Harley twists around to grin at Tony. “Maybe don’t sit on the ledge. How- how does that sound?”

“We’re fine,” Harley protests.

“Nope. Nope nope nope.” He hooks his hands under Harley’s armpits, supporting the kid as he clambers down from the ledge. “Harley your mom would kill me if she saw you.”

One of the points that had been brought up when discussing Harley staying with Tony for the summer was the issue of safety, given what Tony does with the Avengers, and the sheer number of enemies he has. Sitting on the edge of the roof wasn’t the safety concern either of them had had in mind, but it certainly counts as a no-no.

“Bucky would catch me.”

Tony sends an unimpressed look Bucky’s way, but the omega doesn’t look cowed in the least.

“The main point is to not get to that point. So.” He lets go of Harley and plants his hands on his hips. Harley mirrors the pose, jerking his chin up defiantly while Bucky twists around to face the pair, looking awfully self-satisfied. “What’s up? Why are you scheming already?”

“We were just talking about the whole arm thing. Hey, can I watch you open it up? It’s really cool. What’s it made of anyways?”

“Adamantium-vibranium alloy. Don’t change the subject.”

“It’s not gonna hurt anyone,” Bucky says in lieu of an actual answer. Harley nods along.

“Yeah. It’s not going to hurt anyone. It’s just a- uh. A secret.”

“Having secrets with a twelve year old you don’t know is considered a red flag,” Tony sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I’m the one who said it’s a secret!” Harley protests.

“That’s really not any better, squirt. Come on. Back inside.”

Bucky heads in first, leaving Tony and Harley to bring up the rear. Tony pulls Harley aside, and puts his hand on the kid’s shoulder.

“Hey, so. I know you’re at that age-”

“What?” Harley’s eyes are wide and vaguely panic as realization starts to creep in. Tony might be taking a little too much enjoyment.

“That age when you can’t get omegas out of your head-”

“Oh my god, stop!”

“Or betas. Or he- heck. Other alphas. Hormones are a bitch, but Bucky’s a little old for you.”
“Stop! No! I did not come here to listen to the birds and the bees!”

Tony soldiers on, grinning while Harley hides in his hands.

“He’s like, seven times your age if we’re talking time. Over twice your age if we’re talking physicality. It’s not a good idea to listen to these instincts.”

“I’m not listening to this!”

“It’s too late! There is no escape!”

Of course, Harley decides to escape, which leads to the young alpha bolting down the stairs, laughing like a loon while Tony sprints behind him. That little sucker is fast. Harley is saved by Steve, who catches Tony around the middle as the pair runs by.

“Hah! Fuck you!” Harley crows, spinning to watch as Tony struggles to get out of the super-soldier’s strong hold.

“Where the fuck did you learn to talk like that?” Tony laughs in return. School, probably. Tony tends to censor himself around kids.

“Tony!” Steve chastises, as if this is all Tony’s fault. Which okay, it’s maybe twelve percent of his fault. Maybe fifteen.

“Relax, Capsicle. And let go of me! Jesus Christ, you really know how to make a guy feel inferior.”

Steve immediately releases Tony, pulling his hands back as though burned.

“That was a joke, Steve. Ha ha, funny, right? I don’t think it’s possible for a narcissist to feel inferior.”

“Tony.”

Tony rolls his eyes at the gentle concern in Steve’s voice. Steve might be the macho-man battle alpha to Tony’s hominess, but there’s a soft spot the size of Alaska in the good Captain’s heart. He doesn’t like Tony talking about himself dismissively, but whatever. No harm no foul.

“Don’t ‘Tony’ me.” He pats Steve’s cheek, and Steve allows the touch, concern slipping into amusement. “We’ll stop. Right, Harley? No more running?”

“Just no more of that talk,” Harley insists, faking a shudder.

“Do I want to know?”

“Harley’s a young alpha, with young alpha thoughts. You do the math.”

“Okay, that’s it. I’m going to bed.”

Harley beats a hasty retreat to the room he’s been given, and Tony runs his hands through his own hair.

“Was this a good idea? It sounded like a good idea.”

“I think it’s a good idea. You make a good father-figure.”

And that sends an anxious shiver up Tony’s spine. Oof. Yeah. Still coming to terms with that.
He has until the fall to get used to the idea that he’s going to be co-parenting an infant, and he has
Harley here right now, but it’s still- More than a little scary.

“That’s- Uh-” Tony tugs on his hair, and drops his hands down to his hips, changing speeds. “So did
you need something? Why are you lurking?”

“I was hoping we could talk. I didn’t realize you were busy.”

Tony checks the time. Late, but not obscenely late. Not Tony-late.

“I’m not busy anymore. Okay, shoot. What’s on your mind?”

Steve crosses his arms- little red flag going up in Tony’s anxiety-brain, which Tony kicks back
down- and leans against the wall.

“I just want to see if everything’s alright with you.” And of course there’s concern on Steve’s
stupidly-perfect face. “You don’t like coming to my apartment unless something’s wrong.”

Ah. Okay. This. Distract and divert.

“Just a bad dream,” Tony deflected. “You know, the usual. Stress and all that. It wasn’t a big deal.”

Steve doesn’t seem all that convinced. Rather than going for the ‘Tony be reasonable’ angle that
Tony most expects, Steve gets the drop on him with a different approach.

“I care about you.” And that throws Tony off. Because, yeah? Duh? They’re pack? They support
each other? They’re family-bonded? Of course they care about each other.

It’s just that Tony might not be super-used to hearing it explicitly said. Which isn’t a bad thing! He
gets it in all the little things. The implicit, implied, demonstrative things they do for each other. He’s
just not sure what to do right here in this very moment.

“Thanks, big guy. I care about you too.”

Tony’s eyes flick to the side, and back again to fixate on Steve’s v-neck.

Steve pushes on.

“I know. You’re such a good home-alpha, Tony. You take care of your pack like a pro. Let me help
you.” Tony makes the mistake of meeting Steve’s earnest, baby blue eyes. “Talk to me. Let me
know what’s wrong. I can’t help if I don’t know what’s hurting.”

“Has it occurred to you that I don’t want to talk about it?” Tony growls, waspish and defensive. That
boat has sailed. He got distracted. He dealt with it. He’s fine.

Steve looks ready to push on again, but he shuts his mouth.

“I’ll be here when you change your mind.” the other alpha settles with. Not if. When.

Steve is nothing if not confident.

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.” Tony scratches behind his ear, and shrugs. “I’ve gotta, you know.
Check on the kid. Goodnight, Steve.”

“Night, Tony.”
Tony feels Steve’s eyes lingering on Tony’s back as the shorter alpha makes his escape, but Tony tries to shake off the sense of discomfort that never fucking fails to nag at him when he considers going for help outside the stress of a flashback or nightmare or whatever the fuck.

He distracts himself by popping in on Harley. The kid’s already halfway unpacked, and Tony says goodnight. Harley assaults him with a *hug*, which Tony returns, patting the kid on the back and holding him tight.

“This is gonna be awesome,” Harley announces, grinning up at the older alpha.

The door shuts again, Tony leaving Harley to his own devices. He sighs, running his hand through his hair, and scrunches his eyes closed for a moment. Hooray. Emotions.

Bucky is lurking in his bedroom door when Tony passes on the way to his own room, and the omega catches Tony by the wrist, metal plating sliding across Tony’s skin. With a quick pull, Bucky brings Tony in to press his dry, chapped lips to the alpha’s jaw.

“Goodnight,” he rumbles, and then as silent as a shadow, he’s gone again, hidden away in the privacy of his room. Tony is left blinking in the hallway.

“I’m not going to process that right now,” he mumbles to himself. “I just- christ. Time for bed.”

Steve, then Harley, then Bucky. All acting all… affectionate. Not unpredicted, not unusual, just not something his brain wants to process at the moment.

Emotions. Hooray.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Harley's here!

And Tony's emotional spoons are running low today for no reason at all! It's just one of those days for him. Difficulty processing, despite having an objectively awesome day.

Ooooh, what are Harley and Bucky talking about???
Tony’s birthday comes a few days later. The Avengers celebrate as a pack the night before, with homemade PB&J cake and a frankly obscene amount of pizza. There’s a party scheduled on his actual birthday, with celebrities and business partners and paparazzi, but this night is for his family.

Clint usually challenges Tony to a drinking contest, and it’s become a tradition towards the end of the night, but with Tony’s promise to Bucky and his current role as Responsible Adult for Harley, he declines. Instead, Rhodey steps up to defend Tony’s honor.

There’s a hushed argument with Steve. Tony says it’s okay for Harley to be present, that Tony will explain that the heavy drinking isn’t a common thing, and to show the preteen how to indulge safely. Steve says it’ll encourage Harley to drink underage.

Tony wins the argument, insisting that it’s important to be open with kids, while setting clear guidelines (thank you parenting books). They modify the game so that the loser isn’t the one who conks out first, but instead so that the loser of the game is the one who can’t continue to balance on one foot.

Rhodey and Clint face off, each balancing as Tony and Nat hand them their first shot.

In the end, Rhodey wins. Clint loses his balance, laughing as Natasha catches him, and both Rhodey and Clint are handed a tall glass of water. There are gifts, each of which Tony cherishes. A kitschy mug from Steve, which Tony mentally vows to set in a place of honor. An Iron Man, as in an actual clothes-iron man, shirt that has Tony laughing out loud, courtesy of Clint, and so on and so forth. Harley presents Tony with a little machine designed to scribble a blocked pen until it starts writing again. It’s clunky and jerky, and Tony probably won’t ever use it given his preference for digital media, but he ends up all choked up anyways, especially when Harley follows it up with a hand-drawn paper birthday card from Molly.

“You like it?” Harley verifies. Tony recognizes that expression, that alpha-bluster affecting at indifference while the eyes betray him, seeking approval.

“It’s fine,” Tony manages, inserting a pen he found into the contraption. The emotion Harley sees in Tony’s face is enough for him, and the younger alpha bursts into a sunny, self-satisfied grin. Tony remembers the first thing he ever made for his dad. He remembers how it looked shattered on the ground, the pieces all bent out of shape.

He vows to treasure this one. It’s far from Harley’s first machine, but it’s one he made especially for Tony.

Bucky creeps closer. He’s dressed up, which is- different. Black shirt, nice jeans- his hair’s even been styled. It’s more than Bucky’s bothered with since arriving. It’s- Different. A good different, but Bucky doesn’t look nearly as comfortable as he usually does in his t-shirts and loose pants, so that ‘good different’ becomes a ‘not so great’ different.

Harley snatches Tony’s present away, prompting a startled “Hey!” from the older genius, but Harley’s eyes are glittering with anticipation, as Bucky deposits a wrapped package in Tony’s now-free hands. It’s rectangular in shape, and somewhat heavy.
“You didn’t have to get me anything,” Tony protests, but Bucky pins him with his icy blue eyes.

“I wanted to.” Bucky looks sheepish for a moment. “Pepper’s the one who found it for me.”

“But Bucky is the one who insisted he wanted to give you a present,” Pepper interjects. “He asked me what I thought you’d like. I gave him some options, and he picked.” She gestures with her wine glass. “Well go on. Open it.”

Tony feels Bucky’s eyes on him as he picks open the spaceship wrapping paper, and his brows shoot up in surprise. It’s an old, old copy of *The Age of Chivalry*. Dated 1858.

He’s not exactly sure what to say. He *loves* Arthurian legends. It’s not something he’s really mentioned around Bucky, but Pepper for sure would know. It’s sort of a dual gift from the two of them, but the glare Pepper shoots his way when he looks at her promises retribution if he doesn’t place his gratitude squarely on Bucky’s shoulders.

“This is fucking fantastic,” he murmurs, gingerly opening the book. It’s been beautifully preserved. The binding doesn’t crack or groan, and the illustrative prints are guarded by fine, airy dividers. He looks up at Bucky, seeing the relief on the omega’s face. As if Tony could possibly be disappointed. He closes the book and holds it up. “Brace yourself. Your kid’s gonna grow up listening to this sh-stuff.”

Dr. Seuss? Nah. The Bean’s going to fall asleep to King Arthur’s adventures read from a first edition antique. Tony has a reputation as an eccentric billionaire to live up to, after all. Tony grins at Bucky, and the omega’s eyes flick to Harley, who offers a thumbs up.

“Can we have cake now?” Clint demands.

“Hush,” Natasha responds, pinching Clint’s arm. The other omega squirms.

“What? You don’t wanna watch them make eyes at eachother either.”

Tony rolls his ‘eyes’.

“Yeah, fine. Cake.” He runs a hand down the book’s spine, then deposits it with the rest of his birthday loot. “Pregnant people get the first slice.”

“I thought the birthday boy got the first piece,” Pepper pipes, chin in hand while her elbow remains propped against the kitchen counter.

“I’m transferring my birthday boy privileges. C’mon, Buck. Let us eat cake.”

Steve made the cake- a three-layer peanut butter sheet cake with blackberry jam filling and a peanut butter frosting. It’s to *die* for, and after everyone (even JARVIS and FRIDAY) sings ‘Happy Birthday’, Tony fends off the rest of his pack long enough to give Bucky a corner piece. Armed with cake, they all hunker down for a movie. Star Wars. The Return of the Jedi. Harley makes a remark about ‘outdated effects’, and Tony threatens to disown the kid, but he ends up with Harley mashed against one side, and Bucky against the other.

The early birthday celebration is a rousing success. Much more enjoyable than the publicity stunt of the next day.

It’s held in the disused Stark Manor, rather than allowing so many strangers into pack territory. There’s music and booze and people in fancy clothing. Photographers snap pictures to take out of context, and while the whole affair is enjoyable in its own way, Tony finds himself eager to return
He sticks to sparkling cider the whole night, which is a personal record for him considering his previous birthdays. That doesn’t stop what seems to be everyone and their grandma from offering to get him a ‘real drink’. He’s propositioned sixteen times- yes, he’s counting. The most insistent of these propositions- number seventeen now- comes from two omegas (a man and a woman) and their beta friend (a woman). The women of the group plaster themselves to Tony’s side as he tries to make his escape. At least one of the omegas is either nearing a heat or wearing heat hormones like perfume.

Tony finds himself extremely uncomfortable. Last year? Fuck yeah, he would have come back to their hotel. But this isn’t last year, and he’s not interested. He has Harley waiting for him back home. He has Bucky, who’d been sour-faced and brooding the entire time Tony has been getting ready for the public event.

Natasha watches from the edges of the party, his bodyguard for the evening. She’s been getting plenty of attention of her own, but Tony feels her eyes on him like a safety net. All he has to do is make one hand gesture, and she’ll be by his side in an instant. He’d rather let the eager group down easy, though, rather than having an assassin intimidate the crap out of them.

“Sorry guys, I’m really not interested,” he says, plucking the wandering hand of the beta from his shoulder.

Well, maybe not ‘easy’ so much as ‘bluntly’.

“We just want to make your birthday happy, Tony,” the female omega insists. “Come spend the night with us.” She looks at him from beneath her lashes. “Are you an alpha or aren’t you?”

The pheromone-soaked omega- the male- cuddles in closer to Tony. And okay, yeah. That’s not a perfume. It’s a natural chemical cocktail that makes Tony’s head spin, but he takes a step back. It’s a dirty trick on their part, but Tony isn’t some dumbass knothead who can’t be bothered to control himself.

“Look, no means no, guys. I’ve got a pack to get home to. So, uh- yeah.”

“Relax, Tony. Why don’t you let us buy you a drink.” Tony flinches as the male omega reaches out to play with his collar. He doesn’t want to put his hands on any of them, even to push them away. He wants to take the high ground, but he’s really not okay with this.

He gestures for Natasha, and almost immediately, she’s by his side. Slinky purple dress, amethyst demi-parure, killer heels. She brushes away the omegas, wrapping her arm around Tony’s trim waist. She rests her chin on Tony’s shoulder, and her familiar, clean lack of scent is soothing.

“Your omega’s getting antsy, Tony,” Natasha murmurs in his ear, just loud enough to be overheard. “Time to go.”

“Oh? Is the infamous Tony Stark settling down?” the beta taunts to mask her wounded pride. Dismissal is never fun.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Tony grumbles back.

With Natasha’s deadly grace backing him up, the trio don’t push their luck any further. They make their escape, braving the paparazzi outside to enter the waiting car. With the tinted windows hiding the pair, Tony relaxes into his seat.
“That used to be fun,” he whines. “Why isn’t that fun anymore?”

“You’re settling down,” Natasha reminds him, a smirk pulling at her full, painted lips.

He twists around to glare at the beta he actually likes.

“Yeah, thanks for that, by the way. The gossip rags’re gonna have a field day trying to figure out who ‘my omega’ is.”

“I’m sure Bucky won’t mind.”

“Yeah, but we’re still trying to keep him out of the paper. Wait, what? No! Jesus Christ, Nat. I’m not-”

“Very perceptive. Yes, we know.”

“That’s not-”

“Save your breath, Tony.” Natasha reaches up to unpin her hair, letting the scarlet locks hang loose.

“And try to take a shower before you see Harley. You reek.”

Harley isn’t the one Tony has to worry about, though. The kid is snoring on the couch when Tony creeps out of the elevator. It’s only a little after midnight, but Harley looks like he dozed off during a movie. Tony grabs a blanket from the blanket bin, and drapes it over the kid. He can’t help but smile, looking down at the kid. He doesn’t dare linger, though. He really does stink of that handsy guy towards the tail-end of the party.

Tony shrugs off his suit jacket and drapes it over his arm, then sets about loosening his tie enough to pull it over his head. He passes by Bucky’s door, hesitates, and then continues on to his own room. He’s not going to bother Bucky this late at night. The omega needs his sleep, and if he’s not up and about, Tony isn’t going to wake him. He nudges open his own door and enters the dark room.

“Hey, go ahead and get the shower running, Jay,” Tony calls. He slaps a hand on the wall, flicking the lights on-

-and nearly has a goddamn heart attack.

“Fuck! What- Why are you in here?” he yelps. Bucky is seated- fully clothed, thank god- on the edge of Tony’s bed. He’s got the ‘dark and brooding’ look down pat. Tony hears the shower cut on in the bathroom, but that’s gone down a peg in priority.

“Wanna to say Happy Birthday,” Bucky replies, ticking his fingers one by one against his knee.

“So, uh. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks! You didn’t have to wait up to tell me again.” Harley had been the first to wish Tony a happy birthday, having snuck into Tony’s room with FRIDAY’s go-ahead. Bucky, hearing the commotion, had been the second. It was all kind of unnecessary, given the celebration the day before.

“I wanted to.” He smirks- that devil-may-care come-hither smirk you see in the old films- and Tony’s knees go a little weak. No! Bad Tony. Bad. “An’ Nat said you were gettin’ a lotta ‘tention. Maybe I was jealous.”

“She’s a snitch. And don’t worry, baby. I was faithful.”
Teasing is easy. Flirting is fun. Tony doesn’t see anything wrong with it. He’ll maintain a respectful distance nonetheless. He lets the door close behind him, and crosses the room to hang up the jacket and push it aside with the rest of the ‘to be drycleaned’ things. When he turns back around, Bucky is right there.

“Fuck!” he hisses, jerking back to slam against his closet door. He clutches at his reactor. “What the fuck?”

Bucky’s flesh hand gently wraps around Tony’s throat, and Bucky glares down at Tony.

“You stink,” he growls, and oh. Oh.

“Yeah, not everyone’s good at respecting boundaries.”

Bucky doesn’t exactly look thrilled. In fact, he looks pissed. He mutters something in Russian, and Tony rolls his eyes.

“Oh calm down. My honor is no more tarnished than it was this morning. Now lemme go. Water’s being wasted.”

Bucky sucks his teeth, and after a moment he relents. His hands quickly find Tony’s shirt, however, untucking the fabric from Tony’s belted pants.

“What are you doing?” he laughs. His hands bump into Bucky’s as the omega sets to work on the shirt buttons.

“You stink,” Bucky replies simply, as though that explains everything. Tony catches the omega’s hands when Bucky gets about midway up the row of buttons.

“I’ll finish that, okay? I promise I’ll take a shower.”

He trusts Bucky. Doesn’t mind the touches, the grabbiness. Not from Bucky. It’s just- the reactor.

Tony leans up and nudges their foreheads together, then wriggles away, slippery as a fish, to pad into the bathroom, toeing his shoes off as he goes. The socks follow, and then off comes the shirt, and the pants. He expects Bucky to hang out in the bedroom, but of course he doesn’t.

“Do you mind?” Tony sighs, mock-glaring at Bucky in the bathroom mirror. The omega rests, propped up against the bathroom doorway.

