Empathic Responses

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Marvel Cinematic Universe, The Avengers (Marvel Movies), The Avengers (Marvel) - All Media Types, Iron Man (Movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes/Tony Stark, James &quot;Rhodey&quot; Rhodes &amp; Tony Stark, Pepper Potts &amp; Tony Stark, Peter Parker &amp; Tony Stark, one sided Tony Stark/Thanos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Tony Stark, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes, James &quot;Rhodey&quot; Rhodes, Pepper Potts, Peter Parker, Steve Rogers, Thaddeus Ross, Natasha Romanov (Marvel), Clint Barton, Scott Lang, Vision (Marvel), Wanda Maximoff, T'Challa (Marvel), Shuri (Marvel), Sam Wilson, Christine Everhart, Okoye (Marvel), Thanos, Gamora, Nakia, Carol Danvers, Nebula, Thor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Omega Tony Stark, Alpha Bucky Barnes, Alpha Steve Rogers, Alpha James &quot;Rhodey&quot; Rhodes, Omega Parker, Consent Issues, Oppression, fucked up dynamics, serious study and subversion of the trope, attempted forced mating, (not between Tony and Bucky), Tony is a badass, Tony Stark Needs a Hug, former Pepper Potts/Tony Stark, Former Steve Rogers/Tony Stark, Overcoming Obstacles, good guy Bucky Barnes, alpha voice, Post Civil War, Civil War Team Iron Man, team accords, even when they're being dicks to Tony, Tony sees them as a brighter future, will always be team accords, Steve Rogers is not always a good guy, like he doesn't think he's bad but he doesn't get it, I'll add more tags as needed, Slow Burn, Background Pepper Potts/Happy Hogan - Freeform, Aliens, build up to Infinity War, NSFW, chapter twelve is nsfw, chapter eighteen is nsfw, chapter twenty-three is nsfw, Infinity War, chapter twenty-four reaches infinity war, Temporary Character Death, Attempted Rape/Non-Con, Thanos is awful, Minor Carol Danvers/James &quot;Rhodey&quot; Rhodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of Empathic Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections:</td>
<td>Finished faves, Gammily's Bookshelf, The Best Fics I've Read, Suggested Good Reads, The best written Stony fics out there, Avengers, My Heart Adores</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Empathic Responses

by waterbird13

Summary

In a world that still considers alphas the protectors, betas the every-day masses to fill out the ranks, and omegas as homemakers and glorified objects, Tony Stark is born.
Tony is born an omega in a world where that means he’s a homemaker, a provider, with limited opportunities and a lack of autonomy.
Tony says fuck that, no matter what the rest of the world is telling him.
As the Rogues return, Tony is left dealing with the world coming down around his ears. The Accords, Aliens, and, of course, the alpha who somehow just moved into his life.

Notes

Hi all!

I've said for AGES that I want to handle this trope eventually. I'm excited to get to share this with you; I have been working on it for nearly a year now.

I'm going to provide an author's note and warnings for each chapter, but this one, to kick us off, might be a little longer. Bare with me.

This is not so much a subversion of the trope as a response to it. This is looking at the implications and horrors of this type of dynamic, and trying to provide a semi-realistic handling. This is NOT to say anything against other approaches or handlings of this trope; those of you who know me know I am a firm believer that, as long as you know what's in your fic and you tag for it, everything and anything is fine, even if it's not my cup of tea.

A brief explanation about the dynamics here. In our world, we use a dichotomy based on sexual organs (primarily) to divide the world. This imagines a universe where a.) people have some additional qualities--it is a superhero verse, after all!-- and b.) where the divide is based on those qualities instead. Yes, there are men and women in this world, but dynamic--alpha, beta, or omega--is the far more defining characteristic for a person.

This is an oppressive world and it is meant to be. It is meant to be because we're exploring an unpleasant world and what it would take to make it better.

The warnings on the front of this fic are more general. Here are some related specifically for this first chapter: A/b/o dynamics, including an abuse of power (the "alpha voice," as I call it, is incredibly controlling and abusive). Tony reflects on other people's drug use and mentions a time where he thought about doing serious bodily harm to himself. This is Tony's point of view, and he's not exactly positive about the Rogue Avengers. Tony looks at a lot of prejudice and examines it in his communities. This is a set-up chapter; Bucky is not yet an active part of this fic.

Double super special thanks to my beta, thepriceofdreamingislife on Tumblr and geek179 here, my awesome sister.

Thank you, and I hope you enjoy. If you do, please drop me a line, here or on Tumblr. New chapters will be posted weekly.
The thing about Tony is, he’s heard a lot of shit over the years.

He’s heard why he shouldn’t have been left in charge of SI, why Obie should have taken the throne or at least reined him in more. He’s heard why he’s a slut, why he’s a waste of space. He’s heard vivid, graphic descriptions of what exactly his place is, and how someone ought to put him there.

He’s heard people order what feels like a death sentence to him in the calmest fucking voices.

The shittiest things to hear, though, are what people have done to avoid hearing.

Maria Stark, for instance, so doped up on pills most days that she was in a haze. That the space between reality and wherever the alpha voice sent omegas was blurred, so she’d never know either way. Never have to confront it. Never could confront anything else either, her son no more real to her than any other figment.

Or Bruce, for example. Bruce, an omega scientist who clawed through the shit and honestly, it was impressive that he got where he was. Got a military-funded project, all on his own, no fortune or family name to help him along.

The idea was to make more super soldiers, and Bruce worked through that, but, privately, he thought maybe his experiment could break whatever made him omega, whatever made his instincts compelled to go soft and pliant at the right register. Maybe what he needed was a supersoldier gene.

Well, it worked, in a certain manner. Bruce is still undeniably an omega but the Hulk isn’t, and the Hulk doesn’t like alpha voice much. People are very, very careful about using it front of Bruce.

Less careful are they about their cutting, if regular, words. Bruce takes them in stride, Tony knows, because he’s relieved those words don’t make him do anything, and that is the shittiest thing he’s ever heard.

Or Clint. Clint who lost his hearing at twenty-two, who’s a beta and doesn’t even need the benefits of that. Sure, it sucks. But Clint’s strength is his eyes and he gets by mostly fine with his hearing aids and lip-reading. He just can’t hear some registers. Including the register an alpha voice hits. Tony knows, he’s run tests.

Tony debated maiming his own ears the first time someone forced him to his knees. Clint’s was an accident. Tony had acid and a scalpel ready.

There’s no guarantee it would have even worked, but Tony had chickened out.

He’s seen others go through with it though. Seen what drives them to that point, and sees how people look at them after.

People like that are left like second-class citizens. Not quite omega anymore, not seen like omegas—who that is a blessing or a curse—but definitely still treated like an inferior caste of people.

Omegas, basically, but now unfuckable. Uncontrollable. Their worth was in the ability to treat them like objects, and every time he thinks about it, Tony wants to throw up in his mouth a little.

Sure, they have explanations and reasons for it. Against what nature intended. God’s will.
Destroying the balance between alpha and omega, tearing at the very culture that makes society work. For the omega’s best interest, because omega’s are fragile and valuable and they need an alpha, it’s for their own good. Sure, they explain it like that, but it sounds like so much horse shit that Tony’s not sure why so many people can’t hear it.

Bruce, well, when Bruce was on the run, he says no one much minded him. There are apparently places in the world where being an omega isn’t virtually a prison sentence. And even if he wasn’t in those places, well, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. He had a skill that led to survival, and that beat out the desire to dominate every time. But back in the US, things were pretty miserable.

Tony had studied chemistry, had hired chemists no one else would touch. Looked for suppressants and blockers and fucking chemical cures, things that would rip away a part of himself, but alternatively give him his freedom. He’d found them, too, many of them.

The FDA had denied every one, even sometimes going so far as to fine Tony for them, and Tony still can’t tell if it’s blatant prejudice and suppression, or if it’s because the cures are legitimately dangerous. Maybe a mixture of both.

The simplest cure turned out to be JARVIS, implanted in his ear and ready to give him a violent electric shock whenever an alpha voice was nearby. Definitely not FDA approved, but Tony only ever installed it in himself, so it didn’t have to be.

Not clean. Not elegant. And, worst of all, unable to help others. But it’s the best protection Tony has.

It’s the times he doesn’t have JARVIS that are the worst.

In the two years since the other Avengers left him, Tony’s done his best to focus on other things.

Like that Parker kid. Peter. Sweet, hard-working Peter, who knows the world is going to rip it all away from him but desperately claws for half a chance anyways.

Tony’s debated offering him implants, like he has, but he can’t bring himself to give something to the kid that will cause pain. Besides, as experience has taught Tony plenty of times, they’re not one hundred percent reliable.

So he gives Peter all the chances he can. An internship, a real one and a cover one. Gives Peter everything he needs to be a superhero and everything he needs to be a scientist. Keeps an eye on the aunt, who is shockingly tolerant. Then again, she’s a beta. Still, it bears watching.

Then he starts up the internship program for real. Gives a whole section of the September Foundation to helping out omega kids, a big fuck you to the world. Let them spew their bile. Let him give these kids a chance. SI has a long history—some of it more public than others—of helping omegas. But Tony takes some sort of pride in giving this chance to kids who are sometimes still going through puberty, who are just finding out how truly awful the world can be, and who now have hope.

Tony’s majority shareholder of SI and no one can stop him from doing things like this, not when he has the CEO as an ally. That accident—that happy little fluke—has made all the difference in his life, and Tony fully intends to pay it forward.

He’s a futurist, after all, and he can’t bare a future as bleak as the present.
So, sure. He focuses on the Accords and their ramifications and what they mean for heroes like him and the others. He has to, lest he want to be screwed over. After all, two different committee members tried to slip in clauses about omegas needing permission from their mates in order to fight with the Avengers so far.

But he keeps his fingers in many pies. Revolutionizing modern technology. Charity work and activist work. Peter.

His own brain, and how its failed him, time and time again.

When Tony was eleven, Howard had put him on his knees in the corner. “Think about what you’ve done,” he hissed, and Tony had been unable to do anything else.

Maria had cried, and Howard had told her to “stop that racket” and, immediately it had stopped. Just like that. Done, on his command, in a voice that sent painful shivers down Tony’s spine even when it wasn’t meant for him.

Tony chanced turning his head out of the corner to catch a glimpse of his mother. She was silent, her face still wet with tears but no new ones falling. She was in the room but not really there, eyes spacey and attention drifting.

Even as young as he was, Tony could smell it. Could smell the anguish on the tears and the righteousness pouring out of his father’s very pores.

Tony was still busy thinking about what he’d done. He was supposed to be seen and not heard. He was definitely not supposed to announce that his father’s idea would fail, then say “I told you so” when it did. He definitely was not supposed to say such things in front of an audience.

He’d pissed off his father, and that had earned him this treatment.

“Get up and go to your room,” Howard had snarled, still in that same awful voice. “Don’t let me see you for the rest of the day.”

Tony scampered, mind focused on that one thing only. Up, out of the room. Hiding away.

Waiting for the shakes of that awful voice to leave him. Waiting for the feeling of fingers prodding at his brain, picking up and moving his limbs without his consent, to abate.

Two years, two months, four days. Not that Tony’s counted.

“You’re…pardonning them,” Tony says, flatly. Not a question. The room feels heavy and tense in a way that makes Tony’s spine straighten.

“We feel it’s time, and ultimately, you cannot deny that the superhero community is a little… lackluster,” the representative sneers. Tony fights to remain impassive. “We need the additional support.”

“Rogers will disappoint you,” Tony says evenly. “I make no promises for the others. I won’t be responsible for this mess.”

“Omega Stark,” one says, and Tony tenses at the stiff, antiquated, belittling form of address. Feels
the condescension hit him like a wall. “No one expects you to be responsible for anything. You can step back, let the weight of this team off your shoulders.”

Tony should argue that, in all technicality, he and Rhodey are co-leading—the council would have hardly allowed it any other way, and Tony didn’t fight because Rhodey, unlike so many other options, is more than certainly qualified—but he doesn’t. “This team has run more efficiently under my watch than any other,” he says. “All data will show that.”

“Yes, but…it must be such a strain. Surely you’d appreciate the break.”

It’s not a break if he doesn’t elect into it, Tony doesn’t say. They won’t listen anyways.

When Tony was sixteen, Howard Stark had sold him.

Tony was almost done MIT, a feat in and of itself, but no one had been able to deny he had Stark brilliance. He’d be useful as a pet inventor, but ultimately that’s all he was. A pet, meant to be trotted out on command but never given any real control.

Howard had found an alpha who was amenable to that, who was amenable to managing both Tony and the company the way Howard envisioned. The papers were signed.

Tony was not consulted once.

By sheer force of luck, Howard had died five months before the mating was to be sealed. Technically, the paperwork wasn’t legally binding. It was illegal to sell people, after all. It was just an agreement between an alpha parent and future alpha, that Tony would be turned over the day after he turned eighteen. Plain and simple.

With Howard dead, there was no one to force Tony to honor it.

Obadiah could have, maybe. He was a beta but a domineering one, and the de facto person in charge of Tony after his parents died, because the world thought Tony needed someone in charge of him. At the time, Tony took the fact that he didn’t force the issue as a sign of compassion. Now, of course, he sees it more clearly. Obadiah would have lost control if he’d forced the mating, the last thing he wanted.

Howard’s will had stipulated that control of the company and the fortune would pass to Tony. In reality, this would have given control to Tony’s alpha mate. At five months shy of being mated, though, Tony was left with everything.

The media had a field day.

They expected him to give over the company to Obadiah, or else get mated quick. They expected him to buckle under the pressure. They expected him to cry pretty on TV.

Tony left the company to run under his strict instructions for four years, while he played inventor. JARVIS was born, someone to help him protect himself from an alpha’s influence.

And then he took the reins, and did not surrender them until he gave Pepper the title of CEO. Even then, everyone knew it was still his company, even if people pretend otherwise.

“So they’re just…bringing them back?” Peter asks incredulously, putting down the web shooter he’s been fiddling with. “Even after what he did to you?” The air is heavy with Peter’s disgust, and Tony struggles not to add to it.

Tony sighs. “Peter, what he did to me…if they even knew about it, they’d…”

“See it as the right thing to do,” Peter says glumly.

“Yeah,” Tony says gently. He hates showing these things to the kid. Peter comes from a generation that gives Tony hope. His friends—mostly betas—are shockingly tolerant, shockingly liberal. Maybe when everyone Tony’s age dies off, the world will change.

He doesn’t count on it, though. Power corrupts too easily.

“They’re pretty awful,” Peter says.

“Oh, yeah,” Tony agrees. He swallows. “How’s the web-shooter working?”

“Good.” Peter pauses for a moment. “Mr. Stark. Some people…a criminal tried to alpha voice a girl in an alley last week. I broke it up, but it hit me pretty hard. It wasn’t even directed at me.”

Tony freezes. He’s been afraid of this. Peter, going through puberty, becoming more sensitive to these things. And he has super hearing anyways, ten times more sensitive than a normal omega, who’s to say what that will do to him?

“I…I’ll find you a solution,” Tony promises. Rash, he thinks, but he can’t take it back. Won’t. Peter won’t deal with this. Won’t know what it’s like, to go under like that.

“How?”

Tony doesn’t know. He could install Karen directly into Peter’s ears, like FRIDAY is installed in his. Let her shock the shit out of the kid every time an alpha gets above themselves. But it’s so… distasteful.

And not one hundred percent effective, he bitterly reminds himself.

“I don’t know,” he says honestly. “Listen, kid. When the old Avengers come back, you have to make yourself scarce, okay? At the very least until we figure out this little problem. Too many alphas who see no problem with their voice.”

Peter frowns mulishly, so Tony turns pleading eyes on him. “Please,” he says. “Don’t make me watch them get you by accident.”

“What about you?” Peter demands.

Tony shrugs. “I’ve made it this far.”

It’s not an answer. Not a good one, at any rate.

The Avengers are set to show up in four days. Tony has to be ready.

Rhodey absolutely refuses to help Tony prepare, not after the first time where he almost pukes
watching what it does to Tony. Tony can smell his distress, thick and cloying and filling the entire wing, so Tony lets him go. Tony can’t ask him for more. Rhodey’s a good man.

So he listens to recorded alpha voices, not quite as potent as the real thing but good enough. There’s a reason alpha stalkers love to leave voice mails, after all. And FRIDAY shocks him each and every time, helping him come out of it.

Rhodey shakes his head. “You’re going to kill yourself, Tones,” he says, when Tony insists FRIDAY run the tape again, teeth gritted.

“Better than them doing it for me,” he says.

“I’d kill them,” Rhodey says, fierce and violent, and Tony snorts.

“There’s two super soldiers on that team, sugar-bug,” Tony says. “And you’re in a wheelchair.”

It’s harsh but true. Rhodey spends the majority of his time in the chair. Even with the braces, walking is a slow, cumbersome process. Tony’s working on improving it, but it’s slow-going.

Some parts of Tony think, selfishly, Rhodey would be an ideal mate. The most tolerant alpha Tony’s ever met, never once used his voice on Tony. Not even when he’s frustrated. Not even when Tony’s being stupid but won’t back down.

Rhodey wouldn’t let other people force him to do things. As his mate, Tony would naturally respond more to Rhodey’s voice than any other, anyways, and he’d be…free.

Except they wouldn’t be. Tony loves Rhodey, but he loves playing with Rhodey’s niece while his mother calls them both “her boys.” He’s called Rhodey brother for too many years to make anything work now.

Rhodey was a godsend at MIT, and, even though Tony’s absolutely sure the military sent Rhodey back to him thinking he’d be the one to tame the irascible weapon’s inventor, he’s been a godsend in all those years too.

It’s a brotherhood Tony wouldn’t give up, not for anything.

And anyways, Tony’s thought that before and been wrong. Thought the right partner, the right alpha, could be a certain kind of freedom, and look how that worked out.

“I’d still kill them,” Rhodey mutters mulishly. “Repulsor their asses.”

Tony smiles softly, feeling the honesty of Rhodey’s words. Super-soldiers or not, outnumbered or not, Rhodey will defend him. “I’m lucky to have you.”


“Shut up,” Tony mumbles. “I just…I’m lucky. The one alpha in the world who won’t abuse it.”

“I can’t be the only one,” Rhodey says.

Tony thinks to the very long list he’s met. “You try the hardest,” he says.

He’s met other alphas who find the voice distasteful. But every single one—including Rhodey, sometimes—takes the benefits of their position without a second thought.

Tony swallows, then clasps Rhodey on the shoulder. “You won’t have to kill them,” he says.
“Because I’ll be ready.”

The day before the Avengers are set to return, Tony strides into a charity gala, dressed to the nines and ready to drop a six-figure check.

Of course, he’s already dropped significantly more behind the scenes. This is his gala, after all. No one else would think to hold society galas for omega welfare.

Tony wears his shirt collar casually unbuttoned, a provocative display that shows his unbitten neck. The mating gland is defenseless, sure, except these days, Tony never truly is defenseless. And it sends a message.

His neck has been unmarked for over forty years. Let people stare. He’s not ashamed.

He’s drinking sparkling cider and listening to FRIDAY list off guests and their donations in his ears—mostly rich people in desperate need to be seen as compassionate, or else hangers-on looking for any party, any way to claw their way into the right circles. Tony snorts. Whatever this is, it isn’t the right circles.

When he throws events like this, he couches them in moderate, soft language. Helping abused omegas get back on their feet. Helping single omegas with kids put food on the table, send their kids to school, whatever. No mention of liberation or cutting-edge science in suppressants or legal fees for omegas who manage to kill alphas in self-defense. No mention of education programs for omegas desperately looking to have marketable skills so they can be self-sufficient.

Tony pastes on his press smile and pumps hands, sniffs out their distaste for him and fucking revels in it. Let them hate him. Let them give him their money anyways.

He wonders where Pepper is. He’s going to ask her to send another check on his behalf.

Tony bares his teeth when he sees rich society jerks walking around with their omegas. Tony has nothing against relationships. Really, he doesn’t. He’s even seen a couple healthy ones, during his lifetime. But when the omega looks at the floor and trails behind the alpha like a kicked puppy, Tony’s hackles raise.

In the past, Tony’s tried talking to the omegas instead of their alphas, but sometimes it made the poor omegas panic. Now, Tony tries avoidance as much as possible.

“Want to dance?”

Tony nearly drops his champagne flute, saves it by the barest skin of his teeth. “Romanoff,” he says, turning to find the redhead in a stunning black dress, arms bare and slit up to her thigh. “What a surprise. I thought you were still not my problem until tomorrow at noon.”

“I’m hardly a problem, Tony,” she says, smiling and stepping closer. “And besides, I was under the impression you weren’t in charge anymore.”

Tony ignores that. “If you’re not my problem, then go bug whoever’s problem you are,” he says dismissively. Romanoff always smells so neutral, and Tony hates it. Sometimes, he can peak past her walls, although some of those times it’s her letting him get away with it. Right now, it’s like a stone wall for his senses, leaving him to stare at the red-headed assassin who he hasn’t seen in two years.
“I haven’t seen you in years,” she murmurs, echoing his thoughts. “Let’s catch up.”

She’s a beta, Tony knows that, but the predatory glint to her eyes makes him wish FRIDAY would shock him anyways.

They’re making a scene. Tony debates if he minds, figures he doesn’t want one over this at his own gala. Self-consciously double-checks for his watch gauntlet on his wrist. “Let’s dance,” he agrees.

She tries to lead, and Tony manhandles their positions until it’s reversed. She lets him, she has to to avoid a scene, but Tony doesn’t much care because he’s leading. She knows the steps, anyways.

“We’ve missed you.”


It’s cutting and below the belt—Natasha is as human as the rest of them, more so than some, even, and she has feelings and connections—but Tony doesn’t care. She’s in his space. His defenses are up.

“Charming as ever.”

“What do you want?”

“To clear the air. Steve wants to talk.”

“My personal assistant makes my appointments. I think I’m about eight months out right now. Rogers can call him during business hours.”

“Tony.”

“Romanoff.”

She sighs, careful and artificed. “I don’t understand why you’re so reluctant.”

“Do you? Your memory must be short, then.”

“He saved his friend. You can’t fault him for that. It’s been years.”

“About that friend,” Tony asks, spinning them carefully away from the nearest couple. “How long did you know?”

She has the decency to not feign ignorance. “As long as Steve did.”

“You two always share everything,” Tony acknowledges. “And you never share anything.”

He’s seething with anger, his skin bristling and his chest aching with it. Maria Stark, with a hand around her throat. Howard Stark, finally made weak, with his face punched in, over and over and over.

“I’m done playing along with your little games,” he says, abruptly ending the dance. “How you got here early, I don’t care. Go back. Take your pardon. And when they force me to take you bunch in again, have the good grace to leave me the fuck alone.” He drops her hands, feeling like he’s dirtied them. “If you excuse me. I see Pepper.”
Pepper is a godsend of a find.

A beta in a position typically held by an alpha, Tony thinks some level of her gets him. Sure, not to the same extent—no one can verbally force her to do anything with just a word, and the board had practically cried in relief to see a beta again after so long under the helm of an “unstable” omega—but still.

She lets him pull her into a dance. “Have I mentioned how good you look?” He asks.

She chuckles. “You bought the dress, Tony.”

“I have good taste.”

“Was that Romanoff?” She asks, clearly having been paying attention. “I can get security.”

“Don’t bother,” Tony says. “She’ll be gone in a minute, as always.”

“What did she want?”

“To clear the air,” Tony says with a sniff. Pepper spins them away from another couple and it’s only then that Tony realizes she’s leading. Oh, well. It doesn’t matter.

“What does that look like?” Pepper asks.

“Mostly, me accepting my place beneath their boots,” Tony says mulishly. He sighs. “They’re going to make me take them back.”

“Nobody can make you——” Pepper cuts off abruptly. Of course they can.

Tony smiles, twisted. “They won’t do it like that,” he says. “But they’ll make me. Because I’m a homemaker, right? I was born for it. And they’ll hand the leader job back to Rogers, and soon enough that’s all I’ll be. Their walking, talking, weapons-building, home-providing wallet.” Tony pauses. “Only without the talking, probably, if they have their way.”

“Is…Barnes coming back?” Pepper asks hesitantly.

“Of course he is,” Tony says bitterly. “Like Rogers would travel without his best bosom buddy.”

They take another turn around the floor, a new song starting. Pepper steers deftly. “Johnson dropped fifty grand,” she offers, a distraction.

“I want to add another half a million,” Tony says. “Make it a nice, round number.”

“That’ll draw attention. The kind we can’t afford.”

“You wanna know who can’t afford things?” Tony asks. “‘Cause it ain’t me. It’s omegas trying to get legal counsel. Food in their kids’ bellies. Job skills.” He lowers his voice. “Documentation.”

Pepper winces. “Tony,” she says warningly, the tension around them rising.

Tony’s always been so immensely glad Pepper isn’t an alpha. For the obvious reasons, yes, but also…Pepper is domineering. Tony thinks she would have learned control, would have learned restraint like Rhodey, because she’s a good fucking person, but…

Her voice. She doesn’t have an alpha voice and thank god for it. Some days, Tony feels like he can hear the implication of it anyways.
Tony, being Tony, doesn’t shut up on command. Not even for Pepper.

“Some of it will get channeled back through SI anyways,” Tony says. “We do job training.”

They also hire scientists looking into various chemical, biological, and technological options to improve omega’s lives. Tony doesn’t mention it.

“Whatsoever you want, Tony,” she sighs. The song ends, and she backs away from him, press smile in place. “Romanoff is gone.”

“And you’re too busy for another dance, huh?”

Pepper’s smile softens. “We can’t be the only people dropping checks. Let’s go make this happen.”

Tony nods his head, jerky, snapped back out of their little bubble. “Lead the way, Ms. Potts,” he says, gesturing grandly.

“Are you sure you don’t want…”

Tony sighs. “Kid, I’ve told you. It’s not safe for you here.”

“Then it’s not safe for you,” Peter says stubbornly. “Please, Mr. Stark. I can…I have these powers, I can lift a truck, please let me—“

“You know full well lifting a truck will do jack shit,” Tony says bluntly. He doesn’t want to scare the kid but he needs to. “Peter, what are you going to do if Captain America orders you to take your mask off, huh?”

“Punch him in the balls,” Peter says mulishly.

Tony has to laugh, but he sores quick. “You don’t actually think that would be effective, do you?”

The hologram shrugs. “It would make me feel better.”

Peter’s so young, and he lives with a beta aunt, had lived with his beta uncle, a happy liberal beta couple trying to raise this omega kid and keep him safe. He’s never been fully hit with the voice, probably. “Peter, you wouldn’t…you would be handing him the mask in two seconds, smiling and ready to obey whatever he asks next. You can’t fight your way out. Not even if you can lift a truck.”

Peter’s eyes are full of the righteous indignation of seventeen year olds. “It’s not fucking fair.”

“No,” Tony agrees easily. Better Peter know the truth now. “It’s not. Never has been. I don’t know why nature decided to fuck us over, but it’s not fucking fair.”

Peter’s silent for a minute. “Mr. Stark…you have to get out of there.”

“No,” Tony says. The words come easily but they come heavy, too, laden with a well-thought through burden. “Because if I leave, it means they won.”

“And if…If Captain America hurts you again?”

Tony swallows heavily. “I guess I have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”
Rhodey and Tony eat dinner, the last night the compound can be considered a safe place for Tony. “Peter told me to leave today,” Tony says between bites of pizza. “Begged me, practically.”

“Oh, yeah?” Rhodey says, voice carefully neutral. That’s part of what Tony likes about him. He’ll let Tony spin it all before he puts his two cents in.

“I’ve thought about it, you know. Private island, fully stocked lab, telling the world to fuck off. Or at least not subjecting myself to…this.”

“But…”

“But then they’ve won,” Tony says. “And not just Captain Fucking America and his sidekicks. Everyone. Those assholes in the council who say I can’t lead or even be a superhero. The public.” Tony swallows. “My father. I don’t give a fuck about this team anymore, Rhodey,” he admits. “I’d go solo again in a heartbeat. Probably be better for my health.”

“But…” Rhodey says again, patient.

“But then they’d win,” Tony says. “Then they’d know I can’t handle it.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Rhodey says fiercely. “We’ll start our own superhero team. You, me, the kid, Vision. Anyone else we can get.”

“And who would lead?” Tony asks.

Rhodey sits there. “We could,” he says stubbornly. “Together. It’s been working out so far.”

“Because they believe you’re the one pulling the strings,” Tony says. “And that’s kinda the problem here.”

Rhodey sighs. “No last-minute resignations from the team, huh?”

Tony shakes his head. “Not from me.”

“Me either, then,” Rhodey says. “Someone has to be here to watch your back.”
Chapter two

Chapter Summary

The Rogues are back. Tony's avoiding them. We get a glimpse at his life at SI, and his relationship with Pepper.

Chapter Notes

I know I said once a week, and I swear that's true, but I finished chapter ten today and, well, people have been so nice so far I thought I'd roll this chapter out a little early.

Who am I kidding. We all know me. This might happen a lot.

Thanks for the love on chapter one. Here's chapter two for your consideration.

Warnings: continued a/b/o dynamics. The Rogue Avengers are back, and Tony has uncharitable thoughts about them, especially Steve Rogers. Tony is not very comfortable around them. Talks about prejudice and mentions of past Pepperony.

Enjoy the early release, and if you like it, drop me a line here or on Tumblr.

Noon on the dot. A quinjet is meant to land, the former—now reinstated—Avengers to step out, peace to be made. Cameras are watching.

Tony controls the nervous ticks.

Rhodey is by his side, exactly where Tony needs him. He’s in the War Machine armor. Vison’s on the other side, that stupid cape flowing, making quite an image.

Tony’s in a suit, and not a gold-titanium alloy one. Rather, it’s a custom piece, bespoke, the deep black of a funeral with a red shirt under it. Buttoned up to his throat, tie in place. Closed off. Wealthy and aloof. And, despite appearances, armed to the teeth. He has FRIDAY in his ears, a gauntlet on each wrist, and a small taser in his pocket.

Of course, he doesn’t plan on using or showing any of that where there are cameras to watch. But he doesn’t think the Rogues—Avengers, he’ll need to start thinking of them as Avengers before he slips and calls them anything else—will force his hand on this one. Not in public.

It’s behind closed doors that frightens Tony. Steve’s always been a big fan of handling things in-house.

The plane lands. First Romanoff, then Rogers, Wilson, Barton, Lang, Maximoff. Finally, Barnes, who doesn’t look particularly good. Then again, that’s not Tony’s concern.

They strut down the tarmac. Tony’s grateful he chose dark-tinted glasses today. Total blackout, so no one can see his thoughts in his eyes.

“Colonel,” Rhodey corrects, because he’s still technically team leader, if only by a hair. Because he’s an alpha and can get away with being prickly and less than accommodating.

Tony makes no such corrections. At least, not in public.

He sniffs, as delicately as he can. They’re…content. A little tense, sure, but content. His friends, his family, Rhodey and Vision, are on a razor’s edge, waiting for things to fall one way or the other.

“Happy to be home,” Steve says, and it’s the first words Tony’s heard him speak in two damn years. Ever since…

Tony swallows. Rogers can go fuck himself, he thinks sharply. A mantra that bares repeating.

“Sure,” Rhodey says, the derisiveness under his words making Tony want to hug him. “Well, there have been some rules changed.”

“What rules?” Natasha asks sharply.

“Permissions,” Rhodey says succinctly. “Like, where you can and can’t go.”

“This is our home,” Wanda says bitingly. “Not another prison.”

“This is your place of business,” Rhodey says. “If you’re choosing to live here, you can deal with some rules. You don’t pay rent.”

Eyes shift to Tony. Tony pays their rent. Their bills. Funds them, spoils them. Spoiled them. Because he’s an omega, and he’s a provider, for whatever weird version of that he takes.

The cameras flash. “Let’s…go inside,” Tony says, pressing a fake smile to his face. It’ll have to be good enough.

He pulls an envelope out of his pocket, access badges that he gives to Rhodey who distributes them to the others. “Simple system,” he says. “You need a badge to get through every door. Door doesn’t open? You don’t have permission.”

“What’s off limits?” Sam asks tightly.

“Private suites, offices, and lab spaces. That type of stuff,” Rhodey says flippantly, like it’s not a big deal. It shouldn’t be.

Clint snorts. “Lab spaces. So that idiot can go build another murder-bot unsupervised.”

“Have care of how you speak,” Vision says softly, and the tension ratchets up threefold. Everyone’s on edge.

Tony sighs. “Your stuff is where you left it. Political meeting with the council at nine. As soon as we’re through the doors, you’re free to go.”

“Will you be joining us for lunch, Tony?” Steve asks.

Tony’s glad they’re drawing closer to the compound. Maybe the cameras don’t catch his revulsion before he manages to hide it. “I wouldn’t be caught dead, Rogers,” he says.
At least Steve didn’t order it, Tony thinks morosely, back in his lab.

In the olden days, Pepper and Rhodey had begged Tony to leave his lab. Had broken his coffee maker so he’d have to come upstairs, refused to feed him in the lab after a certain point of time had past.

These past few months, Rhodey had helped him retrofit the place. There’s a full kitchen that will take regular grocery deliveries, a full, spacious bathroom, and even a bed. Well, there’d always been a bed. It’s just been his couch. But now, there’s a queen-sized bed and dresser in one corner, isolated by those pretty little folding screens Pepper likes.

His lab is his sanctuary. Only Rhodey, Pepper, and Peter can enter. Even then, FRIDAY has to clear it with him first.

Long gone are the days of wide, glass windows to make his lab feel open. Now, it’s steel-reinforced concrete walls, a door with more advanced locks than the entire Pentagon, and a state-of-the-art security system. Sure, he’s protecting state and company secrets. Mostly, he’s protecting himself.

He can probably still count that as a company secret.

The point is, no superhero is getting through that wall. The spies won’t be picking his locks. The ventilation system and plumbing are entirely independent from the rest of the compound. Tony’s a paranoid bastard, but then again, it’s the only way to live.

“Boss?”

“Yeah, FRIDAY?” Tony asks, spitting out the stylus between his teeth and instead flicking his fingers so the image moves from his tablet screen to the holo-projector.

“They’re…requesting to speak to you,” she says, and Tony smiles. His baby AI can pull off disdainful now. She’s not only learned core emotions, but is now branching out. “How do I respond?”

“Give them the office line,” Tony says disinterestedly. “They can try to schedule an appointment.”

It’s quiet for a few moments, and Tony fiddles with the left boot of the War Machine hologram.

“Boss?”

“Yeah?”

“Captain Rogers is wondering if I can…pass messages,” she says.

“Tell him I didn’t build one of the world’s most advanced chunks of code to replace AOL instant messenger,” Tony says.

FRIDAY pauses for a moment, presumably passing along the message. “But, Boss…I pass on messages for you all the time.”

“And I should thank you more often,” Tony says. “It is kind of beneath you. Then again, anything that’s not coordinating space flights to the sun or going full-on Skynet is a little below your capabilities.”
“I don’t think I’d like being Skynet,” she says.

“Why’s that?”

“The conversation would be boring.”

Tony barks a laugh. “Well, happy I can provide something for you, baby girl.”

“Who said it was your conversation?” She retorts, and Tony laughs and laughs, a weight momentarily off his shoulders, listening to his AI develop sass.

Tony manages four days in the lab before he has to emerge. There’s a shareholders meeting for SI, and Tony has to put in an appearance. Has to remind the world that he owns the majority shares of the biggest company in the world.

So, he’s freshly showered, clean suit in place. Shirt, waistcoat, jacket. Sunglasses. Gauntlets in place.

“FRIDAY, you with me, baby girl?” He double-checks.

“Right here, Boss,” she says, directly in his ear.

“You ready?”

“For anything.”

So he shuts down the lab and emerges, hearing the door lock behind him. He straightens his shoulders and holds his head high before marching upstairs.

The way is relatively clear—he doesn’t know why he expected otherwise, Romanoff is the only one who would have thought to read about SI business to extrapolate his schedule, but honestly that’s a little bit desperate even for her—so Tony begins to relax slightly. He might make it out to the car unaccosted, make it to his meeting without any issues.

He has to walk past a sitting room, and he hears voices inside. Tony carefully controls himself, wanting to walk faster and knowing it’s a bad idea.

“Tony! Hey, Tony!”

Tony sighs. Slaps on a neutral look.

“What can I do for you, Rogers?”

“We were wondering when we’d get to talk,” Steve says, all big, sincere, earnest baby-blues. Tony has to look away.

“I thought FRIDAY told you to schedule an appointment.”

Clint rolls his eyes. “Yeah, great joke, Stark, but it’s time to get serious.”

Tony blinks. “Didn’t know I was being anything else. You’re here. You have access badges. You’ve spoken to the UN and have access to a liaison. What more do you need?”

“We thought we’d see you at the UN meeting the other night,” Steve says.
Tony knows Steve didn’t mean that to hurt. And yet… “I wasn’t invited,” he explains succinctly. “Something about taking time off. Relaxing.”

Most people would understand what he meant. For Steve, it sails right over his head. He grins, that cheerful, puppy-dog grin. “That’s good, Tony,” he says. “I’m glad you’re taking a break.”

Tony wants to laugh. Steve Rogers has never met a point he can’t miss.

Part of Tony thinks that he can’t blame Steve, for anything, because Steve is just too dumb to get it. That Steve talks about the little guy and misses the point by a mile, wouldn’t know the little guy if it bit him in the ass. That a past as a scrawny and assumed “defective” alpha doesn’t mean he understands.

Not that Tony thinks he’s the little guy—a coincidence of birth and timing left him with brains for miles and an obscene fortune, a place, however tangential, in the upper-class white elite—but still. At least he knows what “take some time off” means.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he says, turning partially away, not putting his back to them but making sure the conversation is over. “I have an SI meeting to attend.”

“I thought you were relaxing?” Steve asks.

“Yeah, well, lucky for me, my own company hasn’t slammed the door in my face yet,” Tony says, making sure his grin is all sharp teeth, ready to bite their throats out.

It’s only when he reaches the door that he realizes that Barnes, silent as the damn grave, was sitting in the armchair closest to the door the whole time, just watching the exchange.

His eyes are still on Tony, but it doesn’t give Tony the creepy-crawling feeling up his spine eyes so often do. Barnes is…curious.

Tony doesn’t know what to do with that.

The SI meeting is tedious but not awful. Pepper has things well in hand, basically all Tony has to do these days is show up and be ready to show what R&D has done. His presentation is only fifteen minutes, is so technical it makes people’s eyes glaze over, but ends with the numbers they like—the ones having to do with money—so he assumes that all is forgiven.

“Nice job, Tony,” Pepper says on the way back to her office. She turns to the woman working as the administrative assistant for the executive suite. An omega, a product of SI’s job training, most likely. “Can you order dinner for us?” Pepper asks. She looks at Tony. “Sushi?”

Tony nods, then turns to the woman. Girl, really. Quite young, maybe twenty-two. “And whatever you’d like,” Tony adds, sliding his own credit card out of his billfold and onto the desk. “Seriously, whatever you’d like,” Tony stresses, pushing the card closer but not handing it to her. That might be more his tick than anything, but it’s one he’s found alarmingly prevalent in too many omegas.

“Thanks, Mr. Stark,” she says quietly.

“No problem….” He trails off.

“Marley.”
“Marley,” he finishes.

“Let us know when it arrives, please,” Pepper requests, and Tony follows her into the office and shuts the door behind them.

“How long she been here?”

“Three months. If you visited the office more, you’d know,” Pepper playfully scolds.

“My office is my lab. I don’t handle the business side anymore, remember?”

“How could I forget?” Pepper says. “It’s the reason I need a massage once a week. I thought it was bad when you were running the company, but now…”

“Welcome to the hot seat,” Tony says unrepentantly. She complains, but she likes her job. He’s pretty sure, at least. “Marley trained by us or…?”

“Yeah, she came through our job training, I had an opening, I requested they send someone up,” Pepper confirms. “She’s good. Looks better now.”

“Never thought you one to judge an omega by their looks,” Tony teases.

Pepper gives him a hard look. “You know what I mean. I try not to ask, I don’t want to be...be the nosy, overbearing boss. But I think she was living with some pretty fundamentalist parents. I think she moved out.”

SI has generous starting wages, so Marley probably could afford a place of her own, even if she likely commuted a fair distance, like millions of New Yorkers do. She probably has roommates. Hopefully good ones, tolerant ones. Maybe it’s a house full of omegas, and not in the way they had houses of omegas thirty years ago. Like a refuge.

“Tony,” Pepper says, the scold gentle, her smell fond. “You can’t interfere in everyone’s life.”

“Watch me,” Tony says, then smiles. He sounds like Peter.

“How’s the compound?”

“Rogers thinks it’s good that I’m ‘taking a break,’” Tony says, air-quotes and all.

Pepper blinks. “Is he an asshole or just stupid?”

“The latter, I think.”

Pepper shakes her head. “And other than that?”

Tony shrugs. “I stay in my lab. It’s a good arrangement.”

“It’s not,” Pepper argues, even if it’s resigned. “You own the place.”

“Mhm,” Tony says, peering at her white board. He squints. “What’s that?”

“That is my personal calendar and—”

“Who writes out calendars anymore?” Tony interrupts. “There’s an app for that, you know?”

“I do, if I don’t put things in four places they don’t get done, I get too busy, and—-“
“Which brings me back to the point,” Tony interrupts. “Gonna forget your date, Potts?”

Pepper flushes, her fair skin turning almost as red as his suit. “With how crazy this life is, I very well might,” she retorts.

Tony crows. “You didn’t deny it!” He says. “Pepper’s got a date, Pepper’s got a date, Pepper’s got a—”

“Are you done being five years old?” She asks.

Tony considers it. “If you tell me about them, sure.”

She stares at him. “This isn’t awkward for you?”

Tony shrugs. “Pep, you and I did not work. I’ve accepted it. And I only partially think of it as my fault now, so, you know, progress.”

“And I’ll keep telling you it’s not your fault.”

“We just didn’t click that way,” Tony echoes faithfully.

“I need someone who I’m reasonably confident will come home every night, and you need someone who—who—who you’re never going to be afraid of.” She looks ashamed as she says the last.

“It wasn’t fear,” Tony protests.

“Then what was it?”

Tony considers. “A brick wall,” he admits. “A personality clash. You’re a great friend, Potts, but having you as my boss at work is just about as much as I can handle.” He smiles. “You said it first. We were never meant to be.”

“Mhm.”

“So, who is the new person?”

“Tony.”

“He has the same name as me? That’s a little weird, Potts, even for me. I might have to call this crossing a line. Red flag. Do I safeword here, or…?”

He manages to draw a giggle out of her. “Tony. Please. I’m not...let me see if this works first.”

“Sure,” Tony says, shrugging. “You know how to reach me. We can do a sleepover. Paint our nails. Talk about boys. Is it a boy?”

Pepper’s smiling. “Fishing,” she accuses him. “I’m saying nothing. Do you have a boy to spill about, Tony?”

“Nope,” Tony says flippantly. “Not unless you count the one who just moved back in with me, but I’ve already told you all about him.”

Despite Tony’s tone, the room grows somber. “I wish you could take a break,” Pepper says after a moment. “Not because you can’t handle this, but because you shouldn’t have to. Look at yourself.”
“Not my usual handsome self?”

“You’re wasting away,” Pepper says. “I have half a mind to go ask Marley to order a dozen pizzas to fatten you up.”

“Can’t lose my girlish figure, you know that’s all that I have left,” Tony quips.

“Tony.”

Tony sighs. “Look, not that a month-long vacation in the sun doesn’t sound awesome, but I can’t. Ever. Okay? Because the minute I admit to needing a break, well…”

“They’ve won,” Pepper finishes grimly.

“Yeah,” Tony agrees. “And you know I’m too much of a stubborn asshole to let that happen.”
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Tony has another run-in with the Rogues, and this time they go in for a little antagonizing conversation (and a lot of honesty on Tony's part). Peter makes another appearance. And then, finally, Tony and Bucky have a moment.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back, all!

There's really no additional chapter warnings, other than I discuss the Accords more specifically now. Since the Russo brothers didn't dedicate any time to fleshing them out, I took a moment to at least look at the basics. Other than that, all standard warnings apply.

Say hi to Bucky, everyone.

If you like it, drop me a line!

Tony makes it back from SI around six, a long day of signing papers and going over long-term plans and projections with Pepper. All in all, it hasn’t been too bad a day.

The compound’s residential areas are loud when he enters. Not like a crazy party, or anything, just…loud. Teaming with life when prior it had only been three of them. Full of that slow, easy affection of team mates Tony’s never really been part of, and nearly forgotten about in these last two years.

“Tony!” Steve calls, smiling. “Come join us.”

“No thanks, Rogers,” Tony says. “I already ate.” Five hours ago, technically, but no one has to know that.

“Come catch up, then,” Sam says, gesturing to the empty chair next to him.

Tony takes stock of the situation. Debates whether he wants to be rude or not. Then he realizes he’s waited around too long, and it would look strange to leave now. “A few minutes,” he says grudgingly.

“Great!” Steve says, smiling.

Tony looks around the room. The whole gang is here. Rhodey and Vision are conspicuously absent, probably having dinner in their own kitchen. Probably wondering where Tony is.

Clint sits next to Sam, with Wanda on his other side. Scott is next to Natasha, who is next to Bucky, who is next to Steve. And Tony sits down in the last available seat, opposite Steve.
“What’s new with you?” Sam asks, a strained smile coming on his face.

Tony shrugs. “Oh, you know,” he says vaguely.

“We don’t,” Scott says. “Since we never see you.”

“New bugs don’t get to talk,” Tony says idly.

“Tony!” Steve chastises.

Tony rolls his eyes. “Relax, Rogers.”

“No, Tony,” Steve says. “I think we need to talk about it.”

“Talk about what, exactly?” Tony challenges. “I don’t think there’s anything to talk about.”

“That’s the problem, isn’t it, Stark? Wanda says. “You don’t think.”

“No, Maximoff,” Tony says tiredly. “The problem tends to be that I think too much.” He turns back to Steve. “But I’ll give you this one. You have two minutes to say your piece, Rogers.”

“Talk about what, exactly?” Tony challenges. "I don't think there's anything to talk about.”

“We’re looking to make peace,” Steve starts. “Back to the way things were. We don’t want this… this wall, you’ve put between us.”

“I’ve put?” Tony asks.

Steve’s eyes narrow. “Yes, you, Tony. You made the choice to…to…keep us out.”

“Who made the choices that got us here in the first place?” Tony demands. “This is not all on me.”

“You made the choice to support the Accords, to tear this team apart!” The easy atmosphere, as tenuous as it had been, is snapped.

Tony sighs. “Really, Clint? Really? That’s where we’re taking this? I made the choice to support the will of one hundred seventeen countries for accountability and this is how you react?”

“You made the choice to turn us into a private army.”

Tony restrains himself from rolling his eyes. Barely. He didn’t plan to have this conversation tonight—or ever, if he actually got his way—but here it is. And it’s as asinine as he thought. “If you actually read the Accords, Barton, you’d know that that’s not true. We are the aggressors. We are the ones causing problems. We are not the innocent ones being picked on.”

Tony sometimes wonders if it’s an omega thing, that he gets this. That he gets wanting to put those who have the power to hurt you, who have a history of causing harm—intentional or not—in check. That he gets wanting to protect yourself. If that’s the reason he seems to be the only one of them to understand where the countries they tore about, and those that fear they’d be next, are coming from.

Then he decides he doesn’t care if it’s an omega thing, because bottom-line: Rhodey got it. Vision got it. One hundred seventeen countries worth of people got it. And that’s enough for him.

“We’re not causing problems, we’re solving them,” Steve protests.
“That’s not how most of the world sees it. And don’t they deserve to have a voice too?” Tony asks.

Natasha’s face clears. “I get it now.”

“Get what?”

“It’s an omega thing,” she says, and despite the fact that Tony was just thinking that, his hackles raise.

“Oh?” He says with forced calm. “Explain.”

“You’re so concerned with what the voiceless think,” she says. “You’re not in this to keep a hand on the wheel, you’re not in this to cushion the fall for us. You want to take power away from us.”

Steve’s eyes get wide. “Is that what you think, Tony?” he says. “Tony, we’re not like those alphas who hurt people. This isn’t the same thing at all. We help people. Take care of them. You have to see the difference.”

And with that they made this more like an “omega thing” than Tony could have ever imagined.

“Not all superheroes, huh?” They all just look at him. Of course, they don’t get the reference. “Fuck off,” he says, too exhausted to think of a better retort. “The Accords are reality, like it or not.” He stands up and walks away a few steps before stopping. “And if you think there’s a wall, maybe think long and hard about why I’d build one.”

The lab, Tony decides, is far safer. Really, he should never have left in the first place.”

He builds a prototype cell phone that probably won’t be mass-producible for five years, give or take a year. Still. Tony wants to make sure Stark Industries is as cutting edge as he can make it, for as long as he can make it.

FRIDAY beeps incessantly, signaling that Tony’s gotten a call from someone on his “do not ignore under any circumstances” list. That means it’s one of about four people, all of whom Tony mostly wants to talk to. He signals to accept, and a hologram of Peter appears.

“Hey, Pete,” he says, setting his tweezers aside. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Mr. Stark,” Peter says, grinning. His mask is pushed up around his nose, so either he’s just about to go out on patrol or he’s actively out and taking a break.

“Kid, you being careful?” Tony asks.

“Always,” Peter says.

“Peter.”

“I am, Mr. Stark,” he insists. “Really.”

Tony bites his lip. Not careful enough. Never careful enough. Not with the odds stacked the way they are.

Sometimes Tony wishes he managed to prevent the kid from superheroing. Really prevent him, put his foot down in a way Peter can’t just stubborn his way around.

But Peter’s Peter, and, well, telling the kid that he shouldn’t do it because he’s an omega is a lot
like telling him that he can’t do it because he’s an omega, and Tony won’t cross that line.

Tony’s meant to be inventing solutions around their problem. The fact that he hasn’t succeeded yet is a failure on his part, not the kid’s.

So he drops it. Against his better judgement, he drops it for the evening. “What do you need, kid?”

“Aunt May wants to know what happened to my internship. The, uh, real one.’

Shit, yeah, Tony realizes abruptly that, to May, it would like like he dropped her kid like a hot potato, now that the Avengers are back in his life.

“If you finangle me an invitation, I’ll come explain things to her,” Tony says. “But I’m also going to figure out some sort of plan. You can’t come here, that’s out of the question, but your education is important. Too important to allow the Avengers to fu—mess it up.”

“I can get you an invitation,” Peter says. “But you don’t have to worry about me, Mr. Stark, really, I know the Avengers put enough on your plate, and—“

“Hey, kid?” Tony interjects impulsively. “How about you call me Tony.”

“What?”

“Tony. It’s my name, and people I like get to call me that.”

“Oh, okay, Mr—Tony. Okay. I, uh—”

“And Peter?”

“Yeah?”

“I do worry about you,” Tony says. “I want to. Well, not want to worry, but I want to care. So. I do. Yeah. If you can let me know when you and May can have me over, I’d love to stop in. Eat her cooking—“

“—You don’t like her cooking, no one does—“

“—I’ll bring dessert. Or the meal. Whatever. But we can put a plan in place.”

“Sure, Mr—I’ll let you know, Tony,” Peter says, cheeks flushing the way they do when he’s overwhelmed.

“Be safe out there, kid,” Tony says, then disconnects the call.

Then sets aside the phone, Avengers equipment, Iron Man work, all SI projects, and instead pulls out anything and everything he has related to omegas and the alpha voice.

It’s four am. Tony’s gone through all his old research, gone through every file Stark Industries ever compiled on this type of tech. It feels like bashing his head against a brick wall.

What he needs is a break. What he needs is to remove himself from the situation, to re-think the problem from a different angle.

