Broken Pieces (Let Them Go)

by mistrstank (dreamingdarkly)

Summary

Winter wants to snarl, wants to howl at the injustice of it, but he knows Bucky is right. They
need to get the Witch away from Tony and back home to be punished. He looks down at Tony; at the head of unruly dark hair resting so trustingly against his ribs. He feels the skinny chest rising gently beneath his arm, the steady puff of warm breath he can feel through his sweatshirt. This child is...important and Winter wants, more fiercely than he can ever remember, to protect him.

Or in which Wanda attempts to alter the past Terminator style, Bucky and his moody alter ego intervene, and Winter makes a choice. A choice that leads to new beginnings, fragile hope and maybe the chance to heal.

Currently on hiatus until February 28th

Notes

I am back! Again! And I've started yet another AU!

So I have no idea how long this is going to end up, but I have lots of ideas so we're gonna be here a while. Posting will be every Tuesday (for me, Monday for those of you in the US I believe).

First let me start off by offering thanks to:

The WinterIron Discord server, for endless support and encouragement (enablers, all of them).
Meg and Roe for the fantastic beta work!

Finally, the end of this long ass A/N:

This is AU post Age of Ultron because ewwwww Civil War. It's fairly AU in terms of Post CA:TWS as well, since Bucky is living at the Compound. I'm breaking canon and running with it, so enjoy the ride guys!

See the end of the work for more notes.
It’s not fair.

Wanda clenches her hands around a mug of tea, barely feeling the heat against her permanently chilled fingers. Red flickers up and down her arms and she ignores that too. She stares at the TV, lips curled in a snarl as the muted news story continues to play.

Tony Stark smiles on the screen, the expression tired but genuine. He’s bulwarked from all sides by the Avengers - dirty, tired and smiling as they take a break from the clean up efforts. It’s one of many stills the news channels are all running - *Avengers Clean Up Sokovia!*

She hates it.

She hates that he’s smiling, that he’s stepping foot anywhere near her home after *what he did*. She hates that Pietro is dead, her home is in ruins and he’s still breathing.

He’s a *monster*.

Worse than that, she hates the way the Avengers *forgive him* and say *she* can’t be trusted.

“I’m sorry, Wanda.” Steve says with a small, awkward smile. “It’s just gonna take some time, after...You know.” He trails off with a little shrug and a vague motion towards his own head that she takes to mean her magic.

Everything is his fault - her life is *ruined* because of Stark and it’s not fair. She knows the world would be better without him, she *knows* it in her bones but no one else seems to see it. Her parents would still be alive, *Pietro* would still be alive.
She thinks of nights spent huddled with her brother, desperately sharing what little warmth and comfort they had. She thinks of pain as the experiments ripped into her mind, pieces torn out and something *alien* stuffed back in. She thinks of the coiling, seething mass of power that thrums inside her every day, pushing and pushing and *pushing* against her skin. And she wants him gone, this black mark on her life, this *monster*.

“Murderer,” She hisses, eyes still trained on the TV.

She looks back down at her hands, admires the sparks of red that sway sinuous patterns around her fingers. She has the power, she could do it. But the Avengers...They don’t trust her, but she likes them, thinks one day they could fill parts of the empty space inside where Pietro used to sit. Not all of it, never all of it - but some. With them, she could be happy.

So she can’t attack Stark without alienating them.

But maybe, maybe there was another option…

The team had watched *Terminator* on movie night and while Wanda hadn’t paid the movie too much attention, the concept...The concept sticks with her now. She clenches and relaxes her hands, feels the power rise swift and eager inside her. Yes, she could do that.

Wanda hurries to her room, leaving the TV running in her excitement. Hurriedly she puts on her gear - the red leather makes her feel dangerous, indestructible. She straps a knife to her leg, a gift from Natasha; she knows she’s more of a weapon by herself than the blade will ever make her, but she’s not sure how much the travel will exhaust her. She might have to do it manually - it should bother her more than it does, how little the thought concerns her.

Wanda creeps outside, snaps at Stark’s artificial watchdog when it asks where she’s going. She walks to the edge of the Compound’s grounds - she doesn’t want witnesses to this, in case something goes wrong. She takes a deep breath and pictures Stark. His face causes rage to burn in her stomach, but she doesn’t let it distract her now. In her mind’s eye she peels away the years, reaching for a Stark who hasn’t hurt anyone, who hasn’t ruined anyone’s life.

She has to go far until it feels right, much farther that she’d thought - even as a teenager, Stark was a *monster*. Finally she thinks she has the right image in her head and she wants to crow with glee, seeing him so small and helpless. Yes, this is right.
Wanda reaches out for that thought with both hands, pours all of her power into it and *pulls*. There’s a shriek, like nails on a chalkboard, and a jagged red tear opens in the air in front of her. On the other side she can see a mansion, tall and imposing.

Wanda smiles and steps through.

The Witch is up to something.

Bucky pauses in the hallway, his quest to the kitchen for a cup of hot chocolate forgotten. She’s standing in the middle of the living area, fists clenched as red swirls travel up and down her arms. The sight of her power makes Bucky twitch and he can feel the pressure of Winter’s attention - Winter *hates* the witch.

*HYDRA bitch*.

Winter whispers and Bucky twitches again. He hates to agree with anything Winter has to say, but Wanda makes the hair on the back of his neck stand up. There’s something a little...unhinged in her eyes; she’s a weapon with the safety off and Bucky knows all about weapons. He melts back into the shadows, watches as she scowls at the TV for a long time. If he leans a little to the side, he can just make out what’s got her so riled up.

Stark, of course.

He sees it the moment she comes to some sort of decision - red slides across her eyes for a moment and a chilling little smirk twists the corner of her mouth.

*Mission Parameters: Surveillance.*

They watch as she almost runs for her room.
Bucky doesn’t even think before he starts tailing her.

He follows her when she leaves her room, allows his awareness to shrink until he’s more Winter than Bucky. Bucky was a sniper in the war, and he knows stealth. But Winter? Winter was born to it. They’re a silent shadow as they creep after Wanda, the grass muffling their movements. They’re only dressed in the sweatpants, hoodie and socks they’d worn to sleep in. The grass is wet with dew and rapidly soaks through their socks, chilling their feet.

They both ignore it.

Wanda stands still for a moment, eyes closed; they wait a few steps behind her, crouched and ready. They both flinch at the shrieking sound of the...portal? It opens up before them and they can see a mansion on the other side, one that looks both familiar and not.

_Stark Mansion, December 1991. Mission Objective: observe targets and await movement._

Winter informs him, and Bucky’s insides go cold. She _wouldn’t._

Wanda steps into the portal and while Bucky hesitates, Winter does not.

They dive in right after her.
Chapter Summary

4 Year Old Tony defends himself, Home and Alone style, from an intruder in the house. Bucky and Winter throw down with Wanda. Winter learns he's not very good with children, but maybe Bucky isn't very good either.

Chapter Notes

Two chapters at once! Just to get the set up out of the way, of course. From here the weekly posting schedule will begin.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Two: Home Alone

There’s someone outside the mansion.

Anthony Stark is already awake, sniffling quietly to himself and staring out his bedroom window. He’s wrapped himself in the blanket from his bed and curled up as small as possible in the window seat. As such, he easily spots the flash of red in the darkness and the slender shadow that makes its way across the grounds.

He freezes, the throbbing of his arm forgotten as he imagines the intruder coming into the house. The front door is locked - he knows he locked it before he came up to his room. He remembers pushing a stool up to the door and climbing on it to reach the lock; he remembers falling off the same stool with only one arm to brace himself. The windows, he thinks that’s what they’ll use. He doesn’t hear a window break, but the mansion is huge and his bedroom is in the corner of the second floor.

Tony wipes his face and straightens his skinny shoulders - he’s the man of the house, since Sir, his father isn’t home - he needs to defend his home. He slides out from his blanket, bare feet silent on the hardwood floors. His shoulder throbs with every step as he crawls half under his bed to curl tiny fingers around the bottle of dish soap waiting there. It’s heavy and unwieldy, requiring all his
strength to tug it out from under his bed. The sling hampers his movements and tugs awkwardly at his neck. Tony takes a moment to strip it off his head and throw it aside. It makes his arm hurt more, but he needs the movement. It takes Tony more time than he likes to drag the bottle all the way down the hall to the top of the stairs. Now that he’s closer, he can hear someone moving around downstairs. His heart thunders in his chest, but Tony tells himself to be brave. He struggles with the cap for a moment; he can’t twist his arm without his shoulder throbbing even worse, and it’s one of those caps you have to push on. Eventually it comes off and he heaves the bottle over, the sound enough to cover the whimper he makes as his shoulder screams at the strain.

The soap pours from the bottle in a slick, shiny flood down the stairs. It gleams in the little light coming in through the windows. Tony doesn’t wait for the intruder to come investigate the noise - he runs back down the hallway, sticking to the thick rugs on the floor wherever he can to muffle the sound of his steps.

Behind him, he hears a crash and what he assumes is cursing, though he doesn’t recognise the language.

Tony opens and slams shuts as many of the hallway doors as he can, hoping to confuse the person about where he’s hiding. His mind whirls, the panic sending his thoughts scattering in every direction. He misses Jarvis in that moment, so much he wants to cry, but he doesn’t have time and Stark men don’t cry.

He doesn’t know where to hide.

Tony stumbles into one of the spare bedrooms and tries to ignore the way his breath hitches in a little sob, half stifled. On hands and knees, he crawls under the bed and reaches for the large jar he has hidden there. It’s one of many places around the mansion he has parts stored, pilfered in ones and twos from Sir’s workshop for his own projects. The jar of ball bearings is heavy in his small hands, but Tony gamely tugs it out and into his arms. His injured arm protests the abuse, but he’s determined. He hauls it out into the hallway and empties the jar. He gets down on hands and knees and spreads them in every direction, trying to cover as much of the floor as he can.

He leaves the jar where it’s fallen when he hears the person stumbling their way up the stairs. He’s run out of time.

Tony runs. He runs as fast as his little legs will carry him, down the hallway to the door of the dumbwaiter. He hauls the doorway open and claws his way up and into the tiny space. He’s only four, and even for a four year old he’s small, but he still has to curl up tight to fit. He slides the door closed and jams a fist into his mouth. Tears stream down his face, and his breath hitches every few seconds, but he tries his very very best to be quiet.
He knows no one is coming to save him.

Travelling through Wanda’s portal is a little bit like waking up from cryo - his entire body feels stiff and his stomach is trying to crawl up through his esophagus. Bucky stumbles to his knees immediately after being spat out the other side and wastes precious seconds just breathing and trying not to throw up.

When he finally lifts his head, the Witch is already approaching the house.

Bucky stumbles gracelessly to his feet, almost winding up back on his face for his trouble.

_Hurry!_

Bucky can feel Winter’s concern and it’s enough to spur him on. He breaks into a run, silently thanking the serum as he clears the grounds in probably half the time of an average man. The front door is closed and for a moment Bucky debates searching for the same route in that Wanda used. Winter however pounds against the inside of his skull and his urgency makes up Bucky’s mind; they can guess what Wanda is here for, and she already has a head start.

There’s not enough time.

Bucky rams into the front door of Stark mansion metal shoulder first, at a full sprint. The door splinters inwards with a resounding _crack_, pieces flying in every direction. Bucky staggers a little from the force but quickly regains his equilibrium. The foyer he’s ended up in is empty, however a flash of movement at the top of the stairs draws his eye. He sees Wanda look at him, her face pale and terrified, and then she disappears down the hall. Bucky doesn’t bother calling after her - Steve would have, determined to believe that Wanda was _redeemable_.

Bucky knows better. He knows the kind of monsters HYDRA makes.

The stairs shine oddly in the dim lighting and Bucky pauses a moment. There’s some sort of fluid covering most of the stairs, dripping slowly downward. He can see a smear of it about halfway up
where Wanda obviously slipped in it.

_Clever little one._

Bucky can’t help but agree. He carefully picks his way around the spillage, taking the steps two at a time. He hears a noise further up, and the Witch muttering a curse under her breath; he picks up the pace.

There are ball bearings on the floor - a haphazard mess that a less observant person could easily slip over.

_Resourceful._

Winter sounds _smug_, the creepy bastard.

_We could train. Will be a good assassin._

Jesus Christ. Bucky thinks a resounding ‘fuck no’ in Winter’s direction and takes a running leap to clear the mess. He can hear Wanda moving around further down the hall and he pushes himself on.

“Where are you, Stark?” Wanda yells suddenly as she steps out of one of the side rooms. She’s holding a knife in one hand while weak, fizzling sparks of red circle the other. The light reflects oddly in her eyes, making her look crazed. She eyes Bucky like she’s not sure he’s real, and her lip curls.

“Barnes.” The way his name comes off her tongue sends chills down his spine and Bucky unconsciously snarls.

“You need to stop this, Wanda. He’s just a boy.” Bucky says, making an effort to be calm in spite of the way Winter practically _screams_ at him to act.

“Everything is _his_ fault. Don’t you see?” She whispers and the gleam in her eyes makes something inside Bucky want to curl up and hide. “I can fix everything.” She adds. The sparks around her hand stutter and die out, distracting her as she pauses to frown at her hand.

_Now!_

Winter surges forward, shoves Bucky aside with terrifying strength and leaves him to watch as
Winter takes control. Winter moves, faster than the Witch can track. He crosses the space between them and grabs her wrist, squeezing harshly until she drops the knife with a cry. Bucky winces internally and makes a futile effort to wrestle back control, and when that fails he tries to urge restraint. Her other hand swings up, red sputtering and dying at her fingertips and Winter knocks it aside with his metal forearm. Wanda cries out again and Winter smiles grimly as she staggers backwards, clutching her arms against her chest.

“How could you?” She stares at him with large, wounded eyes. Winter’s lip curls in a snarl as he steps in, following her retreat.

*Don’t hurt her, Winter! She’s just a kid!*

Winter shakes his head and shoves Bucky ruthlessly down, until he feels like he’s watching the world through a very narrow window.

*She is not a child. She chose HYDRA. She chooses the death of children.*

Winter is only distracted for a moment by their internal power struggle, but it’s just long enough for Wanda to move. She swings both hands up and fires a blast of magic their way. Winter dodges the weak attack neatly, darts in close and with ruthless efficiency slams his metal fist against Wanda’s temple. She makes a quiet sound of pain and then slumps bonelessly into his arms. Winter drops her unceremoniously to the floor, curling his lip when Bucky admonishes him for it. He straightens and dusts his hands off like he’s touched something dirty.

*Now you’re just being petty.*

Winter shrugs his shoulders, unconcerned. He turns his attention to the child now, ignoring Bucky ‘tapping’ at the back of his mind. He skips the room Wanda had been searching when they found her and prowls into the next one. He searches all the obvious places - he’s not sure how old the child is, but he is clearly intelligent. It takes moments to clear that room and then Winter is on to the next one.

Four rooms and an overturned bed later he finally gets a hint. If he were baseline human, he may have missed it. Thanks to his enhanced senses, however, he does hear it - a tiny sniffle.

Winter stills, head tilted a little as he listens for the sound to repeat. Now that he’s paying attention, he can hear the stifled sobs. He tracks them down the hall and almost smiles when he sees the dumbwaiter. Of course the child had chosen this as his hiding place. Winter pauses a moment and then gently knocks on the door.

The snifflas stop abruptly.
“G-go away!” A little voice calls out and now Winter doesn’t feel like smiling. So much fear, for someone so young. Winter doesn’t respond verbally, but instead knocks a pattern on the door - some jaunty tune he’d heard on the radio. There’s a very long silence and then, so softly he almost misses it, his pattern is repeated back to him. He can feel Bucky watching him carefully, but he’s not pushing - not yet.

“You are safe now.” Winter says, in as gentle a voice as he is capable of. “I am going to open the door.” He slides the door open very slowly, standing just to the side so that he doesn’t loom in the opening.

The dim lighting in the hallway just barely reaches the space and Winter finds himself staring at a very young Tony Stark. He suspects the child is about four years old. He looks almost exactly the way Winter would imagine a child Stark but there is one glaring difference: his eyes are a very bright blue, rather than the melted chocolate brown he is used to.

“Who are you?” The boy asks, curled tight into the corner of the dumbwaiter. He’s obviously terrified, but he’s also watchful, shrewd in the way he eyes Winter.

“I am Winter.” The boy wrinkles his nose at this response, his little head tilting slightly, but says nothing. “I came to save you.” Winter adds, a little awkwardly. Something bitter and heartbreaking old moves through the boy’s eyes. He smiles, but the expression is wrong in a way Winter doesn’t understand, can’t explain even to himself.

I think that’s my cue.

Winter allows himself to fade; he slides back as Bucky takes over and he is fascinated anew to see the way the boy tracks the changes in their demeanor. He doesn’t understand, can’t, but he notices. “You’re different now.” The boy accuses and where he had started to uncurl, now he tucks himself back into the corner. “That’s right,” Bucky agrees with a little smile. “My name is Bucky. Winter and I kind of...Share custody.”

He can see the way the kid wrestles with the concept, but he seems willing enough to accept the explanation for the moment. “You wanna come out of there, champ? I swear you’re totally safe.” Tony frowns at him, clenches his little fists in the fabric of his sleep pants.

“No.” He finally settles on and hunches back into the corner with a mutinous expression. Bucky blinks, not totally surprised but a little flummoxed on how to respond next. Finally, he simply shrugs. “Okay, kiddo. I get it. I’m just gonna sit down over here, okay?” He indicates the other side of the hallway. Tony sniffs, clearly suspicious and then his eyes go wide as Bucky sits down on the floor with a little sigh. Bucky wriggles until he feels comfortable and then rests his head back against the wall. He closes his eyes after a moment and though he doesn’t doze, he does allow himself to relax. He can feel the kid watching him, can hear the sound of him shuffling around, but he doesn’t react.
He waits with the patience of the sniper that he is.

“That’s it?” Tony finally says and Bucky can tell without looking that he’s trying to be braver than he feels.
“Yep.”

He can practically feel the kid’s suspicion, but he doesn’t say anything else. There’s another long silence, punctuated by the occasional sound of Tony shifting his weight.

“I heard you, before. Talking to the lady. You told her to leave me alone.” Bucky cracks open one eye to find Tony hovering on the very edge of the dumbwaiter.

“That’s right,” He agrees, smiling. “She wanted to hurt you, but I made her stop.” Tony’s eyes go wide and his face pales a little, but he doesn’t shrink away.

“Did you hurt her?” He asks, and he sounds worried, as though Bucky hadn’t just said Wanda intended to hurt him.

Jesus, this kid.

“No, she’s just sleeping.” He hooks a thumb in Wanda’s direction and Tony watches her for a long time, long enough to see her chest rise and fall.

“Oh,” He says, finally, his little face troubled. “Why did she want to hurt me? Is it because of my father?” Bucky grimaces and takes a moment to shift positions, stalling as his brain scrambles for an age appropriate answer to the question. He feels Winter pushing at the back of his mind and with an internal snarl he shoves back.

Tell him she is mentally unstable.

I am not telling a four year old a woman tried to kill him because she’s crazy!

Winter doesn’t reply but Bucky gets the distinct impression he’s sulking.

“Some people don’t always do the right thing,” Bucky settles on, speaking slowly as he feels his way through the words. “Sometimes they get a little lost and good people get hurt ‘cuz of it. It don’t make it right, and you don’t deserve it, but that’s why I’m here. To keep you safe.”

You are so full of shit.

Winter says it like Bucky is a particularly stupid child. Tony doesn’t look particularly placated by the answer either and between the two of them, Bucky sighs and flops his metal arm dramatically over his face.
“Look, kid, I’ll be completely honest with ya. She blamed someone for something they never shoulda got the blame for, a lot of things she caused herself. She thought hurtin’ you would somehow fix that. It don’t matter the why of it, just that she was wrong.”

“Is that a metal arm?” Tony responds, apparently dismissing the subject of Wanda entirely. Bucky’s not sure if he should be relieved or not. Kids!

“Sure is. Do you want to look?” He settles on, holding the arm up for inspection.

Tony bites his lip, looking torn. He hesitates for a few moments and then his curiosity evidently wins out. He crawls out of the dumbwaiter, slowly and favouring one arm. Bucky keeps his expression calm through sheer force of will. Maybe the kid just fell over, or something. Kids hurts themselves all the time, right?

**Do you always lie to yourself? Of course you do, I'm in your head.**

Bucky ignores the derisive tone, though he’s sure Winter can sense the wordless ‘fuck you’. Tony slowly approaches to kneel at Bucky’s side, his expression wary though not terrified as before. Bucky obligingly holds his arm out and watches as the kid pulls it carefully into his lap. “This is so cool.” He whispers, and Bucky can see the excitement in his eyes, though he remains far calmer than Bucky would expect from a four year old. Tony runs careful hands over the limb, makes Bucky flex his fingers one by one.

**He is wounded.**

At first, Bucky thinks he’s referring to the arm and he wants to ask if Winter is going senile, but then he sees them. Finger shaped bruises circling the kid’s wrists, far too large to belong to anyone but an adult. Rage boils hot in Bucky’s stomach and he wants nothing more than to track Howard Stark down and make him hurt.

Winter, however; Winter’s fury is sharp and bitter, like his namesake. It is unforgiving and Bucky is helpless in the face of it, his awareness spiraling away into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Questions? Comments? Leave them below, or come scream at me on Tumblr!
Winter's Choice

Chapter Summary

Tony is a precious, small bean and Bucky is charmed. Winter makes a choice and drags Bucky along for the ride.

Chapter Notes

Ayyyy! posting schedule! I'm on time!

Thanks again to my lovely betas!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Winter blinks, unconsciously straightening his posture out of Barnes’ characteristic slump. He looks down at Tony, who thankfully hasn’t seemed to notice the change. He’s found one of the maintenance panels in the wrist, carefully tracing the edge of it with his fingertips. The distraction seems a good one, as Tony has edged further into Winter’s personal space. Enough that his little shoulder is pressed against Winter’s upper arm. He can’t feel it, of course, but the thought is...nice. No one really touches Winter and he finds he...enjoys it.

“You are injured.” Winter says the words carefully but the child still jumps, his grip on Winter’s metal wrist going white knuckled for a moment.

“It is not nothing, but you do not wish to speak of it and I will not make you.” Tony stares up at him, heartbreaking confusion in his expression, all but clinging to Winter’s arm now.

“Why?”

Winter finds he has no clear answer to the question and he shifts uncomfortably.

“Because...I do not want to.” He finally settles on, for lack of anything better. Tony doesn't seem wholly satisfied with the response and Winter finds himself the subject of a solemn stare for an uncomfortably long period of time. It strikes him again how old Tony is, in spirit if not in body. His eyes are so full of old pain Winter almost can't bare to maintain eye contact.

“Thank you.” Tony says after a long silence and the words are weighted in ways Winter can feel but he doesn't understand. He leans more fully against Winter's side and after only a moment's hesitation, Winter lifts his metal arm to curl gently around the boy's shoulders. Tony stiffens for a second and then melts into Winter's side with a contented sigh, the sound so quiet Winter almost doesn't hear it.
Winter wants, in that moment, to stay. It is the first thing he has memory of ever wanting; the strength of the desire shocks him.

We can’t.

He doesn’t need the reminder, and the fact that Bucky seems just as upset doesn’t help. Winter has never experienced responsibility and more than that, has never found himself in the position of having to deny himself something he wants because of it.

He doesn’t like it.

We don’t have a way back.

The portal may still be there. We have to check.

Winter wants to snarl, wants to howl at the injustice of it, but he knows Bucky is right. They need to get the Witch away from Tony and back home to be punished. He looks down at Tony; at the head of unruly dark hair resting so trustingly against his ribs. He feels the skinny chest rising gently beneath his arm, the steady puff of warm breath he can feel through his sweatshirt. This child is... important and Winter wants, more fiercely than he can ever remember, to protect him.

In that moment, for the first time he can recall, Winter makes a choice. A selfish choice, perhaps, but he can’t find it in himself to regret it.

“I have to leave,” Winter says softly and when Tony stiffens he gently squeezes, cuddling the child closer. “Come, I will not leave you in this place.” He suits actions to words; climbing to his feet and scooping Tony up as he does so. The child goes stiff in his arms, though his little arms go around Winter’s neck easily enough.

“I’m too old to be carried.” He whispers, the words sounding rehearsed. Winter scoffs quietly and hugs the boy closer.

“There is no such thing as too old, only too heavy. You will never be too heavy for me to carry.” He borrows an expression from Bucky and winks, though he’s not sure the expression fits his face. It seems to work and Tony melts against him once more.

Now, the Witch.
His first impulse is to grab her by the ankle and drag her face down through the portal, but he reluctantly curbs it. He doesn’t want to upset Tony, after all, and the child has clearly seen enough violence.

*Christ, Winter.*

*Nobody asked you.*

Winter grabs the back of Wanda’s clothing, yanking her unceremoniously off the floor and throwing her over his shoulder. The metal one, of course.

*I hope it bruises.* He thinks, uncharitably. Bucky doesn’t say anything, but there is a wordless sense of disapproval from the other man. His two burdens established (though only one actually feels like a burden), Winter makes for the stairs. Tony is warm and content in his arms, his little head resting on Winter’s shoulder - right up until they’re crossing the grounds.

The tear is still there, red sparks sporadically flying from the edges and scorching the grass beneath it. He can see through to the other side, to the grounds of the Compound. It’s narrower than it had appeared earlier and has possibly been slowly closing the entire time they’ve been here. Winter pauses a few feet away from it and he feels Tony go tense in his arms. “I don’t want to.” He whispers and begins squirming to get down. Winter controls his struggles easily, though it makes him ache to do so. Tony whimpers and starts whispering ‘no’ over and over. “Do not be afraid, zvezdochka, you will always be safe with me.” He’s not sure where the impulse comes from - perhaps Bucky - but without quite thinking about it, Winter brushes a light kiss over the boy’s forehead. Tony’s eyes go wide and he freezes, struggles completely forgotten.

Winter eyes the portal warily - he’s not sure it’s safe to pass through and he’s loathe to risk Tony in the attempt. He glances at Wanda, dangling limply over his shoulder.

*Winter, don’t you dare.*

*What is the phrase - better safe than sorry?*

Winter don’t!
Winter ignores Bucky, sliding the Witch off his shoulder so that she dangles from one arm. She’s dead weight and heavy, but the metal arm easily compensates and with only minimal difficulty, Winter hurls her through the portal.

*I slipped.*

*I hate you, so much.*

The portal sparks brightly for a moment and Winter sees Wanda go tumbling across the grass on the other side. He’s almost disappointed. He can feel Tony quivering against his side, but the child makes no further move to struggle - rather he clings with all the strength his good arm possesses. Winter takes a step closer to the tear, just in time for the edges to shudder and slide a little closed.

*No!*  

Winter hesitates, despite Bucky urging him to move *now*. He knows Bucky’s priority is to get home, back to Steve and the other Avengers. Winter...Feels no loyalty to Steve Rogers, beyond a distant sense of fondness that comes predominantly from Bucky. Perhaps they would have argued, in so much as you can argue with yourself, when movement on the other side of the portal draws Winter’s attention. A shadowy figure steps over Wanda’s fallen form and bright sparks of gold appear around their hands. The gold slowly overtakes the red, widening the tear until it’s the size of the doorway. It gives off a pleasant hum and Winter can feel the warmth of the magic on his face. The extra lighting also helps him to see the other side, and now he recognises Stephen Strange.

The travel is far less violent this time and Winter arrives from one universe to the other in the time it takes to step forward. Tony gasps quietly, fingers clenching convulsively in the hood of Winter’s sweatshirt, but remains otherwise quiet. He’s greeted on the other side by Strange, who closes the portal behind them with a wave of his hands. Behind him stand the rest of the Avengers, in various states of dress. The only one who looks more or less put together is Stark and even he’s only got the gauntlets on. Steve has the shield, but is still dressed in his pyjamas. They all stare as Winter pauses in front of them and little Tony’s eyes go wide as he takes in all the strangers around him. He quickly hides his face in Winter’s neck, a tiny whimper escaping.