“No,” Bucky quips back.

“Unbelievable.”

When Tony stands nude, Bucky steers him into the shower. Completely unnecessary, given that Tony fully intended to shower on his own anyways, but Bucky seems to take pleasure in helping to wash the unnamed omega’s scent away. Bucky doesn’t join him in the shower, doesn’t even undress (thank god. Tony isn’t sure his heart could take it.), but he does stand and watch like some voyeur, arms crossed, his face melting from sour displeasure to self-satisfied smugness. He waits just long enough for Tony to dry off before scent-marking the alpha. It’s- intimate. Not sexual, but intimate. Bucky strokes Tony’s neck, thumbing the scent-glands beneath Tony’s jaw in a way that sends tingles over Tony’s scalp. He brushes his wrist over Tony’s temples, across his pulsepoints, over his collar bones. And then he smiles, satsified, and he leaves. He just- leaves.
Says goodnight, and leaves. Respects the boundaries Tony’s set on their relationship.

Fuck, but he wishes he could just say screw it and take Bucky as his mate. But that wouldn’t be okay, wouldn’t be right. Not with Bucky so dependent on him. He scrubs the heels of his hands over his eyes, and flops back in bed.

“Goddamn it,” he mutters.

Sleep is a long time in coming. However, come it does.

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Two days later, Tony’s pack expands again, when that Peter kid makes his appearance. It’s Harley’s fault. It really is.

Peter shows up for his first day, and when Peter is escorted down to the workshop- led by JARVIS- Tony is supervising Harley as the young alpha navigates a holographic design. He wants to design his own recreational drone by the time summer ends, and Tony is fully on board with that plan.

The elevator opens, and Peter walks in with his eyes as big as dinner plates. Tony barely manages to say ‘Hi’ before Harley’s shouting, “You didn’t tell me I had a brother!” to be heard over the music blasting from the speakers. However, given that JARVIS cuts out the music almost at that moment- ostensibly to let Tony greet Peter properly- Harley’s voice echoes.

“What?” Peter’s eyes flick between Tony and Harley where they stand surrounded by projections.


“What do you mean, what? Why’s he here if you’re not doing your weird pseudo-adoption thing with him?”

By ‘here’, Tony knows Harley means ‘the lab’. Tony knows he pack-bonds hard, but being called out by a twelve-year-old isn’t comfortable. Besides. He hasn’t technically pack-bonded with Peter yet. He just- wants to keep the kid safe, and provide for the teen, and help him grow up to be the best hero and person he can be. He ruffles Harley’s hair, and Harley shoves his hands away.

“Go ask Bruce to teach you about nuclear radiation, ‘kay? We’ll pick this up later.”

Harley is reluctant to go, but he’s a huge fan of Bruce. Tony says a silent apology for sending an eager preteen to harass Bruce, but he needs some one-on-one time with Peter.

“Adoption?” Peter parrots faintly, the moment Harley’s gone.

“Mentoring,” Tony corrects. “Harley’s brain is too big for his body. He thinks he knows everything. So!” He claps his hands together. “Have you told May?”

“Oh, not yet, Mister Stark.” Peter’s eyes wander, trying to take in the entirety of the lab as quickly as possible. Tony isn’t quite so willing to give Peter the grand tour as he was for Harley, however. “But I will! I know that’s- that’s- that’s a condition. I remember that.”

Tony nods along, running a hand through his hair. “I believe you. I do. We’ll just get the ball rolling on base testing, alright? I’m guessing you haven’t had a fully comprehensive physical, huh? Endurance, strength testing, oxygen efficiency, any of that?”

Peter crosses his arms, shaking his head. “Uh, no. No that’s- that’s pretty in-depth, huh?”
“Eh. It’s pretty standard for Avengers We each do it annually. Not that you’re an Avenger. You’ll be sticking to the little league for now. But still. It’s important to know how far you can really push yourself.”

Peter’s more than a little nervous about being introduced to the resident doctor, but Tony convinces the teen to go with him to the Avengers medical suite.

Dr. Cho is most definitely overqualified to be giving a standard physical. They won’t even start in on the special tests just yet. It’s just height, weight, reflexes, and all that jazz. Peter gets his own encrypted file, and Tony sends him home with a genuine Stark Industries Internship Packet, just to keep up appearances, and a warning that if May isn’t brought in the loop within the next three weeks, Peter’s going to be dropped. What Tony doesn’t say is that he’ll 100% be keeping an eye on ‘Spiderman’, that he’ll be there whenever possible to keep the kid safe even if he isn’t providing tech. He’s not just gonna turn a blind eye on a fifteen-year-old fighting crime. He just-

It’s a mess of grey morals here. He hopes Peter keeps his promise to tell May.

In the meantime, he has a loud-mouthed squirt to hunt down.

“Since when am I your dad?”

Tony catches Harley and Bruce in the scientist’s modeling room. Bruce’s fluid projections are organized differently from Tony’s, more in a flat plane than the 3-D organized chaos of Tony’s projections. Bruce looks at Tony over his glasses, obviously biting back a smile.

“Since you convinced Mom to put you on my school contact form, duh,” Harley replies, poking at an image in the projection. “I decided to adopt you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Uh huh.”

“Congratulations on being adopted, Tony,” Bruce quips, and Tony jabs a finger at him, fixing the beta with a mock-angry glare, but he says nothing in response. “Your kid wants me to explain how nuclear reactors work. I told him to ask an engineer.”

“He says he didn’t work with that kinda radiation,” Harley elaborates.

“Bruce says a lot of things. He knows more than he likes to admit.”

“I noticed.”

Bruce rubs his eyes beneath the glasses, and makes a little hand gesture across his chest, a modified ‘tired’ sign. Bruce sometimes hits a social interaction limit without much warning, and this appears to be it. Tony waves Harley over, and Bruce sends Tony a grateful look.

“Let’s go make a nuclear physicist out of you. Bruce? Thanks for keeping an eye on the kid.”

“Takes a village,” Bruce replies vaguely.

Harley walks out with a bounce in his step, oblivious to the sudden social exhaustion weighing on the mild-mannered scientist. Tony’ll check up on Bruce later, and pulls out his phone to send Steve Bruce’s way just in case for the moment. Chances are Bruce just needs tea and some quiet time, but
Tony likes to cover all the bases.

He feels eyes on him, and manages to catch Harley glancing up at him again and again, hardly looking where he’s going. Tony lays a hand on Harley’s shoulder to keep the kid from walking into a wall.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Can I call you dad?”

Harley doesn’t miss a beat in spouting out his question, and fuck.

“Yeah, sure,” Tony manages. “You weren’t kidding about the adoption thing, huh.”

“We’re connected,” Harley replies simply.

Tony swallows thickly. Keep it together. Don’t get choked up.

He can do this. He can be a father figure. Right?

Harley thinks so.

Bucky thinks so too.

The whole damn pack thinks Tony can be a dad. So maybe he can.

It’s either that, or fuck up multiple kids’ lives. No pressure.

Chapter End Notes

Dad Tony! Dad Tony! Dad Tony!

And Jealous Bucky!

And coming up next: The events up ’til now abbreviated from Bucky's point of view.

Also: This is one of the reasons I don't write actual sex XD I can't even write a character trying to seduce another into a one night stand.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Heya, so warning for non-explicit rape scene at the beginning. If you choose to skip it, just search the page for 'who the hell is Bucky'.

Oh, and Bucky masturbates. Again, not detailed, but he very much does masturbate. The thirst is real in that one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the asset is awoken, it is dragged to a small, empty room. The floor is concrete, dotted with drains to render sanitation easier.

The asset is strapped face-down on a barely-padded bench. It is left alone to recover from cryo. It does not speak. It does not move.

After an indeterminate period of time, it is administered a nutrient injection to the back of the knee. A burning injection is administered to it’s carotid artery, and pressure is applied to stem bleeding until it heals.

It is left alone again. Time passes.

It burns. It *burns*, and it does not understand why.

The first alpha is thrust into the room, and the asset knows relief. The asset also knows pain, but the asset is no stranger to pain.

The first alpha leaves, and another takes its place. And another. And another. They bite its back, growl dark words in its ears. The asset imagines taking them apart, piece by piece, thinks about the fragility of the living body, but another injection is administered, and it does not think after that.

By the end, the asset cannot find the strength to resist. Technicians enter the room, and it is dragged from the bench, and hosed down. It is provided clothing, and allowed rest.

This is a mistake.

It bides its time, resting and recovering and learning for nearly six weeks before it sees its chance. The asset is quick, and brutal, and efficient. One by one, the technicians drop. The guards. The soldiers. The *alphas*. The asset eliminates all threats. It does not wish to be touched again. *Ever again.*

Four days pass. The asset steals clothing to replace the thin, blood-soaked material it wears. The asset does not leave, even as flesh begins to rot and hunger gnaws at its stomach. It does not dare steal food. It will be punished if it does. It does not dare to leave. It will be punished if it does. It will inevitably face punishment for the death of its handlers. It does not wish to face more.

And then another alpha appears. Tall and blonde, with a shield in his hands. The asset is prepared to defend itself. To defend- something. The asset is prepared to defend.
“Bucky?”

This draws the asset up short. It does not attack, as it knows it should. Instead, it cocks its head.

“Who the hell is Bucky?”

This is the first and last thing the asset says to the blonde alpha for many days.

The alpha calls himself Steve. He calls the scentless beta, the little spider, Natasha.

The asset leaves with Steve. Steve is safety. Steve is home.

Why? The asset does not know. The asset does not know.

Steve drives for six hours. The asset sits passively in the back of the car, the spider beside it. They enter the heart of New York city, enter an underground parking area, and the asset is ushered into an elevator.

Steve intends to leave the asset at the mercy of a new alpha, a smaller one. Tony, according to Steve. With Steve gone, the asset knows what comes next. Yet another alpha.

But the small alpha does nothing. Nothing but offer the asset water and food. The alpha tastes the offerings first, in a sign of goodwill.

The asset cannot remember eating. In the time since its last wipe, it has received only injections. And yet the alpha offers food.

The asset eats quickly, fighting its gag reflex to swallow as much as possible, lest the alpha change his mind.

It expects payment to be demanded. It expects the alpha to state his terms.

This does not happen. Instead, the alpha provides the asset with a room. With furniture. The asset makes quick work of arranging things to provide a sense of security. Security? The asset doesn’t understand where that concept has come from. Security is a lie.

And still the alpha demands nothing. He does not retaliate when the asset pins him to the wall. He bathes the asset, and provides another meal. He does not turn the asset out onto the streets when the asset admits having no concrete memory of Steve, or any of the others listed. He-

Cares. He cares?

Why?

The asset begins- There are images. There are memories. Snapshots. Flickers of remembrance. There is no definitive timeline. He remembers watching a family through a sniper’s scope, the crosshairs trained on the little girl. He remembers training the spider, the scentless beta. He remembers beatings and electrotorture. He remembers a train, and a freefall. Bits and pieces, and nothing worse than a snowy forest road, and a couple in a car.


He can’t- He should- Tony will make him leave if he finds out.

But he goes to Tony anyways. Tries to make the alpha understand, that he’s harboring a monster,
that he’s living with a threat.

He cannot bring himself to confess. He can’t. He doesn’t want to leave.

Tony doesn’t understand. He can’t. He’s too-good. He’s too good to see the bad in Bucky. Instead, he takes Bucky out for ice cream. Instead, he coaches Bucky through handling the nausea the taste of milk provokes. Instead, he sets up a medical visit for Bucky.

Bucky is pregnant. It makes sense. Bucky knows he was part of a breeding program, a selected bearer for the ultimate super-soldier. He considers requesting a termination, but the moment the nurse brings up the possibility, it’s like his whole world shifts. *No one* is going to touch his pup. The pup is *Bucky’s*. Not HYDRA’s. Not any of those selected alphas’.

Bucky’s.

Tony- Bucky doesn’t understand the smaller alpha. He immediately offers to provide for the pup. Bucky can still hear the unnames alphas grunting, growling in his ear. Threatening to cut the pup out if it doesn’t belong to them, to put their own in its place.

“It’s not yours,” he manages, but Tony only smiles.

Bucky thinks maybe that’s the moment he first realizes he could be a little bit in love with the alpha. With his steady hands, and his brown eyes, and his huge heart. His line of thinking shifts from ‘it’s not yours’ to ‘it could be’.

So he offers Tony paternity. Tony, however, deflects the offer. It makes sense, Bucky thinks sourly. He understand psychological warfare, understands manipulation and dependency. He knows, and Tony explains, that the alpha fears Bucky is only offering to assure his safety and security.

He lets the matter drop, and steals a discarded shirt to incorporate into his nest. Tony will come around eventually. Either that, or he will flatly say no, and Bucky will respect the decision.

But Tony doesn’t say no. He doesn’t say no when Bucky first offers. He doesn’t say no when Bucky slams him on the ground, driven by blind instinct in the face of the newcomer Clint. He doesn’t- he doesn’t say no.

Bucky bares his throat for the alpha, completely and utterly trusting when Tony offers to give him a shave. He accepts Tony’s offer of food. He thinks they’re okay.

And then Tony gives Bucky a *gun*.

It feels good in his hand. Comfortable. Safe. The other omega- Clint- is less than enthused when he realizes the gun is a permanent gift. Of course, Bucky doesn’t do much to soothe Clint’s fears. Instead he takes aim at Tony’s liquor collection when hormones hit him hard. And still, Tony trusts him. Still, Tony tucks up against Bucky’s side, a blanket around the two of them. Tony calls him Sunshine, and Bucky feels warm. He feels warm, and he feels sick, because he knows what he’s done, and he still can’t bring himself to tell Tony.

Bucky would have expected Clint’s opinion of him to sour even further after that incident, but the other omega catches him off guard by extending the olive branch. The deaf omega begins signing at Bucky more and more insistently, and Bucky even begins to reply. Clint learns that Bucky hasn’t explored modern entertainment, and takes it upon himself to teach Bucky about video games, board games, YouTube, Netflix. He shows Bucky how the air vents are modified to allow the passage of
specific people, although Tony forbids Bucky from entering.

It’s… nice? Nice.

Steve returns with Natalia tagging behind him. Bucky doesn’t like seeing Tony unhappy, or angry, or upset. Tony is all three of those things. He has observed Clint offering comfort and soothing Tony with physical contact. He decides to imitate the technique.

It works. Bucky embraces Tony from behind, nuzzles the alpha’s neck, and immediately Tony is distracted. Steve approves of the open affection, but Bucky remains with Tony between them, as a buffer, or a shield. He remembers the little guy from Brooklyn, the big guy helping him off an examination table in Europe. He remembers bits and snatches, but he doesn’t remember Steve fully, or what they had, or what Steve wants. He avoids Steve at dinner, avoids Steve when possible.

But Steve catches him anyways. He demands nothing, and offers to help Bucky with a scrapbook. The offer catches Bucky completely off-guard, and the hopeful glimmer in Steve’s eyes plucks at his heartstrings. Bucky agrees.

Steve is kind, and respectful, and protective. He offers Bucky everything. Everything he has, everything he is. He offers Bucky safety, and family, and home.

And Bucky accepts, slowly. Bit by bit, he warms back up to Steve, to the little guy trapped in a statuesque body. While Bucky does not fully know Steve, it seems Steve knows Bucky like the back of his hand. He calls Bucky out on his infatuation within days of the scrapbook’s conception.

“He says he doesn’ wanna take advantage,” Bucky explains, flopped out over the couch of Steve’s apartment. He’s spent the day exploring the tower, supervised by JARVIS. He’s pretty sure he spooked some of Tony’s employees, ghosting through the business floors. He’d even made it to the workshop and found some sharp toys stashed away, hidden in a box. Bucky stole one. For the defense of his nest, he tells himself.

“He has a point,” Steve replies, pencil dancing over the pad of paper in his hand. “We’re the only two alphas you know. I mean, the only two halfway decent alphas you know.”

“Yeah. I know. S’just, he’s so caught up in tryna let me make my own choices that he won’ let me make my own choice.”

“If it’s any consolation, I think he’s nursin’ his own crush.”

“Chrissake, Stevie, I know. That makes it so much worse,” Bucky moans, the nickname slipping out without a thought. Steve perks up at the sound.

The beta- Bruce- returns home not long after, and Bucky’s instincts clamor at him to prepare to defend himself. Bruce, however, is quiet and peaceful. Bucky later learns exactly what set his instincts off- the Hulk lurks under Bruce’s skin. But Tony trusts Bruce, and Bruce and the Hulk are one, so Bucky lets his guard down.

The peace shatters horribly not much later. Tony vanishes for three days, and while FRIDAY says the alpha is safe, Bucky worries. When Tony finally reappears, he looks like hell.

Tony brings up the video footage of December 16, 1991, and Bucky feels the world fall out from under him.

*I’m sorry, he wants to say. I’m so sorry. I should have told you. I wanted to tell you. I was a coward. I was afraid.*
He wants to tell Tony about the flayed back he received in punishment for leaving the video as evidence. He wants to tell Tony about the screaming voice in his head begging him to snap out of it as he took Maria’s neck in his hand. He wants to say so many things.

He says nothing. He signs, and asks if this is it. If he needs to leave. There’s a ringing in his ears, and he shakes his head like a wet dog, and Tony holds him, tells him to stay.

Steve is the next to know the full extent of Bucky’s crimes. When the two alphas return, Tony looks even worse. Bucky makes himself scarce, watches from the edges of the room as the pack converges around Tony. He yearns to join, to just- to make sure Tony’s fine. To help.

All he’s good for is destruction. He’s a weapon, a gun to point and shoot.

The pack welcomes him into the nest anyways.

Tony flinches and balks when Bucky makes any sort of sudden movement for a while after that. But the goddamn idiot offers to make Bucky an arm, and Bucky can’t believe it. He’s pretty sure Tony doesn’t have a functional sense of self preservation.

He considers the metal arm later, when he’s alone in his own room. It’s an arm. Functional. More so than a biological arm. He clenches the fist, watches the scales shift to allow movement. He could do without the star branding the shoulder, but otherwise, he doesn’t feel one way or another. He’s detached the arm from himself, mentally. It isn’t his. It’s just there.

But an arm made by Tony? That would be like a brand. A mark. That he’s Tony’s, and that Tony cares enough to hand-craft a complex piece of machinery, just for Bucky.

He wants the arm. He wants something made by the gentle, caring, selfless alpha who probably wouldn’t see Bucky’s genuine interest if he waved a neon sign in front of him.

“Your Ma’s gonna have a brand new arm when you’re out,” he murmurs, tracing a little circle around his navel. He presses his palm flat over his stomach. The pup’s too small to make a difference in his figure, but Bucky- Bucky likes to imagine.

The pup’s genetic sire doesn’t matter. Whoever he was, he’s dead. One of the alphas left to rot in the halls of that secluded HYDRA bunker. He flinches at the memory, the metal fist groaning as he clenches it harder.

That doesn’t- It doesn’t- doesn’t matter. The pup has Bucky. And Bucky?

Bucky isn’t a good person either. Not by a long shot. He needs to get there, though. Needs to be a better person by the time his pup’s born. He needs to get the bullshit in his head sorted out.

The only issue is that by this point, Bucky knows Tony’s paying for all his bills from personal funds. He uses that as an excuse to delay seeking a psychologist for a while, until he confesses his wish to Natalia.

And that’s that. Natalia helps him set up an appointment with a psychologist Clint trusts, and Tony rides with them. Natalia accepts the credit card Bucky pickpockets from Tony, and he’s rewarded with hot chocolate, which makes the whole psychologist ordeal less stressful.

Later that very same night, Bucky tries his luck wheedling the identity of Steve’s SO out of the blonde. Steve cracks like an egg.

“I met him in Washington,” Steve explains. “He’s really somethin’, Buck. Name’s Sam. He’s a good
man.”

Steve says it simply, like it’s some fundamental truth.

Bucky knows good men too.

“Don’t tell the others, though,” Steve laughs, breaking from his dopey-eyed daydreaming. “Let them sweat for a bit.”

“Sure,” Bucky agrees.

Steve ends the conversation by suggesting they go to the barber together, that Bucky should have the full treatment. Bucky sort of shuts down at that. He’s not- not comfortable with that. He doesn’t want that.

He doesn’t reply verbally, just sort of shrugs, and while this worries Steve, he takes the hint. He doesn’t press.

Bucky doesn’t sleep well, but he lies to Tony and says he did. Instead, Bucky pulls on one of Tony’s stolen shirts, and spends the night curled up tight in his nest, hands buried in his hair, and remains tense as his conditioning protests. The asset will comply with handler commands. The asset has no opinion. The asset is a tool.