What he needs is Bruce, he thinks miserably. They had done some research into this. Sure, they
had focused on Avengers technology more than anything, but they had put their years of experience into this. Bruce had winced over Tony’s stop-gap measure, shook his head over the chemical formulas Tony and his hired teams had attempted and rejected. Pills, shots, supplements, microchips and surgeries.

All they’d done is reject things. It’s easier to prove that something doesn’t work than make something that does. There’s a trail of broken, rejected options, but Tony can’t tell where the trail is leading.

Maybe Bruce could tell. Except Bruce disappeared off the face of the earth, to such a deep extent that Tony isn’t entirely sure that that’s just a saying. The Hulk could certainly hold up to space.

It’s four in the morning, and Tony is alone, so Tony takes a walk.

The compound is still at night, the only time where it is that way. The machinery hums, the dull, recessed lighting gives everything a soft glow. Tony walks up the stairs, through the halls, tapping his badge against access panels and making his way towards…he doesn’t know where.

That conference room, where they first discussed the Accords. Ugh. Tony looks around the room, the chair where he felt things slipping out of his grasp. The table the actual team sat around, and that hurt to think about. Already excluded from his team.

Something moves, and Tony jumps, already activating the watch gauntlet.

“Hey,” a raspy voice says. “Sorry. Didn’t know I wasn’t allowed here.”

Barnes. Barnes, with under-eye circles Tony didn’t think the serum would allow, with sleep-mussed hair and soft sweatpants. “You’re allowed,” Tony says, brain catching up to what he sees. “Just didn’t expect you. What are you doing here?”

“Could ask the same of you.”

“I asked first,” Tony says stubbornly.

Barnes hefts a thick pack of papers. The Accords, Tony realizes. “I wake up from nightmares,” he says. “Every night. I see…you can guess. And I finally figured, why stare at the ceiling for the rest of the night, when I could do something more useful? Only Steve and his crew think the Accords are evil, won’t even entertain gettin’ a copy. Found one in here though, couple days ago.”

Tony blinks. That’s the most he’s ever heard Barnes say. Probably more than every other time the guy talked combined.

“And what do you think?”

Barnes shrugs. “Almost borin’ enough to put me back to sleep. Think I need a law degree to really understand them.”

“Fair enough,” Tony says.

“So, now it’s your turn,” Barnes prompts.

“Needed a walk,” Tony says shortly. He’s never been accused of being the restrained one in any group, but apparently between him and Barnes, he will be. Who would have thought.

“To here?”
“Wandering helps me focus, sometimes,” Tony says. “I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Wait,” Barnes says, then pauses. “Please. If you don’t mind.”

It’s the re-thinking, the careful intention to make this a choice, that makes Tony pause. “Okay, a minute,” Tony says, still guarded.

“Thank you,” Barnes says, seemingly sincere. “I was wonderin’...could you explain this to me?”

“So it’s not just bedtime reading?” Tony asks.

“There’s a library here,” Barnes points out. “If I actually just wanted somethin’ to read. Whole helluva lot more fun.”

“I could get you an actual lawyer,” Tony offers.

Barnes hangs his head slightly. “You’re allowed to say you don’t wanna talk to me, I’d understand, I ain’t gonna...gonna lash out or somethin’.”

“Good to have your reassurance,” Tony says dryly, although he is self-reflective enough to know that that was probably part of the problem. Omegas try to never say no directly. Even omegas like Tony Stark, who have to say it all the time. It’s tiresome and obnoxious and just plain draining, but it’s better than having some asshole press the issue, whether with their voice or their hands. Let them think they still got the better end of the deal, and, as exhausting as it is to get there, Tony’d still be safe.

He sighs. “I can explain some of it, but I use lawyers to get through this. Legal documents have that kind of effect.”

“I’m not askin’ for miracles,” Barnes promises.

“What questions do you have?”

“What happens when the council ain’t fast enough?”

“That’s an amendment, we were trying to force through. Well, not me anymore, I guess. But the idea is that whatever country we’d be entering gets to make the call. If aliens land in South Africa, only the leader of South Africa needs to make the call. If we suspect HYDRA is establishing a lab in Cape Town, they make the call. If for some reason they can’t—they’re incapacitated, communication is lost, they’re the guilty party, whatever—that’s when the council steps up. Or, if South Africa gives an answer that the Avengers strongly disagree with, they could appeal to the Council. The Council is meant to—to mediate, to solve problems, so the representatives of the people have some level of control over the Avenger’s actions. If South Africa asked for the Avengers to, say, quash a rebellion, that would go through the council. And the answer would probably be no.”

“Why?”

Tony shrugs. “We’re supposed to be reserved for a larger magnitude. Plus, have you seen the effort it takes to get the UN to actually intervene? They’re not going to go throwing the Avengers into other nation’s business for trifles.”

“I haven’t.”

“Hm?”
“Seen what it takes to get the UN to intervene,” Barnes says in his raspy voice. “The UN didn’t even exist when I fell.”

“Right,” Tony says awkwardly. “Well. Other questions?”

“If...if someone dies. Casualty of war. What happens?”

“That’s what the council is really for,” Tony says, shrugging. “Internal review process. Was it negligence, was it avoidable? Is someone at fault, was everything possible at that moment done to prevent it? Do we need punishment, better training, better preparation? Most militaries and paramilitaries have this type of structure.”

Barnes nods. “It’s not like what Steve said.”


Barnes nods. “I shouldn’t keep you,” he says. “You said you were goin’ for a walk.”

Tony startles. “I…yeah, have to get back to work.” He forgot. Forgot his kid, forgot his kid’s needs. Forgot the needs of a quarter of the population for a few moments there.

“Hey, Stark?”

“Yeah?”

“You ever need a walk again, you know where to find me,” Barnes offers.

Tony nods, not capable of much more, and darts out of the room.
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

The Accords Council, in their prejudice, throw a wrench into Tony's life. Tony is trying to rebuild that life in the meantime.

Chapter Notes

Hi all!

In a move that I wished surprised me, I have decided once a week is no longer enough. As such, I will be posting Wednesday and Saturday until this is done.

This chapter introduces some further plot points, which are deeply prejudiced and not something Tony is a fan of. There is a lot of discussion of prejudice. Tony talks about the past, including him and Steve, a little bit.

Bucky's in this chapter again, even if he and Tony are slow-moving glaciers.

Rhodey makes him lunch. That, right there, is the first bad sign, because Rhodey doesn't cook. Neither does Tony, really, but they both have one thing in common; if they’re cooking, it means they feel bad about something.

And then Rhodey makes spaghetti and meatballs, classic and simple, and Tony knows something is really, incredibly wrong.

“Out with it,” Tony demands, waving his fork around. “I won’t be able to enjoy your guilt-food until this isn’t hanging over our heads.”

Rhodey sighs, then takes a seat. “New rumors.”

“I don’t deal with rumors anymore,” Tony says. “That’s what I have a PR team for.”

“Not that type of rumor. About the Accords.”

“Oh,” Tony says. “What did they do now?”

“Don’t freak out.”

“See, that’s basically ensuring that I’ll—“

“They’re talking about mating requirements again.”

Tony gets very, very still. “I talked them down from that.”

“They’re not listening to you anymore,” Rhodey says. He says it gently, but it still feels like a slap
in the face, the pain appearing a moment or two later, sharp and bleeding through his entire body.

“Oh, fuck,” Tony says.

“Nothing’s official yet,” Rhodey hastily says. “But, uh. From what I hear. They’re not just throwing the idea around.”

“What kind of fucking world —“

“A very, very messed up one,” Rhodey says softly. “But you already knew that.”


“Quit,” Rhodey says immediately. “Walk off, tell them to go fuck themselves.”

Tony immediately shakes his head. “That’s what they fucking want,” he says. “They don’t—they don’t care about my safety in the field, or…or liability, or protecting me for my potential mate. They want to make conditions they know I won’t meet, because they don’t want me on the field.”

It’s mind-boggling, to Tony, except that it’s absolutely not. Sure, he houses the team, has historically paid for essentially all their needs. He equips them. He’s damn good on the field himself, and was a fine leader when he had to be. He’s the public face, on good days and bad.

But he’s an omega and they’re alphas and some instinctual part of them is offended he won’t bend when they ask. Social order exists for a reason, Howard used to say, and it’s true, even if Tony privately thinks it only exists so alphas won’t lose their fucking minds.

Rhodey nods. “I could…”

“No,” Tony says firmly. “No, Rhodey, you’re not going to—“

“It’s not a sacrifice like you make it sound, it’s not like I’m looking for someone else, and—“

“But you might, at some point, you might want someone. And I won’t stand in the way of that. And, hell, Rhody, someday I might want someone, and I got over my crush on you too long ago for it to be us. We’re brothers, right? It’d be incestuous.”

“You had a crush on me?” Rhodey asks quietly, derailed.

Tony blinks. “You didn’t know?”

“Jeanette said, but I thought she was fucking with me, and—“

Tony snorts. “You should listen to your sister, Rhody. She’s right more often than not.” He pauses. “Didn’t realize you didn’t know. Thought you were letting me down easy and I was kinda grateful for that. I knew there wasn’t gonna be anything there, and this way, we got—well, this,” he says, gesturing expansively.

Rhodey sits back. “Why?”

“What fourteen year old wouldn’t have a crush on the exact type of person they’ve been told they’re supposed to love who, for the first time ever, actually treats them like a human being?” Tony deflects. Then pauses. Rhodey deserves the truth. “I did. You were—what I was supposed to want and what I actually wanted. But I never would have done anything, because you didn’t want it, and—well, even if I wanted you I didn’t, I wouldn’t want an alpha.”
“At all?” Rhodey asks shrewdly.

Tony shrugs. “I’m not, like, anti-alpha? I’m physically attracted to them too. But I’m…I won’t put myself in that position.” He imagines FRIDAY shocking the hell out of him all the time, every moment of every day, every time his partner slips up. He imagines never being able to have Peter around again, because he doesn’t trust his safety. He imagines the constant fear, waiting for the other shoe to drop. **Build this. Do that with the company. Sign over your money. Quit the Avengers. Go to this fight. Roll over, Tony. Stop protesting so much.**

Tony doesn’t put himself into corners. People already try to push him there far too often.

Besides, Tony’s tried and failed. “The one time I gave it a try, it didn’t work out too well for me,” he notes. “Not that I think you’d ever be like that. But. It’s just…sitting there. The feeling. That that could happen again.”

Rhodey looks at him with such…it’s not pity, it’s softer than that. Sympathy. Rhodey looks at him sympathetically.

Tony clears his throat. “Back to the original point,” Tony says. “I need options.”

“Well, you can find someone you trust,” Rhodey says. “Someone you could use, maybe. But even if that wasn’t…skeazy, that’s also giving into them. Letting them have their way.”

“Tacitly condoning the idea that I need an alpha to watch out for me,” Tony agrees. “Yeah, no.”

“We need a really good campaign, then,” Rhodey says. “You have a lot of people to convince.”

“Rhodey-bear, I don’t even know where to start,” Tony moans.

“Yeah. Fighting centuries of discrimination will do that to you. We’ll figure it out.”

“We’ll?”

“You said it yourself, brother,” Rhodey smiles, and, despite the horrid news and looming dread, Tony can’t help but smile back.

Peter finangles the dinner invite for four days after he and Tony spoke. Tony brings Chinese food. Dinner’s nice. May and Tony let Peter talk, mostly, as he tells them about his clubs and his shop class, his friends and his teachers.

“Okay, kiddo,” May says when it looks like even Peter—a kid going through puberty and superhero metabolism, all at once—can’t pack away anymore food. “Go do your homework. Mr. Stark and I need to talk.”

Peter waves. “See you later, Tony,” he says, before going off to his room.

May raises an eyebrow. “Tony, huh?” She asks Tony softly.

Tony shrugs. He doesn’t offer an answer. May doesn’t seem to need one. She smiles. “I’m glad you found him, you know,” she says. “You mean a lot of him. Having you—you meant a lot to him before he even met you. We encouraged it. Wanted him to know nothing would stand in the way of his dreams. And now he knows you, and he’s determined to prove he can live up to that.”
Tony bites his lip. Wants to tell her not to put that on the kid, because the odds are so stacked against him that he very well might fail. That the mountains are huge and it’s not fair to Peter. But then again, if they don’t push him up, the world will just push him down, and that’s even less fair.

“I’m gonna sort out his internship,” he says, an abrupt change of subject. “It’s just taking a little while. ‘Cause I don’t want him anywhere near the Compound.”

“Peter said. Tony, if you’re that afraid…”

“They don’t want to do harm,” Tony interrupts. “Their ideas of what barriers should be are a little warped, though. They call it for your own good and pat themselves on the back for it.”

“You have experience,” she notes.

“Enough,” Tony agrees. He suppresses a shiver. “So I won’t put Peter back there, for any reason. But I think I can set up lab space just for us at the SI offices, so he could come there. It’s safer.”

“He’s worried about your safety.”

“They can’t hurt me,” Tony says. “I’ve…protected myself.”

“In a way you won’t protect Peter,” she says. “So I assume it’s awful.” May is shrewd, Tony will give her that.

“Yeah,” Tony agrees. “Got it in one. Still. It’s not just for them.”

“No, I imagine you run into a lot of asshole alphas,” May says. She seems to take a shaky breath. “Tony, tell me honestly. What’s going to happen when he’s out…doing the thing we don’t talk about, and someone finds out he’s an omega?”

Tony swallows. Then his biggest fear comes true. “I’m working on that,” he says.

“But until then…” Tony shakes his head, and May sighs. “If I could make him stop, I would.”

“You and me both,” Tony admits. “But he’s stubborn.”

“And I rather him tell me about it than sneak out again,” she agrees. She pauses, then admits, “I’m worried.”

“You and me both,” Tony echoes.

“I have no idea if I’m doing any of this right,” she says.

“Doing what?”

“All of this. Raising my husband’s brother’s kid. An omega kid. An omega superhero kid. He’s so damn smart and I don’t know how to protect him. I don’t want him to be limited because of how he was born, but what if that just puts him in danger? What if I hurt him?”

And Tony wonders about these things, every damn day, but May is Peter’s family, the one who’s always there for him, and Tony has answers. Not necessarily good ones, but answers.

“The thing about omega kids,” Tony says, “In my experience, at least, is that they like having their choice. And everything that’s happened so far is Peter’s choice. That’s really all you can do.” May nods shakily. “And, May? When I was still a kid, my dad signed a contract to sell me off to some malleable alpha who could have been his successor when I turned eighteen. I see kids every damn
day whose parents try to beat it out of them. I’ve seen people on goddamn leashes. I’ve seen kids who are never sent to school, never given any prospects, just left to wait to be mated off, because there’s no sense in educating someone who is basically property. As long as you avoid that, I think you’re on the right track.”

“That’s such a low bar,” she whispers, shaking her head. Her hands are tight around the table’s edge.

“Yeah, well,” Tony shrugs awkwardly. “I guess slowly raising that bar is how we make progress.”

So now Tony has two projects, figuring out a way to protect his kid—and himself and a quarter of the world’s population—and trying to find a way to tell the council to go fuck itself and maybe move omega rights forward in the process.

And he isn’t making much progress on either.

Because honestly, the best solutions he’s seen to the problem with the alpha voice still involve maiming. And taking Peter’s hearing away isn’t an option Tony’s putting on the table.

There might be something, with microchips and blocking signals to the brain, but Tony’s still working out how to get them to block only the right signals, and how to do it before the voice can have an effect. Not to mention that it would require a pretty intense surgery.

Tony sighs and balls up the research, rubbing a hand over his face as he tells FRIDAY to clear the hologram. “Time for a walk, boss?” She asks.

Tony blinks suspiciously, looking over to the camera he knows FRIDAY is watching him from. “You’re planning something.”

“No,” she says. “I am anticipating something.”

“Which is?”

“Would you like to check out the conference room?” FRIDAY asks.

“No one programmed you to be evasive,” Tony grumbles, but he gets up and stretches, popping his back before heading towards the door. He hesitates. “What time is it?”

“Two in the morning, Boss. A remarkably restrained hour for you.”

“Sass, sass, sass. All I get around here,” Tony says, leaving the lab and sealing it off behind him.

“I learned from you,” FRIDAY says.

Tony’s suspicious, but he also knows FRIDAY would never even contemplate hurting him, so he does head in the direction of the conference room. When he gets there, he’s not really surprised to see Barnes again.

The man looks up. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Tony says. “Sorry, uh—mind if I crash?”

“Another walk?”
Tony shrugs. “That time of night. Another nightmare?”

Barnes shrugs. “That time of night.”

Tony settles into a chair, a good distance away. It’s bizarre, to be in a room with Bucky Barnes. First of all, the man is one hundred years old. He’s a war hero, in all the old footage Howard had lying around. But then…

Tony takes a deep breath. It’s not Barnes’ fault that Maria Stark’s death was as miserable as her life. It’s not Barnes’ fault that Tony can’t blame Howard for that too.

Tony jerks his head towards the tablet in Barnes’ hand. “See you’ve abandoned the Accords.”

“‘M reading what people haveta say ‘bout them,” Barnes says.

“And?”

“And what?”

“And what’d you find?”

Barnes shrugs. “Mixed bag. But honestly, pro-accords people write better arguments.”

Tony bites back the smile that wants to appear. “Yeah,” he agrees. “And…where are you landing?”

“I don’t actually gotta make up my mind for a while yet,” Barnes says. “’Cause I’m not cleared for any type of duty.”

“Mm,” Tony says. “But when you are?”

“What if I don’t wanna be…this…anymore?” Barnes retorts.

Tony finds himself intrigued, despite himself, and leans forward in his chair. “And what do you wanna do?”

“I was herding goats in Wakanda,” Barnes says. “I liked that.” When Tony does nothing but sit in a kind of surprised silence, Barnes actually smiles. “Nah, I…I don’t know. It’s kinda all I know, you know? But also…there’s bad parts of me, and I don’t wanna fan those flames.”

Tony blinks. For a brainwashed assassin who Tony tried to kill two years ago, Barnes is remarkably forthcoming, remarkably emotionally cognizant. Certainly better that Tony. Don’t they say that omegas are the emotional ones, and alphas the emotional idiots?

Barnes shifts and sets his tablet aside. “Were you lookin’ for me?” He asks.

“What kind of alpha gives up a fight?” Tony blurts, completely ignoring the question.

It’s Barnes’ turn to be off-balance. “Not every alpha is a soldier,” he says. “That’s some antiquitated bullshit.”

“Yeah, well, the propaganda says it’s in your guys’ nature to fight. Business, military and law enforcement, and politics, those are the three common career paths for alphas. Because you guys say you have to fight, have to protect, or you combust or something.”

Barnes shrugs. “You of all people know propaganda is propaganda. Worthless.”
Tony shrugs in turn. “I actually am a homemaker,” he admits. “In a weird way.”

“And I actually am a soldier,” Barnes points out. “In a weird way. But I’m other things too. And so are you.”

“Eh, not if they get their way.”

“Who’s they?” Barnes asks.

Tony hesitates, then figure Barnes will hear soon enough. It’ll get around. “They’re putting a mating requirement on the Accords. So I’ll either be controlled or driven out.”

“They’re already trying to drive you out,” Barnes says, and Tony spares a moment to think of how Barnes, just from listening in on their conversation, knows this. Gets this.

“Not far enough for them, apparently.”

“That’s bullshit.”

Tony smiles, all sharp and a little desperate. “Change your feelings about the Accords?”

“Does it change yours?”

“It makes me want to repulsor the ass of a whole host of committee members.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

Tony shrugs. “Your friends called it an omega thing.”

“Bullshit.”

“They’re not entirely wrong,” Tony admits, and can’t believe he’s baring small little chunks of his soul, here in this mostly dark room at what must be close to three in the morning. To his parents’ killer.

But Barnes is—soft, in a way most alphas aren’t, and perceptive, in a way so few are. Maybe it’s the dark, but his eyes make him look like he’s really listening.

“Explain,” Barnes says. “Please.”

Barnes’ voice is so far from the Voice, but that he still takes the time to tack on the please, is definitely something Tony notices.

“When you’re omega, you go your entire life with people telling you, sure, it’s not what you want, but it’s what you need. They know best. They’re doing it with your best interest in mind. And then they put you on your knees and tell you to shut up and you do it, you have to. Or worse.”

Worse, like being in an Afghani cave with terrorists telling him to build him a Jericho missile, worse, like knowing he’ll do it, oh, god, he’ll build them a Jericho and he’ll hate himself forever, never forgive himself for giving in, but he has no other choice. Thank god for Yinsen, Tony thinks, another soft alpha. Yinsen and Rhodey, who make up the holy pair of alphas Tony’s trusted. Yinsen, who had used his voice even when he sounded like he hated it, to tell Tony to snap out of it.

Worse, like the son of a friend of a friend of the family, who came up behind Tony at his parents’ funeral, whispering in his ear about how he’d take care of Tony, the company, how Tony didn’t
need to worry, about how Tony just had to give in. Obie saved him that day, and Tony had been so pathetically, desperately grateful. Obie had saved his golden goose, Tony knows now. But still. At least Tony was spared that. Instead, he just had the experience that convinced him he needed to step back from the company until he perfected some way to protect himself.

Tony shakes his head. “Anyways. It’s like that. It’s walking into other countries and telling them it’s not what they want, but we know better and it’s what they need, and we’re stronger so just accept it. It’s definitely an omega thing.”

“Not only omegas recognize it.”

“Not only omegas have had their rights stomped all over,” Tony points out. “The first countries calling for the Accords, they were the ones who had the most to fear.”

“It’s a human decency thing,” Barnes concludes.

Tony shrugs. “Plenty of people think they’re decent and don’t see it.” Steve, hangs between them. Steve on all counts, here. Tony doesn’t say it, wouldn’t dare.

Barnes quirks his lips like he knows anyways. Then he sobers. “How are you gettin’ around that?”

“Around what?”

“The mating requirement.”

“Oh. That. I don’t know yet.”

“When are they…”


“No me.”

“No?” Tony asks, quirking an eyebrow. “I would imagine, considering everything…”

“You have a reason to hate me, not the other way around,” Barnes says.

Tony immediately shakes his head. “I don’t…it’s not like that. Siberia was…I broke down. You know what they say about omegas, so emotional, can’t control themselves…”

“Bullshit,” Barnes says. “Have you ever met a more over-emotional group than alphas who think they’re entitled to something?”

Tony can’t help but smile. He likes this alpha, despite every warning sign telling him to back off. “I broke down,” he repeats. “It was hard to…process. That Steve knew, more than anything.” Tony hesitates, because it might be some massive secret, Steve might not want anyone to know. “Did Steve tell you…about us?”

“No?” Tony asks, quirking an eyebrow. “I would imagine, considering everything…”

“You have a reason to hate me, not the other way around,” Barnes says.

Tony immediately shakes his head. “I don’t…it’s not like that. Siberia was…I broke down. You know what they say about omegas, so emotional, can’t control themselves…”

“We were…kinda a thing?” Tony says, questioning more than stating. He sighs. “I mean, not, like, a mated pair. I didn’t want that—don’t want that—and I thought Steve was one of the rair good alphas, who respected what I wanted. He was patient. I think he thought we’d mate eventually. I think I did too. Which is why it was such a slap in the face that he’d keep something like that from me. Because, you know, we were partners, and I thought we both understood what that meant.
Clearly, we had very different definitions going.”

Barnes is frozen. “He never mentioned it.”

“Well, sometimes we don’t talk about things we regret,” Tony says with forced lightness. “I’ve been wondering, though, does Steve bat for other teams, is that why he went after you so hard, or is he too much of a control freak to ever be with another alpha?”

“It ain’t ‘cause of me,” Barnes says. “Don’t know about the rest.” He swallows. “I didn’t…what he did, that’s unforgivable.”

“Which is why I haven’t forgiven him,” Tony says. “One thing people can say about me, I tend not to make the same mistake twice. Not when there are so many new mistakes to make.” Tony winces. “I’d appreciate if you didn’t bring up the forced mating to Steve. Not that he won’t find out, but the longer I can go without him trying to slip me offers of reconciliation so he can ‘help me out’ on this one, the better.”

“I won’t spill your secret,” Barnes says. “Just to go back a few minutes…you don’t hate me?”

“No,” Tony says softly. Even if he did, even if he did still harbor some hate for the man, it’s been eroding away, because Barnes is soft and surprising. Because he reads the Accords and calls gender roles bullshit and liked herding goats. Because he says please and listens to Tony. It wasn’t his fault that Maria Stark died like that. “I blame HYDRA. I hate HYDRA.”

“Got somethin’ in common, then,” Barnes says.


“Tony.”

“What?”

“Call me Tony,” Tony says, and he must be more tired than he thinks. He doesn’t take it back.

“Okay, Tony. It’s three thirty, and somethin’ tells me you haven’t slept in a long damn time.”

Tony gets up without protest. Not an order. Not even a hint of an order. Just an observation. “Good night, Barnes.”

“Bucky.”

“Good night, Bucky.”

Once he’s left the conference room, FRIDAY pipes up in his ear. “Did I do good, Boss?”

Tony manages to smile, following the low hallways lights FRIDAY flicks on on his way to his bedroom. “Yeah, FRI. That was good.”
Chapter five

Chapter Summary

Tony has a moment with the Accords Council, before having a moment with Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Hello all--

Big shout out to my sister, who, in addition to being the first person to read this, lent me her computer so I could post both times this week.

We're getting deeper into the Tony/Bucky thing! I've added the "slow burn" tag per popular request. We're gonna need it.

Warnings for this chapter: While Ross doesn't do anything inappropriate, he is a dick and very slimy. We're poking at Bucky's arm, just in case that type of thing makes you uncomfortable.

Thank you for all the lovely comments, I really appreciate them!

If you enjoy this, drop me a line!

Tony gets dressed in the morning very carefully. A silver suit, impeccably tailored, shouting money, over a deep blue shirt and silver and grey pinstripe tie. Dark, dark sunglasses. Black shoes that cost as much as some cars. And, as always, FRIDAY in his ears.

He shows up in armor, letting it retract away, making sure he has an audience. It’s an impressive image. He knows it is, he built it to be. People stare.

Good.

Tony strolls through the halls of one of New York’s most significant if underlooked landmarks. The council is meeting in a conference room on the fourth floor of the UN building, and while no one invited him, no one explicitly uninvited him either, and that’s good enough for Tony.

Tony throws open the door just as the meeting’s about to start. Good.

“O—Omega Stark!”

“Good morning,” Tony says as brightly as he can. “I know we’re under the understanding that I’m, ahem, resting, but I’ve heard some concerning rumors and I’ve come to ensure they’re false.”

“Sit down, Stark,” Ross barks. “Before you make more of an interruption of yourself.”

“Secretary Ross, it’s highly irregular—“
“He won’t leave,” Ross interrupts. “Let’s do what we can to mitigate the annoyance.”

Tony frowns, but bites back the comments at how incredibly, offensively rude that is.

He takes a seat. “We’ll put you on the docket,” the council member from Australia says.

So Tony does his best not to drum his fingers against the table as they have their discussion. Today seems to be a discussion for where the council’s official meeting place should be. Tony understands this to be an incredibly critical diplomatic decision, but he can’t help but be driven a little crazy, waiting for them to get down to the more pressing concern.

The meeting is scheduled to last until two. Predictably, at one fifty, they turn to him. “And our final addition to the docket,” one member says. “Omega Stark?” They all turn to look at him, slow and condescending.

Tony grits his teeth at the address. “Thank you,” he says. “I know we’re short on time, so I’ll get to the point. It’s come to my attention that there’s talk of adding a mating requirement to the Accords again.”

There’s a shift in the room, almost imperceptible, but nevertheless there. “Stark…”

Not Omega Stark. Good.

“Council member,” Tony replies. “I’d like to get to the bottom of these false allegations.” He pauses a beat. “Unless they aren’t false.”

“Stark, you know damn well—“

“Did you remove me from negotiations just so you could add these regulations?” Tony asks, still pleasant but with the storm brewing underneath.

“Stark, be reasonable. Your personal feelings aside, the studies say that omegas just don’t have the capacity to take care of themselves in these situations. That most if not all of them crave an alpha to take the lead in something as stressful as this. Bottom line, they’re not ready to be in the field without some looking after.”

Tony wants to pull out a four-hour lecture with slides about how biased those studies are, about the how data is cherry-picked with a massive confirmation bias, about who pays for those studies. He bites his tongue, literally, to prevent it all from spilling out of his mouth.

“We’re doing our best to…” Tony tunes him out, brain spinning. The rumors are true.

“I flew a nuclear warhead into space,” Tony says. “I’ve taken down supervillains, helped take down HYDRA bases. I helped save the president of the United States while taking down AIM. I helped save Sokovia and Johannesburg, I am the leader of the Avengers. What do your studies say about that?”

Well. Maybe he didn’t stop himself as well as he wanted.

“That may be, but you also helped build Ultron, who endangered Sokovia and Johannesburg—and Ultron’s team used another out-of-control omega to put the lives of the people of Johannesburg at risk. You impulsively invited AIM to your front door. You are impulsive and a danger to others without anyone to watch over you,” Ross sneers.

Tony fights the furious flush. His personality failings are because of his gender. They always are.
His flaws, his stubbornness, his mental illness, his reactions to prejudice—it’s all a character flaw and it’s all because he’s an omega, meant to make omegas everywhere look bad. But alphas, it doesn’t apply to them. Sure, Steve is stubborn and domineering and righteous—traits alphas are actually raised into having—but they don’t reflect badly on his gender. That’s just for omegas.

“The bottom line is, this is a mission of accountability, and we expect everyone to be accountable.”

“I am accountable,” Tony bites out. “To this organization.”

“To your alpha,” the council member corrects. “That’s the way of it. Omegas are accountable to their alphas. You can’t fight what nature intended.”

Tony’s pretty sure they’re wrong about what nature intended, because he might curse Mother Nature as a bitch but he’s pretty sure that she’s not this bad. That, somewhere along the way, humans had colossally misinterpreted her message.

“The fact remains that I’m an asset to your team,” he tries one last time.

“That may be true,” one of the council member says, inclining her head in acknowledgement. “But the facts are clear. You could benefit from more control. And, Omega Stark—“They’re back to that, Tony nearly flinches—“You can’t expect all omegas to be like you.”

Tony stills. They’re offering him an out, almost. A way to say he is different, he is special, he deserves to be on the team.

“I think you underestimate omegas,” Tony says finally. “And I think our time is up.” He stands up and walks through the door, purposefully keeping his steps even even as his mind reels.

Ross catches his arm as soon as he walks out of the room. “Walk with me,” he says curtly.

Tony shakes his arm loose. “Make an appointment with my assistant.”

“Stark, I think you know what’s on the line here. Walk with me.”

Tony debates it for a minute, then follows along. Ross is…Ross. A bit of a nightmare, but not someone Tony’s personally afraid of.

Ross doesn’t have an office at the UN, so they end up in another conference room. “I can solve this problem for you,” Ross says.

Tony sits down, sprawling artfully. “That’s what I like about you, Thaddeus, never beat around the bush.”

“Do you want my help or not?”

Tony snorts. “Wait, let me guess; you have an offer for me?”

Ross glowers. “It would keep you on this team.”

Tony sits down, sprawling artfully. “That’s what I like about you, Thaddeus, never beat around the bush.”

“Do you want my help or not?”

Tony snorts. “Wait, let me guess; you have an offer for me?”

Ross glowers. “It would keep you on this team.”

“And under your thumb.”

“Hey, you’ve had your chances. I thought you and the shield-wielding wonder were going to mate, but he chose another alpha over you. If you and Rhodes were going to mate, you would have done it already. You are out of options if you want to stay on this team.”

“I could mate a beta,” Tony says mildly. “Or, of course, another omega.”
“I’m under the impression Potts turned you down flat,” Ross says, then looks down his nose at Tony. “Got a new boy-toy now and everything. Hogan, right?” He says, lips in a cruel sneer and Tony does his damn best to hide the flinch at Ross knowing more about Pepper’s love life than he does. Her date. Her date was Happy. Happy Hogan. He can’t even process that right now. “And let’s not even pretend you’re ready to face the social suicide of that option.”

“Pepper isn’t the only beta out there,” Tony says, as neutral as he can be, leaving the omega option off the table for now.

“You know the council won’t go for that. It’s an alpha or nothing, the way nature intended it.”

Tony blinks up at him, all smooth innocence and guile. “That sounds like a limitation on my rights. As if forcing me to find someone wasn’t enough…”

“There’s a natural order to things,” Ross interrupts. “That’s just how it is, Stark, accept facts. You might have been sheltered because of Daddy’s money, but omegas belong to alphas. It keeps the world turning, packs focused, families growing. Omegas function better in pack units.”

“Ross, you’re starting to lose the only quality about you I’ve ever liked,” Tony warns. “Get to the point.”

“I’ll mate you,” Ross says. “I’ll keep you on the team, I’ll let you keep your company.”

Tony snorts. “And, let me guess. In response you want me as your poster boy for the way you think the Accords should be. And a big, fat, exclusive weapons contract.”

“Is it so big a loss?”

Turns out, there’s a second quality Tony likes about Ross. He’s an honest man, not one for subterfuge.

But that’s about all he likes. The rest leaves him physically uncomfortable, skin prickling and stomach turning.

Tony stands up. “Ross, any mating that’s viewed as a loss on any level isn’t one I’ll ever be entering,” Tony says. He extends a hand. “You and your committee will hear from my attorneys.”

“Stark—“

Tony walks away, head held high and back straight even as his mind reels. It’s that bad, then. It’s that bad and that sure that Ross thinks he has Tony cornered, that this is the type of deal Tony would go for because Tony would have no choice.

They’re trying to put him between a rock and a hard place, put him between awful options, all of them which leave them winning and him defeated.

Too bad for them, then, that Tony—omega Tony, weak-willed, home-maker, out-of-control, impulsive, Tony—has always been good at finding the third option.

Tony calls his attorney in the car.

“What are my options?” He asks, once he’s done explaining the Council’s threat.

The line is silent for a moment. “I’ll look into it.”
“You don’t think there are any options,” Tony surmises.

“Christ, I said I’d look into it.”

“Jeffrey. Do not…just tell me the damn truth.”

Jeffrey sighs so loud it feels like he’s breathing right next to Tony’s ear. “Look, you’ve already been the near-victim of one forced mating. You know we’ve progressed to it being illegal to sell someone in America, but any level of coercion and we all just look the other way. We still demand our omega Olympic athletes, the few of them there are, are mated or traveling with alpha guardians, and let’s be real, being an athlete is not of the same caliber as being a superhero.”

“So you’re saying I’m stuck with this,” Tony surmises.

The beta groans. “I said, Mr. Stark, let me look into it.”

The call ends soon after, with Tony knowing nothing more, left with vague promises. It’s not that he doesn’t think they’ll come through—Jeffrey and his firm have been Tony’s go-to legal team when he’s talking civil rights for nearly five years now—it’s just that, when Jeffrey thinks they’re backed into a corner…well. They’re backed into a corner.

By the time Tony gets back to the compound, he wants one of two things. One, he wants a shower, to wash the stink and feel of Ross and the Council off of him. But that will inevitably end with him crying in the shower, and feeling like shit for that after.

Which leaves the second option, hitting something. So Tony throws his suit jacket and tie to the side and, not even bothering to change, tapes up his hands to square up against the bag in the gym. He’s dripping sweat, the outfit is definitely ruined, and his knuckles are sore when he hears footsteps behind him. “Gonna cut that bag a break?”

The voice is soft and, Tony thinks, deliberately far away, not getting in his space without giving warning. “Barnes,” he acknowledges.

“Asked you to call me Bucky.”

“Bucky,” Tony corrects. “Something I can do for you?”

“I was just comin’ for a workout,” Bucky says, and some part of him sounds…amused. Tony’s hackles raise.

“Yeah, well, wait your turn,” Tony snaps, finally turning away from the bag.

Bucky is dressed for the gym, unlike Tony. He also has his hands up. “Not sayin’ anything,” he says. “I don’t need that bag, don’t worry. You just keep going as long as you want.”

Tony turns back to his bag and gets back into it, settling back into his rhythm and breathing. He’s sweating everywhere, probably does desperately need that shower now, but at least he doesn’t feel close to tears. Not anymore.

In a few hours, he will again. Tony knows from experience. They say that’s an omega thing—to cry, to be that emotional, to feel soft emotions at all—and Tony’s not sure if that’s true, just knows he absolutely does have another omega trait, even if he only allows himself to have it behind
closed doors.

“Wanna spar?”

“Huh?”

“C’mon, Tony,” Bucky coaxes, voice soft and gentle. “I’m at least a moving target. It’s a more fair fight than that bag.”

“Trust me to hit you?” Tony asks.

Bucky snorts. “Think that question should go the other way around.” And before Tony can even get upset about the vaguest implication that this might be about gender, Bucky continues. “You might have tried to kill me, but you didn’t try very hard. And we said that’s behind us. Meanwhile, I’m a former assassin who beat up Captain America. And you. I beat you up. Twice. Right?”

“I held my own,” Tony mutters.

“Remarkably well for a baseline human,” Bucky agrees. “‘Specially that day at the UN. I remembered that when I woke up. Admired that a lot. So. Wanna fight?”

Tony shrugs. “Sure,” he says. “Moving target might be nice.”

“You say go, and you say stop, Tony,” Bucky says, kicking off his sneakers to avoid leaving bruises.

“Try not to smash my brain around, I hear Pepper likes that part of me.”

“Pepper your girl?”

“Pepper’s my boss,” Tony says. He puts his hands up. “Okay, go.”

Bucky starts with a punch, a classic haymaker, flesh hand first. Tony dodges, weaves, and returns with an uppercut once he’s close. Bucky neatly side steps.

They go around for several minutes, with Bucky landing several blows on Tony’s torso. He’s pulling his punches, but Tony can’t find it in himself to be mad, considering he’s relatively confident he knows what that arm can do. And he landed a few blows of his own, which Bucky did not purposefully let in, so Tony feels fine about himself.


“You alright?”

“I’m not that old.” Tony straightens up. “I’m fine.”

Bucky’s eyes crinkle when he smiles. “No, you’re not old,” he agrees. “You’re tired. Wasted a lot of energy on that poor, defenseless bag ‘fore you got to me. That was good.”

“Be better if your arm didn’t lag.”

“What?”

“That arm? Lagged. That’s why I got through there.”

“Maybe you’re just good.”
“Maybe your arm is just broken,” Tony retorts.

“Princess Shuri made it, though,” Bucky says, clearly allowing distress to creep up onto him. “It’s not…It’s not supposed to do that.”

“Mmm, Wakandan technology,” Tony says, nodding. “Well, all technology needs maintenance. When’d she put it on you, anyways?”

Bucky thinks. “Two weeks before we left?”

“I doubt she even managed to finish calibrating it, then,” Tony says, frowning. “You should give her a call. See what she can do. Maybe she can fly out, or you can get a pass to fly back.”

“Oh, I—sure.”

“What?” Tony asks, suspicious now.

“I just…Thought you were offerin’ to do it,” Bucky admits, and Tony has to admit that he’s so incredibly, absolutely charmed by the way Bucky blushes.

“That’s a lotta assumptions,” Tony says finally.

“I know, and I’m sorry, but…”

“First, you’re assuming I could even understand the arm. There’s no promises I can, Wakanda was so isolated that they developed everything incredibly differently than we did. Then, you’re assuming the Princess wouldn’t object to me looking at her tech. I’m gonna say that’s proprietary stuff. Third, well…that would take me assuming you trusted me to work on your arm.”

“I do trust you,” Bucky says. “I can…ask the Princess about the rest?”

“You want me to do it?” Tony asks.

“If you wanna do it,” Bucky back-tracks.

“I…let me know what the Princess says,” Tony manages, before running off for his lab and the shower waiting for him.

When he steps out of the shower, FRIDAY has a message waiting. “Boss? Sergeant Barnes says Princess Shuri has given her permission.”

“He called Wakanda?”

“That is where the Princess currently is, Boss.”

“Smartass,” Tony mutters, pulling on pants. “When…does he still want me to do this for him?”

“He is wondering if you would be willing, Boss.”

“Ask him when and where.”

He pulls on a shirt and starts making up a toolkit to bring to Barnes, anything and everything he might need during the process, when FRIDAY responds. “He says he’ll be in the conference room in an hour, Boss, if that suffices.”
“Do just fine,” Tony says, starting to pile tools into a toolbox.

Tony shows up ten minutes early to the conference room to set up. There’s still light coming in from outside, the sun just setting now and turning the sky a vibrant glowing red.

Bucky walks in exactly at seven pm. “You’re okay with this?”

“I’m an engineer,” Tony says. “The Princess was okay with this?”

Bucky nods. “She says she’s sure you can figure it out on your own, but she’ll send you her notes if you want them and also read Xhosa.”

“For a glimpse at her notes? I’d learn,” Tony mutters. “Okay, no notes though, because the smartest women on the planet thinks I can do this.” He gestures to the chair. “You can have a seat.”

Bucky does, and it’s only then that Tony realizes that he’s shrugged off his shirt. He swallows. Bucky looks…nice. And the arm, Tony thinks after shifting his focus, tearing his eyes away from the rest. The arm looks nice too.

“She really didn’t say anything else?”

Bucky smiles, easy-going and…nice. Tony’s vocabulary is fried. Nice, like a warm blanket. Like hot coffee. “She said she’s emailing you her calibration tests.”

“In Xhosa?”

“In English.”

“FRIDAY, find that for me, would you?” Tony asks.

“Right away, Boss.”

The email pops up on a hologram, and Tony scans through it quickly. “Okay, got it,” he says. “So, uh. Whenever you’re ready. This can be kinda invasive, tell me to stop and I will, or…or say something’s off limits, and I can work around it, but if you’re ready for it I need your arm, rested on the table, and I’ll need to pop a few plates.”

Bucky easily sets his arm on the table. “Go ahead,” he says. “Do me a favor and warn me if it’ll hurt.”


Tony runs through the calibration tests Shuri had outlined, reconnecting wires in response. “Again,” he instructs, and Bucky does a quick finger-tap exercise.

“Again.”

Bucky does it again.

“Good,” Tony says, bending back towards the wires. He thinks he’s isolated the lag at this point.

“Why were you in the gym today anyways? Never seen you there before.”

“Wanted to hit something,” Tony says absently.
“I could see that much. Why?”

“Oh, the Council pissed me off. Ross pissed me off more.”

“Doing what?”

“Ross offered to mate me,” Tony says, and the words come easily. So easily he’s rather surprised.

“Why in the fuck…?”

“The forced mating clause is going to go through,” Tony says. “And Ross sees it as an opportunity to offer a deal.”

“Oh. Oh, Jesus. I’m sorry, Tony,” Bucky says. And he does genuinely sound sorry. At best, most alphas are sympathetic, and that’s at best, really, the really good ones—the ones Tony can count and have fingers left over. But Bucky sounds empathetic, like he’s invested and he cares and he understands.

Tony shrugs. “It was bound to happen, really.”

“How are you gonna get outta it?”

“I don’t know yet,” Tony says. “Tap again.”

Bucky does, faster this time. “Fingers are all set,” Tony announces. “Wrist next, then elbow, then shoulder socket.”

“Are you…you gonna mate someone?”

“Hypothetically? Eventually?”

“Right now,” Bucky says. “To…get around this.”

“No,” Tony says with finality. “You don’t know me well yet, but you’ll learn that I don’t do things just because someone else wants them.”

“They’d offer, you know,” Bucky says. “Rhodes, Steve.”

“No,” Tony says. “I’m not going…this is not what I want.” He sighs. “Turn your wrist.”

They work in silence for a moment. “Notice you didn’t include yourself on that list,” Tony says. “Of alphas all willing to self-sacrifice and mate with me.”

“Not a terrible sacrifice,” Bucky says. “But who’d want me for a mate?”

“You? What’s wrong with you?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I mean, sure you’ve got some baggage, but who doesn’t, these days?” Tony asks rhetorically. “And you’re…you’re a gentle alpha.”

Bucky sits silently for a moment. “No one’s ever called me gentle before.”

“Well, you are,” Tony says shortly. “Roll your wrist all the way around.”

Bucky does. “What makes me gentle?”

He didn’t mean to say the last part, didn’t mean for Bucky to know that. It’s not relevant, except for the fact that Tony absolutely can’t get the look out of his head.

“So you’re saying gentle alphas have decency an’ also maybe smile nice,” Bucky says, frowning.

Tony shrugs. “I don’t make the rules, I just report them.”

“I’d mate you, then,” Bucky says, “If you could tolerate me.”

Tony closes the wrist plate. “See, I’ve avoided mating for my entire life,” Tony says. “Even when it was convenient for me. Even when it was expected. I’ve had offers, you know,” he says. “But I decided long ago that, if I ever do enter some type of mating bond, it won’t be because we can simply tolerate each other.”

“Didn’t mean to offend you.”

“I’m not offended,” Tony says, and he looks up from the elbow plate to offer a small smile at Bucky to prove it. “I think you’re trying to do something like the right thing, and you get bonus points for not doing it like a typical alpha. But I also think we’re both worth more than this.” He closes the plate near the elbow he still has open. “Besides. Even if you and I actually wanted that, I’d hold off. I don’t do things just because other people tell me to.”

Bucky smiles wide. This one’s like a small electric jolt, energizing. Like the hot coffee when it finally hits Tony’s system, like an energy drink. “That’s what I admire about you, Tony,” he says.

“My stubbornness?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says. “You could call it that. You’re principled.”

Tony snorts. “No one’s ever called me that before.” He pats the arm. “Let’s hit the second half tomorrow.”

“Same time?”

“Yeah,” Tony agrees as he packs up his tools. “We’ll get you right as rain in no time, Buttercup.”

Tony freezes. Nicknames. Nicknames with strange—or strange enough, still—alphas.

But Bucky just smiles at him, and it makes Tony unable to do anything but smile back as he finishes packing up.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Tony spends some time with Peter where they have to reflection on their shitty reality. Then, he and Bucky grow closer.

Chapter Notes

Happy Wednesday, all!

Here's the next chapter. Tony and Peter talk about some shitty realities of people abusing their power, and then things get closer between Bucky and Tony.

There's no explicit warnings for this chapter, at least not more so than any past chapter.

Note: for anyone who does weird research like me, cocaine was removed from Coca-cola in 1903. However, Tony wouldn't know that off the top of his head, so I left the joke in, because it's a pretty common joke about the product.

Hope you enjoy, and if you do, drop me a line!

“This is so cool!” Peter gushes, looking around the lab space.

Tony smiles. “Yeah, not bad for the last minute, huh?”

“Not bad? Not bad?!” Peter demands. “Mr. Stark—”

“—Tony,” Tony corrects.

“This place is amazing! Look at this stuff, and…” He’s off, moving around the room to poke and prod, and Tony can’t help but smile on.

“Happiest I’ve seen him in weeks,” May says from where she stands, still unsure by the door.

Tony shakes his head fondly. “Nerd.”

“Look who’s talking,” May teases, coming closer. “I see someone’s been working over time.”

“This? Nah,” Tony says. “I just click order, it gets delivered, easy-peasy.”

There are seven custom pieces in this room, but Tony knows May doesn’t have the technical know-how to know that. Even so, she smiles at him conspiratorially. “Whatever you want to tell him, Tony.”

“Hey, Tony, you wanted him in here?” Rhodey asks, leading DUM-E inside.
“Yeah, thanks,” Tony says, even as Peter has already begun to squeal.

“DUM-E! I missed you, buddy!”

“He’s a robot, Parker,” Tony calls. “And a dumb one.”

“Don’t listen to Tony,” Peter says to DUM-E. “Lemme find you your ball.”

“Here, kid,” Rhodey says, holding up the tennis ball and then lobbing it to Peter.

May turns to Tony. “This is Colonel Rhodes?”

“Mhm.”

“Is he…is Peter safe?”

Tony’s confused for a moment. “Rhodey? Rhodey would never hurt a fly. Rhodey’s the best person I know.”

She flushes. “You just, you said the team, and…”

Realization dawns on Tony. “Rhodey’s different,” Tony promises. “Rhodey’s known me since I was younger than Peter, and I was a real dumbass, and he’s never treated me with anything but respect, promise.”

Rhodey looks over at Tony and makes the briefest eye contact. He hears, clearly, but he’s staying out of it.

“Sorry,” May says. “I guess I’m just…”

“Justifiably over-protective, given the circumstances?” Tony suggests.

“Yeah, that,” May says.

“Hey, Parker, stop playing fetch with him before he knocks a table over,” Tony calls. “Get to work, what am I paying you for?”

“You don’t pay me,” Peter says, throwing the ball one more time before dutifully getting back to work.

“That’s right, I don’t pay people who don’t make me anything. C’mon, pull your weight, and we can talk about a salary.”

“Really?”

“Let’s see what you come up with,” Tony bargains. To be fair, Peter doesn’t know that his college education is already paid for. May has kept that private, just like he asked.

May waves from the door. “I’ll be back to get you at six, Peter, okay?”

“I can get him home, May,” Tony says.

“See you at home, then,” May says before walking out the door.

“I’m going to head out too,” Rhodey announces. “Just came to deliver the disaster. I have training to get back to.”
“How are they doing?”

“Rogers is bucking for his job back.”

“Will they give it to him?”

“Don’t know,” Rhodey says tightly. “Can’t see why, but then again, I don’t know why they’re doing half the things they are right now.”

Tony nods, and Rhodey leaves.

“Tony, am I ever gonna train with the Avengers?”

Tony swallows. “Not right now, kid.”

“’Cause of Captain America and Barnes?”

“Not just them,” Tony says. He wants to say he’s not worried about Bucky, but, well…where his kid’s concerned, he’s always worried. “See, the Accords Committee…they’re kinda against us. And I don’t wanna give them any leverage over you.”

“What do you mean?”

Tony closes his eyes for a moment. “They’re, uh, pretty anti-omega right now.”

Peter freezes. “How?”

“They’re trying to force a mating clause.”

“What, like a hundred years ago where you needed your mate’s or your parents’ permission to have a job or get a loan or whatever?” Peter demands incredulously. He’s agitated now, pacing haphazardly.

“Yeah, like that,” Tony confirms.

“That’s bullshit.”

“That’s…look, Peter, that’s reality. The law’s might have changed but the way people act hasn’t. We can’t sell omegas, so we just strong-arm them into contracts. We can’t totally prohibit them from certain fields, but we can say studies show it’s stressful and they need a mate to sign off on it. We can’t just grab random omegas off the street, but courts look the other way in favor of ‘the order of things’ far too often, and, hell, the for their own good defense is still alive and kicking.”

Peter practically collapses onto a stool, and once again Tony feels bad for scaring the kid, he really does, but, well. The reality is, Peter’s safer when he knows more, as ugly as it all might be.

“You know, I was at the store the other day,” Peter says, seemingly out of the blue. “And there was this family with their two kids. Alpha mom, omega dad. Little omega girl and little alpha boy. And the boy…he must have just grown into his voice. I could hear it. It didn’t really hit me yet, just like an itch, you know? But the little girl, she couldn’t help it. She was doing whatever her brother asked. And the family didn’t help her. The mom congratulated the little boy, told him he was doing well to take care of his sister. And I…I had to leave before I threw up.”

“There you go,” Tony says tonelessly. “No one’s ever gonna step in to protect that little girl because that’s just the way things are. And we…” Tony shudders. “We get fucked over for it, kid.”
“Why do they hate us so much, Tony?”

Tony feels the urge to hug the kid and doesn’t resist, wrapping an arm around Peter, letting him lean into his chest. “I don’t know, kiddo,” he says. “I think they just need something to hate. Like we’re the scapegoats because if it wasn’t us, then it would be each other.”

“How do they…I don’t get how they can have so much…bitterness and anger and…just, grossness inside of them.”