*Now you’ve done it.*

“Holy shit!” Clint, predictably, is the first to speak.  
“Language!” Steve levels him with a disapproving glare and gestures meaningfully at the child in Winter’s arms. “Buck, what’s going on?” He takes a step forward, but halts immediately when Winter scowls and shuffles backwards.
“Not Bucky.” He growls and watches as the entire team immediately go on alert, their gazes watchful. Tony lifts his head and turns to stare at the others, wary but not outwardly afraid.

Until he sees the shield.

“No!” Tony screams and begins struggling wildly in Winter’s grip, heedless of his own injured arm. “I wasn’t bad! I wasn’t bad! No, please!” Winter almost drops him, he’s so surprised by the change from the previously quiet and clingy child. He’s so preoccupied trying to stop Tony from hurting himself that he doesn’t see the way everyone else reacts - he misses the confusion on their faces, misses the way Stark’s face abruptly goes white.

“Fuck, Steve drop the shield!” Stark barks and Steve almost immediately obeys. The shield hits the grass with a dull thud, the sound enough to draw Tony’s attention. The boy is sobbing; heaving breaths that shake his little chest and press his ribs painfully into Winter’s hands. He’s so skinny.

“Winter, please.” Tony sobs and wraps both arms around Winter’s neck with a hitching little cry. “Please don’t let him hurt me. I’ll be good, I promise.”

I don’t know what to do. Why is he frightened?

Fuck, I don’t know! What kid is afraid of Captain America?

Winter’s heart is pounding in his chest, but he’s not in pain and that’s the only time he can remember his heart rate being so elevated. Something is twisting in his chest at the sound of the child’s distress, a pain he’s never quite felt before. He feels helpless, for the first time in memory since he’d escaped HYDRA’s clutches.

He hates it just as much now.

“Hush now, zvezdochka, what did I tell you? You are always safe with me.” Winter presses Tony closer - irrationally, he wants to hide the child, hide him from the whole world if necessary. “Hey, kid.” Stark’s voice startles him and Winter quietly scolds himself for becoming so preoccupied. The engineer has moved close, easily within arms reach. He expects Tony to flinch away and is summarily surprised when the child lifts his head. “Howard told you about Cap, right?” Stark’s voice drops, low enough that only the two of them and probably Steve can hear him. Tony lets go of Winter’s neck long enough to wipe his face with his good hand and slowly nods. Winter can hear one of the others mutter a low curse and assumes they’ve spotted the bruises on Tony’s wrists.

“You don’t have to be scared. I know what Howard told you - my old man told me the same thing.” Stark doesn’t elaborate on what Howard said, but he doesn’t need to. Winter is starting to get ideas of his own, and he doesn’t like it.
Howard, you fucking bastard.

Steve looks a little green in the face and like he’s torn between stepping forward and running away. Tony’s attention is now completely focused on Stark and he’s even leaning forward a little. “C-Captain America’s not gonna p-punish me?” Tony whispers - or at least what passes as a whisper to a four year old. The Avengers go abruptly still.

“No, no he isn’t. Don’t think of him as Cap, if it helps. He’s Steve and he wears old man clothes and he snores and he eats cereal straight out of the box.” Stark sounds utterly scandalised and Tony gives a hiccupsing little giggle, ducking his head shyly when Stark winks. “That’s silly.”

Shockingly, Stark laughs and reaches out to gently tousle Tony’s hair, ignoring the warning glare Winter sends his way. “Now,” Stark’s eyes flick up to Winter and the look in them is sharp. “You wanna explain to me why you’ve apparently kidnapped a miniature Tony Stark from God knows where?”

Chapter End Notes

Questions? Comments? Leave them below, or come scream at me on Tumblr!
Coming Together

Chapter Summary

In which The Avengers like to argue, Steve puts his foot in it (a few times), Bucky and Tony are shameless flirts and TT is precious.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so this chapter fought me ridiculously hard, and I'll admit I'm very nervous about it! But uh, it also came out quite long, so if you're into that, then yay? Also, I want to preface this chapter with the following: This fic will get a little Steve critical in the future but it is not a character bashing. I love my precious dorito but he's got a bit of growing to do in this. I hope the Steve fans are willing to stick it through with me. <3

Big thanks to my lovely betas and Wakanda_Wardog for the Tony-proofing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Four: Coming Together

“He’s asleep,” Bucky says on a sigh, shutting the conference room door behind him with a quiet click. The rest of the team is already there, arranged around the room. Someone - he’s willing to bet on Steve, the mother hen - has made coffee, and the fragrant smell is a welcome one. There’s a steaming mug waiting for Bucky in front of an empty chair; he can’t help but notice with a certain sense of wry amusement that the chair happens to face the rest of the team.

Are we to be interrogated then?

Bucky ignores the scornful question and plops into the seat, wrapping his flesh hand around the mug at the same time. “The Witch?” The words slip out quite without his meaning them to, thanks to a none-too-gentle shove from Winter. “Hulk Room. Strange did something hooey.” Clint wiggles his fingers, presumably to imitate magic. He looks tense, uncomfortable - likely due to his fondness for Wanda.

His fault for having bad taste.
Oh my god, please shut up. We’re in enough trouble as it is. Stark looks like he’s about to have kittens.

Stark leans forward and the movement is enough to draw the attention of the room. Strange slips in just as Stark opens his mouth, taking up an unobtrusive position in the corner. “I was already awake,” Bucky starts before anyone can say anything. The idea of being interrogated makes him twitch. “She was in the living room, watchin’ the news. There was just… Somethin’ in her eyes, y’know? We didn’t like it, so we followed her.” The room is quiet - the Avengers all listening - so Bucky launches into the story proper.

He doesn’t hold back on any details, even the time spent in the hall with little Tony. Stark looks he wants to crawl under the table when Bucky describes little Tony’s traps and tricks, his mouth twisted with discomfort. Natasha looks quietly approving and Clint understanding. There’s a long silence at the end of his retelling, broken finally when Steve sighs. “Okay, so she went back in time and...what? Tried to murder a four year old version of Tony?” He looks like he’s having trouble processing the idea. “Plausible, but time travel doesn’t explain why I’m still here.” Stark indicates himself with a bright grin that Bucky sees right through. “His eyes were blue.” This from Natasha, who’s looking at Strange. “Indeed. I believe Miss Maximoff may have gone, shall we say diagonally in her attempts to go backward?” Strange’s response draws a round of blank stares and he sighs, like a teacher disappointed with particularly slow children. “She travelled dimensions, rather than merely time. Impressive, for an amateur, but also extremely dangerous.” “Dangerous, how?” Steve cuts in immediately, eyes narrowed. Strange looks miffed at the interruption, but merely sighs. “She didn’t open a door, Captain, she tore a hole. The damage left behind is… Extensive.” “Okay, so that’s all terrible but I want to know why the kid is here.” Stark sounds irritated more than anything, and Bucky would almost believe him if Winter wasn’t already making note of the twitches in his body language.

Stark is freaking out - quietly, but definitely panicked.

“Really, Stark? Maximoff rips interdimensional portals and causes enough havoc to make the Sorcerer Supreme nervous, and you’re worried about a kid? A kid that’s you?” Steve sighs, sounding both disappointed and resigned. “Fuck you, Rogers; that kid is not me.”

Strange’s look is almost gentle as he turns to Stark. "He's enough of you that I understand why Sergeant Barnes brought him here." A tiny smile quirks the corners of the sorcerer's mouth. "Aside from the eyes, he looks just like you."

"Yeah, that goatee he's sporting is a dead giveaway." Stark's deadpan delivery of the line is accompanied by such a measure of sarcasm that Bucky actually snorts.
Which puts eyes on him again. Damnit. Steve looks like he wants to sigh again, the pinched look around his mouth one Bucky recognises.

“Winter wouldn’ leave him there.” Bucky blurts out and determinedly doesn’t meet Stark’s incredulous gaze. "And I decided that was fine with me." Abruptly, Bucky is 100% done with this. He lifts his chin and looks at them all in turn; lets Winter bleed through just enough that he knows his gaze is not only steely, but intimidating. He’s pleased to note Natasha is the only one to hold his gaze for long. "What are we going to do about the witch?"

"Um, also, what are we going to do about the freaking kid sleeping in my guest room?"

Bucky is tempted to smile again. Stark is.... definitely ballsy. "There a problem with him being here?" He can see the words building up behind Stark’s tongue, can see the vitriol he’s getting ready to fire and braces himself.

“The issue of the boy will have to wait, I’m afraid.” Strange interjects, still in that almost gentle tone. “The strength required to safely open a portal to another universe is… Considerable. I’m afraid it might be some time before I’m capable of it.”

“Time? What do you mean, ‘ time’? Maximoff managed to do it on a damn whim!” Stark’s face is so white Bucky almost feels sorry for him.

The boy stays.

No one asked you.

They should.

Well they won’t, so shut it.

I could get rid of the sorcerer…

Winter, oh my god.

“As I said, the Maximoff girl ripped a hole through the fabric of space. Something that big, that traumatic? It makes ripples. There will be tears all over the Multiverse and we don’t want to think about what might be coming through. That will have to take priority over a misplaced child version of Tony Stark, I’m afraid.” Strange sighs, though he does at least look sympathetic.
“How much time, exactly?” Stark says, apparently accepting he’s not going to win this one. “It’s hard to say, but I should think it will take me several weeks.”

*Or forever.*

*Not your call, asshole.*

“Jesus.” Stark mutters and scrubs both hands across his face. Looks are exchanged around the room as the Avengers contemplate the idea of extended babysitting.

“I’m not sure it’s safe to leave a child in our care for that long.” Bruce takes his glasses off and fidgets with them in his hands in a way Bucky knows means he’s uncomfortable. Bucky almost wants to laugh, but keeps a straight face through sheer force of will.

*Give a bunch of superheroes a villain and they know what to do. Give them a child and it all goes to shit.*

Winter doesn’t reply verbally, but Bucky gets the feeling he’s amused (mocking, really).

“What’re you talkin’ about? Kids are easy! Feed them, don’t let them near sharp things, give them video games.” Clint leans back in his chair, unconcerned. “This isn’t just any child we’re talking about, Clint. This is *Tony Stark.*” Steve lifts his brows significantly and Stark leans around Natasha to scowl at him. “The hell is that supposed to mean, Rogers?”

“Nothing!” Steve splutters, hands up in the universal sign of ‘don’t shoot’. “Just… He’s probably gonna be a handful, more than a normal kid.”

*Idiot. He is trying to get Stark to shoot him, right?*

“Listen, Rogers, just because mini-me being smarter than you is more than your brain can handle doesn’t mean you’ve gotta blame the kid too. Dad took care of that while you were having an ice nap.” Stark snarls and simultaneously shoves up from his chair. “Call me when the iced Americano over here warms up.” He throws over his shoulder and the door slams behind him before anyone can reply.

*Is this what love is?*
“No, you freak, shut up.”

There’s a moment of stunned silence that follows Stark’s exit and then Clint abruptly starts snickering.
“Iced americano.” He whispers with quiet reverence and Steve twitches minutely. Bucky waits a moment for Steve to regain his composure and get the conversation back on track. When it doesn’t happen he sighs, loudly.
“Okay, so the kid stays with us while you clean up her mess. Not to harp on about an important issue or anythin’, but what’re we gonna do with her?”

Strange rubs a hand over his chin, his expression pensive.
“I could, perhaps, bind her magic for the moment. It’s a temporary solution at best. The girl needs training, if she’s to be safe. I’m concerned about her mental state, however. It’s a very particular kind of person who contemplates, plans and then attempts the murder of a four year old child.”

*She should be put down, like a rabid dog.*

*Winter, we’re supposed to be superheroes. We don’t kill people!*

*The asset is not a ‘superhero’.*

*We don’t do that anymore, for christ’s sake.*

*An exception could be made.*

Bucky drags his attention away from the internal argument as Natasha leans forward, expressionless but for the cool calculation Bucky can see in her eyes. She’s pissed and trying to hide it.
“She’s been through a lot, recently, with the death of her brother.” She begins, but has to pause as both Bucky and Bruce lean forward. A flush of green climbs up along the side of Bruce’s neck and Bucky can feel Winter shoving at him. “I’m not excusing her!” She adds quickly and it’s enough to at least make Winter pause, though it doesn’t make Bucky relax at all. “I’m just wondering how... stable she is.”

Bucky slowly sits back, confident that for the moment Winter has stopped fighting him.
“She needs to be locked up.” He states, flatly. “The look in her eyes… Somethin’ in there is broken; I don’t know if it was HYDRA or losin’ her brother, but she ain’t Avenger material.”
“Now hold on,” Steve interjects and Bucky tenses all over again. He doesn’t like that tone at all. “She’s just a-”

“If you say ‘just a kid’ again I will force feed you your shield and laugh as you choke.” The words slide out of Bucky’s mouth, flat and cold. He didn’t even notice Winter taking control until it’s over and the other has already settled back to watch.

The room goes utterly silent and Bucky isn’t sure who’s more surprised - Steve or Bucky himself. “I’m not!” Steve finally sputters, but he’s defensive and Bucky knows he had been about to say just those words. “I just mean, she’s one of us, we can’t lock her up and throw away the key. Not without a trial, or any chance to defend herself. That’s not right. We have to give her a chance.” “Steve,” It’s Bruce that cuts in, before the vitriol Bucky can feel building on the back of his tongue escapes. “We already gave her a second chance.” “After she brain f***ed everyone.” Clint points out with a heavy scowl. “You suggestin’ we invite Loki to join up too?” “No, of course not and we’re not talking about Loki! It’s not the same situation.” “Are you fucking serious?” Clint starts and he looks like he’s about to leap across the table. Natasha moves first, clamping a white knuckled grip on the archer’s arm. Steve stands up and paces away, his shoulders tense. Bucky feels a curl of sympathy - he doesn’t remember Steve being this good at putting his foot in it - but it’s almost drowned out by Winter’s emotions. “I gotta leave or Winter’s gonna start throwin’ punches. Decide what you wanna do, we don’t care, but she’s not fucking stayin’ here.” Bucky doesn’t wait for a reply and simply leaves with the same amount of fanfare as Stark.

Quite without meaning to, Bucky finds himself outside the guest bedroom they’d left the kid asleep in. Little Tony (and they really need to come up with a different way to refer to him, since he’s staying) had looked so small and scared in the giant bed, Bucky had hated to leave him.

“Sorry, Winter Brooder!” FRIDAY’s voice abruptly chirps, jerking Bucky out of his thoughts. “Little boss is in the kitchen.”

Bucky casts a nod in the direction of the nearest camera but doesn’t otherwise respond; he reverses his direction and heads for the kitchen. Winter is suspiciously quiet but Bucky isn’t inclined to poke the sleeping bear, so to speak. They’d barely come through that meeting without any physical violence. He doesn’t want to drop the ball now.

He’s about halfway down the hall to the kitchen when he hears the sound of breaking glass and a quiet gasp. Bucky runs the remaining distance; he bursts through the doorway and into an empty kitchen. There’s a broken glass and a small puddle of water on the floor, and a few droplets of blood
next to the mess. A chair is pushed up next to the sink, clearly so someone small would be able to reach. “FRIDAY?” Bucky questions softly, eyes mostly on the blood. “Okay, I’m here! Where’s the fi-” Stark blinks, his eyes taking in the situation rapidly and then Bucky finds himself the centre of Stark’s attention. “Think the kid dropped the glass. Not sure where he went.” Bucky offers with a shrug.

*I can find him.*

Winter’s voice is so sudden Bucky actually twitches and Stark’s eyebrows make a slow ascent towards his hairline.

What’re ya gonna do, sniff him out? You’re not a bloodhound, idiot.

Winter grumbles, but doesn’t push further and Bucky flicks his attention back to Stark. “Welcome back?” The other man says and he looks like he’s trying not to laugh. “Ha, ha. You gonna make with the jokes all day or help me find the rugrat?”

Stark snickers softly and shakes his head. “You start cleaning up that mess, I’ll get Tony tot.”

Bucky shakes his head, but there’s a smile tugging at his mouth. Typical, he gets stuck with the cleaning job. He can hear the sound of Stark moving around the kitchen, the opening and closing of cupboard doors. When he turns to look, Stark has a deliberately relaxed expression upon his face as he peeks into all the cupboards. He grins when he notices Bucky looking, “I’ve never actually looked in most of these. Did you know we own a slow cooker? Not that any of us has the patience to use the damn thing. I mean it would be half a serving for you, and it would take forever but...There is it. I’m less surprised that it’s still in the original packaging than I am that it’s there.” As he speaks he leans back down to look into another cupboard. Bucky snorts a laugh and he means to turn to look for a broom but...

Stark’s wearing loose, comfortable sweatpants. They make him look soft and approachable, until he bends. Then the fuckin’ things *cling* to his ass, defining every delicious curve and Bucky thinks his mouth might be watering. He wants to *bite it*.

*You’re disgusting. Also you told me I’m not allowed to bite people.*
I'll explain when you're older.

I hate you.

“Well hello there, munchkin! You don't look like a coffee mug.” Stark’s voice draws Bucky away from his thoughts. The other man is crouched down to the side of an open cupboard door, leaving a clear route of escape. Even from a few feet away Bucky can see Tony’s white face and wide, terrified eyes. The kid is curled as small as possible in the cupboard, the injured arm tucked against his chest and the other held out as if to ward away a blow.

“I'm sorry.” The kid whispers, and though his eyes are big and wet he doesn't cry.

“Oh honey, no no.” Stark’s voice goes soft and warm, the smile easily heard even if Bucky can't see it. “Accidents happen, don't worry. You're not in trouble, I'm not like him. I know what you think's gonna happen but you're safe, honey. Did you hurt yourself, sweetheart? Do you wanna come out so we can patch you up?”

Tony sniffs and slowly shakes his head. He shrinks a little further into the cupboard. Stark sighs a little, but he doesn't sound angry and he doesn't try to reach for the kid.

He doesn't know Stark.

He barely knows us.

Just try.

Bucky steps forward a little, enough to draw the kid's attention. He smiles gently when those big blue eyes catch his.

“Hey, kiddo.” He says slowly reaches out with his flesh hand to rap his knuckles against the counter. Tony’s eyes light up when he recognises the pattern, a tiny smile forming tremulously on his face. He taps his little hand against the floor in the same pattern and Bucky can't help but grin.

“Is that Morse Code?” Stark asks with a delighted grin and the kid’s smile turns shy.

“It means ‘safe’.” He murmurs and Bucky can't help the surprise on his face.

“You know Morse?” He's treated to identical looks of amused disdain.

“Alright!” Stark says, clapping his hands lightly. “Safety established, so let's get that ouch all patched up, shall we? I'm an old man, I can't crawl around on the floor like this.”

Tony giggles and then immediately looks surprised, as though he hasn't meant to let the sound
escape. He carefully shuffles forwards and willingly accepts the careful arm Stark curls around him.

“Good job on cleaning up the mess. I can see you're great at holding up on your end of the bargain.” Stark says with a wink and Bucky flushes.

“I uh,” He begins, but trails off - he can't exactly admit the reason he got distracted. Stark laughs and jerks his chin at the mess; when Bucky turns to look a tiny robot is busily cleaning it up.

“You're an ass, Stark.” Bucky laughs, even as his blush deepens, and is treated to a bright, natural Tony Stark grin.

“James Barnes, I am scandalized! There are children present!” Stark cries, pressing his free hand over one of Tony’s ears. The kid giggles and tips his face against Stark’s throat. “Alright, alright. Fun’s over, let's see where you hurt yourself, honey.”

Stark places Tony gently on the kitchen counter, ruffling the kid’s hair and earning himself a small grin. Bucky grabs the first aid kit from the cupboard above the fridge and places it next to them. He takes the little foot solemnly presented to him and tries to ignore how fragile and small it feels in his hand.

“Ouch!” He hisses sympathetically when he sees the little piece of glass wedged in the sole of Tony’s foot. “You're a brave kid, you know that?” He's careful when he pulls the piece of glass out, but Tony still flinches. He doesn't make a sound, though and Bucky can't help but wonder what kind of environment nurtures that sort of behaviour in a four year old.

You know exactly why he does not cry.

Bucky studiously ignores Winter's rage and Stark’s forced cheer.

“How about some hot chocolate? I'll leave Nurse Bucky to his ministrations - he'd look much better in a skirt - and I'll make the cocoa.” He busies himself with precisely that as Bucky carefully cleans and wraps Tony's injured foot. The kid is quiet through the whole process, watching Stark with avid eyes.

Bucky can't help but notice how comfortable Stark looks in the kitchen, for someone who supposedly can't cook.

When Stark presents Tony with the hot chocolate, the kid eyes the tower of whipped cream and sprinkles on the top with barely concealed wonder. He takes it very carefully, with a ‘thank you’ spoken so softly it's almost inaudible. He waits a moment, as though he expects the treat to be taken away and Stark carefully pays him no attention.

“Cheers.” Stark says with a little smile and clinks his mug gently against Bucky’s. Bucky dips a finger in the whipped cream and smears it over Stark's nose, grinning when the other man squawks indignantly. He's struck with the urge to lick it back off.
“Well, that’s a challenge if I ever saw one!” There’s a gleam in Stark’s eyes Bucky doesn’t trust; yet he’s still surprised when the engineer scoops the entire dollop of cream from his drink and smears it across Bucky’s face. Tony stares at Bucky with wide eyes and he’s tense, clearly expecting a blow up.

“Game on, Stark!” Bucky cries and scoops the cream off his own drink. Stark yelps and makes a run for it with Bucky hot on his heels, leaving Tony sitting on the bench to watch. They play ‘keep away’ on either side of the island counter for a little while, until Bucky vaults over and smacks a creamy hand print onto Stark’s cheek. The smaller man retaliates with the entire can of whipped cream and Bucky is forced to retreat under the onslaught. In no time at all they’re both laughing, slipping and sliding in puddles of cream that seem to be everywhere. Even Tony hasn’t escaped and is sporting a little dollop on the top of his head, though he doesn’t look particularly upset about it. Bucky is definitely the worse for wear - since Stark had the superior weapon - but he held his own well enough.

“Well, I guess you could say I came for you pretty hard.” Stark pairs the statement with a wink and Bucky can’t help but be thankful for his loose sweatpants. Plenty of room for things to react to the unapologetic leer in Stark’s eyes.

“It’s kind of everywhere. You a bit pent up there, Stark?” Bucky wipes some of the cream from his cheek and sticks the finger in his mouth, being sure to maintain eye contact. He’s gratified to see the way Stark’s eyes darken a little.

“You, please.”

You’re both disgusting and I hate you.

Shut up, I’m working.

Ugh. Wake me when you’re done.

Winter’s presence fades as the other clearly turns his attention away and Bucky is grateful for the opportunity to focus entirely on Tony. Tony, who is looking at him like he wants to lick the whipped cream off Bucky’s face and Bucky is intrigued.

“My name is Tony!” The kid suddenly pipes up and whatever had been building between them for a moment there is shattered. Thank god for the whipped cream being literally all over him, because they probably can’t see his blush.

“Easy fix for that, kiddo.” Bucky says with a grin and reaches out to ruffle the kid’s hair. The cream smears through the dark locks and Bucky laughs as his hand is batted away. “We’ll call you Anthony, since I think the old man here would be offended if we called him Tony Senior.”

“You’re just jealous I aged beautifully, Red October.” Tony retorts and reaches out to bop Anthony lightly on the nose. He ducks his face down, but Bucky can see the shy little smile on the kid’s face. “I don’t think you’re old.” Anthony all but whispers and Tony visibly softens; coming as close to
melting as a grown man can get.

“Come on, T2. Let's get you into a bath and then back to bed.” He says, gently and Anthony beams. Tony scoops him off the counter with one arm and heads for the hallway. Bucky watches them go, something warm and heavy in his chest. Tony pauses in the doorway, and two pairs of inquisitive eyes turn Bucky's way.

“You coming?” Tony asks, lifting a brow. Bucky grins and hurries after them, irresistibly drawn in by the near identical smiles being turned his way.

Chapter End Notes

Questions? Comments? Something you really want to see? Leave me a comment or come and ask me on Tumblr!
Chapter Summary

In which Bucky and Tony derail the author's plan for a little more flirting, things get a little heavy, Tony angsts a lot and Bucky continues to be a soft boy.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so by my clock we're sliiiightly late this week! I apologise for that. It's been a hectic time.

Also starting this week I will be adding a second fic which will feature various coda scenes to the fic that don't fit into the overall piece.

Most of these are Winter's Trollscapades, up to and including using his metal arm to reflect light into people's eyes (thank you Tumblr). For those of you who follow me on Tumblr, I'll be accepting one prompt a week for any little snippet scenes you would like to see, provided they don't conflict with the rest of the fic. So if there's anything you'd like to see, drop me an ask!

Thanks to those of you who have been reading so far, and welcome to those of you reading for the first time! I hope I continue to provide entertainment. <3

My thanks, as always, to Roe and Meg: Cheerleaders, betas and jumpstarters when my brain fails me. This fic exists because of you. <3

**WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER:** The implied/referenced child abuse is heavily present in this chapter. Please be careful with yourselves, my loves, and don't read anything you're not ready for. I've tried to keep it fairly non-graphic! More details in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five

Winter is used to snapping awake; ready and alert in moments, because the Asset doesn’t rest. He is used to feeling unsafe and wakes huddled in the bathtub more often than he cares to admit. Though he no longer feels like The Asset there are many behaviours from his time with HYDRA he is yet to shake off.

Winter isn’t used to comfort, to safety. He isn’t used to easing into wakefulness with an almost
pleasantly groggy sensation. His head is resting on something soft and there is a line of warmth all along his flesh arm. Winter blinks open heavy eyes to a ceiling painted soft blue; he glances down and finds himself smiling as the reason he’s so warm becomes apparent. Anthony is still asleep, his little face pressed against Winter’s bicep while the rest of his body is wrapped entirely around Winter’s arm - he looks a little like a baby Koala. He’s not sure what the protocol is when a child is using you as a pillow. He tugs on his arm a little but Anthony’s grip only tightens and the child whimpers softly.

Winter immediately feels terrible and has no idea why.

Winter carefully tugs Anthony a little closer and runs his metal fingers lightly over the boy’s unruly curls. He can’t really feel the touch, but he’s seen people do this in the movies Barnes watches and they seem to like it. He nudges gently at the other consciousness inside him, but Barnes is apparently still sleeping. Winter finds himself strangely content, gently combing vibranium fingers through Anthony’s dark locks. He loses track of time, perhaps even dozes some more until Anthony begins to shift around. It’s a knock on the door that eventually rouses him once more; Winter sits up just as the door opens and Tony pokes his head in. Tony smiles when he sees that Winter is awake and slides through the doorway. He looks like he’s been awake for a while (or didn’t go to bed at all), dressed in ratty jeans and a black graphic shirt. There’s none of the Tony Stark polish that Winter is used to; he looks comfortable and approachable.

He looks edible.

Oh. You’re awake.

“FRIDAY said you were up. I was about to start breakfast.” Tony murmurs and though he’s clearly making an effort to be quiet, the sound is still enough to disturb Anthony. The boy grumbles and smacks his lips, his grip tightening around Winter’s arm for a moment and then relaxing. Tony chuckles softly and comes to sit on the edge of the bed, his hip just barely brushing against Winter’s leg. A moment later, sleepy blue eyes open and Anthony is looking at him; the boy’s eyes go wide for a moment, confused and a little frightened. It’s only a moment, but it makes something in Winter’s chest clench. A child shouldn’t have so many reasons to be afraid.

“Good morning, zvezdochka.” Winter says and Anthony brightens immediately. He gently taps their little code into the boy’s shoulder and feels the instant loosening of tension in those skinny shoulders. Anthony uncurls from around Winter’s arm - his cheeks a little pink - and starts to sit up. He only makes it part way through the move before he flinches with a little bitten off whimper. Tony moves immediately; he leans over and tucks a careful hand under Anthony’s spine and eases the kid upright. “Aw, honey, that arm still bothering you?” He hisses sympathetically. Anthony goes still for a moment, glances wide eyed between Winter and Tony; very slowly, he nods, like he’s not sure if he’s allowed to.

“You ever been to a doctor, buddy?” Tony smiles, clearly pleased with Anthony’s honesty. Anthony squints his eyes up a little, which is just unbearably cute.

“Yes.”

“Oh good! I love doctors. Doctors are my favorite people. I have a friend who is a doctor, and I was
just gonna go see him. Would you mind coming with me? I bet he could help your arm feel better?”