He seeks out Tony. As far as handlers go, Tony wouldn’t be the worst by far. Bucky doesn’t want Tony to be his handler, but he trusts Tony, and he needs guidance. He can’t make a decision. He isn’t allowed. But Tony refuses to step into the role of handler, which relieves Bucky to no end. Instead, Tony reminds Bucky that he has no handler. That he is not merely the asset. He is Bucky Barnes.

Steve agrees to take Bucky out of the tower instead for a breath of fresh air. They walk through a nearby park, and Bucky purchases coconut milk pistachio ice cream from a vendor. Steve orders chocolate coconut milk ice cream, and pulls a face when he tries the treat. Bucky sticks a heaping spoonful of his own ice cream in his mouth, and smirks around the plastic utensil. He loves the vegan ice cream. Steve? Not so much.

Despite the cold snack, Bucky feels warm inside when Tony calls to check up on him. He tries to convince Tony to join them on an outing. He’d like- He enjoys his time with Tony. He enjoys his time with Steve. He’d enjoy time with both of them.

But Tony deflects, and they both hang up, and it’s Bucky’s turn to endure ribbing from Steve.

“Oughta just tie’em down and make’em see sense,” Bucky mutters, following up with a disgruntled spoonful of pistachio ice cream.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind,” the blonde alpha replies.

“I don’t wanna know how you know that.”

Jealousy flares up in Bucky at the mere thought of-

He growls. And Steve has the gall to laugh.

“’M gonna punch you,” Bucky threatens, and Steve placates him by offering out his chocolate ice cream. Bucky glowers for a moment, but takes it, and mashes the chocolate with the pistachio in his waxed paper bowl. “I want him. He wants me. What’s the fuckin’ problem there?”
Steve shrugs. “We’ve all got our hangups, y’know? I, for example, can’t sleep sometimes. I’m just scared the next time I open my eyes I’ll be seventy years in the future again, an’ everyone will be gone.” Steve glances down at Bucky, and offers a weak smile. “Tony doesn’t think it’s possible to really want a relationship with him. I can’t really begin to tell you how long it took him to realize we-the pack, I mean- don’t just want him for his money. We want him.”

Bucky indulges in the chocolate-pistachio mixture, drawing a grimace from the alpha. He feels the bizarre urge to chew the ice cream with his mouth open, just to gross Steve out further, but he doesn’t act on it.

“Do I even gotta chance?”

“Oh yeah. Definitely. You’ve just gotta wait him out.” Steve’s eyes light up, and a sly smile creeps on the alpha’s face. “Or get the pack on your side.”

So pretty soon it’s set. Everyone already knows about Bucky’s genuine interest in Tony but Tony himself. It’s maddening. It really is.

They have a late lunch in a little out of the way cafe that Steve describes as ‘one of those hipster places with vegan food’. It’s good. Really, really good. Bucky demolishes the meal placed in front of him, easily keeping pace with Steve’s own consumption. When they return home, he’s feeling relaxed. Happy. He wants to go see Tony, and Steve laughs at him, the ass. Bucky sulks away, and asks JARVIS where Tony can be located.

He’s apparently in the gym. Normally that isn’t a problem. Tony is a superhero with muscle mass and aerobic function to maintain. Bucky would also be a bald-faced liar if he said he didn’t watch the alpha work out at times. Mmmm. Tony.

No. The issue is that he walks in at the worst possible moment. Logically, he knows the boxing ring indicates a friendly, non-combative match, but he sees the beta land a glancing blow to Tony’s head, sees the alpha roll with the punch, and he snaps.

The asset is in the ring before his mind even catches up with his body. Primary objective one: protect Tony Stark. Primary objective two: protect fetus. The beta poses no threat to the asset, and therefore to the fetus, so primary objective one becomes the asset’s sole focus.

The beta sputters, eyes wide as the asset grips him by the throat. His body thuds heavily against the gym floor, and the asset swiftly follows. All threats must be eliminated. Failure is not an option.

Tony shouts at JARVIS, and places himself between the asset and the beta. This is unacceptable. The asset stops, and considers the situation. An easy fix. He takes Tony by the waist and tugs him around, using himself as a shield. Tony grips his arm, and the asset does not break free. He watches silently, tense and ready to spring the moment the beta attempts to move. Tony, the fool, tries to push himself back in front of the asset, but the asset keeps him firmly in place. He only moves when the alpha Steve enters, and this movement consists of adjusting himself to face off against both potential enemies.

Tony proves to be an excellent negotiator, especially when backed by the physical threat of the asset. They are soon left alone, and the asset immediately guides Tony to kneel where he can see him, and begins securing the perimeter. Tony refuses to stay down, however, and the asset—Feels.

Exasperation. Pride. His chosen mate is determined.

“Stay still,” he barks, gripping Tony by the front of the damp shirt. The asset—Wants. To bury his face against the scent glands beneath Tony’s jaw, to inhale the scent pooling in his sweat. He wants
to rub their scents together, to mix them until everyone possible knows that this alpha is claimed.

Now is not the time.

Now, the asset must wrangle a squirmy Tony Stark. The alpha attempts to distract the asset, to have him return the gun to its holster, but this would render Tony’s protection much more difficult. His ears pick out the sound of the elevator whirring to life, and he tenses, putting himself between Tony and the metal doors. Tony presses a hand between his shoulder blades in a touch that seems unconscious, but the asset’s focus narrows down to that contact. Warm, steady, secure. Safe.

The elevator doors glide open, and one of the suits of armor the asset has seen in Tony’s lab steps out. He tenses, but Tony speaks, takes his hand, closes the distance between them and the armor.

It’s empty, and Tony insists the armor is intended to protect the both of them, but the asset knows that he’s the most efficient, least fallible line of defense the alpha has. Still, Tony persists, and the asset watches sourly as the gun disappears within the suit of armor. Beyond that, Tony insistently pulls the asset into the elevator- the armor following behind them.

As the doors slide shut, the asset pushes Tony against the wall. Something slick and hot deep within him crows in delight at having his alpha so close. He pins the alpha, wraps his hand around that glowing light shining through the sweaty shirt. He isn’t clear on what exactly it does, on how Tony acquired it, but he knows its removal would mean Tony’s death.

That- thrills him. That he holds the alpha’s life in his hand.

Tony dislikes this, though, and while the asset could easily twist and pull, or push and crack, he lets the alpha break his hold.

When they enter the alpha’s inner territory, Tony attempts to sit down for a drink- lemonade. The asset doesn’t like this. He twists his fingers into Tony’s shirt collar, and pulls him down the hall. Down the hall, through the door, and into the nest. Tony remarks on the asset’s choice of nest material, but the asset says nothing. Why wouldn’t he want to line his nest with the alpha’s scent?

No matter. Tony shuffles closer, wraps the two of them together in a blanket, and-

Dozes?

The asset- The- Bucky? He feels exasperated fondness. No fucking sense of self preservation.

Fine. Bucky just- he’ll just need to protect the sleepy alpha if anything comes up. Even if all he wants to do is nuzzle against Tony’s hair, pin the alpha’s wrists to the nest, rut against- no. No. Fuck. Tony hasn’t given any sort of consent yet (yet), and Bucky knows the immeasurable value of consent.

So he sits there, toying with the stolen knife he’d hidden away in the folds of the nest. Very pointedly not thinking about the fact that he has Tony exactly where he wants him.

Tony is good to him, kind to him. Tony doesn’t fear him, even when he should.

So when it hits him the next morning- that he’d- oh god, he’d nearly killed one of Tony’s friends. He would have killed that beta. Maimed him at the least, just for laying a hand on Tony. How dare that-

No. He doesn’t do that anymore. No.

No.
They end up in Tony’s lab. Bucky- He really does intend to stay awake, to play sentinel to the alpha, but instead Bucky ends up on the couch. Asleep. For fucks sake.

He wakes up later, and by that time Tony is asleep as well, sprawled over a workbench. Bucky sighs. Never turn your back on an assassin. Tony doesn’t seem to have gotten that memo.

But he’s there, and he’s safe, and he’s- beautiful. Even with his face mashed against papers, drool pooling beneath his mouth, he’s beautiful.

Bucky brushes a kiss against the back of the alpha’s neck, feather-light and barely there, and vanishes.

He hides, in as much as lurking through the office levels counts as hiding. JARVIS doesn’t want him to be here, but he’s figured out Tony’s privacy protocols allow Bucky’s free movement so long as there is no danger to himself or others. And anyways, the people working in the office levels have been desensitized to weirdness, so a metal-armed pregnant omega slinking through the halls doesn’t raise a single eyebrow.

Besides. It’s Thursday. Bucky has been reliably informed that Tobias from sales brings his spouse’s baked goods on Thursdays.

He remains on level twenty two as the day-workers trickle in. No one’s ratted him out to their boss yet, and Bucky would be hard-pressed to give up this weird slice of normalcy.

The Avengers call-out allows Bucky to move freely. He lingers just long enough to pilfer a brownie from Tobias, but when he returns to Avengers territory he ends up right back in his nest, seeking comfort and an escape from the self-hatred, the loathing, the knowledge that he is a danger to this found family.

There’s an issue in going to his nest, however. His nest, which Tony slept in the night before. The nest that’s saturated in that almonds and coconut scent.

He wants. Left alone with his fantasies, no one to hurt, Bucky- indulges. He remembers snippets of affairs in the thirties, the forties. He remembers fucking for missions in the time since then. He remembers- the incident, and the vengeance after.

He’d like to remember time with Tony too. He makes do with the blanket they’d shared, bunched up beneath his head, and his own callused fingers.

He showers after. Of course he does. It wouldn’t take a genius to notice the scent of a satisfied omega, and Tony has his dumbass so-called boundaries.

He showers, and he dresses, and he waits for Tony to come back. And he fixates, again. A distraction is only that.

Tony brushes his fears away. Convinces him to have pizza, and that’s that. He almost- almost- asks Tony to come spend the night in his nest again, but nothing’s been washed, and Tony would figure him out in an instant.

So he waits until the next day, and situates himself in Tony’s space again. The new beta- the very one that Steve had told him about- sits awkwardly at the breakfast bar, and Bucky amuses himself by making the beta even more uncomfortable. He approves, though. He does. Stevie knows how to pick them.

Tony leaves, and Bucky spends time with Steve. And Sam.
But it doesn’t really take long for Bucky to fuck that up as well. He touches his stomach. That’s all. That’s it. Bucky touches his stomach. He feels the notable bump, the tautness of the skin, and he shuts the fuck down.

He distantly notes the lightheadedness that comes with rapid breathing. It’s like- like he’s looking down a scope at the situation around him. Like he’s way up on some rooftop (strapped to a bench in a cold, cement cell) watching, not participating. He feels cold (his skin crawls), and the beta- the beta- Sam. Sam is kneeling in front of him, talking quietly, urgently. What? Bucky recoils, flinching in on himself. He won’t hurt Sam. He won’t hurt him.

Bucky ends up curled fully against one arm of the couch. Steve says they should call Tony. Bucky snaps that they should the fuck not. No. Tony has things to do. Things- Things that don’t involve babying a broken omega.

But Tony shows up anyways, shortly after Bucky hangs up from his therapist. And he shows up with food.

Tony says sugar makes everything better. Bucky thinks Tony makes everything better.

A little over a week later, Tony leaves. About a day after that, he comes back. With a child.

Bucky knew about Harley. Tony hasn’t been able to shut up about the kid at the day drew near. So yeah, he’s heard plenty about the kid from Tennessee. Seeing Harley is a whole other matter.

Mine, his instincts decisively say within moments of laying eyes on the kid. Harle is so painfully obviously Tony’s kid. If not in blood, then in spirit. And as such, the kid becomes Bucky’s. He preens when Harley labels him as Tony’s mate, rolls his eyes when Tony splutters and denies the connection. When Harley grabs Bucky by the wrist, Bucky follow, docile.

Bucky provides the expertise in avoiding capture. Harley provides something else.

“You’re sure?” Bucky ventures, skeptical. Harley kicks his heel against the rooftop ledge.

“One hundred percent,” Harley agrees.

“What, an’ you just happen to remember all this?”

“I have an eidetic memory, duh.”

Six steps, taken from one of the magazines Harley’s ma subscribes to. Apparently all you need to seduce an alpha is six simple steps. Style, Flirting, Scents, Touching, Courting, Bonding. Bucky has his doubts. He has a lot of doubts, especially with such a huge leap between ‘touching’ and ‘courting’. But Tony’s been oblivious up to this point, and Bucky might be desperate.

Naturally, that’s when the universe spits the object of Bucky’s obsession out from the rooftop access. Bucky beats a hasty retreat when the kid seems to be able to handle himself.

Style, flirting, scents, touching. Then courting and bonding. What a load of bullshit. Well, he’s got the flirting down, he thinks. Maybe he’s got this?

That doesn’t stop him from seeking out Natalia and begging her help in cleaning up. How the fuck is he supposed to do the style step?

Natalia and Pepper take him shopping. In other terms: he submits himself to mild torture. He doesn’t like being the subject of analysis. He doesn’t like the stuffy, artificially-scented stores and boutiques.
He doesn’t like- any of it.

But he ends up with clothes. Style? Uh, sure. Check. There’s the added bonus of being able to ask Pepper for help getting Tony a birthday present, so that’s good.

He tries out some of Clint’s and then Pepper’s perfumes over the next few days. Scents? Alright, check. Tony doesn’t seem to respond to any of them. Doesn’t seem to notice. He does seem to like the outfits, though, even if they make Bucky feel like a fucking doll. Then again, Tony responds just as favorably to seeing Bucky wear his stolen t-shirts, so maybe that’s a bust as well.

He sees Harley every day. The young alpha seeks him out, if Bucky doesn’t make the first move. He gets a front-row-seat to the spectacle of Harley testing some little machine he’s made for Tony, his heart doing these warm little flip-flops and flutters when he makes his unofficially adopted kid smile.

“D’you think he’ll like it?” Harley asks, looking for Bucky’s seal of approval.

“He’s gonna be over the moon, pal,” Bucky reassures him.

And Tony is. He really is over the fucking moon. Looks like he’s about to cry when Harley plops the machine in his lap. Bucky could fucking purr, he’s so happy. He doesn’t, though. Instead, he hands off his own gift- the book Pepper found for him.

The birthday party is- it’s fun. Nice. The cake is great, the company’s a delight. Bucky enjoys himself.

What he enjoys less is the knowledge that Tony’s actual birthday will be spent at a party. Without Bucky. It drives him up the wall, knowing Tony’s going to be spending a whole night at a party surrounded by people vying for his attention, and Bucky won’t be there to prove Tony’s been claimed. It’s infuriating.

But he doesn’t really have a claim on Tony. So what the hell can he even do.

It’s still satisfying when Natalia contacts him, says they’re heading home. That while Tony was certainly the center of attention, none of it struck home.

Bucky is watching a movie with Harley at this point. The young alpha is exhausted. Almost as soon as Tony left his bed (and fucking god damnit if that wasn’t a tempting sight to begin with) to go primp and preen, Bucky had taken Harley to the gym. He’d intended to teach the kid self-defense. Steve has laid down the law and said Bucky cannot teach Harley to shoot a gun or fight with knives until he’s at least sixteen, but hand-to-hand is still fully on the table.

Harley has a way of sidetracking things, however, and they end up in the pool.

The point being, Harley ends up worn-out, and falls asleep towards the end of the second movie.

-We’re ten minutes out. I’ll warn you that Tony was very popular- Natalia informs him.

Bucky’s teeth grind together, but he takes a breath and tamps down the urge to break fingers. The phone vibrates again.

-He’s been accused of settling down. Didn’t deny it.-

-Also didn’t correct me when I called you his omega until his brain caught up with his mouth :) -

Now that one fills Bucky with satisfaction. It’s proof that Bucky isn’t barking up the wrong tree.
He’ll wait in Tony’s room. Ideally naked in Tony’s bed- he remembers- he thinks he remembers that being effective in seducing a mark. But Tony’s isn’t a mark, and he still has his dumbass ‘boundaries’. Bucky won’t cross those boundaries, but he might- he might push. Just a little. Or a lot.

Okay, maybe watching Tony shower like a self-satisfied voyeur doesn’t count as respecting boundaries, but Tony doesn’t seem to mind. The end result benefits them both. Tony doesn’t smell like a whorehouse, and Bucky is provided a blank slate to mark. He’s… tender. Fucking hell, he just wants to manhandle Tony onto the bed- or better yet, into his nest- and have it the fuck off, but boundaries. Dumbass, paper-thin, squint to see them boundaries. Bucky values Tony’s affection more than he does the promise of sex.

So he scent marks Tony, and he leaves. Of course he does.

Six steps, right?

Chapter End Notes

Bucky is a power bottom. Change my mind.
The thing about being an Avenger is that you can’t ever trust a period of calm. All peace means is that there’s a storm on the horizon.

“What the fuck even is that?” Clint snaps from his perch atop the New York Aquarium. He isn’t as high up as he’d like, but there isn’t exactly plenty of time to go of searching for a new spot to shoot from.

A giant-ass space monster looking like some deep sea gorgon head starfish screeches in the air as it shoots back and forth, held at bay by Tony and the Storm siblings while the combined Fantastic Four and Avengers do their best to figure out how to take this thing down. The central mass is about the size of a bus halved and mashed together into a square- or in this case, a star- but the writhing knot of grabby, spike-ended tentacle things can’t really be defined.

It really, really wants to get into the aquarium.

“No clue,” Tony growls, searing through a lashing, branched tentacle thing with a laser. The thing screeches like an overtaxed piccolo, and it twists, diving towards the aquarium again, but Susan flares out a forcefield.

“Cover the whole building,” Cap commands, and Susan obeys. “Widow, status report on civilians?”

“Everyone’s been evacuated. Returning to battle now.”

“Got it. Banner? Code green. Let’s take this thing down.”

“Fantastic,” the scientist sighs. There’s a click as he disconnects from the team feed, and a moment later, Hulk comes barrelling onto the scene. He immediately lunges at the starfish thing, and that marks the beginning of the end.

The combined forces of the Avengers and Fantastic Four converge in a concerted effort to drop the destructive alien thing. And they do pretty damn well. The best technique seems to be hacking away as many of the branched, spiked tentacles as possible, rendering the thing essentially weaponless. Watery teal fluid rains from the severed limbs, and yeah, that’s going to be a bitch for the decontamination team to deal with, but first things first.

“War Machine inbound. How’s it looking?”

“Under control, honeybear,” Tony coos. He can practically feel Steve’s disapproval at the nickname. “Party might be over when you get here.”

“What a shame.”

The creature thrashes, darting here and there in the air, but Tony, Johnny, and Reed (the dick) keep it more or less pinned. Until it makes a break for the water.

It hadn’t really occurred to them that the thing might also be aquatic, which is their own fault. However, when it lashes out and drags Steve and Natasha with it, no one’s really thinking about how they could have missed something like that.
Tony and Johnny shoot off like rockets. Tony grabs hold of Steve and makes quick work of cutting the captain free as the creature hurtles towards the water, but as he hooks his hands under Steve’s arms to fly him to safety, a barbed tentacle smashes his helmet, wraps around his body, and Tony throws Steve, trusting that his teammate will land safely in the water.

Speaking of water.

They go under, Tony and the creature. He thinks Johnny got Natasha out, but Tony’s pretty fucking stuck. The suit isn’t meant to be submerged, but he’s got a good thirty minutes before oxygen becomes a problem, so he fires up the repulsors and takes a shot. The tentacle around him squeezes, crushes, and red warnings flicker on the HUD.

“Sir, armor integrity is at 73%.” A screech of metal as the barbs drag across his back panels. “68%.”

“That’s not good.”

The team’s yelling in his ear, and his brain decides that now is the perfect time to hit the brakes. He can’t make full sense of the increasingly frantic demands for a status report, assurances that backup’s inbound, so much bullshit. He mutes the team feed.

“Please breathe, sir.”

He can’t. He feels water seeping in through a compromised panel beneath his left shoulder blade. He can’t breathe, because if he does he’ll get a lung full of water and he’s not doing that again, ever again, even if JARVIS says he has six point three minutes before things get to that point. He can’t breathe, but he does, and he does so rapidly, and his head spins, and he feels like he’s moving so slowly, like he’s trapped in a bubble of honey while the world races by him. He drags up his gauntlets and shoots rapidfire blasts at the creature’s main body, and barbed tentacles begin to pry at the plates of his armor.