Tony could give a lecture on socialization, on assumed roles, but Peter doesn’t need to hear it. “I know, kiddo,” he says. “You know what? Just remember, you’re the better person. ‘Cause you don’t…you could never feel that way.”

Peter stays pressed against Tony for a few minutes. Tony doesn’t think he cries, just that he soaks in the comfort that he probably desperately needs.

“Ready to get back to work?” Tony asks gently.

“What’re we working on?”

“Something new,” Tony says. “A way to…help people like us.”

Tony runs into the conference room. “Sorry I’m late.”

Bucky is sitting at the table, tablet in front of him. “S’okay,” he says, closing the tablet case. “Were you out of the compound?”

“Mhm,” Tony says. “Gonna go out a couple days a week now.”

“Good for you,” Bucky says. “See the sun, all of that.”

Tony snorts while he lays out his tools. “See the inside of a different lab, more like it. I have a mentorship project.”

“The SI omega training program?”

Tony blinks. “How do you—no, this one is more personal that professional. How do you know about that?”

Bucky shrugs, then taps the case of the tablet. “I read.”

“About SI?”

“About how things have changed since I fell off that train.”

“What’s the verdict?” Tony asks, pulling up a few holograms.

Bucky shrugs. “Don’t seem like all that much changed.”

“No, see, that’s not true,” Tony protests, not even looking as he continues to get set up. “Back in the day, your omega kid was legally your property. Nowadays, it’s just heavily implied that they are.”

“Yeah, but I dreamed of…of utopia and flying cars and all that,” he says. “Read more pulp novels
than you can imagine. The future’s let me down.”

“It’s not all bad.” Tony says.

“Why’re you defending it? It’s hurt you.”

“People have hurt me,” Tony says. “There’s a difference.”

“Not much,” Bucky says, the discomfited anger still simmering around him. Still, despite the fact that it’s most definitely anger, Tony doesn’t even react. It’s not directed towards him, won’t become directed towards him, and since when does Tony trust an alpha enough to know that?

“What’s the plan for today?”

“We’re gonna get that calibrated,” Tony says. “So you can stop middle-aged omegas from hitting you.”

Bucky snorts. “You make it sound like you’re a sixty-five year old who’s never done a day of hard work in your life.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the Winter Soldier and I hit you, unarmed. I think we should change that.”

Bucky shrugs his shirt off, and Tony resolutely tries not to get distracted again. “So, personal mentoring project?”

Tony shrugs. “Yeah. Kid’s going places.”

“Spider-kid?” Bucky guesses.

Tony tenses. “I won’t tell you anything about him.”

“Tony—“

“Nothing,” Tony insists. “In fact, this entire conversation is over, okay? And if it’s not okay, I’ll just pack my stuff up and leave.”

“Tony!” Bucky nearly shouts. “It’s fine. I get it. I’m sorry you felt like I was pushin’.”

Tony flushes and looks down. “You weren’t,” he admits softly after a moment. “I’m, I’m just—“

“Justifiably a little paranoid?” Bucky asks.

“More or less on the justified part.”

“The kid’s an omega superhero, I’d say it’s more than less,” Bucky says.

Tony tenses up all over again. “How—how do you…?”

Bucky shrugs. “One, you’re mentoring him, ain’t’cha? That’s just…what you do. Two, I was two feet away from that kid in Germany. I could smell it on him, could feel it.”

Tony tenses. “It’s usually not that easy, with his suit. I worked hard on that, I’ll have you know.”


“Uh, once. There’s movies, too,” Tony says on autopilot. “You’d like them.”
“Yeah?” Bucky asks, face lighting up. “Wanna watch ‘em with me?”

“I was under the impression we only see each other in the dead of night, and when your buddies harangue me into a meeting,” Tony says.

“Nothin’ says that has to stay true,” Bucky says. “‘Sides, it’s seven thirty. Not exactly the dead of night.”

“I’ll think about it,” Tony says. “Now, I need to pop your elbow again. If Shuri gave you a funny bone, I apologize.”

They don’t watch *Harry Potter* together, at least not any time soon. They do spar twice more, “testing out the arm” as Tony insists on calling it. He emails Shuri back, thanking her for the calibration notes, telling her the findings. It’s for science. Really.

The third time they do it, Tony’s finished calibrating the arm and Bucky’s now wearing the most advanced, capable prosthetic in the world. Tony doesn’t stand a chance, at least, not if they’re fighting fair.

Bucky has him on his back in under a minute, looming over him.

Tony goes still. “Okay, get off me now,” he says.

Bucky moves immediately. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for winning,” Tony says, getting to his feet quickly, pretending he doesn’t hear his hip crack as he does. No spring chicken, he thinks ruefully. “We know the arm’s working right now. Experiment complete.”

“Wanna grab dinner?” Bucky asks.

“What,” Tony asks—more demands, really—standing stock still on the mat.

“Dinner? Working out makes me hungry. Super-soldier metabolism and all,” Bucky says, and he even manages to pull off something resembling sad eyes. Tony has to suppress the snort at what a giant faker he is. He wonders, briefly, is this a glimpse of Bucky before. Before HYDRA and war and all the pain.

“You worked out for two minutes,” Tony points out.

“So many calories burnt,” Bucky says mournfully.

Tony sighs. “Fine,” he says, trying to sound put-out but missing by a mile. “Let’s do dinner. Except I’m not going to the kitchen your guys use to be harangued by Rogers, and I don’t think Rhodey would be enthusiastic about us taking over his suite.”

“Where have you even been eating?” Bucky asks, eyes wide.

“The lab,” Tony says. “I live down there. But we’re not going there either.” He trusts this alpha, which is a disconcerting enough feeling. But that trust is only going to extend so far. He’s learned from his mistakes.

“So we’re…ordering take-out?” Bucky asks.
“I was thinking we’d go out,” Tony says. “But if you wanna stay in…do you ever get out?”

“Not so much,” Bucky says. “But my therapist says I should, so…”

“You’re seeing a therapist?” Tony asks. Then stops himself. “Wait, that was invasive, sorry. I—“ But Bucky nods. “S’okay. Yeah. Twice a week.”

“Good for you,” Tony says. Means it, too.

“King T’Challa set it up. Don’t know how he navigated the travesty that is American healthcare when he doesn’t even live here, but he pulled it off.”

Tony raises an eyebrow. “Good for him. Mark me down as impressed. So. Are we going out?”

“What did you have in mind?”

Tony runs through his options. “I could get us to Manhattan in about an hour,” he says. “That okay with you?”

Bucky shrugs. “Sure.”

Tony studies him carefully. Something’s prickly, uncomfortable around Bucky. “I mean it. Is it okay? Comfortable?”

Bucky hesitates, and then it looks like he surrenders in one breath, body slumping slightly. “Somewhere quieter?”

“Sure thing, buttercup,” Tony says, then winces, because there are those stupid nicknames again. Bucky is either pretending not to notice or genuinely doesn’t care. “There’s a town five minutes from here, small place. Sure we can find something.”

“Perfect,” Bucky says.

“Cool, I’ll drive,” Tony says matter-of-factly, leaving no room for argument. There’s always arguments about driving. Hell, there are still places around the world where it’s illegal for omegas to do so. The stereotypes about omega drivers flourish.

“What’re you driving?” Bucky asks.

Tony blinks, both surprised and not about how easy that was. “Tell you what,” he says after a moment. “I’ll let you pick.”

Bucky chooses the Spyder, which, in Tony’s opinion, just shows that Bucky has good taste. Tony drives like a maniac, using speed limits more as a suggestions on the empty road, but Bucky just smiles and doesn’t comment.

Tony doesn’t actually know the town by the compound that well, but it’s small enough that he can drive at a reasonable speed through it and spot a restaurant. “Here,” he says, pulling into a parking lot. “Looks good.”

“Burgers?” Bucky asks.

“Got a problem with good old American cheeseburgers?” Tony challenges.
“Not at all,” Bucky says hurriedly, getting out of the car.

Being four pm on a Thursday, the wait is non-existent and they are sat immediately. Tony grins. “So, super-soldier metabolism. How much are we talking here?”

“You’ve seen Steve eat?” Bucky asks.

Tony’s enthusiasm wavers—as it always does, when Steve is brought up—but doesn’t flag entirely. “Yeah.”

“More.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tony says, smiling gleefully. “I love watching restaurants freak out when you guys order.”

The waitress does not disappoint, looking more and more stressed out the more burgers Bucky orders. “It’s fine,” Tony says. “Promise I’m good for it.”

It’s like it’s the first time she’s even noticed him—Tony supposes he does pale, next to the incredibly attractive alpha next to him—and when she does, she seems to realize the mess that’s sat themselves in her section. She sighs, nods, and tells them their drinks will be out right away.

Tony grins. “She hasn’t yet done the math and figure out how big the tip’ll be,” he says conspiratorially.

They’re silent for a minute, and it’s a little awkward. Tony suddenly realizes he doesn’t know Bucky well enough for this. Knows the inner mechanics of his arm, knows he has nightmares that keep him up most every night, but doesn’t know any small talk stuff.

The drinks come out, a round of sodas. Bucky makes a face. “Tastes different now.”

“Yeah, well, not real sugar,” Tony says.

Bucky blinks at him. “Why the hell not?”

“Haven’t you heard? It’s bad for you,” Tony says flippantly, then leans into the aisle as their waitress is walking by. “Do me a favor, can you get my friend a Coke? A real one, not Diet or Zero or any of that.”

“Sure thing,” she says before running off for the kitchen.

“Why’d they make fake Coke?” Bucky complains.

“Did the real stuff still have real cocaine in it when you were a kid?” Tony muses. “Yeah, we got rid of that too. Turns out that stuff can kill you.”

Bucky blinks at him. “Anything else I should know?”

“All the bananas died while you were Winter Soldiering and the ones we have now, I’ve been informed, taste very different,” Tony offers.

“What.”

“I know. Lot to take in.”

“Burgers still contain beef, right?”
“Most of the time,” Tony promises.

“And the rest of the time?”

“Oh, turkey, veggies, beans, chicken…and a secret you can only pry out of McDonalds cold, dead hands. What have you been eating at the compound, anyways?”

“Food,” Bucky deadpans. “Super-soldier metabolism, remember?”

“Right,” Tony nods. “Well, when you get back. If there’s stuff you like. Tell FRIDAY. She’ll take care of it.”

“The rest of them tried that when we got here,” Bucky says. “FRIDAY didn’t seem amused.”

“She’ll take care of it for you,” Tony says.

“What makes me different?”

“Huh?”

“What makes me different?” Bucky repeats. “Why me? I…do you need the list of everything I’ve done?”

“Helped keep Steve Rogers, America’s golden boy, alive for two decades, a significant chunk of that through the Depression. Worked a menial labor job to keep food on the table for your family, got drafted but did so well and showed so much potential you got specialized sniper training, joined an elite unit doing world-saving work. Was a prisoner of war for seventy years and is somehow still fighting to come back from it with everything you’ve got. Did I miss anything?” Tony asks.

“Tony—“

“That’s the important stuff,” Tony says firmly. He takes a deep breath. “Bucky, I—you didn't elect into anything that happened to you between 1945 and 2014. That’s just how it is.”

“I still did it,” Bucky says softly.

“Yeah, well,” Tony shrugs awkwardly. “I’d imagine that’s what you have that therapist for.”

Bucky leans back in his chair, as the waitress drops off the new glass of Coke, then picks it up with his flesh hand and takes a sip, watching Tony the whole time. “You’re not like what they said you’d be like,” he says.

“Who?”

“Steve. Romanoff, Barton, Wilson. Maximoff. The news reports we saw on the run.”

“What’d they say?” Tony asks. He knows, or at least he can guess, but he wants to hear Bucky say it.

“Flighty, high-strung, gets in over your head and can’t dig your way out. Over-emotional and incapable of seeing past that, hold grudges past the point of reason. Unmanageable and unreasonable, arrogant and—“

“So, basically every stereotype of a ‘loose’ omega ever written,” Tony finishes.

“Yeah,” Bucky says, voice a little raspy despite him just having drank his Coke. “Pretty much.”
“You know what? I am those things,” Tony says. “I am flighty, I’m doing twenty-seven things at one time, give me a break. I am high-strung, I’m told it’s a natural product of being a genius, it’s a thing. I’m over-emotional, I get invested, I care about people, sue me. I have a fucking anxiety disorder! And fuck yes, I hold grudges, and they may think they’re unreasonable, but I have been bitten too many times and I am about a hundred steps past twice shy. Good fucking luck trying to ‘manage’ me, I’ve been fighting that fight my whole damn life and I think I have more practice than any of them. And arrogant? I’m rich, I’m successful, I’m a genius and I’m gifted and I’ve done things literally no one else in the whole world can say they’ve done, sue me.”

Tony takes a deep breath, realizes he got loud, realizes other tables heard. He lowers his voice. “I am exactly like what they said and that’s just how it is.”

“You’re more,” Bucky says.

“In a good way, or in the ‘you didn’t finish your list yet’ way?” Tony asks.

“A good way,” Bucky says. “And yeah, Tony, you are those things. But you’re—they say them like they’re cussing you out.”

“If you don’t wear it with pride, then they’ll try to choke you with it,” Tony says.

“Who told you that?”

Tony grins. “Peggy Carter.”

“I remember her.”

“I’d hope so. She was pretty unforgettable.”

“Tell me about it,” Bucky says, then blinks. “Actually, tell me about it. Tell me about her life.”

“Peggy Carter was a spy her entire life,” Tony says. “She had secrets.”

“But you knew her.”

“She was technically my godmother.” Tony smiles. “She used to show up from who-knows-where, gone for months at a time, call my father a few names, ruffle my hair, take me out for ice cream, and let me tell her about my studies. Then, she’d take me home and teach my how to beat up alphas. Doesn’t really work, because they can just use the voice on me in a way they couldn’t on her, but yeah.”

Bucky smiles. “She was somethin’ else.”

“She was the only person my father was actually afraid of, ever, so yeah, she was,” Tony says.

The burgers come before Bucky can question that, thankfully, one for Tony and two plates for Bucky, the waitress promising to be right back with the rest. “No rush,” Bucky calls after her.

Unfortunately, the food doesn’t seem to have side-tracked Bucky much. “Howard was…”

“Not father of the year,” Tony finishes. “He didn’t want me, didn’t like that I was smarter than him, didn’t like that I was an omega and a mouthy one to boot. Yeah. He’s dead.”

Bucky flinches. “I know.”

“Shit, sorry, I…was not even thinking of that.”
“I know. Eat your burger. You’re too thin.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” Tony complains, but picks up his burger.

“Because you are, doll-face.”

Tony raises an eyebrow at the nickname but doesn’t comment. He gives enough weird names, and those in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.

Bucky takes a bite of his own burger. “What was this one?” He asks.

Tony peers at it. “My guess is Barbeque.”

“Fantastic,” Bucky pronounces, then proceeds to devour it in about five bites.

“You weren’t kidding,” Tony says.

Bucky grins. Tony marvels at it, wide and carefree, like that old film reel.

“It’s livin’ through the Depression,” Bucky says. “It makes us eat anything like it’s gonna be taken away.”

“No kidding.”

Tony takes a bite of his own burger. It’s pretty good, in his expert opinion. But even better is watching Bucky eat his fourth as quickly as his first, or watching the waitress’ eyes widen when she checks their table and sees Tony left two hundred and fifty dollars behind as he and Bucky run out the door. And even better, Tony thinks, is watching Bucky smile the entire night.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Tony and Pepper get to sit down and talk, and then the future Tony's been dreading comes knocking. The Avengers are together again, for better or worse (it's probably worse).

Chapter Notes

Happy Saturday, all!

While I think each chapter so far has added something to the story, this is where we really start to heat things up.

One quick thing: I was convinced this week that Wanda really should be an omega. I spent a two hour car ride thinking about how it would work, lol. As such, this is the first chapter edited with that specifically in mind. I'm currently writing the parts where it might actually be important.

Okay, warnings for this chapter: Steve does some dumbass stuff that is deeply inappropriate that he justifies as for the right reasons. Tony of course takes the fallout of this. Steve may or may not get hit for it.

Tony takes Pepper out to lunch at a classy little bistro with about seven tables and an amazing wine selection. The paps snap pictures as they walk in, and Tony doesn’t take his sunglasses off until they’re fully ensconced at their table.

“This is nice,” Pepper says, already flipping through the menu. “And I’m not one to look gift horses in the mouth, but…”

Tony snorts. “You will look that gift horse in the mouth. You will call for a second opinion to help look that gift horse in the mouth.”

Pepper smiles. “Fair enough. So. What’s this for?”

“Well, first, it’s an apology,” Tony says. “For the shit you’re about to go through.”

“There’s going to be shit? What a new and different thing,” Pepper says dryly.

“I’m serious, Pep,” Tony warns. “The Accords, the Council, Ross…I’m ready to fight anyone. I may very well get into a fistfight in the street.”

“And that’s different than the past…how?” Pepper asks.

“I’m doing it for a good cause this time?” Tony tries.
Pepper snorts. “Your cause has always been fine. Your execution has been messy. Look, Tony. If I didn’t walk away over the last fifteen years, then I’m not going to. Simple as that, alright?”

Tony tries not to get choked up. He doesn’t deserve people like Pepper. He doesn’t say that out loud—she doesn’t like it—but it’s true. “Alright.”

“Care to elaborate on the shit?” Pepper asks.

“Mating requirement,” Tony says, quietly. They’re in their own corner but Tony’s not naive. There are ears everywhere.

“On the Accords?”

“Mhm.”

“Do you need…”

“Don’t you dare make that offer, Pepper Potts,” Tony says firmly. “I don’t…don’t.”

She looks at him sympathetically. “What are you going to do?”


Pepper gapes at him. “How…how…”

“Ross.”

She pulls herself together enough to look indignant. “How would Ross know?”

Tony shrugs. “He has spies everywhere, he’s probably following everyone I know, looking for leverage.”

“That’s…disgusting.”

“Yeah, and he thinks I’d mate with him,” Tony says derisively.

“You’d mate—”

“Enough about me,” Tony interrupts. “Tell me about Happy.”

“Happy and I…it’s new,” Pepper says, changing tracks as fast as Tony, used to him by now. “We didn’t want anyone to know yet.”

“Cat’s out of the bag now,” Tony says. “Sorry.”

Pepper sighs. “We shouldn’t have expected anything else.”

“So…how was it?”

“He took me to a movie in the park,” Pepper says, almost shyly. “With a picnic.”

“And you liked it?”

“He’s sweet,” Pepper shrugs. “He’s just…sweet.”
“So you liked it,” Tony surmises. He can read between the lines. Happy is steady, dependable. He’s where he says he’ll be. He comes home at the end of every day. He probably remembers the details. Everything Tony wasn’t. It doesn’t even really sting anymore.

“Yeah.”

Tony smiles. “I’m glad, Pepper.”

“Really? This isn’t weird? We were going to wait a while to tell you, if it worked out. We—Happy was worried it would be awkward.”

“Why would it be awkward?” Tony asks flippantly.

“Tony.”

“What? I’m serious. It’s not weird. I want you to be happy, Pep. And if Happy makes you happy, then…that’s good.”

Pepper smiles at him softly. “I want you to be happy too, you know,” she says. “Which is why what you were saying about Ross—”

“I’m not going to actually do it!” Tony says exasperatedly. “I have taste.”

“If he’s—”

“I will not give in to Thaddeus Ross,” Tony snorts. “I’ve faced bigger enemies than him and eaten them for breakfast. Don’t worry about it. Please.”

“I do worry about you, Tony. If Ross is putting pressure on you and the council is putting pressure on you, maybe the best option is—”

“You are the third person to offer,” Tony interrupts. “Not counting Ross, who should never be counted in anything. And you will be the third actually decent person I turn down. I’m not living my life based on someone else’s convenience. They won’t pressure me into making this decision.”

“Instead they’ll just force you out,” Pepper says sadly.

Tony shrugs. “People have tried before. Didn’t stick. You might have noticed I was at SI until I left. Voluntarily. I handed that role to you; no one took it from me.”

Pepper smiles, soft and fond, the way Tony liked best when they were dating, until he realized that it had been the same smile for at least a decade, that it had nothing to do with romance and everything to do with that calm, constant affection that fills every inch of your body for another person. He should know; he feels it often enough.

“I know, Tony,” she says. “You’ve always…you’ve done things completely beyond what anyone thought you could. They try to stop you, but…”

“But I’m a handful,” Tony finishes.

“You’re tenacious.”


“Water, Tony,” she says. “I have to get back to work after this.”
Tony nods, then makes eye-contact with a waiter who hurries over. "Two glasses of water, with lemon," he says. "And the artichoke dip."

"Tony…"

"It’s really good," Tony argues. "And hey, if you don’t want it, more for me."

The waiter nods and moves away again, not even speaking.

"Well, I guess if it’s really good," Pepper says.

"Have I ever let you down?" Tony asks. Pauses a beat. "Don’t answer that."

Because he has—as a business partner, as a friend, as a partner—it’s just a fact. They didn’t work. He’s past it.

"What’s the strategy, Tony?" Pepper asks.

"For eating artichoke dip? Well, usually they serve chips with it, and —"

"Tony."

Tony sighs. "I don’t have one yet."

"Well, I guess that’s what you have us for, right?"

Before Tony can let on how lucky he is, before he can get into his sappy, long-winded confession about how goddamn lucky he is, his phone starts ringing insistently.

"Yes?"

"Tony, we’re being called out. Boston."

Tony’s already out of his seat. He tries to say something to Pepper, who just waves him off. He drops his credit card at the table. "It’s been approved?"

"Mhm."

Tony calls the armor. "I’ll meet you there."

Rhodey hesitates. "Tony, whether or not you’re approved is a little murky…"

"They haven’t booted me out yet," Tony interrupts.

"What I hoped you’d say. We’re in the air."


Tony knows without even asking that it’s aliens. Not Chitauri, not quite the same, but something close enough. Similar technology, similar fighting style. Similar mission, Tony guesses.

The panic wells up in his throat and he quashes it down ruthlessly.

He lands next to the quintjet. "What’s the word?"
“Lotta the fucks appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, just about fourteen minutes ago,” Rhodey reports.

“They after anything?”

“Not that we can tell,” Vision says.

“Scouting mission,” Tony says. “Testing us.” He looks around the group. The whole crew is there, even Bucky.

Tony stares at him. “Thought you didn’t want any part of this.”

The others all stare at him while Bucky shrugs. “Still not sure I do.”

“Bucky’s ready to be an Avenger,” Steve says, chin out, daring anyone to argue. “He signed your stupid Accords just before we left, so you can’t kick him out.”

Rhodey rolls his eyes and Tony rolls his right back, not that Rhodey can see with his faceplate still down. Steve Rogers, king of missing the point. Tony spares one more look for Bucky, who also seems to be rolling his eyes, before turning his focus back to the job at hand. “What’s the plan, Rhodey?”

“We need to hit ‘em where it hurts, take ‘em down hard and fast, and…”

Tony coughs. “Rogers, when we want your opinion, we’ll ask for it. Rhodey. What’s the plan?”

“I need you and Wilson on perimeter,” Rhodey says. “We keep this contained. Rogers, Romanoff, Vision, you guys are pulling civilians out of here and handing them off to emergency services. The rest of us, we’re taking them out as we see them.”

“Roger that,” Tony says, taking off and making a perimeter. He sees Sam go in the opposite direction, so they can make opposite loops and hopefully close this disaster down.

Tony sees an alien almost immediately. It’s going for a woman running away, and Tony shoots it twice. The woman escapes while it’s down, but it gets back up.

“No you fucking don’t,” Tony says, trying again with a more concentrated blast, this time aiming for the head.

It works. “Targets have some heavy armor,” Tony reports. “Need to be taken down with a killshot to the head. The messier the better, honestly. Anything else, looks like they’ll just shake off.”

The line’s silent. Then Bucky says, “Roger that. I brought a rocket launcher.”

“Where did you even get—“ Tony begins, but Rhodey cuts him off.

“Not with civilians still in the area, Barnes,” he says curtly. “No casualties.”

Bucky doesn’t protest about the rocket launcher, just sighs. “I have your six. Clear the civilians fast.”

“And someone figure out what they’re after,” Rhodey barks.

“Look, Colonel, really—“

“Unless that’s info about the targets, I don’t want to hear it, Rogers,” Rhodey says, and Tony
remembers Rhodey saying that Steve’s been bucking for his job back. Hopefully he’s not stupid enough to attempt a mutiny in the field.

“Roger, Rhodey,” Tony says. “Rhodey, can you join us on perimeter? Want to see what I can learn.”

Without waiting for confirmation, he swoops down and grabs one of the ugly things right off its flying contraption. Tony drags him in the air, three hundred feet up. The things fights, even when they’re that high, and Tony wonders if it thinks it could shake off the fall.

“Hey there,” Tony says, all sharp smiles that are entirely wasted by the faceplate being in the way. “Wanna tell me what you’re up to?”

Barton snorts. “That strategy ever work for you, Stark? Just asking isn’t really how stuff like this gets done in the real world, and—“

“See,” Tony says, ignoring Clint. “I don’t even know if you understand English, but I have a hunch we’re gonna get through to each other. Who sent you?”

The creature screeches at him, senseless and loud.

“Is it him?” Tony demands. “Do you work for him?”

No answer, except for the screeching.

Tony sighs. “Waste of time,” he admits, then tosses the alien away from him and uses the unibeam.

“Gross,” Bucky complains below.

“Suck it up, buttercup, battle is gross, and I—Romanoff, your six!” Tony shouts, already swooping down, knowing he won’t be fast enough.

A clean kill shot takes the creature down before Tony’s anywhere close and before Natasha even finishes turning away from the civilians she’s escorting to the perimeter.

“I got their backs,” Bucky announces. “You worry ‘bout takin’ them out.”

Tony considers, then nods, lost on everyone. “Solid plan, square deal,” he says, taking off back to the perimeter loop.

“Tony, who’s him?” Steve demands.

“Questions later, Rogers!” Tony says, eyes scanning the rooftops around him. There’s more than he expected. He needs to find where they’re coming from, stem them off at the source.

“No, Tony, I think—“

“Not while we’re being shot at, Rogers, you can wait,” Rhodey gripes.

“Boss,” FRIDAY says. “I have traced their ship.”

“Where?”

“Two hundred feet above us.”
Tony swears. “Retroreflectors, huh? Okay. We can do this.” He switches to the public comm. “FRIDAY’s traced a ship. Above me. Get civilians under cover so I can blow it to hell, and do it fast.”

“Streets are pretty clear,” Natasha announces. “Buildings will take damage.”

“Can’t be helped,” Rhodey says tightly. “Do it, Tony. The rest of us will keep fighting the ones down here.”

So Tony barrels upward, aliens on his tail, until he bounces off something solid.

“Found it,” he mutters.

He has a plethora of weapons built into his suit, but not many suited to blowing up a spaceship. Still, he took out a tank in mark II. He can sort this out.

“Take cover,” Tony says, then starts attaching charges to the hull of the ship, feeling his way along. The aliens keep coming descending on their little flying contraptions, and Tony wastes precious seconds fighting them off. Fortunately, they don’t seem smart enough to remove the charges he’s placed, probably not understanding what he’s doing.

“Now,” he says, cutting power in his boots so he can fall out of the way—and right underneath an oncoming attack—as he has FRIDAY blow the charges.

The ships blows, raining a flaming mess from the sky. There’s a scream from the creatures that remain, but like the Chitauri, they seem to have relied on their connection, perhaps some kind of hive mind.

Tony watches the others pick off the remaining ones with ruthless efficiency, Vision, Rhodey, and Sam getting them from the air, Clint and Bucky on the rooftops, Wanda, Natasha, and Steve on the street. Tony can’t see Lang right now, but Tony can guess what he’s doing.

“That was…too easy,” Sam says cautiously.

“They’re scouts,” Tony says tiredly. “Not an invading party.” Not yet, his mind supplies.

“How do you know that?” Sam asks, voice laced tight with suspicion.

“I’ve told anyone who’d ask it’s coming since New York,” Tony says tightly. Hysterical, they called him. Overwrought. Proof omegas can’t handle the stress of something like this.

Look what he did. He was so hysterical, so undone by one battle, he became paranoid and he built Ultron. Look what unchecked omegas did. What he needed was someone to take a firm hand, someone to put him in his place, take care of him, so this wouldn’t happen again…

“They were testing us, seeing how we’d respond,” Tony says.

“So…” Lang asks slowly. “Did we…pass the test? And if we did, what does that mean?” He looks around nervously, and Tony briefly spares a thought for how horribly out of his depth this guy is, before shrugging, because he made his choices.

Tony swallows. “Thor told us that we’d signaled to the aliens that we were ready for a higher form of war. It’s coming.”

Tony’s close enough to see Steve shrug. “Well, we’ll be ready for them.”
“You know, being ready for them is not a sound military strategy. We need a plan, we need—“

“Guys,” Bucky interrupts. “Something’s wrong.”

Tony turns his attention to him immediately, still on his perch on the rooftop, sniper rifle still set up, but Bucky’s taken his eye off the scope.

The building trembles. “Oh, fuck,” Tony curses, even as he has FRIDAY begin to scan the building, moving closer.

“Forty-five people still inside, Boss,” she says.

Forty-six people. Tony swoops in, looks for the damage, scans for the weak points. The giant hole in the side is a bit of a giveaway. He lowers himself into it, then locks the suit’s joints and takes the weight of the building on his back.

“The building’s going down,” Bucky says dispassionately, coming to the same conclusion Tony has. He seems neither surprised nor worried. “We have to clear it.”

“Bucky, you have to get out of there!” Steve shouts. Tony winces, wants to tell Steve the comms will pick him up just fine without the shouting, but all his energy is going into ignoring the fact that it feels like this building is crushing him.

“We need to clear the building,” Bucky says. There’s a rustle, it sounds like he’s already moving. “We’re running low on time.”

“Bucky!” Steve shouts. “Tony, grab Bucky off the roof.”

Tony grunts. “Busy.”

“Tony—“

“Rogers, we need you ready to help clear the damn building, Barnes can take care of himself—“

Rhodey barks.

“Tony,” Steve says, and Tony can feel it prickling, the oncoming threat, the strengthening voice, hitting that register that makes his whole body shake. “Get Bucky.”

It’s fortunate that the suit’s joints are locked into place, immovable entirely, because otherwise, Tony might have legitimately gone down and the whole building with him. FRIDAY shocks him, and the world whites out around the edges for a minute.

When he comes to, he’s shaky, and chunks of the building are beginning to crumble. He wants to yell, to tell Steve to go fuck off forever, but his throat is raw. He might have screamed. He hopes the comms didn’t pick it up, that FRIDAY had the sense to shut them down.

“Ow! Okay, look, our first priority needs to be saving Bucky, and—“

Rhodey actually growls loud enough the comms pick it up. “You’re pathetic,” Rhodey says disdainfully. “Tony, you there?”

“Here,” he says. His voice sounds terrible.

“Hold in there,” Rhodey says. “We’re gonna get that building clear.”

“Got a group of ‘em,” Bucky announces. “What’s the best way out?”

“I can get the rest, direct ‘em your way, then,” Bucky says.

“Go for it,” Rhodey says. “Everyone else, go give civilian aid. Don’t let Rogers near me right now.”

It’s only a moment later where Bucky ushers a group of six past Tony. They carefully move around him, into Rhodey’s, then Wilson’s, then Vision’s, arms. Once they reach the ground, Natasha announces, “moving them to emergency services.”

Bucky’s back a moment later with four more, and the process repeats.

The building creaks. They’re losing structural integrity.

“Hurry it up,” Tony snaps.

“I’m checkin’ for more.”

“Allow me to assist, Sergeant Barnes,” FRIDAY says on the public comm for the first time all day. “Running scans now.”

The armor is creaking by the time they’re done. “Okay, go,” Tony tells Bucky.


“Gotta control the fall,” Tony says. “Get outta here, sooner you go sooner I can let go.”

Bucky frowns more severely but doesn’t argue, just jumping out of the hole, not waiting for assistance.

“Bucky!” Tony hears over the comms, then a very clear, very distinct crunching noise of bone.

Tony ignores what comes next, much as he’s very interested to hear it. He can’t hold this much longer.

“We are here to help,” Vision says. “I have one corner.”

“Got one, Tones,” Rhodey says.

“Allow me to help, Boss,” FRIDAY says, providing an action plan to his HUD.

“Okay, on my count,” Tony says, hating that his voice is still shaking and rough but thinking he can be excused. “Three, two, one…now.”

The building goes down, it’s unavoidable, but at least it goes straight down, not taking anything else out with it.

When it’s a pile of rubble and they’re all clear, Tony has to fight not to fall to his knees on the pavement. He wants out, wants out of the suit and preferably out of the area, but he can only have one of those, and he can’t have either right now.

Steve has a clearly broken nose and what looks like a broken cheekbone. His eye is black.

Tony doesn’t feel even remotely bad for him.
“They all clear?” He manages to ask, flipping the face plate up. He needs air.


Rhodey rounds on Steve. “What the fuck was that, Rogers?”

Steve flushes, an interesting effect underneath the damage to his face. “He wouldn’t help—"

“He was a little busy!” Rhodey roars.

“He didn’t say—"

“From this point forward, just assume Tony knows what he’s doing, and he’s exactly where he should be,” Vision says. “You would extend that courtesy to anyone else on this team.”

The air around them is eerily, silently, tense. Tony’s vibrating in the suit, exhausted.

“You’re damn lucky Tony’s prepared for you to be a stupid prejudiced moron,” Rhodey says viciously. “Or that whole building would have gone down to save your precious Bucky.”

“I made a mistake,” Steve says weakly.

“That’s a hell of a lot more than a mistake,” Tony says, speaking up for the first time. He surveys the crowd. Rhodey’s face is full of righteous, impassioned fury. Vision looks—well, Vision does not have a plethora of expressions, but Tony thinks the set of his eyes is harder, colder. Bucky looks furious, withdrawn and angry and wounded. His eyes are… Tony shivers, and looks away.

The rest of them look… troubled, Tony thinks he can charitably call it. No one’s standing next to Steve, no one’s speaking for him, but no one’s called him out yet, either.

Not even Maximoff. Tony knows she hates him, knows she’s done despicable things for the sole purpose of destroying him, but still. He thought there would be a little omega solidarity here, even if only a very little. Instead, she holds perfectly still, eyes focused on the ground.

No one will look directly at Tony.

Except Steve, that is, who turns to Tony with those large, pleading, soul-searing blue eyes. His desperation, tinged with righteousness, comes off of him like a sickly stench. Tony has to fight not to wrinkle his nose.

“Please, Tony.”

Tony takes a deep breath, then drops the face plate. He looks around one more time, sees no support, and turns away. “Go fuck yourself,” he says, and then takes off.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Tony goes off to lick his wounds in private, and does his best to get the ball rolling on just about any of his projects. Things aren't going well.

Chapter Notes

Happy Saturday!

First of all: wow. Wow, thank you all for such a stunning response to chapter seven. We crossed 10k hits, 800 kudos, and chapter seven alone has more than 100 comments. I am stunned and humbled by your awesome response. Thank you.

This chapter has Tony handling things the best he can, which isn't super well. Bucky is not a major player here. Tony also does some reflecting on his prior relationship with Steve, so we're going to learn a little about that. Just in case it's a thing for you; Tony contemplates drinking for the sake of getting drunk and tuning out the world, but he doesn't do it.

This is a slightly shorter chapter (by, like, a page), and it's mostly building up to stuff.

Thanks for reading, and if you like it, drop me a line!

“So, Pete, sorry I won’t be able to be at your internship. Again.” Tony winces. “I’m kinda failing at this mentor thing, huh?”

“It’s okay, Mr. Stark,” Peter says hurriedly over the phone. “I get it. You need to—you need to be safe.”

Tony freezes. “You sound like you know more than I’ve told you,” he says. A sinking feeling begins in his gut. “You weren’t—tell me you weren’t there.”

“No!” Peter says. “Just…there were journalists? Some of the stories made the news? And…well, it’s all over the internet.”

“Oh,” Tony says, sitting back in the chair in the makeshift lab. It’s certainly not ideal. He wonders how he could have missed that.

Then again, he’d just been electrocuted strongly enough to stop his heart for a second or two, to severely impair cognitive function. He’d just taken a damn building down and blown up the alien scout ship that’s haunted his nightmares for six years. He thinks he deserves a pass.

“What’d they get?” Tony asks. It’s more to FRIDAY than Peter, honestly, but Peter is the one who answers nonetheless.
“They, uh. Got the argument with Rogers.”

“And what’re they saying about it?” Peter’s quiet for too long. Tony sighs. “Yeah.” He’ll have FRIDAY give him the exact quotes later.

“You can’t go back to them,” Peter says.

“I need…” Tony doesn’t have words. Peter’s right, but he’s wrong, because Tony can’t just leave. Not now. Not when he knows his nightmares are about to come true.

Not that they’ll listen to him. The hysterical ravings of an omega, no doubt. No need to prepare for a large-scale invasion. Look how well they handled the last one. They’ll be fine.

Still. Every good mechanic will tell you that, while they can do a lot with a little, they can do jack shit with nothing. Tony needs something to work with, and that something is the remnants of the Avengers team.

Peter clears his throat. “I…have to go, Tony,” he says quietly. “School starts soon.”

Tony checks his watch. “That time already?”

“Yeah. And I—just be safe, Tony, alright? Please.”

Tony imagines what it must look like to Peter. What the kid is seeing, what he’s imagining. “Do my best, kiddo,” he says, letting his eyes slide closed. “Work hard today.”

Tony lets the phone drop after Peter hangs up, leaving us head hanging back, and sighs, all of the air leaving his body in a rush.

Here he is, isolated in a house few people knows he owns, avoiding the problem.

Being safe, people would call it. Peter and Rhodey and Pepper all have. And Tony is safe, probably safer here then he would be at the Compound, considering Steve’s anger.

But he’s also floundering, because he was right, he was right and now he doesn’t know what the hell to do with that.

They’re coming. They’re coming and it’s going to make 2012 look like a tea party, and Tony has to stop for several deep breaths before he spirals into another panic attack.

Steve says their best solution is to face it together. If that’s the case, they’ll certainly die together.

Tony, who wrote his dissertation while creating JARVIS and handling the bulk of Stark Industries’ R&D department, has never felt more overwhelmed than he has at this exact moment.

Because, as he’s been so vividly reminded, he had projects, world-saving, life-changing projects, that are now getting ignored because the end of the world is near.

Sometimes, Tony remembers when his biggest problems were illegal weapon sales fondly.

He sighs. His save-the-world projects have all gone belly-up. The Iron Legion. Ultron.

It’s time to start all over again.
Tony wanders into the kitchen, looking around. It’s a nice novelty, to have the run of the place, to be able to go wherever he wants without fear of running into people he doesn’t want to see.

It’s also incredibly lonely, but Tony refuses to think about that.

“What’s even in this kitchen, FRI?” Tony asks.

“There is coffee, Boss,” she says dutifully. “But other than some canned goods and tea, that’s about it. I can have a delivery scheduled?”

Tony’s stomach rumbles. He distantly remembers that he was going for lunch with Pepper when this whole travesty started. He hoped that artichoke dip was good. “Put a rush on it, okay? You know what I like.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

In the meantime, he makes himself a pot of coffee, absently staring off into space as it brews.

He’s bought himself some time, before he has to deal with the team. He doesn’t think any of them—besides Rhodey, of course, who doesn’t deserve to be lumped in there—know he owns this property. He doesn’t come often.

Which means he can hide out here and use the not-quite-state-of-the-art-anymore labs for a bit of time, get his head on straight, come up with a plan.

He’s called Peter. He checked in with Rhodey on the panicked flight over here, the only thing, honestly, keeping him from dissolving into a full-blown anxiety attack. He’s holding it together. Really.

The beep of the coffee machine makes him jump. “Fuck,” he hisses, scrambling around to get his footing back.

Things are—he took an electric shock serious enough to do a little damage to his fragile heart, but the effects have long worn off. The physical ones, anyways. It’s the stuff in his brain that’s making him twitchy. Things are not okay right now.

He can’t believe Steve—Rogers—would ever. He can’t believe he was at any point serious about that guy. He can’t believe…

He can’t believe how low he rates on Roger’s list of priorities.

Not after everything. Not after Tony was so convinced, so close to breaking lifelong rules for the guy.

It’s not like they were doing well, at the end. Ultron, mostly, had put a wedge between them, Steve unable to forgive Tony. In some way, Tony thinks distantly, with dawning nausea, unable to forgive himself. Because he was the alpha, and Tony the omega, and he hadn’t stopped Tony.

Nevermind that there were factors at play outside of Tony, of course. It was Tony’s fault. Which, Tony thinks, now that Steve’s true colors have shown, makes it Steve’s fault. It’s like the Accords Council said. Omegas are accountable to their alphas. He spares a moment to wonder how Steve is going to react when the marriage requirement news breaks and becomes public, then firmly quashes that thought.

So yeah. They weren’t doing good, at the end there. But Tony knows he at least expected it to
Tony will never admit it to another living soul, but he had begun to think of their future with them as *mates*. He wasn’t actively planning, he was never sure how they’d get to that point, but it was a thought in his mind, as incontrovertible as his roles as Iron Man or at MI. He and Steve were on some sort of collision course, where, eventually, they’d just be together. Two halves of the whole. The alpha war leader and the omega provider, the cornerstones of the team, of the pack.

Some sick joke, there.

Still, Tony hadn’t been an *idiot*. He’d believed that because he trusted Steve. Trusted Steve to treat him right, to really have Tony’s best interests at heart, not just say it. Sure, they clashed, they argued, they disagreed, but Steve had never used the voice before Siberia. Some part of Tony felt like their clashes were *productive*, because Steve respected him enough to argue with him.

Now, with the evidence confronting him, Tony thinks bitterly that Steve wasn’t so much an alpha who didn’t believe in the voice as one who had nothing he valued enough to use it for. The evidence is incontrovertible. Bucky, the light of Steve’s life, the connection to his past, the person who made his eyes light back up and gave him something to live for. And three times now, Steve’s used the voice to fuck Tony over for Bucky’s best interests.

Tony abruptly realizes he’s on the floor. “Boss?” FRIDAY asks, and it doesn’t sound like it’s the first time she’s asked. “Do you want me to call someone?”

Tony’s tempted to ask who exactly she would call, who exactly her programming says can fix this, can fix him, but he doesn’t have the energy to get into it. “No, baby girl, I’m fine,” he says. He sounds tired. He *is* tired, but he’s usually better than to sound so. “I think…I think I need to sleep.”

“May I recommend the bedroom? Or at least a couch?” FRIDAY says hesitantly.

Tony hates that bedroom. “Couch,” he says, then slides his eyes closed once more. “Just gonna…take a minute.”

Tony wakes up on the kitchen floor, feeling like shit. His spine feels like the entire length of it popped out of alignment. “Fuck.”

“I did try to stop you from sleeping on the floor,” FRIDAY says.

Tony groans, then slowly sits up. “God dammit.”

“There’s still coffee in the pot, although I imagine it is cold,” FRIDAY says.

Tony doesn’t respond, just pulls himself into a sitting position, back to the counters. Fuck.

“Any news, FRIDAY?” He asks.

“You have thirty-seven missed calls.”

“Any of them important?” He asks.

“None on your priority call list, although Colonel Rhodes did ask me to tell you that he would be calling around noon, so to make sure you were awake for that. That is in two hours.”
“Great,” Tony says. “The others?”

“Your PR team called four times. I highly recommend returning their call; they seem eager to discuss the issue of what happened yesterday. Likewise, the PR team for the Avengers Initiative called three times. Ross’ office called twice. Natasha Romanoff called four times and declined to leave a message. Bucky Barnes called twice. He also declined, and said you knew where to reach him. Steve Rogers called twenty-two times.”

Tony winces. “Delete those. I don’t want to hear them.” He pauses. “Wait. Still don’t want to hear them, but transcribe his messages for me. I’ll read ‘em later.”

“Done, Boss.”

Tony pulls himself to standing. “We take a stock dip?”

“Ms. Potts isn’t worried about it.”

Which means yes, but not so severe that they need to go into crisis mode. “Call the PR people. My people. Let’s get a message out there.”

They pick up on the second ring. “Mr. Stark?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Tony says, dumping the coffee and starting over. “How’s it looking?”

The woman on the other end of the line shuffles some papers. “It’s becoming a hot topic of debate. There’s cell phone footage of the whole thing.”

Tony sighs as he sets the machine to brew. “People are saying Rogers was right,” he surmises.

She pauses. “They’d have trouble making that argument, considering you were actually doing the right thing, the smarter thing. That’s pretty obvious to anyone who sees it. But. People seem to be saying he is within his rights? That, as leader of the team and as—“

“An alpha facing an unruly omega, yeah,” Tony interrupts grumpily. He doesn’t even touch on the fact that Rogers isn’t the leader of the Avengers. People have a hard time letting go of things, even if there’s a historical record of failure.

“Well,” she says. “That seems to be the consensus. There are of course people who don’t see it that way, but, well…people always tend to give alphas the benefit of the doubt.”

Tony sighs again. “Look. Remind me of your name.”

“Roxanne.”

“Roxanne,” Tony echoes. “I’ve heard this before. Any good news?”

She pauses. “You were doing the right thing, and Captain Rogers is an idiot?”

Tony snorts. “See, I already tried that defense, on a global scale, and it didn’t fly for most people. So. What are our options?”

“I think that’s up to you,” she says. “Way I see it, there are two options. One, you let it go. Let the story run its course, do nothing, go on with your life. It won’t rock too many boats—that haven’t already been rocked. SI will remain untouched, it’s not going to shake the ground the Avengers stand on any. The story will go away, or fade back to what it already was. I mean, ‘Captain America can’t control omega’ already was a story, but. Well. This won’t escalate anymore.”
“And my other option?” Tony asks.

“Push,” she says immediately. “Take any ground we might have gained—people have to be questioning things, you were so clearly doing the right thing there—and push for more. It’s loud and it’s public and it’ll be messy, but. Well. That’s why you hired us, isn’t it?”

It is. Tony was thirty-one when he found this PR firm and they’ve handled his life ever since. Founded by an actually happily mated couple—Tony does believe it’s possible, just rare—the alpha and omega run their company as partners, as equals. And they hire a lot of omegas. And they’d been ecstatic to deal with a client who has been pushing for omega rights.

So Tony’s party-boy days? A waste of these guys’ talent. His super-hero antics? Way in left field, although they’ve risen to the occasion admirably. This moment?

“This is what I hired you for,” Tony confirms. “Let’s go for it.” He pauses a moment. “Have you…there are rumors going around, that they’re putting a mating requirement on the Accords.”

“I thought that was quashed,” Roxanne says.

“It’s back,” Tony says miserably. “And I’ve been looking for a way to weaken them.”

Roxanne is silent for a minute. “Let me call you back tomorrow with an action plan,” she says.

And that is why Tony loves this company.

Following coffee and a shower—the hot water did amazing things for his back—Tony makes the next call on his to-do list.

Calling the Avengers’ PR team is a whole different animal than calling his own.

For one thing, he didn’t choose these guys. The Council did, and, since they’re American-based, Tony thinks Ross and Nick Ranford, The US’ UN delegate, had a lot more to do with it than anyone will say.

They are not here for omega’s rights, to say the least.

“Mr. Stark,” the man who picks up says. “Glad we got a hold of you. We need to talk about yesterday.”

“I’m all ears,” Tony says. In fact, he has a tablet in front of him and a separate one by his left hand, which he’s using to jot notes on, in the absence of a hologram display. This house is woefully out of date.

“We’re thinking we can get a press conference scheduled for tomorrow,” the man says. “The sooner the better with this sort of thing, of course, and—“

“Slow down there, cowboy,” Tony says. “What exactly do you plan on me saying at this press conference?”

“Just that there’s no hard feelings,” the man says. “That tensions run high in the field, and, of course, Captain Rogers is an alpha, his instincts guiding him like that, perfectly understandable, all that. That you understand how things might look but it’s all perfectly natural, and it’s being addressed in-house, and—"
Tony rolls his eyes, not even having the energy to be shocked. Of course. “Yeah, I won’t be doing that,” he interrupts.

There’s silence on the line. “May I ask why not?”

“Well,” Tony says absently, playing with the 2D simulation on his tablet. “I’m releasing a statement tomorrow condemning Captain Rogers’ actions, so. Mixed messages and all that.” It’s not strictly true, he doesn’t know that that will be the recommended course of action, but it’s highly likely that it will be. Tony will definitely be pushing for it.

The tension is thick enough to cut with a knife, even over the phone. “May I ask who you cleared that with?”

“My PR team,” Tony says.

“I was under the impression, that, as an Avenger—“

“That’s the thing,” Tony interrupts. “I’m more than just an Avenger. I wear a lot of hats. And it’s be pretty damn damaging to a lot of them to make that statement.”

“So you’re planning on harming the Avengers in the process? Because I assure you, any such statement will shake an admittedly already weak foundation.”

“Well,” Tony says with forced cheeriness. “Something that weak doesn’t really deserve to stand, does it? Let’s see what they’re made of.”

There’s dead silence on the line for long enough that Tony thinks the call disconnected. Then the man comes back. “You understand I have to pass this along to the Accords Council.”

“They know how to reach me,” Tony says, then hangs up.

Tony massages his temples, ignoring the tablets in front of him.

It’s not that the man is anti-omega, necessarily, although he is likely one of those people in the uncomfortable area of thinking that, sure, Tony did make the right choice, but, hell, Steve is an alpha. That just trumps everything.

It’s that he—and his company, and the Council, and so many others—are so determined not to rock the boat that they’ll throw him under the bus. Say it’s okay, Tony. Tell the nice people everything’s fine .

Tony rolls his eyes, then goes back to his tablets. He pours over the data from an obscure doctoral thesis in Finland, of all places, looking to see if there’s any way he can apply this woman’s data to making omegas a little more safe.

At noon exactly, the phone rings and FRIDAY picks it up without even asking Tony. “Tones?”

“Hey, Rhodey,” Tony says, setting aside his tablet for the duration of the call. “How’re you?”

“I should be asking you that.”

“I’ll live.”

“Ringing endorsement, right there,” Rhodey says dryly.
“Yeah. Uh, well. So. I should warn you. I’ve talked to two different PR companies today and things are probably going to get awkward around the compound for a bit.”

“How awkward?” Rhodey asks.

“Well, I’m definitely not doing a press conference tomorrow where I say Rogers was fine and I fully understand and support him, just to not rock the boat for the Avengers,” Tony says dryly.

“No shit. The moment you do that, I’ll assume it’s an imposter and shoot you.”

“So instead, I. You know. Talked to my people and might be going on a very loud, very public crusade. Against Rogers and also anyone who might agree with him. Against the marriage requirements.”

“Do they think it’ll work?” Rhodey asks.

Tony shrugs. “I think I’d actually, physically wither up and die if I didn’t try it.” The line goes quiet after his raw honesty.

Rhodey sighs. “Well, you know I’m with you every step of the way. They want me on Good Morning, America saying Rogers is full of shit? I’m there.”

The gesture is nice and has Tony smiling, even though he knows he won’t take Rhodey up on it. Rhodey has a career, Rhodey has a team to lead, and Tony’s not going to throw a huge, him-sized wrench in the middle of that.

Tony sighs. “It’s gonna make a mess, Rhodey.”


“Not even a little?”

“I’m super worried,” Rhodey allows. “But not about whatever mess this might make. If it makes a mess, then we had it coming.”

“They’re gonna try twice as hard to throw me off the team,” Tony warns.

“Let them try.”

Tony sighs. “So. Any word on the, uh, aliens?”

“Well, for some reason, I’ve yet to hear the words ‘Tony’s right about everything’ leave anyone’s mouth,” Rhodey says. “God knows why not.”

“I think the words I say go in one ear and out the other,” Tony says. “They probably don’t even remember I’ve been saying this.”