Winter can’t help but raise a brow and feels Bucky mirror his own skepticism.

*I don’t think I’ve ever seen Tony willingly go to medical.*

*I wonder if it hurt his face, trying to sell that lie.*

“Um…” Anthony squirms in place and twists his good hand up in the sheets. He looks nervous, and Winter expects him to say no like he clearly wants to.

“Okay.” The word is practically whispered and the bright smile drops from Tony’s face a little. “There’s nothing to be scared of, honey. You’ll really like my doctor friend.” Slowly, a smirk curls Tony’s mouth upwards and he leans a little closer. “You wanna know something cool?”

Anthony bites his lip until Winter nudges him gently and then he releases it with a guilty look. Tony doesn’t wait for a response, instead making a great production of looking around the room for eavesdroppers.

“My doctor friend can turn into a giant green man, so he’s pretty cool.”

“A giant?” Anthony’s face is skeptical, but interested.

“Oh yeah, he’ll scare the pants off you know who. Now, let’s get this show on the road!” Tony claps his hands together and the enthusiasm in his voice, however put on, seems to do the trick. Anthony grins shyly up at him and with barely any hesitation, holds his arms up. Winter slides out the other side of the bed and snatches Anthony up with his flesh arm at the same time, carefully tossing the child over one shoulder. Anthony giggles and bats at Winter’s back with his good arm.

“Win-teeeeeeerr!” He wails, though he doesn’t sound upset. Winter merely smiles and starts walking.

“You are like a small sack of flour.” He informs the boy, who squawks indignantly. “’M not small!”

“Wow, dated reference much?” Tony jumps in, one eyebrow raised and reaches out to gently push a strand of Winter’s hair out of his face. He’s so careful and gentle that their skin doesn’t even touch, and yet it is nice. Winter feels... bashful, of all things. His cheeks feel strangely warm.

Alright enough of that, get out of the way, Robocop.

Bucky’s words are accompanied by a none too gentle ‘nudge’ and Winter finds himself summarily displaced.
You stole that off of Tony.

“Huh. You know, I’ve seen that several times and it doesn’t get any less weird? Does it get crowded in there? I’m just little old me inside here and it feels like there’s never enough room, enough time, enough processing power.” Bucky blinks his eyes open to find Tony staring at him, thoughtful and a little amused. He parses slowly through the babble and eventually comes out with, “Um.”

Tony laughs; a full bodied thing, his head tipped back to expose the line of his throat and Bucky’s brain stalls a second time.

“Bucky, is that you? ‘Cause I gotta say, I never expected Winter to be the more verbal of the two of you.” He gently teases and Bucky flushes immediately.

“Takes a moment to adjust, is all.”

Liar.

Winter sounds smug, the asshole. Bucky slides Anthony down off his shoulder and plants a smacking kiss on the boy’s cheek.

“Morning, kiddo!”

Anthony giggles and makes a production of scrubbing at his cheek. “I already said good morning!”

“Uh uh, you said good morning to Winter.” Bucky blows an obnoxiously loud raspberry on the boy’s cheek and then laughs at the high pitched sound it produces. He knows they still have a long way to go; that the damage Howard has already done won’t be healed so quickly, but to see Anthony smiling now… It’s special.

“As adorable as this is,” Tony drawls and Bucky finds himself flushing all over again under that amused gaze. He’s pretty sure Steve told him he used to be smooth. “Shall we?” As he speaks, the elevator doors slide smoothly open.

“Right.” Bucky mumbles and tries to ignore the way Anthony goes abruptly still and quiet.

Bruce looks up from a microscope when the elevator doors slide open. He looks like he’s been in the lab for far too long; his hair sticks up in gravity defying ways, his glasses are slightly crooked and Tony’s pretty sure the bags under Bruce’s eyes have bags. Tony refrains from commenting, though,
because he can see Bucky’s judgey eye in his peripheral vision and he’s not opening that can of worms.
“Brucie!” He struts across the lab and drapes himself over the other scientist’s back. Bruce indulges the physical affection with the same embarrassed tolerance as he does most of the craziness in the Compound.
“Tony, Barnes.” He acknowledges with a tired little smile. His eyes slide to Anthony, who squirms to be let down as soon as he sees the other adult looking. Bucky lets the kid slide to the floor and flicks a confused look Tony’s way when Anthony immediately ducks behind his legs. Bruce spins around on his stool, with Tony shifting to accommodate the movement.

"Hey there. My name is Bruce. I saw you last night, but I don't think you had your eyes open."
Anthony peeks around Bucky's legs just enough for one blue eye to be visible. Tony can just see where his little fingers are clenched in Bucky’s jeans. "Tony, why do I get the feeling you're here for a reason other than impersonating a koala and blowing things up?"

"Because you're very intuitive, Brucie-bear and you know I love you for it."

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Tony. Is this the part where I remind you I'm not that kind of doctor?" Bruce half turns and starts rummaging in a drawer, withdrawing a handful of colourful lollipops a moment later.
“Hey!” Tony pouts immediately. “I can’t believe you’ve been holding out on me! Science bros before new arrivals! Even cute ones.”
“I’m only letting you in because of the cute new arrival.” Bruce groused, gently batting Tony aside.
“Would you like a lollipop? I hide them from Tony. Too much sugar isn’t good for him.”

Bucky snorts quietly, ignoring Tony’s scandalised gasp and nudging gently at Anthony’s shoulder. “In my own house.” Tony whispers, in the kind of tone one usually reserves for something too horrible to contemplate. Anthony steps a little closer to Bruce, dragging Bucky behind him by virtue of the grip on his pants. He stares at the handful of lollipops with a heartbreakingly serious expression for a long time and then glances up at Bucky.
“What’s Winter’s favourite colour?”

Bucky blinks, completely thrown by the question and he can feel the echoing sense of bewilderment from Winter.

_Favourite? I don’t understand._

_It means something you like! Which colour do you like?_

_The asset is...allowed preferences?_

Bucky winces internally, though he’s careful not to let the expression show on his face. Anthony is still watching him with a quietly expectant look on his face. Tony leans into his side unexpectedly,
the smaller man’s body a warm weight against Bucky’s flesh shoulder. He opens his mouth, intending to pick a colour at random, since Winter seems to have stalled out completely.

Red.

The word comes from Winter and Bucky finds himself echoing it. “Red is a very good colour.” Tony agrees immediately and nudges Bucky’s shoulder gently. “I know a certain metal superhero who is quite fond of red. No connection, of course.”

“Actually, I think it’s very connected. Winter’s not afraid to play favourites.” Bucky grins and is pleased to see spots of colour bloom brightly on Tony’s cheeks. Anthony watches the byplay for a moment and then carefully selects a red lollipop from Bruce’s hand. “Thank you, sir.” He says softly, though he makes no effort to unwrap the candy. If anything, Anthony holds it like he’s not quite sure what to do with it and the quiet confusion on his face is enough to somber the mood immediately.

He’s not sure how similar the kid’s experiences have been to his own, but Tony knows that he’d never had candy before, at Anthony’s age. “Here, munchkin. Like this,” Tony crouches down and shows Anthony how to take the wrapper off. He presents the bright red lollipop to the boy afterwards. He tries to ignore the look on Bucky and Bruce’s face as Anthony cautiously puts the candy in his mouth. His eyes immediately go wide, the surprise and delight clear. Tony’s stomach twists uncomfortably and he’s reminded of the first time someone gave him candy. He has to turn away for a moment to keep his composure.

It’s a reminder he could do without, but he can’t begrudge the pure joy in Anthony’s expression.

“The arm, I’m assuming?” Bruce interrupts gently, proving yet again he has a wicked sense of the Tony Stark Discomfort Scale. Anthony looks a little hesitant, but nowhere near the level of fear when they’d first arrived. “Could you do a couple of scans? We don’t know anything about the injury, or how long he’s had it.” Bucky is the one to answer and Tony would feel bad about tuning out, but Anthony pops the lollipop from his mouth and his lips and tongue are stained cherry red and it’s cute as hell. “Still not that kind of doctor.” Bruce stands up with a sigh and moves deeper into the lab, headed for the medical equipment he keeps on hand. “The medbay would be better for more detailed investigations, but I have enough for a basic look.” He calls over his shoulder. Anthony looks up at Tony and a small, sticky hand curls immediately into his pant leg. “Is it going to hurt?” He asks, though he sounds entirely resigned, like it’s a foregone conclusion. Bucky makes a sound like he’s been gut punched and Tony keeps himself from flinching with the same iron spine Howard had installed in him as a child. “No way, little man. I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you.”
The X-Rays sit in a damning spread across the screen, underpinned by photos of bruises and scars. Bruce and Tony stand side by side, in probably the most uncomfortable silence Tony has ever experienced with his fellow scientist. Distantly, he can hear Bucky talking in a low voice to Anthony, the two of them occupied on another screen across the lab. He doesn’t remember what they were looking at, doesn’t care to try. He feels sick, his stomach heaving violently in his chest. He can see the flush of green running along the side of Bruce’s neck, fading in and out as the other man breathes deeply. The evidence in front of them is... damming. Tony’s no doctor, but he’s a genius and he knows what he’s looking at. The shadowed lines of healed fractures, the pattern of fingers painted across pale skin, the outline of ribs where there shouldn’t be.

“Tony,” Bruce chokes out, and his voice is somewhere between Bruce and Hulk. “I know.” Tony manages, from a throat that feels like it has something lodged in it. “Tony, please.” It takes a second for Tony to catch his friend’s meaning. It’s only when he catches the way Bruce is suddenly looking at him, scanning up and down like he can see through Tony’s clothes that he gets it. “I know what you’re trying to ask, and no.” The words taste like ash on his tongue and he has to force them out; drop them like heavy weights into air that already feels thick with things Tony isn’t ready to face. “He was an ass, but not...This is- no.”

The words seem to help Bruce, at least a little. The other man takes one more deep breath and the green flush slowly fades. “There’s no fracturing in the arm or shoulder. My best guess would be a dislocation, probably recent if it’s still causing him this much pain.” Bruce says, slowly and there’s something heavy in his voice; remembered pain, but Tony isn’t in a position to pursue it. He still feels like his stomach is trying to crawl up his throat. “As I said, though, it’s a guess. I’m really not a medical doctor, Tony.”

“Thanks for doing this, Bruce.”

“There’s...a lot of recent fractures here, and here.” Bruce points at the X-Rays of Anthony’s arms and then his left leg. “Most of it would be hidden under clothes; the bruising, that is. How- uhh. The injuries were. Careful.” Bruce stumbles a little, but Tony can guess what he’d meant to say and that’s enough. It’s too much.

Tony pushes away from the table and makes a beeline for the attached bathroom, feeling the bile rise in his throat. He crashes painfully to his knees next to the toilet, just in time to heave, though there’s nothing in his stomach to come up. His stomach doesn’t seem to get that though and Tony is left huddled miserably over the toilet while he feels like his body attempts to turn itself inside out. He’s distantly aware of a cool sensation across his forehead and a line of warmth across his back. It takes longer than he’d like to realise that the warmth is Bucky - supporting him from behind - and the coolness is a damp cloth pressed to his forehead.

“Shh, doll, you’re alright, jus’ let it go.” Bucky’s voice is a soft rumble Tony feels as much as hears. It’s a soothing counterpoint to the way his stomach rolls and heaves like it’s trying to crawl up his throat. Bucky stays with him the whole time, the soft words in his ear an anchor he desperately needs. When the heaving passes Tony slumps back and Bucky takes his weight easily, an arm sliding around his waist. Gently, he rubs at Tony's stomach and the motion is strangely relaxing.
“There you go. Feel better?” Bucky murmurs, his cheek brushing gently at Tony's temple. Tony hums quietly, eyes closed as a headache starts to pound away in his skull.

The soft sound of Bruce’s voice floats in from the other room, and he’s so glad his friend is there to watch Anthony while he has his little freak out, even as shame claws at him. He should be better than this. His emotions are a jumbled tangle; anger - at this other incarnation of his father, who is somehow more horrifying even than Tony’s father. Horror, disgust, grief for the innocence Anthony clearly lost far too young. The worst, though, is the part of him (far larger than he’d like) that is just relieved that Tony had escaped this particular level of cruelty and violence. Shame leaves a bitter flavour on his tongue and Tony’s eyes feel hot; what kind of person is he, to be thinking of himself when a child is waiting outside? A child who has been abused and kicked at every turn.

“How dare he?” Bucky goes still and his eyes turn flat and cold. His expression spasms for a moment, switching from the blank expression of the Winter Soldier to the horrified face of Bucky Barnes. Tony waits quietly while the other man clearly fights a war with himself, and in any other situation Tony might find the rapidfire changing of expressions amusing.

“Jesus,” Bucky finally whispers and his eyes are soft and sad. “Why?”

Bucky goes still and his eyes turn flat and cold. His expression spasms for a moment, switching from the blank expression of the Winter Soldier to the horrified face of Bucky Barnes. Tony waits quietly while the other man clearly fights a war with himself, and in any other situation Tony might find the rapidfire changing of expressions amusing.

“Jesus,” Bucky finally whispers and his eyes are soft and sad. “Why?”

_It doesn’t matter why. We should eliminate him, he is clearly a threat._

_He’s not even in the same universe, leave it._

_And what if he comes looking for Anthony?_

_I’d like to see him try._
Tony thrusts his hands through his hair and leans forward to hunch over his drawn up knees. “I don’t know! This shouldn’t have happened! Where was Mom? She didn’t give a fuck most of the time, but at least she kept the old man distracted. And Jarvis...He always steered H-Howard clear of me whenever he was that angry.” Tony’s surprised to realise he’s crying; a few tears escaping despite all his best efforts at composure. Bucky doesn’t try to touch him and Tony is thankful though at the same time he mourns the warmth of the other man’s arms.

“Something went wrong, then. Do we ask him?”

“God, no.” Tony shudders at the thought. “If something happened to them, we don’t want to remind him of it.”

“So what’s the plan, then?” Bucky offers quietly and twitches again, as though listening to another voice.

“Fucked if I know. He can’t...We can’t, I can’t send him back to Howard. No way in hell.”

Bucky huffs quietly and looks like he’s gearing up to say something when the bathroom door slides slowly open. Blue eyes peek around the edge of the doorframe first and then the rest of Anthony follows through. He’s got a cup of water in one hand and another lollipop in the other; both of which he presents to Tony with a shy little smile.

“Bruce says candy fixes everything.” He states solemnly, and Tony can’t help but smile. He takes the water first and then reaches for the lollipop. Anthony holds it away and frowns at Tony like a particularly disobedient child.

“Dessert after breakfast.” He states primly, and Tony is startled into laughter.

“Yeah alright, munchkin. Breakfast it is.”

Breakfast is just the three of them, and after the emotional turmoil of the morning Bucky is thankful for the reprieve. There’s something brittle about Tony, though he smiles and puts on a brave face for Anthony. He doesn’t seem to realise how intuitive the kid is, even for a four year old. Anthony is clearly aware that something is going on, but he shyly attempts to cheer Tony up, in his own way. He tries to help Tony with the pancakes they have for breakfast, though his contribution is mostly an incredible talent for spreading flour everywhere.

The cleaning bots are not impressed.

Winter, too, is sullen and quiet. He offers only the occasional commentary and even that seems merely reflexive. Bucky’s pretty sure his asshole alter ego is attempting to plan a mission back to Anthony’s universe to voluntarily assassinate Howard Stark. Bucky must be an asshole himself, because he’s not all that sure he’d stop Winter.
You’re too quiet.

Murder isn’t for the fragile of mind.

Did you just imply I’m delicate, you bastard?

I thought I was pretty clear.

Tony settles them in the living room after they’ve eaten; he collapses onto the couch while making a great effort to seem like he isn’t exhausted. Bucky takes the other end, and with barely any hesitation Anthony climbs up between them. The couch is big enough they aren’t touching each other, even when they sprawl out a little.

“I vote mindless cartoons. Mindless cartoons? Good, cartoons it is.” Tony announces and gestures to FRIDAY’s sensor.

Bucky settles slowly into the corner of the couch, eyes half lidded as he quietly observes Tony. He’s never seen Tony anything but put together, armoured even when he’s stumbling blindly into the kitchen in a tank top and sweats that are more engine grease than fabric. This morning, he’s seen different sides to Tony; sides he’s not sure how to piece into the giant puzzle that is Tony Stark. It’s both unexpected and extremely gratifying to realise he’s been allowed to see Tony vulnerable this morning, however unintentional.

Now that he knows what to look for, it’s easy to see. The rigid way Tony sits, though he’s making an effort to appear relaxed. The inward curl of his shoulders, like he wants to hunch over and present a smaller target but equally afraid of showing his belly. He looks wary, hunted and Bucky could kill Howard all over again. Not just for the damage done to Anthony, who is clearly innocent, but also to Tony. Tony, who has lived a large portion of his adult life suffering from and still feeling the effects of Howard’s ‘parenting’. He wants to ask him about it, get Tony to talk to him, wants to reach out and comfort, but he senses it wouldn’t be welcome right now.

Bucky is so lost in his thoughts - so intent on Tony - that for a moment he completely forgets about Anthony. He’s abruptly reminded of the boy’s presence, however, when a tiny hand pats gently at his knee. When he looks down, Anthony has grabbed the throw from the back of the couch and is staring hopefully up at Bucky. Bucky can’t deny the boy anything, even now and leans back a little further. Anthony climbs into his lap and arranges himself comfortably, a bundle of warmth draped across Bucky’s chest. Tony eyes their movements with quiet amusement, and when Anthony settles with a little huff Tony laughs softly.

“You comfortable, munchkin?” He asks, and chuckles again when Anthony hums quietly.
The cartoons continue on, ignored almost entirely by the adults, though Anthony watches them with a bemused sort of fascination. Tony acquires a tablet from seemingly nowhere, at some point, and is working with rapt attention.

It’s been long enough that Bucky is almost dozing, soothed by the gentle feel of Anthony’s heartbeat and the sound of his quiet breathing.

“Tony,” Anthony’s voice, spoken in the stage whisper of a child thinking they’re being quiet, nudges Bucky out of his half doze. “Do you wanna share my blanket?” He asks, with that shy little grin that is becoming increasingly possible to resist.

“I’m not cold, but thanks kiddo.”

Anthony looks heartbroken, like his favourite toy has been snatched from his hands. He doesn’t say anything, but sighs softly as though it was a foregone conclusion Tony would say no. Tony looks stricken and hastily scoots across the couch.

“Hell, why not? Who doesn’t love a good snuggle.” He says, while wriggling his way between Bucky and the couch. Bucky manfully doesn’t comment when both Tony and Anthony manage to nail him in several places with pointy elbows. The end result is Tony stretched out and sandwiched between Bucky and the back of the couch, with Bucky’s metal arm curled around Tony’s back. The throw is very carefully settled over their torsos, since it’s not large enough to cover their legs. Anthony throws a smug grin up at Bucky before settling back down and Bucky almost laughs, realising how beautifully Anthony played his older self.

Bucky patiently waits until Anthony’s breathing has evened out into sleep and then squeezes Tony lightly to get his attention.

“You’re not alone, you know.” He whispers, and feels the way Tony tenses against him. “Whatever you wanna do, we’ve got your back. Kid needs someone in his corner.” He feels Winter echo the sentiment, though the other doesn’t actually say anything. Tony is silent for a long time, still in a way that has Bucky concerned he might have said the wrong thing. Finally, Tony sighs softly and squirms a little closer. His head rests on Bucky’s shoulder, and his breath is a warm caress over Bucky’s neck.

“Not exactly model dad material over here, but we’ll work something out.”

Lying like this, Bucky can’t see Tony’s expression, but he doesn’t need to in order to be able to pick up on the self loathing the other man is projecting.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re great with him. Besides, no one has to make any decisions yet; Strange said it’ll be a while before he can make a portal, anyway.”

Tony hums noncommittally. “Yeah, I guess.” Before Bucky can reply, there’s the tickle of Tony’s hair on the underside of his jaw as the genius muffs a yawn in Bucky’s shoulder.

“You should get some rest,” Bucky says instead. There’ll be time for these discussions later. He can feel how tired Tony is, slumped half across him. It’s evident today has been rough on him. It’s been rough on all of them. He chooses to ignore the fact the day isn’t even half over.
“Sleep is for the weak, Barnes. You can’t tell me how to live my life, you’re not my real mom. Maybe you need sleep.” He mumbles nonsensically, and Bucky smiles soppily at the ceiling.

Any other protests Tony might’ve made are silenced the moment Bucky gets his hand into Tony’s curls, carding through his hair soothingly. The genius makes a low, satisfied noise and melts into Bucky.

“Go to sleep, kitten.” Bucky murmurs into the top of Tony’s head before taking his own advice and slipping into a warm, comfortable sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Child Abuse mentions: Previous fractures/injuries
Chapter Summary

In which Tony and Anthony spend some time together in the workshop, Tony has a crisis and Rhodey saves the day.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so we're doing a little time skip here, kiddies! Just to move the plot along a little and so we don't get bogged in the nitty gritty forever. Thanks to those who have been with me from the beginning, and welcome to those new to the story!

Enjoy the update. <3

Thanks again to my beautiful betas, Roe and Meg, without who's encouragement this story wouldn't exist.

Chapter Six: Bots and Bears

Two weeks later

Tony leans back from his work bench with a sigh, stretching his arms up until his spine pops. He can admit to himself that he's probably getting too old to be hunching over a project for hours on end. He'd forgotten how stiff and sore it leaves him, but this is the first time he's had in two weeks to dedicate to working.

It's shockingly difficult to find time when you've got a four year old underfoot, Tony reflects wryly. He's barely been in the workshop; his already short supply of spare time spent with Anthony and the Bucky/Winter combo. He's not sure he can remember the last time he got such regular meals or this much sleep.

It had been awkward the first few days and Tony had been glad to avoid the other Avengers. Strange had taken Wanda somewhere with the promise of 'rehabilitation' and the rest of the team had seemed to clumsily gravitate around that empty space. When he allows himself to think about it, something aches in his chest at the thought that his leaving the team in the immediate Ultron aftermath hadn't affected them the same.
“Boss, you have visitors.” FRIDAY chirps and Tony turns to see Bucky on the other side of the glass doors. He’s got Anthony on one hip, a plate in the other hand, and a small smile on his face. “Spoke too soon.” Tony says to himself and waves for FRIDAY to open the doors. It’s not like he minds - work is something he can catch up on anytime, but moments like this with little Anthony are irreplaceable. He can’t, won’t make the same mistakes as Howard. He knows far too well what it’s like to be pushed aside for work.

“He was asking for you,” are the words spoken the moment the doors slide open and Tony revises his initial assessment. Winter, then.

Now that he’s paying attention, he can see the weird combination of stiff posture and fluid movements that characterises Winter’s presence. The kid is looking around the workshop, eyes rounded in awe, but his attention quickly snaps to Tony. Anthony wriggles to be put down and then he reaches up for the plate. Winter obediently hands the plate down and then watches with a little smile as Anthony marches his way up to Tony. “You didn’t eat breakfast with us.” The boy declares, sounding adorably offended. Tony chuckles and accepts the plate, dropping a brief kiss in Anthony’s hair. “Thank you, munchkin.”

When Tony looks up, Winter is smirking at him. “We made pancakes. They are ‘happy to see you’.” He says and Tony looks down to see that a smile has been drawn on his pancake with syrup. He can’t help but laugh, enjoying the light pink that touches the tips of Winter’s ears. “Bucky’s suggestion, I’m sure.”

He carries the plate to the couch he keeps in the workshop for long work stints and sits down. DUM-E, U and Butterfingers evidently all become aware at the same time that there are new people in the workshop. DUM-E is the first one out of his charging station, wheeling his way across the workshop with cheerful beeps.

“Robots!” Anthony’s eyes go wide and he all but vibrates in place. Tony expects him to race over but he looks as though his feet are glued in place. DUM-E has no such compunctions and wheels all the way up to Anthony, twisting his camera this way and that to examine the child. “Go ahead, kiddo, he won’t hurt you.” Tony calls out and Anthony lights up.

As though having permission has opened the floodgates, Anthony reaches up with both hands and runs them carefully over DUM-E’s strut, examining every inch. Winter watches it all, ignoring the other two bots who are poking at him from both sides.

“Alright, you hyperactive buckets of bolts, leave Sergeant Broody alone. Remember when we talked about boundaries? I know we’ve had this conversation. I will turn you guys into really elaborate lamps, don’t think I won’t. ‘Industrial’ is a whole fashion style now, you’ll fit right in.”

U whistles angrily and Tony almost laughs, but holds his composure. “Don’t you swear at me, young man! Kids these days, no respect, it’s like I didn’t build you with my own two hands.”
Anthony giggles and even Winter’s lips turn up a little. He weaves his way from between the two bots and over to Tony, where he pauses for a moment. “Bucky is going running with The Captain,” He states, his nose wrinkling a little at Steve’s title. “We will see you later.”

Winter bends down and hovers over Tony, who sits absolutely still. The moment lasts embarrassingly long, well and truly long enough to be awkward.

*Just, kiss him on the forehead, or even the cheek, you idiot.*

*Shut up, I know what I’m doing.*

Winter settles on gently, awkwardly patting Tony’s hair and then strides from the workshop before Tony can think to react. Well, alright then.

Tony takes an absent minded forkful of pancake, eyes on the doorway through which his favourite supersoldier just disappeared. “That was weird, right?” He says out loud.

“I wouldn’t know, Boss. I’m just the eyes in the sky.” FRIDAY responds immediately with mock solemnity.

“Sass,” Tony grumbles around a second forkful of pancake. “In my own house.”

He polishes off the rest of his breakfast in the time it takes for Anthony to finish his inspection of the other two bots. DUM-E trails him everywhere like a faithful puppy and Tony can’t help the no doubt sappy expression he’s wearing.

“You gettin’ this, FRI?”

“Of course, Boss. Saved it to your private archive.”

He watches his kids for a little while longer - ignoring the way his eyes burn a little - and then sets his plate aside. “Alright, T2!” He calls out and Anthony immediately stops what he’s doing, his hands going behind his back like he thinks he’s in trouble. Tony carefully ignores the motion, though his heart aches with the familiarity of it all. “These robots are pretty cool, but do you want to see another one?”

Anthony smiles beautifully at him, the nervousness sliding from his posture almost immediately. He very calmly walks to Tony’s side, though it’s obvious he wants to run. Tony scoops the kid up and settles him on one hip, quietly pleased when Anthony rests against him. He takes the kid across the workshop to the row of Iron Man suits in their display cases. Anthony gasps quietly as FRIDAY slides the door open on the newest model and it steps smoothly out. “This is Iron Man.” Tony steps closer to the armour and raps his knuckles against the faceplate. It slides smoothly away to show the empty interior. “It’s a suit.”
Anthony leans forward and gently places his hands over the armour’s chest, tracing the edges of the arc reactor with his fingertips.
“Do you wear it? What’s it do?”

The question makes Tony smile and he unthinkingly drops a small kiss on the boy’s forehead.
“I wear it to help people. Fight bad guys, rescue cats from trees, people from burning buildings. You know, good guy stuff.”
“You’re a superhero? Like... like Captain America?” Anthony looks less than enthused and in fact he goes very tense. Tony almost sighs but carefully keeps his expression even.

Damn you, Howard.

“No, honey, not like that. You haven’t got anything to be afraid of.”

Anthony squirms a little and refuses to meet Tony’s eyes.“P-papa says Captain America punishes bad boys and he’s a superhero.”

Tony slides one hand into Anthony’s hair, cuddling him closer and resting his cheek against the crown of Anthony’s head. Tony’s heart aches and he can hear those words in Howard’s voice, an unpleasant echo in his skull. It makes his blood boil to know that Howard in every universe is apparently a douchebag. He pushes those thoughts aside forcefully, because none of it matters; what’s more important is Anthony and making sure he knows he isn’t to blame for Howard’s shit.

“Sweetheart, you are not a bad boy. No one is going to punish you or hurt you. I promise.”

Anthony sniffs, looking up at him with wide eyes. “Really?”

Tony swallows the lump in his throat and nods. “Yeah, of course. We all- we all care for you, kiddo. And no one wants to see you sad or unhappy.”

“But what if I’m bad?”

“Well, then me or Bucky or Winter will tell you what you did wrong and help you make it right. Well, maybe not Winter. He seems like a troublemaker, doesn’t he?”