He isn’t exactly clear on the following events. One moment he’s sinking deeper, pulled along by a pissed off tentacle thing, and the next he’s in the air, Rhodey’s metal-clad hands holding his deadweight. Then suddenly he’s out of the suit, on the beach, and then the Hulk is there, and in a blink Steve and Natasha and Clint show up.

Then he’s in a car, and Rhodey’s hands are on him, and he’s not- he sees spots, and Rhodey presses a strong, sure hand against his rapidly rising and falling chest as he curls as small as he can against the closed door.


“Pack,” Tony manages to choke out. He shouldn’t have left them. He shouldn’t have left them. What kind of shit alpha panics and abandons his pack? He’s dizzy, and his chest hurts, hurts more than it should. Is he dying? Is this it? Maybe that’s better. Then his pack won’t have a piece of shit home alpha.

“Your pack’s fine. They’re fine Tony. I promise. Okay? Pinky promise.” Tony’s hands are fisted tight against his undersuit leggings, but Rhodey worms his pinky around Tony’s in the childish gesture. “C’mere. C’mere, Tony. I’ve got you. Steve’s protecting the pack, okay? He told me to protect you.”

Rhodey gingerly hauls Tony across the seat, and Tony limply allows himself to be manhandled. Rhodey is safety. Safety in the desert, in a party with too much to drink and too many people willing to take advantage of an underage billionaire, in a literal fucking firefight, in an ocean. Rhodey guides
Tony’s head down against his shoulder.

“Breathe with me. That’s important, Tones. In, two three four- out, two three four. In two three four, out two three four.”

He tries. He really fucking does. He tries, and he sucks at it, but Rhodey holds him close and tells him how well he’s doing, and he thinks maybe he can do this? In two three four, out two three four. In, out.

In-

When did they get to the Tower? How long have they been in here? He feels like a fly trapped in amber, stuck and preserved as the eons fly by. They’re out of the car, Rhodey supporting Tony’s stumbling weight, and head right into the elevator. Rhodey tries to keep him upright, but Tony sinks to the floor, puts his head between his knees, and Rhodey rubs his back instead.

He’s helped up again when they reach his floor, and Tony rips himself out of his best friend’s grip to make a beeline to the bar. With shaky hands he drags an amber bottle from the wall. He fills a crystal tumbler to the very top, and the tremor gripping him sloshes liquor over the edge as he lifts it to his lips.

But he can’t. He can’t. He made a promise, and he drops the full tumbler in the sink where it shatters. He flinches from the noise. He’ll deal with that later. It’s fine. It’s fine. It’s fine.

Everything is fine.

“Tony?”

Bucky’s voice is loud, and Tony flinches from that too, bringing a hand up to dig into his own hair. To pull. It hurts. Hurt is good. It makes everything go quiet, for just a moment. There’s shattered crystal in the sink. That would hurt less than drowning.

“I’m sorry, Bucky, but I need you to not be here right now.”

Why did Rhodey say that? Why-

Time seems to skip in bursts. He’s stripped- maybe by himself? Maybe by Rhodey? He’s stripped and bundled into the softest, warmest things he owns, then wrapped in a blanket. His breathing hitches again, and he can’t breathe, and why can’t he breathe? He digs his nails into his scalp and pulls at the skin because the pain is something he can focus on, and the hum of electricity is so fucking loud, and- and- and-

“Open up, Tones,” Rhodey orders gently, and Tony trustingly obeys. He’s administered a small tasteless pill, followed by warm water, and it’s not long after that he sleeps.

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Tony feels like absolute shit when he wakes up. He’s groggy, and exhausted, and- huh. He’s also not alone.

Natasha sits at the foot of the bed, carding her fingers through Clint’s hair- Clint, who’s sprawled sideways across Tony’s legs. Bruce is right there beside Tony, leaning against the headboard while he reads. There’s Steve nodding off in a chair, and Rhodey keeping guard by the door.

“Hey there, Sleeping Beauty,” Bruce greets, and something warm and fuzzy wraps its way around
his heart. He knows exactly what happened before his impromptu nap. He remembers the panic and
the choking breathlessness and the inability to keep track of linear time, but while he’s tired, and to
be perfectly honest feels like he’s been hit by a truck, it isn’t lingering. Rhodey probably broke out
the Oraxylan, the alpha-specific sedative Tony keeps on hand for emergencies like that one, where
everything compounds and compounds and compounds until there’s no end in sight. Just for
emergencies, though. It’s addictive, if you aren’t careful. And Tony is careful. He’ll just need to stay
in bed for a little while, shake off the lingering effects. Aftershocks of the breakdown might hit him
as his system clears, but he’s got his fingers crossed against that.

“Hey yourself.” He’s not going to mention his breakdown if they don’t. He closes his eyes, tries to
pull the blanket up over his head, but his hand hurts, and he slits an eye open to examine it.

Right. That’s right. He grabbed crystal, after it broke. Rhodey forced it out of his hand before he
could actually squeeze the sharp pieces, but the cuts apparently needed to be dressed in a bandage
that feels stiff around his hand.

“Are you alright?”

That one’s Steve.

“Yeah.”

No further comment.

The lights are dim, and Tony hears the door open and close. He buries his head against Bruce’s hip,
and the beta runs his fingers through Tony’s hair.

“Was anyone hurt?” he mumbles.

“Sue got a nosebleed,” Clint informs him. “And Steve dislocated his shoulder.”

“What?”

He sits up immediately, and stars swim across his vision at the sudden change in position. Bruce
steadies him as he blinks his eyes clear.

“Clint,” Steve admonishes, before turning his attention to Tony. “It’s nothing. I already healed. See?”

He’s in casuals, so he pulls the left sleeve up, shows Tony the full range of motion. Tony isn’t quite
satisfied though.

“When did that happen? When I threw you in the water?”

“I’m fine, Tony. Don’t worry about it.”

So yes. Fantastic. Tony rubs his knuckles against his eyes. Way to go.

The door opens again, and Rhodey slips back in.

“Pepper called,” he tells Tony. “Again. She wanted to check on you.”

“I hope you lied and said everything’s fine,” Tony growls, but the sound is fucking weak.

“Nope. I told her it was bad enough that I had to convince JARVIS to give me an Oraxylan tablet.
But that you’re doing better now. She says she’ll come by later, if you want her to.”
“Why not. JARVIS, let her know to swing by.” He pauses. “Hang on, what time is it?”

“Eleven PM, sir,” JARVIS replies.

“Fuck. Nevermind. Tell her I’ll see her tomorrow. She should get some sleep.”

He hauls himself out of bed, but it quickly becomes apparent that he’s not fully in control of his body. Steve is pretty much the only reason his face doesn’t meet floor. It’ll be a few more hours before the meds are actually out of his system.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Steve asks.

“T’find Bucky, dumbass. Why isn’t he here?” Oh. Wait.

Oh.

He probably doesn’t want to be there. Why the hell would he?

Rhodey reads him like a book.

“Relax. I kept him out.”

“What? Why?”

He remembers Rhodey telling Bucky to give him space earlier, which was probably good. Bucky can’t possibly want to deal with a fuckup alpha who can’t even breathe properly.

“I didn’t want him to hit a trigger for you. ‘Cause of the video.”


“Alright, well, thank you, but I don’t think that was the right call. Let go of me.”

He shakes off Steve’s hands, only to literally fall right into Rhodey’s. The beta takes advantage of the height difference to pick Tony up, and deposits him back in bed.

“If you hurt his feelings I’ll kick your ass,” he mutters.

“Yeah, good luck with that, Mr. I-Can’t-Stand.”

Tony grabs Rhodey’s wrist, and glares up at his friend.

“Go get him, and get your asses back in here.”

Apparently it’s pack time. Jesus fucking Christ. Tony’d honestly rather hole up on his own and sort himself out. There’s no goddamn need to make everyone watch him flounder like an ass, but they’re all already here, and Tony can’t see a reason to exclude Bucky.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, fuck off.”

It’s an affectionate ‘fuck off’. Rhodey knows this.

Besides, he deserves it for keeping Bucky out of the cuddle puddle.

Rhodey comes back after a solid fifteen minutes.

“I can’t find your man,” he announces.
“Oh my god, you’re useless. FRIDAY, let Bucky know he’s got an invite to the pack party.”

“See if I talk your ungrateful ass down from a panic attack ever again, you child.”

“You didn’t talk me down; you drugged me.”

Consensually. In accordance with the specific, outlined procedure Tony and his former therapist and his prescribing doctor all worked out together. The rest of the pack watches them squabble, until Bruce forces Tony to lay down again. He tries to convince Rhodey and Steve to join the four of them already crushed in bed together, but the two men respectfully decline. Fine. They can be that way.

He just wants to be warm. Warm, the way New York water is not.

Bucky helps, when he shows up. He slips into the dark room, now illuminated by Tony’s reactor alone, and navigates around the chair Rhodey’s pulled up, to get into bed. Tony’s feeling muzzy now, with the pack’s mated pair a comforting weight against his legs, and his fellow scientist nodding off behind him. He welcomes Bucky without a second thought, though. Lets Bucky take his time deciding to get under the covers, and then it’s fantastic, because Bucky is a goddamn space-heater, and Tony wastes no time in pressing up as close as he can. Things are starting to sound cottony, and Tony just wants to sleep, and his whole bonded pack plus Rhodey is here now, so that doesn’t seem like too bad an idea.

It’s hard to pull himself out of bed, the next day. He doesn’t manage until one in the afternoon. No one forces him but himself, and he finds himself with a shadow at all times. Which is, you know. A good idea. He’s sort of- it feels like he’s not really there. Like he’s holding a video game controller. Like he’s not in his own fucking body. Tony doesn’t do well with that sort of feeling. No one wants him to grab shattered crystal again, or anything else like that just to bring himself back into his body. They’ve done this for Steve before, once, when they’d fought some nut with an ice ray, but Tony can’t help but feel like it’s different for him. Steve isn’t a fuckup broken alpha. He’s allowed to need help. Tony isn’t.

But help he gets.

He tries to get ready for a board meeting the next day, but Pepper crushes that attempt and orders him to remain home, promises to bring donuts later. Bucky watches him, always watches him, though he seems a little less willing to approach when Rhodey’s near, which is bullshit. But hey, Tony can’t exactly shove them in a closet until they make nice. No fucking way. So he’ll deal with their mutual wariness until they sort themselves out. They’re both adults.

“And it turns out that the aquarium’s octopus was actually an alien. Can you believe that?”

Harley somehow has all the details about the incident the day before. Tony blames- Well. He blames FRIDAY and Harley combined.

“No way, really?”

Harley probably knows that Tony’s putting on a show. He’s already been briefed by Steve regarding the events at the aquarium. The giant pacific octopus, Squirt, seems to genuinely be a shapeshifting alien hiding out on Earth for whatever reason, and the starfish thing was hunting him. Or something. He’s the WSC’s problem now, being treated as a welcome visitor last Tony heard.

The starfish thing, however, is definitely dead.

He shivers.
Bucky takes note immediately, and hauls over a blanket, just like he’s done every time Tony so much as rubs his arm.

“I’m not actually cold,” he protests, just like every other time, but just like every other time, he takes the blanket.

It’s warm, like water is not.

He’s benched for a few more days. Day three, he leaves the tower to do grown-up bullshit like his job. Day four he accompanies Bucky to an OB/GYN appointment. Day six he’s back in the lab, fixing what the starfish broke. Day seven, he’s cornered on the way to his floor.

By Steve.

Goddamnit.

Tony’s preparing himself for an argument about his mental health, but Steve holds up his hands placatingly.

“It’s the fifteenth,” Steve says, like that’s going to mean something to him.

“Yes,” Tony agrees, deadpan.

“Sunday the fifteenth. Of June.”

“Yes.”

Steve rolls his eyes.

“Come on. Harley made you breakfast.”

Breakfast. Right. Tony’s- He might have spent the night in the lab.

“You let a twelve-year-old cook? Are you serious?”

“He asked us for help,” Steve protests by way of defending himself. “He was supervised.”

“Who’s ‘us’?”

“Me’n Bucky.”

“Why?”

Pack breakfasts aren’t exactly unusual, but this seems less ‘pack’ and more ‘Tony and Harley and Steve and Bucky’. And Steve’s making a big fucking deal over the day and Tony really doesn’t get it.

At least, he doesn’t until he walks into the kitchen, and Harley puts a chunk of paper in his hands.

“Happy Father’s Day,” the young alpha greets, grinning, before he hurries back to where Bucky’s keeping an eye on pancakes. Purple pancakes. Uh, alright. He looks for Steve, trying to figure out what exactly is happening, but the other alpha is nowhere to be seen. Damn sneaky bastard.

So he looks down in his hands, at the heavy chunk of paper. It’s a printed coloring-book-style page of his Iron Man armor, carefully detailed with some kind of marker in black and silver. The repulsor blasts are perfect lines of various colors merging into a straight rainbow.
There’s a split down the middle, and Tony opens it. The card folds in on itself, and there’s a picture of the Bean, printed and split down the middle. He opens it again, and it’s Harley’s sketch of the drone he plans to build. One more time, and ‘Happy Father’s Day!’ is meticulously drawn across the paper, surrounded by circuit-board lines. Tony swallows, and opens the card again back onto the colored armor.

“What’s this?” he asks, trying to keep his voice as steady as he can.

“That’s my armor,” Harley tells him. “I could be your sidekick.”

“We’ll talk about it when you’re eighteen.” He can’t imagine putting Harley in danger like that, but like Peter’s already proven, kids can’t always be kept from doing dangerous bullshit. Self-defense training first. “I like the repulsors.”

“JARVIS’s been helping me run simulations on manipulating the beams. There’s not really a use for the rainbow, but I think it looks cool.”

“It looks fucking awesome is what it looks like.”

Harley lights up, and Tony isn’t quite sure what to do. He thinks he might cry.

Bucky saves him by dropping another purple pancake onto the mountain already made, and bringing the plate over to the bar.

“Food’s ready,” he rumbles.

Breakfast consists of purple pancakes (neither Bucky nor Harley realized blueberries shouldn’t be mixed into the batter, but dropped onto forming pancakes instead, and Steve caught them too late to stop them), a hashbrown casserole, and fruit. Comfort food. Good food.

Tony drowns his pancakes in margarine and fancy syrup. The pancakes are a little too crispy around the edges, and the vegan cheese in the hashbrown casserole feels weird in his mouth, but Tony’s-

He’s probably happier than he’s been in a long fucking time. And he feels- real.

He feels real, sitting there with Bucky, who’s inhaling his pancakes and potatoes like a madman, and Harley, who meticulously cuts each pancake into perfectly-sized squares.

The card finds its way to a place of honor in his lab, and while Tony doesn’t actually cry, it’s a damn near thing.

Chapter End Notes

Depersonalization is a bitch. I'm not sure if that's the right word, but that's what I call it when it happens to me, and if you've never experienced it before, let me tell you it fucking sucks.

I've got this idea that alphas, betas, and omegas are metabolically different enough that some medications have to be specialized to work with their systems. Like here Tony is given an alpha-specific sedative, because alphas are less sensitive to ones marketed to betas or whatever. And it's an addictive one, but a fast acting one. It's kept locked up to prevent anyone from getting their hands on it, or Tony from trying to access it when he doesn't need it so he doesn't develop an addiction, and JARVIS is the one with the key.
to the lock. To get those pills you have to convince JARVIS first.

I'm probably going overboard on the whole 'dad Tony' thing but I love it. You can't take it from me.

And Rhodey was trying to protect Tony, and trying to prevent Bucky from accidentally triggering a worse state of mind in case Tony saw him and immediately associated him with the video of Howard and Maria's deaths. It wasn't malicious, and it wasn't because he doesn't like Bucky, but because he just wanted to take care of Tony.

I've got a companion piece up, in which I'll post scenes that are sexual in nature as I decide to write them. I'll try to keep this one relatively clean in case explicit/sexually mature scenes aren't your cup of tea.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

So this one's getting updated before A Whole New World mainly because I'm having a bit of writer's block for that. I think I'm getting stopped up because we're so close to the end.

But anyways! Have some of this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next few days are spent avoiding Natasha.

Well, Bruce avoids Natasha, and Tony mostly manages to keep Harley away from her. Not because she’s in a bad mood, or feeling malicious, or anything like that, but because she and Clint are preparing for Clint’s heat.

He’s like fucking clockwork, that crazy sunuva bitch. Mid June, mid October, and mid February of every goddamn year, unless he decides to take suppressants to push things back. They’ve known it was coming, have it all marked out on the calendar, but the clearest indicator isn’t anything to do with Clint, but the way Natasha responds.

She’s possessive and defensive, where she would normally be subtle and calculating. She doesn’t leave Clint’s side for a moment. And all the while, Clint just goes about his business like nothing’s out of the ordinary, like he isn’t flushed and feverish with a preheat cycle, like he doesn’t have a murderous redheaded Russian glaring daggers at anyone who comes closer than three feet away. She knows no one in the pack is going to hurt Clint, or take him, or separate them, but Tony is also aware that she doesn’t have a history of being allowed to keep her bonded mates. Clint is apparently her third, and while she doesn’t talk about the first two, Clint has confided in Tony that he’s the only one she’s ever had outside the Red Room.

So nobody blames her for wanting to keep Clint safe, even from her own pack.

This does, however, lead to incidents. Like Tony and Steve trying to break up a fight between Natasha and Bucky before it even begins.

“Let’s take a deep breath, and calm down, okay?” Steve soothes.

Natasha’s utter lack of scent is disconcerting when combined with the otherwise aggressive posturing going on. Bucky, however, is easy to read. And he’s fucking pissed. Not Winter Soldier pissed, but definitely mad. He growls something in Russian, and Tony’s been following through on his personal vow to learn the language, so he gets the gist. Something about ripping her head off if she threatens Harley again.

“No one threatened Harley,” Tony says calmly. Harley’s been ushered away by Bruce, to get him out of the way. “Alright?”

Natasha might have been a little overzealous in shooing the curious young alpha away from Clint, but she definitely hadn’t threatened him. Maybe startled him, at worst.
Tony is absolutely, without a doubt certain that nothing has been done to warrant decapitation.

He’s currently standing between his two aggravated teammates with his arms outstretched like the world’s flimsiest wall. Either one of them could rip him down like tissue paper, even with alpha strength on his side. Thank anyone and everyone that Steve’s got his back, hovering close to Bucky while Clint works to calm his mate.

“Think of the pup,” Steve murmurs, a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. The omega shrugs Steve away and glares daggers at him.

“Yeah, yeah, do that. No strenuous activity, right? Harley’s fine. We’ll go check on him, but fighting would probably be the worst thing right now. And you.” He turns to Natasha. She hasn’t backed down yet, but Clint’s on his way to softening her up. “I know you’re getting antsy, but, uh- Maybe go peg Clint or something. Relax. We can start bringing food to your room if you want to keep him in your territory.”

“No objections there,” Clint murmurs with a grin, and the sweet, syrupy scent of an omega on the cusp of heat would be distracting, if Tony wasn’t familiar with Clint by now. It helps that he’s got a pair of scent-dampeners clipped around his wrists. While not technically necessary at home, it’s considered polite to wear them, and Clint chooses to do so. “C’mon, Nat. Let’s go.”

He leans in to whisper something into her ear, something that makes Steve’s face redden and draws an unamused grunt from Bucky, but Tony doesn’t have the enhanced hearing to make out more than hushed murmurs. Neither Natasha nor Bucky are willing to back down first, though Natasha’s allowed Clint to take her hand, and Bucky’s got his own hand resting on his belly.

“Alright, I’m going to count, and you’re both going to stand down on three. Alright? Same time. And I will be very fucking disappointed in the both of you if you try to be the last person standing.” He glances between them again, and slowly lowers his arms. “One. Two. Three.”

And they both back off.

Bomb defused. Jesus.

Natasha and Clint clear out fast, and Steve immediately tries to press Bucky, to figure out what exactly set him off. Because all Tony and Steve could see was Harley sitting down on the couch a little too close to Clint, and Natasha growling at him to stay away from her mate. Harley had quickly apologized and scrambled away, and then Bucky had stepped in.

Honestly, it was an overreaction on all sides. Harley might be an alpha, but he’s twelve, and despite Tony’s teasing threats regarding The Talk, he’s a kid, and doesn’t have any real interest in the omegas in the tower. So Natasha and Clint’s bond isn’t being threatened. Nor was Harley himself threatened, contrary to what Bucky seems to believe.

“Steve,” Tony pipes up, when it’s immediately clear that Bucky doesn’t want to talk. “Go chat with the wonderpair. See how they want to move forward.”