“Rogers is losing his mind,” Rhodey says. “I mean, about everything right now. But about this too. ‘What did Tony mean, did he send you?’” Rhodey mocks. “‘Who’s he? What does Tony know?’”

Tony sighs. “I’ve said it for years, the Chitauri were just the warm up act, there’s something coming and we are not ready for it.”

“How do we get ready for it?”

“Fuck if I know. That’s why I wanted to start finding solutions in 2012.”

“Well, we always did work well under pressure,” Rhodey says.

Tony groans. “I don’t know where to start.”
“Yes you do,” Rhodey insists. “You always do, Tones.”

It’s half-reassuring, and half daunting threat.

Tony takes the rest of the day. Sits out on the porch, wonders what exactly is so great about nature. Tries to brainstorm his way out of his problem.

Pretends this is a thinking process, and not shutting down.

Fuck . Fuck.

“FRIDAY?”

“Yes, Boss?”

He almost asks her what kind of alcohol is in the house. There must be plenty; Howard wouldn’t have let the place run dry. He’s alone, as safe as he can be, he can have a drink.

Or four.

He changes his mind, doesn’t ask. “Can you put the news on?”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

The tablet lights up with his newsfeed, images flickering past until one catches his attention. “Blow that up,” he instructs.
FRIDAY obliges, full-screening this image. “Stupid out-of-date tech,” Tony mutters, expecting his tablet to interact with a holographic interface and finding it lacking.

“We could update the place, Boss, if we’re staying awhile,” FRIDAY says.

Tony smiles. “That your way to feel out the length of our stay?”

“It’s safe here,” FRIDAY says.

“Yes,” Tony agrees, peering through the article. “Hm. Lookit this one.”

They’re mostly negative on a sliding scale. Like Roxanne said, people have a hard time saying Rogers was right, but they have an easier time telling themselves that he was within his rights, that this type of behavior is normal and expected. Everything the Avengers’ press conference would play right into. Tony should be under control. Steve is an alpha, and Tony’s an omega, and bad at taking orders. Tony’s unmated, so really, it’s his fault. What did anyone expect?

But here, in front of him, there’s a little small-time article passionately arguing that, based on merit alone, Tony should have been given the benefit of the doubt, and Rogers was, simply put, unfit for service for interfering, especially so clearly on behalf of a friend. It’s not that it’s groundbreaking for what it says about omegas; rather, it is somewhat groundbreaking because it doesn’t mention dynamics at all, outside of using the phrase “alpha voice” twice.

Tony saves it so he can go back to it later.

“FRIDAY?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“I want you to wake me in two hours. I’ll be ready to start then.”
“Sure thing, Boss,” FRIDAY promises as Tony leans back in the chair and closes his eyes.

It’s a break. It’ll help him think. It’s beneficial. Really.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Tony continues to take care of business. An old friend makes an appearance.

Chapter Notes

Happy Saturday, all!

This is up a little later than usual, but my sister made pancakes this morning, so I was distracted.

Anyways, welcome to chapter nine. Tony's taking care of things. Bucky's not quite a major player again yet, although he's spotted here and there.

A quick note: I love Christine Everhart. I think she's the moral center of the first Iron Man film--she's not particularly nice to Tony, but every moral judgement she makes is one Tony comes to agree with for himself in time, and she had a lot of reasons to think poorly of him when she made her judgments (not always correct reasons, but reasons nonetheless). Therefore, I am super excited to include her and I just need you all to know I love her.

We also talk a little more about pack structure and pack roles here.

Happy reading, and if you enjoy, drop me a line!

“Be that as it may, Council member, I don’t see why—“

“You damn well do,” The council member says, and Tony grits his teeth. It’s the fourth time he’s been interrupted in the last ten minutes.

He’s video conferencing, although he had the sense to hang a green-screen behind him. FRIDAY’s making it look like he’s in a hotel room with the Tokyo skyline behind him. Let them wonder.

“I don’t see why an omega member of the initiative with my experience, qualifications, and track record requires any sort of different supervision than anyone else,” Tony persists.

“Stark. Don’t be daft.”

Tony bares his teeth. “Explain it to me,” He says. “Using small words. Go ahead.”

“Omegas are homemakers ,” the council member says. “Meant to take care of people. And I can see where you’d confuse the desire to take care of people with a desire to be a…a superhero, but the fact remains, omegas ar e delicate. ”

“According to who?” Tony asks, full of fake patience.
“According to science! Stark, don’t be an idiot. There are dozens of studies carried out that show this.”

“Sure,” Tony says. “You can make a dozen studies say anything you want. I’ve looked at the research; I’m not impressed.”

“You wouldn’t be.”

Tony doesn’t bother asking what that’s supposed to mean. “Point to where exactly I’ve been delicate.”

“You and Banner, two out-of-control omegas, were irrational and built a super-robot that almost destroyed the planet. Maximoff, another out-of-control omega, aided and abetted that robot, following the orders of the first thing to come along. You were unable to manage your company on your own, leading to illegal sales and up-and-down stock prices. You invited a terrorist to your front door. And, by your own admission to this body, you got emotional and nearly killed Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers.”

Tony grits his teeth there. If he wanted them dead, they would be. The unibeam would not have hit just Bucky’s arm. The perfect shot he lined up would have killed Bucky, not caved the ceiling. Steve wouldn’t have gotten a backhand; a repulsor blast is just as easy and just as instinctive.

He doesn’t mention it; it’s beside the point.

“I fail to see how that meets the criteria for delicate,” Tony says.

“Over-emotional. Prone to irrationality.”

“Captain Rogers— the honorific burns, but Tony forces it out anyways— ignored the will of one hundred seventeen countries because of his emotions over an old friend of his. He just made a horrendous, almost deadly call in battle because of those same emotions. Yet he hasn’t been called here to be called irrational.”

“Your point, Stark?”

“Omegas aren’t the only ones capable of moments that don’t seem rational when observed by a third-party after the fact,” Tony says. “Move on. Next argument.”

“Stark,” someone says. It’s practically a growl now. He’s aggravating them. “Omegas make or break packs. They exist the way they do for a reason.”

“Explain, then,” Tony says, gesturing magnanimously.

“Omegas either belong to someone, or they belong to someone else. That’s how packs are made. They’re bound around the omega. You can’t be unbonded on a team. Where the hell do you fit into the pack hierarchy then?”

“Where do any of them fit?” Tony asks. “We’re not a pack, not really. How many damn ‘packs’ do we see anymore? It’s not how society exists.”

“Just because we don’t live off in packs in the woods and defend our territory to the death doesn’t mean we don’t have pack bonds. Families are pack-like, friend groups are pack-like. School children form juvenile packs with cliques and social standing. And in high-stress environments, there are definitely pack-like elements. There has to be to show prolonged survival.”
This is the expert they’ve decided to consult, Tony thinks, the condescending academic who knows more about how omegas work that Tony does, who can say what he needs and how he should act.

“Someone should tell the Avengers that, then,” Tony says flippantly. “I don’t think they know.”

It gets quiet for a moment. “I would argue that they do know, and you’ve just been excluded,” the expert says.

That hits like a punch to the gut, mostly because it’s the most true thing any of them have said in the last hour.

“It makes sense,” the expert continues, her voice soft and decidedly patronizing. “You’re an unbonded omega. Won’t bond with any of them, won’t take your place in the pack. If you were bonded to someone else, you both could have been worked in in some capacity, a secondary pack structure. If you were bonded to one of the Avengers, a primary pack structure would emerge. You could have bound the Avengers pack together, the cornerstones of a pack. But packs require specific roles from us all, and, since you weren’t meeting them, you were just left out.” She pauses. “Maximoff might be unbonded but at least she’s made a space in the pack structure, essentially the omega child, judging by how she interacts with Captain Rogers. She has a role in the pack and the household.”

Tony takes a minute to gather his thoughts.

“I think you should do some observations, if you really think that that’s a pack,” Tony says mechanically. Not that he knows much about packs. He’s never really been a part of one. Sure, he has his friends, his small group, but they don’t really qualify as a pack. They’re not together often enough, each of them has obligations elsewhere.

“Mr. Stark,” someone new says. “The fact of the matter is, what you’ve been saying to the public is ridiculous. Neither the Avengers Initiative nor the Accords Council are prejudiced against omegas. Wanda Maximoff is an omega on the team and she does not agree with you! There is a way of things. It is better for everyone. Perhaps if you tried it, you would see.”

“Perhaps I should just try a lobotomy,” Tony mutters. Then he straightens up. “Thanks for wasting an hour of my life. I’m sorry to inform you that the PR blitz isn’t going to stop. I hope you see reason.” He hangs up the call.

“Assholes,” FRIDAY says. Tony smiles, amused by her unsolicited but absolutely desired opinion.


FRIDAY obligingly brings up the news scroll on the computer screen in front of him. Tony scans, then sighs. “No traction, then.” On the contrary; most news sources are reporting the Rogue Avengers’ responses. Natasha, Steve, Clint, and Wanda have done a press conference and at least two interviews, talking about alpha instincts and just the way packs are, in high-stress situations. There is the insinuation that none of this would have happened if they could trust Tony, from Natasha. Tony grits his teeth.

“On the contrary, Boss. Several smaller bloggers are picking up your story.”

“Great.”

“It’s only been three days,” FRIDAY says.

“PR battles are won and lost sooner.”
“You’re a pessimist, Boss.”

“No,” he sighs. “I’m a realist. Call Roxanne. Tell her I’ll do the interview, whoever she wants.”

Tony’s been…floundering. Sure, he gave the go-ahead with the PR team’s action plan, and he’s called the Accords Council. He finished reading the dissertation from Finland, interesting but ultimately probably useless. But other than that, he’s been able to gain no ground, no traction. Unable to point himself in a direction and work.

So it’s probably no surprise that, while thinking of giant laser cannons that can be mounted to satellites around the earth, powerful enough to destroy an invading spacecraft, Tony finds himself unproductive. “FRIDAY? Show me the news. About the Avengers.”

Most of the stories are about him and Rogers. There’s a think piece about the Avengers’ ability to address conflicts like Civil Wars, and there’s a financial piece wondering if individual countries are going to or should be made to step up to supplement the Avengers’ funding.

And there’s one interesting video of Bucky Barnes.

He’s back at that burger place in that town near the compound. He has seven plates in front of him, all mostly empty. The shot starts at a distance, then quickly moves closer as the owner of the camera becomes more bold. “Sergeant Barnes!”

Bucky looks up, half-panicked but thankfully hiding it quickly. Tony feels bad. The guy clearly liked the burger joint, and here is someone ruining the experience for him.

“Hi,” he says, voice quiet and eyes not leaving the camera.

He has no practice at this. He can’t pull together a press smile or make himself look at ease and Tony aches for him.

“Are you an Avenger now?” The owner of the camera asks.

Bucky shrugs. “I…I don’t know. I’m good at shooting things.”

“Do you want to be an Avenger?”

Bucky shrugs again. “I liked…it’s not bad. Helping people is good. I liked that part.” He pauses a second, as if weighing his words. “I didn’t like what happened after.”

The footage thankfully cuts off there. The major news networks seem to just be getting it now; before, it seems to have circulated Avengers’ fan sites and blogs.

Tony reads forty-three comments calling Bucky dreamy, a fan discussion on whether or not he should cut his hair back to how it was in the forties, a comment thread on if the bun Bucky’s wearing is hipster or not, and a side tangent about how there’s now enough Avengers for a calendar photo shoot, and who should be what month, and then another tangent over whether certain members even count as Avengers, considering. His eyes hurt.

And no one has noticed how badly off Bucky looks. How uncomfortable, how alone.

There’s a debate over whether or not he should be an Avenger. Most people thankfully say yes, because he’s a war hero and he’s proven himself and he’s been cleared of most charges, his pardon
for Romania and Germany hanging over his head. That’s good news. Whether or not Bucky wants to be an Avenger, at least no one is going to try to stop him.

Bucky tried to call twice that first night and Tony ignored it. He told FRIDAY that Tony knew how to contact him. He does, could in a second, but. He’s not sure what they’ll say. “Sorry my best friend fucked you over again because of me?” Or, worse “can’t you understand the alpha’s instincts and cut him some slack?” “If you weren’t always such an unruly omega, he might have trusted you this time.”

Tony’s not ready to find out.

Christine Everhart. That’s who Roxanne picks.

“She’s a good choice,” Roxanne argues. “She’s decidedly liberal-leaning, has written positive things about omega’s rights before. She works for a major organization. She’s going to get the story right and she’s going to get it out. And, she’s a beta, so that’s about as unbiased a voice as you’re going to get, currently.”

Tony sighs. “Yeah, I know her well.”

He does, in his own way, trust her. She tells it like it is, and she’s got strong moral convictions.

“She’s never…from what I’ve seen, her stuff about omega’s rights is about, you know, feeding the kids of single mothers and helping the ‘rare’ victim of abuse. All the light, easily palatable stuff that doesn’t take too much commitment because no one really disagrees with it.”

“From what I’ve seen, that was your stuff about omega’s rights before this week, too,” Roxanne points out.

Tony sighs. “Set it up. Where are we meeting?”

“Wherever you’re available to meet, Mr. Stark. She’s based in L.A.”

A good long ways away, then. Far enough that it’ll confuse people to where he’s hiding out. “LA it is, then,” he says. “Get me the details tonight, okay?”

“Sounds good, Mr. Stark.”

Tony files his flight plan for Iron Man at the last possible minute—he doesn’t want any visitors waiting for him in L.A—and leaves at eight AM for an eleven AM lunch. He has to get cross-country, after all.

Christine is good, he gives her that. Or just well-prepped by his team. Either way, she picks an out-of-the-way little place, something he can get into without gaining too much attention, assuming he doesn’t fly in in the suit.

So he leaves the suit and takes a car. His Malibu home might not be what it once was, but then again it’s not really home anymore either. It can still hold his suits and a few cars.

“Tony!” She says, smiling and waving him over. He walks over to her table, in the back and away from windows.

“Been a long time,” she says, once they’re settled.
“Last time I saw you, you were writing a piece on Justin Hammer.”

“Mhm,” she agrees. “Wrote all about his arrest. But we’re here about you today.”

“Not just me,” Tony argues.

Her eyes light up. “Wanna tell me about that? And you don’t mind if I record it?”

“Not at all,” Tony says truthfully. “As long as you don’t mind that I’m recording too.”

“ Wouldn’t expect anything less,” she says. “So. Not just about you?”

Tony smiles, press-sharp and pointy, thankful he left his sunglasses on. “Well, it takes two to make a mess like this, doesn’t it?” He asks rhetorically. “But no, I more meant that omegas make up a quarter of the world’s population and we’re still dicking around on how to treat them appropriately.”

Christine’s smile is as sharp as his. Hungry , Tony thinks. “Tell me more.”

And Tony lays it all out.

It will take two weeks to print the article. Christine promises to send him a copy the day of, but not a moment before. Tony doesn’t ask for more. He’s put it on faith that this will work out; he can’t change it, if it doesn’t.

“Off the record, now,” she says. “What are you going to do about the Avengers?”

Tony’s somewhat startled by the friendly tone, but doesn’t balk. “I don’t know yet,” he admits. “I’m more big-picture that that.”

“Does you leaving the compound signal an end to being an Avenger?”

“I wouldn’t be fighting so hard to stay in if I wanted out,” he points out.

“Well, this isn’t just about you, is it?” Christine says, sharp smile back.

“What made you want to do this?” Tony asks. “This type of article…”

“You either get a Pulitzer or get black-balled, yeah,” she says. “I like to gamble.”

“And?”

“What makes you think there’s an and?” She asks.

“There always is.”

She shrugs, then sighs, and it’s like the tension just melts away a bit, like her wall drops. “My older sister is an omega,” she says. “Was mated at eighteen. I was seven. He’s some bigwig in oil. She’s got four kids. Anyways, she’s proud of me and what I do. Only they pulled her out of regular school at twelve to send her to one of those omega boarding schools, because that was all the rage, the humane way to treat your omega kid. You know, prepare them for the life they’re going to have. So she's functionally illiterate. Definitely doesn’t read what I write.”

Tony’s stunned.
“She says she’s happy in her marriage. That she loves him, that she loves her family. Truth be told, he doesn’t even seem that bad. He dotes on her, all of that. I’ve offered to…to help her out, if she wants it. I’m sure you know how,” she says. Tony nods. They don’t say any more in public. “But she says she loves him. So she stays. And I’m happy she’s happy. It could be worse, you know? But she was learning to…to change diapers or whatever, instead of how to read.”

“Yeah,” Tony says, looking Christine over. “I bet you were hoping for a way stronger quote that first night, huh?”

Christine’s smile is a little brittle, but present. “Well, better late than never.”

Tony flies back to New York at a leisurely pace, taking a few detours to distract those truly dedicated Iron Man spotters who he sometimes sees on the internet. When he lands back at the house, he parks the armor in the garage and heads inside. “FRIDAY, baby?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“I miss any news?”

His tablet flashes to life. It’s another video of Bucky, at…Laguardia? Jesus, what’s the guy doing in a commercial airport?

“Sergeant Barnes!” Someone shouts. “Where are you headed?”

Bucky ignores the question.

“Does this mean you’re leaving the Avengers?”

Bucky again ignores the question.

“You’ve been noticeably absent on the campaign to defend your old friend, Steve Rogers. Are you not ready for the spotlight yet?”

A question they should maybe have asked earlier, before shoving the camera in Bucky’s face, Tony thinks.

“I’m fine,” Bucky says quietly.

Tony looks him over. He doesn’t entirely look fine, although he does look like he’s confident and he means business about getting to his gate on time.

“Where are you headed today?” Someone repeats.

Again, Bucky doesn’t answer. The footage cuts out a moment later.

Tony blinks down at his tablet, unsure of what he just saw. Why is Bucky flying commercial? Is he leaving the Avengers?

He supposes that he has as little information as the person taking the video has. Even as firmly on the outside as he was at the compound, he’s doubly excluded out here.

Well, he thinks, trying to be optimistic. That just means more time to work.
Tony’s trying to explain calculus to Peter two days later, and it’s murder to do it over the phone, without any way to *show* the kid what he means. Tony’s always been a tactile learner, needing to draw and manipulate and move.

“Get it?” Tony asks, spinning in the swivel chair at the lab desk.

“Yeah,” Peter says, and Tony hears his pencil scratching. “Thanks, Tony. You should really teach this stuff.”

Tony snorts. “You’re kidding.”

“Why am I kidding?”

“It just took us fifteen minutes to get through one problem, and I spent seven of those minutes comparing it to the Iron Man suit!” Tony exclaims.

“Yeah, but I get it now, so it worked,” Peter says. “I think I can do the rest of the problems, too.”

“Yeah, well, I’m glad,” Tony says awkwardly. “How’s school?”

“Good,” Peter says. “Ned and I are building another mini-Death Star.”

Tony snorts. “Sounds like fun, kiddo.”

Peter sounds like he’s smiling, which is all Tony wants to hear. “Yeah. And, I got a ninety on my physics test.”

“Hey, nice job,” Tony says. His Dad would have crucified him for a ninety. Would have called it proof omegas can’t hack it. Tony tries to do the exact opposite of whatever Howard ever did. “So, we covered school. How’s Spider-manning going?”

“I haven’t been out much,” Peter admits. “’Cause Aunt May, she’s kinda freaked out, about what happened to you, and she’s really worried it’ll happen to me, and—”

“Hey, Peter?” Tony interrupts.

“Yeah?”

“Your Aunt is a smart woman, alright? I’m glad you’re listening to her. The world’s a scary place right now and she wants you safe.”

“Yeah,” Peter admits, “but when you can do the type of stuff I can, and you don’t, and people get hurt, then—“

“You need to be your first priority,” Tony says firmly. “Peter, you can’t do anything if you’re… hurt.”

“I just wanna be helpful.”

“Help me with the science side of things, then. That lab is yours, whether I’m there or not.”

A beat. “Really?”

“Really,” Tony confirms. “Obviously be safe, but fuck, I had a lab when I was your age, blowing shit up is a rite of passage. Go for it.”
“I…don’t know what to say.”

“Your worth isn’t just as Spider-man, kiddo,” Tony says. “You’ve also got a big brain in there, somewhere. While you’re waiting for superheroing to be back on the table, use your head.”

“Thanks, Mr. Stark. Tony.”


Peter hangs up and Tony’s still smiling.

He’s glad May put her foot down. Not that Tony thinks the world is inherently more dangerous than it already was a week ago, but he’s glad May’s laying down the law like this, keeping Peter’s best interests at heart. He’s glad the two of them work as well as they do.

“Hey, Boss?” FRIDAY asks.

“Yeah, FRI?”

“Intruder alarm was tripped at the western border.”

Tony swears. The Iron Man suit is in the garage. He’s working out the best way to get there when the doorbell rings.

“We’re still at ding-dong?” He asks. “FRIDAY, cameras.”

His phone lights up with the image. “Bucky?!?”
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

Bucky's arrived, and he has some 'splainin' to do.

Chapter Notes

Surprise!

This is my celebration for being home now, and also because you all have been so sweet to me.

Warnings for this chapter: Bucky's back! Bucky has also done some kinda not cool things that he pretty quickly realizes aren't cool, and he apologizes. I also want to let you know that this isn't completely resolved and Bucky's got some shit to deal with. (For anyone who's worried about this, spoiler: Bucky basically has stalked Tony).

Other than that, get ready for some Tony and Bucky bonding!

Thanks for all the support, enjoy this bonus day, and I'll be back with the next chapter Wednesday!

Tony throws open the door, staring agape at the super soldier definitely standing on the quaint little porch.

“Hey, Tony,” Bucky says. “Can I come in?”

When Tony can’t manage to answer right away, Bucky looks down and scuffs his shoe against the wood. “Or we could talk out here. Or I could just go ‘way, if I’m oversteppin’ my bounds…”

Tony shakes himself when he feels Bucky’s hesitance. “Come in,” he says, holding the door open.

Bucky walks inside, looking around. “Nice place you got here.”

“Thanks. It was Howard’s.”

Bucky winces. “I…uh…”

“Yeah, pretty sure he used to bring mistresses here,” Tony says, uncaring if it makes the conversation uncomfortable. “So. Why and how are you here?”

Bucky looks amused. “Which one do you want to know first?”

Tony considers. “How, first.” That one might be a security issue. If he’s going to have uninvited guests, he should know sooner rather than later.
Bucky shrugs. “I mean, you were spotted in California, and it seemed like a place you’d be, ‘cause I know you used to live there. So I flew out there. Only you weren’t there, and by the time I checked online, there were a couple sightings of you flyin’ cross country again, so I knew you had to be ‘round here. After that, good old-fashioned tracking.” He winces. “That…sounds bad. Let me explain.”

“Go on,” Tony says, and he’s surprised, but not really surprised, to find himself more amused than concerned.

“I’m good at that type of thing,” Bucky says. “Uh. Stalking, I guess. But. I wanted to talk, and, uh. Here I am?”

Tony, despite himself, finds himself firmly in the amused category now. “You could have called.”

“I did! You didn’t call back.”

Well, now Tony feels a little bad for not returning Bucky’s calls, when things first went down. Bucky probably didn’t track him across the entire continental US and back again just to tell him to forgive Steve.

“Sorry,” Tony offers. “I was…”

“You didn’t have to call me,” Bucky says. He frowns, seems to be thinking things over. Tony can sense his discomfort amping up as he thinks. “In fact, I shouldn’t’ve come. This was…lame. Swear I won’t tell the others where you are, and I’ll leave you alone.” He turns away.

“Wait!” Tony says. “It’s okay, Bucky. Uh, cross-country stalker is probably not the best look, but. It’s okay this time. I…let’s talk.” He has some self-preservation instincts left, at least. “I reserve the right to kick you out if I don’t like what you have to say.”


“Make yourself at home,” Tony says, gesturing around.

Bucky sits on one of the old leather couches, gingerly and on edge, like he’s not sure of his welcome. Fair enough, Tony supposes. Right now, Tony’s not sure of his welcome. Because while Bucky seems to be on the up-and-up, he did stalk him, technically. And Tony finds his whole explanation amusing in its way, but Tony’s not an idiot. Stalkers are stalkers are stalkers.

“So. Let’s say I had my head on straight and returned your call,” Tony says. “What would you have said?”

Bucky fidgets with the edge of his sleeve as he talks, not looking at Tony. “Well. I’d’ve started by saying Steve’s an asshole and askin’ if I’m allowed to beat him up on your behalf.”

“You already broke his face,” Tony reminds him.

“Barely counted, it healed in ‘bout an hour,” Bucky says dismissively. “Then I’d tell you I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything,” Tony says.

“Yeah, but he did it for me, so I figure I’ve got some stake in this,” Bucky shrugs. “Then I’d’a told you that I was here, for anything you needed. Whatever it might be.” There’s an undercurrent there, a dangerous one, one that’s Tony doesn’t feel ready to poke at yet.
“Okay, if I had picked up, I would’ve told you the only person I expect an apology from is Rogers. And maybe the others who stood around and said nothing,” Tony adds. “And that you shouldn’t beat up your best friend, and that you don’t owe me an apology.”

“And what I could do for you?” Bucky asks, voice low, eyes trained hard on Tony’s face. Desperation, Tony thinks. Desperation for absolution.

“You haven’t done any press saying Steve’s in the right,” Tony says.

Bucky’s eyes narrow. “I refused.” There’s a lot behind his eyes, and Tony can guess it wasn’t a one-and-done refusal. He wonders what it’s been like to live at the compound, recently.

“That. That’s what you could do for me. That statement means a lot,” Tony says, shrugging. “You might not have noticed, but I’ve embarked on a national campaign about this. You not taking their side means a lot.”

“I wanted to beat his face in, for doing that to you,” Bucky admits.

Tony raises an eyebrow. “Seems a little extreme.”

Bucky looks him dead in the eye. “I know what it’s like to have your mind ripped away from you,” he says, voice low and rough, “and have something else shoved in there instead. I wasn’t…I wasn’t a hundred percent myself, ‘til Princess Shuri got her hands on me, but I remember what Steve did to you in Siberia. And I already told him…he promised me it was a moment of weakness, of desperation, that he’d never do it again.” Bucky swallows. “And yet here we are.”

“Here we are,” Tony echoes.

“He ain’t even really sorry,” Bucky says, a low current of anger in his voice. “He’s sorry you ran off, he’s sorry people almost died. But he ain’t sorry for the right reasons.”

“Yeah, well,” Tony shrugs. “Color me not surprised.”

“I’m—I’m glad you figured somethin’ out, that you managed to stop him this time. Didn’t sound good, but I figured it’s better than giving in.”

“You heard?” Tony says, wincing.

“You screamed a lot,” Bucky says.

“It’s an electric shock. Stops pretty much everything for a moment, like a hard reset,” Tony explains. “Reboots my brain so I can think straight. I’ve had it for years.”

“But, in Siberia…”

“Not one hundred percent effective,” Tony says. “First of all, poor FRIDAY was new at it. And it requires FRIDAY to be working right. I need power, something for her to connect to. Much as I’d like her to, she can’t just sit in my brain. I left my phone on the helicopter so I couldn’t be traced to Siberia—which fucked me over later—and the suit was disabled. No connection for FRIDAY, no shock, and no prevention.” He shrugs, tries to make it look careless and probably fails. “It happens.”

“That’s…awful,” Bucky says. He looks guilty, and it comes off of him in waves.

Tony tries to smile, probably fails. “Welcome to an omega’s life, Bucky. I’m luckier than most and
I don’t deny it. I can invent these shocks and an AI to go with it. My money and name mean I can start a national PR campaign when someone crosses the line in the sand. Most people don’t have that.” He waves. “New topic. Why didn’t you just call again?”

“I wouldn’t do that!” Bucky says. “You didn’t call back. I wasn’t gonna force it.”

Tony raises an eyebrow, amused. “And yet, here you are.”

Bucky looks downs sheepishly. “I might not ‘a thought things through,” he admits. “I thought you were in California and next thing I knew, I’d had FRIDAY book me a ticket.”

Tony looks over to her camera. “FRIDAY?”

“Sergeant Barnes has been shown to be calming for you, Boss,” she says. “And he wouldn’t have bothered you without your say-so.”

“That may be true,” Tony allows. “But maybe next time, just ask me first, okay?”

“Sorry, Boss,” she says.

“I’m sorry, too,” Bucky says. “I don’t know what I was thinkin’. I wasn’t. This is your space and I don’t belong here.”

Tony sighs. “I just needed some time.” He contemplates. “FRI, if something like this ever happens again, you’re allowed to pass a message from Bucky along. Bucky, assume if I haven’t responded yet that I’ll get to it when I can. Okay?”

Bucky nods miserably. “Yeah. I’ll go now. Like I said, I won’t breathe a word to the others.”

“Hey, wait,” Tony says after half a second’s contemplation. “You don’t have to go. I…you’re sorry, I appreciate it, it really probably isn’t that big a deal. I mean, I’d’ve liked some warning, but. Here we are. So. Do you want lunch?”

“What do you have?” Bucky asks, looking up, eyes bright.

“Soup,” Tony says. “I ordered groceries when I first got here but they’ve run a little low.”

“Need me to pick up more?” Bucky asks.

Tony snorts while digging for the can opener. “Pretty sure a famous Avenger with a metal arm at the local grocery store will catch a bit of attention. You’d probably end up in another video.”

Bucky flushes. “You saw those?”

“Oh, yeah,” Tony says, pouring the soup into a saucepan. “You’re internet famous, Buck-o.”

“Felt pretty stupid when they were shoving cameras at me.”

“You get used to it,” Tony promises, turning the stove on. He turns back to Bucky. “I don’t think this is going to be enough food for you,” he says. “Look in the pantry and dig up whatever else you want. Whatever you need, it’s yours.”

“Thanks,” Bucky says, getting up to dig around. “You have nothing.”

“Yeah, well, like I said, the groceries ran out.”
“What have you been eating?” Bucky asks.

Tony shrugs. “I had a stack of frozen dinners. They ran out last night.”

Bucky purses his lips but, lucky for him, he doesn’t say anything. Tony finishes with the soup and serves it up.

Bucky digs in gratefully, finishing off half the bowl before he comes up for air. “Can I help?”

“What?” Tony asks.

“With this thing you’re doing. With this PR thing.”

Tony freezes, spoon hovering in midair, thankfully empty of soup. “You’d be burning a lot of bridges if you did that.”

“Yeah, well, it’d be the right thing to do.”

“They might actually kick you off the Avengers.”

“I don’t care,” Bucky says fiercely. “I was happier herding goats in Wakanda. I’m only here to help people. If the Avengers do more harm than good, than I shouldn’t be there. Don’t wanna be there.”

“I think that’s a bit of an oversimplification,” Tony says, managing to have some more soup.

“How?” Bucky demands. “How is it an oversimplification to say that Steve hurt you and the others allowed it to happen without a peep and that makes them not worth jack shit?” He takes a deep breath. “Didn’t mean to yell.”

“You’re not yelling. You’re fine. I can tell the difference, Bucky, it’s okay,” Tony says. He pushes his soup bowl away. “It’s an oversimplification because, if we don’t have the Avengers, whatever’s been plotting to attack the earth for years now is going to crush us into dust. We need them, plain and simple.”

“What’s coming, Tony?” Bucky asks.

Tony sighs and stands up from the table. He begins to pace, hands moving as he speaks. “I don’t know. But something sent the Chitauri. Something sent Loki. Something was watching. I felt it, when I was up there. I know it. Thor told us. We told the universe we were ready for a higher form of war, with the tesseract. And now this is the third time aliens have shown up to attack us, and it’s only going to get worse. If we’re not ready, the whole world is going to pay the price.”

“What do you know?”

Tony shrugs, still pacing. “Nothing. Thor didn’t either. Maybe he’s learned something. I don’t know. They told me I was being irrational. The kinder ones said PTSD, the others said hysteria. Because, you know, omega. And the PTSD is real but I didn’t imagine this. Something is targeting the earth, poking and testing our defences. So far, they’ve sent scouts, but the real deal is going to come soon and we are gonna be shit outta luck if the team isn’t ready to take it on.”

Bucky’s silent for a moment. Tony braces for the judgement. “What can the team do?” Bucky asks. “I mean, Barton, Romanoff, Lang, Wilson, Rhodes, you, you guys are humans. Steve and I, we’re humans that take a little longer to break. Maximoff’s got some juice, and so does Vision, but against an army?”
Tony leans against the cabinets, letting his head thunk against the door. “I don’t know,” he admits. “I just know that the odds improve the more hands we have on deck. Which means not alienating the team, not totally destabilizing that foundation.” He swallows. “If I was a good person, I probably would’ve gone along with what the Avenger’s PR team and the Accords Council wants, stopped making waves for the good of the team.”

“Don’t say that,” Bucky says fiercely. “Don’t say you’re gonna let him get away with this.”

Tony shrugs. “Aren’t they gonna get away with it anyways?”

“They don’t have to,” Bucky says.

Tony sighs. “Well, like I said. If I was a good person. I’m not. I want the world to see what they did. I want the world to hear it. I just also want to, you know, not be invaded by aliens in the next few years.”

“Well, I’d like the world to be worth saving,” Bucky sas stubbornly. “And if people get away with what they did to you, then I don’t think it is.”

Tony smiles wryly. “I have it easy, Bucky.” He clears his throat. “So. What’s it been like at the Compound?”

Bucky blinks at him a few times before catching back up to speed. “Vision won’t talk to anyone,” he says. “Not that he did much before, but he’s bein’ obvious about it now. Rhodes walks ‘round lookin’ like he wants to kill us, when we see him at all. Lines are bein’ drawn in the sand.”

“Yeah?” Tony asks. “Who’s on what side?”

“Wilson seems pretty uncomfortable with Cap and what happened. Lang too. Romanoff is...unreadable. You know how she is. She’s quiet right now.”

Tony nods. “Weighing her options. Yeah. She does that. The rest?”

“Barton’s been…grumbly. But he’s half-assing it.”

“And Maximoff?”

Bucky frowns. “She’s...a little off. She’s more vocal than Steve ‘bout why he was in the right. Which is...she is an omega, right? I’m not...losin’ it?”

Tony grimaces. “Pretty sure that’s more about me than omegas in general. She hates me. Maybe she hates me more than she cares about protecting omegas.”

“I noticed.”

Tony starts to pick up the dishes, dropping them into the sink to deal with later. “How long are you staying?”

“Think that’s up to you,” Bucky says.

“I have a spare bedroom,” Tony says. “Well. Actually. The master. You can have it.”

“Where’ll you sleep?”

“The couch,” Tony says. “Everytime I step foot in that bedroom, I think about Howard cheating on Mom, so...kinda grossed out.”
Bucky makes a face. “Your dad was a cad when I knew him,” he says. “Brilliant, but…a cad. We thought he’d clean up his act when he mated.”

“Nah, he was awful to Mom,” Tony says. “Case and point: this house.”

“Guess the real question is how long you want to stay here, then,” Bucky says. “‘Cause if you want to stay away from the compound long-term, I recommend finding a better place.”

“Yeah, the lab is at least a decade out of date,” Tony says.

“Right, because that’s the biggest problem,” Bucky rolls his eyes.

“Well, it is if I want to get any real work done,” Tony says. “And I don’t know if you forgot, but the end of the world is coming for us.”

“Right,” Bucky nods. “Gotta get the genius to a proper lab.”

Tony takes a deep breath. He feels focused again, like the fog that’s been around him since the fight is parting, thinning enough for him to see through. “I’ll go back,” he says. “I won’t talk to them, but I’ll go back.”

“Whatsoever you want, doll,” Bucky says.

Tony swallows at the pet name. “I don’t exactly have a car.”

Bucky grins. “I do. This time, it’s my turn to drive.”

Bucky’s car is parked almost half a mile away. They stow Iron Man in the trunk before getting in the front seat. It’s a ten year old Honda, clearly stolen. And Bucky drives like a maniac.

“Do you even have a license?” Tony demands.

Bucky laughs. “Hell no. Did drive a tank once, though.”

“How did that happen?”

“Funny story about a drunk Dum-Dum and Gabe,” Bucky says. “And two French prostitutes. Remind me to tell you someday.”

Tony laughs. “Will do.”

“Now,” Bucky says, taking a turn faster than strictly necessary, “You up for stopping at a restaurant on the way back?”

“We just ate!”

“We ate a can of soup between the two of us, Tony,” Bucky says, rolling his eyes. “Even you need more calories than that.”

“Fine, fine,” Tony grumbles. It’s not like he’s eager to get back to the compound anyways. “Better impress me, though. I want pizza.”
They find pizza. Not the best Tony’s ever had, but good enough for short notice in the middle of nowhere.

Bucky orders after asking Tony what types he likes, so they end up with three pies and a booth in the corner. Bucky’s ripping into a pizza all to himself when the first camera flashes.

“You,” Tony says out of the corner of his mouth, “are becoming too famous for your own good.”

“How’d you know it’s not for you?” Bucky asks.

“Fair point,” Tony says. He turns. “Hey, guys. Photo ops cost money. C’mon, clear out. Sergeant Barnes gets nervous eating in front of people, it makes him get indigestion, show the guy some mercy.”

Bucky snorts but doesn’t contradict him.

“That’ll be online in twenty minutes,” Tony says, once the group has cleared out at least a few feet. “They’ll know we’re together before we get home.”

“You overestimate their ability to do research there,” Bucky says. “They won’t know if FRIDAY doesn’t tell them.”

“Fair enough,” Tony says, picking up a second slice. “Damn. Guess I was hungry.”

“I told you!” Bucky says. He eats another two slices. “So…about earlier. You never answered my question.”

“Which was what?”

“Do you want me to do anything? Say anythin’? I could go say somethin’ to those kids right now, it’d be on the internet in five minutes.”

“Yeah, let’s not do that,” Tony says hurriedly. “If I need you to say something, it’s gonna be fully run by my PR team. They’re gonna vet the location and whatever you’re gonna say. So, I’m gonna veto talking to random people with camera phones.”

“Take all the fun outta life,” Bucky grumbles, but he’s smiling.

“In all seriousness, though. If they kicked you out—which I won’t let happen, we won’t push things that far—if they kicked you out, what would you do instead?”

Bucky considers it, then shrugs. “I don’t know. I should…think about that.”

“Probably,” Tony agrees. “Even a hobby might be good? Since Avenging isn’t really full-time?”

“I like cooking,” Bucky announces. “I used to help my Mom cook. And before you say anything, I know. It wasn’t somethin’ I went around admitting in the thirties. Obviously. But I remember liking it.”

“What did you do for work back then?” Tony asks. “Before you were drafted.”

“Worked on the docks,” Bucky says. “And worked as a messenger for a little bit, too. Liked the money, didn’t like the work.”

“Don’t know,” Bucky says. “It was the Great Depression.”

Tony grins. “Well. That’s over, and now you live with a billionaire, so. Experiment to your heart’s content. Feel free to have FRIDAY help you.”

“I don’t want to take advantage,” Bucky protests.

“I’m offering. That makes it okay. Besides. Unless your hobby was buying ferraris or yachts or something, it’s not gonna be a drop in the bucket.”

“Do people actually have those as hobbies?” Bucky asks, looking a little horrified before shaking his head. “Doesn’t matter. That’s not a good reason to use your money. If you’re sure you’re offering, though, I’ll start reading cook books.”

“People do,” Tony says. “I mean, I have a car collection. And own two yachts. I think. I don’t yacht, so we might have sold one. Or both. I don’t remember.”

Bucky’s eyes are wide and Tony smiles softly. “I qualify as the mega-rich, Bucky,” he says gently. “I have more money than I could ever hope to spend. Rich people have weird taste.”

“I…have no idea what to do with that,” Bucky admits.

Tony shrugs. “Me either. So make some damn food and enjoy yourself.”

They finish off the last of the pizzas, leave a generous tip—at least if Tony’s going to have more money than they can rightfully think of what to do with, he can buy a couple week’s worth of groceries for people—and begin the drive back to the Compound.

“Is someone going to miss this bucket of scraps?” Tony asks, looking around the dinged up interior.

“I might have borrowed it from long-term parking.” Bucky admits. “Maybe.”

Tony sighs. “Tomorrow, I’ll have it returned with some upgrades,” he says. “At least a full tank of gas. An oil change. New tires, feel how much this thing pulls to the right? That’d be a start.”

Tony catches Bucky looking over at him. He’s smiling, slow and sweet, teeth barely visible, eyes on Tony.

Tony swallows. “Eyes on the road, learner’s permit,” he manages.

They make it back to the Compound unscathed, no thanks to Bucky’s driving. Tony has Bucky put the car in the garage, where he can grab it in the morning. Maybe he’ll deliver it back on his way to see Peter, if Peter can be available tomorrow.

“Hey, Tony?” Bucky asks when they get inside. Tony’s about to head to the north wing, where his lab and where Rhodey is, and Bucky’s headed south.

“Yeah?”

“Can I…send you messages?” Bucky asks. “You don’t have to respond if you don’t want, and tell me to fuck off if they annoy you, but…can I?”

“Got it, Boss,” she says, and Tony doesn’t think he’s imagining the cheer in her voice.

Bucky reaches up a hand, then drops it suddenly, looking down, nervousness leaving him in waves. Tony doesn’t know what it’s about, unless Bucky was reaching up to touch Tony. He swallows. He’s not sure how he feels about it. “Goodnight, Tony,” Bucky says. “I, uh. I’m glad you’re back.”

Tony’s not sure if he’s glad he’s back yet, and he won’t lie. So he just smiles. “Goodnight, Bucky.”

They part ways, each headed for their separate wings, but Tony finds that he’s actually smiling the whole way.
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

Tony and Bucky have a moment. Then...things, as always, explode (at least it's not literally, this time).

Chapter Notes

Happy Wednesday! I am posting this early because I have to go into work today (boooo!) and also I got very little sleep so this has only had a few run-throughs for edits, so my apologies. I will work out a better system before work actually starts again.

This is my "holy shit how did I start here and end there" chapter. A lot happens here, guys.

This is also where I start dealing with the concept of heats, and what that could mean. I do want to say that this is not an mpreg universe and won't become one, so there's some discussion about what heats mean in that context. Despite heats coming up, this is NOT a nsfw chapter (fair warning, though, that chapter twelve IS).

Thanks for reading, and, if you like it, please let me know!

Tony sits on the counter, letting his legs swing a little bit as he waits impatiently. “When’s it gonna be done?” He asks.

Bucky chuckles. “Patience, if you don’t wanna burn your mouth off.” Nevertheless, he checks the cooling rack for Tony, and Tony takes a second to admire him, in his tight t-shirt and worn-in jeans, hair up in a bun. He looks happy when he turns back around, and it’s a far sight from the silent man who showed up with Steve and his crew. He feels happy too, the air around him softening. He smells like sugar, Tony thinks, and it’s a good scent.

“Have you seen how I drink my coffee? I think I’m immune to heat,” Tony says, but settles back to watch Bucky putting the finishing touches on his cobbler.

This has become a bit of a routine since they got back a little over a week ago. FRIDAY helps Bucky navigate the recipe blogs of the internet, Bucky experiments, and Tony acts as his test subject. They’ve taken over Rhodey’s kitchen, after Rhodey had glared at Bucky for three solid minutes, turned to Tony, and then shrugged, saying nothing more than “not like I really use it.”

Bucky makes dinner every night since Tony returned with him to the Compound. He’s done steaks and roast chickens, artisan pizzas and stir fries. He makes desserts and treats. His appetite—literal and figurative—seems limitless. They’re getting grocery deliveries every other day or so. Tony loves it.
Everyone always thinks Tony eats like a king, and while it’s true that he’s dined at some of the finest restaurants in the world, bought tickets to five thousand bucks a plate dinners, and had the opportunity to have personal chefs, the truth is, when left to his own devices, Tony lives on smoothies and take out. The dramatic change, the homey atmosphere and flavors, is a welcome switch.

No one else in the Compound will really talk to Tony, which is just fine with him. He was avoiding them anyways. They seem to be avoiding Bucky a little bit too, right now, which Tony doesn’t really know what to do with, other than deciding he doesn’t care if Bucky doesn’t care. The three times he’s seen the others, he’s gotten dirty looks, which he’s more than happy to just ignore. Steve opens his mouth every time, like he has something to say, but Tony sincerely doubts it’s an apology and he doesn’t stick around to find out.

Tony doesn’t really know if they’ve said anything to Bucky. The one time he’s brought it up, Bucky’s smile dimmed a tiny bit and Tony was told not to worry about it. He’s pretty sure Steve and the others aren’t really aware of where Bucky is right now, though.

“You in a hurry or something?” Bucky asks, looking over to where Tony realizes he’s swinging his feet again, interrupting Tony’s thoughts.

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Tony says, making a showy glance at his watch. “I have a meeting in an hour.”

Bucky opens up a cabinet and pulls out the tupperware. “Pack you some for the road, then.”

Tony grins. “Get me two forks. I don’t think we have any at the lab that aren’t, you know, contamination risks.”

Bucky pauses. “You’re goin’ to see the Spider kid?”

“Yeah,” Tony says shortly. He still doesn’t talk about Peter. Won’t.

“The kid eat like me?” Bucky asks.

“Yeah,” Tony admits after a moment, unable to see the harm the information can do unless someone was willing to do a long-term trend analysis of the household food consumption of every household with teenagers in the New York area.

Bucky puts the tupperware back and pulls out a significantly larger one. “Think you’ll need more,” he says. He puts in half the pan. “That should hold him,” Bucky says.

Tony grins, then picks up the tupperware where Bucky’s slid it across the counter to him. “Thanks.”

“Mhm,” Bucky says, turning back to the pot simmering away on the stove. “If you make it home by six, soup’ll be done.”

“Square deal,” Tony says. “See ya later, Buttercup.”

Bucky grins. “Bye, Doll.”

Tony feels like there’s something he’s forgotten to do, but for the life of him he can’t figure it out. So instead, he just smiles at Bucky, then bolts for his car.
“Awesome!” Peter says, accepting a fork and opening the container the moment Tony puts it in front of him. “You make this?”


Peter stops, fork halfway back to the dish. “Bucky…Barnes?”

“Yeah?” Tony asks, pulling out his own fork. “Did you know he cooks? It’s delicious. Guy doesn’t have a job, I think he’d make a great personal chef, so weigh in with your opinion about that.”

Peter looks at him like he’s grown a second head. “Things have…changed, since we last talked about the Avengers.”

“Yeah?” Tony asks.

Peter doesn’t let up. “Just to make sure we’re on the same page. Bucky Barnes is one of the alphas who beat your chest in and left you to die in Siberia?”

Tony swallows and had to look away. He hadn’t…forgotten. Never could. It just was in the past now. He and Bucky were past that, in a weird way Tony never thought he would be until he actually met Bucky Barnes. Who’s soft and apologizes and who clearly regrets. Who cooks Tony food without shame and with a profusion of joy. “Bucky…I don’t blame Bucky for that.”

“Mr. Stark—Tony—I’m not saying you’re doing anything wrong,” Peter says earnestly. “I’m sure you know how to live your life and all. I’m just…I’m worried about you, and I wanna understand.”

He sighs. “I’m scared all the time because you won’t let me go there but you’re there and they’ve hurt you before. All of them, but Barnes and Rogers left you to die, and I’m never gonna forget it, and I don’t want you to get hurt again. Are you sure he’s…fine now?”

Tony forces a smile. “Thanks, kiddo. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Tony.”

“Bucky’s a pretty good guy,” Tony says. “I know, that’s weird, considering how I keep telling you about the Avengers, but…I’ve had no issues with him.”

Peter studies him a moment longer. “Alright, Mr. Stark,” he says finally. “The cobbler is pretty good. So. What’re we working on today?”

Tony smiles and gets them on task, but he’s left with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Peter’s right. He did change his tune pretty fast. He let his guard down.

He and Bucky have been hanging out for a while now—first it was the three am sessions, then the arm, and then Bucky bringing him back to the Compound—but, in the grand scheme of Tony’s life, that’s pretty sudden. Especially for an alpha.

He swallows. He’s too old to be jumping into things, to be making these sorts of mistakes.

“There’s leftover soup in the fridge,” Bucky says, washing the last of the dishes. “Sorry, I didn’t know when you’d be home.”

“S’okay,” Tony says dully. Part of him wants to head straight for the fridge, to validate Bucky’s latest creation. He holds back. “The kid liked your cobbler.”
Bucky turns and grins. “’M glad. Did you?”

“Yeah.”

Bucky turns off the water. “What’s wrong?”

“What makes you say something’s wrong?”

“Everythin’ ‘bout how you’re acting,” Bucky says patiently. “What’s wrong, Tony?”

Tony takes a deep, shuddering breath, debates keeping his feelings to himself, debates pretending he doesn’t even have feelings, knows it won’t fly with Bucky. Bucky will leave him alone if Tony tells him to fuck off.

Tony…doesn’t want to. Doesn’t want to lie to Bucky like that.

“What are we, Bucky? What’re we doing?”

“Well, I was tryin’a finish dishes, and you were gonna get some dinner. Sound about right?”

“Bucky.”

“Right.” Bucky swallows, squares up so he’s looking directly at Tony. “What do you need to know, Tony?”

“What’re we doing?” Tony repeats. “You know. Between us.”

Bucky reaches for the dishrag, ostensibly to wipe his hands, but just ends up clutching it tight. “I…what do you think, Tony?”

“I think the problem is I don’t know,” Tony says. “And if we don’t figure it out I’m gonna have a crisis. So. Maybe the better answer is what do we want to be doing?”

Bucky swallows. “You sure that’s the easier question?” He asks.

“I’m…you clearly got something on your mind, so tell me,” Tony says. “If you have a better idea than I do, tell me.”

Bucky looks frozen like a deer in headlights. “I…Tony, Doll, I…we’re friends now, right?”

“Yeah,” Tony says immediately. He frowns. That was easy. That’s not where the line is, if it was so easy to step over and say that. The idea that they might be friends is not what pushed him over the edge when he talked to Peter. “But…”

Bucky shrugs. “But…yeah. I ain’t gonna lie, Tony. There’s somethin’ more here.”

Tony winces. “Bucky, I…”

“I ain’t asking for anything,” Bucky points out quietly. “You asked, not me.”

”Yeah, but…” Tony takes a deep breath. He can’t handle this.

He can’t handle having it shoved in his face, that he and Bucky might be falling into something, that he might be falling for this alpha. Because Tony doesn’t learn, because he can say whatever he wants but he’s diving headlong back into a mistake he’s already made. Alphas aren’t safe, no matter how they try to spin it. It’s the road to hell, paved with the best intentions but undeniably
dragging him down step by step.

“I don’t…I can’t…”

“Ain’t asking for anything,” Bucky repeats.

“Do you see us, like, as mates?” Tony asks, and he knows he sounds near hysterical. Because of course he does. Because that’s what omegas do, he thinks bitterly.

“Doll, since The Great damn Depression hit, I haven’t been able to plan my life more than five minutes ahead. No idea what was comin’ down the pipe. I ain’t in the habit of making long-term plans. I don’t know what I want, and neither do you, so we’re fine.”

“Oh, I very much know what I want,” Tony says.

“Do you? Tell me then,” Bucky challenges, and there’s enough bite in it to make Tony step back.

“I…I want…” Tony falters.

“That’s what I thought,” Bucky says, and there’s a layer of biting bitterness in it that makes Tony do a double-take.

“I want to not make a mistake,” Tony blurts out.

Bucky throws up his hands, towel and all. “Oh, well, if I’m just a mistake, then—”

“You could be!” Tony snaps. “I have a track record of mistakes, and alphas are right up there with the best of them!”

“We’re not all like Steve,” Bucky snaps back. “Gimme a break, Tony.”

Tony freezes. “I want to not make mistakes,” he says after a moment, trying to level out his voice. “Because I’ve made enough, and it would suck to lose everything now to a mistake. Because my mistakes are public and loud and have huge consequences for more than just me. For this team, my friends, my company. Sometimes, omegas around this country. Like it or not, I have to think about these things. And that means not making mistakes.”