Anthony giggles, “Winter is nice. He’s.... He’s my friend.” He adds tentatively - almost in a whisper - as if he’s not allowed to have friends. Tony knows from experience that this is probably the first time Anthony has even had someone he can call a friend.
“That’s great, T2. Winter’s a good friend.” Tony gently sits Anthony down on a workbench, relieved to see the tension has left the boy’s expression. “Watch this, kiddo.”

He turns and the armour is already shifting, the back sliding open and ready to receive him. He steps into the familiar embrace and feels the metal close behind him. The HUD light up and Tony twists to see Anthony staring at him in wide eyed surprise. He flips the faceplate up so Anthony can see him grinning and spreads his arms out wide.

“What do you think, huh?” The joints whir and click with every movement, the sound as familiar to Tony as his own heartbeat.

To Anthony it's probably something new and magical; his eyes are bright with curiosity and excitement. He’s leaning forward so far he’s in danger of falling off the bench and Tony can’t help but laugh. He runs Anthony through the basics of the suit; shows him the repulsors in his hands and the various weapon compartments around the suit that pop open. He even holds the helmet over Anthony’s head so he can see the HUD. The kid loves every minute of it and soaks up the information like a sponge.

And then Tony shows him the rocket boots.

“You can fly?” Anthony all but whispers the words and the sheer awe in his voice warms something in Tony.

“Sure can, honey. Faster than your average jet.” He knows Anthony probably can’t understand that reference, but even to a four year old that sounds fast.

“Can you show me? Please?” Anthony’s eyes are suddenly big, blue pools of pleading and Tony is a weak, weak man.

Which is how Tony finds himself hovering about six inches off the ground with all three bots on standby and Anthony in his arms. A normal four year old would probably be loud in their enjoyment, but Anthony is quiet; the only sign of his excitement is the way he quivers in Tony’s careful grip and the size of the grin on his face.

Tony lets them drift in a slow circle, keeping a careful eye on DUM-E who’s looking a little trigger happy with his fire extinguisher. He lands them carefully after they’ve completed their little circuit and genly sets Anthony down while he strips out of the armour.
“Alrighty then, pint sized! You wanna get your hands dirty, or were you just planning on lazing around all day?”

Anthony freezes, tension working its way through his muscles once more. Anthony’s eyes dip down immediately and he worries his lower lip between his teeth. He squirms under Tony’s regard and the silence stretches on.

“Hey,” Tony murmurs and gently chucks the kid under the chin. “What’s eating you, cupcake?”

“I’m not allowed to play in the workshop. Dad says I’m too little and I won’t understand anything.”

“Is that so? Well, in the house of Tony you definitely meet the minimum height requirement. Go ahead, Fri, show him.”

FRIDAY obediently projected a height scale just below Anthony’s head, making the boy giggle.

“You made that up!” He cries, waving his hands and dispersing the projection.

“Yeah, well, so did whoever said you’re too small to learn.”

Tony sets them up a little workstation on one of his other benches, away from his more sensitive projects. He gets Anthony carefully situated on a tool and slowly, patiently, teaches the kid how to play with the holograms. Anthony’s face is alight with interest and he fires off questions almost faster than Tony can answer. He’s patient, though; if there’s one thing he’ll never do, it’s treat Anthony the way Howard would.

“Alright, so what’re we building?”

Anthony chews his lip and glances towards the bots, his expression shy. Tony is inordinately flattered by Anthony’s interest in his children and he knows he’s probably wearing a ridiculous smile.

“You want to build a mini-bot, munchkin?” He asks, reaching out to ruffle Anthony’s hair. The boy grins at him and nods, though his expression remains a little hesitant. Tony chooses to ignore it for the moment and starts to sketch out some rudimentary plans.
They get lost in the work and though Anthony really is too young to understand the more complex concepts, he does an admirable job of keeping up. Anthony mostly helps with the small things - holding things in place while Tony manipulates the tools and patiently twisting screws in. Tony quietly imprints these moments on his mind despite the fact FRIDAY is probably filling an album with Anthony’s photos. The sight of Anthony diligently wielding a miniature screwdriver with his tongue poking out to the side and a look of fierce concentration is one Tony will treasure.

“So what’re you gonna name the ‘bot, kiddo?” Tony asks at one point, his attention only half on the circuits he’s carefully soldering.

“I thought BUD-E like buddy because he’s gonna be my friend. I don’t have any friends, ‘cept for Winter.”

Something in Tony aches at this little boy, forced to make his own friends because he doesn’t have any; it hurts worse to realise this is - was - him.

“Yeah, I didn’t have any friends growin’ up, either. Just robots and stories.” Tony barely keeps the bitterness from his voice.

“I had a Bucky.” Anthony says, only just above a whisper. Tony freezes.

“What?” He gets past numb lips.

“A Bucky Bear.” Anthony fidgets with the screwdriver, his eyes far away. Tony doesn’t want to ask, knows the answer to the question, but he finds himself saying the words anyway.

“What happened to it?”

“Sir destroyed him. He said I was too old for toys.”

Tony flinches - a full bodied movement - and sighs softly. He wants to curse but settles for merely thinking it.

“Aw honey, I’m sorry.” He drops a kiss on the top of Anthony’s head and the boy lifts his head to smile sadly up at him.
“Don’t be sad, Tony. I’ll have a BUD-E, soon.”

Silence settles over them, then, but it’s comfortable. They get a partial body assembled - something small enough for Anthony to carry in his arms - when the bots apparently *lose their damn minds.*

DUM-E beeps loudly and Tony turns just in time to see him spray U in the face with the fire extinguisher. The other bot makes a sound that can only be interpreted as outrage and tries to wrestle the extinguisher away from a belligerent DUM-E.

“Hey!” Tony yells, standing from his stool and racing over. He snatches the extinguisher from DUM-E and holds it away from the pair of them. “Does this look like Robot Wars to you? Are you kidding me with this? I’m in the middle of revolutionising six different fields of engineering and you two are, what, having a foam fight? You’re *helper* bots!”

DUM-E beeps sadly, reaching for the extinguisher with one clicking claw.

“Uh uh! Don’t you beep at me in that tone of voice. Do I look moved? Let me tell you, DUM-E, I am not moved by your sulking. I should donate you to a community college, you can spend the rest of your digital years stacking blocks for all I care. Now apologise to your brother.”

U wheels in a slow circle, until they’re effectively presented with his ‘back’.

“U,” Tony warns and wags a finger at him, though the bot can’t see it. “You cut that out. The last thing I need is Anthony learning from your behaviour.”

In the meantime, Anthony has made his way over and he giggles as Tony continues to berate the bots. DUM-E is happy to be distracted by the new arrival and leans down to gently poke at the boy with his clawed ‘hand’. Anthony grasps the claw with both hands and pretends to shake it with a solemn expression. The bot whistles shrilly - the sound nothing short of elated - and promptly decides to grip Anthony by the back of his overalls and *lift.* Anthony giggles and waves his arms around, pretending to fly.

Tony can do nothing but laugh as DUM-E slowly wheels in a little circle, Anthony dangling securely from his grip.

“Look, Tony! I’m Iron Man!”

Tony is so busy laughing at the sight the pair make - at the unrestrained joy on Anthony’s face - that
he completely misses the doors sliding open behind him.

“Jesus, Tony, what the hell?” Bucky’s voice is like a shock of cold water. It slides unpleasantly down Tony’s spine and wipes the previous humour like it was never there. DUM-E freezes immediately and the grin drops from Anthony’s face. “That can’t be safe! What’s he doin’ so high up?” Bucky continues, striding straight past Tony and scooping Anthony into his arms.

“A place like this.

The words rattle around in Tony’s brain; they swell and echo until the fondness is gone from Bucky’s tone and all he hears is disapproval and disappointment. “Yeah,” He mutters, rubbing at his chin with one hand. “Guess I didn’t think of that.”

Bucky frowns and steps closer, Anthony quiet and watchful in his arms. “Hey, doll, it’s okay. No harm done. None of us are exactly prepared for this.” He ducks in before Tony can think to react, pressing a kiss to Tony’s cheek and lingering just long enough for his warm breath to be felt. “I gotta feed the beast lunch. You comin’?”

Tony clears his throat and looks away, fighting to pull his press smile into place. “Yeah, I’ll uh...Be there in a minute, Buckaroo. Just gotta check a few things over. I’ll see you soon, T2.”

Bucky doesn’t look convinced and even looks like he’s thinking about saying something, but Anthony tugs gently on his hair.

“Can I have macaroni for lunch?” He questions, eyes wide and guileless and Bucky is successfully diverted.

The workshop is quiet after they leave, the bots are hovering around Tony’s legs and his customary music is completely absent. Tony feels nauseous and anxiety thrums under his skin. He can’t believe he was so stupid. Who the hell thought it was a good idea to let Tony Stark look after a kid, unsupervised?
Tony stumbles to sit down on his stool, staring blankly into the distance. Jesus, he can’t do this. He can’t parent. With an example like Howard to see him through; he’s well on the way to middle aged and he’s still fucked up by his childhood. How can he hope to do any better for a kid? Bucky’s right, he’s definitely not prepared for this.

“Boss, I’m obliged to let you know I’m enacting the ‘Tony’s losing his shit’ protocol.” FRIDAY chimes, her voice obnoxiously cheerful.

“Belay that, FRI! Do not call Rhodey!” Tony yelps, but FRIDAY’s only response is a screen in front of him and the sound of a dial tone.

“Oops, sorry boss! The line is already ringing.” She chirps, as though she couldn’t just hang up.

“Traitor.” Tony hisses and would probably have launched into a more in depth diatribe but at that moment the call connects. Rhodey’s face fills the screen in front of him, tired but smiling.

“Sugarplum!”

“Aw, cut the crap, Tones.” Rhodey replies, but he’s grinning. “I know FRIDAY called. What’s up?” Rhodey’s expression is patient and loving - like always - and Tony feels a little of the tension slide away.

He tells Rhodey everything, from Bucky coming back through the portal with his miniature self right through to their time in the workshop.

“Well, shit man.” Rhodey leans back, his expression a little shell shocked. “How are you doin’? Having a little you around, fresh from Howard, has got to be pretty heavy.”

“I need a drink, or twelve.” Tony snorts bitterly, scrubbing both hands over his face like he can just wipe the stress away. “But shit, Rhody, what the hell am I gonna do? I can’t send him back there but he’s probably just as fucked if he stays with me.”

“That’s bullshit, Tones.” Rhodey’s face suddenly fills the screen, his eyes grabbing and holding Tony’s attention. “Fuck Howard. You survived that piece of shit, he didn’t break you. You’re the damn Iron Man!”
Tony flushes and looks away, unable to hold the intensity of his best friend’s gaze. “Rhodey.” He manages to choke out, the word half strangled by the lump of emotion that’s taken up residence in his throat.

“Tony, you’re my best friend. I’ve known you since you were some punk ass kid who didn’t know when to quit. I know you can do this. If you can’t trust yourself, man, trust me.” Tony doesn’t look up, but Rhodey has known him too long and his voice suddenly gets louder. When Tony looks up, Rhodey is leaning right up against the screen. “Tones, trust me.”

His doubts don’t magically disappear - even Rhodey doesn’t have that power - but he feels... grounded. He feels like he can hold on a little longer, even if he’s still pretty (definitely) sure he can’t do this.

“Okay,” Tony whispers and hears the quiet sigh Rhodey makes in response.

“Okay.” He repeats and he smiles the same warm, gentle smile he had the day they first met.

“Now, it sounds like you’ve got places to be. I’ve got some things I’ve gotta finish up here, and then I’m coming to meet my, hell I dunno, Godson? Nephew? Hang in there, Tones. I’ll see you soon.”

They say their final goodbyes and then the screen goes blank, leaving Tony in silence again. This time it’s...Not so bad.

“Thanks, FRI. You were right. This time.” He murmurs.

“Of course, Boss.” FRIDAY’s voice is warm, as warm as she can make it, and the sound of it reminds him of how much she’s grown, how human she is now. Tony flashes a smile at her nearest camera and pushes upright in the same moment.

“Alright, kids, let’s lock it down for now. I’ve got a lunch date.”
Belonging

Chapter Summary

In which Rhodey is a buzz kill and a Tony whisperer of all ages, Strange is a troll and Tony gives a gift.

Chapter Notes

My sincerest thanks, as always, go to Roe and Meg, who scream at me regularly and keep me inspired.

We're starting to faceplant the plot now, my lovelies! A bit of a rollercoaster in this chapter, but it's the next one you really wanna buckle up for! ;-)

Thanks for reading, and see you next week!

Chapter Seven: Belonging

“I cannot believe you, an actual heathen, live under my roof!” Tony drums his fingers against the side of his coffee mug, his expression both incredulous and offended.

“I am not a heathen,” Bucky is calm, though he’s trying and failing not to grin. “I’m just saying I don’t think pizza is an essential food group.”

“Pizza is life.” Tony hisses and the way he’s holding his fork is starting to look vaguely threatening.

“Are you two really debating pizza over whatever that is?” Clint - perched on the kitchen island as though there’s nothing unusual about it (there isn’t) - leans over to give Tony’s plate a dubious look. Tony looks at his lunch for a moment and pokes it with his cutlery. It makes a squelching noise he’d rather not think too closely on.

“Rude, Barton.” Bucky doesn’t seem to notice anything amiss, eating quickly and neatly. “There ain’t nothing wrong with my cookin’.”

“I don’t think that’s cooked.” Clint says slowly, watching as Anthony stabs the gelatinous mass with his fork and let’s go. The fork stays upright and Clint goes a little green. “Oh god, it’s not sentient is
“God, I hope not.” Tony whispers, staring at the food with newfound fear. “I don’t think I can handle the politics of a sentient lunch on this littlesleep.”

Bucky flips the both of them off, careful to make sure Anthony can’t see the motion. Clint grins cheerfully and hops down from the counter. “Alright, well you guys enjoy your lunch. I’m sure it’s, uh...Yeah, I can’t even lie.” With a jaunty wave over his shoulder, Clint all but flees the room.

The moment he leaves Anthony takes a deep breath and the almost imperceptible stiffness of his shoulders relaxes. He pokes at his food for a moment longer, his eyes mostly on the way Bucky chows through his lunch. Hesitantly, the boy scoops up a small amount of the food and raises it towards his mouth.

“Oh, honey no.” Tony leans over and arrests the motion, his nose wrinkled. “Don’t eat that, sweetheart. We’ll get arrested for attempted murder.”

“That cuts, Tony.” Bucky deadpans, though he very pointedly puts his own cutlery down.

You know we share tastebuds, yes?

What’s your point?

I can’t believe you subjected me to that so you could prove a point.

This from the guy who didn’t know he could have a favourite colour?

The Chair fried memories, not tastebuds, idiot.

The Chair encouraged compliance, not stupidity, but you only seem to be good at one.

I hate you. So much.
“I’m sorry, Robocop, but cooking is not one of your many talents.” Tony tries to sound sympathetic, but it’s pretty obvious he’s choking back laughter. Anthony is starting to smile, no doubt realising he’s not about to get in trouble. Bucky tries to hold his composure a little longer, but in the end he can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of him.

“Okay, so the army definitely didn't teach me how to cook.” He collects their plates and scrapes the remains into the trash. “If HYDRA tried, I don’t want to remember it.” Bucky adds and is pleased when it surprises a laugh out of Tony.

“I took the liberty of placing an order at your favourite pizza place, Boss.” FRIDAY cheerfully announces and Tony grins.

“Oh good, we won't starve.” Tony winks at Anthony as he gets up to help; they have a dishwasher, but it seems a little excessive for the amount they have. They stand shoulder to shoulder at the sink in comfortable silence and it’s all quite domestic; it’s a strange and unfamiliar feeling, like a shirt that doesn’t fit quite right. Tony’s not sure if he wants to flee back to the lab and his robots or impulse by a soccer mom van. Of course, if he did buy a van he’d have to modify it a little to make it acceptable. Maybe he should revisit dad’s old hovercar theory...

“Tony!” The word is accompanied by the light flick of a dish towel against his shoulder and the combination is enough to drag Tony out of his head. Bucky smiles when he sees Tony’s paying attention, “There y’are, doll. Where’d you go?” He leans in until their shoulders are pressed together, close enough that Tony can feel his breath.

“Just thinking, cupcake, nothing to worry about.” Tony drops his gaze to the dishwater and puts a little more space between them under the guise of reaching for the next plate. Bucky’s eyes narrow a little, clearly not convinced by the display, but he doesn't push it.

“About yesterday. I'm sorry I went off on you like that,” Bucky twists the dish towel in his hands, his expression quietly sheepish. “I know you would never put Anthony in danger. I just panicked and my mouth ran off on me. You didn' deserve that, doll.”

Tony's brain just...blanks. Bucky hadn't been wrong, had he? Tony was being reckless and stupid and he shouldn't be left alone with a child. Why was he apologising? People didn't apologise to Tony Stark.

“You weren't wrong. He shouldn't have been dangling off of DUM-E like that, he could have hurt himself.”
“No, you were there and watchin’. DUM-E wasn’t zoomin’ all over the place, he was bein’ careful. I should’a trusted your judgement. I do.” Bucky smiles and knocks their shoulders gently together.

Warmth blooms in Tony's chest and the feeling is enough to quiet the self loathing for a moment. He opens his mouth to reply when FRIDAY interrupts.

“Boss, I'm picking up something strange on my sensors.”

Tony spins around, his eyes immediately going to Anthony. The boy is staring back at him, calm and unharmed.

“Location?” Bucky is tense, the plates in the metal arm flexing open and closed.

“Unknown.”

The answer comes a moment later; with a quiet ‘pop’, an owl literally appears. It glides across the room and circles Tony's head until he holds his arm out. The bird lands gently on his arm and only then does Tony realise the bird is holding a letter in its beak and is pure white.

“Fucking Strange. I hate him.” Tony hisses but he's already reaching for the letter. The envelope is sealed with wax, because of fucking course it is.

*Stark, this is not your Hogwarts Letter. I'll be there in half an hour.*

“Sass,” Tony grumbles, vindictively crushing the letter in his fist. “All I get from you people is sass and headaches.” The owl hoots softly and flaps it’s wings. Tony grimaces and holds his arm out, not particularly wanting to be smacked in the face with an errant wing.

Which turns out to be the least of his worries, because the bird explodes in a shower of glitter. Tony sighs loudly and stares forlornly down at his glitter covered suit. He’s gonna be washing glitter out for weeks. “Alright, Dumbledore, this is war.”

Anthony giggles, making a belated effort to hide it behind his hands. “You look like a fairy now.” He whispers and Tony pokes his tongue out at the kid.
“I mean, you’re always making Harry Potter references, can you really blame him?” Bucky’s expression is all innocence but he’s obviously fighting a grin.

“Traitor. Just for that you can go and get the pizza. I’m not greeting a delivery person like I’ve just bathed in a damn craft supplies box.”

Bucky snorts and leans in until their noses are almost touching; his eyes are alive with mischief and paired with his little smirk Tony finds him captivating.

“You’re cute when you’re mad.” He murmurs, thumbing some of the glitter from Tony’s cheek.

“Just when I’m mad?” Tony breathes and the soft chuckle Bucky lets out sends warmth straight to his toes.

“Naw, doll, I reckon you’re pretty cute all the time.” Tony’s breath feels like it sticks in his lungs and he finds himself unconsciously swaying a little closer. Bucky rests his free hand on Tony’s hip and with gentle pressure he guides Tony closer, until their chests are touching.

Tony isn’t sure who moves first, but he sees the intent look cross Bucky’s face and the hunger in his eyes; they both lean in, their lips a breath from touching -

“Who ordered the pizza?” Rhodey crows, his voice overly loud. Bucky and Tony spring guiltily apart and Tony feels his cheeks flush. He ignores the quiet, disappointed sound Anthony makes and lunges for Rhodey.

“Sugarplum!” He hits his best friend at a run and the other man easily adjusts, curling one arm around Tony’s back and squeezing. Tony inhales, his face tucked in against Rhodey’s shoulder, and is flooded by that warmly familiar scent. “Thank you for being here.” He says it quietly, so only Rhodey will hear.

“Always, Tones, always.” Rhodey presses a brief kiss to Tony’s temple and then steps back. He keeps one arm around Tony’s shoulders and puts the pizza on the table with the other. “You get any sleep last night, man? You look beat.” He pokes gently at Tony’s cheek, tutting at Tony like he’s an errant child. Tony bats at his hands,

“Sleep is for the dead!” Tony yelps, finally succeeding in escaping Rhodey’s mothering. “You’re still not my mom, Rhodes!”
Rhodey snorts and with a final squeeze, lets Tony go. “Barnes, right? Good to meet you.” He offers his hand and Tony watches with quiet surprise as Rhodey’s knuckles go white where he grips Bucky’s hand. Bucky raises an eyebrow and looks like he’s fighting not to smile. “You two were lookin’ a little close.” Rhodey offers and Tony’s definitely familiar with that look on Rhodey’s face.

“What can I say?” Bucky drawls with a lazy grin. “Tony’s magnetic.”

Rhodey chuckles and turns Bucky’s hand loose. “Jesus, I’m not even touchin’ that. Alright, Tones, you gonna introduce me?”

Anthony is staring at the three of them with wide eyes, holding himself tensely at the edge of his chair.

“Anthony, this is my best friend, Rhodey.” Tony steps closer, running a gentle hand over the kid’s hair. Anthony relaxes slightly at the touch and even leans into it.

“Nice to meet you, sir.” He says, polite and proper.

“I’ve been wrangling Tony for years.” Rhodey says with a grin, ignoring Anthony’s obvious discomfort. “See all these grey hairs? They’re Tony hairs.” He adds, ignoring Tony’s squawk of indignation. Anthony blinks at him for a moment and then tentatively smiles.

“Slandering my good name!” Tony yelps and both Bucky and Rhodey laugh. Bucky fetches fresh plates from the cupboard and lays them out on the table.

“Only the truth, Tones, only the truth.” Rhodey takes up serving the pizza, passing Anthony his plate first. The warm smile he gives the boy has Anthony ducking his head, face flushed. “So, I hear you met Iron Man.”

Anthony perks up immediately, his shyness momentarily forgotten. “Yeah!” He enthuses, smiling brightly. “It was so cool!”

Rhodey shoots Tony a sly smirk, the expression enough to make Tony’s eyes narrow suspiciously. “Did you know,” He murmurs and leans across the table like he’s going to share a secret. “Iron Man is War Machine’s sidekick?”
Tony chokes on his pizza and Bucky snickers, even as he reaches out to pat Tony on the back.

Anthony’s eyes widen and he leans closer too, pizza completely forgotten. “Who’s War Machine?”

“War Machine, at your service.” Rhodey grins and even salutes. Anthony gasps, comically loud and all but bounces in his chair.

“Can I see?” Anthony leans so far forward he almost plants his elbow in the pizza slice. Laughing, Rhodey reaches out and rescues the food. Anthony flushes, but doesn’t withdraw from the touch.

“Sure can, little man. We’ll go down to the lab a little later and I’ll show you. Tony told me you like buildin’ things, so I brought some models for us to build together, too.” Rhodey reaches out and steals another slice of pizza right from Tony’s hand, managing to do so without turning his head.

Anthony looks completely charmed and there’s a small grin tugging at his lips. “Really? I’d really like that!” He replies, with a surprising amount of enthusiasm. At this point he’s all but climbing the table to get closer to Rhodey, his eyes big and star struck.

Rhodey launches into one of his stories, once he sees the way Anthony has relaxed. Tony, who has heard this completely boring story more times than he can count, promptly tunes out. He stares into the distance and tries to ignore the way Bucky’s foot is nudging against his own.

Honestly, the man is terrible for both his attention span and his blood pressure.

“Boss, Strange has arrived in Meeting Room One. I let the other Avengers know, too. So far only Captain Rogers has elected to attend the meeting.” FRIDAY announces and Rhodey tilts his head.

“Meeting?” He flicks a quick glance at Tony, who merely shrugs.

“Strange has been looking into how Anthony got here. Guess he’s back with an update.” He says, carefully avoiding the topic of Anthony’s future. Bucky has gone still and tense next to him, the metal hand curled into a fist so tight Tony thinks he can hear the metal groaning. “Why don’t you guys go on ahead? I’ve gotta get something from the workshop, and I’ll meet you there.”
“Should we take Anthony?” Bucky asks and Anthony sits up immediately, his little face solemn.

“Yes, please.” He replies, before anyone else can say anything. “I want to know what’s going on.”

Bucky frowns and clearly wants to say something but Rhodey talks over him. “Sure thing, kiddo.” Bucky lets it go with a quiet sigh. He throws the remains of the pizza in the fridge and sets the dishes on the bench to be washed. “Come on, little man, I’ll give you a ride.” Rhodey says and turns to offer a first confused and then gleeful Anthony his back.

Bucky watches them go with a tiny frown and then turns his gaze to Tony. “Don’t be too long, you hear?” He drops a lightning fast kiss on Tony’s cheek and then trails the other two through the door.

Strange drops his hands with a little smile and then with a flourish produces an array of colourful lights that make Anthony giggle. “Well then, it seems like dimension hopping hasn’t harmed your energies at all.” He says the words to Anthony, who mostly looks confused, but Bucky relaxes all the same.

*Of course he is fine. He is strong.*

*Oh good, I’m so glad you’re an expert in dimensional travel now.*

“What about travelling back?” Steve asks and smiles a little when Anthony allows him to help the kid down from the table. He almost immediately withdraws, however, to huddle in between Rhodey and Bucky.

*Back? I do not think so.*

*Shut up and let me handle this.*

“Back? Is that really a good idea, Cap?” Rhodey argues, before Bucky can even get his mouth open.
“I don’t know all the details, but seems to me the kid wasn’t exactly livin’ it good over there.”

Steve hesitates and there’s something almost nervous in the way he fiddles with the hem of his shirt. “What if we’re *unbalancing* something, by taking him away? He might be important to the development of his world, as much as our Tony. People need him.”

“To be completely honest? I don’t give a damn. I’d rather have a me out there somewhere with no Tony than give the kid back to Stark senior.” Rhodey reaches down and ruffles Anthony’s hair. “Besides, never too much Tony as far as I’m concerned.” He adds, gently, and Anthony gives him a tiny smile.

“That’s hardly your decision to make, Colonel Rhodes.” Steve responds, disapprovingly. *The Captain understands nothing as usual.*

“And it ain’t yours, either!” Bucky cuts in, hotly. He stands up, hands clenched into fist. Winter’s and his own anger rolls together in his stomach, burning like acid and he wants to yell and start throwing punches all at the same time.

“You’re talking about taking a kid away from his family!” Steve pushes away from the table, hard enough to make it rattle. Anthony yelps and presses close to Rhody, hiding his face away in the man’s shirt. He glances guiltily at the boy and slowly, consciously relaxes his posture.

“Have you spoken to the boy?” Strange asks, his tone mild despite the tension in the room. “I hardly think he views Howard as *family.*”

All eyes turn to Anthony, whose eyes are big and watery with the onset of tears when he straightens up. “Was I bad?’ He whispers, slowly moving his gaze around the room until it rests on Bucky. “Is that why I can’t stay?”

Winter shoves, *hard* and Bucky makes room, until it’s the two of them staring into heartbroken blue eyes. “No, *zvezdochka,* you have not been bad. We are very happy to have you here.”

Anthony looks unconvinced and they can’t blame him, with the conversation happening over his head. They regret having let him come to the meeting, but he’s here now and there’s no way they can send him out.
“Maybe the kid should wait outside?” Steve says, in an uncanny echo of their thoughts. Anthony’s hands twist in Rhodey’s shirt and the material is probably warping, though the other man doesn’t seem to care.

“No, no way. This is his future we’re discussing, how would you like to be told to sit outside?” Bucky snaps, trying to wrestle Winter back down and keep his attention on the conversation at the same time. Who knew having two people in one body was so damn exhausting.

Stop it, I will not sit quietly.

Winter, god damn it, shut up!

“It’s clearly upsetting him and he’s just a kid. Most of this is probably going over his head.” Steve pinches the bridge of his nose between two fingers, as though fending off a headache, which Bucky is pretty sure is bullshit because Steve doesn’t get headaches anymore.