This isn’t a traditionalist, conservative pack. Clint isn’t locked away out of ‘temptation’s view’ for the duration of his pre- and proper-heat. But if it’s going to be a genuine problem for the peace of the pack, they might have to ask the pair to stick to their floor for the week. Which will end up being them sticking to their room, because neither of them are going to be willing to leave after a certain point, hence why Steve and Tony take turns ferrying water and food.

The other alpha very obviously considers arguing for a moment, but this isn’t the field. It’s not a real
battle. It’s an altercation between family, and that’s Tony’s sphere of influence.

Not that he doesn’t argue with Steve in the field. He does. He definitely does. That’s neither here nor there. Shh.


“You, come with me. ‘Kay?”

He throws out an arm around Bucky’s tense shoulders, and valiantly pretends that the way Bucky melts into him doesn’t make his heart flip flop like a fish in too-shallow water.

In, out.

“We’re gonna go check on the pipsqueak, and then you’re getting a bath. Sound good?”

Bucky only said it once and probably won’t say it again unless placed under duress, but he’s hitting the stage of his pregnancy where his pelvic area aches like no one’s business. The admission came at Dr. Miran’s office, and the doctor assured him that it was normal, and everything else looks perfectly fine, but Bucky burns through normal and omega-specific painkillers in five minutes tops, and no one is willing to risk hurting the pup with an upped dose.

Warm water helps, though. Hot water bottles, baths, a controlled heating blanket- things like that.

Bucky bobs his fist for yes, letting his head drop to the side to nudge against Tony’s.

They find Harley and Bruce in the library- an addition specifically designed for Bruce and Steve. They’re the only two with extremely strong opinions on physical books. Bruce is teaching the young alpha how to play chess. Or, he’s already taught Harley, and they’re now playing a game. Bruce could probably end the game in ten moves or less with Harley, but he’s taking it easy on the inexperienced kid when Tony and Bucky walk in.

The pair glance up at the newcomers, and Harley smiles. There’s worry in his expression as his eyes flick between Bucky and Tony, but it melts away when Tony casts an easy grin in his direction.

“Everything’s fine. We should have laid down some rules about this whole…” He makes a vague gesture with his hand. “Thing.”

“Mom’s said you always have to be respectful of omegas, especially when they’re in heat, ‘cause not enough people’re gonna be that way.”

“And your mom is one hundred percent right. You did really well, squirt. We’ve just all got issues.”

He leaves Bucky’s side to lean over Harley, bracing a hand on the kid’s shoulder. “Move that knight there. You’ll have his bishop in two turns.”

“No, that’s using a tactical advantage.” He can just about hear Bruce’s eye roll. “Anyways, my point was, Nat’s got issues about letting people near Clint when he’s like this, and we should have either told you or asked them to hang out on their own floor. I’m sorry.”

Harley twists to look up at Tony, chewing the inside of his cheek. He then relaxes, and shrugs.

“It’s fine. You learn from mistakes.”

He delivers this pearl of wisdom with the tone of a great sage, the cheeky squirt. Tony can’t help it.
He laughs.

“Thank you, oh wise one. What are you, Yoda? You’re about the right height.”

“Like you’re one to talk!”

“Ouch!” Tony clutches his reactor and steps off the to left. “You wound me, Harley. You really do. Bucky, defend my honor.”

/What honor?/ he signs. He already seems a little brighter, and that devastating half-smile on his face is a gift.

“You’re the worst. The absolute worst.” He turns his attention to Bruce. /You alright? Or do you need to tap out? I can take the kid. /

“I’m going to learn ASL too, and then you’ll all be in trouble,” Harley grumbles.

Bruce smiles, adjusts his glasses, then signs, /I’m fine. I’ll have JARVIS let you know when I need a break. /

“Sounds good,” he says, mostly for Harley’s benefit. “Nat and Clint’ll probably hole up for a while.” Usually about five days, “And you’re sure you’re okay?”

Harley nods decisively.

“Yeah. I’m sorry for almost starting a fight.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for. Those two are just being touchy.” He hears Bucky huff in exasperation behind him. “And as much as it pains me to admit, you might have been the most mature one involved today.”

“Does that mean I can watch Game of Thrones?”

“Answer is still no. You have to convince your mom, not me. Well!” He claps his hands together and looks brightly around the room at his three packmates. “Bucky and I have important things to attend to. Stay out of trouble; don’t incite the Hulk.”

“Tony, don’t give him ideas,” Bruce sighs, rubbing his eyes beneath the glasses.

Tony grips Harley’s shoulder and leans over to whisper, his voice pitched loud enough for everyone to hear, “Hulk likes snickerdoodles, just FYI.”

A true fact. A wonderful, wonderful true fact.

Harley is fine, and now that Tony has verified it personally, he doesn’t feel bad about guiding Bucky up to the penthouse. The strange configuration of furniture in Bucky’s room isn’t nearly as weird anymore. Tony has had plenty of time to get used to it. He navigates the maze to the bathroom while Bucky slowly follows behind him. While Tony gets the water running, Bucky strips. He’s getting big enough that his balance is off, so he doesn’t protest at Tony helps him sit in the water.

Bucky openly purrs, now. At first he’d been silent as a stone, as stiff as a board. Tony gets that. It’s a testament to how safe Bucky feels now that he melts into the water, lets Tony support him, and closes his eyes, and *purrs*. It’s a raspy, sandpapery sound, and Tony can’t help the bursting pride at being the one to draw it out.

He startles when Bucky grasps his wrist without warning.
“Jesus Christ, what the hell?” he hisses, heart thumping in his chest. “I thought you were relaxing.”

“I just-” Those blue, blue eyes blink up at him, wide and amazed. “I think I felt ‘em move.”

It takes a moment for Tony to fully process that, but when he does he immediately lights up.

“What? Really? Are you serious?”

Water pours off Bucky as he sits up, and he drags Tony’s hand to his stomach. Tony leans close, eyes riveted on the point of contact. Bucky twitches.

“There. Feel that?” Bucky’s face splits in a grin. “S’like a little butterfly.”

Tony, unfortunately- He doesn’t feel anything. But Bucky has this awestruck look in his eyes, and his hand has smoothed over to rest atop Tony’s, and he’s reluctant to break the moment.

He can’t take his eyes off Bucky. Off the way the water plasters his hair to his skin. The lopsided little smile Tony knows is the real one, not one of the masks. The smooth skin of his jaw. The dimple in his chin.

Okay. Moment over. He’s going to do something stupid if he doesn’t back off now.

“I don’t think they’re strong enough for me to feel yet,” Tony admits reluctantly, withdrawing his hand from the warmth of Bucky’s stomach. “Alright, well. Um.” He flicks the water off his fingers and rocks back onto his heels. “I’ll go get you a towel. I’m sure Steve would love to hear the Bean’s moving. You should tell him.”

Right. Smooth, Tony. Awesome deflection. Bring up the brother.

It isn’t exactly a terrible plan, though. Steve’ll go wild, and maybe with his super-soldier senses he’ll be able to feel the butterfly kicks.

No, that’s adorable and makes Tony want to kiss Bucky’s belly. Don’t think about the butterfly kicks. Fuck!

He takes care of the cleanup while Bucky dries off and gets dressed. Maybe he takes a little longer than need be, but whatever. He’s stalling. So what? Bucky is fully clothed, if a little subdued, when Tony flicks off the bathroom lights and comes out. The omega’s jaw is set as he brushes his damp hair out. Tony runs a hand through his own hair. Only too late does he remember the residual water on his hand. His hair is a spiky mess. At least it draws a smile out of Bucky.

“So, uh- You want me to go find Steve?”

“Nah. I’ll go get him myself. We probably oughta put the date in the pup’s book. First kicks.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Tony hooks his thumbs in his pockets. “Bucky- I can’t wait to meet them.”

Bucky pulls an elastic hairtie off the brush handle and sets the brush down. He stretches the elastic between his fingers, looking at his hands, but he glances up to give Tony a smile.

“I can’t wait for you t’feel ‘em move.” Bucky ties back his hair and adjusts the band tee he stole from Tony. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t actually have any of those shirts in his possession anymore, unless they happen to be actually his size rather than the oversized things caught at concerts. “You’re gonna be the second one t’know when it’s possible.”

“Why the second?” Tony laughs. “Should I be offended?”
“Nah. I’m just gonna need to ask someone to make sure before I get your hopes up again.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Tony opens his mouth, but he isn’t sure what to say. His jaw clicks shut again. The silence is more than a little awkward, so Tony blurts, “Steve. I mean, for the book. Save the date, right? Let’s go find Steve.”

They find Steve, and Tony makes his exit while Steve eagerly awaits permission to feel Bucky’s stomach. Okay. Time to check on the pack’s mated pair, and then he’ll go be actually productive.

Natasha and Clint are fine, although the as soon as the elevator doors open to their living room, Tony immediately mashes the close door button again. He has no problem walking in on them during actual heat, because then he has purpose. Then he’s taking care of his vulnerable packmates. Making sure they drink, and eat. Running errands. Right now, he’s just walked in on them fucking, and nope.

“Okay, JARVIS? Warn me if I’m about to do that again.”

At least he knows they’re completely fine.

“Of course, Sir.”

Not like the pack keeps many secrets anyways.

He doesn’t end up being traditionally productive that day, but he does take Harley out to an ice cream cafe, and that’s a blast.

Chapter End Notes

I figure it’s fine for an omega to be out and about before their heat, and during heat if they feel up to it or absolutely have to. Like, there are traditionalists who say an omega should be sequestered for the duration of the preheat and the heat itself, and there are plenty of rotten people who would use it as an excuse to assault or harass an omega, but there’s no real reason. Pheromones, yes, but it’s like seeing and being distracted by someone in an extremely flattering bathing suit if you happen to be attracted to that type of person. You don’t have to act on it, and probably shouldn’t in many cases. Same here. Tony was physically affected by a stranger’s pheromones at his birthday party because they were deliberately amplifying and playing them up and forcing themself in his personal space with the intention to seduce him. It wasn’t the fun kind of affected.

And I'm doing so much research on pregnancy and baby development that I think targeted ads are going to start recommending prenatal vitamins or something. Either that or the people I work with are going to assume I think I'm pregnant.
Pepper breezes in the next day when Tony’s in the middle of tying his tie. In fact, they nearly run into each other as Pepper exits the elevator. Tony checks his watch.

“I’ve got plenty of time, Pep.”

“What? No. No, I’m not here for you. I’m taking Bucky shopping. He needs a baby shower registry.”

“Oh. Oh! Oh! Can I come?”

“No. You have work, and Rhodey’s driving us. We don’t need any more testosterone. So if you will excuse me.” She steps around him, eyes on her phone. “FRIDAY is helping me figure out what you’ve already obsessively bought, and Bucky’s going to help me decide whether we need to return it and put something else on the registry.”

“Oh, wow. Harsh.”

“Not harsh. Practical. You’ve got a meeting in two hours.”

“I know. I was- I was on my way. Since when are you making plans with Bucky?”

“Since Natasha told me I’m on Second duty for the next week. You should probably head out. Traffic is hell out there today.”

“Like it normally isn’t?”

“Just go, alright?” Pepper glances at him over her shoulder. “And remember, green isn’t your color.”

Tony scoffs under his breath as she disappears around a corner.

“I’m not jealous,” he mutters, and steps into the elevator.

The meeting is boring, and it’s hard to stay focused when his mind keeps wandering to Bucky and Pepper and Rhodey all out on a shopping trip. Tony prefers online shopping, but he might be sulking a little that he wasn’t invited along.

He manages to survive all three hours of it, though, and stops on the way home to pick up pho from that unassuming hole-in-the-wall place Clint loves. The one whose only entrance is a side door in an alleyway. Tony doesn’t go often- not a fan of the spices in the broth- but Hau treats him like he’s a regular. Almost certainly because Clint is a regular.

He ends up with two bags of pho containers, and some sort of sweet corn pudding.

When the elevator opens up onto Clint and Natasha’s floor, Tony is balancing four huge water bottles with the pho. He wrinkles his nose at the overwhelming scent that hits him when he steps out into their living space, but he has a mission. Food.

Clint and Natasha are wrapped around each other in bed, pressed close together when Tony shows up. Clint’s dozing, but Natasha’s sharp eyes lock on Tony as soon as he nudges the door open. He
lets her warning growl roll off him like water off a duck’s back, and instead holds up the takeout bags.

“I bring gifts,” he informs her. “There’s che bap in there somewhere.”

He can see plates on the floor beside the bed, bearing the few remnants of Steve’s lasagna and some protein bar wrappers. He’ll clear it all away when he leaves again, but first-

Natasha allows him to approach the bed. She maneuvers Clint into sitting up and rouses him. Tony forks over the food, and Natasha tears open the bags. She’s careful about keeping the sealed bowls upright, but she wrinkles her nose at the cooked strips of beef in the broth.

“I know you like raw, but I’m not risking the E.coli by bringing you raw beef from Harlem, ‘kay? Now eat. I’m not leaving until you’ve eaten something and drank half of this.”

He shakes one of the water bottles, and Natasha holds out her hand to take it.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, setting the bottle down beside her. Clint is looking a little more aware, but his eyes are still fever-bright and unfocused. Some omegas are fully in control of themselves during these times, but heat tends to put Clint pretty far out of it, at least for the first couple days.

“Where are the chopsticks?”

“Chopsticks? Uh uh. Soup in bed is risky enough. I brought you a fork. You’re welcome.”

“You’re a heathen.”

She takes the fork and spoon anyways. Tony leaves for a moment, and comes back with a bowl of lukewarm water and a hand towel. While Natasha begins feeding her mate, Tony takes the opportunity to give the both of them a quick washcloth bath. Clint first, while Natasha’s distracted.

When Tony leaves, Natasha is still coaxing Clint to eat. They’ve both had water, and seem to be in good health. He takes the plates from their lunch, but leaves the takeout containers. Steve will pick those up when he takes his turn to check on them later.

Okay. Alright. Good. Clint and Nat are fine. They’re happy, healthy, and well-fed. Check that off the list.

Tony leans against the elevator wall, dishes balanced in his hands, and says, “Hey, JARVIS? Tell Steve the Wonder Pair are doing just fine.”

“It isn’t like Steve can’t ask JARVIS, or even go down to check on them whenever he feels like it, but Tony just feels like he ought to give an update of his own.

He dumps the dishes in the dishwasher and retreats to switch into more comfortable clothes. Jeans and a T-shirt. Can’t go wrong with that. All of his comfiest oversized shirts have been sacrificed to the pregnant bundle of hormones in his tower, but Tony really can’t complain. His vocal cords aren’t designed to allow purrs like most omegas’ and a very few betas, but seeing Bucky dressed in his things? Oh yeah. If he could purr, he definitely would.

He does a walk-through, seeking out the rest of his packmates. He finds Steve in the other alpha’s studio, working on some watercolor thing Tony can’t identify yet. Steve is good, so next is Bruce. Bruce is knitting, so he’s fine as well. That leaves Harley and Bucky.
The pair of them are huddled up together, watching Breaking Bad. Tony isn’t exactly sure how age-appropriate the show is for a twelve-year-old, but-

“Mom says I can watch it.”

“Uh huh. Is that right.”

“I’m serious!”

“And if I were to set up a videochat right now, she’d back you up?”

“Definitely.”

“Mm.” He’ll verify Harley’s story later. For now it’s time to redirect. “Hey, I’m about to go wake up HENRY. Wanna come?”

Bingo. Harley perks up and wriggles away from where he’d nestled against Bucky’s side. Bucky lets the kid go. It’s a shame. Tony honestly could have watched the pair snuggle for hours. No, wait. He would have happily joined them for hours.

“Uh, duh!”

Tony can feel Bucky’s blue, blue eyes on him, and he says, “You can come too.”

As if that were even in doubt.

With a possibly age-inappropriate show forgotten, they all retreat down into Tony’s lab. The usual state of controlled chaos greets them, and JARVIS lights the room. Tony fiddles with a tablet, and the projection of JARVIS’s- well, his mind. The projection of JARVIS’s mind blazes gold. The gold is JARVIS’s doing. Tony originally designed the projection to be blue, but his AIs tend to develop their own preferences. JARVIS says that warm gold represents him better.

FRIDAY’s projection, when he brings her up, is still blue. She’s branching out, though. The projection is less of a light blue, and more of a glowing indigo.

HENRY, though, is arc-reactor blue.

“He’s about two weeks old now,” Tony explains as he examines the sedately-turning structure. FRIDAY and JARVIS have much more active projections. “Right now he’s technically dreaming.”

“Why?”

And that’s Bucky. Tony turns, and meets the awed gazes of both Harley and Bucky.

“Uh, HENRY’s sort of going to help keep Fury’s new secret band corruption-free. Or, mostly. Perfection is hard to achieve. JARVIS has been, uh, he’s been giving HENRY information. Human rights, philosophy courses, moral theory, things like that. He’s been dreaming to process it. More efficient than muddling through it while awake. I mean- uh- He’s going to keep learning when he wakes up, but I thought it would be good to have a foundation first.” He spins on the spot again, facing HENRY’s comparatively-small projection. JARVIS is huge. FRIDAY is moderately sized. HENRY is quite small. Like, basketball sized. He’ll grow as he develops and learns. It’s sort of an age thing.

“So here goes nothing.”

Tony slips a set of fingertip interface pads on his right hand, and he gently touches HENRY’s
projection.

Immediately, the projection flares. It pulses a few times, then settles down to a steady glow.

“Hey there, HENRY,” Tony murmurs, drawing his hand back. “Welcome to the world.”

HENRY doesn’t answer at first, and Tony doesn’t blame him. He’s essentially just been born fully conscious. That has to feel weird.

There’s a web-camera already set up for HENRY’s use, while he figures out how to function. Tony doesn’t want to overwhelm him all at once by allowing him access to more than one visual input until he gets his bearings. The webcam is clipped to the tabletop beside a speaker also set aside for HENRY, and Tony crouches down in front of it.

“I’m going to connect you to a vocal library,” he announces. “Pick whichever voice you want.”

His fingers flick over the keyboard JARVIS helpfully pulls up to his right- the one Tony designed himself. A new connection is made in HENRY’s projection, and Tony waits patiently while the AI does his thing.

Minutes trickle by. Tony can be patient when it’s actually worth it. His patience pays off.

“Hello.”

The voice is youthful, but not young. Not childish. Probably masculine, but edging on androgynous. There’s absolutely no accent, like HENRY digested a dictionary and decided to use the exact pronunciations of everything. That’s probably the truth of the matter, actually.

He’s tentative and cautious, testing out the vocal software. Tony grins at the camera.

“Hello to you too, HENRY. How do you feel?”

Henry takes a moment to consider.

“My systems are fully operational. I- feel fine.”

“That’s good. That’s really good, sugarbug.”

He hears Harley quietly repeat ‘Sugarbug?’ with incredulity behind him, but Tony just smiles.

“I’ve got some people with me who are really excited to meet you. Do you feel up to it?”

“Yes,” HENRY decides after a few seconds. “I would like to meet people. Where are they?”

“Well, there’s JARVIS. He’s been watching over you, sugarbug. And there’s your sister FRIDAY too. Whenever you’re ready, you can open up to them and say hello.” He waits a beat, careful not to overwhelm him. “And I’ve got some of my packmates here too. This is Harley.” He motions for Harley to come closer, and he presents the young alpha to the camera. “He’s pretty much my de facto kid.”

“Hello Harley.”

Harley nearly vibrates out of his skin with excitement.

“Hi, HENRY. You’re amazing.”
HENRY takes a moment to process this, but when he responds, he sounds almost bashful.

“Thank you, Harley. I am certain you are as well.”

Tony feels a curious touch at his shoulder, and he reaches up without looking to take Bucky by the wrist and bring him into HENRY’s view as well.

“This is Bucky.”

“Hello Bucky.”

“Uh- hey. Hi.”

Tony thinks the introductions are going pretty well. Very well, in fact. They move on to calibrations, make sure everything is in working order, and that goes very well too. When Tony takes his two packmates and leaves again, HENRY is once more engrossed in his crashcourse to humanity- this time actively rather than passively processed.

They grow up so fast.

He’ll introduce HENRY to the rest of the pack later- definitely before he introduces the young AI to Fury. For now, he has a bubbly Harley asking questions left and right, and Bucky is no help whatsoever. Instead, he eggs the young alpha on. Fucking traitor.

Tony does his best to answer, giving Harley a crashcourse of his own in the creation of a functional, sentient AI.

Bruce makes curry for dinner- three batches. One spicy for himself, a moderately spiced batch for Tony and Steve, and a mild batch for Bucky and Harley. It’s fantastic, and Steve brings two bowls down for Natasha and Clint as well.