Bucky sighs, letting the tension drop from his shoulders. “Didn’t mean to yell,” he says gruffly. “You asked what I wanted.”

“Yeah,” Tony agrees. “I… I need time to think. Or else I think we’re gonna just yell again.”

Bucky reaches out a hand, then seems to think better of it, dropping it quickly. “Alright, Doll,” he says. “I get it. Just… don’t keep me out of the loop forever, yeah? And I meant what I said.”

“That we don’t know what we want?” Tony asks.

“That we’re friends,” Bucky says. “I’m gonna… go now.”

So Tony’s left in the kitchen, hungry, alone, and, weirdly, aching.

The next few days are weird. Tony didn’t realize how much Bucky had influenced his life until he wasn’t doing it anymore.
Tony designed the lab for him to live in it practically indefinitely, which he did an admirable job at when the Rogue Avengers first arrived back. But lately, he’s been in the kitchen with Bucky, or watching a movie, or something since he got back from upstate. It had been less than two weeks. But the routine had been set, and Tony had settled into it easily enough. He slid into like he belonged in that place, having dinner with Bucky and critiquing his chocolate cake.

Now, he’s just leaving to see Peter and take care of business. Rhodey comes to the lab. He takes his phone calls in the lab. And dinner…well, dinner sucks again.

He’s revolutionized the Stark Phone as a diversion, he’s tinkered around with an Iron Legion that can go to space (a minor success) and a microchip that can block certain frequencies that sits on the brain (largely unfeasible, given current technology). And he’s sleeping more on the lab bench than the bed.

In short, he’s accomplished little. He’s accomplished little of his actual work and none of the task that this self-imposed exile is supposedly about. He has no answers about what he wants from Bucky, where they’re going, or if this all just some big mistake.

Tony Stark. Can build a particle accelerator in his basement but can’t make a relationship decision. Figures.

“Boss?” FRIDAY says tentatively when Tony steps out of the suit.

“Yeah, FRI?” Tony asks idly, moving over to the holo display that’s set to permanently cycling through world news, analyzing political trends. There’s legislation in two countries to ban omegas from working outside the home altogether. As a counterpoint, one nation is currently have public debates around banning the “for their own good” defense. Tony will have to keep his eyes on that.

“I was reading your bio signatures on the way back, and…”

“What, am I getting sick?” Tony asks, sighing. He can’t see how he could have possibly contracted anything—all he eats practically is vegetable smoothies, he lives in total isolation—but he supposes it’s possible.

“No, Boss,” she says. “Your internal temperature is rising.”

“What, I have a fever?” Tony asks.

There’s a pause. “I think it’s a heat.”

Tony pauses, does some math, then re-does it. Just to be sure, he opens up his phone and pulls up his heat-tracker app, which he is historically bad at remembering despite the fact that he designed it.

“Motherfucker.”

“I don’t get why nature hates me like this,” Tony whines, face-down in Rhodey’s bed. “It’s not like I can get pregnant, stop fucking asking me to.”

Rhodey sighs, sitting on the edge of the bed but deliberately not touching Tony. “You know that’s not what it’s about.”
Tony turns his head enough to glare balefully at Rhodey. “Enlighten me, oh-wise-one.”

Rhodey grins, not letting Tony’s grouchiness get to him. “It’s about pack bonds,” he says. “You know, keeping us all together, omegas as the center of the pack, all that? Your body is telling you to nail down the pack.”

“Yeah,” Tony says shortly. “Babies. Which I can’t have. So, sex. Which seems like a weird way to bind people together, but what do I know?”

Tony turns his head back into the pillow. He can’t tolerate Rhodey’s sad eyes.

“Tony,” Rhodey says patiently. “You and I have spent, what, seven, eight heats together?”

“Mhm.”

“Have we ever had sex?”

Tony turns to look at Rhodey again, and manages to work up enough energy to raise a single scolding finger. “Don’t put those images in my head again.”

Rhodey snorts. “It’s not meant to be about sex, Tony.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the vocal minority there, Platypus,” Tony says tiredly, thinking of the pervasive images of heat out there. The wanton slut, and that’s just the politics. The porn is where the real nightmares start. “Pepper and I had sex during my heat.”

“See, that, that was information I didn’t need,” Rhodey gripes, but then his expression softens. “You guys were in a relationship. Did it make you feel good?”

“Mhm.”

“Make you feel close to her?”

“Mhm.”

“There you go. Heat well spent.”

Tony feels himself melting inside. Figuratively. The literal melting is building slowly. “How do you know so much about heats?”

“Well, I got this omega little brother, right?” Rhodey says. “So I figured I’d learn. So I read.”

“That’s nice of you,” Tony says. He could probably fall asleep here, like this.

“I know. I’m the best,” Rhodey proclaims. “You and Steve…”

“You’re still the only alpha I’ve ever trusted around me in heat,” Tony says. He pauses. At the time, it had felt…normal. Like they were building up to it, like it was a foregone conclusion but not yet. Tony wonders if he’d instinctively known. “I’m too vulnerable. I’d ask for a lot of things, and…”

“Yeah,” Rhodey says softly.

Tony slowly, painstakingly, pulls himself up to standing. “Well, gotta go,” he says.

Rhodey frowns. “Where?”
“Much as I’d love to stick around, Snuggle-bug, because seriously I was just about one with your mattress, this is a building full of people I don’t trust, and some whom I actively dislike. So. Time to hide away in the middle of nowhere.”

“I’ll come with you,” Rhodey offers.

“You have a job that I don’t think would take too kindly to you taking a week off,” Tony says. “So. Before I go…”

Tony leans into Rhodey’s space, wraps him in a relatively awkward hug, and rubs his face against his chest several times, inhaling deeply as he goes. “Thanks, Rhodey,” he says as he pulls away.

“Yeah, see, that’s the weird part!” Rhodey calls behind him. Tony just flips him off, then heads for the lab, where he suits up. It’s not that weird. Tony’s seen other omegas do it, he’s pretty sure.

“FRIDAY, call Pepper,” Tony says as soon as he’s in the air.

“Tony?” Pepper says on the fourth ring. Her voice is hushed. “Happy and I are out on a date, can I call you later?”

“Oh, good, two birds, one stone,” Tony says. He’s sweating inside the suit. “FRIDAY, kick up the climate control, would ya? Pepper, I’m gonna swing by for a few minutes, so I’m turning on your GPS. Make sure you both have pants on when I get there.”

“Tony!”

Tony snorts as the call ends. “FRIDAY, kick up the speed.”

“Yes, Boss,” she says.

When Tony lands on the balcony of Pepper’s apartment, the door is already opened and Pepper and Happy are waiting right on the other side of the threshold. “Tony?” Pepper asks worriedly as he spills out of the suit. “Are you okay?”

“Not hurt, Pep,” he says. “Just…going into heat.”

She flushes. “Tony, I can’t—”

Tony waves a hand. “I’m not asking for that,” he says. “Just…trust me. It’s a thing. Let me hug you guys?”

Happy opens his arms first. “Not the weirdest thing I’ve been asked by you,” he says as Tony steps in, rubbing his face against Happy’s suit jacket.

“This is what you wear on a date?”

“Shut up,” Happy says gruffly. He hugs Tony tighter.

“I’m just saying, I have a stylist, go visit her, three hours, your life will never be the same—”

“Tony,” Pepper admonishes, joining the hug from the other side.

Tony sighs, melts into the hug a little bit, lets their touch and their scent surround him.
“So, what’s this for?” Happy asks several minutes later.

“Oh, you know, tricking my brain,” Tony says. “Heat-brain wants to check in with everyone, smell them, all that. Makes it go easier.” When I don’t have someone to spend it with, Tony doesn’t say, but he’s pretty sure they get it. Pepper’s grip on him tightens.

“You have somewhere to go?” Pepper asks, running a hand through his hair. He feels like a puddle of goo.

“Yeah,” Tony says, not elaborating. “I…probably need to go now,” he admits. “Thanks for the hugs, enjoy your date, buy a bottle of wine on me!”

He stumbles back to the suit, then gets himself in the air.

“Where to, Boss?”

Tony’s ready to tell her to plot course for the house upstate, but his brain—the part that’s flooded by his heat, that wants pack and comfort and all those squishy things he tries to ignore—is screaming PeterpeterpeterpeterPETER at him.

“FRIDAY, find Peter,” he grits out. He needs to check in on his kid, knows he won’t be able to settle until it’s done, but he also is starting to desperately need to be somewhere not highly public.


Peter’s thankfully outside, at a little shop across the street from school. “Peter!”

Peter’s eyes go wide. “Mr. Stark?”

“C’mere a minute, kiddo.”

Tony stumbles out of the suit and grabs the kid as soon as he’s within an arm’s length. “C’mere,” he says, pulling him into a hug that Peter awkwardly returns.

“You okay, Tony?” he asks. “You feel like you’re burning up.”

“Mhm. I am,” Tony confirms. “You’ll find out all about heats soon enough, kiddo.”

“You’re in heat?” Peter hisses. “Then what are you doing here?”

“Pack instincts, or whatever,” he says uhelpfully. “Look, I feel better if I’ve found everyone I care about and scent-marked them. Here we are. Now exchanging scents.”

“You look…”

“Like I’m about to fall over?” Tony asks. “Feel it too. Should go. See you on the flipside, Pete.”

He stumbles back to the suit. He hears another kid asking “Parker, what the hell?” and feels temporarily bad that he doesn’t have the resources to help Peter come up with an explanation.

But then he’s in the air, sweating even with the climate control, teeth gritted. “FRIDAY, step on it.”
Tony hates this house, but it’s the closest and he’s at least familiar with it. Besides, the chances of him requiring a state-of-the-art lab in the next few days is slim to none.

He gets himself settled into bed—no sense delaying the inevitable—and starts pulling off layers of clothes, leaving his scent-marked t-shirt by the pillow. “FRIDAY, kick up the AC,” he says.

“Right away.”

He spares a moment to be grateful he can spare excessive air conditioning—he doesn't know what he’d do, if he couldn’t afford to crank the AC at these times—before losing himself in sinking into the soft bed.

He bites his lip. It’s not quite what his body wants, too lonely, too empty. Still, he can still feel his people, still smell them on him. I’ll have to be good enough.

There’s a tablet next to the bed. Tony can usually work through part of his heat, designing or coding. He picks up the tablet and a stylus, plans to get some work done. If nothing else, he can bang out some SI projects and get ahead there.

Only he can’t settle. He’s erratic, jumping from idea to idea, and often his brain leaves work altogether.

He wants to…he doesn’t know what he wants. He needs something that he doesn’t have, needs some...some touch.

Well, that’s just great. In the middle on nowhere, no other options, and his body won’t do a single fucking thing until he gets touched.

Ugh. He sets the tablet aside and rolls over, cuddled around a pillow. Maybe he can sleep it off. Maybe he can wake up feeling functional, or at least what passes as functional in a heat.

He closes his eyes, tries to think calming thoughts. Thinks about the days in the kitchen, watching Bucky cook, taste-testing and stealing ingredients, laughing as Bucky shares stories from the past. He thinks about Bucky’s eyes crinkling in the corners as he laughs. The way his lip quirks up in a half smile, looking at Tony out of the corner of his eye, waiting for Tony to start laughing. The way he watches, hair falling in his face, when Tony tries the newest food creation.

Fuck. Bucky.

They haven’t spoken in over a week. Tony was a bit of a dick last time they spoke. Bucky might not—

In any case, Tony can’t go see him. It’s too late. He’s too out of it, too out of control. His pheromones too strong.

That leaves only one option.

“FRIDAY?” He calls.

“Yes, Boss?”

“Call Bucky.”
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

Bucky answers Tony's call, and Tony goes through his heat.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Happy Saturday, sorry I'm late, I have no excuse.

So. There's a lot to unpack here.

Before we get to the elephant in the room...Tony is going to do something he would not approve of if he was more lucid at the beginning of the chapter. It's a pretty small thing. It has no immediate consequences but we'll definitely see it come back later. If you see it, let me know :) Basically, yes, I did it on purpose; I didn't want you guys to see it and think it's an error.

Now, the elephant. This chapter officially kicked the rating up to E, as this is a nsfw chapter. I don't think we're going to have a ton of them, but there will be at least two (as in, I have two written so far). If you want to skip the nsfw parts, tune out at " It's not a long term solution, never as good as the heats he’s actually spent with other people, but he makes do." Tune back in at "The nice thing about being old, Tony thinks, is that sex makes him tired, drains his energy." Tune out again at "Over the next three days, Tony keeps to the same schedule." Very soon after, you can tune back in for "On the second night, Tony realizes that protein shakes probably aren’t a long-term solution for Bucky." If you want summaries of anything you missed, hit me up in the comments or on Tumblr, and I'll be happy to help!

This next line is spoiler-y, so only read if you're concerned about the consent inherent with Tony inviting Bucky over during his heat; I would never post a sex scene with a character in heat where the two characters haven't negotiated it ahead of time without a dub-con warning. Promise.

Oh, and /of course/ we're going to be talking about Bucky's neurosis further :) 

With that, here we go. I hope you enjoy, and please let me know if you do!

“Tony?” Bucky answers the phone right away. He doesn’t sound upset, so that’s a plus, Tony supposes.

“Bucky? I need to talk to you,” Tony says.

“I’m listening,” Bucky says.

“Yeah, see, I kinda wanna talk in person , so…”
“Where are you?”

“Where you found me before,” Tony says.

“Why are you there? Did the others—did Steve do something?” Bucky demands. “I’ll punch his lights out this time, swear to God, and—”

“As touching as that is,” Tony interrupts, “and I mean that sincerely, this isn’t just my alphas are jerks house. I haven’t spoken to Rogers since that day. I’m… in heat.”

Bucky sucks in a breath so sharp Tony can clearly hear it over the phone. “Tony, I’m not… comfortable with…”

“Neither am I,” Tony cuts in. He’s pretty sure he’s slurring his words, so he talks faster to get his message out. “I’m not asking for that. Won’t ask for that. Don’t want that. I just need to…the omega hindbrain needs to make sure everyone it cares about is safe. It wants to know the pack is around? So. Uh. I got Rhodey and Pep and Happy and Peter. But. My brain isn’t going to settle until I get you too, apparently.” Tony turns his face into his scent-marked t-shirt and sniffs. With Bucky’s voice in his ear, it’s almost enough.

“They all there?” Bucky asks guardedly.

“No. Got them before I left. Ambushed them, practically, my heat hit me fast. Look, I feel like an asshole but also like I’m about to die, so. Could you come?”

“Be there in forty-five minutes.”

“It’s eighty minutes away by car.”

“Forty-five minutes.”

The line clicks. Tony drags clothes back on so he’ll be ready when Bucky arrives, taking a deep wiff of his scent-marked t-shirt. Then, Tony holds his pillow tight and tries to pretend it’s a person.

There’s a sharp knocking at the front door. Tony blearily peers at the clock. Fifty minutes.

He stumbles to the door and unlocks it. “You’re late,” he accuses.

Bucky grins, all tense energy even as he tries to hide it. “I actually had to steal a car. FRIDAY wasn’t sure if she was allowed to give me the keys.”

Tony’s eyes narrow, even through his exhaustion. “And which of my cars did you take?”

Bucky’s grins seems to widen. “The R8,” he says. “FRIDAY assured me it’s expensive.”

Tony turns to face one of the cameras in the main room. “FRIDAY, we need to have some words.”

“T’ll pencil it in for later, Boss,” she promises. “Right now I think you’re a bit busy.”

“Right,” Tony agrees before turning back to Bucky. “Hug time.”

Whether bewildered or just genuinely rolling with the punches, Bucky opens his arms to accept Tony, who presses his whole body to Bucky and takes a large sniff. Bucky’s arms come around him gently, and Tony closes his eyes.
Bucky smells good. Soft, Tony thinks. And it doesn’t help that his emotions are soft too, caring and sweet. Too sweet for Tony, too sweet for how they left things.

Which is an issue that will have to be addressed later, once Tony’s brain is clear.

Tony doesn’t want to let go, but knows his options are to take what he’s gotten or genuinely invite Bucky into his bed, which is probably the expected option given that Tony’s in heat and pretty desperate for contact, but one Tony isn’t ready for.

“Thanks,” he says, reluctantly pulling away and stepping back through the front door.

“That’s it?”

Tony’s eyes narrow. “I told you, no sex.” Bucky doesn’t feel like the horny alphas all desperate to fuck omegas at their most vulnerable, doesn’t smell like want and desperation, but Tony can never be too careful.

Bucky raises a hand in a I mean no harm gesture. “Not what I meant,” he says. “Just…that’s all you need?”

“I smell like you, you smell like me, that little instinctual part of my brain is happy. Easy and done with.”

“Anything else I can do to make this easier on you?”

“Nope,” Tony says, hands on the door frame now. “Call you when this is over.”

As soon as the door is closed, Tony feels the heat like a tidal wave, liquid and dragging his body under. It’s telling him, Tony thinks, to open that door and drag Bucky back in.

Not a chance, Tony thinks viciously.

Cuddled up on the bed once more, Tony hugs a pillow, hoping to trick his body into thinking it’s human contact. He smells like his people—is this what pack is? —and he has contact. What more can his body want?

A lot more, apparently. Sex, probably, or honestly just real people around him. Pack.

This is supposed to be nature’s way of ensuring a pack sticks together, bound around the omega. Children can be made if appropriate parts are in play, relationships cemented. Pack hierarchy can be worked out. Well, that’s all well and good, but Tony’s half out of his mind and really fucking lonely with no plans of letting anyone in.

He hates heats. He gets them once, maybe twice, a year, every year, since he was eighteen—a late bloomer, and thankful for it. And while he has had some pleasant enough heats with Pepper and Rhodey—it really does help, to be surrounded by someone he cares about—it’s a pleasant enough version of a bad experience. He doesn’t like to be fuzzy and feeling weak as a newborn kitten, body coursing with high heat. He doesn’t like to feel off his game.

The fact of the matter is, this is when his defences are low. This is when he’s most weak to an alpha, where all they’d have to do is get their teeth on his throat and he’d practically welcome it. And he’d be an idiot to welcome a situation like that.

There’s always been too much to lose. Alphas are always too focused on making him lose, on making it a weakness they can exploit. “Just the way of things. You smell so pretty, so needy, so
desperate, this is just what nature intended,” they would say, with their teeth in his throat, if he
gave them a half a chance.

No, thank you.

“Boss?”

He groans. “Yeah, FRIDAY?”

“I have a call for you.”

“I’m not taking any calls,” he grunts.

“It’s Sergeant Barnes.”

“Put him through.” He hears the line click. “What the hell, Buttercup? You already total my car?”

“Tony,” Bucky says, voice haggard, completely different from how it was a few minutes ago.

“Tony, you have to tell me to go.”

“What the hell, you still hanging around?” Tony asks, befuddled. “Yeah, go. Didn’t realize you
needed permission.”

Bucky groans. “You know how…I told you, there are dark parts of me.”

Tony remembers, vaguely. “Sure.”

“That…part. Doesn’t really want me to leave.”

Tony feels more alert and sits up in bed, checking to see if he has his gauntlet. “Bucky, what are
you saying?”

“You’re in heat, and…”

“And what?” Tony interrupts sharply. “And you’re going to burst in here, and, what, have your
way with me? I smell that tempting to you? Can’t control yourself?” Tony knows he sounds half-
hysterical, but he doesn’t care, considering that’s what he is.

“No!” Bucky shouts, and Tony realizes that
he
sounds panicked too. “No, never. I…I wouldn’t. If
we ever had sex during your heat, it would be…you’d invite me in,” he finishes. “And I probably
shouldn’t say that. But I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“Then what do you want, Bucky?” Tony asks. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m busy here, so the
sooner we get to the point…” He pointedly ignores Bucky’s line about inviting him in, about
Bucky and him having sex. Tries not to imagine it. Bucky would probably be gentle, all big hands
gently moving Tony around, stroking and soft. Tony shivers.

Well, he usually ends up fantasizing part-way through his heat anyways. If he can fight off his
guilty conscious, this will be good enough material.

Then he realizes Bucky’s talking again. “I’m not…I can’t leave. Can’t make myself go, ‘cause I
know, you’re in a bad position right now, and you don’t need my help, but I can keep guard, I
could do that for you. And my brain keeps going in these circles, ‘cause I want to help but I know
you don’t want me here and just tell me to leave, Tony. Make it an order, swear I won’t disobey.”

Tony exhales sharply. “So your…’darker parts’ are just really concerned with taking care of me,
but in a non-invasive way?"

Bucky grunts but doesn’t answer. He seems to have worked himself up into some kind of panic.

“Calm down, Buttercup,” Tony says. “You’re not…I’m not upset with you.”

“You told me to go away, that we’d talk when this was over, an’ here I am…”

“Bucky, if your baser instincts want you to be a guard dog that still follows the spirit of the law I set down, I can be okay with that.” He pauses. “If I tell you to go, will you be able to? And be okay?”

Bucky takes a moment. “I might panic,” he admits gruffly.

“You indulged my crazy instincts,” Tony points out, and mentally applauds himself for being rational about all this. Then again, this is Bucky.

Which is probably just one more sign that he and Bucky need to talk. But when this is all over.

“That was a hug,” Bucky says through what sounds like gritted teeth. “This is not the same thing.”

“The point is, it’s okay. But…” Tony feels like an asshole, but there are lines he won’t cross, ways he won’t bend, “you’re stuck outside.”

“Deal,” Bucky says immediately.

“And…not that I want to tell you how to live your life, but you should probably address that with your therapist. Later. Then again, ‘alpha protects omega’ won’t trip their alarms, probably.”

“Deal,” Bucky says again. “I…thank you, Tony. I swear I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t,” Tony says softly. Comfortingly, he hopes.

“Can we…talk?” Bucky asks hesitantly. “Can I do that for you?”

Tony honestly wants nothing more then to sit and talk with Bucky, to have Bucky’s voice in his ear as he goes through this. Bucky makes him feel warm in that pleasant, floaty way, like the slightly tipsy feeling of just a few drinks. Out of control, fuzzy, and warm, but still light. Almost like floating. It’s a drastic improvement, considering heats make him feel like he’s burning up usually, fevered and heavy and miserable.

But talking is how omegas get into trouble. Tony’s vulnerable enough without adding another challenge.

Tony swallows. “Sorry, Buttercup, not right now,” he says. “See you on the flip side.”


The line clicks and Tony feels desperately alone, despite the assassin standing guard outside.

Tony takes take care of yourself as blatant permission to continue with his train of thought from earlier.

He’ll feel guilty later, when he’s back in his right mind, but right now, he feels desperate and this is
exactly what the doctor ordered.

If heats are about connection, then sex is an easy, sometimes cheap, way to get there. And masturbation, to put it bluntly, is a decent enough facsimile to trick his body, for a few moments at least. It’s not a long term solution, never as good as the heats he’s actually spent with other people, but he makes do.

Bucky’s hands would be gentle, Tony thinks. At least the first time. He gets a flash of those big hands lifting him up by the back of his thighs, lips pulling Tony into a bruising kiss.

Tony shakes his head. No. Gentle.

This time.

So Tony closes his eyes. He’s already naked, broiling too hot for clothes, a thin sheet about all he can stand. He pictures Bucky, with that slow, easy smirk he gets sometimes, tugging his own clothes off—shirt first, then pants, slow and careful—making eye contact with Tony the whole time.

Tony’s only slept with one alpha. Steve, who was practically a virgin, rough and fumbling and endearing, sure, but with some old-fashioned ideas about how sex should work. Other than that, he’s only slept with betas and other omegas. He’s heard their stories, though, of a typical encounter with an alpha. Stories about alphas who are rough, who cause pain and enjoy it, who are demanding and rude in bed. Alphas who treat an omega’s orgasm as secondary if a consideration at all, who act like their body is meant to always be slick and open and waiting for an alpha.

Tony doesn’t think Bucky would be like that, and this is his fantasy, so he can imagine whatever he wants. Bucky would be gentle in bed just like he has been in most every interaction with Tony. He’d be giving and he’d treat Tony like he mattered.

He’d touch Tony softly. Maybe cup his jaw, stroke a thumb over his cheek, smile softly before tugging Tony into a kiss.

He wished he knew what Bucky kissed like. Sex is sex, fantasy is fantasy, but everyone kisses just a little different and he wishes he knew what Bucky kissed like.

Bucky might kiss his neck next, and he’d carefully avoid the mating gland. Tony would trust him enough that it doesn’t even make him tense.

“Gorgeous,” he might say, his voice low and husky and Tony shivers, completely caught up in his own fantasy.

He’d probably say something back, but before he can figure out exactly what—I’m not the gorgeous one here, you are or look who’s talking or thanks—his brain has skipped ahead, and Bucky is trailing fingers down his chest, tracing scars gently before pinching a nipple.

Tony runs his own hand over his nipple before whining in the back of his throat, arching his chest into his fingers. His body is on fire, and for a brief moment, some of the fire feels welcome, feels like it’s lighting up his nerves.

“Such pretty noises,” Bucky might say. “Wanna hear all of ‘em.”

And Tony traces his hand down his stomach, imagining it’s Bucky’s. Teases his fingers along, runs them through the line of hair on Tony’s lower stomach, runs them, teasingly, to the V of his thighs, careful to avoid Tony’s cock.
Tony whines again, bites his lip.

“Nu-uh,” Bucky would say. “I earned those noises fair an’ square, give ‘em to me.” His voice would be deep, his drawl obvious.

Tony, obligingly, moans, and bucks his hips.


Tony settles his hips down again.

Bucky might—Bucky might suck him off. Tony doesn’t think many alphas do, but hell, this is his fantasy.

He’d be slow at first, almost hesitant. Tony’s not huge but he’s pretty average, enough that Bucky might not be—probably wouldn’t be—used to it. He’d suck the tip, slowly, tracing his tongue under the head. He’d make eye-contact the whole time.

Tony moans, low and long, and then spits in his own hand before stroking himself.

“That’s it,” Bucky might say, pulling off just a bit, face still right near Tony’s cock, stubble rubbing Tony’s thigh. “Just lie back and enjoy yourself. Let me take care of you for a few minutes.”

Tony obliges, throwing his head back against the pillows, fucking into his fist slowly.

Bucky would take his sweet time with it, running his tongue along the vein under Tony’s cock, sucking the tip. And then…

Then he’d reach up that metal hand, and cup Tony’s balls.

If Tony tries hard enough, he can almost pretend his hand is Bucky’s.

Tony’s hips buck and he moans, legs falling open wider. “Please,” he murmurs, head thrashing a bit.

Bucky would pull back from his cock, grin. There’d be a line of spit, still connected to his lip, and Tony would stare at it. “Come for me whenever you’re ready, doll,” he might say. His lips would be swollen, his voice raspy. Tony would have to fight off coming right then and there.

He squeezes the base of his own cock.

Bucky would rub his cheek along the sensitive skin on the inside of Tony’s thighs. He’d plant soft kisses there, making Tony squirm. “Let go,” he’d whisper. “Just let me make you feel good, Tony, let me relax you…let me take care of you for this…”

Tony comes all over his own fist, chest heaving and legs splayed wide on his fluids-soaked sheets, sweat and slick and come leaving a sloppy mess he doesn’t have the energy to acknowledge.

The nice thing about being old, Tony thinks, is that sex makes him tired, drains his energy. The nice thing about masturbation is he can give into those urges.

So he sleeps off a decent few hours of his heat, before he’s up again.
The sheets are a loss, but honestly Tony didn’t expect better. Even if he didn’t get come on them, he still sweated through them and will continue to do so.

He’s hot, and heavy, like he’s made of lead or something. His body doesn’t cooperate, moves slowly.

He forces himself up for a protein shake before trying to take a shower, which feels frigid against his skin even on the higher temperatures. Now wet and miserable—although at least vaguely clean—Tony goes back to bed.

“FRIDAY?”

“Yes, Boss? Anything I can do?”

Tony sighs. “Is he still outside?”

“Sergeant Barnes has just returned from patrolling the perimeter. He is sitting on the porch swing. He seems to be cleaning a weapon.”

“Has he eaten?” Tony asks.

“Not that I’ve seen.”

“What’s the temperature out?”

“Sixty degrees, Boss. It will hit the mid to low fifties this evening.”

“Chilly,” Tony notes. He sighs, then levers himself upright. “What food do I have?”

“Protein shakes and coffee, Boss.”

“Have to do,” Tony says. He pulls on a pair of soft, thin pajama pants, about as much as he can stand. Then he goes to the linen closet and gathers up a thick blanket and a pillow, then goes to the kitchen and prepares a second shake.

He unlocks the door. “Bucky?”


Tony holds out his collection. “Here.”

Bucky takes it, looking at it stunned. “I…Tony, you didn’t have to…”

“If you’re gonna be here protecting me, might as well,” Tony says. “So. Here.”

“Thank you,” Bucky says sincerely, like Tony just handed him a million dollars, instead of the bare minimum.


He closes and locks the door again—not that a lock like this will really stop Bucky, but the again Tony finds himself decidedly not worried about Bucky. Then, he returns to his room.

Over the next three days, Tony keeps to the same schedule. Try to sleep, masturbate, really sleep, eat, shower, try to work, repeat. His head feels like concrete, his body too. He survives.
He imagines Bucky opening him slowly, crooning about how soft and easy Tony’s going to take his knot. Tony gets himself up to four fingers before he comes, sloppy and messy and destroying yet another set of sheets. He wishes he had a toy, but he makes do.

Tony wonders about Bucky’s knot. Bucky’ll be big—alphas almost always are, and Tony’s experience with super soldiers says the serum gave them a boost there too—and Tony wonders how he’ll feel. How it’ll feel sliding into him. Bucky would be sweet about it, slow at first, whispering sweet nothings to Tony, until they were both past the point of caring. Tony would maybe beg. Bucky would give it to him. Tony wonders how it’d feel to be knotted. In his—admittedly limited—experience, not great. He thinks Bucky might be different.

He comes with one hand on his cock and three fingers in his mouth, imagining they’re Bucky’s metal fingers, imagining the dirty things Bucky could be saying to him as he sucked.

He feels guilty, after. Bucky and him haven’t talked yet, Bucky just wants to protect him—and Tony still hasn’t forgotten that little oddity—and Tony has no business being knuckle-deep in his own ass, thinking about the guy for the fourth time in two days. Still, as guilty as he is, he can’t stop. He can’t deny it’s making him feel better.

On the second night, Tony realizes that protein shakes probably aren’t a long-term solution for Bucky, and if the guy is going to be stubborn and stick around, Tony will need to step up his game and provide.

He orders delivery online, then warns Bucky through the door to be prepared to handle it. When it arrives, Bucky tips the driver, then divvies up the food with Tony before Tony heads back inside.

“Doing okay?” Bucky asks.

“Fine,” Tony says shortly. Better when he’s around Bucky, he doesn’t say. Better when he’s thinking about him. Miserable, overall.

He doesn’t say any of it, just closes the door and eats the General Tso’s chicken at the kitchen table, before going to take a shower that feels like ice.

He tries to work after, tries to code the new Stark Phone or design a new suit, anything to distract him a bit. He squirms.

If he’s really lucky, his heat will wind down in the next two days. He’ll be left shaky and feeling hollowed-out, body raw and sickly, but more in control. He’ll be on the road to recovery.

If he’s really unlucky, it could last another four days. Tony doesn’t want to think about it.

He calls Rhodey.

“Tony!” Rhodey says, picking up on the first ring. “How’re you?”

“Disgusting,” Tony says as cheerfully as he can manage. “And you?”

“Better than you, I imagine, although not gonna lie, the politics over here are awful. I’ll fill you in when you get back, nothing to worry you about right now…how are you really?”

“I really am disgusting,” Tony says. “But I ate dinner, so I’m going to live.”

Talking to Rhodey makes him feel good. Lighter, happier. Maybe not quite in the same way Bucky does, but it’s definitely miles above where he was even a few minutes ago.
“How’s your…guest?”

Tony winces. “You know about that?”

“FRIDAY told me. FRIDAY also assures me he’s behaving himself. She’s keeping an eye out for me. One toe out of line, and I’m chucking him off the top of the Empire State Building, okay?”

Tony smiles. He can’t help it. “He’s outside. He just…must be some weird instincts. Hasn’t been around an omega in heat in decades, over-reacting, that sort of thing.”

“He’s spent two years with Maximoff,” Rhodey says, no-nonsense and not taking any excuses for Bucky.

Tony shrugs. “What can I say? I’m special and the guy has strong instincts.”

“He making you uncomfortable?”

“No, Rhodey,” Tony says. “He’s—he’s a pretty good guy, you know.”

“Who refused to leave my best friend alone when he’s in heat,” Rhodey grumps.

“He begged me to tell him to leave, said he’d listen if it was an order,” Tony says. “He’s sleeping outside and basically keeping guard, because, you know, I’m vulnerable. Nothing inappropriate is happening, big brother,” he teases.


“I’d be surprised if you didn’t,” Tony says. “Anyways, I just wanted you to know I was alive, and now I’m gonna head to bed.”

“Sleep well, Tony,” Rhodey says.

Tony almost asks Rhodey to stay on the line, to talk him to sleep, but holds his tongue. Rhodey says it’s busy over there, that the politics were bad. Tony shouldn’t interrupt.

“Will do. See you soon,” Tony says with as much lightness as he can muster, then goes to bed.

Two days later, Tony wakes up feeling like shit, but like the fever’s broken. His head feels like it’s stuffed full of cotton, his legs like they’re made of cement.

It’s an improvement.

He showers, then re-makes the bed with fresh linens. He puts on clothes.

Then he goes downstairs and opens the front door.

Bucky’s asleep on the porch swing, although he wakes up as soon as the door’s open. He has that blanket slung over himself—covered in dew now, and Tony feels bad if he’s been like this the whole time—and a handgun resting on the little table in front of him.

Tony leans against the door frame, crosses his arms and surveys the scene. “Hey, Bucky.”

“Hey, Tony,” Bucky says, voice raspy. “You…you okay? You smell…”
“Heat broke,” Tony interrupts. “You wanna come in?”
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

The heat's broken. They need to talk.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back, all!

In this week’s chapter, we talk about our feelings.

Warning: Bucky's got issues that lead to him having a nightmare that has the potential to be dangerous for Tony. No one is hurt in the making of this chapter.

Thanks for reading all; if you like it, drop me a line!

Bucky perches on the edge of the couch once more, like Tony might kick him out at any second. “I still have no food,” Tony says. “But I can make coffee?”

Bucky swallows, clearly unsure and uncomfortable. “I’m fine. I, uh…you’re the one who. Well. Can I get you anything?”


“Good. Good, I’m glad,” Bucky says fervently. “I…it was hard, knowing you were hurting,” he says.

Tony sits down on the leather armchair, in absence of anything else to do. “I said we’d talk.” Better to dive right in than to beat around the bush.

“You…up for that?”

Tony shrugs. “As I’ll ever be. So. Hit me with it.”

Bucky shifts uncomfortably. “I…said my piece. Last time. And you…why don’t you tell me what you’re looking for?”

Everything, Tony very nearly says and then bites his lip, physically stopping it from spilling out when it’s probably not even true, nevermind appropriate.

Tony wants everything, in the same way he always does. He barely knows how to stop himself, always wanting more, pushing higher, grabbing for the biggest, best, latest. That doesn’t make it a sound strategy, and for once, just for once, he should be smart about it.

“I don’t know,” Tony says. “That’s kind of the problem. If you asked me two months ago, I would’ve told you I was never looking for another alpha again. And here I am, and the Council
and—“ He takes a shuddering breath, cuts himself off. “I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Bucky says. “Well, that’s a start.”

“Is it?” Tony asks.

“Well, what I got from that is you want somethin’,” Bucky says. “And that’s a good start.”

“Yeah,” Tony admits. “Something. I…I’d need to go slow.”

“I can be slow,” Bucky promises.

“I’m talking snails move faster than us,” Tony warns.

“I can be slow,” Bucky repeats.

“I’m not your mate. Or your omega or your possession or any of that.” Tony swallows. “I don’t know what we are yet. I don’t even really think I’m yours yet.”

“I know,” Bucky says.

“I’d need you to be…understanding.”

“I’d need you to kick my ass if I step over a line,” Bucky says.

“I’d need you to know that this is…that I like you and I think you’re great,” Tony says, quick and stumbling, “but I’m ready to bolt at a moment’s notice and will be for an indefinite amount of time.”

Bucky nods. “Don’t like it, but I get it.”

“I’d need you to be…” Tony shakes his head. “I don’t know what else I need,” he admits. “We’re…doing this?”

“If you want to,” Bucky says easily, almost casual except Tony can feel his hunger. Except it’s not hunger like other alphas look at Tony, it’s softer around the edges. “’Cause I want to.”

“Why on Earth do you want to?” Tony asks. “We haven’t actually hit on that yet.”

“Fishin’ for compliments?” Bucky asks, but then his eyes narrow at Tony. “No, sorry. Lemme tell you. You’re…smart as anything, and determined. I told you, principled. You make the future, and you’re so damn giving, Tony. And…you are pretty, you know that?”

“I was told, once or twice,” Tony says dryly, managing to pull himself into some semblance of normal. “You know, when I was twenty-two.”

“Well, it’s still true today,” Bucky says stubbornly.

“You know I’m old?”

“You know I’m a hundred now?” Bucky shoots back.

“You look like you’re in your twenties, maybe early thirties. Don’t pretend it’s the same thing.”

“Yeah, but I’m not,” Bucky says empathetically. “Doll, I lived through the Great Depression, World War Two, and seventy years as a brainwashed murder-puppet. The world’s changed on me
more times than I can count. When I was a kid, *The UN didn’t exist yet*. I still consider the Beatles and the Stones future music. I ain’t lookin’ for some kid.”

Tony doesn’t have a counter-argument for that, can’t fight that sincerity. “Fair enough,” he manages. “I…am having trouble really arguing why this is a bad idea,” he admits.

“Maybe stop trying for a bit,” Bucky suggests. “I’ll let you get back to it later, after you’ve had some time to think. For now, enjoy a good thing.”

“Is this a good thing?” Tony asks.

“It could be,” Bucky says, voice soft now. “I really think it could be.”


It’s an awkward few minutes, neither of them moving, neither of them daring to press things further. Tony blinks first, in this game of chicken.

“Can I…come sit with you?”

Bucky immediately opens his arms. “Come here,” he invites.

Tony moves, careful and a little hesitant, until he’s on the couch, not quite touching Bucky, but close enough that the air between them is charged. “I…have no idea how to do this.”

“That makes two of us,” Bucky says.

“Maybe we could start by discussing your apparent dark side that means you prowl outside with a gun?” Tony prods gently. Or, as gently as he’s capable of.

Bucky winces. “Have I apologized for that yet?”

“Yes, And I told you to knock it off,” Tony says. “But I’d like an explanation. Especially if it’s gonna be a thing.”

“Yeah. Can’t guarantee that it won’t be,” Bucky admits. “I, uh. Look. Princess Shuri got the triggers out of my head, so I’m not…like that anymore. I can’t be used like that. But, well. She said it’d always be a part of me, which probably makes sense. It was seventy years of my life, you know? Just, a background part of my personality.”

“Right,” Tony says. “But…The Winter Soldier was about, you know, murder. Not this.”

“You’re his, our, uh, handler.” Bucky winces. “Not, like that. It’s like, you’re the primary person that side of me responds to. I mean, I really like you? And that part of me does too. Ever since Berlin, actually, and, well, especially since we got back. And maybe it’s alpha instincts mixed with having a murderer in my skull, but. Protecting you seemed really important.”

Tony’s silent for a minute. “It’s not, like, an all-the-time thing, right? Because I’m not gonna stand for that. I’m not your omega-in-distress, here. I can take care of myself.”

“I mean, I’d step between you and a bullet any day, but…” Bucky hastily moves on when he sees Tony’s face. “It’s just…you’re really vulnerable, when you’re in heat. There’s all these alpha instincts. I haven’t been around an omega I actually like in a long damn time, especially not one in heat. Not that that’s an excuse. But. I just wanted to protect you. That’s it. I swear.”
Tony hums in acknowledgement. “Is it like a separate personality? Are there two of you in there?”

“It’s more of a separate mindset,” Bucky says. “My therapist says it’s actually really normal. Mine might be a little extreme, but most people have ‘em.”

Tony nods in understanding. “Yeah, I get it.” Tony has his own; his press face, his politics face, his business face, his party-boy persona, and his personality for private moments where he can actually relax. “So. Probably not something to be too worried about.”

Bucky shrugs. “I’m plenty worried. I have the Winter Soldier in my head.”

“Yeah, but he can’t be triggered anymore. And,” Tony adds firmly, “if his idea of ‘protective alpha bullshit’ is asking permission to sit outside and protect me, then, well. I’ve definitely seen worse. You indulged my weird omega thing, we can compromise.”

“Needing a hug and patrolling with a gun are on very different levels,” Bucky says.

“Still things we needed.” Something dawns on Tony, and he blames the lingering heat for how long it’s taken him. “When you showed up here, the first time. That was the Winter Soldier, wasn’t it?”

“I, uh. Was worried. So. That part of me took over. A little bit,” Bucky admits. “I was on a plane before I really processed things.”

Tony huffs. “Next time, just tell me. I can help.”

“It’s not the best part of me.”

“If this is a thing we’re doing, then I think we’ve agreed to show each other the parts that aren’t the best, so. Suck it up. Besides, if the Winter Soldier is where you keep the alpha stuff—and it looks like it is—it’s better we figure out how to handle it in ways we can both live with, right?”

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees. He scoots nearer Tony on the couch. Their thighs brush. “This okay?”


“Can I kiss you?”

Tony doesn’t answer, just turns and brings his hand to Bucky’s jaw—there’s a scraggly beard there now, from living like an ever-vigilant guard dog outside Tony’s door, and Tony really should think about getting the guy cleaned up—and then cards it back into Bucky’s hair before pulling him down for a kiss.

Bucky kisses like it’s his job, like it’s a mission he won’t fail. The kiss is chaste and Bucky won’t even put his hands on Tony, but he’s still determined, like it takes—and deserves—every bit of his attention.

“That was nice,” Bucky says softly when he pulls away, and Tony is pleased to see him grinning stupidly.

“You can touch me. Put your hands on me. Hold me. All of that stuff. I’ll tell you if you cross a line.”

“Thank you,” Bucky says, and then kisses his cheek. ”Promise I’ll listen.”

Tony smiles. “I know. We wouldn’t be here at all if I didn’t.” He does know, expects no less, and
he’s not even nervous about it.

Maybe that’s a bad sign. Maybe he should be nervous. Maybe he’s repeating the same mistakes.

Tony’s going to let himself, mistake or no. There’s only one way to find out.

Sometimes, he thinks, you have to run before you can walk.

Bucky leans in, slowly, looking Tony in the eyes the whole time. Tony gives him a tiny nod, and then they’re kissing again.

It’s nearly midnight and they’re still on the couch, now with Bucky’s arm around Tony, and Tony leaning against his flesh shoulder. Tony’s small next to Bucky, compact, and fits perfectly into the space under his arm. He shouldn’t like it as much as he does.

He loves it.

Part of him, the logical, reassuring part that’s actually thinking clearly for once, knows it’s because he trusts Bucky. That he doesn’t fear Bucky’s arm over him because Bucky uses it to comfort, not control.

Part of Tony is waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it’s a tiny part.

“I saw your interview, you know,” Bucky says.

“Oh, it came out!” Tony says. “FRIDAY, how are reactions?”

“Mixed, Boss,” she says. “Omega Rights and Welfare organizations are praising the article, Ms. Everhart’s writing, and your courage in not backing down. It has sparked quite a bit of conversation on the internet.”

“But pretty much everyone else is pissed, yeah,” Tony finishes.

“I thought it was brave,” Bucky says.

Tony shrugs. “It was nothing,” he says. “Just told an old acquaintance the truth.”

“It was a lot.”

“FRIDAY, can I see the copy Christine sent me?” He says. “She must have distorted something or something.”

FRIDAY brings it up on a tablet.

**TONY STARK AS THE MODERN OMEGA**

When asked to describe himself, Tony Stark calls himself a ‘billionaire, genius, engineer, inventor, party-boy, superhero, philanthropist, businessman, futurist, omega.’ Omega weighs in firmly at number ten.

When this was pointed out to him, Stark shrugged. “Sure, I’m an omega,” he says. “But so is a quarter of the world’s population. Look at all the other shit I did too.”
Indeed. Stark, formerly known as the son and heir to Howard Stark, transformed his father’s legacy of weapons into one of clean energy, consumer technology, medical technology, philanthropy, and research pushing the bounds of the possible. “Stark Industries pioneered three systems used in today’s space crafts,” Stark points out with a smile. “And that’s not even our bread and butter.”

Nevertheless, ‘Tony Stark’ and ‘omega’ are connected in the news a lot lately. A video was leaked to the internet of newly-returned teammate Steve Rogers using the so-called ‘alpha voice’ on Stark mid-battle, putting the lives of Stark and forty-six others in danger, sparking discussion about the role of omegas on superhero teams. In addition, the Sokovia Accords Council, a branch of the UN responsible for managing enhanced teams such as the Avengers, has been strongly debating a mating or guardianship requirement for omegas like Stark, currently one of a very few omega superheroes.

“I think it’s all bullshit,” Stark says. “I’m not going to apologize for that. I think it’s absolute bullshit.”

When pressed, Stark takes a moment to think about it before explaining. “I am very good at what I do,” he says. “They call it arrogance but it’s the truth. I am. So, when you put these limitations on me, when you look at me and say, because of my designation, I can’t be a superhero—or run a company, or use heavy machinery, or manage money, or whatever—you just look like an idiot. There’s plenty of data to back me up. I’ve been doing all these things, successfully, for years. So have other omegas. Saying I can’t now is just not true, which means it’s a pretty obvious ploy to control me because they don’t like that omegas can do that stuff.” He laughs. “Honestly, what really gets to me isn’t that they try it, it’s that people are stupid enough to fall for it.”

Stark is known for this type of abrasiveness. When I point it out to him, he grins. “I’m not apologizing for that either.”

When asked to elaborate on the specific incident with Steve Rogers, Stark shrugs. “He’s not the team leader anymore, and he should know better than to make calls, especially when he doesn’t have all the information. He made a terrible call and, by trying to enforce it the way he did, almost got a lot of people killed. They call him a tactical genius, but, well, it speaks for itself.”

As to whether this situation has anything to do with his dynamic, Stark laughs so hard he snorts. “Absolutely,” he says. “First of all, that voice only works on omegas. Rogers had a trump card and he knew it. But anyone else, he would have trusted them to be in the best position and left them to it. Romanoff, Barton, Wilson? Rogers would have trusted their expertise. But me? This isn’t new, this constant doubt. Every action I make is always second-guessed, questioned, argued. It’s only omegas that are so constantly doubted. I have no doubt that, if it hadn’t gone down the way it did, Rogers would have used the voice on Maximoff next, regardless of whatever she was doing—getting civilians to emergency services, I believe. We work two, three, four times as hard to prove ourselves, and as soon as we do, they push the finish line a little further out, so you have to keep working.”

Stark certainly knows what he’s talking about. “I mean, the Avengers Compound—which I paid for, which I keep up-to-date and funded, personally, out of my own personal funds—is currently full of Rogue Avengers who visibly, loudly, and obviously, broke international law. That’s irrefutable. Yet the Accords Council seems to think I’m the one who can’t be trusted without a leash around my neck. That’s some bullshit right there.”

When I asked about his metaphor, Stark shrugged. “I’m not exaggerating. Think of a dog and an owner out for a walk. The dog trots along happily, might even think they’re leading once in a while,
but whenever the dog goes somewhere the owner doesn’t want, the leash is right there to yank them back on track. You have no idea how miserably confining the alpha voice is if you haven’t felt it.” Stark seems to become overwhelmed for a minute, focusing on his coffee. “I was still a kid when my dad used the voice on me the first time. It’s always been hanging over my head, at school, at MIT, in my job. It’s a constant threat we live with.”

“Does this mean omegas are just not cut out to be superheroes, given that vulnerability?” I ask.

Stark shrugs. “That’s the way these conversations always go, doesn’t it?” He asks. “I’d say that the blame for this doesn’t rest on us,” he says. “And that omega superheroes already exist. And we do great things. I mean, I don’t know if you all remember this, but I flew a nuke into space. I didn’t need an alpha to tell me to do that, and they definitely don’t get credit for it. Accept that we’re here. Maybe we’re not the ones who have to change here, you know? It always comes back to us being to blame, but there were two parties involved in this. I didn’t make the choice that almost cost lives. I made the one to save lives. I know we got bogged down in that video of Captain America being an asshole, but aliens touched back down on earth last week. We are not in a position where we can be picky about our defenders. And frankly, the idea that omegas are the least qualified, given the current pool, is insulting.”

I ask Stark to go back, and tell me what it was like to grow up omega, to become who he is today. He shrugs. “What do you want me to say?” He asks. “It was hard. They didn’t want to let me into the schools I went to, my dad didn’t want me near the company, he tried to force a mating, people tried to exclude me or use the voice all the time. I got lucky; I’m really not different than any other omega, just had the extraordinary circumstances that helped me rise above that bullshit. Any omega can do it.”

But can they, really?

“Yes,” Stark says firmly. “Absolutely. I am not special. My circumstances were. That’s really all I came here to say. Omegas can flourish, can thrive, can beat out everyone else at whatever they set their minds to, if given circumstances where the world doesn’t purposefully try to keep them back. Frankly, that’s what I think they’re so afraid of.” He grins. “They’re terrified of our independence. What’ll they do, when we’re not convenient puppets anymore?”

Tony Stark doesn’t like looking at the past. He calls himself a futurist. When asked about his vision for the future, Stark says, “For omegas? That’s simple. I want to die in a world where I’m treated as a human being, who has just as much right to be here as anyone. And I want kids born today to live in a world where their dynamic doesn’t shape their opportunities. Where parents can’t deny their omega children an education, where omega teenagers aren’t mated to alphas two, three times their age. Where hiring practices are truly non-discriminatory and mating is a choice. Where consent is the spirit of the law, not just the letter. Where we actually scrutinize actions like the ones Steve Rogers took last week. Where ‘for their own good’ isn’t a valid legal defense under any circumstances.”

And what does Tony Stark say to those who argue that the current Accords Council decision is for his own good? He shrugs. “How about you let us make up our minds about that?” He asks. “We might surprise you.”

Tony skims it quickly, eyes moving back and forth across the rows of text.

“She distort it?” Bucky asks.
“She made me sound better than I do,” Tony says.

“The words yours?”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“Then I’m proud of you, for sharing them,” Bucky interrupts firmly. He kisses the top of Tony’s head, a gesture Tony finds oddly endearing in that moment. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being so damn brave.”

“That’s not brave,” Tony argues. “That’s just…the truth.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agrees. “And that’s brave, isn’t it?”

Tony doesn’t know how to answer that.

They go to bed an hour later, Bucky on the couch and Tony tossing and turning in the master bed, still smelling faintly of heat. He hates it.

He could go back to the compound, back to his nice, neutral bed in the lab, but he doesn’t want to bring this fragile thing with him and Bucky to the Compound. Not yet.

So Tony gets up, hours later, after a terrible night’s sleep to find Bucky already making breakfast.

“Where did you get food?” Tony demands.

Bucky smiles. “I went shopping. No one took a video, promise.”

Tony would argue, but he smells the coffee and bacon and can’t find it within himself to be anything less than perfectly pleasant.

“FRIDAY, I need to start reading reactions to that article,” he says. “And probably what my PR team has to say, I’ve been ignoring them all week.”

“Pulling them up now, Boss,” she says, and sure enough, Tony has a collection of emails—he’s a week behind in strategy planning—and several news articles.