“You’re upsetting me and I don’t see you leaving.” Rhodey sniffs and the expression is - for a moment - so Tony that Bucky almost laughs.

I could make him.

Don’t you dare.

“Very mature, Colonel Rhodes.” Steve says, unimpressed. “Look, I’m not saying that I think it’s a good idea to send him back, I’m just concerned about the bigger picture here. The consequences for our actions. It’s more than just our personal preferences we have to consider.”

Strange hums, thoughtfully. “To be frank, I don’t think I can recall this ever happening before. Dimension travel has been possible for those with the right skills for some time, but I don’t believe anyone has ever switched universes and stayed.”

“Well unless the entire damn Multiverse is going to collapse, and maybe not even then, Anthony stays.” Rhodey states, chin lifted and body braced like he’s ready for a fight.
“Really? You’d just doom the whole multiverse over one person?” Steve responds, eyebrows lifted and expression caught somewhere between impressed and disappointed.

“For Tony? You’re damn right.” There’s no hesitation in Rhodey’s reply. Bucky nods, the tension in his frame slowly loosening. Steve notices the change and his eyes narrow, something a little bitter flashing in his expression momentarily.

“If this were anyone else, we wouldn’t even be entertaining this option. Why are we trying to break the rules -” He begins and Bucky leans forward, though it’s Winter who speaks.

“Finish that sentence at your own risk, Captain.”

“See, this is what I’m talking about!” Steve snaps, his fists clenching at his side. “You’re so wrapped up in Tony you can’t see past your own bias!”

“Bias? Are you for real with this?” Rhodey’s face darkens with rage, and Bucky’s sure if it wasn’t for the fact Anthony was basically in his lap the man would be on his feet. “You’re talking about a child, Steve! Where’s that Captain America compassion?”

“I know you’ve seen Bruce’s reports, Steve.” Bucky leans forward, trying desperately to catch Steve’s eye. “You know what’s waiting for him there.”

“It’s not about that!” Steve all but roars, his face flushed with rage. “Howard Stark was not some kind of monster! Buck, you knew him - he was our friend! You can’t seriously believe he was responsible for that.”

“Jesus, Steve! The man was a peacock. He thought his shit didn’t stink, that’s how convinced he was of his own greatness!” Bucky’s shouting, now, though he’d intended to keep his cool.

Anthony whimpers, pressing in close against Rhodey. Rhodey holds the boy close and starts to stand with the intent of taking the boy outside, but he doesn’t get the chance.

The door swings inwards, stopped from violently banging against the wall only by Tony’s hand. “What the hell?” He hisses and somehow without raising his voice he has the entire room’s attention. Anthony immediately stretches both arms in his direction and Tony wastes no time in gathering the
kid up. “I leave you idiots alone for five minutes and you decide to start a damn civil war in front of a kid?”

Steve tips his chin up, somehow managing to look entirely unrepentant, while Bucky and Rhodey look away like scolded children.

“Come on, sweetheart.” Tony murmurs and presses a gently kiss to Anthony’s head. “We’ll wait outside while these guys sort themselves.” He glares around the room one last time and then retreats.

Tony doesn’t slam the door, though he dearly wants to. Anthony is shaking like a leaf, though and clinging to Tony’s neck with a strength that borders on painful. Tony takes them across the hall and into another empty meeting room, dropping down into a chair with Anthony in his lap. “Hey, sweetheart, you’re okay. I know that must have been scary.” Tony murmurs, pressing a gentle kiss to the boy’s temple.

His neck is damp with tears, though the boy doesn’t make a sound. Tony’s heart turns over in his chest, the familiarity hitting him as hard as it has every other time. Without quite meaning to, he finds himself tapping morse code gently on the back of Anthony’s shoulder. He cycles through several words, though the one he comes back to most often is Bucky and Winter’s: safe.

“Hey, munchkin, I brought you a present. Stayed up all night getting it ready, actually.” Tony eventually says, jostling the kid in his lap a little. Anthony sniffs one final time and then slowly lifts his head.

“A present?” He looks confused, and the expression would be adorable if it wasn’t so heartbreaking. Tony smiles gently and carefully wipes the traces of tears from Anthony’s cheeks.

“Remember we talked about friends yesterday?” He whispers and Anthony frowns, at first; a moment later his expression clears and the boy slowly nods. “Well, I thought, I don’t need my friend as much anymore and he might be getting a little lonely. So maybe you could look after him for a little while?” As he speaks, Tony reaches around Anthony to pick up the Bucky Bear he’d left on the table. The bear is a little faded with age, but he’s as clean and repaired as Tony and his limited stuffed toy knowledge could manage. Turns out, dry cleaning a stuffed bear isn’t as easy as Google might suggest.

Movement at the door catches Tony’s eye, and though he keeps his attention mostly on Anthony, he looks just long enough to see it’s Rhodey and Bucky. They hover in the doorway and their expressions are just as wrecked as Tony feels. Jesus, this kid is gonna break all their hearts.

“For...me?” Anthony’s eyes widen, the hopeful look on his face enough to make Tony’s eyes sting. He reaches for the bear like he expects it to be snatched away at any moment. When Tony only
continues to hold it out, patient in a way he almost never is, Anthony finally takes it. The bear is promptly crushed against his chest as Anthony half curls around it, his shoulders shaking all over again. “Thank you.” He whispers, and he sounds completely overwhelmed.

Tony glances up in time to see Rhodey wipe what he’s pretty sure is an actual tear from his face. Bucky is smiling fit to burst and Tony’s face feels like it’s on fire. He clears his throat and drops his eyes back to Anthony. “You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

“So that’s why you weren’t in the meeting.” Steve says from the doorway. He hovers there awkwardly under the unfriendly gazes of both Bucky and Rhodey.

“Quit with the judgey eyes, you two.” Tony grumps, adjusting Anthony carefully in his lap. “You’re just as much to blame as he is.”

Steve smiles a little and takes a hesitant step into the room. “I’m really sorry for scaring you, Anthony.”

Anthony slowly looks up and Steve’s expression warms considerably. “That’s a nice bear. Did Tony give that to you?”

Anthony nods, fidgeting nervously with the bear’s ears, his eyes darting up and then away again rapidly. “He was Tony’s.”

“Really, Tony? No Captain America merchandise?” Steve teases gently, flicking his gaze up to Tony’s.

Tony snorts and rolls his eyes. “You wish, Cap. I had way too much style for sleeping with the stars and stripes.”

“Oh, but you’ll sleep with the sidekick.” Steve casts a sly look at Bucky, who flushes slightly. Tony coughs and makes a point of cupping his hands over Anthony’s ears.

“Steven!” He gasps, mock outraged. “How dare you insinuate such a thing.”

“Punk, you never would’a made it without me.” Bucky snorts, his expression unbearably smug.
“Pretty sure I would have been fine.” Steve sniffs, offended. “But really, Tony, I’m so hurt. Not even an action figure?”

Tony huffs a laugh and shakes his head. “Sorry, Cap. Mom didn’t find your colour scheme all that appealing and Howard didn’t have anything Captain America in the house that wasn’t in his collection room.”

For a moment - at the mention of his parents - Steve’s smile wobbles, but before Tony can ask about it, Anthony tugs gently as his sleeve.

“Can I still see War Machine today? And build with Rhodey?” He asks, though he sounds like he fully expects to be told ‘no’.

“Course you can, munchkin.” Tony smiles immediately, dropping a quick kiss on the boy’s head. Rhodey stands and scoops Anthony from Tony’s lap, holding the boy over his head and making airplane noises.

“We’ll meet you in the lab, Tones!” He calls over his shoulder and leaves to the echo of Anthony’s excited giggles.

In the wake of his departure, Tony turns a raised eyebrow on the two supersoldiers. “So, does someone want to explain all the yelling?” He inquires mildly and has the pleasure of watching two grown men squirm.

“We just disagreed about what’s best for Anthony.” Bucky shrugs and he casts a mutinous look at Steve. “Strange said he’d call you tomorrow to discuss. Apparently we ‘can’t be trusted to behave like adults’.” He adds with a sour expression, marking quotation marks with his fingers.

“Well I can’t say I disagree.” Tony snorts, pushing himself up from the chair. “Alright, well I’ll see what he has to say tomorrow. In the meantime,” And Tony steps closer to Steve, leaning up into the taller man’s space. “If you scare the kid like that again, Captain, we’ll be having words at the business end of my repulsors.” He slowly turns his gaze to Bucky, who flushes guiltily. “Same to you, Freezer Burn.”

And then Tony, ever the King of dramatic exits, struts out of the meeting room.
This time, he slams the door behind him. It’s exactly as satisfying as he thought it’d be.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

In which Rhodey is the best uncle, Steve and Bucky have a talk and secrets are revealed that threaten to destroy everything.

Chapter Notes

ALRIGHTY MY DARLINGS.

First of all, sorry this chapter is a weensy bit late! I’ve been sick for pretty much the last week and it hasn't been A Good Time haha.

Second of all, uhhh...Remember that angst tag? :D

ALL ABOARD THE PAIN TRAIN HERE WE GOOOOOOO!

Chapter Eight: Revelations

“Boo!” Tony shouts, throwing a piece of popcorn at the TV. “No way a horse jumps that far. They’re a pancake somewhere on the street below.”

“Boo!” Anthony agrees with a giggle, though he chooses to eat his popcorn instead of throwing it.

“Tony, we’re watching Tangled. I don’t think they tried too hard to make it accurate.” Bucky snorts and lifts the popcorn bowl away from Tony’s reaching hands. “Uh uh, nope, your popcorn privileges are revoked.”

“Traitor.” Tony hisses, making grabby hands at the bowl. Anthony - the little backstabber - snuggles closer into Tony’s side, preventing him from reaching for Bucky. Tony considers calling him out on the side switching and then Anthony offers up his own small bowl of popcorn with a shy little smile. Tony sticks his tongue out at Bucky and pops a piece of delicious snack food in his mouth.

Bucky shakes his head - though there’s a fond smile on his face - and slouches further into the couch.
“You’re ridiculous.”

They settle into a comfortable silence for several minutes, with the only sound being the adventures of Eugene and Maximus on screen. Anthony is a warm weight against Tony’s side, the boy’s head resting trustingly on Tony’s stomach. Bucky Bear is tucked under the boy’s other arm, squeezed close in a grip Tony hasn’t seen loosen once.

“Boss, you’ve got a call coming through from the Wizard.” FRIDAY chirps and Tony groans. He supposes he should just be thankful that it’s not another damn owl.

“Put it through on my earpiece, Fri.” Tony drops a brief kiss on Anthony’s head and switches the kid over to Bucky. In his ear, the phone call connects with a quiet ‘click’. “Strange,” Tony acknowledges. “The hell happened in that meeting today?”

“Ask your pet soldiers.” Strange grumbles and the disgruntlement in his voice makes Tony smile. “A bunch of hotheaded idiots, all of them. They did raise some interesting points, however.”

Tony hums quietly, standing up from the couch and wandering a few steps away. He can feel Bucky’s eyes boring holes into the back of his head, but he’ll fill the other man in later. “Oh good, I’m so glad you found the conversation interesting. Meanwhile, Anthony had a few years scared off his life.”

“Relax, Stark, the boy handled himself admirably. The adults in the room, less so. No, what I found interesting was the concerns the Captain raised. This is an...unusual situation. I’ll need to do some reading up to see if this has happened before. We don’t know what could happen, if Anthony stays in this universe.”

Tony scrubs a hand over his face, holding in a sigh through sheer force of will. “What exactly are we talking about here?”

“At worst? We could destabilise Anthony’s universe. We don’t know how important a role he’s supposed to play in the timeline there. Or maybe, nothing. This isn’t a usual situation.”

“Strange...What he went through, there. You can’t ask us to send him back to that.”

“Tony,” Strange’s voice goes gentle, soft in a way Tony hasn’t heard it before. “We’ll find
something. Just..Give me time. I’ll be in touch.”

Tony stands there for a long time after the call ends, staring blankly ahead. Shit. His brain whirls in circles, desperately offering up problems and solutions and then more problems. If that isn’t a metaphor for his life he doesn’t know what is.

“Bad news?” Bucky’s voice surprises him, though Tony refuses to jump. He’s gotten a little too comfortable with people who move silently. He turns and Bucky’s right there, standing so close Tony can feel his warmth.

“Not great.” Tony sighs, tipping his head to the side until his neck cracks. “Well, no news really. Strange is going to do some digging. Apparently we’re in uncharted waters, or something.”

Bucky steps even closer, resting a hand lightly on Tony’s hip and squeezing gently. “So, what I’m hearin’ is, let Strange do his thing and stop worryin’ about things you can’t change. Our priority is Anthony, right?” Bucky’s voice - thickened by the Brooklyn accent - is like a warm balm to Tony’s frayed nerves. He lets himself be drawn back to the couch and more or less manhandled up against Bucky’s side. Anthony crawls over and sprawls across their laps, pointy little elbows and knees hitting them both as he settles down.

They watch the rest of Tangled like that, curled into each other in a no doubt horrifyingly domestic image. The credits barely start rolling when Anthony tips his head back to pin Tony with a pair of pleading blue eyes.

“Can we watch another one? Please?” He asks, with that same tone like he fully expects to be denied. Tony is learning to hate that tone, because he caves to it every time.

“Alright, FRI, let’s see the rest of my kid friendly playlist.” The playlist menu comes up on the screen, with all the colourful movie covers so Anthony can see. Tony smiles and manfully ignores the smirk Bucky aims his way. Smug bastard. As if he would do any better. “Alright kiddo, anything jumping out at you?”

“That one!” Anthony all but vibrates in their lap with excitement. Tony really isn’t that surprised to realise it’s the cover of WALL-E that has the kid so excited. Robots, of course. Tony knows he’s going to end up crying again, damn it.

“Stark!” Natasha comes through the doorway and her voice is so surprising Tony jumps, fumbling the remote. Anthony stills, though his expression isn’t quite as wary as it’s been in the past, meeting
strangers. “I’ve come to kidnap you.”

“But Nat,” Tony whines, making a helpless gesture meant to encompass his current position and the movie he’s about to play.

“It’s time for our nail date.” Nat inspects her hands a moment, one eyebrow coolly lifted.

“I thought that was next week.” Tony runs a gentle hand over Anthony’s back; he can practically feel the kid’s disappointment.

“It was, but I broke a nail in some jerk’s face.” Nat smiles serenely and holds up her hand to show the ruined nail polish. Bucky snorts and taps lightly at Anthony’s forehead.

“You didn’t just hear that.”

“Ugh, fine. My pedicure was starting to look a little ragged.” Tony slowly sits up from his slouch, scooping Anthony up in one arm as he does so. Anthony carefully avoids his gaze, face downturned. “Hey, munchkin, can you look at me?”

Anthony doesn’t respond for a long moment and at first Tony thinks he’s being ignored. Finally, the boy lifts his head and yep, there’s a definite pout. “We were gonna watch a movie.” He whispers, sounding utterly heartbroken.

“Aw hey, you can still watch the movie with Bucky, can’t you?”

If anything, Anthony looks even more upset. “I wanted to watch it with both of you.” He mumbles and drops his gaze away from Tony’s.

“Alright, then we will!” Tony agrees immediately, squeezing the boy in a warm hug. “We’ll watch it tonight before bed, okay? I’ll only be gone for a few hours, I’m just gonna spend some time with Nat.”

Bucky leans forward and runs his hand gently over Anthony’s head. “In the meantime, you can spend the afternoon however you want, how’s that sound, champ?”
Anthony’s eyes widen and then a smile slowly takes over his face as the bribe clearly works. “Anything?” He all but whispers and both adults immediately become nervous. Tony glares at Bucky over the top of Anthony’s head. “Can... Will Rhodey be busy?”

Tony hides his grin, though just barely. Anthony’s hero worship for Rhodey was unbearably cute. Besides, Rhodey was completely awesome. “I’m sure he’d love to spend the day with you. FRI, can you ask Rhodey to come up?”

“He’s already on the way.”

Anthony gasps, and his eyes positively light up. He looks as though Christmas has unexpectedly arrived, bouncing happily in the seat. “Really? He wants to spend time with me?” He whispers and Tony’s heart aches for the disbelief in the boy’s voice.

“I’ll bet he’s very excited, kiddo.” Tony glances up and meets Nat’s eyes; at some point in the conversation the woman had ghosted out of the room and come back with Tony’s wallet, keys and her own bag. “Alright, hint taken.” He laughs and drops a quick kiss on Anthony’s forehead. Bucky catches his hand briefly and gives it a warm squeeze. Tony pauses for the briefest of moments and then brushes his lips gently over Bucky’s cheekbone. He’s pleased to see the skin immediately stain pink.

“Be good, both of you!” Tony calls over his shoulder and glances back just once to see Anthony gleefully waving from the couch.

Bucky flicks the TV off after Tony’s left, since he’s fairly sure Anthony has no interest in watching anything. The kid hasn’t looked away from the hallway leading to the elevator. He was all but vibrating in place, his excitement was so palpable. “Relax, kiddo, he’ll be here.”

Anthony spares him a brief smile but almost immediately returned his lazer focus to the hallway.

What’s so special about this ‘Rhodey’? I could beat him in a fight.
Winter, are you jealous?

I don’t know what you’re talking about.

Fighting someone isn’t always the answer.

It’s worked so far.

Bucky almost laughs at the petulant tone in Winter’s words, but manfully keeps a straight face. He endures several minutes of quiet mutterings in Russian at the back of his mind before the elevator doors finally open. Rhodes staggers out, arms laden with brightly coloured boxes that are stacked so high he has to stabilise them with his chin. It doesn’t stop him from grinning brightly when he catches sight of Anthony, eagerly waiting.

“There he is!” Rhodes calls and then has to scramble for a moment not to drop anything. “Gimme a hand, will ya champ?” The words are barely out of his mouth and Anthony is across the room like a shot, arms out and the smile almost too wide for his face. Rhodes carefully transfers some of the smaller boxes into Anthony’s waiting arms; Anthony doesn’t look away from Rhodes, doesn’t even glance at what he’s being given.

Bucky saunters over at a slower pace and then almost snorts aloud when he realises what Rhodes has brought.

Boxes of Lego and model building sets, all brand new.

Bribery!

Winter sounds utterly scandalised and Bucky barely chokes back a laugh. Rhodes lifts a brow at him and Bucky waves his concern aside. Winter being jealous is hilarious.

“So, wha’ddy think?” Rhodes leads the way over to the living area, shoving the coffee table aside with his leg to make enough room for them on the floor. He spreads the boxes in a neat little row on the floor and Anthony copies him, frowning thoughtfully at them.
“They’re very nice?” He says after a very long pause, clearly totally confused.

Rhodes smile freezes a little, but he gamely carries on. He lowers himself to sit on the floor, back resting against the couch and Anthony hurries to copy him. “They’re for you, little man. I thought we could build them together.”

Anthony’s eyes widen and his gaze slowly drifts back to the boxes. “A-all of those for...for me?” He sounds panicked, rather than excited, his little face going white.

Bucky’s eyes narrow but he doesn’t interfere, watching Rhodes carefully to see how he handles it.

“Well, sort of.” Rhodes responds with enviable calm. “I really wanted to build them, I think they’re really cool. But I’m not very good at doing it, so I thought you could help me.”

Anthony looks torn, for a moment but the panic slowly recedes from his face. The idea of doing something with Rhodey is clearly good temptation, but he still looks concerned. “But they’re not all for me, right?” He asks softly and his face is heartbreakingly sad. “I don’t deserve all of this.” He adds and his voice drops to a near whisper.

“Well, how about you help me build them, and then it’ll be like you earned them, right?” Rhodes delicately suggests, settling a careful arm around Anthony’s shoulders. The boy appears to mull this over for some time and then finally he smiles a little.

“You really need my help? You’re so big and smart! You’re War Machine.”

“Everyone needs help sometimes, ain’t no shame in that.” Rhodes responds easily and gives the boy a friendly squeeze. “Now, why don’t you pick out which one to build first?”

Bucky slowly relaxes, now that it looks like the danger has passed. Rhodes throws him a wink over Anthony’s head as the boy turns his attention to the boxes with almost comical seriousness. “I think I’ll leave you two to this,” He murmurs, just loud enough for Rhodes to hear. “Might be good for the kid to spend some time with other adults.”

Anthony selects a Star Wars Lego set - probably because of the spaceships on it, if Bucky were to
guess - and shuffles back to Rhodes on his knees. “Is this one okay?” He holds the box up and his face is so hopeful.

Rhodes grins immediately, “Good pick!” He enthuses and Anthony’s face lights up. “I love Star Wars.”

“Before you get too busy, I’m gonna go see Steve, if that’s okay with you?” Bucky taps Anthony lightly on the nose and the boy immediately blushes, his little nose wrinkling.

“You’re gonna miss out on the building!” Anthony looks completely scandalised by the thought and Bucky can’t help the warm smile that steals over his face.

“You won’t finish all of this before I get back!” He grins and leans in to ruffle Anthony’s hair. “Even you’re not that smart, kiddo.”

“Well, okay! Don’t be too long!” Anthony beams at him, though it’s not long before his attention drops back to the box in his hand. Bucky makes an ‘I’m watching you’ sign with two fingers, though Rhodes looks totally unimpressed.

*We should stay, I don’t trust him.*

*Oh my god, shut up. He deserves some time with Anthony too.*

*Why? He hasn’t earned it.*

Bucky shoves himself to his feet and pauses only long enough to stretch the kinks out of his spine. “FRIDAY, let Steve know I’m on my way, will ya?” He throws up at the ceiling as he makes his way to the elevator.

“The Captain is happy to receive you.” FRIDAY responds after a brief pause and the formal way she says it makes Bucky snort.
Steve does look ridiculously pleased to see him, when the elevator doors slide open. He’s hovering nervously next to his couch and past his shoulder Bucky can see two beers and a bowl of popcorn.

“I thought, maybe we could watch the game?” Steve offers with that bashful half smile Bucky vaguely remembers from his childhood. Bucky stays in the doorway for a moment, long enough for the smile to slowly start to fade, and then he finally sighs.

“Don’t think you’re that easily forgiven, punk. You were an ass.” Bucky wags a finger in Steve’s direction and is gratified to see the flush of pink and the way Steve looks down.

“Yeah, I know. It’s not easy, y’know, trying to make the right decisions all the time.” Steve flops down on the couch with a sigh and picks up his beer bottle. Bucky settles next to him, a respectable distance away. “It all seemed so easy, with the Howlies.” Steve says quietly, worrying at the label on his beer bottle.

Bucky snorts, picking his own drink up and leaning back. “Sure it was, you had Phillips leadin’ the way and the Howlies weren’t exactly inexperienced, y’know?”

Steve huffs quietly and his expression is both sad and fond. “The Avengers aren’t exactly new to this either, Buck.”

“Yeah, but leading men into battle against other men is one thing. Leading a volatile, mixed bag of personalities against aliens? Basic didn’t exactly cover that, Steve.” Bucky takes a swig of beer, swirling the liquid on his tongue a moment before he swallows it. Jesus, even beer tastes weird. “And this ain’t our world anymore, Steve. Did you take any time when you woke up, or just jumped into the first fight you saw?”

Steve flushes and fiddles with his bottle a little more intently. He’s yet to take a drink from it, Bucky notes. “I… A little! I took a little. But mostly…Straight into it, I guess.” He shrugs self consciously. “There wasn’t any time. Loki and New York just kind of happened.”

“And after? Why not have someone else lead for a while?”

“It’s not that simple, Buck!” Steve sighs heavily and sinks back against the couch. “It’s, people
Expect to see Captain America leading. He’s at the front line, leading the charge, so to speak. I can’t stop, or stop down.” Steve trails off for a moment, slouching even further, and for just a moment he looks defeated. “Then I’m weak and I’m letting someone down. I can’t do that, Buck. I have to be strong. I have to be Captain America.”

“You’re not just ‘Captain America,’” Bucky argues, lifting his fingers to make quotations around the name. “You’re Steve Rogers, too. And don’t he deserve a break, after all the shit he went through?”

“Steve Rogers is just going to have to suck it up. People need Captain America.” Steve’s chin juts out mulishly and Bucky knows immediately that he’s lost this particular battle. A stubborn Steve is more than likely an immovable one.

“Sounds like crap to me, but I ain’t gonna waste my breath.” Bucky plops the now half empty beer bottle back on the table and then slouches back, his posture a mirror of Steve’s. “So what game we watchin’?”

Steve smiles and the expression transforms his face. He looks younger for a moment as lines of stress ease from his face. “I thought we could start with the ones we missed from the war and go from there? Tony collected recordings of as many of the games that he could.”

“Sure, why the hell not. Rhodes will have the kid busy for a while yet. He bought him about 12 different sets of Lego.” Bucky snorts. Steve’s smile wobbles for a moment and then finally settles, perhaps slightly more wistful than it had been.

“He’s surprisingly attached to you. Both of them are.” He offers, quietly.

“The hell does that mean?” Bucky lifts an eyebrow, even more suspicious when Steve goes a little pale and drops his gaze.

“Just, I didn’t realise that you and Tony were… close. And then with the kid, he’s terrified of me, but he even likes Winter.”

Bucky’s second eyebrow rises to join the first. “Okay, I’m going to ignore the insult to my roommate, Steve,” He says slowly, drawing the name out until the other man meets his eyes. “Are you jealous that a kid likes me more than you?”
Steve’s entire face flushes a dark red and he quickly looks away. “No! I just. Was surprised. You and Tony have history.”

Bucky’s insides go cold and for a moment he feels like someone stuffed him back in cryo. The cold travels down his spine and spreads out along his limbs. Winter goes still and quiet in the back of his mind. “Yeah, we do.” Bucky scrubs a hand over his face and breathes out a quiet sigh. “He seems okay, though. Hell if I know how; most days I still can’t process it all. Having his acceptance, in spite of everything, it helps me keep goin’.”

Steve smiles but there’s something wrong with the expression and his face has gone pale once more. “I’m really glad you’re here, Buck. I can’t imagine my life without you. End of the line, right?”

“Yes, of course.” Bucky says slowly, more than a little concerned. “Stevie, you alright?”

Steve blinks and then seems to shake himself loose of wherever his mind had wandered. His expression relaxes into a more natural smile. “Sure I am. Just didn’t sleep well last night.”

Bucky stares a little longer but Steve has already turned away. He picks up the remote and flicks the game on, as though nothing had happened. Steve doesn’t acknowledge Bucky’s continued perusal and with a quiet sigh he slowly settles back to watch.

That was weird, right?

The Captain is always ‘weird’, but that was suspicious.

I can’t decide if that was really helpful or totally useless.

I feel that way about you a lot.

“So, you broke your nail off in a guy’s face?” Tony doesn’t even bother to keep the incredulity from
his voice. He leans back with closed eyes and enjoys the warm water his feet are resting in.

“Not entirely ‘in’, I suppose.” Natasha hums thoughtfully and she sounds relaxed, content even. “There was a lot of punching involved first.”

“And where was this, exactly?” Tony wiggles his toes and almost starts to wiggle his fingers too when Meg, the nail technician smacks him with her file.

“Classified.” Natasha returns, smugly. Tony groans and he’s pretty sure he hears Natasha laugh softly.

“I could find out, you know! You’re not as sneaky as you think you are, Itsy Bitsy.”

Natasha huffs another laugh and Tony can’t help his answering grin. It’s nice to hear her laugh. “You could,” She acknowledges, sounding supremely unconcerned. “But you won’t.”

“You sound so sure! I’m almost insulted. You, accusing me, of respecting boundaries? What world have I stumbled into? I bring you to my favourite nail salon, interrupt my Disney movie marathon, and I get this. You, besmirching my terrible name.” Tony opens his eyes just so Nat can see the full scale of his unimpressed expression and then goes back to meditating on the back of his eyelids.

“Didn’t you hear? Tony Stark is a responsible parent now.” Nat sounds like she’s laughing again, though her voice is surprisingly warm. “He does bath time and balanced meals, instead of workshop binges and government system snooping.”

“The horror.” Tony deadpans and is rewarded with Nat’s endearingly rusty little chuckle.

“It looks good on you, Tony.” She says, and her voice is soft and warm in a way Tony rarely hears it. “You’re doing a really good job, with Anthony and Bucky. It’s been good for both of you, looking after the kid.”