Clint’s heat breaks a few days later, and the first time Clint makes an appearance- freshly showered, newly awakened from a fourteen hour nap- Tony pumps his fist and crows, “He lives!”

“Yeah yeah, shut up asshole,” Clint gripes, but he’s got a lazy, contented grin on his face. “Nat’s still asleep, but I want coffee.”

And obviously, he wants to be social, because there’s definitely beans and a coffee machine in his own apartment. There’s no need to invade Tony’s space.

Tony makes him coffee anyways, and Clint settles down on the couch with the mug clutched within his hands.

So yeah. Clint’s obviously doing fine. Tired, but fine.

Natasha? Not so much.

She hides it well, of course, but when Tony wakes up that night to find her crawling under the covers with him, it’s pretty obviously something’s amiss. Natasha isn’t really one for cuddles, unless she’s cuddling with Clint.

Still, Tony makes room, and lets her lay her head down on his chest. He gingerly wraps an arm around her, struggling to wake up a little more and actually process the events unfolding.

“Hey,” he mumbles. “Everything okay?”

Natasha doesn’t say a word, just settles her cheek more comfortably against Tony’s shirt-covered
chest—just to the left of the arc reactor, never touching.

Tony doesn’t press. He simply strokes his fingers through her curly hair and stares up at the ceiling.

When she does eventually speak, it’s to spout some sort of bullshit that Tony doesn’t believe for an instant, but accepts. She’s not really one to seek comfort, and when she does, it takes a bit of talking around the subject for her to finally spit out what’s bothering her.

“I have a tangle in my hair that won’t come out,” she murmurs, despite the fact that Tony’s currently petting her hair, and it’s completely tangle-free. “I need help with that.”

“Okay. I can do that.”

Natasha slips out of bed, and Tony follows suit. Although, he will admit he’s much less graceful. JARVIS helpfully lifts the lights a little, casting the room in a dim glow. Natasha came prepared. There’s a hair washing tray and a set of hair products braced against the wall. The tray was a gag gift from Tony to Clint, after watching a few episodes of Brooklyn 99, but jokes on him. Natasha makes use of it.

Natasha pads into the bathroom to set up, and Tony drags a chair out of his room and into the bathroom after her. The wash tray braces against the sink, Natasha sits in the chair, and Tony gets to work.

The detachable shower head is long enough to reach the sink, and Tony makes full use of it as he wets Natasha’s hair.

“When is Bucky’s pup due?” Natasha asks without preamble, as Tony squirts shampoo in his hand.

“Early November, I think. Maybe late October. Sort of depends.”

“Mm.”

Tony buries his fingers in Natasha’s hair, scrubs circles against her scalp. He works from the roots to the ends, and then begins the cycle again. Natasha’s eyes slip closed.

“Clint does not want children.”

That’s common knowledge. Clint is very, very obviously opposed to the concept of having a tiny human within one of his organs, and he isn’t shy about saying it. Tony remains quiet, lets Natasha figure out what she wants to say.

“I- I cannot have children either.”

Also common knowledge. Natasha isn’t nearly as vocal about it, but she’s confided in the pack, when talking about her Red Room traumas. Sterilization and surgical removal of any and all scent glands were part of the Red Room’s initiation.

Tony takes the shower head again, and rinses out her hair.

With her eyes still closed, Natasha continues.

“But when he is—deep. Deep in heat. He asks me for children. He begs for a pup.”

Tony makes a little noise in his chest, just to show he’s listening. He doesn’t, however, want to interrupt. Instead, he rubs thick conditioner between his fingers, and scratches his nails gently across Natasha’s scalp. Natasha’s jaw works, tenses and relaxes.
“I can’t give him anything. I am not male. I cannot sire children. And I am sterile. I can’t bear any.”

She falls back on her native accent, when she’s upset. Her tone might be level, her voice unwavering, but when her accent makes an appearance, that’s a big clue.

“Neither of you want pups, Nat,” Tony gently reminds her. “And there are options, if you guys ever change your mind.”

“But what if Clint changes his mind?” She looks up at him, face carefully blank. “What if he changes his mind, and I cannot give him what he wants? What if I am someday not enough?”

And that’s a hard question. Tony knows that the ‘someday’ won’t come. Clint looks at Natasha like she hung the moon, and Natasha is just as dedicated. And there really would be options available, like adoption, or a sperm donor, if the unlikely event of Clint changing his mind were to happen. So in a way, the answer is easy. The hard part is convincing Natasha.

“I think,” he carefully begins as he washes the conditioner from her hair. “That you should talk to Clint about this. Alright?” He strokes his thumb over her temple. “You’re so good to him, and I know he loves you. You shouldn’t hide this from him.”

Natasha doesn’t reply, so Tony runs the water through her hair again, and- now satisfied- guides her to lift her head so he can wrap a towel around her hair. She takes the absorbent fabric from him to dry her own hair, and Tony lets her, instead focusing on the cleanup.

After a moment, Natasha announces, “I’m going to make coffee.”

It’s about four in the morning, but Tony says, “Make me a cup as well, please.”

He can’t fix Natasha’s fears for her, especially when they don’t really have anything to do with him, but he can definitely sit on the balcony with her, a carafe of coffee between them, and wait for the sun to rise.

Chapter End Notes

Hey... So, I was trying to do NaNoWriMo, but then my brother asked me to knit him a hat for his birthday, so suddenly the time I was spending writing had to be transferred over to time spent for knitting, since I really don't have much free time at this point of the semester. Anyways, NaNoWriMo was why I pretty much vanished for a while. I'm going to be postponing my NaNoWriMo stuff until December, when classes are out and my workplace is being remodeled. Then I'll probably have time for both starting a novel and writing for you guys.

Now! Back to the story!
So, uh. Don't read too much into this, okay? I'm not going to confirm anything. BUT. If a baby happens to end up being a mutant, what would some hilarious or awesome powers for a baby to have be? Not confirming or denying anything. Just hypothetically speaking. I think I've got it decided, hypothetically speaking, but I just thought I'd throw that out there.

And I don't know why the fuck I turned emotional bathing into a trope, but I've committed so, you have to suffer through it.
Chapter Notes

So this one's short, but I really wanted to end on the scene I ended on, so whatever. I doubt any of you will complain once you read the content.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve’s birthday isn’t really a huge affair. He doesn’t like being the center of attention for parties, so there’s no party. Instead, Steve grills hamburgers on the roof. With a mountain of bean burgers for Bucky too. It isn’t just eggs and dairy that turn his stomach anymore, which Bucky doesn’t seem too pleased about, but they make do. Tony- God help him, but Tony has decided to go vegan in solidarity. Ugh. Fuck, he misses bacon.

But he eats the bean burger, and it’s actually pretty good.

Harley decided to try veganism as well. That was yesterday. He lasted about six hours before he had a ham and cheese sandwich.

Tony invited Sam to join their little pack gathering, so the beta made the drive all the way up to New York to surprise Steve. He’ll be leaving with a brand new pair of wings to call his own if Tony has anything to say about it. Happy birthday to Steve and all that.

Natasha baked the cake. Tony is almost certain she volunteered just so she could make the frosting boozy. She presents Harley with an individual slice frosted without the bourbon, and Bucky and Tony have access to weirdly-textured vegan versions. Again, without the bourbon.

“You are so fucking lucky I lo-” Tony cuts himself off, and shoves an entire cupcake in his mouth instead.

“So lucky you what?” Bucky presses, his own cupcakes forgotten.

“Like you. Lucky I like you. These things are weird.”

“Uh huh.”

“Oh my god, just kiss already,” Harley moans.

Tony ruffles Harley’s hair, pulling at the thick locks to stand them on end.

“Woops. I might have gotten some frosting in there. Don’t know how that happened.”

That’s a lie. There’s no frosting in Harley’s hair. He doesn’t need to know that, though.

Bucky has mercy on the kid, and dutifully examines Harley for rogue frosting. Tony can’t keep the sappy little smile off his face, and Bucky manages to catch his eye. He smirks as he tells Harley, “Nah, you’re good. Tony’s just bein’ a dick.”

“Steve! Bucky said a bad word!” Clint announces as he walks by to the cooler for another beer.
Sam snickers, but Steve just shakes his head. He’s pretty much given up at this point. It’s a shame that he doesn’t rise to the bait anymore. That was half the fun.

So yeah. The party is a blast, small as it is, and when the sun goes down, the fireworks blossom across the sky in a rainbow of light. Tony helps Bucky out of his seat, and they join the rest of the pack at the edge of the roof to watch the show. Bucky nudges Steve with an elbow.

“Hey, ‘member when I gotcha thinkin’ they did the fireworks ‘specially for you?”

Steve looks sharply at the omega, a look of astonishment on his face. Tony leans forward against the wall around the roof’s edge. He doesn’t want to intrude- nor do the rest of the pact- but it’s hard to miss the way Steve’s voice wavers when he simply says, “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

Allow him to reiterate.

A blast.

The success of the celebration carries Tony through the next week. Even as he walks into a meeting with Pepper the following Wednesday, she comments on the ‘pep in his step’.

“I don’t know what to say. Things’re just good right now,” he replies.

Things become considerably less good when a nuclear reactor in Massachusetts threatens to melt down while a Stark Industries research team runs tests. As they find out a few days later, the team had nothing to do with the cooling system malfunction. A pipe cracked due to age and a preexisting, undetected defect. However, since SI had a presence at the reactor, Tony was called, and he responded. The crack had been located by the time he arrived, and he helped to seal it while measures were taken to shut the reactor down for repairs.

However, while the cause of the near-disaster was defective machinery, Stark Industries just so happened to be running an experiment at the time, and the news stations covering the evacuation and panic of the crisis seized on that information, so now they’re running PR damage control.

It sucks.

By the time Sunday’s board meeting rolls around, Tony’s pretty sure he hasn’t slept in three days, and hasn’t been home in five. Happy thoughtfully provides him with a massive travel mug filled to the brim with countless espresso shots. He can do this. He can do this, and then he can go home to see his pack. His kid. His- well. He’ll see everyone.

He took a quick shower in the jet to New York and dressed in the suit sent along by Pepper. One of the interns winces when Tony takes off his sunglasses to reveal the grey bags under his eyes.

Pepper sits beside him at the meeting, nudging him every time she notices his lack of attention. A knock at the closed door interrupts the tiresome alpha droning on and on about stock values. It’s the intern from earlier.

“I’m sorry, Mister Stark, but you have visitors. They say it’s urgent.”

And then comes Harley wriggling past and rounding the table, completely out of place in his cargo shorts and t-shirt. Tony lets the kid pull him out of his chair and out the door. Thank god for small mercies.

“It’s an emergency,” Harley insists with wide brown eyes. “They’re in your office.”
Or maybe not. No such thing as mercy.

Tony breaks out into a sprint, Harley following close on his heels. Tony hears Pepper call after him, but it’s an emergency.

In hindsight, maybe he should have seen the grin on Harley’s face as he proclaimed ‘emergency’. In Tony’s defense, he’s on his 74th hour awake, so maybe he can be excused. In any case, when he bursts into his office ready to confront whatever emergency there is, he sees Clint sitting at his desk, spinning in the high-backed chair, and Bucky leans against the window, looking down at the city below.

Tony freezes. His exhausted brain attempts to catch up. Okay, so he was expecting an actual emergency. Not this picture of calm. His eyes flick between Clint and Bucky, and then he turns back to Harley.

“I thought you said there was an emergency.”

He needs more espresso.

“Did I? I can’t remember.”

“Don’t play coy with me. You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Bucky told me to get your attention.”

“Alright, well, you’ve got it. What’s the problem?”

“Why doncha come over here an’ find out?”

Bucky tilts his head and gestures for Tony to come closer, and okay, yeah. Sure. He’ll play along.

So he does. He crosses the room, and lets Bucky take him by the hand. When that hand is pulled to press securely against Bucky’s stomach, however, Tony thinks his racing heart might stop.

“Is it-”

“Jus’ wait for it.”

For a moment, time pulls thick like taffy. And then there’s a tap. A tiny, gentle thing. A kick.

“Oh my god,” he breathes. “Oh my god.”

It’s faint, like a heartbeat, but my fucking god. Tony rests his other hand on the swell of Bucky’s stomach as well.

He feels another tap against the heel of his palm, and while he vehemently denies tearing up, be might, maybe, possibly could be a little misty in the eye. It feels real. Or, realer. More real. Whatever. There’s a tiny person beneath his hands, and he’s going to meet them in three months. He looks up at Bucky with awe in his eyes, and that soft, pleased smile greets him -the one Bucky reserves for his favorite moments.

The experience is overwhelming, and Tony is still exhausted, and a little light-headed from the adrenaline rush, and maybe he kisses Bucky. No- he definitely kisses Bucky. Just, cups his face, and kisses him. A tiny, gentle thing.

Bucky’s metal fingers dig into his hair, but the omega doesn’t pull him away. He pulls Tony closer.
Presses them as smoothly together as can be managed with the Bean occupying space between them. And the kiss is no longer a tiny, gentle thing. It’s hungry, and claiming, Tony slides one hand around to cup the back of Bucky’s neck, while the other slips lower to dig its fingers into Bucky’s hip.

It’s easy to get lost in the moment, but Pepper clears her throat from across the room, and both Tony and Bucky pause to look at her like they’ve got their hands stuck in the cookie jar. A red flush warms Tony’s neck. He’s never been embarrassed like this before, but then again- Pepper’s never walked in on him with anything more than a one night stand.

She looks between them, and her disapproval regarding the interruption of her business is clear, but her expression softens as she says, “About damn time.”

Chapter End Notes

Also:

I love how interactive fanfiction allows you to be with your readers.
Alright, so I wanted to get my Star Trek one written up at the beginning of the month, but then I started accidentally overdosing on my meds, and continued for two weeks. This, of course, meant my attention was shot, by anxiety was through the roof, and I was extremely unproductive. This is becoming my feel-good story, though, so here's five-and-a-half thousand words of Tony being a dad. Oh, and some smut in the companion fic. There's that too.

Edit: I feel like I should explain. I was on one dose, in which I took 2 pills one day, one pill the next, and went back and forth. Then my dose went up, and I took 2 pills every day until that prescription ran out. Then the new prescription was filled, but I kept taking 2 pills out of habit. This, however, meant I was taking significantly more than I should have. Not fun. Not fun at all.

Pepper sends Tony home, promising to make vague excuses to the rest of the gathered people. It’s a fucking shame that the rest of the higher-ups refuse to keep their main New York offices in Stark Tower anymore. Instead, there’s a sister building halfway across the city. Sure, marketing and final-phase product testing and legal and so on and so fucking forth remain based in the Tower, but Tony misses the days when he could simply get in an elevator after the meeting and end up in the penthouse.

Ugh. Now he needs to commute. Whatever. It’s annoying, but Tony understands. The other SI bigwigs don’t want to be associated with the Avengers. Less dangerous that way.

In any case, Clint and Bucky bundle Tony into the backseat of the sleek hatchback chosen for this little excursion. Harley calls shotgun, not that Bucky seems to want the spot anyways. No, instead he oh-so-generously lets Tony use his shoulder as a pillow.

Now that he thinks about it, Bucky may actually have ulterior motives.

“Stop sniffing me,” Tony grumbles. “Didn’t your mom ever tell you not to do that shit without asking? Rude. So rude.”

There’s a difference between reading scent cues and actively scenting someone, in either sense of the word. Not that Tony genuinely minds. No, he’d honestly be purring if he could. Bucky likes his scent. Why else would he nuzzle against Tony’s hair and breathe deep?

Tony’s manners aren’t much better. He keeps his hands plastered to Bucky’s stomach, greedy for each and every tiny little tap. The Bean’s settled down. Tony hasn’t felt a kick in several long, long minutes, but he refuses to risk missing one.

“Y’smell like almonds,” Bucky rumbles in response.

Clint makes a gagging noise from behind the wheel, and Tony grins as he hears Harley smack the omega’s arm in admonishment.
“They’re cute,” Harley furiously whispers.

“They’re disgusting,” Clint counters.

Tony can’t help but laugh.

“Like you’re one to fucking speak.”

Bucky mumbles a quiet ‘Language’ into Tony’s hair, and Tony would elbow him if he wasn’t so concerned about actually hurting the nearly-indestructible omega.

The drive home takes about a half hour, and Tony— he might be close to nodding off by the time Clint parks. He makes it into the elevator, and someone must have sounded the alarm, because everyone’s waiting for him right outside the elevator on his floor. Tony recognizes this gesture for what it is. Sure, everyone could probably wait for Tony to catch up on some much-needed sleep before pouncing on their missing alpha, but they all know that Tony wouldn’t be able to rest without confirming everyone’s wellbeing, now that he has the opportunity.

So he hugs Bruce and scent-marks the beta, bumps foreheads with Natasha, and gives Steve a solid pat on the shoulder. They’re all doing well. Concerned for him, but well. Then he points at Harley.

“We’ll be having words about that little ‘emergency’ stunt,” he warns, but Harley doesn’t seem too worried. “Alright guys, don’t wake me up unless the Tower’s on fire. And maybe then try to handle it yourself first.”

He flicks a lazy salute and retreats to his room. The pack can do whatever. His space is their space. He just wants the bed. So yeah, he drifts through the door, doesn’t bother to shut it behind him. Why would he? He’s decent, and he’d trust every single one of his packmates to handle the arc reactor, if that explains anything. Not without anxiety- because that’s present, even when he’s handling it himself- but he’d trust them.

He fully intends to just flop out on the made bed. Suit and shoes and all. He does. He really does. But the door clicks shut, and strong hands catch him around the waist and push him up against the wall. Bucky licks into his mouth like a man starved, and okay, yeah. That might be Tony’s fault. The gentle finesse of that first moment in a fucking office of all places is nowhere to be seen. Instead, it’s hot, and wet, and jesus christ Tony wants.

But he tilts his head back against the wall, giving Bucky space to mouth at his neatly-groomed jaw, and says, “Sunshine, I’m gonna have to pump the brakes, m’kay?” And yep, just like that the flames sizzle down to a flickering ember. Bucky simply rests his cheek against Tony’s, his nose tucked just below the alpha’s ear. “Later. Later, alright? I really am fucking tired.”

“Yeah fine,” Bucky mutters, but he backs off. Of course he does.

Tony steps forwards and hooks a knuckle under Bucky’s chin. He steals one more innocent kiss and murmurs, “Ask me in the morning.”

He doesn’t doubt Bucky will hold him to that implied promise, but for the moment- sleep.

He loosens his tie and kicks off his shoes, and he’s fully prepared to get in bed just like that, but Bucky doesn’t approve. No, he manhandles the suit off of Tony, which would be fucking hot if Tony had the energy to do anything more than blink tiredly and yawn. Tony finally, finally manages to slide beneath the covers in his boxers and undershirt.

JARVIS helpfully cuts off the lights, but Tony doesn’t end up alone in bed. Instead Bucky joins him
beneath the sheets. Pushy fucking guy, isn’t he.

“What will your chaperone think?” Tony mumbles. Not that most Americans bother with omega chaperones anymore.

Bucky settles in comfortably as if he owns the fucking bed. Tony rolls over and scooches closer. He’ll be big spoon. That’s fine. Everyone loves being the little spoon, but the Bean’s presence means their roles are set for the foreseeable future.

“Hate t’break it to ya, but I ain’t needed a chaperone since th’thirties.”

Tony rests his forehead against the back of Bucky’s neck.

“And I guess it’s a little late for propriety.”

Y’know. Given all the baths and whatnot.

He feels a little rumbling laugh through Bucky’s back. Point made- did he have a point? Or was it more of a joke? Anyways, point made, Tony conks out like a toddler on a sugar crash. He’s out like a light.

He could probably sleep for a solid forty-eight hours, but when has he ever done that? It’s been a while. He’ll say that. His body considers ten hours to be luxurious. Twelve to be indulgent. So sleeping the rest of the day and the entire night away? Waking up after the sunrise?

That’s a post-Iron Man record.

Waking up to a demanding bedmate?

Well, that’s another delightful turn of events.

Even better: Bucky turns out to be a cuddler. Which is good, because Tony is too. Sweaty and comfortable- at least, comfortable until everything dries- Tony settles behind Bucky and hooks an arm over the omega’s side. He noses at Bucky’s neck.

“Y’shoulda bit me,” Bucky grumbles, and honestly, his tone hurts. It hurts. Hits Tony right in the pride.

He kisses Bucky’s neck in retaliation.

“I don’t bite people I’m not mated to.”