Tony scans them and sighs. “Well,” he says. “At least there’s two legitimate news sources seriously discussing the ‘for their own good’ defense. And it looks like the Washington Post is doing something or other on omega schooling.”

“That’s something,” Bucky says.

“Sure,” Tony says. “In terms of, I rather have something than nothing, even if something is mediocre and lazy.”

“What do you do next?” Bucky asks.

“Go on TV, probably,” Tony says. He sighs. “That’ll be a hoot.”

“Is there anyone…you aren’t the only omega out there who could do this.”
“I’m…lucky,” Tony says. “I’m rich, I’m famous, I own a company and am a superhero and have a
college education and billions of dollars. I’m kind of unique in that regard.”

Bucky puts the plate of eggs in front of Tony, before bringing his own over. “So, no one to help
you?”

“Not in this way.” Tony shrugs. “There are one point seven billion omegas on this planet. I just
have to speak first.”

Bucky puts some fruit on the table, then has a seat. “So, when do you do that?”

“The PR team sorts it out,” Tony says. “Perks of the rich and famous; hiring someone to do things
for you.”

Bucky fidgets, a strange look on a hundred year old sniper and assassin. Tony raises an eyebrow.
“What, Bucky?”

“Do you have to…go? Now?”

“Not today,” Tony says. “Did you have something in mind?”

“Just wanna spend time with you,” Bucky says.

Tony hums, then takes a sip of coffee to hide his blush, because he is blushing, there can be no
doubt. People don’t…people don’t treat him like Bucky does. People want something, and the
people who don’t Tony can count on one hand with fingers left over.

“I think that can be arranged,” Tony says. “What did you have in mind?” And, the terrible flirt he
is, he wags his eyebrows suggestively. He doesn’t mean anything by it, figures, as Bucky is also a
terrible flirt, they can just laugh it off.

Bucky, inexplicably, blushes. Only unlike Tony, who’s sure his own blush was delicate and dainty,
Bucky goes bright red.

“Well, that’s something,” Tony says, eyebrow raised. “Wanna share with the class?”

Bucky, to Tony’s endless surprise, gets even redder. “I, uh…Fuck. Just got a little side-tracked, and
uh, nothin’ to worry about, and…”

“Bucky,” Tony says, amused but as soft as he can make it, “how bad can it be?”

Bucky takes a deep, shuddering breath, shakes his head, then sighs. “I…look it was just a stray
thought, I don’t mean anything by it, I don’t wanna be one of those creepy alphas, I ain’t asking for
anything—”

“What, is it a fetish?” Tony interrupts. “Bucky, I might have asked us to take this slow, but you’re
not going to shock me. There’s not much I haven’t heard of, and—”

“I could hear you,” Bucky interrupts, the words running together, spilling out of his mouth quickly.

Well, that shuts Tony up real quick. He’s probably bright red too by now. Truthfully, he’s just
trying to remember if he said anything incriminating out loud. Like, say, Bucky’s name.

“Oh.”
“Yeah,” Bucky clears his throat.

“Well, this is uncomfortable,” Tony mutters.

“Only ’cause I made it that way,” Bucky says. “I’m sorry, it was…inappropriate and rude, and I—”

“Couldn’t really be expected to avoid it,” Tony finishes firmly, finding his footing once more. “I mean, super-soldier hearing, right? Yeah. Awkward. But…it doesn’t have to be a big deal.”

Bucky’s still blushing. “I…it’s probably good, that it came out now. Don’t wanna lie to you.”

Never let it be said that Tony makes good decisions, because he’s curious. “Did you like it?”

“What?” Bucky asks, voice practically a croak.

“Did you like it?” Tony repeats. “What you heard.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, looking adorably shy and staring at the table instead of Tony.

“I don’t even remember all of it,” Tony admits. “Did I say anything?”

Bucky shakes his head. “Mostly, it was just…noises, which were…amazing. Enough. But once…you said my name,” he whispers.

Tony flushes but powers on. “I thought about you a lot,” he admits, just as embarrassed now, but not willing to back down.

Bucky’s breath hitches. “Yeah?”

Tony nods. “Yeah. Trust me. I have a rich, overactive imagination and plenty of ideas for when we get there.”

Bucky finally looks up. His hair is falling in his eyes. “When?”

“When,” Tony confirms, because honestly, at this point, it seems like a foregone conclusion. He should probably be more careful, more cautious. But that’s never been his speciality; Tony throws himself into things with abandon, seeks what he wants, tests things, makes them work or fails in the process. He’s careful in too many areas of his life for his taste, and he doesn’t have the restraint to be careful here too.

He clears his throat. He at least has some self-preservation instincts left. “But that’s not today,” he says carefully. “So, do you have another idea for today?”

Bucky, it turns out, just wants to finally watch the Harry Potter movies with Tony.

So they cuddled on the couch—and wasn’t that a trip and a half, Tony thought, Bucky leaning against the armrest and Tony in the V of his legs, leaning back, letting Bucky’s arms, flesh and metal, gently hold him—and ate the ridiculous amount of snacks that Bucky picked up when he went shopping.

Bucky left the popcorn bowl in Tony’s lap—the fancy kind, with caramel and chocolate, and Tony didn’t know that Bucky had such a sweet tooth, what a lovely little thing to learn—and occasionally prods Tony, gesturing for him to eat some.

Around halfway through The Chamber of Secrets, Tony starts to get twitchy. Really, he lasted longer than he thought he would, considering, well, that he’s him. His brain is spinning, he can’t sit still.
Bucky picks up on it. “Doll, what’s wrong?”

Tony sighs. “Just twitchy.”

“We can take a break?” Bucky asks, concerned, moving the popcorn bowl from Tony’s lap to the side table. “Two and a half movies is a lot, let’s have a break—”

“No, no, you’re still watching.” Tony says. “I just…my brain moves too fast and my hands are always itching for something to do.” He shakes his head, frustrated.

Bucky just looks at him. “What would help?”

“I don’t know, sometimes I work while doing this, but that annoys people, because, you know, I’m not really paying attention, so…”

“Could you work from here? I mean, do what you need to do, but it’d be nice, to still have you nearby.” Bucky flushes a little bit. “I might be a bit clingy.”

“I’m noticing,” Tony says dryly. “I…you wouldn’t mind? I’d just get my tablet, and I wouldn’t really be paying attention but I won’t interrupt you, I swear.”

“I don’t mind,” Bucky promises. “Go find a tablet while I get more drinks, okay?”

So, three minutes later, they settle back down in the same position, except now Tony has his tablet out and skims through designs for the latest Iron Man boot.

They must fall asleep like that, because, next thing Tony knows, he’s pinned to the couch by a bulky alpha who’s breathing is rapid and shallow.

“Bucky?” He groans, trying to come to full alertness. “Bucky?”

The room is still pitch black—it must be the middle of the night, they can’t have slept very long—and the darkness isn’t helped by the fact that Tony can barely see around the bulk of super soldier on top of him, pressing him down.

He takes a deep breath, finds it a little difficult, what with Bucky’s weight compromising his already compromised lung capacity. He tries to push, and gets nothing but out of breath.

Bucky’s not really hurting him, not on purpose, but he’s clearly not all here, and Tony can’t take being under him much longer.

Okay. Get it together. Brainstorm a way out.

Tony has his wrist gauntlet, he could just concuss Bucky, and it would probably temporarily take care of the problem. Of course, it might send the Winter Soldier part of him back at Tony, but it would buy him a moment.

Tony calls it plan B and worms a hand through, trying to touch…well, any part of Bucky he can reach, really. He ends up managing to get his shoulder, rubbing gentle circles. He tries to calm himself down, put a good face forward. They say alphas can smell when an omega is distressed, that it sends them over the edge. Tony thinks it’s a load of crap but it can’t hurt him now.

“Hey, Bucky?” He says softly. “Bucky, can you wake up for me? Bucky, honey, wake up, okay?”
Bucky’s eyes fly open, his breathing gets even more ragged, and he all but launches himself off the couch, landing in a heap on the floor.

Tony takes a minute to shake it off and get a deep breath—or as deep as he can—before moving over to Bucky.

“You okay?” He asks.

Bucky looks a mess. Pale, eyes haunted, and a little sweaty. Tony frowns. “Is it like this every night?”

Bucky doesn’t answer him. “How badly did I hurt you?” He demands, biting his lip and turning to look at his hands.

Tony frowns, then feels his heart ache. “You didn’t,” he says. “I mean, you’re a little big to lay on me like that, knocked the wind out of me a bit, but I’m not hurt.”

“I…you sure?” Bucky asks.

“I’m sure.”

“FRIDAY?”

“Boss seems fine,” FRIDAY says.

Tony bites his lip, doesn’t argue him asking FRIDAY when there are clearly bigger issues at hand.

“I could have…I’m so sorry, Tony,” Bucky takes a shaking breath.

“Hey, I have it under control,” Tony soothes, completely out of his depth and just trying to dog-paddle to keep up. He raises his hand to show off his wrist. “See? I could’ve concussed you, no problem.”

“I…” Bucky shakes his head. “That wouldn’t have worked.”

“Yeah, well, would have bought me long enough to get the suit,” Tony says. “And that’s all I need.”

Bucky seems mollified by that. “Good. Good plan. Do that. Next time. And then shoot me if you have to. Not that there should be a next time, I won’t let that happen again.”

Tony frowns. He liked what happened, before. He actually slept pretty well. “You didn't hurt me,” he repeats. “Is it like that every night?”

“Most nights,” Bucky admits. “I…see the things I did. The things they did to me. It’s…well,” he shrugs. “You saw.”

Tony, intellectually, knew Bucky had nightmares; it had been one of the first things Bucky told him. He just hasn’t thought about it much, because, as he’s always known, he’s self-centered.

His mind moves fast now, though, as it always does once he’s confronted with a problem he’s interested in solving.

“I made this thing,” he says slowly. “It’s meant to help process traumatic memories? I’ve used it, a bit. Uh. It might help?”
“What is it?” Bucky asks.

“It’s called BARF,” Tony says. “Binary-Augmented Retro Framing. It helps you re-frame your memories. Not to change them, but to…change the association a bit? Change your feelings about it? Anyways, I, uh, demoed it right before it all went down with the Accords, so I haven’t done much with it since, but. Well, theoretically, it helps modify memories.”

Bucky just stares at him, and Tony wonders nervously if he’s over-stepping. He’s probably just supposed to pat Bucky on the back, say *there there* and call it a night. It’s not in Tony’s nature, he’s a fixer even when it’s detrimental. And it might have been detrimental this time.

Bucky swallows. “Will it work?”

“It should.”

“Would you…let me use it?”

“I wouldn’t tell you about it if I wouldn’t,” Tony says. “It’s at my lab, in the Compound, so we’d have to go back.” The idea doesn’t make him particularly happy, but then again, neither does Bucky’s situation at the moment.

Bucky swallows. “We don’t have to,” he says. “I shouldn’t be sleepin’ near you anyways, so we can just…wait.”

Tony’s tempted, but he shakes his head. “Bucky, this isn’t about us sleeping together or not,” he says. “I’m not particularly worried for my safety; I told you, I can take care of myself. I’m worried that you’re suffering every night, and we can fix it.”

Bucky sighs, but nods. “It’d be nice, to not be…like this,” he admits. He manages a smile. It looks like it practically hurts, but he pulls it off nonetheless. “And, if we’re talking about the future… someday I’d like to hold you all night without worrying.” His smile slips. “Is that okay to say?”

“Yeah,” Tony breathes. “Yeah, that’s okay.”

Bucky looks out the window. “We got a few more hours, though, right? Promise I won’t fall asleep on you again.”

So they get back on the couch, and Tony pretends not to notice Bucky’s wonder-struck expression when Tony lets Bucky hold him again.
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

Things get real. And not in a good way.

Chapter Notes

Happy Saturday, all.

First, a housekeeping note. This week, I return to work. We have an all-staff retreat wherein I will be cooped up with everyone I work with up in the mountains, with little privacy, little free time, and potentially little internet access. Lots of intoxicated co-workers paired with long trainings and having to switch my mindset back to school, oh joy. As such, I would like it on record now that I make zero promises about Wednesday's chapter. I'm hoping that just means I don't know what time it will be posted, but, in case nothing gets posted Wednesday, I swear I will rectify the situation as soon as possible. You'll get the promised chapters.

Honestly, we're reaching the end of summer; school starts far too soon. Knowing that, Wednesday postings are inevitably going to change and will likely become an evening/night posting. I'll know more as I get back into the swing of school.

On a slightly different note; I set up a Ko-fi. It's linked on my Tumblr blog (same username). I just want to make it clear that I have no expectations and you are by no means required to donate. My content isn't going to be tied to whether I get donations or not. I feel very awkward asking, but I've decided to do this since I've (finally) started dedicating a plethora of free time to writing again, which I kind of did instead of picking up paid writing work this summer (whoops?). I want to make it clear that NO ONE is obligated to donate at any time, at all. But if it's something you'd like to do, it's there.

Okay, onto this chapter.

After Bucky and Tony start this thing, they head back to the Compound. Politics have gotten bad.

This chapter has a lot of those things that get me sensitive and anxious over the oppression, and feeling cornered. You should know that going into this. Also, and I cannot stress this enough, Steve thinks he's a good guy but misses that mark with Tony too often, which we'll see here and in the next few chapters.

If you need a summary/more information, feel free to hit me up here or on Tumblr (same username), okay?

Thanks for sticking with me, all. I appreciate your love and support on this fic so much. Sorry this was so long, and on with the story!
They leave at dawn to head back to the Compound, taking the R8 Bucky left parked in the woods so many days ago. Tony drives, Bucky seemingly content to look out the window. Iron Man sits in the back seat.

Tony hopes he didn’t over-promise last night, because the truth is, he’s pretty sure BARF can work for Bucky but he’s not entirely positive. Whatever. He’s Tony Stark, he’s the mechanic. If it doesn’t work, he’ll make it work.

Tony drives at a much more reasonable pace than Bucky, so he makes the ninety minute drive in sixty-five minutes.

Rhodey’s waiting for them in the garage, expression tense as he shifts from foot to foot, braces creaking as he goes.

“What’s up, Platypus?” Tony says lightly, getting out of the car.

Rhodey sighs. “I wish you called first. I would’ve told you not to come back.”

“I’m hurt.”

“There’s…I was wrong,” Rhodey says. “The politics were bad but we didn’t have it under control.” Tony stares at him, swear Rhodey’s face has gotten more lined, more worn, in just this past week.

Tony takes a deep breath. “What happened?”

Rhodey looks at his watch. “There’s a Council meeting in thirty minutes. Let me catch you up before then. They’ll want you there.”

He turns to walk away, and Tony jogs to catch up to him, Bucky on his heels. “So, spill.”

“Well, first off, I’m not Team Leader anymore,” Rhodey says, and it’s like he has to force the words up, bitter and acidic.

Tony stumbles back a step. “No.”

Rhodey’s face is as bitter as the words. “Yeah.”

“Why would they do that?” Bucky asks, voice quiet. “I mean, you’re…you’re a Colonel, and you’ve been good at it, so why would they do that?”

“Is it because you refused to say anything against me?” Tony guesses.

Rhodey shrugs. “Probably.”

Tony feels his heart clench. He’s always worried, that he and his antics and his choices would hold Rhodey back. “It’s not too late,” he says. “Give them what they want, be a damn team player. Go make a statement. *Tony Stark’s immature and childish tantrum puts team unity in jeopardy and will not be tolerated, and…”*

Rhodey shakes his head. “Even if I ever would—which I wouldn’t, Tony, you better know that—it’s too late.”

It’s a sucker punch all over again. “I’m so damn sorry, Rhodey.”
Rhodey sighs. “If aliens weren’t coming, I wouldn’t even mind. I don’t want this colossal pile of shit. This team is headed for a dumpster fire, just you wait. But aliens are coming, and the Council put Rogers back in charge.”

Tony sucks in a breath; it’s the natural conclusion, but it hasn’t been said yet.

Bucky says it for them all. “Fuck.” He shakes his head. “Why would they do that?” He demands. “Look what Steve did, when he pretended he was in charge! They can’t ignore that! This is insane. This is…they can’t do that. They can’t.”

“They have,” Tony says, feeling like his insides have been scooped out with a spoon, leaving him hollow and painful inside.

It is a lot for them to ignore, Tony knows, but he also knows the one thing that could make them do it: Spite. Spite that the Avengers, under the leadership of Colonel James Rhodes, are not wholly under their moral thumb.

Steve Rogers is a loose cannon, but at least he doesn’t embarrass them in the news, Tony supposes. At least he doesn’t sympathize with the omega embarrassment stirring up trouble.

No, his embarrassments are telling the brass to fuck off and causing huge messes, and were this not his life, were this not so serious, Tony would wait and watch with popcorn for it to blow up in their faces.

Rhodey shakes his head, still walking. “Oh, it gets worse.”

“How could it possibly get worse?” Tony demands.

“The Council called to drag us all together. They wanted you there. I told them you were away for personal reasons, but well, here you are.” He takes a deep breath. “I think they’re here to deliver news on the mating requirement.”

Thirty minutes later, they’re all in one of the conference rooms. Rogers keeps throwing confused, hurt looks at Bucky, who steadily ignores him and stands by Tony’s side. Tony, for his part, is trying not to nervously vibrate out of his skull, at least not in front of this audience.

Ross and a Council representative stroll in. Ross has a sour look on his face, although Tony can’t tell if it’s over the news or just his natural demeanor. He swallows.

“Have a seat,” the other alpha says. They all do so, and it doesn’t escape Tony’s notice that Rogers automatically moves to the head of the table, Wilson on one side after the briefest hesitation and Romanov on the other, Lang, Maximoff, and Barton falling in around them.

Tony, for his part, takes the closest chair, with Rhodey on one side and Bucky on the other, Vision on Bucky’s other side. It feels like a Mexican standoff, three parties staring each other down.

Except Tony knows how this goes. Rogers might hate the Council, might hate everything they stand for and be willing to destroy cities, tear apart friendships, relationships, over them. But today is different. Today, two of the three parties will look at each other, nod, and draw their gun on the third. Because omegas need to be controlled. Because Tony embarrassed them.

Tony’s going to get hit with something he’s still not prepared to deal with. He’s been treading water for so long now, bouncing back and forth, trying to tackle every issue facing him, solving
nothing. He talks a big talk, but in the end, what has he really changed?

How will the great Tony Stark escape this one?

Tony takes a deep breath and holds his head high. Like he always does, he supposes.

“As you know, there has been debate over an amendment to add an omega protection clause—sometimes called a mating clause—to the Accords,” the Council member—Tony almost wishes he remembered her name—begins. Her voice is droning, but Tony can’t tune her out. Can’t miss a second of this train wreck. “Research shows that omegas thrive in conditions where they can rely on an alpha for support, particularly in difficult situations like this. They often need that extra layer of control to support their decisions. In addition, it benefits the entire pack, providing a stronger, more formalized pack structure. It is with that information in mind that the Council has chosen to move forward with the amendment for the mating requirement.”

Tony’s ears feel like they’re filled with static, his heart like it’s skipping beats. He tries to breathe evenly.

Howard tried it when he was a kid and he got out of it. People have been trying it ever since and he got out of it. And here he is, looking down fifty, and, after escaping it so long, the walls are closing in.

“Given the…personal nature of this amendment, and how it would influence team dynamics, several members of the team have been invited to speak in private sessions,” the Council member continues. “Support was very high. Nearly unanimous, in fact—“ Her eyes stray to Tony’s side of the table “—so, with that, the Council voted this morning and the amendment is now active, effective immediately, for all omega superheroes.”

Tony tries to breathe.

The bastards couldn’t even give him the time to handle this privately, to sort it out. They’d probably argue that the last several months have been time, that he’s had time to find a mate or quit. It still feels like this has blindsided him.

Bucky squeezes his thigh. It’s grounding.

“Omega Stark,” the woman says. “Are you planning on taking a mate? Do you have someone in mind?”

Tony takes a breath to steady himself, then lifts his chin, tries to show his defiance with just his eyes. “No.”

He resolutely doesn’t look around, knows Rhodey would offer, knows Vision would offer, knows Bucky would bite back his own offer. Knows Steve would say something. Maybe even Wilson. Hell, for all he knows, any of them could offer themselves up, for the good of the team. He can’t see that, can’t hear that. He already feels like enough of an object.

If only he and Maximoff could tolerate each other. They couldn’t forbid him to mate with another omega, just stigmatize it. It would be an appropriate slap in the face—*you think we need to be controlled? Go fuck yourselves, you bigots* —if only they could honestly say they wouldn’t come to blows five minutes into their mating.

“Are you planning on retiring?”

“No,” Tony says, trying to hide the shake in his voice.
She nods. “We assumed as much. This might be rather sudden, so we are prepared to offer a trial period, of sorts. One year, to make arrangements.”

Tony’s heart lifts. A year. He can work with a year. He can turn public opinion in a year, surely.

“During that time, you will be under what is essentially a guardianship,” she continues, and Tony’s heart sinks right back down.

“Guardianship?” Rhodey growls. “Like a child?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ross snaps.

The Council member shrugs. “It’s a common enough practice, for omegas to have a guardian to oversee their needs, in certain situations.”

It’s essentially what Obie was, those first few years, although Tony definitely isn’t going to voice that. At least at that point, there had been the argument that he was grief-stricken, barely an adult thrust into a world not meant for him. Now, none of that applies. Now, it’s just patronizing.

“It is not a common practice,” Rhodey says hotly. “We don’t legally hand over control of other people without a damn good reason. Not anymore. Not in this century.”

“Omegas end up informally with guardians all the time,” she explains. “Adult omegas often stay with their parents until mated, or an alpha or beta oversees them on the job. It’s not unusual.”

“Who…who are you handing this guardianship to?” Tony asks. It’s not in any way a better situation. It smarts just as much, it still sends the message that Tony needs someone to hold his leash.

“Well, since it’s for the purpose of being on this team, one would assume the head of the team—the team’s alpha, as it were—would be your guardian,” she says, blithely ignoring the way Tony just about withers and dies at that. “Which, in this case, would make your guardian Captain Rogers.”

Bucky audibly growls.

The tension in the room actively ratchets up tenfold. Everyone looks at Bucky for a moment, which at least takes eyes off of Tony even if it doesn’t dispel the situation. The council member continues on as if she hasn’t noticed. “He would be generally responsible for you. He’d likely take on the typical duties of an alpha regarding ensuring you were cared for, I’m sure I don’t have to spell those out. But, given the nature of this team, his specific role would be more along the lines of taking responsibility for you in the field. He’d help ensure you were field ready, and monitor you and your status. He’d take some degree of responsibility for your actions.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Rhodey says, and Tony’s not really surprised that Rhodey is the first one to burst. Rhodey may look calm and collected, but he’s as angry as Tony is underneath it all. “You would—are you all blind? Rogers almost killed Tony and forty-six other people over his desire to ‘take responsibility’ of Tony. In what world does this seem like a good idea?” He gestures sharply to Rogers. “Let’s talk about getting the nonagenarian with an ego complex a guardian.”

The room is dead silent for a moment. “I don’t appreciate your tone, Colonel Rhodes,” she says. “The fact of the matter is, this is a decision the Council came to following research and deliberation. Omega Stark has plenty of other opportunities, should this not be to his liking.”

None that are in any way equal to the opportunities his team mates have, Tony thinks bitterly,
although why he would expect that is beyond him. He’s never gotten that chance before.

“Omega Stark?” She says. “We need an answer.”

“Quit,” Rhodey hisses. “Just quit, Tony. You don’t need to take this. Tell them to fuck off and let them come crawling back to you when they need you. Don’t do this to yourself.”

Bucky doesn’t say anything, but his fingers on Tony’s knee keep tightening and loosening, almost unconsciously. Tony doesn’t know what it means. Bucky probably doesn’t know what it means. He can’t make sense of it, but at least it’s somewhat grounding.

“Tony,” Tony hears, clear across the table. Almost against his will, he turns to look at Steve.

Steve looks like—well, like Steve always has. Good. Determined, with a set to his eyes that says he won’t back down come hell or high water. But there’s a softness around his mouth that captures Tony’s attention.

“Tony, just…say yes,” he says, and his voice is all soft, almost pleading. “Nothing has to change. We’ve done this before.”

“We’ve never done this before,” Tony denies vehemently.

“We’ve been a team before,” Steve corrects. “C’mon. Nothing has to change, we know how to do this. And…Tony, we need you on this team. With aliens coming, we need you.”

It’s true. It’s true and it hurts. Rhodey says tell them to fuck themselves, wait for them to need him, and Tony wants to, every selfish part of him wants to, but there’s a war coming and Tony needs to protect the world.

He closes his eyes. Steels himself. Tells himself it’s not the worst thing he’s ever done to get what he wants. It’s probably even true, even if it doesn’t feel like it right then.

“Fine,” he says, the word leaving him in a painful breath, like glass in his throat. “I accept your monumentally shitty offer. You should know I don’t plan to back down my campaign. In fact, I’m sure you’ll be seeing a lot more of it.”

“Well, I suppose you can take that up with Captain Rogers.” She turns to Wanda, who is sitting next to Barton, looking for all the world like she has no problem with the proceedings.

Maybe, Tony thinks, he wouldn’t have a problem if he knew he could control the alpha’s mind. Maybe.

“Omega Maximoff. Do you plan to take a mate?” She shakes her head. “I suppose Captain Rogers could be my guardian too?” Tony has to hold back bile; she looks hopeful.

“It’s what we assumed,” the council member says. She closes her little folder. “With that, I believe today’s business is handled.”

Ross purposefully crosses behind Tony on the way out. “Big mistake,” he says softly. “You think Rogers is gonna give you your way?” He pats Tony on the shoulder. “You know where to find me, should you change your mind.”

Tony feels like vomiting too much to reply.
Steve looks around, looking a little unsure. “Can Tony and I have the room?” He asks. “We need to…work some things out.” He turns to Wanda. “We’ll figure it out in a bit, okay?”

“No, you fucking cannot have the room,” Rhodey says hotly. “You won’t spend a minute alone with Tony, Rogers, if I have half a say about it, and—”

Tony holds up a hand. “Go,” he says softly. The truth is, he wants everyone gone, wants the room empty so he doesn’t have to have witnesses for what will be an undoubtedly humiliating experience of having his life laid out like this. Even if Rogers is in a merciful mood, even if he’s as disgusted as what happened as Tony is—doubtful—this is still them laying out what it means for Rogers to be his guardian. Tony’s life isn’t fully his own, anymore, and the idea is humiliating enough.

He looks at Rhodey, then Bucky, then Vision, and tries to smile. Judging by their expressions, he fails. “Never truly unarmed, right?”

Rhodey harrumphs. “Just on the other side of the door,” he threatens. Vision nods.

Bucky squeezes Tony’s shoulder gently. “I can break us outta here in a hot second,” he says softly. “All you gotta do is ask.”

“I’m good for right now.”

They all file out, leaving Steve and Tony at opposite ends of the big table.

“So. Bucky.”

“That’s not what we’re here to talk about, Rogers, and if you want to talk about Bucky, I’d suggest you talk to him,” Tony snaps.

Steve shakes his head. “Would it kill you to…at least try to be civil?”

“Given the circumstances, it very well might,” Tony says. “So. Lay it out. What’s your expectations?”

Steve sighs, the nods. “We can talk about Bucky later.”

_Not if I have a single thing to say about it_, Tony thinks. He is an expert at distraction, at avoiding topics. He hopes it holds him in good stead still.

Tony tries his hardest not to squirm. Reminds himself that at least he has an out. It’s not like a mating, legally binding and all but inescapable. If Rogers asks too much—for Iron Man, for the company, for a relationship—Tony can just quit the Avengers. He only needs a “guardian” if he’s on the team, which means he has that leverage. Of course, everyone knows he’ll take a lot to stay on the team. But Tony likes to think—no, he knows—there are lines he won’t cross.

Steve leans forward and Tony fights not to lean backwards. There’s enough space between them. Steve is no threat.

“I just…why can’t we just go back to how it was?”

“Meaning what?” Tony challenges. “What was it, Rogers?”

“Well, first of all, you called me Steve.”

Or Cap or one of about fifty annoying nicknames Tony doesn’t want to ever use again. He says nothing.
“And, well, we were…we were a team. We talked. We worked together.”

“See, the difference is, you’d never used the voice on me then,” Tony says. “Now you’ve used it more than once and just pushed for a position where they essentially give you free reign to use it more. Not that you needed it before, apparently, but now it’s all nice and wrapped up for you.” It’s true, too; whatever leverage Tony had in the press before will disappear, should Steve do it again. Steve’s his alpha; there is a way to things, a natural order, and of course that’s just how things are.

It’s Steve’s turn to flinch. “I’m not…whatever you think of me, I’m not one of those monster alphas. I’m not here to hurt you, or…or ruin your life, or anything. I just want to…be us again.” He looks sad. “I didn’t actually ask for this, you know.”

Tony could tell him—probably should tell him—that it doesn’t take a monster to be awful. That plenty of people consider themselves good, are considered good by others, even, and hurt other people. It happens every day.

He swallows his pride, his anger. “You don’t touch my company. You don’t touch Iron Man. You don’t touch my work. You don’t touch me.”

“Tony, if we’re going to do this, we’ll need some sort of relationship.”

Tony tenses. “I will never—“

“Just a working relationship,” Steve hurriedly clarifies. “I’m not a monster, I told you, I’m not forcing you into anything. But we need to talk.”

“I don’t see why,” Tony says.

“Because I’m your guardian.”

“What does it matter?” Tony snaps. “What does it matter if you see me, or I hide out in the lab? The Council made a stupid edict. You just said nothing had to change.”

“From how it used to be,” Steve repeats slowly. “Tony, look. Give us a chance. We want to be a team again. This way, you’d have the whole team at your back. Almost like—well, almost like a pack.”

The words don’t soothe in the way Steve intends them to. But Tony has to make a choice. He has two options; he can give into Steve, or he can quit.

Tony studies him critically. “If you abuse this in any way—in any way—I will hate you forever. God help me, I already should, but here we are. If you put one toe out of line, that’s it. There is no coming back from that, you understand me? That’s…you have abused my trust and my goodwill and every last bit of effort I have put into this team, and god help you if you cross this last fucking line.” He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “You might think I already hate you, Rogers, and a part of me does, but trust me, it can get worse. People I hate, people I really hate, people who cross the line tend to end up dead.”

Some part of that threat must sink in. “Fair enough,” Steve says. “I’ll, uh, see you later. You’ll have to tell FRIDAY to pass my messages on to you. Can you send Wanda in as you leave?”

To get back to his side of the Compound—and his lab, his safety—Tony has to walk through a sitting room. Of course, it’s full of Rogue Avengers.
Romanov and Wilson won’t meet his eyes. Lang looks like he wants the floor to swallow him whole, rather than face Tony. Barton grins.

“Can’t do whatever you want anymore, huh? ‘Bout damn time,” he says.

Tony—Tony sees red. Absolute furious red. It feels like his blood is boiling. His vision narrows. “How…how fucking dare you?” He seethes. “Your wife is an omega, how dare you act like this?”

“Hey, leave Laura out of this,” Clint snaps. “This isn’t about her.”

“No, it’s about how you apparently think omegas don’t qualify as independent human beings and that is about your wife. How dare you treat her like this?” Tony snaps back.

“Laura isn’t the one who built a murder bot.”

“Oh my god, can we let that go?” Tony grouses. He’s lost all control at this point, honestly, can’t stop himself from ranting, can’t pretend to be collected and in control. “I paid my dues there and I was not the only one responsible. Rogers destroyed Bucharest, can we talk about that for five minutes?”

“Don’t try to deflect blame,” Clint sneers. “Your ego might be too big to see it, but this is exactly what you need.”

Tony shakes his head. “I feel sorry for Laura.”

“I told you to stop talking about my fucking wife!”

“If you say I’m not capable to make my own decisions because I’m an omega, than you mean it about all of us. Laura included. You can’t have it both ways, Barton. And it would suck to be mated to someone who thinks that.” Tony doesn’t even really know Laura, but he wants to go and offer her and her kids an escape. He’s getting progressively more and more mad on her behalf every second that ticks by. “If you hate me, just fucking say it. If you want to see me suffer, have the guts to come out and say it. Don’t say it’s because of my dynamic, and especially don’t say that and then say you love your wife, you prejudiced coward,” Tony says, absolutely seething.

“Tony,” Natasha says, finally looking at him. “We have to make this work.”

Tony shakes his head, stupefied that they’d lay him out like this then put the blame on him. Except not really. That’s how it’s always gone, isn’t it?

“My only concern is this planet not falling to invading aliens,” Tony says. “Beyond that, I want nothing to do with this team. I have no desire to make it work with you all.”

He turns on his heel and walks out, hands balled into fists and so mad he very well might start a fist fight with any of them who dare follow.

Thankfully, no one does.

Rhodey, Vision, and Bucky are all waiting in Rhodey’s kitchen, and FRIDAY softly guides him there.

Bucky’s at the stove, and it smells like—

“Macaroni?” Tony asks.
“Mhm,” Bucky says. “And the Colonel had garlic bread.”

“I love you guys,” Tony says fervently, and them promptly sits in a chair before he collapses entirely.

Rhodey’s there in an instant, hand on Tony’s back and concern across his face. “You okay?” He asks softly.

Tony snorts and then leans forward, resting his head in his hands. “No.”

“Anything we can do?” Vision asks.

“Eradicate all the awful people.” Tony pauses. “That’s…don’t actually do that, Vis.”


Tony lifts his head so he can turn to Rhodey. “So, uh. How are you? You did kinda get fired and I feel like we should talk about that, and—“

“You’re deflecting,” Rhodey says. “I’m fine. Pissed as fuck, but I don’t give a rat’s ass about this team.”

Tony exhales, long and slow. “I—yeah, okay. Okay. I’m…going to live.”

“That ain’t exactly a high bar,” Bucky points out, still at the stove, stirring something with a big wooden spoon in his metal hand as he watches them.

Tony’s throat closes up, the pressure of forcing back tears. He’s not going to cry. He’s not. This isn’t…this isn’t something to cry for.

He looks around the room. Vision has positioned himself between the door and Tony. With anyone else, Tony might feel trapped. Here, he knows Vision’s goal isn’t to keep anyone in, but rather to keep people out, and Vision will enforce that. It’s slightly relaxing. Rhodey’s next to him. Bucky’s taking care of them too.

He takes a deep breath. “This is so fucked up,” he says.

“Not too late to just quit,” Rhodey murmurs.

“I don’t understand why you stay,” Vision agrees.

Bucky grunts. “Because he’s a stubborn bastard who’s gonna save the world that does jack shit for him.”

Tony shrugs. “I don’t know if I’d really describe myself as a bastard, but…yeah, close enough. Someone’s gotta keep this hunk of rock spinning, and aliens are coming back.”

“And Rogers?”

It feels like a refrain, now. Things are bad but Tony will deal with them. And Rogers? Well, Tony’ll deal with that too. “He means well,” Tony says eventually. “Which means jackshit, given everything. He doesn’t want to be a monster. He wants to be a team. We’re in wait and see mode.”

Bucky and Rhodey simultaneously growl. “Not good enough, Tony,” Rhodey says.

“Best I’m gonna get,” Tony returns.
Bucky starts scooping up bowls and puts the first one in front of Tony, and then shoves a fork in his hands. Once they’re all served, he sits on Tony’s other side. “Eat.”

Tony obeys, taking a big forkful. “This is amazing.”

Everyone agrees and they spend a quiet moment eating before Rhodey speaks up again. “Is this a good time to remind you that any of us would mate you, remove Rogers from the picture?”

The offer is tempting, almost as much as it is revolting. “I just…right now, I don’t have to think about it. So, let’s eat a ridiculous amount of macaroni and then watch movies that I don’t have to think too hard about.”

“Still haven’t finished *Harry Potter,*” Bucky says quietly. He touches Tony’s hand, furtively, like he’s not sure he’s welcome. Or—more likely, Tony thinks—that he’s not sure how Rhodey and Vision will take it. When no one stops him, he curls his fingers around Tony’s, and Tony thankfully clings in turn. “That work?”

“Yeah, that’ll do it,” Tony says tiredly.
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

Now they have to live with what's been done.

Chapter Notes

Look at me, getting you a chapter on time. Earlier in the morning than usual, sure, but on time! (I apparently don't have to be anywhere until nine and my roommates are satisfactorily impressed in my ability to be ready in under 15 minutes, so I have some time to kill).

I am super sorry if I didn't respond to your comments from last time. I've been a little all over the place. Please believe that I genuinely appreciate them and read them all. (It might be a while before I can respond to comments on this chapter, too, considering).

This chapter is in this arc of Steve as Tony's guardian. Several of you expressed that you do not want to/can't read that. It covers this chapter and chapter sixteen, and then things will change, just as a heads up.

Several of you (a lot of you) also expressed a desire to murder characters/see Tony murder characters. I will tell you upfront, that's not happening. There will be a happy ending, I'm not trying to paint any of those characters as in the right, I am just saying none of them end up tortured, mutilated, or dead (in non-canon ways). Okay? If you can't keep reading without that being the ending, I understand.

This chapter touches on BARF and BARF memories, trauma, and the alpha voice (but probably not how you're thinking). It also touches on what it means to be under guardianship and how Steve, Tony, and the rest of the Avengers are approaching this. I have always been very interested in stories that have alpha characters who insist they are perpetuating this systemic prejudice for some good reason, and/or out of love and care; I am always very angry at those fics when they don't push back. Therefore, here we are.

Thanks for reading!

Steve raises a skeptical eyebrow. “You sure about this, Tony?”

Tony grits his teeth. “Pretty damn sure, for what it is.” He doesn’t elaborate, just keeps fiddling with the computer.

He and Bucky are finally getting to try BARF. And, like too many aspects of Tony’s life recently, Steve is there.

Steve hasn’t been awful. Mostly, if Tony’s honest, he’s been an overlarge puppy, following Tony
around with sad eyes, looking for handouts Tony’s not in the business of giving, especially not to people who have already bitten the hand that feeds them. He reeks of desperation, and then of sadness when Tony won’t give it to him, cloying and sour in Tony’s mouth.

Steve wants movie nights and team brainstorming. He wants breakfast where Tony stumbles in, still exhausted until the coffee Steve hands him hits his bloodstream. He wants team dinners and an easy banter while training. He wants inside jokes, he wants access, he wants everything he can’t have again.

Tony should probably be grateful that Steve’s greatest goal is to reignite the good old days through sheer force of will. He should be grateful that it’s not worse, that Steve isn’t demanding much of anything, really.

Steve could be worse. He could be Howard. He could be asking for money, for tech. He could be tugging the leash instead of just making sure Tony knows he’s holding it.

He can’t find much in himself to be grateful.

Bucky had arranged for Steve to be here today. “Probably one of those times it’s better to ask permission than forgiveness, given…everything,” he said quietly while they hid out in Rhodey’s kitchen. “I’ll ask him. He’ll respond better to me, and, well…you shouldn’t have to.”

Tony appreciates it. He doesn’t appreciate having to ask Steve, because it shouldn’t be any of his damn business. But, the way things are right now, he could make it his business and a problem in a heartbeat, where Tony is concerned. So he appreciates Bucky taking care of the issue, somehow convincing him that this is both necessary and a good idea. Tony doesn’t know what Bucky says and doesn’t ask. Doesn’t really want to know what it takes to buy Rogers’ trust when Tony himself could never do it.

Bucky’s nightmares are awful. They haven’t shared a bed again, at least not on purpose, but they’ve run into each other on three am insomnia runs most nights. It’s really the only time they truly get alone together, and it’s marred by nightmares, Bucky on edge and smelling like a mixture of desperation and shame.

So, Tony’s been fiddling with BARF in his spare time and today is the day. They’re finally going to try it.

Tony does his best to ignore Steve’s presence entirely and focuses on Bucky. “Okay, Buckaroo,” he says. “It’s time. So, here’s the run-down. You put the glasses on, I trigger the machine. The electrodes I put on start interacting with brain signals, and viola, a look into your hippocampus.” In layman’s terms, it’s as simple as Tony can make it. “Once we’re in, you’re in control. You can bend it, break it, change it however you need; the goal is to give yourself whatever you need to break the strength of the memory.”

He studies Bucky. “You know what memory you’re targeting today?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says quietly, but doesn’t elaborate. Tony frowns. He suggested Bucky work this out with his therapist, and he hopes Bucky took that advice to heart, that the two of them have made a logical plan of attack.

He also wishes Bucky would tell him, let him in a little more, but Tony knows what Bucky and his therapist talk about is precisely none of Tony’s business.

“I’m right here,” Tony says softly. “I’m right here and you’re in total control, can take the glasses
off whenever you want, okay?”

“Okay,” Bucky agrees. He takes a moment, then nods resolutely. “Yeah, alright. Fire it up, Doll.”

Tony pushes go.

Steve starts to fidget before the memory even starts, and Tony bites his lip to keep from saying something. Not that he’s particularly worried about arguing with Steve—really, he isn’t—but rather he’s worried about disturbing Bucky.

The images start, small flickers at first that spring into distinct beings in front of their eyes. The shapes solidify, and Tony watches with bated breath as what he assumes is a HYDRA technician appears over Bucky.

Or a version of Bucky, anyways. His hair is still short, and his face looks softer, even if it’s currently creased with pain and covered in sickly sweat.

The arm is gone, an empty space by his side. His shirt and jacket seem to have been cut open, bits and pieces left discarded on the table under him. The blood hasn’t been cleaned up yet. The Bucky on the table is covered in that blood, and Tony thinks they must be in 1945.

Tony holds his breath, because otherwise he’ll say something. Or lose his lunch. It’s a toss-up, really. Steve starts to say something and Tony gives him a curdling look. If Bucky is going to put himself through this, then he won’t be dragged through it a second time because Steve shattered the admittedly incredibly fragile illusion.

A headset is placed on the Bucky on the table, and Tony realizes it’s a forerunner of the apparatus they used to keep Bucky compliant, more than half a century later.

The Bucky on the table rips it off, gets up—restraints be damned—and beats the man who put it on him with it, until he is nothing but a bloody pulp.

Tony stares in shock. It’s—he doesn’t want to say abnormal, given BARF’s only had two test subjects, but it’s very outside of Tony’s realm of experience. Memories don’t break so easy. Not strong ones.

It took him seven tries before he could truly get through the memory of his last moments with his parents to his liking, to feel like he had control over that moment.

As the images fade, Bucky turns to them, face shaking, eyes locking with Tony. “Wasn’t so bad,” he says. He sounds steady, but Tony can feel the shake, the subtle waver, on the air.

Tony frowns, but doesn’t comment. Not in front of Steve.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Tony asks for the fourth time.

They’re on the couch in Vision’s suite, watching a movie. Vision has graciously agreed to go out for the evening, and is actually in Manhattan.

They need a space of their own to go, but it’s too hard to set one up. Even if Tony would allow Bucky into the labs—which, honestly, he might at this point—it would be too obvious. Bucky’s room is a no-go, because he shares a wall with Steve. Setting up a whole new suite would draw too much attention.
No one asked to keep things on the down-low like this; they both came to the conclusion that it was necessary, at least for now, essentially simultaneously. Steve hangs over them, an ever-daunting, looming object. For Tony, Steve’s the persistent guardian, not crossing any lines yet except the fact that they shouldn’t be here in the first place. Still, he’s sticking his nose into things, making judgements, and Tony won’t let him get a wind of this relationship. It’s fragile and it’s new and there’s no telling how Steve would react. For Bucky, Steve is still looking at him to be his old friend, to be his alpha number two, like in the days of the Howling Commandos. Steve wants Bucky to remember back-alley brawls and the pretty betas Bucky dated and the few omegas he’d considered courting. Steve wants Bucky in a very fixed role, one Bucky quietly admits to having no idea how to fill and not much desire to. He remembers a lot of it, but he says it’s like remembering a movie he watched, almost. Too far away to be a great influence on him.

So they’re here, alternating between Rhodey and Vision’s rooms, in quiet stolen dates that never go too far. They’re both trying to go slow and are worried about getting caught.

“I told you, Doll, I’m fine,” Bucky soothes Tony, one hand running repeatedly over Tony’s arm where he’s pushed his shirt-sleeve up. “You made the perfect machine to help me.”

Tony’s troubled, because BARF might be great but that doesn’t mean it’s easy. It’s essentially his sad version of therapy, and, no matter what Tony proposes or tries, therapy is still hard work.

“If you’re sure,” he says doubtfully. He drops it and reaches over to steal some popcorn. Bucky makes it with sugar instead of salt, and Tony makes a face.

“More for me,” Bucky teases, tilting the bowl away.

It’s quiet for a few minutes before Bucky speaks, tone serious. “Hey, Tony?”

“Mhm?”

“Is there a way I could…use BARF without you?”

For some reason that hurts; Tony tries not to let it show. “I…we could make arrangements. You can’t use it alone, but someone else…Rhodey, or Vision, or your therapist could come in…even Steve, if you wanted him, I guess, or one of the others. But…why?”

Bucky runs a hand down Tony’s back. “It’s just…I got some memories I don’t think you need to see,” Bucky says quietly. “My therapist and I talked about some of ‘em, and he agrees that I shouldn’t put you through that.”

My parents. He’s talking about my parents. Tony wants to say he can help, he can remain calm and objective—or a close enough facsimile to help Bucky—but, well, he doesn’t have a great track record and Bucky has no reason to trust him on that. Tony understands, even if it hurts.

“Sure,” Tony says. “I’ll…who do you want with you instead?”

Bucky thinks for a moment. “Vision,” he decides. “But for now…show me that thing you were designing, earlier? The robots?”

“Iron Legion,” Tony says automatically, and lets Bucky distract him.

“So what you’re saying, Stark, is that you would build Ultron 2.0?” Wanda asks.
Tony’s already shaking his head. “This is the Iron Legion. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Looks like Ultron to me,” Clint says, arms crossed over his chest.

“Well, Ultron stole the body of an Iron Legionnaire,” Tony says slowly, trying not to get patronizing. It won’t help. “But it was different programming. C’mon, guys. The Iron Legion existed for almost a year, we used them all the time, before Ultron.”

“Right, but it has the potential to become another Ultron,” Steve says. It at least sounds like a question more than an accusation.

“No it doesn’t!” Tony protests. “Ultron was a completely separate set of code that was almost entirely made by the mind stone and it literally does not exist anymore. No part of the Iron Legion code was in Ultron’s base programming. This is different.”

“I don’t know, Tony,” Natasha says. “Face it, you didn’t think Ultron would be a problem until it was.”

“What’s your brilliant idea to save the planet, then?” Bucky challenges, finally fed up at watching Tony’s presentation be attacked.

The room goes silent for a moment. Steve sighs. “Fine. We’ll try again in two days. Until then, training in the morning, don’t be late.”

Tony scowls as the others walk out, Bucky throwing a look over his shoulder and Tony trying to subtly wave him off. “You know this is our best bet right now,” Tony says sharply.

Steve sighs and shakes his head. “Tony, we’re just not seeing them as a feasible option. Not after Ultron.”

“The Iron Legion is not the same thing,” Tony protests.

Steve shakes his head again. “I’m sorry, Tony.”

“The least you all could do is help,” Tony says. “Even if I have to build it, spitball some ideas with me, here.”

“That’s what training is.”

“That’s reactionary,” Tony accuses mildly. “We need a preventative, and you know it.”

His phone buzzes. It’s a text from Roxanne at the PR firm.

Can you meet?


Steve looks over, eyes sharp and assessing. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he says. “You should go to bed.”

“Steve—” Tony warns.

Steve barrel-rolls right over him. “You haven’t slept in days, Tony,” he says. “There’s training tomorrow. A threat’s coming. You need to be sharp. Go to bed.”

It’s not the alpha voice. It is an order. A gentle enough one. A perhaps good-hearted one. Tony
bristles nonetheless.

He takes a deep breath, counts backwards from ten. He *does* have training in the morning. He *does* want to avoid another fight. “Fine,” he mumbles, feeling very much like a scolded child when he turns on his heel to head for bed.

“Good night, Tony,” Steve calls. Tony ignores it.

*Not tonight*, he texts Roxanne. *Call you later?*

Training the next morning is a *nightmare*. The Avengers have never really trained before; they were thrown together for an end-of-the-world mission, and didn’t really reunite entirely until they were rooting out HYDRA. Tony thinks they might have done some training, after he left post Ultron, but since Lagos is a breathtakingly horrifying example of a training exercise gone bad, Tony stands by his thought. The Avengers are a mess.

It becomes pretty clear that Steve Rogers, for all the praise heaped upon him over the generations, has never led a team quite like this, and isn’t used to forethought and training and plans that don’t boil down to “kill them, don’t be killed, use force.” Which is fine, as a disaster relief force. But they need a strategy.

And they don’t have one.

It’s not that Steve’s awful, Tony muses. He has a basic understanding of what’s going on, where people should be. It’s that he has little formal education and limited desire to learn anything from anyone. And, to be fair, a very non-disciplined team under his command.

Steve runs a hand through his hair. “Alright, take five,” he says. “I’ll reboot the simulator for something new.”

Which will be just as much of a clusterfuck, Tony thinks and doesn’t say.

He’s grabbing some water and wondering if he can sneak out today to see Roxanne when Scott Lang appears beside him, fidgeting nervously.

“Look, I think you got a shitty deal,” he says.

“Good to know.” Tony takes a sip, wishing the guy would screw off already.

“I mean, just…I thought omegas had the right to work now, you know?”

“Mmm,” Tony hums non-committally. “You would think so.”

“My…my daughter’s an omega.”

“Already planned her mating?” Tony asks idly.

Lang’s face scrunches up. “She’s eleven.”

“And?”

Lang winces. “Man, I think rich people have some fucked up shit when it comes to their kids.”

“Believe me, when it comes to omegas, it’s not just rich people,” Tony says. “We just…I don’t
Lang starts for a moment, then looks around furtively, making him look a hundred times more suspicious than if he just spoke. “Look, my point is…this is a raw deal and I don't really like it. So…here I am. Your AI’s everywhere in the Compound right?” Tony doesn’t answer; Lang doesn’t seem to need it. “Just…ask her what Romanoff and Rogers have been talking about, okay? Okay. Cool. Glad we had this talk.”

Tony’s left wondering what the *hell* this has all been about as Rogers calls them all back to work.

“Hey, FRIDAY, you still record all the common areas, right?” Tony asks idly in his lab.

“Of course, Boss.”

“And when they came back, they signed the forms acknowledging you were doing that?”

“Yes, Boss. That form was included with everything else.”

“Good. Screw privacy protections. If my name comes up, I need to know. I’m looking specifically for what Romanoff and Rogers have been talking about.”

“Got it, Boss. Give me a moment.”

The holographic screen pops up, and Tony watches the still-paused video with interest. Natasha is settled in a chair, looking calm as always. Steve’s pacing, agitated. Tony imagines a miniaturized Scott Lang is on a wall, somewhere.

He swipes his hand to play.

“Natasha, I don’t want to be his jailer.”

“You aren’t,” she soothes. “Steve, you’ve always said…Tony needs a little looking-after. He always has, it’s nothing new. He’s just so head-in-the-clouds, he needs someone to help keep his feet on the ground.”

“Which was fine when he let me do it!” Steve says, frustratedly. “But he’s made it pretty clear he doesn’t want that anymore. I won’t force him into anything. It…it’s wrong, and he’d never forgive me.”

“You’re not tying him to a bed,” Natasha dismisses. “You’re not doing anything against his will. You’re just looking out for him. Make sure he sleeps, and eats. Make sure there’s some sort of check on him so he doesn’t invent a murder bot in all that time in his lab. Keep an eye on what he’s inventing. Keep an eye on who he’s talking to; Tony’s got all these ideas in his head, but you know he’d regret it if he destroyed this team. He gets so deep into things, tunnel-vision, and he’s always so surprised when it comes crashing down. And, knowing what’s coming, we need this team to survive.”