Tony smiles, the expression an automatic response to the sound of Anthony’s name. “He’s a good kid that got dealt a shitty hand. I’m glad we’ve shown him something better. And Bucky; well I can’t say he’s not a surprise. But, a good one I think.”
“I’m glad.” Nat whispers and there’s a thread of emotion there, something deep that Tony knows instinctively not to pursue. “It might not mean much from me, but I’m proud of you. It’s not easy to move past what they made you… I had Clint, and it looks like Bucky has you. You can’t know what your forgiveness probably means to him.”

Tony blinks his eyes open and slowly straightens up. He waves Meg aside and the woman obligingly moves back, giving them the illusion of privacy by fiddling with her supplies. “Forgiveness for what? Kidnapping my younger self? I mean, it’s a bit awkward, yeah, but I don’t really think he needs to be forgiven for it.”

Nat’s face goes white and there’s something like horror in her eyes when they snap open to meet Tony’s. She sits up as well and for a moment her expression is open, fragile. “Tony,” She whispers and her tone sends chills down his spine; he feels as though a rock has settled in his stomach. “I’m talking about your parents.”

Tony’s world freezes. The rock sinks even further and Tony feels like he’s sinking with it.

“What about my parents?”

They’ve finished most of the first game and are presiding triumphantly over the remains of three pizzas when the elevator doors slide open. Steve blinks, clearly caught off guard without any sort of announcement from FRIDAY. Bucky, looking up, starts to smile when he sees it’s Tony coming towards them. The expression slides right off his face when he gets a closer look at Tony.

The other man is white with rage; his eyes are almost black with it, spitting fire as he storms across the room towards them. Steve jumps up and Bucky follows. He can feel Winter - alert and watchful - ready to find whoever put that look on Tony’s face. Tony walks right up into Steve’s face, seemingly completely immune to the height difference between them. His lips are pulled back in an almost feral snarl.

“Did you know?” He hisses out and Bucky blinks at the question, utterly lost. There’s something desperate in Tony’s eyes; an answer he’s begging Steve to give. Steve seems to catch on immediately and his face pales a little. Steve’s eyes slide to the side, his gaze slipping from Tony’s. Bucky knows immediately that the answer isn’t going to be what Tony wants.
“I didn’t know it was him -” Steve starts and Tony cuts him off with a slashing gesture. Bucky’s breath feels like it freezes in his lungs.

No, no, no, no.

“Don’t bullshit me, Rogers! Did you know?” Tony’s voice shakes with emotion, some horrible combination between rage and grief.

“Yes.” Steve barely whispers the word, but it seems to hit Tony like a blow. He staggers back a step, twisting away when Steve reaches as though to steady him. Bucky steps in, helplessly drawn to Tony the way he always is, but now he knows; he knows what that weird conversation with Steve was about.

Oh God he knows.

He’s not surprised when Tony snarls at him, his body wound tight like he’d enjoy nothing more than throwing a punch. Tony’s eyes - when they look at him - are so filled with pain and rage that it makes Bucky ache. What does surprise him, more than it should, is the cold hatred.

“What?” Tony hisses and now he’s stepping closer and it’s Bucky retreating. Retreating as it almost seems like Tony swells in his rage, his presence filling the room in a way that makes it hard to breathe. “Was this all a joke to you? You, what, murdered my mom and then you thought you could just keep it a secret? Both of you?” Tony’s eyes bounce back and forth between the two of them.

Bucky flinches back under the onslaught and his throat feels tight, the words building up so quickly they’re clogging up. “No!” He manages to choke out, but Tony steamrolls right over him.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” His voice rises, until he’s almost screaming. Bucky staggers back again, catching himself on the edge of the couch. Steve looks no less frozen, his hands opening and closing uselessly at his sides. “Would you have fucked me, knowing I didn’t know?”

The tears are almost a surprise, the sting of salt in his eyes a welcome physical distraction from the way his heart feels like it’s being yanked from his chest, piece by piece.

I didn’t know, I didn’t mean to. Winter’s voice is a bare whisper on the edge of his consciousness but Bucky can’t spare the attention.
“Were you just biding your time? You and that fucking parasite in your head. Did you bring Anthony over deliberately? Huh? Answer me! Was this all a fucking game?” Tony’s crying now; the tears streaming down his face, but he’s no less terrifying in his rage for it.

Bucky feels the words like a bullet. *Parasite.*

*Tony, please…*

Winter sounds wounded in a way Bucky has never heard from him. The combination of Winter’s and his own pain renders him mute, his world narrowing to the look in Tony’s eyes and a faint ringing in his ears, like he’s going into shock. He vaguely notes Steve trying to splutter out something; some kind of excuse.

Tony ignores him entirely and steps close to Bucky - close enough that he can feel the other man’s warmth, smell the spicy scent of his cologne. The cologne Bucky had been *basking* in this morning. He wants to commit it to memory now, because he’s pretty sure this is the closest he’ll ever get to Tony again.

“Stay the fuck away from me. *Both* of me.” Tony hisses and even though he sounds like his heart is bleeding as much as Bucky’s, the threat in the words is very real. He storms back out as quickly as he’d arrived, and the elevator doors sliding closed behind him seems agonisingly final.

In the silence left in his wake, Bucky slowly sinks down onto the couch.

*Winter, are you okay?*

He’s met only with silence and when he probes a little deeper, *emptiness*. Winter’s… gone. He can’t detect anything of the other and his mind feels cavernous in a way he can’t ever remember feeling. He senses Steve slowly approaching, but he’s too busy contemplating everything he’s just lost to really pay the other man any attention.

It’s only when Steve puts a tentative hand on his shoulder that Bucky is drawn fully from his thoughts. “Buck, I’m so sorry.” Steve whispers, and he sounds agonised.
“You told me he knew.” Is all Bucky can think to say; words falling from numb lips, while all he can focus on is the hollow space inside where Winter should be.
Chapter Summary

In which Bucky has some questions for Steve, Natasha has a little more than that, Rhodey makes a heroic sacrifice to save Bucky Bear.

Chapter Notes

AHHHHH I'M SO LATE! *dies*

This chapter was so heavy to write, my goodness. Turns out, I am not so good at the angst, guys! I just want to write snuggles and fluff all the time, who knew.

Sorry again for being late!

And heads up next week's chapter may be a little late as well, as I have a visitor coming from New Zealand! :D WOOOO!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nine: Reckoning

“You have seconds to explain, Steve.” Bucky can barely get the words out; it feels like there’s a lump in his throat and he can barely breathe around it. He’s sitting on the edge of the couch, hunched over his knees and desperately trying to hold everything in. He’s not sure if he wants to cry or scream more.

“Buck, I-” Steve starts and he sounds wrecked. Bucky hates him a little in that moment; Steve has no right to sound like he’s the victim. “I’m so sorry.”

“That’s not an explanation.” Bucky lunges to his feet and is gratified to see the way Steve shrinks back half a step. “Why would you lie, Steve? To me?” He’s caught somewhere between rage and grief. Rage, because the person who’s supposed to be his best friend has just destroyed everything. Grief, because of everything he’s just lost.
Winter’s silence is *deafening.*

“I meant to tell Tony! I did!” Steve scrubs both hands through his hair and his expression is harried. “I just couldn’t ever find the right time. Tony was going through his own stuff, with Ultron and Pepper. I couldn’t put that on him, not when he was so... so devastated. You didn't see him, Buck. And then when we found you, things were slowly getting better but everything just moved so quickly, it never felt like the right time. And then Anthony and finding out about... Howard... about what he did- how he was with Anthony. With Tony. I- god, I fucked up, Buck. I know that. I just- I guess I was just trying to protect you. ” Steve steps a little closer and reaches out. Bucky scramble

“What the *fuck,* Steve! Why didn’t you tell me? I could have told him!” Guilt chokes him; he shouldn’t have left it to Steve, anyway. He should have taken responsibility himself and perhaps if he had this wouldn’t be happening. Maybe he’d still have Tony.

“You’re my friend! I was trying to protect you.”

“Damn it, Steve, Tony’s your friend too! Who the hell do you think you were protecting?” Bucky snarls, his fists clenching in the fabric of the couch until he feels it tear in his grip.

“Both of you! Or at least trying to. It just got so muddled up. I can’t- God, Bucky, sometimes I feel like I’m being pulled in ten different directions and everyone just expects me to make all the right choices all the time but I- I can’t. I fuck up too. I know that. I hurt Tony. Before, during Ultron. I guess I was just- I didn’t want to hurt him *more.* And I didn’t want him to- he can be a bit… I mean, he can hold a grudge. You just see the good parts cause you’re sweet on him but I was scared if he knew, he would do something drastic. I don’t think I could stand by if he decided to go after you, Buck. It would’ve ended in a fight. I know it would’ve.”

“Everything ends in a damn fight with you, Steve!” Bucky spins away, because if he keeps looking at that sad, pleading expression on Steve’s face he’s going to vomit. Or lay the guy out. “Tony deserved better than that. You’re a coward.”

There’s a long silence behind him; he’s not even sure Steve is breathing, for a moment. “I know.” Steve finally whispers, so faintly even Bucky’s enhanced hearing almost misses it. “I was so scared to ruin everything that I...ruined everything.”

Bucky sighs, the anger draining away until he feels hollow and empty. What does being angry solve, anyway? Bucky curls in on himself, hugs his own waist so tightly it hurts. He wonders, bitterly, if he holds on tight enough he can stop himself from flying apart at the seams. “God, he’s never going to
“Forgive me.”

Behind him, the elevator doors slide open with a quiet ‘ding’. Heels tap their way across the floor and Bucky catches the faintest whiff of a sweet and subtly spicy perfume. He knows without turning that it’s Nat.

“So,” She says, her voice as even and calm as he’s ever heard it. When Bucky turns to look, her eyes are ice cold. “You didn’t tell Tony. Either of you. Care to explain why?” She sounds almost pleasant, but Bucky knows better. He counts at least 12 hidden knives on her person and Natasha looks like she wants to reach for every single one of them.

“I didn’t know.” The words taste like ash on his tongue; they taste like failure and weakness. He hadn’t known, but he should have made sure. It feels like a cop out answer and the sneer Nat gives him suggests she feels the same.

“I’m sorry?” She raises a perfectly manicured brow and smiles at the both of them. It’s not a friendly expression.

“It’s my fault.” Steve steps a little to the side, placing himself in between Bucky and Natasha. His shoulders are squared, chin up and he looks like he’s facing down a firing squad. Which, Bucky supposes, isn’t entirely inaccurate. “I, when Bucky first got here. He asked me about... Telling Tony. I told him that Tony knew.”

“I see.” Nat steps closer and Bucky has a moment to see a flash of something metallic before she’s moving, fluid and deadly. Steve yelps as Nat’s fist strikes his face with an audible crunch. Steve staggers backwards, hands coming up to clutch at his face. There’s blood pouring from his nose, painting a garish mask on pale skin.

“Ugh, Nad, whad was dad?”

Nat doesn’t respond verbally but holds up her hand to show the black metal encasing her knuckles. It smoothly retracts backwards into an unassuming little bracelet and Nat smiles, coldly. “Tony made it for me. He offered the full gauntlet, but I really only needed this.”

“Jesus.” Steve’s eyes are watering with the pain and as much as a large part of Bucky still - will always - love the punk, he can’t help but feel a sense of vicious satisfaction at the sight. The bleeding has already slowed, thanks to the serum but Steve’s face is still a gory mess to look at and his nose is
a little disfigured.

“You’ve got a little something on your face, Steve.” Nat smirks, briefly and taps the bridge of her own nose.

“Weally, Nad?” Steve looks utterly unimpressed. He grabs a tissue from the box sitting on the coffee table and makes a half hearted attempt to clean up the blood.

“That’s not what she meant, Steve. Here.” Bucky steps closer, reaches up and in one smooth move, wrenches Steve’s nose back into place.

“Fuck!”

That’s for Winter, Bucky thinks in the privacy of his own mind. He ignores the ringing emptiness where Winter should be. Nat smiles and it’s the first genuine expression she’s worn since arriving.

“Now Steve, why don’t you sit down and we can talk about why you lied to all of us.” The words are couched like a suggestion but the tone is decidedly not. Steve, for perhaps the first time in a while, makes the smart decision and drops down onto the couch. Tellingly, Bucky thinks, Nat chooses to remain standing. The tension in the room is so thick Bucky thinks he might choke on it and abruptly he has to leave. He can’t stay for this conversation; he’s heard enough of Steve’s excuses.

He slips towards the elevator, moving as silently as he was ever trained. Nat’s eyes turn his way briefly but she says nothing and Bucky takes that as permission. Surprisingly, the elevator doors slide open for him before he gets there. He makes it inside and holds it together long enough for the doors to close.

As soon as he’s alone Bucky slides to the floor of the elevator; he feels like a puppet whose strings have been cut. The elevator floor is cold underneath him, but the sensation barely registers. His mind feels like it’s drowning in white noise and there’s a ringing in his ears. His vision narrows to the cold grey walls of the elevator, darkness swimming around the edges and he just wants to drown in it. His breath saws in and out as he struggles to breathe past the weight sitting on his chest.

“...In the elevator...Compound...is approximately 5:25 pm...cloudy but...humidity...chance of rain.”
The voice comes to him slowly, his ears catching snatches of words in amongst the ringing. Distantly, he registers that the words are repeating in the same calm, lilting accent. He tries to hone in on the words, to use them as an anchor in the storm. He can feel himself slipping every time he reaches, the thunder of his own heartbeat threatening to drown everything out. He’s never lost it like this, not so completely and for a moment he misses Winter’s influence so much he aches.

The words disappear and a soft tapping replaces it. It takes several repetitions before his brain latches onto the pattern, clings to it in a way the words couldn’t reach him. The pattern repeats over and over until he finds himself completely attuned to it, everything else pushed away. He taps the pattern out on the tops of his knees with both fingers and it’s so familiar he doesn’t even think about it.

Safe, safe, safe.

FRIDAY taps out to him over and over, the same way Bucky had done it for Anthony. His eyes sting unexpectedly, followed shortly after by the hot trail of tears that wet his face. “I didn’t think you’d be up for helpin’ me out.” Bucky rasps, when his vocal chords feel a little less paralyzed.

“You forget,” FRIDAY replies, in tones far softer and kinder than Bucky thinks he deserves. “I am monitoring the open living spaces of the Compound. I know what really happened.”

Bucky makes a choked sound that he tries desperately to stifle, caught somewhere between laughing and sobbing. “No offense, doll, but that’s not as comfortin’ as you might think.”

“I understand. Boss will, too. He’ll just need some time.” FRIDAY sighs a little and she sounds sad. On any other day Bucky would marvel over the layers of emotion FRIDAY manages to convey.

“God, what’s Anthony gonna think?” Bucky scrubs his flesh hand over his face, wiping away the traces of his tears. “What if he thinks I abandoned him?”

“I think you’re underestimating Mini Boss’ attachment to you, and so is Boss.”

Bucky huffs a laugh, though his heart’s not really in it. “Thanks, Fri.” He slumps back against the elevator wall, eyes closed. A moment later he blinks back up at the camera. “We’re not moving, are we?”

With a quiet whir, the elevator starts moving. “I thought you might need a moment.” FRIDAY
replies, the warmth clear in the words. A moment later and the doors slide open again to the residential floor. “Give it time, Boss will come around.” She adds quietly.

Bucky’s only reply is a curt nod, the stranglehold he has on his emotions far too tenuous for more than that.

“We’re approaching the base, Colonel!” Anthony announces, his expression set with determination. He carefully flies his little X-Wing around the couch cushion sitting on the floor, dubbed ‘Planet Friday’, who’s sole population consists of Bucky Bear. Rhodey very carefully doesn’t smile, though Anthony’s serious approach to playing pretend is possibly the cutest thing he’s ever seen.

“Bogey spotted!” Rhodey swoops his own Lego ship up next to Anthony’s with one hand and brings a TIE Fighter up in his other hand. FRIDAY helpfully projects the high pitched sounds the engines make from the movies.

“Oh no!” Anthony gasps, comically loud. “Imperials! We’re under attack!” He jerks his little ship down in a sweeping arc which Rhodey carefully copies. The sounds of lasers fills the air as they enact their little space battle.

“Taking heavy fire! Evasive action!” Rhodey gently spirals his X Wing down and as Anthony watches with rapt delight he makes a production of chasing it down with the TIE Fighter. “I’m hit, I’m hit!” He yells and carefully plops the ship down as FRIDAY projects a dramatic explosion.

“Oh noo!” Anthony yells and then his little face scrunches in determination. “I’ll avenge you!”

Abruptly the background noise disappears, to Anthony’s quiet sound of disappointment. Rhodey blinks and twists around to look at FRIDAY’s nearest camera. “Yo, FRI, you quittin’ on us? We were just getting to the best bit!”

“Oh apologies, Jim. Boss is on his way in.” FRIDAY responds curtly. It’s the snippiest Rhodey can ever remember hearing her and since her conception that tone has never been aimed at him.
He opens his mouth with the intention to question her further when Tony storms into the room. His face is white with fury, but his eyes… His eyes are wet and wounded. He looks caught somewhere between rage and a sorrow Rhodey hasn’t seen since Obadiah’s death. Rhodey stills immediately because he knows this expression; he knows what causes Tony to look like he’s been put through the emotional meat grinder.

*Not again,* he thinks despondingly. He wonders - not for the first time - what it is about his brother that seems to invite betrayal.

“Hey Tones.” Rhodey calls out and is proud of how relaxed he sounds. Anthony’s head snaps up at the sound of Tony’s name and he grins.

“Tony!” Anthony starts to scramble up, but arrests the motion halfway when he sees the look on Tony's face. A little frown forms and it's clear he wants to run to Tony but isn't sure of his welcome.

Tony’s expression softens the moment he sees the kid. He crouches down and opens his arms, which is all the encouragement Anthony needs. He places his toys down on the floor and all but flies across the room to Tony.

“I missed you.” Rhodey can hear the words, muffled though they are as Anthony’s face is pressed into Tony’s shoulder. They have an immediate effect on Tony; his shoulders loosen a fraction and there's a tiny - if sad - smile on his face.

“Missed you too, sweetheart. Let’s never be apart for a small amount of time again.”

“Tonyyy!” Anthony whines, though he’s giggling so Rhodey supposes the kid isn’t that upset.

Over Anthony’s head, Rhodey has an entirely different conversation with Tony. Admittedly it's not a particularly in depth one, but Rhodey has always been pretty good at deciphering Tony's expressions. What he's seeing now essentially amounts to 'not now', which Rhodey chooses to interpret as: not in front of Anthony. It frustrates Rhodey to have to wait, knowing that whatever this is will probably require a War Machine ass kicking. He knows Tony, though and he can accept that nothing will be said while Anthony’s in the room.

“Did you have fun with Rhodey?” Tony drops a kiss on Anthony’s forehead and then scoops the kid up onto his hip. He carries Anthony over to where Rhodey is sitting and eases down next to him with a quiet groan. Anthony curls up in Tony’s lap without hesitation, his face the very picture of
“Yes! We played Star Wars!” Anthony leans forward to pick up the X Wing he’d put together and holds it up for inspection.

“That’s amazing, honey!” Tony enthuses and Anthony’s face just lights up. He launches into the complete saga, beginning with Bucky Bear under attack on his home planet by the Imperials and ending with Rhody’s tragic demise. Tony listens with rapt attention and for all that he still seems like the walking wounded, the smile on his face is genuine.

“Oh yeah, I died a real hero.” Rhody drawls, scooping up Bucky Bear with one hand and passing him over. Anthony grins and presses the bear close to his chest.

“It was amazing!” He enthuses, as excited as if they’d really been flying spaceships rather than playing with Lego. Tony chuckles and tweaks Anthony’s nose.

“I’m pretty sure we shouldn’t be celebrating Rhody going down in a spectacular fireball.” He muses. Tony pretends to think about it for a moment and then shrugs. “You’ll be well remembered, probably. I’m sure Bucky Bear is thankful.”

“Hilarious, Tones.”

Footsteps approaching draws all of their attention to the doorway just in time for Bruce to come in. He pauses briefly when he realises there’s three sets of curious eyes aimed his way and offers his usual nervous smile. “Hey guys.”

“Hi Bruce!” Anthony is the first to pipe up and he sounds relaxed despite the new addition to the room. “Have you come to play Star Wars, too?”

“Not this time, no.” Bruce’s smile grows into something a little more natural. “Actually, I thought you might like to come down to the lab with me for a little while? I have some experiments we could try together.”

Anthony gasps - comically loud - and turns pleading eyes on Tony. “Can I?” He whispers and he’s all but vibrating in place, he’s so excited.
“As long as you promise to listen to everything Bruce tells you, I don’t have a problem with it.” Tony smiles down at Anthony, clearly charmed by the boy’s enthusiasm. He barely finishes getting the words out and Anthony’s scrambling out of Tony’s lap and from the way Tony goes a little green for a second, not carefully either.

“I’ll bring him back for dinner.” Bruce promises, and then blinks in adorable confusion as Anthony grabs hold of his hand. He stares at their hands for a long time and looks a little overwhelmed, which Rhodey supposes is fair - a lot of kids are probably scared of the Hulk.

Rhodey watches the pair of them leave hand in hand, hearing the sound of Anthony’s excited chatter grow increasingly distant. The moment they’re gone, he swings his eyes back to Tony and finds the other man carefully avoiding his gaze.

“It’s Tony who leans in, pressing their shoulders firmly together. He seems to draw strength from the contact and Rhodey’s more than happy to give it. “They lied to me.” He whispers and for a moment Rhodey can see the bewildered hurt that reminds him of Anthony. What makes rage boil in his veins, though, is the resignation. The acceptance, as though betrayal is some foregone conclusion and the hurt is his penance for daring to hope.

“Who lied?” Rhodey is proud of how even his voice is, considering he’s quietly contemplating the size of War Machine’s guns and how to hide a body. He’s pretty sure Natasha would help; she’s weirdly protective of Tony.

“Did you know the Winter Soldier assassinated my parents?” Tony asks the question in the same tone one might ask someone to pass the sugar, as though the words don’t matter. As though they don’t carry the kind of weight Rhodey knows they do.

“What? Tony, what the fuck?”

“I don’t know when Steve found out,” Tony continues as though Rhodey hadn’t spoken. “But he knew. He just… Didn’t tell me. Guess he thought I might not pay the way for one armed wonder.”
Rhodey doesn’t want to know. God, he doesn’t want to know. “So how did you find out?” He finds himself asking and he wants to yank the words back out of the air.

“Nat knew. She thought I handled it all really well, forgiving Buc- Barnes, the way I did.” Tony still hasn’t met Rhodey’s eyes since he started talking and Rhodey is beyond worried. He leans a little harder into Tony, until they’re basically holding each other up.

“Shit.” Is all he can manage to say. There’s words boiling up his throat, too many to possibly get them all out. He wants to call Barnes every name under the sun, he wants to ruin Steve’s perfect fucking face with his bare hands, regardless of whether or not they’d break. But he knows that’s not what Tony needs - Tony never has and never will need Rhodey’s vengeance, though he’s got it. Slowly, Rhodey brings his arm up around Tony’s shoulders and isn’t all that surprised when the smaller man immediately turns into him. Tony huddles in his arms, small and wounded. It’s the same way he did when he was a scrawny seventeen year old surrounded by college students who either hated him or wanted to be him.

And Rhodey’s the same guy he was back then, sheltering Tony against everything he can and mourning all the things that get past his guard anyway. Like Barnes, fucking Barnes.

“Yeah, shit.” Tony snorts, though he sounds like he’s on the verge of tears. “I just can’t… I can’t compute this, Rhodey. What the fuck do I do? Anthony loves Barnes but I just, I can’t.”

“You don’t have to do a damn thing.” Rhodey runs a gentle hand over Tony’s hair, feeling the way the other man melts a little at the touch. “Sure, the kid will be upset, but he loves you too. We’ll work out how to do right by the both of you.”

“I don’t want to see him.” Tony says, his voice uncharacteristically small.

“You won’t,” Rhodey promises, low and fierce. “I’ll make sure you’re safe, Tones.”

Chapter End Notes

*holds out tissues*
Chapter Ten: Fractures

Pepper Potts walks into the Compound two days after “The Incident”, her face set like she’s about to go to war. Her phone is clutched in one fist, still open to Rhodey’s message and in her other hand she carries a thermos. The click of her heels across the floor is a rhythm as familiar as her own heartbeat and is oddly soothing.

“FRIDAY, where’s Tony hiding?” She calls as she steps into the elevator left conveniently open. FRIDAY doesn’t respond verbally but the doors slide closed and the elevator starts to climb. Pepper’s eyebrows lift in surprise; the elevator going up? Not in his workshop, then.

Sure enough the elevator spits her out on the residential floor. Pepper makes her way down the halls, pausing only when she reaches the fork that leads to the communal kitchen or Tony’s private residence.

“Boss is in his private living area.” FRIDAY offers after a moment; her voice is oddly subdued and
Pepper’s concern only grows. She takes off down the hallway at a fast walk (her mother’s voice telling her ‘a lady never runs’ echoes in her head), all but bursting through the doorway, because she has never heard FRIDAY sound that way.

She arrives to chaos and really after this long knowing Tony, she shouldn’t be surprised. Rhodey is sitting at the dining table with Tony and a little boy she knows to be Anthony. The pair of them are the absolute picture of frustration, while the little boy looks a cross between belligerent and heartbroken. She’s pretty sure that’s scrambled egg in Tony’s hair and that’s definitely pancake batter smeared up Rhodey’s cheek. The little boy has an almighty scowl on his face and three separate plates in front of him.

“Sweetheart, you’ve gotta eat something.” Tony says, sounding like he’s at the end of his tether. At this point Pepper’s eyebrows are trying to climb into her hairline. What in the hell?

“No! I want Bucky!” The boy slaps his hands on the table, staring at Tony with big, accusing eyes. The plate is pushed a little further away, wobbling dangerously as it goes.

“Well then, I see I came at the right time!” Pepper says loudly, before Tony can have the breakdown she can see building. His eyes snap to her immediately and Pepper is gratified to see the immediate glare he shoots at Rhodey.

“You called a Code Condiment? Why would you call a Code Condiment?” He hisses, reminding Pepper of an offended cat.

“I...don’t know why I’m surprised you called it that. God, why am I friends with you both?” Pepper casts a despairing glance at the ceiling and not for the first time questions her life choices.

“Because you love us and we’re the lights of your life.” Rhodey gets up from the table and steps close to brush a kiss over her cheek. “Welcome to the madhouse.”

Pepper hums agreeably, brushing the streak of crusted pancake batter aside with her thumb. “Yeah, I can see that.” Tony stays sitting but tips his face up when she comes close. Pepper makes a show of rolling her eyes but obliges him with a kiss on the forehead anyway. “Do I want to know why it looks like you bathed in breakfast before you ate it?”

Tony sighs and slumps down in his chair; his face is drawn and pale, with lines of stress she hasn’t seen since Afghanistan. “Parenting is hard.” He laments quietly. The boy, Pepper notices, has the
grace to look a little shamefaced.

“I did it, ma’am.” He admits, his voice so soft Pepper almost misses it. “‘M not hungry.”

Pepper blinks once at the surprising display of manners- ma’am, really? She’s never heard Tony call anyone by an honorific unless it was cloaked as an insult. A glance at Anthony’s body language gives her images of an abused puppy her friend had once brought home who cowered in the corner at every raised voice. She’s not good with kids but she’s good with Tony and she can see the scared little child who had to build walls made of barbed wire. It makes her ache, to see the two versions of Tony side by side.

“That’s still no excuse to cause a mess, Anthony,” Pepper says, her reprimanding words softened by her careful tone and the fact that she kneels down to put herself level with the kid.

“‘M sorry.”

“Did you not like the pancakes? Did Tony cook again? You should never let him near the stove. He once cooked me an omelette in three hours and it was burnt! And there were eggshells in it!” She says in an exaggerated tone of voice, rolling her eyes.

Anthony smiles a little and even lets out a little laugh. Pepper feels a sense of achievement greater than any she’s felt wrangling million dollar contracts for SI.

“He’s not so bad. Bucky’s worse.” Anthony provides before the small sliver of amusement flees his face and he curls in on himself, a dejected look on his face.