Ergo, he’s never bitten anyone. Unlike Steve, he isn’t a nippy alpha. And there’s a difference between mating and fucking, okay? At least, Tony makes the distinction. It’s like the difference between marriage and dating, in his eyes.

“You’re gonna be mated t’me, aincha?”

“Yeah- I mean. Yes. That’s the intention, Sunshine. I’m just not comfortable making that decision after five months knowing you.”

Bucky goes quiet for a moment, but he sighs. “Guess that’s fair.” Warm fingers guide Tony’s hand to Bucky’s stomach, and Tony strokes gentle little circles over the scar-spattered skin.

“Give me a chance to- to court you. Okay?” He won’t mention that he’s still half-certain Bucky will change his mind. Tony is no spring chicken. His mental health isn’t fantastic. His physical health has
taken a hit over the years too. All he really has to offer is financial security, and Bucky doesn’t seem to be the gold-digger type. “I’ve always wanted to do that properly.”

And that isn’t a lie. It’s the full truth.

“Guy like you ain’t never courted b’fore?”

“Cross my heart. Answer’s no.” He might have tried with Pepper if the Avengers hadn’t happened, but she hadn’t ever seemed interested in an actual courtship anyways. Pressed as close as he is, Tony detects the subtle shift in Bucky’s scent immediately. “Someone’s feeling smug. You like that idea? That out of all the people I’ve been with, you’ll be the first I’ve ever courted?”

“I like feelin’ that important.”

“C’mere.”

Bucky again refuses to lay on his back, citing circulation concerns just like before, but Tony coaxes him into rolling over so that they’re face to face. He cups the back of Bucky’s head and nuzzles his forehead against Bucky’s.

“You’re important.” He murmurs the words with all the conviction of a prayer.

There’s a shitton more to talk about. Tony still has his fears that Bucky’s picked him due to proximity and stability, but Bucky isn’t shy about scruffing the alpha and giving him a gentle shake-something Tony tolerates with grace. The counter-argument presented involves Tony taking the precious right of choice away from Bucky by making the executive decision to maintain distance in the same of providing independence. Which, okay. Yeah. He can see how that was a problem. Well, now he can see how that was a problem. At the time it seemed like a perfectly valid course of action.

But Bucky’s doing better now. There are still lapses, nightmares, triggers, but yeah. He has a point. Tony needs to trust Bucky to know himself now. He can’t promise he’ll be perfectly reasonable, but Tony’s going to give it a shot.

This seems to satisfy Bucky. For the moment, at least. Not completely, though.


“Go for it,” Tony manages. Sure. Why not. A traditional alpha-omega bond forms when chemicals in an alpha’s saliva hit complementary molecules released by bruising the scent glands at the base of the omega’s neck. Hence why they’re called bonding glands. Everyone involved gets a nice burst of the freshly-made bonding complex, and that goes on to interact with various neurotransmitters and other, unknown factors, and wham bam, there’s the fabled bond.

Point being- their current agreement on waiting to Mate with a capital M, and therefore Bond with a capital B, isn’t threatened.

Tony rolls over onto his back when Bucky pushes. He reaches out and traces his thumb along one of the flushed stretch marks pulling across the lower half of Bucky’s bump. Bucky takes a few moments to realize there’s no way he’s going to bend fully over with the Bean in the way. Tony laughs as Bucky grumbles and manhandles him to lean against the headboard. No luxurious throne of pillows for Tony.

This unfair treatment is easily forgotten. Yeah, all Bucky does is graze his lips across the scent points beneath Tony’s jaw, and Tony’s attention immediately snaps to him.
“Thought you wanted to bite me,” he teases. He can’t help it. Even with an assassin’s teeth at his throat, he can’t resist.

“I’ll get there.”

The provocative, sucking kiss over his fluttering pulse- it’s the kind of thing that would have put the idea of ‘round two’ into Tony’s mind, had he been about two decades younger. But yeah, not happening. He simply drops his hands, rests them on Bucky’s thighs.

He knows the little kisses and nuzzles up and down his neck are meant to distract him. Put him off guard. Evolution graced omegas with less than a fifth of the normal number of nociceptors around their bonding glands. Betas? Alphas? Yeah, no such adaptation. In other words, Tony’s got all the pain receptors. All of them.

So really, catching him off-guard might be the best thing.

Still hurts like fucking hell when Bucky bites down. He flinches back against the solid headboard, but he manages to avoid yelping like a dog, channeling it into a grunted “Fuck!”

Bucky’s lips are tinted red when he leans back and smirks. Tony looks down and feels at his abused neck.

“You really went for blood, huh.”

It’s going to scar like a bitch, but Tony’s pretty fine with that. Once it stops smarting, he’ll probably be poking and prodding at it. Maybe invest in some v-neck shirts. He wipes the blood off Bucky’s lip, and Bucky turns his head to kiss the alpha’s palm.


“Sir, Mister Parker has entered the lobby. Where shall I direct him?”

Bucky needs no prompting. He’s already sliding out of Tony’s lap when Tony says, “Send him to the lab. Keep him out of trouble. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Of course, Sir.”

As much as Tony would like to laze around in bed for a few more hours, he can’t bring himself to keep Peter waiting. So yeah, he pops in the shower. Bucky quickly follows, but Tony puts a kibosh on the whole ‘handsy in the shower’ thing. Because yeah, heavy petting in the shower is fun, but Tony can see in his mind’s eye Bucky slipping and falling and that would be absolutely awful. So the shower takes two minutes tops. Check that off the list.

Bucky wraps himself in a towel to make the proudest walk of shame Tony’s ever seen. Out the door he goes, presumably down the hall to his own room. When Tony deems himself presentable, he leaves too, but his destination is the elevator.

Of course, he doesn’t remain alone for long. Before the elevator door even opens, Bucky returns like a bad penny.

“What’s up, buttercup?”

Bucky rips open a paper wrapper, and oh. Right. Gauze.
“Don’t scare th’poor kid.”

“May I remind you that this right here is entirely your fault?”

Still, Tony accepts the gauze, and he tenderly presses it to the deep bite at the crook of his neck. He’d sacrificed a towel to stop most of the bleeding, but it still isn’t pretty to look at. Well, to someone who isn’t Tony. Or Bucky, for that matter.

“Y’don’t gotta remind me, dollface. I ain’t gonna forget.”

Bucky’s hair is still damp, and Tony works out a tangle with his fingers as they ride the elevator down. Bucky doesn’t really have any business coming along, except:

“I ain’t seen Peter in a while.”

“You haven’t seen him much ever.”

Tony might be a little confused. Just a touch. But whatever. Neither Bucky nor Peter are a danger to each other, and who the fuck knows. Maybe Peter needs an omega role model in his life. Sure. Whatever.

Peter’s picking at the webbing between his thumb and forefinger when Tony walks in. It’s been a while since Peter last visited for his ‘internship’. Tony had needed to press pause on the whole thing as summer crept in fully, because all the while, Peter hadn’t quite found the nerve to tell May yet, and yeah. That was a big requirement.

“Good to see you, Pete.” The kid’s head snaps up, and he stares at Tony with wide, startled eyes. “Lost in thought?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah yeah yeah. I’m just-” His eyes flick over to Bucky. “Hi. I, uh. I forgot your name.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. Y’only saw me once. It’s Bucky.” The omega peels away from Tony’s side and slinks around the edge of the lab to take a seat on the ratty, worn-down couch Tony’s owned since he received his second doctorate. “Don’t mind me. I’m just th’moral support.”

“Moral support,” Tony scoffs. “You’re nosy, is what you are.” Tony’s attention shifts back to Peter. “So. Long time no see. What brings you in today?”

Peter rocks from his heels to the balls of his feet, and settles down again. He flexes his fingers nervously.

“I’m gonna- gonna-gonna tell May,” he blurts.

“Oh. Awesome! Cool, yeah.” Tony nods along. Great. That’s good. That’s definitely good. Get the legal guardian up to speed on Peter’s leisure activities. “So do we have a timeline? Do you need help preparing a speech or something? I mean-” Tony slips his thumbs into the jean pockets. “How do you want to do this?”

“Um.” Peter chews on his bottom lip for a moment, before he says, “She’s actually, um, on- on- on her way. Yeah. I told her we’d give her an update on the- on the internship.”

Ah. Okay, slightly less good. Significantly more intimidating.

“Right. Huh.” Time for a game plan. He claps his hands together in front of himself. “So here’s what we’re going to do. We’re gonna go upstairs, and I’m gonna make coffee. Or tea. Do you like tea?”
Tony isn’t a fan, but this isn’t about him.

“Coffee’s good.”

“Hot chocolate’s better,” Bucky throws in. Tony flaps a hand at him.

“It’s the middle of July. I’m not serving his aunt hot chocolate. That’ll be a ‘you’ thing. Okay, so coffee. Hey, JARVIS? Ask around and see if anyone’s got some cookies they’re willing to part with.”

Coffee and carbs. A classic pair.

“Of course, Sir.”

Tony crosses the room and helps Bucky to his feet. As they walk back towards the elevator they just came from, Tony clasps a hand on Peter’s shoulder and nudges him along. The young omega enters the elevator without protest, but he remains stiff as a board. The stress cues pouring off him in waves are acrid and harsh. Bucky gains his attention by nudging the kid.

“Hey, deep breaths. We’ve gotcha.”

Peter obediently sucks in a breath, and noisily lets it out. His heel taps restlessly against the floor.

“She’s gonna freak out. And when she freaks out, I freak out.” He grinds his palms against his eyes. “God, she’s gonna be so-”

He trails off.

Alright, so maybe no coffee for Peter. Maybe hot chocolate in July really is the way to go.

Tony pulls the crinkly paper gauze wrapper from his pocket. He holds it out between two fingers, offering it to Peter.

“What- What’s this?”

“Paper. Take it.” He wiggles the piece of trash in the air. “Rip it up. Shred it. Breaking things is fun.”

Peter accepts the offering, albeit with abundant skepticism. Still, the distinctive sound of paper ripping fills the elevator, and Tony holds out his hand for the pieces. Peter balks at the prospect of dropping paper shreds into Tony’s hand, but the alpha wiggles his fingers.

“Come on, kid. It’s fine.”

The teen finally drops his scraps into Tony’s waiting palm. There we go. At least the utter bizarity of the situation seems to have distracted Peter from his headlong rush into an impending panic attack.

The elevator doors slide open not long after. Tony guides Peter out with what he hopes is a comforting touch between the shoulder blades, and look at that. Steve’s already there. The teen freezes the moment he sees Steve, but they really do need to exit the elevator, so Tony gently pushes.

“Hey, Peter,” Steve greets warmly. “I hear you fellas need some cookies.”

He gently rattles a box of Thin Mints, and Tony growls in faux-anger.

“Steve, you sly dog. You’ve been holding out on us for months!”
“If I let everyone know I still had Girl Scout Cookies in the freezer, they would’ve been gone in a day and you know it.”

Fair. True and fair. The betrayal still stings.

There’s no mistaking the sound of paper tearing as Peter plucks at the distraction in his hands.

So yeah. Tony defers to Bucky’s good judgment on the hot chocolate thing, and pretty soon there’s a plate of Thin Mints and Tagalongs hanging out on the coffee table, accompanied by a carafe of almond-milk hot chocolate. The cookies may not be strictly vegan, but neither Tony nor Bucky are in this for moral reasons, and since you can’t technically taste the eggs and dairy in these cookies, Tony figures they’re in the clear.

Bucky takes a whole roll of Thin Mints with him and makes himself scarce, when Tony gently points out that maybe it would be good to have this be a private conversation. Tony doesn’t doubt the overprotective omega’s going to be watching. He has a well-documented soft spot for scrappy, hardheaded fools who don’t know when to quit, and Peter fits the bill nicely. For the moment, though, Tony plants Peter down on the sofa, pulls up a chair for May across the way, and goes to join the kid. He sits down a respectable distance away, but he’s rarely been accused of knowing when to leave well enough alone, so he scoots a bit closer.

“Y’okay there, kid?”

Peter nods silently, then pauses. Shakes his head. Takes a shuddering breath. Tony gets it. Of course he does. Some stressful things would be better off handled quickly, like ripping off a bandaid.

“C’mere.”

He holds out an arm in invitation, and Peter leans in for the world’s most awkward side hug. Alright, probably not the most awkward, but it’s a strange position they put themselves in for a moment.

“Ideas? This is your show, kid. I’m the backup.”

Peter pulls away from Tony to sit up straight, and he runs his hands through his floppy hair.

“I-Ideas. Yeah. That would be good.” Tony pours Peter a cup of hot chocolate, and the kid holds it between his hands, peering into the steaming liquid. He takes a jerky sip, and rests the mug on his knee. “I’ll do what you did. I mean- the video thing. Show her the videos, tell her- tell her it’s me.”

“And after that?”

Peter looks down again, swallows thickly. His toes tap on the ground, and he glances back up at Tony.

“After that, we’ll- we’ll wing it.”

It’s a statement, but the tiny uptick in tone betrays Peter’s seeking approval. Tony relaxes against the back of the couch.

“Alright. That, Peter, is what I do best. We’ll wing it.”

And that’s what they do. Tony volunteers his phone when May shows up. Peter makes use of the projections, pulls up some YouTube videos, presents them to May. She watches, not quite clear on the reason behind the impromptu presentation, and then Peter says:
“That’s me.”

There’s a beat of silence, and May repeats, “That’s you.”

“Um. Yes. Yeah. Yeah, that’s me.”

Moments trickle by as May’s eyes flick between Tony and her nephew, and Peter just gets antsier and antsier. Until—there we go. He gets up, walks across the room, and proceeds to climb the fucking wall. Okay, so. Winging it.

“What. The fuck.”

Peter crawls across the ceiling for good measure, and drops back down to the couch. He bounces slightly, and Tony reaches out a hand to steady him while May watches with wide eyes. Then, of course, there’s the explanation. Some things Tony’s heard before, some things he hasn’t. Genetically-engineered spider, painful bite on a field trip, wham, bam, superpowers, red onesie, fighting crime. There we go. Bare bones.

Peter falls silent, quiet as a mouse. Which turns out to be Not That Great, as May and Tony realize nearly in tandem. The young omega keeps a white-knuckled grip on his half-empty mug of hot chocolate, but his eyes aren’t quite focused. May immediately rounds the coffee table and kneels down on the floor near Peter. She rests a hand on his knee.

Tony isn’t entirely certain what the problem is, but he can very clearly tell there’s a problem. He pretty much—pretty much simply observes while May murmurs to her nephew. Tony glances around the room, at the floor-to-ceiling windows he’s so fond of. Okay, maybe that’s a part of the issue. Peter wears those dumb goggles for a reason, when he throws himself into high-stress situations.

He twists a little on the couch to face the kid, and quietly says, “Hey Peter, lookit me. It’s kinda bright in here, huh?” He receives a tiny little nod, and that’s all the confirmation Tony really needs. “JARVIS, black-out the windows. Lights at 40%.”

The windows darken immediately, and the overhead lights dim to a glow. Metal fingers smooth over Tony’s shoulder, and he reflexively reaches up to touch Bucky’s arm in greeting.

“Who’s that?” May demands, keeping her voice soft and quiet.

“Bucky,” Peter manages. “He’s—he’s—he’s nosey.”

Tony’s lips quirk up at hearing his own words being repeated.

“Yeah, he’s got a soft spot for scrawny things with no common sense.” Bucky, thank fucking christ, doesn’t try to crowd Peter. He remains behind the back of the couch, but oh, idea. Light bulb. “Pete, d’you wanna go lie down? Bucky knows a bunch of dark, quiet places to hide in.”

Bucky doesn’t speak—unwilling when faced with a new face like May— but he hums in agreement. Peter barely nods again, and Tony looks to May for her permission. After a moment’s hesitation, she gives her consent, and Bucky spirits Peter away to whatever hidey hole he considers best. It’s hard not to trust a pregnant omega. It’s hard not to trust any pregnant person, but the monkey-brain seems to place ‘expecting omega’ on the top of the trustworthy list. Not always a good thing, but Tony knows for an absolute fact that Bucky wouldn’t hurt a kid if his life depended on it. Not anymore.

The windows clear up again, bathing the room in sunlight, and May sits unceremoniously on the floor, rubbing her temples. Tony decides to join her. He shoves the coffee table out of the way, and plops down on the rug. May drops her hands.
“I don’t know why, and I don’t know how, but he trained himself to keep his panic attacks silent,” she mumbles.

“Bucky’ll take care of him. I promise.”

“That- Bucky? He’s good with teens?”

“He’s good with preteens, at least. He bonded with Harley soon as they made eye contact.”

“Who’s Harley?”

“A kid who adopted me. Long story.”

That’s the end of that, for now. Tony crosses his legs, leans against the couch beside himself. May reaches over and grabs a Tagalong. She shoves it in her mouth and chews.

After swallowing, she flicks up a hand and lifts her shoulders, just a bit.

“So what d’you want me to say?”

Ah. There’s the rub.

“Nothing, really. He’s not my son; he’s not my nephew. I want to help him, but the condition was that you be made aware.”

“Help him. What the fuck do you mean, help him?”

“So the basic idea is, that if he can get you on-board, I equip him. Give him a line to the Tower so he can call for help if he gets in over his head. Put him in something more protective than pajamas and modified goggles.”

“You want to give a fifteen-year-old weapons.”

“I want to keep him safe.” That’s sort of- sort of the point. He doesn’t make weapons for the army, but he makes them for his Pack. Because the Pack doesn’t fuck off and attack people because they’re pissed off or want something. They defend. They avenge. They protect. And that jives with Tony’s- he doesn’t want to be cheesy, but sure. It jives with his soul. “I can’t stop bad things from happening. I can’t keep a kid from doing stupid things because he wants to help. What I can do, is keep good people from getting hurt.”

“So what, I don’t have a choice? This is happening whether I want it or not?”

“Fuck no. No, that isn’t what I’m saying at all. I mean, I can’t stop him. I’m not technically a legal authority. I’m not his guardian. If you want to stop him, and you can stop him, then that’s your choice. I’m not technically a dad yet. I get it, okay? I have all these ideas, and I want to help, but you’ve been raising Peter for years. You have a better handle on him than I do. So yeah. We just- We just thought- Cards on the table, yeah?”

May’s stone-faced stare could probably be labeled a legal weapon, because Tony feels like he’s slowly being impaled. She has mercy, turns her gaze off to the side to examine something Tony can’t pinpoint, and when she looks at him again, she says, “I want to meet Harley.”

“What? Why?”

So that was probably the last thing Tony could have guessed would happen. Why Harley? What does he have to do with anything?
“Let me meet Harley.”
Not an answer, but sure. Fine. Tony doesn’t get the feeling that May’s a danger to his kid, so sure.

“JARVIS, where’s Harley?”

“Harley is currently in the elevator, accompanied by Master Barton. Shall I reroute them to this location?”

“Yeah, sure. If they’re okay with it.”

Before too long, the elevator door slides open. Tony waves at Clint, and while Clint smiles and waves back, he doesn’t join Harley in leaving the elevator. Instead, the kid approaches alone.

“Why are you sitting on the floor?”

“I don’t know. Why not?”

That seems to be enough of an answer for Harley, because the kid grins and joins them.

May’s eyes soften just a bit as she examines Harley, and the kid peers back at her with his big dark eyes.

“May, this is Harley. Harley, this is May.”

Harley doesn’t really say anything, so May picks up the slack.

“Hi, Harley. It’s good to meet you. Tony says you adopted him.” Ah. Right for the jugular. “What does he mean?”

The kid looks to Tony for guidance, and Tony nudges his arm.

“Hey, don’t worry, squirt. This isn’t an interrogation. May’s Peter’s aunt, and she’s worried about him.”

Harley lights up.

“Oh! I like Peter. Nice to meet you, May.” That’s all it really takes to help Harley relax. Just bring up the older kid he admires. “Dad was attacked last year, and he ended up crash-landing in my hometown. I let him warm up in Mom’s garage.” Harley glances down at his fingers as he picks his nails. “We’re connected.”

May shifts around to kneel, and sits back on her heels.

“What does that mean?”

Harley looks up at her again and chews his lip, then replies, “It means he’ll always protect me, and I’ll always protect him.” Tony opens his mouth to protest, but Harley cuts him off with an elbow to the ribs. “Shh. He says he doesn’t need it, but he does. He took out his arc reactor to save a kid I knew.” A moment, a breath, and then Harley quietly, proudly murmurs, “I put it back in.”

“That’s-” May begins, but Harley cuts her off.