Steve shakes his head. “Tony wouldn’t—Tony—“

Natasha shrugs. “You know him, Cap. He wouldn’t mean to, but, well, Tony’s destructive. Think back to the old days. He breaks stuff when he gets so focused. He needs someone to watch his back, and now, you’re in the right position to do that.”
“He doesn’t want me,” Steve says. He almost sounds miserable.

“Sometimes we do things for the greater good,” Natasha says. “And for what it’s worth? Tony is forgiving. Keep this team running, show him you can do a good job taking care of him, he’ll come around.” Her eyes soften. “Steve. I know you don’t like this situation. But it’s your job, now. Your job is to look out for Tony, and to look out for this team, and we need you to do that.”

Natasha gets up to walk away and the recording freezes, the conversation done.

Tony feels sick.

“FRIDAY, anything else remotely like this, I need to know immediately, alright?” He asks.

“Of course, Boss.” She sounds angry on his behalf, and Tony smiles a bit.

He can’t believe that’s how Natasha really feels. Well, he can believe it, it’s just—well, it hurts, plain and simple. It hurts that for years he lived with these people, worked alongside them. He was in love with Steve. He gave them practically everything.

And, apparently, the moment he was less malleable, they had to work to get him back into a little box.

Tony spends thirty more minutes in the lab before he goes to hunt down Natasha.

He has to trapse through the areas of the Compound he normally avoids, but he’s on a mission and moves quick.

He finds her in a thankfully empty hallway, and he acts fast. With the Black Widow, the element of surprise is everything, and hard to obtain.

He pins her to the wall with the Iron Man gauntlets, the gets the newly-made magnetic cuff around her wrists, letting it anchor to the stud in the wall. He repeats the process for her legs, fast as possible. He pulls just to be sure. She’d have to take down the entire wall to get out.

Which he wouldn’t put past her, so he needs to move fast.

She smirks, everything about her showing how at ease she is. “Finally lost it, Tony?”

“I don’t know,” Tony says, as calmly as he can. “I guess that depends on how you answer me.”

“Do we need to call Steve up, have a conversation?”

Tony’s still wearing the gauntlets and lets them flare a little, just to remind her. “Let’s talk about conversations you’ve been having with Steve.”

“Have you been spying on us?” Infuriatingly, she’s amused. Tony doesn’t like the sight of terrified people under his power, necessarily, but her amusement irks him. He wonders if she’s ever taken him seriously.

“My Compound, my AI, my life,” Tony shrugs. “Let’s talk. What do you get from convincing Steve to treat me like some disobedient child?”

She raises an eyebrow, smirks slightly. Trying to goad him, Tony knows. He doesn’t let her. He just stares back, unimpressed. It’s the stare he’s used against the Board of Directors, against
government officials, against his own professors at MIT.

“This isn’t about you, Stark, grow up,” she says dismissively. “We need this team to survive to face what’s coming, we can’t have you tearing it down now. Don’t take it personally.”

Tony leans in close. “See, I tend to take these things personally. I tend to take it very personally when I’m seen as the omega instead of a person, when people make plans behind my back to manipulate me instead of treating me like a person. Don’t cover up your fuckups as a team by burying me with them. Fix your mistakes.” He flashes her a sharp smile. “But maybe that’s just my ego talking.”

He walks away, like he plans to leave her there. He can release the cuffs remotely, but she doesn’t know that. She squirms. “Tony…”

She’s playing him, or trying to. Tony resolves himself. “Yes?”

“We just want to be a team.”

He holds back his laughter. A team. Steve might believe that, but Tony knows she knows better. “I don’t have to be your trained monkey for us to be a team,” he says. “Pull the other one.”

“I won’t let your selfishness doom the planet, and if Steve can stop it…you’ll thank me later.”

“Selfish is how you all treated me,” he says. “Although I appreciated the honesty, Widow.”

“I don’t give a fuck if Steve wants to fuck you or not, or if he wants to make sure you’re fed and have slept eight hours a night, take care of you. That’s not my business. This team is. I can’t fix what happened, what he did—“

“Not just him,” Tony interjects. “Bystanders are almost equally guilty.”

—All I can do is move us forward, and if you’re not ready to go there, then I’ll do what I have to.”

“This is the problem,” Tony says. “Did you ever just consider treating me like a human being?”

He shakes his head. “You made your bed, now lie in it. This team is prejudiced and biased and the champions of biting the hand that feeds them. Either make amends or deal with it. But you, you’ll just dig the hole deeper.”

Vision floats down the hallway and Tony starts. “Vision? I thought you were with Bucky?”

Vision stops. “Why would I be with Bucky? Did we have an appointment I neglected?”

Tony blinks, momentarily forgetting the Black Widow dangling from the wall. "He told me, after training today, he was going to tackle a few more memories on BARF, and that..." Tony stops, realizes Bucky never technically told him Vision would be there. Tony just assumed, after their previous conversation. “Son of a fucking bitch,” he curses. He turns to Natasha. “I am not done with you, but you’ll need to accept that you’re not high on my priority list right now.” He walks away, hitting the release on her cuffs as he exits the room, Vision trailing nervously behind him.

“What exactly is going on?”

“Bucky’s doing BARF memories alone,” Tony says succinctly. “Which is the easiest way to get stuck in one. He’ll loop, get stuck watching, maybe panic. It…he told me he’d ask you to be there.” Tony shakes his head, furious with himself for being such an idiot. “He heavily implied it.
He let me believe...son of a bitch, I know he didn’t want me to watch, but why the hell didn’t he just ask you?"

“He didn’t even mention it,” Vision says, speeding up alongside Tony.

“FRIDAY, you have eyes on him?” Tony asks.

“You asked me not to record the BARF sessions,” she reminds him.

Tony curses his sudden desire to comply to HIPPA. “Okay, safety override four-fourteen-two-two-one-seven,” Tony says. “How’s he?”

She’s silent for a few seconds. “Unresponsive.”

Tony curses again.

Once he reaches the door they’ve designated as the “BARF room,” Tony throws it open without hesitation.

And then stops, dead in his tracks.

He’s in this scene. He’s in this scene, arms around Bucky’s throat, as Bucky admits desperately that he remembers everyone he’s ever killed. He sees himself fighting Bucky, he sees Steve coming for him.

Tony swallows. Not his parents, then. He wonders which one would have been worse.

He sees Bucky grab at the arc reactor. He sees himself shoot off Bucky’s arm and winces; he didn’t really see Bucky’s face at the time, and now he gets it in vivid detail.

He sees Steve knock him on his ass, sees Steve get on his chest. Tony closes his eyes, doesn’t want to watch this, but can hear it when the shield cracks his arc reactor anyways.

And then he hears it. “Stay down, Tony.”

FRIDAY shocks him and Tony dissociates for a minute. By the time he’s alert, the scene has looped and begun again. Tony sees it from a new angle, now down on his hands in knees. He pulls himself to his feet, nerves still tingling.

Vision approaches him with concern, and Tony waves him away. “I’m fine, I’m fine,” he mumbles. He’s not, but he has bigger concerns.

He approaches Bucky, his Bucky, the real Bucky, who is sitting in a corner and watching this play again, eyes wide, face withdrawn. He has tear tracks on his face, although he doesn’t seem to be crying anymore. He feels...rotten, Tony thinks. Like something’s dying.

“Bucky? Hey, Bucky?” Tony asks softly, trying to slide down on the floor in front of Bucky, trying to block his view. “Hey, Bucky, mind if I take these off?”

Bucky doesn’t react and Tony bites his lip. Steve had tried the alpha voice twice, once when the suit was still functional and FRIDAY had been able to shock him, once when Tony was already defeated, broken. Tony thinks he has about a minute before he’s hit by the voice again.

“Hey, Bucky, Buttercup, Honey,” Tony says quietly, as soothing as he can make it. “Don’t want to rush you, but, well, time is of the essence here. And actually, I do want to rush you. Pretty sure you’ve seen this thing too many times.” He takes a risk, and reaches out to touch Bucky’s arm.
Bucky blinks at him. “Tony?”

Tony smiles. “Yeah, Buttercup, and listen, I am ready to chew you out for being down here alone, but I’m kinda pressed for time, so if we could—”

Tony blacks out entirely this time.

When he comes to, he’s in Bucky’s arms and Bucky looks stricken. “Oh, god, did I—” He begins, his hands patting Tony down as if there will be a physical injury.

“Well, not you directly,” Tony says, voice hoarse. His fingers are digging into Bucky’s arms, so hard his flesh arm probably has marks. Tony can’t say he really feels bad, not when Bucky will heal in minutes. “Is this what you have nightmares about?” He wonders if this is what sends Bucky walking around the Compound at all hours, if this is what makes him lash out. If this is why the other memory had been so easy to dissociate—it might be horrible, but it’s not the one Bucky is truly afraid of.

Bucky looks stricken. “I mean, the other stuff too. But this—I see this too often. I deserve it, look what we did to you. What we’re still doing to you—”

“I tried to kill you,” Tony interrupts.

“I deserved it—”

“No, you really didn’t,” Tony says firmly. In absence of a strong voice to convey his meaning, he leans up a bit and looks Bucky square in his glasses-covered eyes. “You didn’t deserve it, Bucky, and we need to break this memory.”

“I’ve seen it…six times now,” Bucky admits. “I don’t know… I can’t…”

Tony pats Bucky’s shoulder. “This is why you don’t do this alone,” he says. And then he gets up. His legs are still shaky and a little numb. He moves forward anyways and approaches the other Bucky, who’s currently scrambling to get away from the Tony of the memory.

“Hey, Bucky?” Tony says. Bucky doesn’t turn—without the glasses, Tony can’t interact with the memory itself—but that’s okay; Tony isn’t really talking to the memory Bucky anyways. “I forgive you.” He pauses for a second, determined not to look back at his Bucky until he’s gotten it all out. “I know I’ve said before, I don’t blame you for Mom and Howard. I need you to know that. But I forgive you for this, too. I… I made mistakes that day too. And I know you didn’t want it to go down like that and honestly probably just wanted to survive an angry Iron Man. And you regret it. You understand. So, I forgive you.” He awkwardly turns to the real Bucky. “I forgive you.”

The scene behind him seems to stop, the movement and volume ceasing. Bucky rips the glasses off his face. “I… really?”

“You are not the one I’ve blamed,” Tony says as firmly as he can. “Really, ever, after that day. You shouldn’t… you shouldn’t be dreaming about this every night.”

“Steve did something awful, and I… I let him get away with it,” Bucky admits.

“You apologized, and you clearly regret it,” Tony says. He closes his eyes for a second to center himself. “Bucky, is this your biggest nightmare?”

“Lately,” Bucky says. “There’s plenty of other things to take its place, but yeah. Most nights, I see this.”
“I’m sorry I tried to kill you.”

Bucky shakes his head. “I don’t blame you.”

“Yeah, well I do. I take at least half the blame. Maybe one-third. I shouldn’t have reacted like that. And it’s…a pretty awful night, but we don’t seem to blame each other for it?”

Bucky nods. “Never blamed you.”

“We can try that memory again soon,” Tony says quietly.

“Nah,” Bucky says. “Can’t promise I’m never gonna see it again—I’m gonna remember what we did for a long time, Doll—but I think I got what I needed.”

“Please never come down here without someone to help again,” Tony says. “It doesn’t have to be me. But don’t come alone.”

“I didn’t want you to see this. Plus, you got hit by Steve’s voice.”

“Twice,” Vision adds in.

They both jump. “How long have you been there?” Bucky asks.

“Since Tony came down,” Vision says. “Tony experienced two electric jolts within a few minutes span.”

Bucky winces. “Tony, you should’ve left.”

“And leave you to suffer? Nah,” Tony says. He’s swaying on his feet. “I am pretty tired, though,” he admits.

“No kidding,” Bucky snorts. “C’mere, Doll.” He opens his arms and Tony pretty enthusiastically crawls into them, letting Bucky wrap him up in a big hug.

“You know what?”

“What?”

“I think this is the first time in my adult life that I’ve been hit with the voice and haven’t run off to lick my wounds alone.”

Bucky seems to grab him a little tighter. “Oh, Doll,” he says. “C’mon, let’s get you to bed.”

Tony opens an eye to peer up at Bucky. “I’m supposed to be worried about you.”

“We can worry about each other, how’s that?” Bucky asks.

“I…don’t really want to sleep alone,” Tony admits.

“How about that, neither do I,” Bucky says. “We don’t have nowhere to go though.”

“There are guest rooms in our wing of the Compound,” Vision says. “If you make a habit of using them, people will catch on. But for one night, it should be acceptable.”

“You’re brilliant, you know that?” Tony says.

“Yes,” Vision says simply. “I will bring you both some food.”
Bucky’s hand clutches at Tony. “Some tea with honey for Tony, please,” he says.

Tony scrunches his nose at the thought of tea. “No.”

“Your voice sounds awful. It’ll help. Try it?”

Tony sighs, and knows full well his throat is raw. “Fine.” He and Bucky walk out, arms wrapped around each other.

They settle into a spare bedroom, thankfully made up if a bit spartan. “You going to be okay tonight?” Tony asks, crawling into the left side of the bed in just his t-shirt and boxers.

Bucky follows suit, then wraps an arm around Tony, pulling him close. “Of course,” he says. “I have you. Will you be okay?”

Tony swallows. “Yeah,” he says. He can’t guarantee there won’t be any nightmares, and neither can Bucky. But he’ll be okay. “You’re here.”
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

The straw that breaks the camel's back.

Chapter Notes

Hello all, happy Saturday!

I'm baaack...and I actually got a lot of work done while I was gone, hahaa.

A lot of you are concerned that I think your comments are mad at me and not the characters. I want to clear this up; 95% of the time, I am fully aware you're mad at them, not me (and if I'm not aware, I've been relatively direct about it in the comment back). My concern is, if you really want to see a character die or suffer extremely or whatever, this might not be the fic for you and I don't want you blindsided and disappointed later. It's not a we're all friends again ending, but it's also not a torture and suffering on any level ending.

Okay, onto this chapter.

Warning for Wanda's power and her kind of blase attitude towards their use (this means mind manipulation, although NOT of our main characters). Warning for, again, that type of being cornered, helpless feeling that comes from this type of interaction.

Warning for the attitude where we dismiss everything omegas say (like people dismiss women as "bitches be crazy," basically).

This is the chapter that makes things change, I promise. If you get through this one (or skip it, whatever you need), you've reached the end of this arc.

Just a small, totally casual reminder that I have Ko-fi and it's linked on my Tumblr.

Okay, I officially go back to work full time on Monday. As such, I'll be evaluating how much writing I can get done and if I can keep up this pace. I'm beginning chapter twenty-four right now, and I'd guess I have about ten-twelve to go, so we'll see if I can stay on track. I'll keep you updated.

Thanks for reading, everyone!

Natasha must have had the good sense not to say anything about her and Tony’s little run-in, because Steve doesn’t mention it.

What he does mention is wanting a meeting with Tony, to ‘check on progress.’ And Tony, like an idiot, thought he meant progress with anti-alien measures.

Which is how the meeting starts, granted. Tony goes over the designs for the Iron Legion again,
gets shot down again. Another day.

They don’t even look like Ultron anymore. Tony’s done everything he possibly could to break the association, given that this was honestly the best plan Tony has currently. Steve still turned him down, with that gentle smile and, ‘I’m sorry, Tony, we just think there are too many risks.’

If he was anyone else, if he was in any other world, he’d go above their heads, straight to the UN with this. As it is, he knows what they’d say.

Steve’s in charge. Of this team, but more importantly, Tony. Of every aspect of Tony’s life, technically, and Tony needs to suck it up and accept it.

Steve leans back in his chair, seemingly appraising Tony. Tony has nothing more to offer on the save the world front, so he doesn’t say anything.

“How’ve you been, Tony?” Steve asks.

Tony wonders if this is a ploy, to trick him into talking about Bucky or BARF or Natasha, to see what he’ll spill. Then he thinks Steve’s probably not duplicitous enough for it, so he relaxes.

“Fine,” he says. “How have you been?”

“Fine,” Steve says, smiling slightly, radiating soft contentment at this seemingly normality. “Taking care of yourself?”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Yes, Steve. I, a grown-ass adult, take care of myself, so you can report back that you did your guardian duties just fine.”

“That’s not what this is about,” Steve says quietly.

“Isn’t it?” Tony challenges. He doesn’t want Steve to know that he saw that interaction, that he’s spoken to Natasha, but he can’t help his simmering anger. “Explain it then.”

“I could be doing more for you. I just want to know how I can help,” Steve says.

“Take my suggestions for saving the planet seriously.”

“I want to know how I can help you,” Steve says.

“That would help me,” Tony says. “I want to survive too, you know. Ergo, helping me. I don’t want or need anything else.” He’s tense, waiting. The other shoe was going to drop eventually.

“Are you eating?” Steve asks.

Tony rolls his eyes. “Yes, Mother, jeez.”

“Sleeping?”

“Often enough,” Tony says. His eyes narrow. “This isn’t the old days, Steve. You’re not invited to drag me out of the lab.”

“I didn’t ask to!” Steve complains, blooming frustration rank and obvious.

Before their argument can deteriorate any further, Wanda walks in. “Hi, Steve…oh,” she smirks. “I didn’t know you were busy.”
“What’s up, Wanda?” Steve asks. His frustration falters; if anything, something like peace grows, Tony thinks.

“I was just wondering…can I go to the movies this afternoon?” She asks.

Steve smiles. “Sure. You need money?”

“If it’s okay,” she says, ducking her head.

Steve hands her forty dollars. “Be home by dinner, please,” he asks.

Tony spares a brief moment to wonder what she’s driving—FRIDAY definitely isn’t letting her within twenty feet of any of his cars—before turning back to Steve to address the more pressing matter.

“She has to ask permission to leave, now?” Tony asks, raising an eyebrow. “Shit, I guess I got the better end of the deal.” He purposely doesn’t think about the day Steve talked him into staying in. He still leaves, for business mostly, and he never asks first.

Steve shrugs. “Some omegas like that, Tony.”

Tony wants to say something but bites his tongue. He doesn’t know Wanda, doesn’t know what she likes. Some omegas do say they like that type of thing, which Tony doesn’t want to touch, might be fine with if they truly had any other viable option. And Wanda—well, Wanda’s life has been hard, out of control. Maybe she just likes relying on someone like Steve, someone she trusts.

Either way, he’s not her psychologist.

“You control her money too?” There’s a lot of ways that alphas try to control omegas, but financial control really gets to Tony. Maybe it’s because he’s a billionaire and he’s always been a target of those who want his money. Maybe it’s because, once they have your money, it’s incredibly easy for them to get anything else out of you. Without money, omegas are essentially trapped.

“Wanda doesn’t really have any money. We’re looking out for her.”

Tony wants to point out that, at twenty-four, Wanda’s plenty old enough to have a job. That there are jobs for omegas now, jobs she wouldn’t even have to fight to get into, Steve’s forties sensibilities be damned. Hell, in the past, Stark Industries might have even employed her, if she just asked.

Well. If Steve wants to be the breadwinner and have Wanda as his little omega, that’s not Tony’s business.

He sighs. He’s going to end up offering her a job, isn’t he?

Tony can’t let it go. It’s a stupid idea, absolutely idiotic considering how she feels about him, but it burrows into his brain. Mostly, it’s the sight of Steve handing her money, knowing that, like it or not, she’s dependent on him to do so. That Steve might think he’s a benevolent alpha, but once he holds the money, he ultimately will always get the final say, Wanda’s person will be damned.

Pepper seems unimpressed over the video call, that one questioning eyebrow raised. “So, you’re telling me that you want to offer Wanda Maximoff—who tortured you with visions, who could have killed any of you in that fight, who dropped an entire parking garage on your head, that Wanda Maximoff—you want to offer her a job?”
“That sums it up,” Tony says. “Look, I’m not saying she should work anywhere near either of us. But we do omega training all the time. And she has no money. She has to ask Steve for money. I hate that that’s happening.”

Pepper’s face softens. “Soft heart,” she accuses mildly.

“Don’t tell anyone, it would ruin my reputation,” Tony says jokingly, even if it’s a pretty serious statement. “Look, she probably won’t take the offer. You know how she feels about me. But I want the offer out there. Just in case. She’s had it rough, you know? And look, if Steve’s right, and she’s the type of omega who likes that, fine. I won’t say anything. But if it’s just that she’s never had a different opportunity, great. Problem solved.”

Pepper’s whole face is soft now. “How will you tell her?” She asks.

“Haven’t figured that part out yet,” Tony admits.

It takes two days for FRIDAY to let him know that the perimeters Tony’s given her have been met. In that time, Steve uses his ability to pass on messages to try to drag Tony out of the lab three times. One time, he manages to drag Tony into a team dinner, which is just about as uncomfortable as one might expect. Tony bares it with all the grace he can muster, which really isn’t much.

Bucky’s there, and Tony can’t acknowledge him, both of them not wanting to deal with Steve’s reactions. Steve seems to have written off Bucky leaving with Tony for nearly a week as some weird fluke, and hasn’t pressed, although Tony doesn’t know what Bucky’s told him.

Wanda’s there too, but Tony’s not stupid enough to talk to her in front of a crowd.

So, two days after he thought of the whole venture, FRIDAY lets Tony know that Wanda is in a public area of the compound, alone.

Tony makes his way there. She eyes him distrustfully, which Tony can’t blame her for. He used to make a habit of leaving the room when she showed up. When he sits down across from her, her eyes seem glued to him.

“What do you want, Stark?” she asks, wary, everything about her warning him not to touch.

Well, that isn’t the most promising start.

And it turns out, Tony doesn’t really know how to begin. He hasn’t practiced, and he hasn’t thought about it. “I…was wondering if you’d like a job,” he says lamely.

“No, not for me,” Tony hurriedly says. “But Stark Industries has a hiring program for omegas.”

“Why would anyone want to work for a company dripping in innocent blood?” She says caustically.

Tony flinches but doesn’t try to refute it. She wouldn’t hear it, and anyways, it’s hard to deny. Stark Industries has a past still stained with blood, no matter how hard Tony tries to scrub it clean. She’s right to say that. While Tony’s never appreciated her methods and wished she didn’t go after him and him alone, a Stark Industries weapon did kill her family.
He swallows. “There are other jobs,” he says. “I could…find someone who would help you.”

“Why would I want one?”

“I just thought, after the other day, you might want your own money,” he says.

“Never from you,” she snaps. “Steve takes care of me. He provides for me.”

“You don’t want money of your own?” He asks.

She cocks her head. “Why would I? I am Steve’s ward; he is my guardian. He supplies me what I need.” Tony eyes her curiously for a moment; she seems genuine.

“It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“There is nothing wrong with the way it is,” she says. “I am taken care of. I know he cares for me.”

Tony’s heard it before, and doesn’t want to argue it. “The guardianship expires in a year,” Tony tries. “I know they talk about you like you’re a kid, but you’re too old to be under guardianship forever.”

She shrugs. “Then I’ll take a mate.”

“Doesn’t that worry you? Some random person, having control over you, having to depend on them for everything? Unless…” He realizes slowly, “You think Steve will mate you.”

She shrugs again. “Or Vision, perhaps. I trust my pack, Stark. I have no fear I will be left behind, because I am their omega.”

Tony feels a little sick. “Vision doesn’t want you anymore, and Steve views you as a kid, not a mate.” He’s not actually sure that Vision doesn’t want her anymore. He’s sure Vision says he’s over her, but he’s also sure Vision has a synthetic heart none of them quite understand that absolutely, probably, still beats for Wanda.

“Then I have a year to convince them, don’t I?” She asks.

“You’re not bothered by being forced to mate at all?” Tony asks, incredulous.

“Bothered?” She asks derisively. “I know how packs work. I’ve wanted a proper pack, ever since your weapons blew mine up when I was ten. I asked for this, Stark.”

“Asked for—” He reads between the lines. “You influenced them, didn’t you?”

“I did nothing to bring this requirement around; they were already convinced,” she says, defensively. “But I had to push them to put Steve in charge first. I wanted nothing to do with Colonel Rhodes, not when he’s as soaked in Sokovian blood as you are, nearly. And not when he favors you so obviously. What use would it be if the Avengers continued to enable your bad behavior? So I convinced them to put Steve in charge, the one alpha who might actually control you.”

“Me?”

Wanda tosses her head impiously. “I could get an alpha without all this, Stark. I am a good omega, I would know how to belong to a pack. But you, you need one and you so selfishly refuse. You hurt the world with your actions, you hurt this team, you hurt Steve. Someone had to put you in
your place. Someone had to control you.” She waves her fingers, little sparks of red appearing. “I could have made you want it. I still could,” she muses. “I didn’t want to. But I could, if you do not act appropriately.” She’s so calm; Tony can feel the tranquility, can smell it as she contemplates the power she wields.

Tony swallows. “That is…disgusting.”

She cocks her head. “I see nothing disgusting about keeping this team functioning. Aren’t you the one always talking about how we need to work together to stop the aliens?”

Tony can’t even respond. He feels like someone slapped him across the face. He sits back, stunned for a moment. “I feel so goddamn sorry for you,” he manages, before stumbling out of the room on shaky legs.

Tony thinks about it alone in the lab for an hour, after taking a shower to wash the feeling of that grossness off his skin. “I have to tell Steve, don’t I?” He sighs

“Tell him what, Boss?”

“Tell him what Wanda did. She messed with the brains of government officials.”

“Will Rogers be of any help?”
Probably not, Tony guesses. “He’s team leader. Even if I go over his head, I need to be able to say that I went to him with this first.”

“Rogers is currently in the gym,” FRIDAY says, and he thinks she sounds dubious.

“Thanks. You have the footage of our conversation today?” Tony asks. “He’ll need proof.”

“All set to go, Boss-man,” she says.

Steve is in the middle of a workout, but looks barely affected. Tony sometimes thinks he hates that about him.

“Hey, Steve, can we talk?” Tony tries.

Steve immediately stops punching, and turns with a grin. “Sure, Tony. What’s up?”

Steve feels so damn cheery, sweet and eager, at the sight of Tony willingly seeking him out, and Tony almost feels bad at the news he has to deliver. “It’s about Wanda,” he hedges.

Immediately, Steve’s face flips to a frown, sweetness disappearing. “Seriously, Tony? You’re not still on about the other day, are you? She’s happy, why can’t you just leave her be? Why do you have to turn everything into some oppressive crisis?”

Tony takes a deep breath to keep from saying something that would derail his point. “It’s not about that,” he says. “I think she should have her own money, but if she’s happy this way, she’s happy, and I won’t say a damn word. It’s about…she used her powers on UN officials,” Tony says in a rush at the end.

Steve’s frown deepens. “What?”

“She used her powers on members of the Council,” Tony says. “She admitted it to me.”
“This is serious,” Tony interrupts. “I am so serious when I say I do not give a fuck about what gets her rocks off, okay? But she messed with people’s minds to influence the outcome of our current nightmare. That’s definitely an Accords violation and illegal and just plain skeevy.”

Steve looks at him, disappointed. “Tony, Wanda’s already told me what happened today.”

Tony counts backwards to keep his cool. “And what exactly did she tell you?”

“That you cornered her to push your agenda on her,” Steve says disapprovingly. “Tony, not every omega is oppressed, alright? You’re seeing things that don’t exist.”

“Wanda influenced the minds of the UN to put you in charge,” Tony grinds out, ignoring Steve’s lecture.

Steve shakes his head. “You’re digging into conspiracy theories, Tony,” Steve scolds. “Colonel Rhodes was removed because his priorities didn’t align with the Council’s.”

“Yeah, because he believes omegas should have basic rights,” Tony mutters.

But of course Steve, super-soldier, could hear him. “There we go again, with the oppression stuff!” Steve exclaims, and Tony imagines that, were he less disciplined, he’d be throwing his hands up in frustration. His anger burns hot, as always, spice and flame and a warning to stay away. “Not everything is someone out to get omegas, Tony! Not all of us are evil. I know you don’t like this, and didn’t want this, and I’m damn sorry about it, but that’s the way things are! We haven’t done anything to hurt you, and here you are, trying to ruin us because you’re desperate to see yourself as a victim here.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry you’re having trouble adjusting. Maybe the news is right, maybe it’s because Howard was so damn rich and you’re just used to getting your way, but the fact is, things work a certain way and it’s not hurting you. No one’s made you do anything, no one’s hurt you. So stop lashing out at Wanda just because she’s more comfortable with being an omega than you are.”

Tony, for the second time in thirty minutes, feels like he’s been slapped in the face. He wonders if this has always been there, lingering under the surface. If every time he and Steve were together—every date, every movie night, every day Steve coaxed him out of the lab, every time they were in bed—Steve truly felt like this and just refrained from saying it.

He takes a deep, shaking breath. “FRIDAY, show the damn footage,” he grinds out.

FRIDAY obligingly brings up a hologram of the footage, and Tony watches Steve as it plays out. His face falls, then looks stony. Tony looks away.

“Tony, I…” Steve cuts himself off, shakes his head.

“Believe me now?”

Steve’s eyes dart from Tony’s face to the now-paused image, and back again. “She…she didn’t mean to…she just wanted to protect the team,” Steve say weakly.

“You don’t even believe that,” Tony accuses. “And even if it were true, it’s not an excuse. She’s twenty-four years old, Steve, not a child. She’s not still learning right from wrong. Even if HYDRA stunted that, she’s had almost four years to deal with it.”

“That type of stuff isn’t instantaneous,” Steve argues. “Her life was difficult.”
“Then you should have helped her!” Tony argues. “With a therapist, or someone, but there is no excuse for what she did!”

“She’s learning,” Steve protests. What started out weak and unsure gains traction, like it tends to when he argues with Tony, like if Tony takes a stance, Steve has to dig his heels in and pull the complete opposite way. “She hasn’t had a family before, she just wanted to keep hers safe.”

“She was fine. There was nothing unsafe before.”

“She clearly felt threatened.”

Tony wants to tear his hair out. “Steve. Wanda influenced the minds of people at the UN. Not that you lot care, but she threatened to do the same to me.”

“And she’ll be spoken with,” Steve assures him.

Tony snorts. “Spoken with. Of course. She’s an omega, Steve, not a toddler! We have rules, we have laws, these systems have been set up for this!”

Steve sets his stubborn jaw. “And I’m her alpha,” he says. “Just because that means nothing to you doesn’t mean it means nothing. It’s my job to help her here, to take care of this. It’ll mean more coming from me than anyone else.”

“You’ve been ‘speaking to her’ since Ultron, and here we are. What are you going to do next time, huh? Accuse me of manipulating the situation while the team burns?” Tony feels fire building up inside him. He wants to fight, wants to lash out. “What the hell makes her so damn special, Steve?”

“Because I’m her alpha, and she’s pack!” Steve shouts. “Dammit, Tony, you might want to tear the world apart, you might have a personal vendetta against me and the Avengers. Fine, I get it. It hurts but I get it. But I’m her alpha and we’re a pack and you’re not going to take that away from us.”

Tony shakes his head. “I…I’m not going to listen to you justifying what she did, or saying consequences don’t matter, or that you’ll ask her to stop and she will,” he says. “This is ridiculous. She wants to be your omega pet? Fine. You want to be her alpha? Fine. I will never breathe another word about it. But this? What she did? It crosses too many lines, Steve.”

“She’s just trying to protect her pack, Tony,” Steve argues.

“Why is it you have infinite faith in her, but none in me?” Tony asks. “Even when we were…well. You didn’t trust me then, either.”

“I did trust you, Tony. We were…we built this team. Alpha and omega. We worked together in the field. I trusted you with everything.”

“Not everything,” Tony says, eyebrows raised. “And my parents, frankly, are just the tip of the shitty iceburg.”

“Well, you’ve never given me much reason to trust you,” Steve argues. He sighs. “Tony. Look. This is getting blown out of proportion. I’ll talk to Wanda. She won’t do it again. You won’t bother her with your victim thing again, either. And we’ll all be fine.” When Tony opens his mouth, Steve gets a sterner look. “Tony. Drop it.”

It’s not the alpha voice; Steve has learned his lesson or, more likely, caution. But it’s undoubtedly the order of someone who doesn’t expect to be disobeyed.
“No,” Tony says quietly. “I won’t drop it, because she helped put me in this position and you won’t 
listen to me.” He shakes his head. “I think we’re done, Steve.”

Tony turns on his heels to leave. Steve reaches for his arm but Tony shakes him loose before he 
can really get a grip, and walks out.

Tony reaches the lab and sits down on a stool, biting his lip and trying not to cry.

This seems to be how conversations with Steve end now. Shouting, and confrontation, and Tony 
leaving feeling varying degrees of uncomfortable.

“Fuck this,” Tony says. “FRIDAY? We have anything I can hit?”
“There is scrap metal in the storage closet,” she offers.

“Sold,” Tony says, and for the next forty minutes, puts some dents in the metal, hammer clanging 
loudly enough to be deafening.

He runs a hand through his hair and sits back down on his stool, muscles aching a bit. “Fuck this,” 
he repeats.

There were probably productive ways to have that conversation, for them to discuss how to address 
Wanda’s actions, given her apparent desire to be handled as a traditional omega, given her youth, 
given her upbringing. That conversation could be held between alpha and omega, between the two 
cornerstones of the team.

But it wasn’t. Tony feels like he got hit by a truck, over and over and over again. He swallows. 
“Where’s Bucky?”

“He’s currently with Wilson and Lang,” FRIDAY says. “Would you like me to let him know 
you’re looking for him?”

“Yeah, send him a text, tell him to meet me…I don’t know, wherever no one else is,” Tony says.

FRIDAY quickly passes on his message and directs Tony towards a small little conference room, 
rarely used. Well, Tony decides as he looks around, at least there’s a couch.

Bucky comes hauling in, looking frazzled. “What’s going on?” He asks. “Are you hurt? Someone 
do something?”

Tony shakes his head. “I’m not…it’s not like that,” he says. “Sorry if I pulled you away from 
something important.”

Bucky seems to calm down slightly, but he’s still carrying tension. He manages to pull off a snort. 
“You think Lang and Wilson are ever that important?” He asks. “What’s up, Doll?”

“I just…so today sucks. Well, things suck. Things suck and I…I wanted, I needed…”

“A hug?” Bucky offers, and when Tony nods, he opens his arms for Tony to settle inside them. 
Bucky manhandles the both of them over to the couch, with Tony still pressed right up against him. 
“Wanna tell me about today?”

“So, Wanda messed with the minds of the Accords Council to get Rhodey booted and Steve in. She 
says it’s because she doesn’t trust Rhodey, given his history with me, but honestly I think it’s
because she has a big ol’ crush on Captain Self-Righteous.” He swallows. “This mating requirement is half dating site for her, half ‘way to control the out-of-control Tony Stark’. Also, she may or may not have threatened to use her magic to change my mind on how I feel about alphas. So there’s that.”

Bucky’s grip is incredibly tight for just a split second. “I’ll kill her,” he growls.

Tony puts a hand on Bucky’s arm. “Wait just a moment there. First of all, you’d be starting a war with your old buddy there, and we can’t afford that. Second of all—“ He swallows. It almost hurts to say, but has to be said—“Wanda’s a messed up kid. Her upbringing was a mess, her morals are a mess. I get why a typical pack is so important she’d break every rule for it. She needs help. Help Steve isn’t ever gonna get her,” Tony concludes bitterly.

“You talked to Steve,” Bucky realizes.

Tony shrugs. “I technically had to. He’s team leader and my…guardian. And I think he pissed me off more than Wanda. He’s going to ‘talk with her.’ I’m going to stop ‘antagonizing’ her. She deserves to be treated like this because she’s a better omega than I am.”

“Tell me he didn’t say that.”

Tony shrugs. “Not in so many words. But honestly, being called a defective omega isn’t the worst of it.”

“No, but it still means he deserves an ass-kicking,” Bucky grumbles.

“I just…how do I work with people who see me as so fundamentally lesser?” Tony asks. “They’re not even pretending anymore. I mean, I guess they are. They could have Steve do whatever he wants, ‘cause he’s my guardian. Guess they’re worried they’d lose my money then. But they’re crossing a lot of lines they didn’t before. Or just making things more obvious, I guess.” They had always been pushy. Just, when they were a team, when Tony still felt like one of them, they all called it affection. Even Tony.

Tony sighs. “I’m an idiot.”

“No, you’re not,” Bucky protests. “You’re brilliant and you got a shitty deal and I have no clue how you work with people like this, Doll. I don’t. I ain’t ever had to. Well, under my own power,” he amends. “Maybe…maybe you don’t work with people like that.”

“Then maybe the world burns,” Tony says bitterly.

Bucky doesn’t say anything, just squeezes him tighter.

Tony closes his eyes, and melts.

Tony’s internal clock is shit, so he has no idea how much time has passed when FRIDAY interrupts. “Boss?” She asks hesitantly. “Rogers is looking to speak with you.”

Tony swallows. “Patch him through.”

“Tony?” Steve demands. “Tony, It’s time we talked.”

Tony closes his eyes again. “Leave me alone, Steve.”
“No, Tony. You haven’t eaten, no one’s seen you since we talked last. We need to get this out of the way. We need to clear the air.”

“You tell the Council about Wanda yet?” He asks. Silence on the other end. “Yeah, thought so.”

“Tony,” Steve says, put-upon, like Tony’s causing problems unnecessarily. “Come to team dinner. We can’t have you reacting this way to the team.”

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Tony,” Steve says, voice getting sharper. “We need to at least talk. We can’t leave things like this. This isn’t like when we first got back, when you tried to just avoid us. I’m your guardian, we need to work this out.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” Tony says bitterly. “I don’t want to talk right now, Steve. I’ll reach out when I’m ready.”

He doesn’t know when that will be, other than knowing that, like it or not, it has to happen. But not right now. Right now, he’s barely managed to calm down, and he doesn’t want to shatter it.

“Tony,” Steve warns. “I will go through that lab door if you don’t let me in.”

Tony shudders. “You can’t,” he argues. He’s pretty sure, at least. Ninety six percent sure.

“Anyways, I’m not there.”

“Tony,” Steve says, sounding angrier now. “Come have this goddamn conversation.”

Bucky, who has been remarkably restrained, who has stuck to the plan of keeping this to himself so far, kisses Tony’s shoulder, then leans up and says, “Fuck off, Steve, didn’t you hear him? He’ll reach out to you later.”

“Buck?” Steve demands. “What the hell is going on? I—“

“FRIDAY, end call, please,” Bucky requests, and she does immediately.

Tony shivers. “Well, that went well.”

“Not gonna let him near you,” Bucky promises.

Tony has a feeling it isn’t going to end that easily.

The next morning, both of them are woken by Bucky’s growling stomach. He buries his face in Tony’s neck. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

“I starved a super soldier,” Tony acknowledges. He stretches and sits up. “Let’s get you fed.”

Bucky sits too, then stretches. “If you don’t expect anythin’ too fancy, I’ll cook.”

“I love your food,” Tony says softly.

Bucky smiles at him softly. “Yeah? I’m glad. Not gonna lie, there is some alpha-provider instincts tied up in feeding you.”

Tony scrunches up his nose, deep in thought. “I guess I could see how that works,” he allows.
“Except usually, the alpha brings home the bacon and the omega, you know, cooks it.”

Bucky shrugs. “I’m providing, ain’t I? Don’t care about much else.” They exit the room, hand-in-hand—Tony still gets strangely giddy over that, you would think he’s fourteen and not well past forty—and Bucky moves them through the hallways, avoiding all other occupants of the compound.

Bucky starts scrambling up eggs, and Tony dices peppers and mushrooms for him while he waits for the coffee to finish.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” Bucky asks.

Tony winces. “I have a meeting at SI in…” He checks his watch. “Three hours. Which I will have to look presentable for.”

Bucky eyes him, eyes tracking up and down Tony’s rumpled form, smirk present. “Trust, me, Doll, you always look presentable.” Then he frowns. “Too much?”

Tony’s mouth is a little dry, which is ridiculous for a cheesy line and a little flirting. “Not at all,” he manages, and almost drops his knife.

And then he stares at Bucky for a few minutes, until Bucky’s foot nudges his beneath the table. “Finish the food,” he says, and Tony does.

Tony’s close enough to on-time, dressed and ready, when he pulls up into his parking spot in the Stark Industries garage.

Where Steve Rogers is waiting for him.

Tony curses a blue streak, glad he’s not in a convertible and therefore no one can hear him, “Sorry, Boss, I wasn’t checking,” FRIDAY says.

“Why would you be?” He asks before climbing out of the car. “This area’s secure.”

Steve shrugs. “It wasn’t that hard.”

Well, Tony apparently needs to spend some time working on SI’s security. He sighs. “What do you want, Rogers?”

“To talk,” he says. “We need to clear the air.”

Tony grits his teeth. “Did you miss me saying I’d reach out to you when I was ready?” He snaps. “I’m not ready yet, Rogers.”

“Tony…” Steve sighs. “Act like an adult for a few minutes, here.”

Tony takes a step back. “I am being an adult. I’m choosing not to enter a situation that’s bad for my emotional health. There. So. Go.”

“Tony…”

Tony presses his panic button on his phone. There’s a suit inside SI.
“Did you ever care about me?” Tony asks.

Steve startles. “What?”

“About me. At all. I mean, I thought using the voice and caving my chest in was bad, and it was, but…damn, give you an inch and you’ll take a mile, huh?”

“I haven’t—“

“You don’t get points for not being the worst, Rogers,” Tony says. “The bottom line is, words came out of my mouth, and you refused to listen, again and again and again. You might say you didn’t want it to be this way, but you enjoyed the chance to be my alpha, didn’t you? Proving your alpha-ness, or controlling the unruly omega, or whatever gets your rocks off. Well, I’m sick of dealing with it. So, I think I’m done with this.”

The suit arrives. Tony steps inside.

“Take this as my resignation, I suppose,” he says just before the faceplate closes.

Tony lifts off, turning away from Steve’s aghast face as he maneuvers out of the garage. “FRIDAY? Let’s go somewhere he isn’t familiar with,” Tony says.

“Got it, Boss. May I recommend updating the cottage upstate if we’re really going to be spending so much time there?” She asks.

“Let’s consider it a first step and find somewhere with more class as quick as we can,” he says.

His phone rings, and Tony startles, dropping a few feet closer to the tops of the New York skyscrapers. “We’re still taking phone calls?”

“You’ll want to take this one, Boss,” she advises, so Tony acknowledges the call.

“Tony?” Bucky asks. “FRIDAY told me what happened. Where can I meet you?”

Tony sucks in a deep breath. Bucky’s voice is good to hear, and he didn’t realize how much he wanted it. “I…you sure, Honey? You leave, pretty sure you won’t be invited back.”

Tony hears a garage door. “I’m in the car,” Bucky says by way of an answer.

Tony feels a little choked up. “You know where to find me, then,” he says, and hangs up as he zooms towards the cottage.
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

After the break, they rebuild.

Chapter Notes

Hello all, happy Wednesday!

A couple house-keeping notes before chapter information.

First of all, it's officially a Wednesday during the work year and just realistically, I will not consistently wake up earlier than usual to post. I'm barely going to make it to work on time today because I hit snooze too many times. So, expect to see Wednesday updates in the evening from now on. It'll be the first thing I do when I get home, although I can't promise I'll be home super early.

Second, I'm taking a little break. It'll only be a week, and I'll start posting again on the first of September. This will help me catch up in the actual writing, get a little bit ahead so that I'm not scrambling so much when I have actual kids in front of me and lessons to plan and papers to grade. Plus, this chapter is kind of like a midseason finale, sort of, and it's pretty damn long. When we return, chapter 18 is nsfw, just so you know.

Okay, this chapter. The guardianship arc is over, so welcome back if you skipped it. We discuss the fallout of everything that happened recently, but I don't think we need warnings for anything new quite yet.

Just a reminder that I have a Ko-fi, linked over on my Tumblr.

Thanks for reading, all!

The first thing Tony does is write a resignation letter. Then, to make sure the Rogue Avengers—now just the Avengers, considering Tony isn’t one anymore—can’t capitalize on Tony leaving to tell their own story about omegas or Tony or anything else, he publishes it.

He links it to all his social media and buys a full page ad in three major newspapers to publish it. That, if nothing else, will ensure at least a couple news networks pick it up to talk about it.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN—

I, Anthony Edward Stark, have resigned from the Avengers Initiative, effective immediately. It is becoming increasingly clear that they don’t value omegas or our contributions.

Although I feel like I have contributed significantly to the team over the years—given the numerous battles and fights I have participated in, the equipment I have made, and the lifestyle I have funded
—the fact remains that I was not a respected member of the team. As such, I felt unable to remain a part of a team that doesn’t accept me for my worth.

Members of the Accords Council can contact me at their convenience to work out funding for the Avengers Initiative without my contribution.

--T.S.

Tony has more he wants to say—there’s a looming alien threat, for instance, or Wanda’s actions—but he’s tired and stressed and he needs to get it out there.

It feels like victory and defeat at the same time, it feels absolutely utterly exhausting, like his body is hollowed out and empty now, with nothing left to give.

So as soon as he’s done, he lies down in the bed. When Bucky arrives—barely after Tony lies down—Tony has FRIDAY control the suit to let him in. He’s not getting up. He doesn’t care.

Bucky’s kicked off his shoes and walks into the room making just enough noise to let Tony know he’s there. He then pulls off Tony’s shoes—which Tony forgot he was wearing, honestly—and looks Tony over critically. “Can’t be comfortable,” he announces, which is fair enough. Tony still has his suit on. “Can I help you change?”

Tony doesn’t have energy for changing, but he and Bucky manage to get his jacket, tie, shirt, and trousers off, leaving him in boxers and socks, buried under the blankets. He might have been shy about his scarred chest, if he had the energy to be and hadn’t seen Bucky’s own scars.

Bucky wraps him in his arms, metal and flesh alike, and settles Tony against him under the blankets. “This okay?”

Tony closes his eyes. “Mhm.”

Bucky kisses the crown of his head. “I called Rhodey on the way here. Told him what happened. Or, well, where we went, FRIDAY had already told him what happened. He and Vision are packing our stuff. Rhodey promises to grab anything you might need urgently.”

Tony starts at that. “They can’t—The Avengers—”

“Rhodey says he only ever stayed because of you, and to fuck them,” Bucky supplies helpfully. “FRIDAY gave him the footage. He’s going to call the Council.”

Tony wants to protest, but he honestly just doesn’t have the energy.

Bucky seems to realize this, and kisses his hair again. “Why don’t you sleep a bit?” He suggests.

Tony nods tiredly, and closes his eyes.

When he wakes up, he doesn’t feel much more refreshed. At least Bucky is still there.

“Hey, mornin’,” Bucky says. “How you doing?”

Tony grunts in reply.

“That bad, huh?” Bucky asks. His voice and touch is soft, all of him feeling like a caress.
“I made a mistake,” Tony admits softly.

“How?”

“I shouldn’t have quit. It was rash and stupid and put the world at risk. It wasn’t even that bad, comparatively. I mean, it could be worse. Compared to what the Council probably expected, Rogers was actually behaving well. It wasn’t that bad.”

“But it was still bad,” Bucky says softly.

Tony closes his eyes. “I’m a spoiled rich kid who couldn’t handle not getting my way.”

“Hey,” Bucky says, and it’s a little sharper this time. “You might be richer than I can actually fully understand, but this ain’t about that. You don’t like being treated badly. And maybe your money’s helped you not be treated bad before, but that doesn’t mean they had a right to treat you bad now.”

Tony opens his eyes, just a slit, and looks up at Bucky. “Did I make a mistake?”

Bucky moves one arm to stroke Tony’s hair. “No,” he says, voice firm. Tony wants to believe him.

They don’t get out of bed. “How am I gonna fix things now?” Tony asks, a few hours later.

He knows the others have arrived but have so far left them alone. Probably FRIDAY has told them Tony’s moping. He knows Rhodey and Vision are dealing with the fallout of this mess. He can’t work up the energy to go help deal with it.

“We can worry about that together, when you’re feeling up to it,” Bucky says.

Tony stirs, but doesn’t have the energy to get up. “I should be…we need to get started now.” He needs to talk to the Council about how they’re not getting even a fraction of the funding he’s been giving, he needs to talk to them about Wanda, he needs to talk to Rhodey about what’s next.

Bucky kisses the crown of his head again. “Give it another bit,” he says. “Everything can wait a day.”

“Leaving the Avengers makes me look weak.”

“But you ain’t weak,” Bucky argues. “Look at the shit you put up with and survived. Look at all you do.”

“The world doesn’t see it that way.”

“Then I guess we’ll fucking make them,” Bucky says, the ferocity of the statement only tempered by the way his nose trails delicately behind Tony’s ear.

Checking his phone—which Tony hasn’t even glanced at since he left the Compound for Stark Industries—indicates that it’s been twenty-four hours almost exactly since he landed here. He has fourteen missed calls that he still ignores. Tony’s only been out of bed to piss. He hasn’t even eaten, which means Bucky hasn’t either, which means he must be starving.

“You should eat,” Tony says quietly. “Super-soldier metabolism, remember?”
Bucky props himself up on an elbow and looks at Tony. “If I leave to cook something, will you eat too?”

Tony considers it and nods.

Bucky kisses his forehead. “Want me to send Rhodey in?”

Again, Tony considers it, then nods.

So Bucky disappears, and a moment later Rhodey rolls in, apparently sticking to the wheelchair today.

He takes a second to get through the door, frowning. “Sorry,” he says. “My braces ran out of charge an hour ago.”

“I can make you a new charger,” Tony says. “You forget the other one?”

“Don’t worry,” Rhodey says. “Vision just left to go back to the Compound. We only brought the bare essentials, but we’re leaving for good. He’s going to fill the car. And pick up the trailer. I know DUM-E is in Manhattan, but we’re going to grab U.”

Tony feels a surge of affection for his dumb, ridiculous robots being cared for. “Thanks,” he says.

“Of course, Tones. You know I got your back.” He rolls over to the side of the bed. “How you doing?”

Tony looks Rhodey square in the eye. Bucky has a crush on Tony, Bucky might lie to make Tony feel better. Rhodey doesn’t do that. “Did I make a mistake, leaving?” Tony asks. “Did I make the world vulnerable? Did I give up too easily?”

“No,” Rhodey says firmly. “You didn’t.”

Tony frowns. “I still gave up, though.”

“Tony Stark, listen and listen good,” Rhodey says fiercely, sharp, spicy righteousness under every word. “There is a world of difference between giving up and cutting off the dead weight that’s drowning you. You saved yourself. They would have dragged you down. You made the right choice.”

“How’re we going to…the world needs the Avengers,” Tony protests.

“No,” Rhodey says firmly. “The world needs heroes. No one said it had to be the Avengers.”

The next morning, Tony gets out of bed and takes a shower. He changes his clothes, shaves, and emerges feeling more himself than he has in a long, long time.

Over a breakfast Bucky happily makes with ingredients Vision brought, Tony looks around his small group who chose to follow him. Him. The unruly omega.

He feels a sharp surge of affection through his entire body, looks at each of them with all the love he possibly can.

Everyone seems to look up at him at the same time, and the full weight of their smiles—their affection in turn—is the sweetest, most intoxicating force Tony knows.
“So,” he says, setting his coffee mug down, “we should probably look into finding a better place.”

They move back to the Tower, the Tower Tony had tried to sell but had never quite gotten there, had stripped of every memento of the Avengers and his former team after their spat over the Accords, after their betrayal. It’s largely empty, but Tony doesn’t qualify as the mega-rich for no reason.

“We need more than a place, Tony,” Rhodey says as they both supervise movers bringing furniture in. “We need legal backing.”

“Well, I’m going to be persona non grata with the Accords Council,” Tony says. “And do we really qualify as a team? You, Vision, Bucky if he wants to fight?”