Pepper raises an eyebrow at the twin distressed expressions on Jim and Tony’s faces, the latter’s tinged with guilt. She had no idea little Anthony was so invested in the erstwhile ex Winter Soldier. This is such a mess.

But that’s exactly why Jim called her. Virginia “Pepper” Potts is an expert at cleaning up messes, and a goddess at cleaning up Tony’s.

“That’s fine, dear. Why don’t you get cleaned up with Jim- I mean, Rhodey,” she amends at the look of confusion on Anthony’s face, “while I get Tony to clean up this mess he made. And then you and I can have a fun day together.”
Anthony looks up with a frankly adorable gobsmacked expression, “Me? You want to spend time with me?”

(Of course! Didn’t Tony tell you I was coming to see you?” She asks, “So forgetful, that one.”

“I’m so sorry, it’s all my fault.” Tony cuts in with a rueful smirk but she can read the relief in the set of his shoulders.

“And your punishment is going to be cleaning this up.” Pepper throws over her shoulder.

“But we’re going to make sure there aren’t any more messes, aren’t we, Anthony? Tony isn’t so bad, is he?” She says, repeating his words, a tactic she picked up very quickly in her career to convince stubborn old men to listen to a young, female “secretary”.

Anthony scuffs his toe against the leg of the table mutinously, “No, he’s not bad.”

“Then, we have to make sure we’re not punishing him unnecessarily, right?”

There’s a look of heartbreaking fear that crosses Anthony’s face before he shakes his head, “No, ma’am. I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright, sweetheart.” Pepper replies, reaching forward to place a hand on a tiny bony shoulder. “And call me Pepper. Now, if you’re good for Rhodey I’ll even tell you the story of how I got the name.” She winks at him and the boy tentatively smiles back.

Anthony slides slowly down from the chair and takes Rhodey’s hand without complaint. Pepper watches just long enough to see the pair leave without incident and then, only when they’re nowhere in sight does she turn her attention to Tony.

“Tony,” She begins and almost laughs at the way he preemptively cringes. “I love you, but what?”

“God, I don’t know, Pep.” Tony slumps down until his face is on the table, pillowed by his folded arms. “Everything is fucked up.”
Pepper hums quietly, keeping her hands busy with picking the bits of eggs out of Tony’s hair. She listens as Tony slowly tells her everything Rhodey couldn’t communicate in an SOS text message. At some point she moves from cleaning food out of Tony’s hair to just stroking her hands through the soft waves. It’s as soothing for her as it is for Tony, who slumps into her grip with a quiet sigh.

“I don’t know what to do, Pep. FRIDAY said, I know Bucky didn’t lie, but Winter...he still did it. I can’t just, I don’t want to just forget that.”

“I don’t think anyone’s asking you to,” Pepper says slowly, tugging gently on Tony’s hair until he looks up. “It’s okay to not be okay with something, Tony. Admittedly, this is a really weird situation, but these things take time to process. You have to allow yourself that time.”

“I can’t just avoid Bucky forever. It’s not fair to Anthony. We’ve kinda been doing this whole joint parenting thing.”

“Parents get separated all the time,” Pepper snorts dismissively. “They make it work and so can you.”

Tony grumbles out a response too low for Pepper to hear and she tweaks his ear reprovingly. “I’ve never known Tony Stark to be a quitter.” She admonishes gently, the words softened by the affection behind them. “Think off all the things the world would miss out on if he was. Like Iron Man.”

“Cute, Pep, very cute. But punching bad guys and inventing tech is easy. Kids are... kids.” Tony stands up as he speaks, as though he’s too restless to stay still any longer. Pepper watches, quietly horrified, as Tony starts to pick up the kitchen in one of the most domestic displays she’s ever seen. “I know in my head that it’s not Bucky’s fault, what happened, and that he didn’t lie to me. I should just suck it up, for the kid’s sake.”

“I’m going to stop you right there.” Pepper interrupts firmly, snatching the dishes from Tony’s hands. “You don’t have to ‘suck it up’, Tony. Why do you always have to sacrifice so everyone else can be happy?”

“Pep, Pepperpot, light of my life, the kid’s four for crying out loud. He doesn’t deserve-”

“Well, neither do you!” Pepper snaps immediately, slamming the dishes violently into the sink. One of the plates chips but the others miraculously survive. “Tony, you really like the guy and you just found out he murdered your parents.” She continues, ruthlessly ignoring the way Tony flinches.
“You can’t just ignore or will away how that makes you feel!”

“I’m not! It feels fucking awful, but he was HYDRA’s attack dog! I’ve seen some of the files, the shit he went through, Pep.”

“You’re arguing yourself in circles, Tony.” Pepper sighs heavily, letting the anger out in one long breath. She leaves the dishes where they are and steps into Tony’s side, tucking herself close when he wraps an arm around her. “You can understand how it happened, why it happened; you can understand it’s not Barnes fault. Logic is always easy for you. Understanding something doesn’t always stop you from being hurt by it, though. That’s not wrong.”

Tony leans his head against the side of hers, his nose pressed lightly into her hair. “You promise?” He mumbles, and for a moment reminds her of a little boy seeking reassurance.

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“Well, there was that one time with the broccoli.”

“Oh my god, Tony, you are an actual child.” Pepper snorts and then catches the glint of mischief in Tony’s eyes which sets her into laughing. “Sneaky vegetables aside, I promise I’m telling you the truth on this.”

Tony laughs quietly and drops a brief kiss on her temple. “Sneaky vegetables is a pretty big lie, Potts.”

“Well, you should be very nice to me because I brought you a present.” Pepper holds the thermos up with a grin, belatedly realising she’s been holding it all this time. At Tony’s confused look, she untwists the top and waves the steam under his nose.

“Is that your special eggnog? You only make that for Christmas!” Tony’s eyes light up and he makes exaggerated grabby hands at the thermos. Laughing, Pepper hands it over.

“Normally, yes.” Pepper tweaks his ear gently, grinning at the indignant sound Tony makes. “But just this once, for you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a nephew to go spoil.”
“Oh god, restrain yourself Potts, please.” Tony calls out as Pepper makes her way to the door. “And don’t send him back with a sugar high!”

The bottles of liquor sit in a neat row, taunting him with their shiny, intact seals. The amber liquid of his favourite brand glows warmly in the dim lighting and Tony wants it. God, he wants it. The tried and true Stark method of coping: oblivion in a bottle. Tony picks the bottle up and turns it over in his hands; he’s ashamed of the way his mouth waters at the thought. Sure, he’s had a drink in the last couple of days. There’s no way he’d make it through without it, but he hasn’t gotten drunk in far too long. With the way it feels like his heart is a bleeding mass in his chest, he desperately wants to.

The last two days he’s felt like a spring coil, winding tighter and tighter. Usually he would let the steam out in the lab, spend a few days avoiding everyone and living inside his own self-made world. Mix that in with the occasional drunken blackout and that’s pretty much the recipe for staving off a breakdown. Without his usual coping methods, Tony feels like a pot that’s about to boil over. His skin feels too tight, he hasn’t slept more than a couple of hours and at this point he’s regretting ever trying to parent.

He’s had the day to himself, thanks to Pepper and Rhodey, but no motivation or energy to do anything. He hasn’t been near the workshop and even if he had… he’s not sure he’d be able to do anything. Reluctantly, Tony turns away from the bar, pulling the shreds of his composure together. Anthony is sitting on the couch, ostensibly watching a movie, though Tony doesn’t think the kid is paying it any attention. He looks tired and sad, which Tony can absolutely sympathise with.

“Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you to bed.” He steps around the couch and leans down with the intent to pick the boy up.

“No.” Anthony says, in what has become a frequent occurrence over the last few days. The boy crosses his arms over his skinny little chest and offers the fiercest pout in his repertoire, wriggling away from Tony’s reach.

“Sorry, sweetheart, but I’ve had enough. I’ve been pretty patient with your behaviour, but that stops now.” Tony keeps his voice even, though it’s a struggle. He’s so tired.
Anthony hesitates for a moment, chewing on his lower lip, and for a second Tony dares to hope. It’s quickly shattered, though, as Anthony’s stubborn expression returns. “No. I want Bucky! We always do bathtime and storytime together.”

Anthony’s eyes fill with tears and that expression is so much worse. He looks heartbroken and Tony hates having put that expression on the kid’s face. His heart feels like it sinks somewhere to the region of his stomach. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but things are gonna be a little different for a while. You saw Bucky for lunch today and tomorrow he’ll put you to bed.”

The tears spill over, though Tony only sees them for a moment before Anthony stands up and throws himself against Tony’s legs. He presses his damp face into the leg of Tony’s jeans and utters a soft, hitching sob. “That’s not together!”

Tony’s heart breaks all over again and it’s a feeling he’s gotten far too used to recently. “I know, sweetheart. Things are a little complicated right now.” God, he wishes he could uncomplicate them. His feelings on Bucky are a mess and sorting through them all would take an emotional maturity Tony knows he lacks.

It… helps, knowing that Bucky never lied to him. Knowing Bucky shares mental real estate with the guy who killed his Mom? Well, that’s a little different. He’s still working on that one and God, he misses Bucky but the thought of facing Winter…

“I know it’s not together and I know it sucks.” Tony runs a gentle hand over Anthony’s curls. The boy doesn’t look up, but he does lean into the touch and for the moment that’s enough. “It’ll get better, I promise. We all just need a bit of time.”

“Owmuaym?” Anthony mumbles into the material of his pants.

“Sorry, what was that, honey?”

“How much time?” Anthony repeats, this time pulling his face away.

“I- I can’t say, Anthony. I’m… sorry. It’s just…”

“Don’t say it’s adult stuff! I hate it when everyone says it’s adult stuff! I’m not stupid!”
“Anthony, please don’t shout at me. You’re in no way stupid but there are some things you don’t understand. He-ck, even I don’t understand this completely. But I’m trying, okay? I’m trying, honey, and I’m sorry if it’s not good enough for you but- but I’m trying.”

Tony feels the tell tale trickle of wetness down his cheek and goddammit, he promised himself he’d never cry in front of Anthony. He still remembers every instance he saw his mother’s tears as if they’re seared in his brain and he doesn’t want to do that to his chi- to his younger self.

Anthony pushes away and runs for his room, with Tony trailing behind him. When he gets there he climbs onto the bed with barely stifled sobs. “Try harder. I don’t want bedtime unless it’s together.” He burrows under the blankets and curls into a ball.

For a moment, Tony feels numb; the sensation of not being good enough should be familiar by now. He should be used to feeling like less and yet it still surprises him. God, how terrible is he that even a four year old thinks he’s not good enough.

“Right.” Tony manages to push out past the lump in his throat. He leans down to kiss the top of Anthony’s head and the boy flinches away. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

Tony stumbles out of Anthony’s room and back over to the couch in something of a daze. He’s barely aware of sitting down, swiping uselessly at the tears on his face. God, he’s such an idiot.

“Boss?” FRIDAY tries after he’s been sitting there for God knows how long. “He didn’t mean it, surely.”

Tony feels like shit; he feels like his heart hasn’t just been broken, but beaten and stood on as well. In spite of that, he has a moment of pride anyway for how much FRIDAY has already grown. “Thanks, baby girl.” He whispers, and means it.

Steve Rogers, ‘the man with a plan’. Captain America, ‘bravest man there is’.
Staring at himself in the mirror, Steve has never felt more like a fraud; not even when he was doing the USO tours. He drops his gaze from his reflection, unable to stand the rightful accusation in those eyes. He remembers when he was a boy, and his mama used to tell him to always be truthful because lies always had a way of tanglin’ you up. He thinks she had some flowery analogy for it, but really the message was what he heard: don’t tell lies because it’s wrong and hurtful and the truth always comes out.

I’m sorry, mama.

He’s pretty sure she’d be ashamed of him now. He’s ashamed of himself. Steve’s tried to live by a moral code, before and especially after Captain America. Looking at the wrecked remains of his two closest friendships, he can’t help but wonder when that changed? When did making things easier become less important than doing what was right? He’d like to say it was a mistake, that he didn’t know what he was doing, but…

Steve’s done with lying, to himself or anyone else.

“Straighten up, Soldier.” Steve tells himself and slowly lifts his head to look at the mirror. He still wants to flinch away and it feels like everything inside him shrinks from his own visage, but he makes himself keep looking. “Face your mess and clean it up.”

As far as pep talks go, it’s pretty pathetic, but he’s not sure he deserves better. He’s allowed himself two days to hide and mope from the consequences of what he’s done, but not anymore.

Bucky is a ghost of himself, drifting around the tower or hiding in his room; the only smile Steve’s seen from him in two days has been aimed at Anthony. Tony, he hasn’t seen at all, but he can’t imagine the other man is doing much better.

“FRIDAY, could you see if Tony is willing to see me? I’d like to talk, but I don’t want to barge in.”

“Awfully considerate of you, Captain.” FRIDAY snips immediately. “I didn’t think the Boss’ feelings ranked very high in your priorities. Maybe somewhere below your morning ablutions?”

Steve holds his tongue and takes the barbed comments as his due. It must earn him points of some variety, because after a short silence the elevator doors slide open.
“Be very careful with how you proceed, Captain.” FRIDAY warns and the threat is clear in her voice.

“Understood.”

Steve spends the short elevator ride up fiddling nervously with his clothes and wondering if his white shirt has sweat stains on it. He can’t remember ever having been this nervous before, not even when jumping from planes (or crashing them). Seeing Tony is going to be… hard. The conversation they have to have is going to be worse, but Steve owes it to Bucky and Tony to do what he can to fix this. The doors slide open to a view of Tony sitting on the couch, shoulders rounded like the entire world is resting on them. When he looks up, it’s with red rimmed eyes and a lingering wetness on his face Steve can still identify.

Steve feels like he’s been punched in the solar plexus. He’s never seen Tony cry and never thought he would; he wants even less to have been the cause of it. Shame coats the back of his throat, thick and tar-like. He steps out of the elevator and hovers for an awkward moment, until Tony raises a scornful eyebrow and gestures at the armchair across from him. Steve settles slowly onto the edge of it, poised like he’s ready to run. Tony sits in silence, watching him and Steve is completely wrong footed; he’s never known Tony not to start a conversation and get the ball rolling. He’s not sure why he didn’t think it would be different this time.

“I owe you an apology,” Steve starts eventually, the words coming slow and awkward. Tony merely raises the second eyebrow to join the first. “I don’t have an excuse, and even if I did I wouldn’t make you listen to it. I’m sorry, Tony. You deserved the truth and you deserved it from me.”

“And Bucky?”

“I never told him, that I kept it a secret.” Steve keeps his eyes on Tony, even though he wants to look down, wants to hide from the rage and pain he can see in those expressive eyes. “I let the both of you down, in the worst ways. I… was a shameful coward.” His own eyes feel wet, but Steve refuses to cry, because this isn’t about him. It’s about Tony and Bucky and fixing what he broke.

“So why didn’t you tell me?” Tony’s voice is flat, with no inflection to give away his thoughts. His eyes are a maelstrom of emotions and Steve is floundering, he knows he is.

“I, because, it… was easier. At first I thought I was sparing you pain. You’d just broken up with Pepper and then Ultron happened.” Steve clenches his fists and draws a shallow, shaking breath. Tony snorts derisively, but doesn’t interrupt. “But that’s not what I was doing at all, was it? I was hiding from my duty as your friend, as Bucky’s friend. The only one I was saving was myself.”
“I appreciate your apology.” Tony says slowly, his face pinched like the words taste bad in his mouth. “I can see how it happened, but Steve I am so angry and saying you’re sorry doesn’t magically make that okay.” Tony pushes to his feet and walks a few paces away, his fingers tapping at his sternum in a nervous gesture Steve recognises.

Then there’s a quiet sniffl e, the sound just barely loud enough to be heard. Tony’s face freezes for a moment and then his expression darkens. He walks across the room and gently closes what Steve assumes is Anthony’s bedroom door. When he turns back around, the venom in his eyes makes Steve flinch.

“You know what, no. Fuck your apology, Steve! What am I supposed to do now? I have a kid in there whose heart is breaking because he can't have what he desperately wants, and needs anymore. I haven't slept in days, and I can't even get drunk enough to make it all stop hurting. What the hell am I supposed to do now?! At any point in the past few years have you ever considered what might happen because you were too much of a coward to tell me the truth?!”

“Tony, I'm-”

“Don’t fucking say you’re sorry again, Rogers! Years, you’ve sat on this! You weren’t sorry, then! You’re only sorry now that you’ve been caught!”

“That’s not true!” Steve tries, desperate now that he can feel the conversation spiralling out of control.

“Well how should I know, Rogers? Sometimes my teammates don’t tell me things.” Tony hisses and Steve couldn’t stop the full body flinch if he wanted to. He remembers those words, remembers throwing them at Tony like a weapon during the Ultron fiasco.

God, what a hypocrite he’d been.

“I guess this is a bad time…” Bucky’s voice sounds unexpectedly from the elevator, drawing both their attention. He’s huddled in the doorway in one of his oversized hoodies, the dark fabric sharply contrasting his pale skin. “I, uh.” Bucky stumbles, his words grating harshly so it sounds like he’s been gargling gravel. He holds up Anthony’s stuffed bear with a little shrug.

“Oh, I didn’t even realise he didn’t have it.” Tony says, faintly. His words seem to draw Bucky’s
attention and his gaze swings first to Tony, where it tracks over the obvious signs of his tears and then swings back to Steve.

“Th’fuck did you do now?” He hisses and Steve aches at the rage in his voice, the clear threat of violence.

“He apologised.” Tony is the one who answers, his lip curled up in a snarl. “It was a very Steve Rogers apology: pretty to look at but ultimately useless.”

Steve flinches, for what feels the millionth time since this whole conversation started. He knew that Tony would be mad, knew that he deserved that rage, but this is more than he could ever have prepared for.

“Guess I shouldn’t bother apologisin’, then.” Bucky mumbles, shifting on his feet like he’s not sure if he should run. Steve hasn’t seen him like this since he first arrived to the Compound; hovering in doorways like he’s pretty sure he doesn’t belong.

“You shouldn’t,” Tony agrees quietly, taking a half step closer to where Bucky stands. “You don’t owe me one.”

Bucky straightens slightly and there’s a tiny glimmer of hope in his eyes. “I knew, what he did.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t you. It was him.” The rage in Tony’s voice on that singular word is clear and Steve can see the way the hope in Bucky’s eyes dies.

The silence after is awkward and painful and all three of them are considering fleeing the room when Tony blows out a breath and rubs at his eyes, hard. He shakes his head, looking so conflicted it’s even showing in his haggard face as he looks but doesn’t look at Bucky. "Just... go give Anthony the bear. He misses you."

Bucky obediently shuffles across the room, but he pauses next to Tony instead of proceeding into Anthony’s bedroom. “I miss him too but, he ain’t the only one I’m missin’.” He says the words so quietly Steve almost misses them and abruptly he feels like he’s witnessing something intimate and private. He watches the two of them sway a little closer into each other’s space, as though even the pain of the last two days can’t stop the way they’re drawn together. He can see it so clearly now; watching the two of them together, Steve can see the beautiful, precious thing he’s fractured.
The door cracks open just slightly beyond the pair of them, but Steve doesn’t draw attention to it. There’s healing here, little pieces that just might glue back together and Anthony deserves to see it.

“I’m sorry,” Tony whispers and his eyes are wet again. “I know it’s not your fault, but he’s there too and-”

“He’s not.” Bucky interrupts harshly and his expression is conflicted.

“What?”

“Winter’s gone. He disappeared that night and hasn’t come back.”

There’s a wet sounding gasp and as one the three adults spin their attention to the door. Bucky is the one to reach out with a shaking hand and push on it. The door slides slowly open the rest of the way to reveal Anthony, his face streaked with tears and a horrified expression. “Winter’s gone?”

Chapter End Notes

Erm...

*ducks the flying fruit?*
Splinters

Chapter Summary

Bucky goes looking for Winter and finds something a little more instead.

Chapter Notes

So, as it turns out, my work schedule has unfortunately gone a bit screwy, plus work itself has been very stressful. In other, happier news, I'm moving! Into my very own house! How terrifyingly adult. So my posting days might get a little random for a few weeks while things settle.

I can promise, however, that there will continue to be weekly updates! The days might just be wonky.

Also, we're climbing off the Pain Train kids! Time to get some healing for our poor bruised hearts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eleven: Splinters

The door closes quietly and Bucky’s attention is instantly drawn by the sound. Tony leans against the door, his face pale and drawn.

“He asleep?” Bucky rasps and the sound of his own voice is startling. Tony snorts quietly, scrubbing both hands over his face. He stays where he is for a long time, indecision painted over his features; finally, Tony pushes away from the door and approaches one slow step at a time.

“No,” Tony says on a sigh and drops himself down onto the couch. He’s not as close as he might have sat before, but he’s there. Bucky’s heart thunders in his chest. “He wants to be left alone.” Tony adds quietly.

“We really messed this up, huh?”
Tony laughs, though the sound lacks humour. “Oh yeah. Whoever let us parent clearly wasn’t thinking.” He sounds bitter and sad. Bucky hates that a lot of that is his fault. There’s a long, awkward pause where Bucky fishes for words even though his tongue feels thick and useless in his mouth. He almost wishes Steve was still here - almost. He wonders if he should leave, but Tony doesn’t ask and he can’t bring himself to offer. He’s missed Tony, an ache he hasn’t been able to wholly ignore or process.

“So... What happened?” Tony is the one to break the silence, the question landing heavily in the air between them. Bucky glances at Tony from the corner of his eye, but the other man’s expression is closed off and unreadable.

“Dunno,” Bucky mumbles, picking at a loose thread in his pants. “When you were talkin’ and everythin’ was goin’ on he just... Disappeared.”

“Are you... okay?”

“M’fine. It’s quiet, I guess. Weird.” Bucky huddles inside his hoodie, wishing for a moment he could disappear inside the fabric. He’s never been awkward with Tony before and to hear how stilted their conversation is now aches.

“Right. Of course.”

“Think he’ll be okay?” Bucky’s eyes turn towards the closed bedroom door; he doesn’t want to talk about Winter. He’s worried - more than he thought he would be - but Anthony dominates his thoughts. The door stays tightly closed, but his enhanced hearing can just barely pick up the sound of crying. Tony doesn’t answer right away, following Bucky’s gaze and sighing quietly.

“Maybe,” Tony frowns, his fingers tapping quietly over his sternum. “He really liked Wi- uh. Him.”

Bucky flinches; Tony’s careful avoidance of even saying Winter’s name is painful to hear. “Yeah.” He choke out through a throat that feels suddenly constricted.

“Just give him time, he’ll get there.” Tony says quietly and Bucky feels that they’re no longer just talking about Anthony. He shouldn’t, he knows that, but the quiet statement lights a tiny spark of hope.
“Whatever he needs.” Bucky murmurs, lifting his gaze to Tony’s. He can see the other man knows immediately that Bucky doesn’t just mean Anthony. “And, uh. Tony? I’m sorry, for everythin’.”

Tony blinks, a little thrown, and then a moment later his expression twists into a wry, bitter smile. “More apologies tonight than I’ve ever heard.” He observes quietly.

“Think that says more about other people than it does you.” Bucky inches closer, close enough to feel the heat of Tony’s body, though he doesn’t touch. “Tony, I’m sorry you’re hurtin’ and I’m sorry Anthony is hurtin’.”

Tony is quiet for a long time and then he sighs again. He reaches out and lays a hand on Bucky’s knee, giving it a very brief squeeze. “This isn’t… It’s not your fault.” He says, quiet and slow. “I’m not, I’m not mad. I don’t really know what I am. This is a huge thing to swallow and I still, I need to process.”

It hurts, to hear the unspoken request for space in Tony’s words and yet… There’s a sense of peace immediately on it’s heels, because Tony isn’t saying ‘never’, isn’t expressing hatred for Bucky, though he probably should. Whatever they had, it’s not gone. There’s a few broken pieces to it, but it’s not shattered beyond repair. The notion makes Bucky smile, if only a little and he pushes to his feet. Nothing’s fixed - Anthony’s little heart is broken, Winter’s still gone - but maybe there’s hope it won’t always be like this.

“’M gonna say g’night to the kid.” He tells Tony softly and he’s impressed with how even his voice is. He’s scared Tony will say no, tell him to leave, but the other man merely twitches his lips in the tiniest of smiles.

“Good luck.”

Bucky takes that to be as close to permission as he’s going to get. He knocks quietly on Anthony’s door and isn’t surprised when the kid doesn’t answer. He hesitates for a long time before stepping inside the darkened room. His eyes adjust rapidly to the darkness, lit only by the little Hulk bedside lamp, and he can see the small lump under the covers. Anthony looks small and sad, huddled into a tiny ball. He doesn’t say anything as Bucky comes to sit on the edge of the bed, though Bucky knows he’s awake.

“Is he really gone?” Anthony whispers after a long silence, his tone heartbreakingly sad. Bucky reaches out to lay a gentle hand between the boy’s shoulders. Anthony tenses, but doesn’t quite pull away from the touch.
“I’m not sure,” He replies, as honestly as he can. “He hasn’t been answerin’ me for, well, since things went bad.”

Anthony turns over then and Bucky finds himself scrutinised by watery blue eyes. “What went bad? Was it, did Tony do something?” He sounds simultaneously sad and angry at the thought.

“No! No, honey, no.” Bucky shuffles up the bed so he’s sitting against the headboard and then he tugs Anthony into his lap. The boy curls up small and trusting in his arms and it’s a relief to realise that not everything is different. “I can’t tell you everythin’ that happened, because it’s not my story to tell.” Bucky says, speaking louder when Anthony opens his mouth to protest. The boy blinks and though he still looks disgruntled, he stops to listen. “See, I’ll put it to you like this. Winter and I are together because of some very bad people, who did some very bad things. What they did put Winter inside me and made me go away for a while.”

“Is Winter… is he bad?”

“No,” Bucky says slowly, thoughtfully. “He’s not, not bad. He never had no one t’teach him what bad is. He was like, well I guess like a robot. He’s been learnin’ what’s good.”

Anthony is quiet for some time, his little face frowning fiercely in thought. “So why did he leave me?”

Bucky flinches internally at the heartbroken, lost way Anthony asks. He tightens his hold on the boy, cuddling him a little closer. “I think… maybe he’s hiding. Somethin’ he did a long time ago, before he knew better, it hurt Tony real bad.”

“I broke one of Jarvis’ special glasses, once.” Anthony whispers softly, apropos of nothing. “It was really special to him, he said his mama gave it to him.”

“And what happened after that?”

“I hid.” Anthony confesses, the words so soft even Bucky’s enhanced hearing has trouble. “I was scared he’d hate me, if he knew it was me.” Bucky hums quietly and brushes a gentle hand over Anthony’s curls.
“I think Winter feels the same way about Tony.” He says and gives Anthony a gentle squeeze. “Now, you’re supposed to be sleepin’.” Anthony pouts immediately, suddenly looking his four years of age.

“I want to stay up until Winter comes back.” He declares stubbornly. “So we can all have story time together.”

“You could be waitin’ a long time, and growing boys need sleep.” Bucky taps Anthony lightly on the nose, smiling gently when the boy bats at his hand. “Sometimes people need a little time and a little patience to get where they’re goin’.” He adds quietly, thinking of Tony.

“Well, that sounds stupid.” Anthony tells him, even as he crawls reluctantly from Bucky’s lap and back under the blankets. Bucky brushes a brief kiss over the boy’s forehead and tucks him in. Anthony is quiet, watching him through half lidded eyes as Bucky makes his way to the door. “You’ll tell him, right?” He asks softly, just as Bucky is reaching for the door.

“What, honey?”

“Winter,” Anthony whispers, his face sad but resolute. “You’ll tell him I miss him?”

“Course.” Bucky chokes out and turns back to the door.

Winter, where the hell are you?

Bruce looks up from a microscope when the doors slide open for Bucky. He looks surprised for a moment, blinking owlishly behind his glasses.

“Bucky, hi.” He offers after a beat of silence, spinning his chair to face the doorway. “Do you need something?”

Bucky hesitates, debating with himself on whether he should just go to bed. Bruce waits patiently as
Bucky sorts through his thoughts; his face never wavers from the open, welcoming expression. “I think, yeah.” He finally settles on and Bruce smiles immediately.

“Of course,” he gestures to another seat across from him and waits as Bucky settles himself into it. “What can I help you, with?”