“I call him Dad ‘cause my first one left and never came back. Tony did. He didn’t have to, but he did. He came back, ‘cause we’re family, and you always go back for family.”
Tony feels like they’re a little bit off-topic now, but then again, he’s a little distracted trying to swallow the lump in his throat. May doesn’t seem to have much to say either, so Harley twists to look at Tony.

“Clint and me were s’posed to meet Nat at Coney Island. Can we go now?”

“Yeah. Sure, squirt. Don’t throw up.”

Harley gives Tony a quick hug, and then scrambles to his feet.

“It was nice to meet you, May. Maybe you’ll come back sometime to see what me and Peter make.”

“Have fun at Coney,” May says in response. When the kid’s gone, Tony pours them each a generous mug of hot chocolate. After a few seconds’ thought, Tony tops off Peter’s mug.

“Let’s go find your nephew.”

Surprise surprise, Bucky stashed Peter away in his own nest. FRIDAY lets them in on that little secret. When Tony knocks on the door, Bucky answers. Thank fucking christ there aren’t any weapons to be seen. Peter’s burrowed in the pile of blankets and pillows, flicking idly through his dimmed phone. Tony passes off Peter’s mug, and lets Bucky steal his own.

“All good in here?”

Bucky bobs his fist in a ‘yes’, and Peter mumbles and affirmative as well. It isn’t long before Peter clammers back to his feet, subdued and tired from his nearly-silent emotional freak-out, and Tony sees them to the front door. He offers to call a driver, but May declines.

“I think you’ve got my number. Peter definitely does.” Tony hooks his thumbs in the belt-loops of his jeans. “Maybe we’ll talk again. One way or the other, I’ve got a spot for Peter in my R&D lab, if you’re still okay with it.”

“We’ll think about it.” May moves to walk away, but she pauses, and throws one last glance at Tony. “I promise.”

And that’s all Tony can ask for. He trusts May to do whatever she feels is best for her nephew, whether or not that includes letting him run around as Spider-Man.

“Bye Peter. I’ll see you around.”

Peter waves as well, and that’s that.

Chapter End Notes

My fears have come true. Targeted ads are showing me baby stuff. Such as, and I’m not making this up, the Baby Shusher, which is a $35 piece of plastic that plays a looped recording of someone going ‘shhhhh’.

I'm not certain if I've said this, but I recently came to the realization that I'm not basing my ABO dynamics fully on wolves or other canid animals (and I mean interpersonal behaviors, to clarify. Not the actual pack dynamics, which I understand are very different from ABO tropes), like I guess you're supposed to. Instead, I realized I was
essentially turning the Avengers into huge, dangerous housecats. Think about it. Communal childrearing. Social grooming. The headnuzzles. Presenting food as a sign of affection.

I know canon Bucky doesn’t have as much of a drawl as I’m giving him, but I like it. I liiike it.

In addition, I feel like these guys are sort of OOC, but I also feel like that sort of comes with the territory of an ABO AU.
Chapter Notes

I don’t typically handle criticism well, which is absolutely something I’m working on, but that doesn’t mean I’m not trying to better my writing. I’ve started listening to podcasts by established authors and writing instructors, and I’ll be attempting to incorporate their techniques from now on. However, I would very much like suggestions in the Moments in Between part XD I try to write with empathy, but I can’t manage any for sex scenes.

When May returns, she busts in like a storm. At eight in the morning, JARVIS rouses Tony to let him know May just entered the lobby. Bucky grumbles, mashing his face into Tony’s pillow when Tony pulls away from him in favor of rolling out of bed. Tony had sort of hoped to escape without waking his bedmate, but yeah. That’s a losing battle when said bedmate is a trained assassin constantly on high alert.

“Sorry, Sunshine. Duty calls.”

“Y’r gonna hafta ‘pologize for wakin’ me up,” Bucky mumbles, letting his eyes slip closed.

“Don’t worry, Frostbite. I’ll make it up to you.”

He yanks on clothes, does his best to make himself presentable. He’s never been on the receiving end of his patented ‘show up with no warning’ technique. Yeah, sure. Enemies assaulting him could count. That Whiplash guy definitely counts. But someone who isn’t out to kill or kidnap him? Someone who wants to chat? Yeah, no one’s really done that to him. No one’s had the balls.

As annoying as it is, the move certainly earns May plenty of respect on top of what Tony already has for her.

Hair still mussed, jeans pulled off the floor and a random t-shirt dragged from the drawer, and sandals on his feet, he goes to meet his doom. Hell hath no fury like a loving guardian.

As JARVIS brings May up to the penthouse, Tony loads ground beans into the coffee maker and flicks the machine on. Some people might go to work at eight, but Tony doesn’t feel functional until, like, ten at the earliest, most normal days. Pete let it slip that May’s an ER nurse, so chances are, she’s either coming home from or going in to a shift, unless she enjoys traipsing across the city with the first wave of rush hour. So… Coffee probably wouldn’t go amiss with her either. Unless she hates coffee. He sets out a second mug anyways.

The elevator slides silently open, and May steps out, arms loosely crossed. She’s silent for a moment, but Tony makes the first move.

“Coffee?”

May’s eyes flick down to the mugs on the counter, and she relents, approaches, sits down. The barstool’s legs need tightening, judging by the subtle rock of the stool.
“Yeah, I’d kill for some coffee right now.”

“No- uh- no need for that. We can’t condone murder here.”

He slides a steaming mug of coffee gingerly across the smooth granite surface, and May accepts. She takes a sip, and Tony leans braces his hip against the opposite site of the breakfast bar. He taps one finger against the black backdrop of the kitschy New York souvenir mug. The iconic skyline blossoms into view as the ceramic heats up.

“Is Peter alright?”

May seems awfully calm to be here regarding something happening to Peter, but better safe than sorry.

“He’s fine. We’ve- we’ve been talking.”

“That’s good. Great. I mean- yeah.”

Better than stony silence or furious screaming. Talking is- is- it’s a good medium. The best medium. Healthiest.

“This is important to him.” Her mug clinks against the granite, and she rubs her browbone with a thumb and forefinger. “This whole- vigilante thing. But you can see how this is a problem for me, right?”

“Yeah. I mean- yeah.”

“So- I just- I need to know you can keep him safe. If this happens. Alright? So how are you gonna keep him safe?”

It clicks, then, that this is a sort of interview. A negotiation. Alright. Sure. That’s fair.

So he lays out his ideas. May listens, inscrutable, as Tony talks about training, body armor, and help testing and formulating equipment. She adds terms of her own. Rules on what Peter can handle alone, and what she needs to put her foot down on. There’s some negotiation here and there, and negotiation that will undoubtedly continue happening until Peter’s an adult. May gives Tony a curfew to help enforce, and a whole host of other things. Which is, y’know. Completely rational. Tony understands. He’s totally on-board. May’s the guardian, and Peter’s a kid. He gets it.

And in the meanwhile, May signs off on an actual Stark Industries internship. Which Peter absolutely will engage in, she assures. It’s just- since technically he won’t get any outside credit for the whole Spider-Man thing, given the secret identity situation, an official internship gives Peter something to put on his resume. Gives him an excuse to hang out at the tower. Gives Tony an excuse to check up on him.

Of course, Tony has some ideas of his own. But he doesn’t want to make promises unless he knows he can deliver. There’s an AI in stasis, one of FRIDAY’s contemporaries, and she was awesome. Great. Protective. Just- jealous? Not jealous. That isn’t quite it. She just never liked sharing space with JARVIS. Tony feels it’s time to bring KAREN out again, see if she gets along with Peter.

So yeah. A productive morning, unexpected as it is.

Tony fully intends to shuffle back to bed and make good on his promise to apologize to Bucky, but the squirt waylays him, demanding breakfast and attention. As Harley pours himself a gourmet, totally healthy and not at all cavity-inducing meal of frosted flakes with sliced bananas, Tony pokes
his head in the doorway of his bedroom.

“Hey, Sunshine. Hungry?” he asks the lump beneath his sheets. “Harley’n I are gonna have breakfast.”

“I’ll be out inna minute,” the lump replies.

And, true to his word, Bucky joins them not much later. With- with an unconventional food choice. Not- okay, so it isn’t the **weirdest** food choice. Bucky grabs a can of baked beans from the pantry as he enters the kitchen. It’s just weird for breakfast, this side of the pond.

“Whatcha got there?”

The can opener grates against the metal of the can. Tony hates those beans. Way too sweet and sticky and gluey, but JARVIS handles most of the grocery orders based on a standard list and special requests. Apparently, Bucky wants baked beans. Ugh.

“Beans. That gonna be a problem?”

“I mean, no, but- oh jesus christ.”

There goes a spoonful of peanut butter. Into the beans. Bucky’s cravings up until now have been pretty manageable. Vegan ice cream, for example. Tony hasn’t encountered the bizarre ones yet. Today seems to be the day.

Harley scrunches up his nose when confronted with Bucky’s food choice.

“Hey, you can’t eat uncooked beans! That’s gross!”

“Really?” Tony eyes the kid incredulously. “That’s your problem? The beans aren’t warm?”

“Says here they’re fully cooked.”

After a moment of thought, however, Bucky compromises. The beans hit the inside of a bowl with the sort of wet plop unique to canned goods, and Bucky shoves the bowl into the microwave. All the way across the room, the distinct scent of warmed peanut butter assaults Tony when the door pings open again. That, and the smell of whatever sweet sauce one makes vegetarian baked beans in.

Hey, at least Bucky won’t have to worry about anyone stealing his food.

Anyone but Steve, apparently.

The alpha catches one whiff of the bizarre combination a few days later, and a dopey, golden-retriever grin claims his face. Bucky eyes him with caution, the bowl clutched between his hands so tightly Tony swears it’ll break any moment.

Steve, bless him, holds up his hands in preemptive surrender. Bucky’s shoulders remain hunched, his eyes sharp and tense, but within moments he nestles back into Tony’s outstretched arm. The two of them remain comfortably on the couch. Tony pulls up footage of these little cuddle moments, sometimes, because it’s abso-fucking-lutely hilarious to watch himself drape his arm around Bucky and hold him close like a bantam rooster sheltering a standard hen.

“Thor called,” Steve explains, eyes flicking back to the monstrosity of clashing flavors in Bucky’s bowl. “Well- Jane did.”

“I swear, someday I’m going to make Thor a phone he understands,” Tony grumbles. It’s a sore
spot. A blow to his pride. Here he is, the leading edge of progressive technology, and one of his packmates has the gall- the gall!- to liken using his technology to banging two rocks together. Not in that exact phrasing. That’s just what Tony heard.

Not that Tony holds it personally against Thor. No. He gets it. Advanced alien civilization and all that. It’s just- ugh. His ego. His tender, sensitive ego.

“What are you eating?”

“Beans,” Bucky grumbles around his mouthful, which- ew.

“Can we not talk about that? Please? Tell me about Jane and Thor,” Tony begs. It’s really- the thought of peanut butter and canned baked beans together makes Tony feel the need to throw up a little. He’s just making a conscious choice not to be a dick to the pregnant person.


“Or. Or, and I’m just spitballing here- We could put a pin in that conversation, and come back to it later.”

Bucky blows his bean breath over Tony’s face, and the alpha makes an exaggerated gagging sound.

“You’re disgusting.”

The whites of Bucky’s teeth flash.

“Awfully sure of yourself, huh.”

“What, you gonna kick me out?”

As if that’s even a possibility.

Steve politely coughs, and Tony’s eyes flick back up to the other alpha.

“So… Thor.”

“Thor.”

“We’ll have a full pack by Saturday.”

Something warm and happy blossoms in Tony’s chest, and he grins. “Yeah? Can’t he fly?”

“Jane’s coming along, and she’s bringing her pack too.”

And now it makes sense. Erik seems to acquire a new phobia every other month. A deathly fear of heights happens to be one of them. Ergo, no planes. Not without significant drugs, and as an alpha, Erik probably doesn’t react well to sedatives. Tony can relate.

“Okay. Great. Um. Did she say how she wants to handle housing?” Tony has a funny feeling that Erik won’t want to stay up at the top of a tower. “Y’know what? I’ll call.”

“I asked, don’t worry. Erik’s doing better. He thinks he’ll be fine this time around.”

“I’ll reserve a room anyways. Just in case.” A ground floor hotel room. Maybe a suite. Just in case Jane and Darcy want to stick with him. Who is he kidding? Of course they will. A ground floor suite
it is. There has to be one of those *somewhere* in New York, right?

“I can do that, Tony. You look- comfortable.”

Hey, no. Tony provides. Steve protects. They’ve been *over* this.

“That’s *my* thing. Don’t take my thing.”

Mr. Goody Two Shoes, always being helpful. How dare he.

“You ain’t goin’ nowhere,” Bucky announces decisively. “Hey, Baby Girl?”

“What can I do for you, Other-Boss?”

“You c’n cover the whole hotel thing, yeah?”

“Of course. I’ll take care of that right away.”

Bucky’s metal elbow digs into Tony’s ribs, and he takes another bite of his beans.

“Problem solved.”

Problem solved indeed. Tony settles back down, still more than a little displeased about being muscled out of his usual role. Steve’s robust laughter does nothing to soothe his ire. Tony’s mouth twists in a scowl.

“Yeah yeah. Get out of here, Steve.”

Steve only protests a little bit, but as the elevator doors slide open, the other alpha hesitates. He turns around, one hand still on the doorway of the elevator as if to keep it from closing- like that’s an issue with JARVIS in control- and says, “I was thinking. I’m going to cook the pack dinner tomorrow.”

Tony’s head tilts, and his lips purse.

“I thought we agreed on takeout tomorrow.”

Steve’s fingers tap at the edge of the elevator door, and he refuses to make eye contact. Tony’s curiosity quickens. Steve’s ability to lie comes and goes at the weirdest times.

“I know. I was just thinking- maybe I’d like to cook.”

“You’re hiding something.”

“I am.”

“Oh. Well.” Tony really didn’t expect that to work. “Fine then.”

That’s that, really. Bucky snickers, and Tony would absolutely elbow him like a child harassing his crush if he didn’t still worry about hurting the pup.

The mystery remains. Although, perhaps the bigger mystery might be how Steve managed to convince Natasha to postpone her choice of takeout location. Things become just a little more clear when Nat breaks out the bathtub vodka. Not much more, but a little bit. The ingredients Tony examines before being roped into Mario-Kart by Clint and Harley help paint a bigger picture.

It’s something Russian. Probably. Maybe.
“Georgian,” Steve corrects, handing Tony a pile of plates come evening.

“Georgian,” Tony parrots back. “Where the hell did you learn to cook Georgian food?”

Bruce nudges Tony out of the way to reach the utensils. There really are too many of them in the kitchen. It’s a spacious design with plenty of room, but of the five of them currently occupying the area, only three can be considered useful. Tony, sadly, does not number among the three.

A wooden spoon scrapes across the slick ceramic bottom of the red-lacquered dutch oven as Steve stirs the stewed bean concoction he’s spent the whole damn day working on. Bucky hovers curiously, though Steve has until this point refused to let him have a taste. Steve nudges the omega with his elbow.

“We had a neighbor for a few years, when I was livin’ with Buck’s pack. Miss Ketevan. Your Ma called her Ketie.” Steve glances at Bucky, and plucks a small cereal spoon from the countertop. He twirls the utensil between his fingers as Natasha breezes by to pull a roasting pan of garlic-crusted chicken from the oven. “She’d cook for us sometimes, when Misses Barnes was out working. Made this great stewed bean recipe.” There’s this wistful little smile on Steve’s face- the one that plucks at Tony’s heart. “It’s s’posed to have walnuts and herbs and spices, but after the market crashed none of us could afford that sort of thing.” He dips the spoon in the fragrant red beans. Steam rises from the pot as Steve scoops up a sample. “Misses Barnes switched it out for peanuts and molasses, and on special occasions she’d use the old spices Miss Ketie gave her. Didn’t really taste the same, but it was nice.”

The blonde alpha gingerly blows on the spoonful of stew, and he offers the utensil to Bucky.

“I don’t remember any’a that,” Bucky mumbles as he takes the spoon.

“That’s alright. It’s only- I think you’re missin’ your ma’s food.” Bucky’s eyes remain locked on the cabinetry to Steve’s right. The muscle of his jaw jumps, and Tony swears he can hear the omega’s teeth scrape together from across the room. Tony feels like a voyeur. Like an intruder, despite the communal nature of the kitchen.

He bows out. Steps back. Gives them what little privacy he can given the open design of the Tower living spaces. There’s a table to be set.

Bruce lifts half of the plates from Tony’s stack- so, like, three. The utensils and accompanying dining accessories already sit in their places; before much longer everyone’s sitting down like they’re a nuclear pack in a 1950s illustrated advertisement. A nuclear pack with two dads, one aunt, two uncles, one ma and a kid who isn’t really legally or genetically related to any of them. Maybe not the picture perfect 50s family, then.

A family nonetheless.

Sitting at the round table they use for these centralized meals feels bizarre. The standard is to serve pack meals buffet style and spread out to sit wherever they please in the same general, speaking-distance vicinity. Steve, however, was adamant. Traditional-ish pack dinner.

No one mentions the wet and watery sheen to Bucky’s reddened eyes, but as they make casual conversation, Bucky’s deadly glare dares anyone who makes eye contact to mention the welling tears, like someone drawing a line in the sand. Tony musters his courage and quietly murmurs, “Are you okay?” but the sharp, silent nod Bucky gives him doesn’t exactly scream ‘I want to talk about feelings’.
The food is good. Tony will give Steve that. Of course, he can’t eat the chicken due to his promise to Bucky, or the real cheese-stuffed bread, but the semi-vegan equivalents are pretty damn great. Strange texture, wonderful flavor. He even samples the beans, but molasses remains one of his least favorite things. Bucky, however, savors Steve’s cooking. He devours everything heaped onto his plate, and angrily rubs at his wet eyes with his increasingly damp sleeve cuffs.

Tony knows Bucky’s memory remains spotty. Everyone does. It’s just- sort of a thing. Tony’s dying to know if this is a remembrance moment. If it’s the good kind, or the bad kind. Or if it’s a sense memory. The sort of thing dragged up- not quite remembered, but intensely felt- by a taste or a touch or a smell or a sound. Like the scent Tony can’t quite attach to a specific flower, but has memorized where in the New York Botanical Gardens he can find it. The one that brings back a hazy, half remembered memory of an aching, bruised jaw and delicate fingers running through his hair as Maria comforted him.

“Are you okay?”

His eyes flick up across the table to Clint, and he manages a smile.

“Yeah, sorry. Got caught up in my head. I’m fine.”

Don’t make this about himself. Don’t. That’s bad alpha behavior, in Tony’s book. Bucky’s metal shoulder bumps against Tony’s own flesh and bone shoulder, and he leans into the contact for a moment.

The rest of the meal passes by without incident, despite Bucky’s increasingly frustrating sniffling. A plan forms in Tony’s mind, to gently and carefully question Bucky, see how he’s doing later, when they aren’t surrounded by the rest of the pack. If Bucky’s fine with it, that is. No use in pressing a matter he doesn’t want to talk about. But yes. Tony will ask.

And he does. Once the table’s been cleared and a movie’s been watched and Tony and Harley have video chatted with Mrs. Keener, Tony relaxes in bed with Bucky, the two of them huddled together like they’re sharing secrets. He cards his fingers through the fine strands of Bucky’s hair, twirling the ends around his thumb before letting them slip free. His other hand rests idly on the swell of Bucky’s stomach.

“D’you want to talk about it?”

A simple question. No strings attached, no expectations. No mention of the subject, but no doubt what it’s about.

Bucky breathes deeply, and rests his metal hand over Tony’s on his belly. His throat clicks as he swallows.

“I don’ remember my Ma,” he mumbles. “I sorta can picture my sisters, but Ma-” He pauses and drops his head back against the headboard. “I don’ remember her, but I tasted Stevie’s food and I- It was a lot. I felt- a lot. Don’ really got much else t’say ‘bout that.”

A little tap pokes at Tony’s hand, and he strokes his thumb over Bucky’s skin.

“Okay.”

There isn’t much else to it.

Chapter End Notes
I know officially Sarah Rogers died in 1936, and Steve would have been an adult by then, but for the purpose of this, Steve was orphaned at age 14, and moved in with Bucky, Bucky’s mom, and his three sisters.

On the subject of sweet pasta sauce: I feel like if I ever cooked for someone’s Italian grandma, she would murder me. I add brown sugar to my pasta sauces.

End Notes

Really, truly, comments are precious to me. Especially when you guys write what you like about it. Your favorite part might not be my favorite part, but then I go back and read your favorite part again and usually see it with new eyes.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!