“I guess, you heard about everything?”

Bruce hums quietly, sliding his glasses off and cleaning them in his hands. It’s a nervous tick Bucky has seen from him many times, enough to recognize it immediately. “Some, but not all of it, no. I know something happened between you and Tony, something to do with Winter.” He pauses for a moment and then Bruce’s mouth curls in a wry little smile. “And I know not to leave Natasha alone with Steve for a while.”

Despite himself, Bucky huffs a quiet laugh. “No, definitely not.” He lets the silence lie for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “Winter hasn’t, he hasn’t been around since everything happened. Can you, Anthony is really upset, is there a way you can just - I don’t know, can you check?”

Bruce frowns, sliding his glasses back onto his nose and blinking at Bucky over the rims. “I see. Well, we don’t really have anything on file, in terms of what Winter actually is. So I don’t know how much help I can be.” Bruce spins to face a nearby computer, tapping quietly at the keys. “We have some old brain scans here that Tony dug out of the HYDRA file dump, so I suppose we could do some scans now and see if they’re different. It won’t be conclusive by any means, but it’s likely the best I can do.”

“Anythin’ is better than nothin’.”

Bruce offers him a tiny, encouraging smile. “You say that now. Truth is, Winter was something new and he may be a little more in the realm of, well, magic than science.” Bucky doesn’t reply verbally, but his incredulous look must be more than enough as Bruce chuckles softly. “Little bit of a stretch to think the Winter Soldier might be made of magic, huh?”

“A little. Guy was a headache most of the time.” Bucky shrugs a little. “Hard to imagine HYDRA usin’ magic, either.”

“Well, let’s see if we can answer the question then.” Bruce stands up and makes his way across the lab to a thickly padded white bed. “If you wouldn’t mind?”
“Not gonna hurt or anythin’ is it, doc?” Bucky asks, though even as he says it he’s boosting himself onto the bed. He’s surprised to find it’s quite comfortable as the lights above him automatically dim so they don’t stab at his eyes. Bruce appears in his field of vision, holding a small round robot that glows the same shade as the Arc Reactor.

“It won’t hurt at all,” He assures Bucky with a smile. “This is PUNT - Particularly Unique Neuroimaging Technology. He’s still in the testing phases but he should do just fine.”

Bucky can’t help the way his lips automatically smile at the name, the tension coiled in his stomach relaxing a fraction. “Another one of Tony’s?”

Bruce - unexpectedly, - grins and the expression makes him look years younger. “Naming things isn’t one of his strong points.” He admits and his smile turns wry. “Thankfully, inventing stuff is.” He does something with the bot outside of Bucky’s vision and then let’s it go. There’s some quiet whirring and little fans extend out either side; the little ball simply floats where Bruce leaves it. A small circle of light brightens considerably where he’s looking at it and then it drifts closer.

“Alright, look straight up and lie very still now.”

Bucky complies readily enough, feeling safe and comfortable with the thought that it's Tony’s tech Bruce is using. PUNT whirs up to hover over Bucky's head as Bruce moves out of sight. The lights dim further and then Bucky is awash in blue as lights pass over him. He hears Bruce make a quiet sound from somewhere to the side, but the room is otherwise quiet and still.

The scan only takes moments, which is fortunate as Bucky’s anxiety ticks steadily higher. There’s a jaunty little ‘beep’ from PUNT to indicate the scan is done and the lights come back on. Bucky sits up immediately, glancing anxiously in Bruce's direction. The doctor stands in front of a screen, his face thoughtful though not concerned.

“Well?” Bucky asks, unable to contain himself. Bruce blinks at him, as though coming out of a daze.

“Oh, sorry! Here. FRIDAY, if you please?” He waves a hand, moving to the middle of the open space. The screen behind him blinks off and suddenly Bucky is staring at a giant hologram of… his brain. Bruce skirts the edges and then reaches out to hover his palm over a slightly shadowed area. “See this? This is damage, likely from your time with HYDRA. It's healing really well, you can see that in how light the shadow is.”
As he's speaking, Bucky steps closer. He has no idea what he's looking at, aside from the obvious of course. He nods along with Bruce's explanation, though, even as he quails at the thought of The Chair. He circles around the projection, searching for… something. Some sign of where Winter comes from. Bruce watches him quietly, his mouth twisted into a tiny grimace.

“You won't find it.” He says softly, sympathetically. “What, what you're looking for. It's not there.”

“What am I looking for?” Bucky murmurs, brushing his fingers through the hologram and watching as it shifts.

“Aside from the damage that I showed you, this is a perfectly normal brain.” Bruce's eyes stare intently across the space between them.

“So, what? Winter is gone, for good?”

“Bucky, there's no sign of Winter ever existing. Whatever you think Winter is, or was, it's not here.”

Bucky's breath freezes in his lungs. It's like going into cryo again, the cold starting at his fingertips and sinking slowly inward. “What I think.” He breathes, his mind looping over and over the words as the realisation sticks in his brain. Bruce doesn't think Winter is real.

But he is, isn't he?

He knows Winter is real. Winter is… different, annoying and weird. Bucky loves chocolate but Winter thinks it's too sweet. He likes broccoli covered in barbeque sauce for a snack, which Bucky thinks is a crime for many reasons.

That's a real person, right? They're not the same. The way Winter felt about Tony compared to how Bucky feels? It's not the same. They're not… He didn't make Winter up. He couldn't have.

But if he did, is it such a bad thing if Winter is gone? Maybe it's good, being alone in his head. No commentary on his everyday life, no violent urges or thoughts. Maybe he can leave HYDRA, The Winter Soldier behind, finally move forward. Maybe this is his third chance, because Lord knows he's already used his first and second.
He pictures Anthony's face, the heartbroken loss in his eyes. Hears the words all over again.

*You'll tell Winter that I miss him?*

Panic creeps along the edges of Bucky's mind, because regardless of whether or not Winter is *real*, how could he ever tell Anthony? Distantly, he hears Bruce calling his name but it's like he's stuck, caught watching the tears slide down Anthony's cheeks inside his mind. God, he can't disappoint the kid; not Anthony, who has already been hurt so much, *suffered* so much loss. He can't add to that list.

A familiar scent tickles his nose, cinnamon and engine oil, a combination he would never have thought appealing. He leans into that scent, into what it means for him: *home*. Fingers brush lightly at the side of his neck, calluses scraping a gentle path up to his jaw. The touch is repeated to the other side, until his face is cupped in warm hands. Bucky's breath shudders out on a quiet sigh and he lets the grip guide him down, until his face is tucked into the warm pocket where shoulder meets neck.

*Tony.*

He hears Bruce and Tony talking quietly over his head, though he doesn't give the conversation any consideration. Tony is here, with him. In spite of everything they've been through, everything standing between them right now. Tony's hands are an anchor, where they comb gently through his hair, his scent a comfort.

“*You with me? Bucky?*” Tony murmurs, the words close against Bucky’s ear.

“*T-think so.*”

“You wanna tell me what's going on?” Tony's voice is smooth and gentle, and for a moment it's like the last few days never happened. It's like the pain of the truth coming out isn't there and Tony is warm, real and *present*.

“W-winter,” He chokes out, and wants to he ashamed of the way his hands clench in the fabric of Tony's hoodie. “He's not, I think, he might not be. He's gone.” Tony is quiet, though his grip never wavers and he doesn't withdraw. Bucky waves a hand at the projection and he's sure Bruce has already explained so he doesn't bother.
“Winter is real. Right?” He whispers, and he knows his voice is small and lost. Tony tenses for a moment, his grip momentarily tightening before he slowly relaxes.

“What makes you think he might not be? The scan?” Tony withdraws just a little, nudging at Bucky until he's upright and they can make eye contact.

“He's not there.” Bucky gestures again at the hologram spinning innocuously in the centre of the room. The image of Bucky's brain; healthy, normal and no Winter.

“So what?” Tony responds and barrels forward before Bucky can react. “Maybe he wouldn't show up there. Bucky, Winter might not be anything physical. I hate to admit it, god it makes me want to scream, but there are some things science just can't quantify.”

“Yet.” Bruce adds quietly with a little smirk and Tony tips his head in acknowledgement.

“Yet.” He agrees immediately. Bucky can see the strain in Tony's eyes, what it costs him to have this conversation about Winter. It's so typical of Tony to shove his own pain aside for someone else; Bucky is humbled to realise he's still worth that to Tony.

“Point is,” Tony starts, distracting Bucky from his thoughts. “We don't know what Winter is, or was, and maybe whatever that is? Doesn't show up in a brain scan.” Tony waves his hand and the scan disappears.

The lab seems empty, and much larger without it.

“I can feel where he should be.” Bucky confesses quietly, tapping at his temple. “I can feel the empty space, like I'm missin' somethin’.”

“No one is saying Winter isn't real.” Tony tells him, and finally steps back and out of Bucky's space. “He's real to you, and to Anthony.” He adds, and the implication is clear that it's all that matters.

“So, what next?” He knows it's not fair, knows he shouldn't ask for Tony's help. All questions of Winter's true nature aside, he (and Bucky) killed Tony's parents. But Tony makes him feel stronger, like everything isn't falling apart.
Tony makes him think he can get through this without hurting Anthony more than they already have.

“We keep looking.” Tony says with a shrug, as though it’s as simple as that. “We can ask Strange to take a look, if we have to. Guy owes me a favour.”

“Why does he owe you a favour?” Bucky asks, trying and failing to think of a time when Tony did some sort of favour for Strange. If anything, the guy seemed to have been helping them out a lot, lately.

“Because he’s an asshole and I hate him.” Tony says simply, with an almost angelic smile.

“That’s… Not how that works, Tony.” Bruce admonishes, though he’s clearly trying to hide a grin.

“After that owl stunt?” Tony folds his arms petulantly across his chest. “Guy should be thanking me for asking.”

Despite himself, Bucky finds a smile fighting it’s way onto his face. He knows everything isn’t magically okay, knows in fact that it’s far from it, but having Tony’s support makes him feel… Lighter. “Okay,” He says quietly, tucking his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. “So, we keep looking and in the meantime we tell Anthony?” He trails off, leaving the question hanging in the air.

Tony sighs heavily and turns away for a moment. His hands scrub through his hair, making it stick up adorably. Bucky hears him muttering a mixture of curses, some Bucky’s pretty sure aren’t even in English. Finally he spins back, straightening his shoulders like he’s made a decision. “Look, it’s… It’s ass o’clock at night, I haven’t slept in too long. You probably, most likely haven’t slept much either. We don’t have to tell him anything right now, he’s sleeping. Let’s, uh I guess, why don’t you come to, to breakfast tomorrow. We’ll have breakfast. Together. And, figure it out then.”

“Breakfast?” Bucky replies, faintly. Tony’s inviting him to breakfast. His heart picks up in his chest, the thumping so loud he wonders if Tony can hear it. He hasn’t, they haven’t done anything like that. Not since before.

“Yeah.” Tony smiles, just slightly. He reaches out and touches a brief hand to Bucky’s arm. “We were in this together, before. Maybe… Maybe we try that again.”
Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed, guys! Also, an extra special surprise is coming up soon! Stay tuned. :D
Returning

Chapter Summary

In which Anthony has a nightmare, FRIDAY continues to be awesome and someone finds their way home.

Chapter Notes

Phew! So I made it!

This chapter might be a little rough in places, and I apologise for that! Truthfully I typed a large majority of it out on my phone in between moving and unpacking! I was very determined to get a chapter to you all this week. <3

Next week's chapter will post on FRIDAY as I'm going away on a work trip the first half of the week and won't get much writing done. After that, life should return to normal!

Keep your eyes open, folks, as the first coda scene will be posted tomorrow! Winter: The early days!

Finally, there's some graphic mentions of violence in this chapter which some people might find a little squicky. To anyone looking to avoid this section, skip from:

"Hello? The sound of his own
To

...I miss you...

Chapter Twelve

The room is dark when Anthony wakes - violently - with a bitten off scream trapped in his throat. He gasps quietly, hands twisted in the blankets and the vision of Howard’s fist swinging towards him still playing out behind his eyes. The whimper escapes him unbidden and though he knows that he should be safe, he can’t stop himself from looking towards the door, waiting for him.

“Little Boss?” FRIDAY’s voice plays softly through the room and the Hulk lamp next to the bed slowly brightens. Greenish light spreads around the room and a tinny voice announces ‘Hulk SMASH!’. Anthony slowly relaxes and scrubs at his face to hide the evidence of his tears.
“‘M okay.” He whispers, pulling Bucky Bear close and burying his nose against the soft fur. “A bad dream.”

“Do you want to talk about it? From my reading on the subject, it might help.”

Anthony sniffs quietly and shakes his head. He doesn’t want to talk about it. He just wants to feel safe. He wants to sleep and not be afraid, to wake up and not be terrified. Having Bucky Bear helps, but not being alone is better. Resolved, Anthony wipes his face again and then shuffles to the edge of his bed, dragging Bucky Bear along behind him.

“What can I do, Little Boss?” FRIDAY speaks again, her voice doing the soft thing that makes Anthony feel warm and loved.

“I want. I want…” He trails off, hands twisting in his bear’s fur nervously. There’s a long silence as Anthony struggles to find his words and then his door slides open. Soft lights illuminate along the floor, leading away down the hall.

“I think I know just what to do.”

Anthony barely hesitates before following the lights. FRIDAY is amazing, and his friend. If she thinks she knows what to do, Anthony is pretty sure she does. She leads him to the elevator, the doors standing open and waiting. The floor is cold on his feet and he wishes he’d thought to wear his shoes. He thinks Tony would be upset to see him wandering around at night by himself and without his shoes.

“FRIDAY?” Anthony whispers, as the elevator doors slide closed. It doesn’t start moving yet and Anthony guesses she’s listening. “I was bad.” He confesses, the words small and bad tasting in his mouth.

“I don’t understand.”

“I said mean words to Tony.” Anthony shuffles his feet, staring down at the pale skin peeking out from his Hulk pajamas. “I made him sad.”

“He knows you didn't mean it.” FRIDAY soothes gently as the elevator slowly starts to move.
“From my understanding, Little Boss, people say a lot of things when they're upset and they sometimes don't mean them.”

“He doesn't hate me? You promise?”

“Definitely not! But he'll tell you that himself next time you see him.”

The doors open once more and Anthony follows the trail of lights down the hall. He's never been to this part of the Compound before. It's scary and dark; he hopes he won't get lost, but with FRIDAY guiding the way he's pretty confident he won't. The lights take him through several twists and turns before eventually terminating at one door. Anthony hesitates outside for a moment and then lightly taps against the wood with his fist.

He can hear movement on the other side of the door; a quietly muttered bad word and some shuffling, and then the door swings open.

“Kid?” Bucky doesn't look like he's been sleeping at all, his hair sticking up in every direction and his face is pale and drawn. Anthony throws himself forward without hesitation and is immediately caught in strong (and now familiar) arms. He's lifted off his feet and tucked into a tight, warm hug.

“I had a bad dream,” He tells Bucky softly, with a quiet sniffle he can't quite suppress. “Wanted Winter. He makes me feel safe.”

Somewhere over his head, Bucky sighs. “Yeah, I know he does, buddy.”

“Is he, is he really gone?” He clutches Bucky Bear closer with one hand and clings to the collar of Bucky's shirt with the other. He knows He would be angry, to see Anthony behaving like a baby. But as Bucky slides a warm hand gently up and down his back, cuddling him close, Anthony thinks being a baby is totally worth it.

“I dunno, kiddo.” Bucky says softly, carrying Anthony further into the room and sitting down on the edge of his bed. “Why didn't you go to Tony, sweetheart? It's a much shorter walk.”

Anthony hesitates, burrowing closer to Bucky in the process. He wants to lie, or not answer the question, but he knows that's bad too. “I wasn't nice to Tony.” He mumbles eventually and Bucky makes a quiet noise of understanding. “I thought he made Winter go away.”
“No, honey, no. Tony didn't do anything wrong.”

“So you and Tony still love each other?”

Bucky makes a strangled sound and Anthony twists around to look at him. His face is a funny shade of pink and he looks a little like the time Anthony made Jarvis a coffee for the first time. Jarvis had really liked the coffee, or so he said. Looking at Bucky's face now, Anthony thinks he might have been lied to.

“Well, I mean, it's not. Tony and I, we uh, well, we like each other a whole lot. But we ain't together, not like your Ma and Da were.” Bucky splutters, running his hands through his hair and making it stick up further.

“Obviously,” Anthony replies, the ‘duh’ implied. “My parents didn’t really like each other most of the time.”

Bucky doesn't reply verbally and simply tugs Anthony back into his arms. Anthony snuggles in happily enough, though his mood is soured by the thought of his parents.

“Can you make Winter come back?” He asks after a short silence. He tries not to sound like he's whining, but he doesn't think he succeeds.

“It's not that simple, Anthony. I can't ‘make’ him do anything.”

Anthony thinks about this for a moment and then sits up. He twists in Bucky's lap until he can stare up at the man's face. With great solemnity (for a four year old, at least) he places both palms on Bucky's cheeks and stares into his eyes.

“Winter, you gotta come back now.” He whispers, leaning in until they're almost nose to nose. “I miss you and you gotta come back.”

Anthony stares for a long time, but there's no change in Bucky's expression; not even a flicker. If anything, he just looks sad. Anthony pats lightly at Bucky's cheek. “Winter! Winter, come back!”
“Sweetheart,” Bucky tries, expression pained.

“No! He has to come back!” Anthony's voice thickens with emotion and his eyes fill with tears. “He's, he's my best friend. He keeps me safe.”

“I know -”

“No!” Anthony drops his hands from Bucky's face to swipe at the tears on his own. Bucky reaches up to help and Anthony shoves his hands away. “No, no, no!” He screams and then stops trying to speak entirely. Anthony's body shakes with the sheer violence of his sobbing as he takes great, gasping breaths of air.

“Anthony, calm down, sweetheart. You're going to make yourself sick.” Bucky keeps his voice calm and even as he gently taps his fingers against Anthony's shoulder. He repeats the pattern over and over, but for the first time it doesn't help.

If anything, Anthony's cries only increase in volume.

~x~

The Chair is cold at his back, cold enough it penetrates through the leather. He waits patiently as the restraints are secured to his wrists and ankles, cold steel over fragile joints. When it's offered, he opens his mouth for the bite guard. The one time he refused, he bit off his tongue. Growing it back bad been… Uncomfortable.

He does not refuse anymore.

The Handlers talk around and over him; he is never directly addressed during a session. This does not surprise him. The whine of electricity sends a frisson of alarm down his spine but he waits it out. Resistance is not tolerated.

The electrodes are secured around his head, the glue tacky and uncomfortable against his skin. He clenches his fists, knowing the pain he is about to endure and knowing equally that there is no avoiding it.
The Handler steps up to the controls and even from here he can detect the creak of leather gloves as they reach for the dial.

_Pain._

It arcs from the top of his head to his toes. He screams through the mouthguard and convulses against the restraints. They pull harshly at his skin, and distantly he knows it will bruise.

_You deserve this._

He doesn't know where the thought comes from, amidst the sheer agony he's experiencing, but he knows immediately that it's true.

_Parasite._

Yes, that too has a ring of truth to it. He is an interloper, a monster; unwelcome and _tainted_. He deserves this pain, this loneliness.

The pain stops and between one blink and the next The Chair is gone. He stands in an empty white room, alone.

“Hello?” The sound of his own voice shocks him. Rusted and broken with disuse, his tongue tripping clumsily over the single word. It echoes back at him several times and the sound is hollow and lonely.

Movement from the corner of his vision draws his eye and he turns immediately. A single drop of red makes a slow path down the wall. Blood, he knows immediately though he couldn't explain how. The first drop is joined by another and then again until a slow trickle becomes a flood.

He backs away as it washes towards him, smearing down the white walls and puddling across the floor. It starts to fall from the ceiling, then and he cries out when the droplets land upon his skin.

In moments it's up to his knees, and then his chest. Minutes, and he's floating in an _ocean_ of blood with barely an inch between himself and the ceiling.
You did this.

He wants to scream for help, wants to beg but no one will come and no one should.

“I'm sorry!” He gasps out, in the second before the blood closes over his face. He closes his eyes and lets himself sink.

“You're sorry?”

He opens his eyes and immediately recoils. Howard Stark stands over him, eyes boiling with hatred from a bloody, ruined face.

“You don't know sorry.” Howard hisses, blood spraying from his mouth with each word. “You're a thing, a weapon. Weapons don't get to be sorry.”

“Please…” He whispers, cowering from hatred in those eyes. “I didn't, I didn't want to.” He feels the hot slide of tears down his face, but doesn't try to wipe them away. He knows he doesn't deserve mercy and he shouldn't be asking but god, he just wants it to stop. For just a moment.

“Weapons don't want things, you fool. Aim and fire, that's all they are.” Howard sneers and holds his hand up in the imitation of a gun. “Bang, bang.” He says it with a cruel, mocking smile.

...I miss you...

The words are out of place, jarring in this landscape of agony and regret. Howard disappears between one blink and the next, leaving him in an empty room once more.

You gotta come back now.

The voice hurts to hear, but it's a good hurt. He focuses on it with painful attention; the person sounds sad and he wants to fix it. Distantly - as though from very far away - he can hear a child crying. This, too, strikes him as very wrong. He staggers to his feet and starts to walk towards the
“Parasite, where do you think you're going?” Tony snarls, appearing in front of him. He hesitates only a moment before walking right through.

“You ruined everything.” Steve says, sounding sad rather than angry. He doesn't stop walking.

“Did you think you could be forgiven?” Maria next, soft and sad and beautiful. He passes through her, too.

“Weapon!” Howard is the final one to appear, huge and terrible in his rage. “You belong here, with us!”

“No,” He whispers, shoving through Howard after only a moment's hesitation. “I am not a weapon, not anymore. I am Winter.”

He opens his eyes, and he is in Their room. Anthony is screaming in his lap, his face red with the effort and his little hands clenched into fists.

“Hello, zvezdochka. I am sorry I made you wait.”

At first, Anthony doesn't react. His cries are truly heartbreaking to listen to and Winter would like nothing more than to strangle the one responsible. Unfortunately, he's pretty sure that person is him.

“Come now, no more tears.” He murmurs and reaches up to gently wipe the boy's face. He's not sure if it's the nickname or the cadence in his voice, but something must get Anthony's attention. The boy’s cries settle into much less violent, hiccuping sobs.

“W-Winter?”

Carefully, Winter runs his flesh hand over Anthony's curls, smoothing them back from the boy's sweaty forehead. “Yes.”
*About time, you ass.*

*Did you miss me, then?*

*Oh, shove it. I still hate you.*

The banter is familiar, comfortable. He feels oddly welcomed by it. It's a tiny spot of warmth, quickly snuffed out when he catches sight of Anthony's expression.

“You left!” Anthony accuses, even as he presses close, little hands fisted in the material of Winter's shirt.

“Yes,” He says again, his stomach twisting uncomfortably. He thinks this is what guilt feels like. “I needed, I was, I am sorry.” He doesn't know how to explain it to Anthony; the need to hide, the sickening sensation of having hurt Tony. He'd felt like he should be punished and so he'd locked himself in his own private little hellscape.

Looking at the tears still flowing down Anthony's cheeks, Winter feels… Selfish.

“You gonna go away again?” Anthony asks, miserably.

“I, no.”

*He's had a rough time of it.* Bucky whispers quietly in the back of his mind.

*That seems apparent.*

Anthony is quiet for some time, resting quietly in Winter's arms. Slowly he starts to relax, losing the white knuckled grip on Winter's clothes. At first, Winter thinks the boy has fallen asleep, until Anthony sits up again. The boy twists until he's perched on Winter's knees, staring solemnly into his face.
“Did you hide ‘cause you made Tony sad?’

“I was, I was bad. Before. I did things I should not. Tony would not want me here.” Winter confesses quietly, his voice wrecked with emotion.

“Jarvis told me ‘You can't escape the responsibility of tomorrow by avoiding it today’.” Anthony says, in the voice of someone clearly parroting something they’ve heard but don't actually understand. It makes Winter smile and he lightly tweaks the boy's nose.

“You don't know what that means, do you?”

Anthony tries to avoid it, glancing away and scrunching up his face, but eventually sighs and slumps a little. “No,” he admits quietly. “Was somethin’ Jarvis said when I was hiding from something.”

Winter feels a burst of fond amusement from Bucky and can’t help but echo it himself. “I see. Well, it’s good advice.” He allows and Anthony beams.

“So you’ll talk to Tony? Good!” He replies and then crawls out of Winter’s lap and into his bed proper. “Goodnight, Winter!”

Winter blinks, a little taken aback as Anthony for all intents and purposes settles in. He has the vaguest feeling the kid just outmanoeuvred him.

Well played, kiddo.

~x~

Tony twists around in bed with a sigh, grabbing one of his pillows and fluffing it aggressively and then stuffing it behind his lower back. The room is in almost complete darkness, lit only by the light of the walk in closet and the screen of his Starkpad.

“Boss, you’ve slept three hours in the past four days, don’t you think you should get some rest? Symptoms of severe sleep deprivation include-” FRIDAY starts, soft and concerned, and Tony interrupts her with a wave.
“I know the symptoms, baby girl. I'm fine.” He sighs and reaches for the coffee mug on his bedside table. It cohabits the space with six others in various degrees of empty. He slugs the last of it, grimacing at the flavour of cold coffee. “Alright, bring up the next round.”

The Starkpad screen flickers and the Winter Soldier mission report is replaced by another one. Tony checks the index number on the file and then casts a suspicious look at FRIDAY’s nearest camera. “You skipped one.” He accuses.

“Boss, the last file was a video.” FRIDAY admits readily enough. “My primary purpose is to ensure your well being and I determined that video to be counterintuitive to this programming. You don't want to watch it.”

Tony scowls, gripping the pad a little tighter between his hands. “FRI, you know you're my girl but I'm a grown ass man and I don't need molly-coddling. Show me the damn video.”

“Boss, please.”

Tony blinks, utterly taken aback by the emotion he can hear in FRIDAY’s speech. He's sure if she was human her voice would be cracking with it. Slowly, he sits back against the headboard. “Okay, baby girl, okay. I won't look.” He says, quietly. To himself he can admit if the video has FRIDAY that spooked he's probably in no place to watch it. Tony feels like he's on a hair trigger at best and the Winter Soldier files don't exactly make for light reading.

Tony settles in to read the next report; this one is four years from the last and he grimaces his way through the clinical description of defrosting Bucky. Well, Winter he supposes. He skims through the details and skips onto the next one.

“Jesus,” Tony hisses quietly between his teeth. “Is this a fucking punishment guide?”

He gets as far as ‘The Asset responds best to The Chair’ before throwing the Starkpad aside in disgust. Fucking HYDRA.

“God damn it,” Tony scrubs his hands over his face. “FRI, how's the kid doing?”
“He is with Bucky. I believe he is sleeping there tonight.”

“Good. Okay, good.” Tony sighs heavily and clicks the Starkpad off. He slides it onto the corner of the bedside table, shoving it in amongst the coffee mug graveyard.

“Speaking of sleep…” FRIDAY trails off meaningfully and her persistence makes Tony smile. “You're not fine, Boss. Could you try? For, well for me?”

“Aw, FRI that's a low blow.” Still, Tony shuffles down on the pillows until he's lying down. He'll readily admit he's utterly exhausted, but that’s never changed anything before.

“You’ll thank me when you’re older.” FRIDAY quips immediately and Tony snorts.

“Sass,” He grumbles half heartedly. “All I get from you is sass.”

FRIDAY doesn’t reply, but a moment later soft music pipes from her speakers. It takes Tony a second to recognise it and when he finally does, the smile is automatic. It reminds him of the piano pieces Maria had used to play, though it’s not quite the same. It’s both soothing and a little bittersweet; he finds himself absently tapping his fingers on the sheets in time with the key strokes.

Tony doesn’t even notice his eyes getting heavy and within moments he’s asleep, the gentle piano playing on into the night and FRIDAY watching over him.

End Notes

Questions? Comments? Leave them below or come say hi on Tumblr!

Also in case it is a little confusing: Winter is his own person and frequently makes comments when Bucky is in direct control. Winter's dialogue/thoughts will always be BOLD and ITALIC. Bucky's, likewise, will always be ITALIC.

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