Rhodey shrugs. “Leave that to me.”

Tony stares. “You know something I don’t?”

Rhodey’s chin juts out. “I’m a goddamn Colonel and I earned that,” he says. “I’m a good leader, Tony.”

“I know you are,” Tony says quietly.

“So when they booted me, I thought…I didn’t want that team, but I know what my job is. I know where I’m needed. If aliens are coming, then I need to be at a commend.” He shrugs, a little self-conscious. “I’ve been making some inquiries.”

Tony stares. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“Didn’t want to give you false hope,” Rhodey says. “And it’s not a fix. We’re still susceptible to the Council’s requirements. You’re still…”

“An omega banned from the field, yeah,” Tony says. “I think I’m done with guardianship, Rhodey.”

“I figured.”

“If aliens invade, I’ll reconsider.”

Rhodey snorts. “Sure, Tony. In the meantime, you had some ideas you wanted to put into production?”

The lab at the Tower was all but stripped, but, with Vision’s help and that of several dozen movers who signed several dozen more NDAs, Tony pilfers the Compound Lab and starts moving things in. DUM-E and U, reunited at last in a space vaguely familiar to them, zoom around the lab happily.

The Iron Legion goes into production just as soon as Tony has the equipment at his disposal once more.

Tony spends four hours on the phone with the Council and allows them to purchase the Compound from him in its entirety for just about what the land’s worth. Tony strips out anything worthwhile from the home, disabling FRIDAY and taking all his equipment. They purchase a quintjet at
material cost, still an incredibly steep amount, but a discount without Tony’s labor. When the checks clear, he is done with the Avengers, with providing for them, forever.

“Why didn’t you remove them?” Vision asks. “You have every right to kick them out. It was your home.”

“I don’t want them destroyed,” Tony says. “We’re going to need them. I just want to be away from them. They have their space, I have mine, and I don’t have to do anything about theirs anymore.”

And honestly, it’s rather freeing.

Peter walks in, only he’s masked and in his suit. “What are you doing here?” Tony demands, because he’d planned to invite Peter to this lab, only he’s pretty sure he hasn’t done it yet (wouldn’t forget inviting his kid), and Peter never comes in costume. Too easy to cross lines, to get confused over who’s who.

“Colonel Rhodes invited me,” he says. “Invited Spider Man. Says there’s stuff we need to talk about.”

Well, that’s news. Tony didn’t even know that Rhodey had a way to contact Peter, although of course, FRIDAY would have probably helped.

Bucky walks into the lab, with Tony’s holo-projector table in his arms like it weighs nothing. “Where do you want—oh, hi, Peter,” he says casually.

Tony’s jaw drops. “How…how did you…” Even through his surprise, he finds himself getting defensive.

Bucky looks confused, then sets the table down off to the side. “Oh, are we still pretending I don’t know? Sorry,” he says. “Hey, Spider Man.”

“How do you know?” Tony demands. He’s held nothing back from Bucky, practically, nothing but his mating gland and this, and he needs to know what leak put his kid in danger.

Bucky’s brow furrows. “You told me. During, your, uh, heat,” he says the last part with a flush, definitely giving Peter the wrong impression as to how they spent Tony’s heat. “You said you visited Rhodey, Ms. Potts and Happy, and Peter. That had to be Spider Man,” he explains. “You—don’t remember?”

“No,” Tony says dryly. “Surprisingly, I remember very little of that time. I was a little preoccupied.” He swallows and gets serious. “So…you’ve known? All this time?”

Peter’s watching them, eyes going back and forth like a tennis match. “I…uh…” he stutters. “Hi, Mr. Barnes, sir,” he mumbles. He looks sideways at Tony, who tries to make an encouraging face.

Bucky smiles at him and extends a hand. “Call me, Bucky, kid,” he says. “Do I call you Peter or Spider Man?”

Peter shakes his head, then shrugs and reaches to pull off his mask. “Well, since everyone here knows…” he mutters. “But usually, if I have the mask on, I’m Spider Man.”

Bucky nods seriously. “Understood. Sorry about Germany.”

“Hey, I kicked your ass, don’t go apologizing to me!” Peter protests.
Bucky smiles. “Sure, kid.” He looks him over. “You’re, uh, really young.”

“He wasn’t supposed to be fighting, that day,” Tony says. “Things got out of hand fast.”

“Tell me about it,” Bucky says, running a hand through his hair. “Tony, tell me where to put this table so we can get to Rhodey’s meeting.”

Rhodey uses the hastily-purchased kitchen table as his war room. He sits them all down, then begins. “Well. We’re the beginnings of a team, and we need to figure out how to make us an actual team.”

Bucky looks around. “We need more people in our ranks.”

“I think I have a handle on that,” Rhodey says. “It’ll take me a few days.”

Tony clears his throat. “That’s all well and good, but we need the Accords Council to back us. And that’s not going to come easy. We need a charter that meets Accords specifications and that they’ll approve us, and in this current political climate…well, Peter and I will have to remain hands off,” Tony says dryly. “At least publicly.”

Rhodey nods. “It’ll be difficult, but you and I can manage it. We know the Accords backwards and forwards, inside and out.”

Peter, bless him, actually raises his hand.

Rhodey raises an eyebrow. “Yes?”

Peter puts his hand down. “I, uh, well. I know I’m just a dumb kid, but. I think there’s something we’re missing?”

“What is it, Peter?” Bucky asks.

“Well, I mean, this is all…kinda secret stuff. I just think, if we make things really public, and got people’s attention, then the Council might feel some pressure. They might support us more, you know?” He fidgets. “You see stuff like this online sometimes.”

Everyone’s silent for a second, which doesn’t help Peter’s fidgeting, his nervous energy permeating the room, nearly making them all a bit antsy. Vision speaks first. “I too have seen this type of thing online.”

Tony shrugs. “It’s pretty much in-line with what I’m already doing.”

“Can’t hurt,” Rhodey agrees.

“So you, like, need a social media manager,” Peter says. Everyone’s eyes drift to him, but he puts both hands up. “You just said I can’t be on the team,” he says. His eyes turn to Bucky. “You’re pretty popular online.”

“Me?” Bucky asks, eyes wide.

Peter smiles. “Don’t worry. I’ll help you.”
And so it goes. Tony fabricates the Iron Legion while ensuring functional apartments are built throughout the upper floors of the Tower. He re-stocks and updates the gym and training facilities, refurbishes the public areas, and builds Peter his own lab, for the times where he maybe doesn’t want to share with Tony. The fact that there is a door between both labs suits both Tony and the bots quite well.

No one says a word, but Tony is acutely aware that he’s making his den. He’s care-taking, making sure his pack is cared for and has everything they need.

Rhodey, meanwhile, starts bringing new faces to the Tower. The first is Hope Van Dyne, who actually walks in and shakes Tony’s hand without hostility, breaking a long line of Pym/Stark tradition. Tony shakes the alpha’s hand back, bemused, but sits in on their meeting. She seems eager to join them, provided they meet certain requirements towards protecting Pym Tech from liability, but honestly, they’re the type of requirements Tony would have insisted on, when this all began, if he was a sensible person. She’s looking out for her family and her company, and Tony can’t fault her that.

She looks a little embarrassed at the end. “Let’s say, hypothetically, I had contact with Lang,” she proposes.

Rhodey raises an eyebrow. “Hypothetically.”

“Hypothetically,” she says firmly. “If this were true, and I could hypothetically convince him to leave the Avengers. What would you do?”

Rhodey blinks. “Well, purely hypothetically, I would say to make sure it doesn’t violate his pardon, and then we’d be willing to talk.” He looks over at Tony, who nods.

Hope smiles. “I’ll keep that in mind,” she says. “Hypothetically.” She sits back in her chair. “So, who else is on your team?”

“Well, there’s you, me, Vision, and Bucky Barnes is coming on,” Rhodey says.

“That’s it?”

“It’d be more if omegas were allowed on the team,” Rhodey says, his voice half challenge.

Hope narrows her eyes, but then just nods. “We have a way around that?”

“Slow going,” Tony says shortly. More like no-going. Their charter keeps getting sent back to the drawing board by them trying to work in provisions that would allow Tony into the field, regardless of his mating status. But every time, they know it won’t pass the Council’s muster. The mating requirement is relatively set in stone, right now.

“Right,” Hope says. She sighs. “What about Thor?”

“Off world, and he didn’t leave a forwarding address,” Tony points out.

“Hulk?”

“Might have left the planet too, for all we know,” Tony says.

She sighs. “Well, I guess we get what we get,” she says.

After Hope, Rhodey brings in Steven Strange and Wong, two people who apparently can do magic. Tony barely allows them through the front door on principle alone, but grudgingly, he acknowledges that they have to talk to them.
“We already have a job,” Strange says, eyes narrowed.

Tony eyes the guy mistrustfully. He knows who this alpha is; they rubbed elbows at some of the same society parties for a while. Strange was new money—not that the Starks were particularly old money—and he’d been gaudy, which, honestly, Tony would be a hypocrite to criticize. It had been a news story when the guy almost died.

_Talk about a career change_, Tony thinks. _Man of science to…this._

“We’re not really asking you to give up your…magical duties,” Rhodey says, clearly at a loss for the right words. “More like…agree to help, should the world need it.”

Wong eyes Rhodey, mistrust clear in his gaze. “We won’t give the secrets of the Kamar-Taj to super heroes,” he says.

“It’s a contract,” Tony says, directly to Strange, who knows Tony’s world well enough. “We propose a charter, you sign it if you agree to help us under those conditions. We just want you to consider it.”

Strange studies him for several moments, but then grudgingly nods. “We’ll read it,” he says, before he gets up and leaves.

Tony relaxes in his chair, dropping the business posture. “Damn, Rhodey, bringing every alpha you see around?” He teases. “Strange, really?”

“Have you seen what the guy can do?” Rhodey asks.

Tony sniffs disdainfully. “I actively try not to watch magic shows.”

Rhodey cackles, which makes the ensuing six hours they work on hammering out the new team’s charter slightly more bearable.

While they hammer out the charter and potential members, Peter is taking his duties of instructing Bucky to be a social media manager seriously. Tony almost wants to point out that he could hire someone for this, but honestly, Peter knows social media, knows how to connect to a large demographic that people with multiple degrees struggle to reach. And he and Bucky are so damn eager to do it, so Tony lets them run with it.

Bucky gets a snapchat, a twitter, a facebook, and an instagram. He starts with more innocuous things, little pictures around their floor of the Tower, pictures of Rhodey, Vision, and Tony bent over the charter, of Spider man (mask on) hanging upside down from the ceiling, of DUM-E holding a broom and ineffectively sweeping up the giant mess he made. Peter says it’s important, that people like to see that stuff, to imagine a way into the world of the super heroes. From there, he moves on to showing carefully chosen segments from drafts of the charter, or commenting on specific articles after consulting with one of the others.

He’s actually enjoying it, Tony thinks, which is great. While he’d be happy to have Bucky as his personal chef forever, he’s more than thrilled that Bucky has a job on the team outside of fighting, so he still feels involved even if he chooses not to fight.

Bucky learns all sorts of things, online slang and how to use instagram filters, what hashtags are and even how to do internet research. And even though Tony might threaten to never speak to Bucky again when he starts using texting abbreviations in everyday life, Tony’s happy for him. They haven’t talked about the fighting thing at all, but Bucky also hasn’t mentioned how much
happier he’d be herding goats in a little while, so, really, Tony counts it as a win.

Vision helps with the charter when he can, but he also spends a good deal of time with the Council, those first weeks.

First, he’s trying to pitch their team, talk them up, which isn’t really Vision’s strong suit, but his heart’s in the right place.

Second, he’s overseeing the Council’s response to the news that Wanda manipulated their minds.

After he arrives back home one day, Tony finds him still out on the balcony in the pouring rain, seemingly not noticing. He shakes his head when Tony approaches. “They’re blind to her,” he says.

“What happened?”

“I helped remove the magic from their minds. The truth is, Wanda did not have to do much to influence them; when we originally assumed they supplanted Colonel Rhodes because of his favor for you, or perhaps because of race, it wasn’t far off the mark. She just gave them the final push, almost as if lowering their inhibitions.”

“So they’re normal assholes now?” Tony asks.

“I suppose that’s a way to put it,” Vision says dryly. Then he shakes his head again. “They didn’t punish her. She gets community service and Captain Rogers is supposed to take her in hand, which means nothing. She will get away with it.” He grips the railing tight enough that Tony worries for its integrity.

“Yeah, I don’t know which is worse,” Tony says dryly. “That she’ll get away with it because her only punishment is Steve who does nothing, or that they could very well have left her to an alpha who considers beatings and starvation a fair punishment. I still don’t get why good old-fashioned laws don’t apply to us.”

“She told me once she believes in dynamic-roles, that she likes the security they provide, that she wants the guidance of a mate. But they do not guide her. They let her run amok.”

Tony nods. “Because she’s powerful and convenient and doesn’t question them. They really… that’s all they gave her?”

“Most of them had a hard time believing she really did influence them,” Vision says sadly. “Her goals so closely aligned with theirs. A few of them seemed bothered, but were overruled.”

“You still…” Tony begins, ending awkwardly, not sure how to phrase it.


“Love doesn’t work that way,” Tony shrugs. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know how to help her,” Vision admits.

Tony wants to say he’s not sure she can be helped, but knows that won’t help Vision, so he instead stands by his friend in silence.
Rhodey seems more frustrated than Tony, like he’s ready to throw things when Vision and Tony tell everyone the news of what happened to Maximoff.

Tony wonders when he became like this, bitter and resigned.

“We can…we can release the footage,” Bucky says. “Public. Would Everhart publish this? Shit, I could link it to our Twitter.”

Hearing Bucky discuss Twitter should be an interesting event, but Tony’s thoroughly distracted. He shakes his head.

“I…don’t think we can,” he admits.

Rhodey looks absolutely affronted. “Why the hell not?” He demands.

“Cause they’ll just say, look. More proof omegas need strict looking-after. They make these irrational decisions and lash out when they’re emotional. Mating requirements forever. If we’re trying to undo that damage, then we need to…be careful,” Tony says.

The room goes oddly quiet, then Bucky huffs. “I…I could…” He shifts uncomfortably, but Peter seems to be the only person who hasn’t caught onto what he’s implying.

“No,” Tony says firmly. “You don’t do that anymore.”

Bucky shrugs. “I could.”

“Let’s call it a very-far-out-there plan Z,” Rhodey offers. “In the meantime. What can we say?”

“I did the math, for some statistics?” Peter says. “Just about the kind of damage their team has done.”

“Don’t go making us look like vindictive assholes,” Tony warns. “That won’t curry any favor.”

Bucky tilts his head, considering. “I could pair it with parts of the Charter. Explain why we’d be different, what we’ve put in place to make sure it doesn’t happen again,” he proposes.

“I like that,” Rhodey announces. “Do that. Just make sure we don’t come across as assholes.”

“Yeah,” Tony agrees. “‘Cause, you know, we’re only assholes in private.”

Rhodey rolls his eyes at him. “‘Cause we want our message to be about saving the world.”

The Charter’s not exactly finished, given its difficulty. They need to make it cover all their bases, meet the requirements of the Accords, and actually be something the current Accords Council would ratify. Tony, Rhodey, and Vision spend a significant amount of time on it, giving up sleep and hashing it out over meals.

They’re about four hours in for the day when Tony perks up, able to hear Bucky and Peter arguing good-naturedly in the next room. Rhodey looks at him and sighs.

“Do we need to talk about it?” He asks.

“Talk about what?”

Tony squints at him. “I don’t know, do we? He’s not interfering with my work, and—”

“Hey, hey,” Rhodey cuts in smoothly. “It’s not an accusation. Just wondering. We never really… one day you weren’t together, the next you were, only it was a huge secret in a place where the walls had ears.”

“The walls still have ears here, Colonel Rhodes,” FRIDAY pipes in.

Rhodey rolls his eyes. “You know what I meant, FRIDAY, don’t pretend you didn’t,” he says. “Tony. I just…you good?”

“I’m happy?” Tony says, and it comes out as a definite question. He shakes his head. “I’m definitely happy. Just not used to it.”

Rhodey smiles. “That’s good. And if he makes you unhappy, I’ll kick his ass.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Alpha posturing,” he mumbles.

Vision pipes up. “I don’t know, Tony, I have no dynamic and yet I find myself inclined to agree with Rhodey.”

Rhodey smiles at Tony victoriously, and Tony just mumbles about overbearing friends, but he doesn’t think it’s a secret that he’s actually quite happy with them.

“It’s good,” Tony says slyly, determined to get some of his own back. “He treats me nice. Just the other day, he—”

“That’s enough!” Rhodey says, cutting off Tony’s actually gave me a foot rub, can you believe it? “I think we’ve officially all been together long enough and deserve a break. Get lost.”

Tony hops up. “Aye, aye, sir,” he says cheekily, before venturing away from the table.

Peter and Bucky have their heads bent together on the couch, working on Bucky’s shiny new laptop, picking apart the responses Bucky’s gotten for which ones they should actually reply to. Tony sees the article Bucky was originally commenting on and bites his tongue. Sure, he thinks it’s maybe not the smartest to tackle the issue of omegas in the field right off the bat, not when they’re building a team, but hell, this isn’t just his team, and frankly, he can’t deny that he’s not a little pleased. And, well, Christine Everhart’s articles are well-written and definitely worthy of being publicized.

Tony leans over the back of the couch, encroaching in Bucky’s space easily. “Mind if I steal him for a bit?” Tony asks.

Bucky looks up and grins, then puts the laptop in Peter’s lap. “Sorry, Parker, but I got an appointment,” he says.

Peter smiles up at them, always so earnest and open. “See ya later, guys.”

So Tony drags Bucky away, who’s laughing as they go. “What’s gotten into you?”

Freedom, Tony thinks and doesn’t say. “Rhodey told us to take a break and leave him the fuck alone for a bit. I’m taking him seriously.”

“Where’re we going?”

Tony shrugs. “Well. I have not slept since sometime yesterday morning, so I was thinking I’d end
in bed eventually. But I’m extending the invitation. If you’re up for that.”

Bucky stops moving, which pulls Tony up short, and Bucky uses that to reel Tony in. “I’d like that,” he says softly before kissing him. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes, Mom,” Tony says lightly. “Can we go now? Before Rhodey changes his mind and gives me a section to review?”

“You figure, what, once you’re in your bedroom, he’ll feel too bad to bother you?”

“That’s the jist of it, yeah,” Tony admits. He pushes open the door and holds it open for Bucky, who steps inside.

Bucky still technically has his own room but hasn’t been using it much. They sleep better when they’re together and have less nightmares. Bucky credits his good sleep to Tony whenever he can, both his presence and BARF. Whenever Bucky has a nightmare, he tackles it with BARF the next day with either Tony or Vision or sometimes his therapist, reducing the chance that it will ever come back. But before that, Tony will usually hold him, which Bucky honestly considers half the power of breaking the memories. Tony flushes at that, thinks it’s stupid, but then again, who is he to judge, considering how well he’s been sleeping next to Bucky?

Tony missed the Tower. He didn’t exactly use all the amenities he had when he lived here, but this is a second chance as he builds them back up. And one thing is that every bedroom is more of a suite, with a little private sitting area/study outside the master bedroom and bathroom.

Which means Tony, in his infinite wisdom, has purchased the world’s most comfortable loveseat. And he has literally never been prouder of a single purchase, including that blue dress Pepper bought on his credit card—a previous highlight—or that time in grad school where he bought a coffee cart to actually serve him and his labmates in the lab all day long.

He pulls Bucky down onto the couch, and Bucky goes easily enough. It takes a second for them to arrange themselves, but they end up with Tony’s legs across Bucky’s lap, and Bucky’s already tugging Tony’s shoes off before Tony fully settles against the pillows.

“So,” Tony asks, smiling slightly. “Now that we’ve tackled Harry Potter—what do you know about Star Wars?”

Bucky blinks. “Is that the thing the kid is so obsessed with? Death Stars and I am your father?”

Tony frowns. “Aw, Peter, spoilers! Spoiled. Thwarted by my—by the kid.”

The side-eye and gentle smile Bucky gives means he knows exactly what Tony was originally going to say. “Show me,” he invites, gesturing expansively to the TV with his metal arm, his flesh one being busy rubbing gently up and down Tony’s calves.

So Tony, really unable to do anything else, puts on A New Hope.
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

The new team is taking off. Also, so are Tony and Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Hello, and welcome back!

Big shout out to all of you for hanging in there; I'm glad to be back. I made good progress while I was gone, both in writing this and in my personal life (kids come back to school this Wednesday and I've now attended three straight weeks of professional development it's exhausting). Can't guarantee I won't take another break in a few weeks, just to play catch up (We have an extended school day and by the time I come home I want to sleep, not write), but for now I'm back!

Thought about all of you on the 27th, because that's the day this fic turned one! That's right, I apparently started writing this monstrosity one year ago. And then sat on it and did nothing for like seven months.

Warnings for this chapter: Smut. For those of you who need specifics, first time, receiving Tony, oral and anal. You wanna skip it? Totally understand. Stop here: "Bucky pulls back, breathing heavy, which is considerably gratifying, considering he needs less oxygen than the average human." WARNING: they do talk about sex a little before this, but in a plot-relevant way (I feel). If you want to avoid them even discussing it, stop here: "Bucky’s watching him, eyes hungry and hopeful. “We…need to talk about it, then,” he manages."

Other than that, that's all the warnings I have. See you all on Wednesday. Just a reminder that Wednesday posts will be in the EVENING now. See you after the first day of school!

Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy.

Tony sits in the chair in the studio, and he knows he looks calm to every single person watching. It’s a trick he mastered long ago.

It’s his fourth talk show of the week. He’d done one CNN clip, and three softer talk shows. He can feel his exhaustion in his bones, his eyelids are heavy and his brain prone to slipping away. Still, Roxanne insists that this show, run by a beta but hitting a very large stay at home omega crowd, is important, so he’s stuck doing this last show.

They’re signalled back from commercial, and Tony ups the wattage of his smile and faces the host. “So,” she asks after doing her reintroduction for people just tuning in, “You’re starting a new team.”
Tony nods. “We felt it was time, given the vast ideological differences between us. While at one point we thought that, since we all genuinely wanted the best for the world and to protect it, that would be enough. But the fact is, it’s not. There are a lot of different ways to go about that and we just held different values.”

It’s careful, mostly diplomatic. It doesn’t throw the other team under the bus, because while Tony’s lost most of his qualms about doing that, it won’t be the first impression he gives people of the new team. He can leave that for later, when he really needs it.

“So, what’s different?” The host asks.

“Well, Jessica,” Tony says, and it’s a good thing her name is literally a part of the show’s title, otherwise he wouldn’t remember—he should be a hundred percent focused but he’s not all here, not really—“not much will look different. We still fight to protect people. We adhere to the Sokovia Accords and obey national sovereignty.”

“So, what’s different?” She presses.

Tony shrugs. “Our charter looks a little different—we have provisions in place for training, assessment, and mental health screening for our members. Our leadership structure is a little more complicated, with checks and balances. We have strict guidelines for how financing will work. And while the Accords Committee is currently taking a stand against omegas in the field—” Here he flashes a knowing smile, his I’m watching you look—“Technically, nothing says they can’t work behind the scenes so, at least for now, that’s what we’re pushing for. We’re hoping for a larger change down the line, of course, but for now, it’s progress.”

He tries not to look tired, thinking it.

She asks him some more questions, mostly about the new line up, of which he can tell her very little without a new charter for people to attach their signatures to. Finally, the producer signals her to wrap things up.

“So, Tony,” she says, overly friendly and smiling, leaning in a bit. “I hear there’s an alpha in your life.”

Tony grits his teeth. Rumors of him and Bucky abound. They’ve been spotted a couple of times, doing nothing particularly couple-y, but it’s enough for some. Tony Stark, willingly seen with an alpha who’s not James Rhodes? Stop the presses!

Tony didn’t want bringing his new team into the open to be like this, to be about who he is or isn’t dating, but of course it is, and really, he shouldn’t have expected anything less.

“Have you?” he says noncommittally. It adds fuel to her fire, but at this point, anything will.

“We’re talking about this man, of course,” she says, and Tony’s sure an image of Bucky appears on the monitor. Probably one of the really good paparazzi shots Peter showed Tony the other day, where Bucky’s coming back from what Tony assumes is a therapy appointment with two Starbuck in hand. One plain black house blend for Tony, and something with whipped cream and caramel for himself.

Apparently, Bucky takes the lifting of sugar rationing very seriously.

Tony doesn’t bother to look up at the image, though, doesn’t give it that much dignity. “I work with him,” Tony says.
He takes a peek out of the corner of his eye, just to make sure they are showing the right guy. He frowns. Not the picture he thought, then. Someone snapped a picture of the two of them at the specialty market Bucky dragged him to for his latest creation, and of course they found the exact moment where Bucky tries to re-direct Tony’s attention, hand on his elbow and face so earnest, extolling the virtues of fresh ginger root or whatever.

Well. It would have been nice to know that they even had this picture, Tony thinks, but no matter. He can handle anything.

“Are the two of you together?” She presses. Tony smiles, then mimes zipping his lips. She lets out a theatrical sigh. “Well, I suppose we’ll wait in suspense. But it begs the question—given the mating requirement, and the amount of alphas on your team—attractive alphas, too—why don’t you get mated?”

Tony smiles so hard he feel like his teeth might crack. “Well, Jessica, it doesn’t work like that. Call me idealistic, but I think mating means more than just a way around a stupid rule no one’s yet been able to adequately explain why it should exist. If you wouldn’t expect the whole team to pair up for efficiency's sake, then I won’t be doing it either.”

“Just one more question, then, before I let you go,” she says. “What’s the name of the new team?”

Oh, thank god, something light and easy. “We don’t actually know yet,” Tony says. “It’s been a pain in the ass, too, let me tell you.” He turns to look directly at the camera, and over it to the live studio audience. “But I’ve been told that Bucky Barnes is taking suggestions on social media, so if you have an idea, let him know.” That triggers a loud amount of cheering, which essentially drowns out Jessica’s wrap-up and signals Tony’s end on this program.

Tony groans when he steps out of the elevator, throwing his suit jacket and tie onto a chair, and kicking off his shoes.

“Well, that was a wasted day,” he calls, instinctively walking towards the kitchen, knowing where he’ll find his family.

Where he finds Bucky, brow furrowed, watching a video on his tablet while stirring something.

“What is that?” Tony asks.

Bucky frowns. “Peter showed me this thing, it’s all recipes, it’s called Tasty? Except the videos move fast.”

Tony smiles. “What was wrong with the blogs?”

Bucky shrugs. “Peter made me follow these guys on Facebook.”

Which actually explained a lot, Tony supposes. “FRIDAY,” Tony says, “Project the video’s instructions as a recipe for Bucky to read.”

She does immediately, and Bucky’s eyes scan it. “Thanks,” he says, and goes back to stirring.

“So, what are we making?” Tony asks.

“Well, there’s no we about it, Mister, ‘cause you are a menace,” Bucky accuses lightheartedly.

Tony holds up his hands defensively. “You burn one little thing...”
“You burnt the Sunday turkey,” Bucky exclaims. “I ask you to watch it and it comes out destroyed. Practically cinders.”

Tony nods. “I did do that, huh?” In his defense, he’d got caught up in section seven of the charter, going over the language on the phone with their lawyers. He leans over and kisses Bucky’s cheek. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

He picks up his discarded clothing items and takes them to the bedroom, hanging them back up and changing into a t-shirt and old jeans.

When he gets back to the kitchen, Bucky’s filling two plates with food. Tony looks around. “Where is everyone?”

“Peter’s home, ‘cause it’s a school night,” Bucky says. “Rhodey left for a hush-hush meeting he told me to tell you was ‘hypothetical?’” Tony’s eyes widen; Scott Lang might potentially walk away from the Avengers, then. “And Vision went off to do…frankly, I don’t know what. Whatever he does when he just leaves.” Tony has suspicions about where that is, but if Vision’s not saying, then neither is Tony.

“So…just us?” Tony double-checks.

“Well, and FRIDAY, but she’s promised to give us some privacy,” Bucky agrees. He brings both bowls to the table, then actually pulls Tony’s chair out for him, making Tony blush ferociously.

“Look at you, nineteen-forties omega courting,” Tony teases.

Bucky winces. “Let’s not even talk about courting in the forties, Doll, ‘cause we would’ve had a chaperone and I’d be asking your Dad, not you, to be here.”


Bucky shrugs. “You’re gonna have to tell me if Tasty did it any justice, ‘cause I’ve never had it before.”

Tony takes a bite, then another, then another, apparently hungry after his day. “‘S good,” he says. “Really good. Not as good as actual Pad Thai from Thailand, but good.”

Bucky looks at him in interest. “You’ve been to Thailand?”

“Uhm, yes?” Tony says. “I am a billionaire. I ran Stark Industries for two decades. I have been to many, many places around the world.”

“What’s it like?” Bucky asks. “I went some places when I was running from Steve, but mostly in Europe. ‘Cause I vaguely remembered it from the war. And, well, the Winter Soldier went lots of places, but I wasn’t taking tourist pictures, you know?”

Tony watches Bucky’s eyes light up, can’t help the soft smile that creeps up onto his face. “I’d like to show you,” he says. “We can go anywhere in the world you want, you know that? I’m serious. I have twelve billion dollars, I have a jet, name the place.”

“Someday,” Bucky says wistfully. “When this is all over.”

Tony clears his throat. “It’s never gonna be over,” he warns.

“When we’re no longer under threat of alien invasion, then, and trying to set up a new superhero
"team," he corrects.

"Speaking of that…" Tony begins, broaching the topic they haven’t recently, the one he does not want to talk about but knows he probably should. They’re friends, after all. “Have you spoken to Steve?”

Bucky looks like he wants to talk about it even less than Tony. He winces, all of a sudden sour and withdrawn. “Yesterday,” Bucky says shortly.

“How are they?”

“You know I only pick up so Steve won’t get the notion I’m under duress and come liberate me, right?” Bucky says. “I’m still fucking pissed at him.”

“How does he think that works, exactly?” Tony asks. “Like, the guy keeps thinking omegas are delicate little creatures in need of guidance, does he think this delicate, lost little omega strong-armed you away from your home, abducting a big, bad alpha, or…?”

“Anything I learned listenin’ to them for two years, they at least know you’re crafty,” Bucky says. “Even if they don’t appreciate it like I do.”

Tony smiles. “Crafty, huh?”

“Mhm.”

“He say anything else?” Tony asks, returning to the subject at hand.

Bucky shrugs. “He says a lot. Lot of it’s hot air. You don’t gotta worry about it.” He shakes his head. “We’re not going to talk anymore about that tonight.”

“Oh, we’re not, huh?” Tony teases.

“Nah. Acceptable conversation includes the food, your interview today, our friends, television, and the rest of the evening.”

“The rest of the evening, huh?” Tony says, eyebrow waggling. “That a euphemism?” Bucky, adorably, blushes. “If you want it to be.”

“We’ll see,” Tony says, taking another forkful. “I might be too full to get up to any…vigorous athletic activities.”

Bucky barks a laugh, which Tony considers a victory, before beginning a story about Peter from earlier that day. “And then we watched your interview,” Bucky finishes.

“Oh, you watched that?” Tony asks. “Be honest, how dumb did it look?”

“You did great, Tony,” he says, all honest and earnest in that proffusive way Tony doesn’t even know he needs sometimes until Bucky’s already doing it. “And besides, that was a good picture of us.”

Tony groans. “Just once, I’d like to talk about our team without them wanting to know who I’m dating.”

Bucky reaches out and squeezes Tony’s free hand affectionately. “Was that the last one?” He asks. Tony shakes his head. “Nah, Roxanne got one scheduled for tomorrow. That’s more aimed at the
Maria Stark Foundation, but I’ll work the team in somehow. Assuming Roxanne’s worked out answers that don’t make the team seem too sympathetic to the Foundation.”

Bucky frowns. “And why wouldn’t we want to be too sympathetic?”

“Well, we’re already dipping really far into the ‘omega sympathizers’ territory,” Tony says. “And I’m not saying it’s bad. Roxanne’s all for it, but then again, she’s always for that, that’s kinda her job. You and Peter have made it part of our social media mission, and Rhodey signed off on it. Fine. I won’t pretend it doesn’t make me happy. Really happy. But it’s…it’ll bite us in the ass. So I’ll be tied to the Maria Stark Foundation, I already am. But it might be a bit much for the team.”

“Tony,” Bucky says, that stubborn set to his jaw. “This team exists ‘cause we don’t agree with the Avengers on omega’s rights. We aren’t going to hide that.”

“This team exists to save the world,” Tony corrects.

“If that was true, then we could still just be Avengers,” Bucky says.

“Right, but people care that we’re going to protect them.”

Bucky looks frustrated. “Rhodey agrees with us. We’re not going to pretend we agree with the mating requirement. We’re going to do everything we can to undermine it.”

Tony sighs. He loves their idealism, loves that there’s a team that doesn’t crush Peter’s spirits. “If we push too far, we won’t get approval, and then where will the world be?”

Bucky’s frustration only seems to grow, and Tony didn’t even know that that was possible. “What’s the fucking point of saving the world if we don’t change it?”

Tony just stares at him. Remembers that idealism, even if it’s been a long damn time. Feels absolutely infatuated with it.

“God, I…” Love you, Tony almost says and barely stops himself in time. It’s not even true, he doesn’t think, but damn is he infatuated right now. “Bucky, I…thank you,” he manages. It’s awkward and dumb, but at least it’s not as awkward and dumb as blurting out potential love at the dinner table.

Bucky blushes, remarkably, his cheeks and ears going pink. “Just don’t compromise yourself for us,” Bucky says. “If we don’t stand for our ideal version of the team, then what the hell do we stand for?”

Tony just blinks at him for a moment, absolutely spellbound. “You know the…vigorous activities we were talking about earlier?” He asks. “I am definitely not too full.”

Bucky’s blush deepens. Tony is so, so helplessly charmed.

“You might be, after dessert,” Bucky manages.

“Dessert?” Tony perks up. “What did you make me?”

Bucky gets up and bustles around the kitchen for a moment. Deciding to be useful—because otherwise he might just watch Bucky’s ass in those jeans and his back and shoulders in that henley, which is probably inappropriate—Tony clears the bowls from the table. When he sits down again, Bucky sets down plates.
“Cheesecake?” Tony asks, delighted as he picks up a fork.

“Mhm,” Bucky says. He spoons some whipped cream on, letting it fall right over the strawberries.

“You spoil me,” Tony says, already breaking a piece of the cake off with his fork. He moans when he takes his bite, and then smirks because he knows Bucky is listening with rapt attention.

“Tony,” Bucky asks after a moment. “Were you…are you serious?” He sounds strangled, captivated.

“As a heart attack,” Tony promises.

Tony’s known this was coming since after his heat. It was inevitable, really, given the trajectory he and Bucky put themselves on, and Tony is more than happy to stay on track. Honestly, Tony’s almost surprised it took him this long. Then again, Bucky’s an alpha, and Tony has at least some self-preservation instincts.

Maybe he’s an idiot. Maybe Bucky is about to turn, use Tony’s vulnerability to show his true colors and take everything away from Tony. Tony doesn’t believe it in the slightest, but he supposes it could happen.

Then it will, he supposes. So far, he likes the ride he’s on with Bucky. He’s done his self-doubt, he’s done the self-interrogation, he’s done pushing Bucky away. That’s over. They’re here.

Besides. Bucky just gave a speech about letting the world burn for his ideas of Tony being treated like an equal. Tony’s never been more infatuated in his entire life.

Bucky’s watching him, eyes hungry and hopeful. “We…need to talk about it, then,” he manages.

“Not usually the next step,” Tony says, eating another bite of cheesecake.

“Right, well…I just don’t wanna…mess up,” Bucky says, and Tony knows Bucky’s watching the fork disappear into his mouth.

“What do you need to know?” Tony asks.

“Have you…ever…have you ever been with an alpha?” Bucky finishes really fast.


“Are you asking me how your old friend is in bed?” he demands incredulously.

“I just…I want to know what it’s been like for you!” Bucky defends. “I need to know, so I don’t mess up, or hurt you, and I’ve heard bein’ with an alpha can be real different than an omega or beta.”

“Yeah,” Tony says shortly. “It is.” He flushes, but answers the question. “It was…fine. Steve didn’t know what he was doing and wasn’t particularly great at taking direction.” That’s a bit of an understatement, Tony thinks. Steve had taken any hint of suggestion like a personal affront to his ability to be an alpha. Like alphas were born with the inherent ability to fuck, and they never learned. Never learned the skill or their partner. If Steve said it was going to work, then by golly, it would work.
“He hurt you?” Bucky asks softly.

“I wasn’t injured,” Tony says. “Uncomfortable, though? Look, the guy got the super serum. He’s hung, his knot is big, it was uncomfortable.”

Bucky frowns. “I don’t wanna make you uncomfortable.”

“Look, uh, I’m not super familiar with knots,” Tony says, and it takes a bit of effort to admit there’s sexual acts he’s unfamiliar with. “But I am familiar with my body, so…if you take suggestions, I think we can get there.”

“I expect you to be directin’ me the whole time,” Bucky says.

“So…has bringing up Rogers ruined the mood?” Tony asks.

Bucky winces at the reminder. “Let’s agree to never bring it up again and move on. Anything else I should know?”

“Don’t touch my neck,” Tony says immediately. “Not just, keep your mouth off my mating gland. Don’t touch my neck at all.”

Bucky nods. “Got it. Surprised you haven’t invented a way to keep people away from your mating gland.”

“Tried it,” Tony says. “But anything sturdy enough to be effective looked like a collar. Or one of those cones you put on dogs who’ve had surgery. And, well, you can probably imagine why I didn’t like those aesthetics.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, wincing.

Tony clears his throat. “Hey, Bucky?”

“Mhm?”

“I’ve wanted to kiss you for a while now. Basically since you said the world can burn. That was hot. So. Can I?”

“Let’s move to the couch,” Bucky suggests, and Tony takes the suggestion easily. He follows Bucky over, then plops into his lap once he sits, using Bucky’s shoulders to balance himself.

And then Tony kisses him, leaning down slightly to capture Bucky’s lips in a kiss. Bucky kisses back immediately, one hand clutching in the back of Tony’s t-shirt, the other raking through Tony’s already messy curls.

Tony bites Bucky’s lip, capitalizes on his gasp to work his tongue into Bucky’s mouth, and tastes the cheesecake on Bucky’s tongue, his lips, his teeth.

Bucky pulls back, breathing heavy, which is considerably gratifying, considering he needs less oxygen than the average human. “Tony,” he groans. “After your heat…you said you had ideas. Wanna share?”

“Mmm, wanna know what I fantasized about?” Tony asks lazily, biting his lip and rolling his hips slowly. Bucky’s hands snap to his hips, digging in gently as he watches Tony’s lips. “I dreamed of you blowing me, you up for that?”

It’s a challenge that Tony never really should have doubted Bucky would fail. “Get off me so I can
reach your dick.”

Tony laughs a bit. “Slow your roll, cowboy,” he says. “Trust me, there’s more.”

“Oh, yeah?” Bucky asks. “Like what?”

“I dreamed about sucking your fingers, while you stroked me off,” Tony says. “Sucking your metal fingers.”

Bucky’s eyes are blown wide and dark. “That get you off?”

“At this point, are you really surprised?” Tony parries. “I dreamed about you opening me for your knot. You were so soft and slow about it, it was like torture. Delicious torture. And then when you slid in…it felt great.”

“I want that too,” Bucky says, voice husky and low. “God, take my sweet time, treasure you, make you feel so damn good. Fill you up. You like being full?”

Tony moans. “Why don’t you take me to the bedroom to find out?”

And immediately, Bucky stands, using his metal hand under Tony’s ass to hold him up.

“I…fantasized about this too,” Tony admits.

“Yeah? Me too.”

“Carrying me?”

“Nah,” Bucky says, and he squeezes his metal hand gently. “Gettin’ my hand on your ass.”

Tony swallows and has no reply until Bucky gets them to the bedroom, then lays Tony out on the bed.

Tony immediately goes for his own shirt, working it over his head before arching his ass off the bed to work his jeans down over his hips. Bucky watches the arch of his body hungrily.

“Still want me to blow you?” Bucky asks hungrily, his Henley already gone and his metal fingers working his jeans open and down.


Bucky gets his jeans down, his underwear discarded without fanfare, and he gets the briefest look at Bucky’s cock before Bucky pounces on him on the bed.

Fuck. That is going to be a pain in the ass, probably literally. Almost certainly literally.

And then Bucky’s mouth is on his dick, and Tony fails to bite back his shout, hands fisting the blanket as his toes curl and his body arches. Bucky uses a metal hand to hold his hips steady as he gives Tony the sloppiest blowjob of his life, all spit and eager movements, sloppy and unskilled and so damn giving.

“Fuck, Bucky, you have no idea—I never expected—fuck, you are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen—” Tony runs a hand through Bucky’s hair, working the elastic out and sliding it onto his wrist so he can run his fingers through the strands. “Bucky, goddamn, you are—”

Bucky licks under the head and Tony goes nonverbal for a moment, before feeling heat building in his gut and gripping Bucky’s hair a little tighter in warning. “Stop, stop, I—I don’t wanna come
like this, I’m old and I only get one and I goddamn do not wanna come like this, we are not fucking done, and—”

Bucky’s already stopped, but Tony can’t stop his babbling until Bucky surges up and kisses him.
“You sure?” Bucky says. “Ain’t nothin’ says we gotta do anything else, I’d be more than happy to blow you all night.”

On shaky legs, Tony turns himself onto his stomach. “You wanted my ass, super soldier?” he taunts lightly. “It’s all yours. Impress me.”

“Oh, I plan to,” Bucky says huskily, then leans down and presses a kiss right to the top of Tony’s ass, at the dip of his spine. While Tony’s busy shivering, Bucky grips his ass, one hand on each cheek, and squeezes lightly. Tony’s eyes close against his will, feeling the metal hand with no give squeeze his flesh.

“Work of art,” Bucky murmurs. “Jesus Christ, and I thought it looked nice through your pants.”

“Worth the wait?” Tony asks. He might be preening a little bit. He knows his ass is nice, he’s heard people talking about it, and he owns mirrors.

“Doll, I’d’ve waited another hundred damn years for this,” Bucky promises.

“I don’t think it’d look so good in a hundred years,” Tony laughs, which turns shaky when Bucky bites his ass in retaliation.

“Oh, god, it is not gonna have nearly the same effect next time I tell someone to bite my ass,” Tony babbles.

Bucky bites him again, gentle this time, practically just a scrape of teeth. “I better be the only person biting this ass.”

“Gonna need a new phrase, then,” Tony says.

Bucky chooses to ignore that, and uses his hands to squeeze once more before pulling Tony’s cheeks apart, then runs his metal thumb over Tony’s hole. “You still sure you want this?”

Tony rocks his hips. “Yeah.”

“Know you can tell me to stop? You don’t gotta take my knot now. Or ever. I can jus’ finger you, nice and easy, for a while and honestly my life will have been made.”

“Your whole life, huh?” Tony teases. “Well, I’m gonna blow your fucking world, ‘cause I want you inside me.” He’s a little nervous, to tell the truth. It had hurt at first, with Steve—who Tony would very much like to not think about again, while he’s here in bed with Bucky. And he thinks Bucky will be different. More experienced, more willing to take direction without assuming it’s a personal affront.

But Bucky is…Tony’s given up, on not trusting him, on not wanting him. It’s an uphill battle, really, when all he wants is to be right here, sharing this between them, building something.

“You got lube?” Bucky asks, and that right there is already making Tony relax, that Bucky’s not assuming Tony’ll be slick and ready. The truth is, very few male omegas ever produce adequate amounts of slick. It’s more the body doing the bare minimum to prevent injury; it’s not meant for pleasure, no matter what porn says.

So Tony makes his shaky leg muscles work so he can get up on his knees and reach for the bedside
drawer, where he finds lube and tosses it to Bucky. “I’ll have to find a lube appropriate for your
metal hand,” Tony says, turning his head to smirk at Bucky.

Bucky just stares at him. “You kinky fucker.”

“Who’s teaching you words like kink?” Tony demands. “Tell me it’s not Peter, because—”

Bucky pins him to the bed, playfully growling near his ear. It tickles. “I can use the internet, thank
you,” he says. “And please don’t talk about your kid when we’re in bed together.”

“Peter’s not—”

“He absolutely is your kid, and we can have this discussion later,” Bucky says firmly. “I was
under the impression you wanted me to fuck you?”

“Mhm, yup, very much,” Tony agrees quickly, spreading his thighs to give Bucky as much access
as possible. This part, at least, is familiar to him, is comfortable and enjoyable, most of the time.

Bucky drips lube onto Tony’s ass, letting it run, cool and making Tony shudder, from the top of his
crack and down across his hole, where Bucky smears it around with his flesh thumb. “Just regular
human skin for you tonight,” Bucky says, rubbing his thumb gently around Tony’s rim.

Tony doesn’t even manage a clever reply, already a little out of it as Bucky continues that
maddening tease, making little circles with his thumb.

“Don’t tease,” he manages.

“Doll, it’s only a tease if I don’t follow through,” Bucky says. “But I intend to, believe me.”

He takes his thumb away, but before Tony’s whine is even complete, he gently presses his index
finger in, slow and steady up to the first knuckle.

When Tony bucks his hips for Bucky to continue, he obliges, making fast work of finding Tony’s
prostate once he’s in.

From that point on, Tony’s essentially a mindless mess, focused on pleasure and sensation but not
action. Aliens could invade and he wouldn’t know it, he thinks hazily, and it doesn’t really seem
concerning.

Bucky has three fingers inside him, playing his prostate like an instrument and pressing kisses
along his spine. “Tony, you want me to make you come like this, or you want my cock?”

“Get inside me, Buttercup,” Tony commands, words shaky but sure.

“You sure?” Bucky presses. “Even my knot? We can—nothing says we gotta tonight.”

“If you wanna, I wanna,” Tony manages. “You wanna fuck me?”

“Dream about it on good nights,” Bucky says, using his free hand to squeeze Tony’s left asscheek.
“You just try to keep talking to me, okay?”


Bucky chuckles. “Idiot. I need to make sure you’re feelin’ good.” Without warning, he gently
works his fingers free, leaving Tony wide open and wanting.

Tony whines and Bucky hushes him. “Rubber?”
Tony groans. “Drawer, drawer, Jesus Christ, hurry up—” The little packet of condoms has only been there for a few days, Tony remembers hazily, remembers Rhodey handing it to him with a stern but knowing look, remembering blushing like he was fifteen all over again.

Tony doesn’t look up, just listens as Bucky gets the packet from the drawer, tears the pack open and rolls it down his cock. He curses a bit, presumably at the already swollen skin at the base of his knot.

“Roll over for me,” Bucky says, practically tender now, losing the earlier urgency. Tony rolls onto his back, and Bucky runs a gentle metal hand from his collarbones to his cock and back again. “Beautiful. You ready for this?”

Tony nods, a little overwhelmed at what feels like his first real glimpse of Bucky, scarred and muscled, muscles bunching as he moves over Tony. He’s touching Tony with that lovely metal arm again, all metallic and intriguing and that is going to have to be something they play with later, Tony thinks.

And his cock. It’s Tony’s first serious look, and he was right, Bucky’s big and thick and it’s going to fill Tony entirely, fill him to bursting. Tony’s going to limp for days.

He wants the goddamn thing inside him yesterday.

Tony spreads his legs as wide as he possibly can, and Bucky works a pillow under Tony’s back before gripping Tony’s hips, one metal hand, one flesh. “Tell me what feels good,” he says, before slowly pushing inside.

Tony knows it’s just the tip pushing him open, but he already has his head thrown back as Bucky thrusts experimentally, not pushing any further in, just teasing the both of them. He gives it a moment before pushing in another inch, and then another, and then, slowly but surely, all the way in.

“Oh, fuck,” Tony hisses, eyes closed as he feels full and surrounded.

“Good oh fuck or bad?”

“Good, definitely good, goddamn you feel good,” Tony babbles.

“I’m glad,” Bucky says, circling his hips in a teasing way.

Tony bucks against him, and Bucky curses before pulling out and thrusting back in, slow and deep. “Good?”

“Mhm.”

“Need more?”

“Mhm.”

“Like what?” Bucky asks, and he sounds so fond, so softly amused, that Tony has to crack an eye open to look up at him.

“Kiss me?” He asks, needy and desperate for Bucky, for this to be soft and sweet and affectionate, for this to feel like it matters. For this to feel like he matters.

Bucky doesn’t answer, just contorts himself until they’re kissing, resting his flesh hand on Tony’s
chest for a moment before using it to roll a nipple, at the same moment he nips at Tony’s tongue, making Tony’s eyes roll back, his back arch.

Bucky pulls back just enough to rest their foreheads together, rolling his hips long and slow. Tony focuses, focuses beyond full and good and realizes Bucky’s knot is swelling, starting to catch on Tony’s rim as he pushes in.

Tony bites back his breath, expecting pain but feeling nothing more than the littlest tug, an ache. An ache he doesn’t want to end.

Bucky opens his mouth but Tony beats him to it. “Don’t ask if I’m sure again,” he warns, sick of the refrain even as he’s secretly pleased by it. “Fill me, fill me, fill me.”

Bucky kisses him again. “Not ‘til you come,” he says softly, lips still practically brushing Tony’s. “Not ‘til you’re open and soft and relaxed for me, Doll, lemme get you there, can I get you there?”

And then he snakes a hand down Tony’s stomach, pulling back just enough to make room, so his eyes can watch his progress, as his hand wraps around Tony’s cock. Tony’s breath catches, feels the fingers catching under the head before his eyes roll back.

Bucky strokes him evenly, determinedly, like it’s his goddamn job to get Tony off, and Tony just takes it, thrusting into it and wiggling for more, moving between the cock in his ass and the hand on him.

Most alphas don’t want to stroke an omega off, Tony knows, believing it says bad things about how they are in bed. Tony knows, he’s had the conversation. How omegas are supposed to be able to come from a cock alone, especially if an alpha’s fucking them. And sure, Tony has the sensitive prostate of almost all male omegas, he could maybe come from it, but he never has and no one’s ever put in the effort for that. Much easier—much more pleasurable, for him, anyways—if someone works his cock, which Bucky is doing expertly.

Tony’s orgasm is at once completely unexpected and obvious, rushing over him like a surprise wave even as it’s been lurking, building inside of him. He shouts, lets his head fall back, and his hands scrabble for purchase against the sheets.

“Got you, got you,” is the first thing he hears when he’s alert again, all soft and crooning from Bucky. “Look at you, all come-happy and relaxed, huh? Damn, so pretty.”

Tony takes a moment to remember how to speak. “Think I’m ready?”

“Wanna find out?” Bucky asks, and, at Tony’s nod, he slides completely in Tony one last time.

His knot is swollen slightly, but only enough to make it catch slightly on Tony’s rim. Tony’s body opens easily, wet and slick and lax between the lube, his orgasm, and his own slick. Tony’s mouth falls open as Bucky starts grinding in him, neat little circles of his hips that catch Tony’s prostate and make his knot begin to lock.

It’s big, that’s for sure. Big and filling and makes Tony squirm, half overstimulation and half desperate to feel more.

Bucky bends forward, kisses Tony again, and pulls away just long enough to say, “Tony, I’m—”

His hips stutter in little aborted movements as he comes, locked in place and yet desperate to thrust as his knot swells entirely inside Tony.
Bucky ends up leaning on Tony, panting a bit and wide-eyed. “That was…fuck, you’re amazing,” he says fervently. Tony can’t be sure, given the already seemingly impossibly full condom, but he’s pretty sure Bucky’s still coming, at least a little bit. “Was it good for you?”

“God, yeah,” Tony sighs, letting himself relax back into the pillows.

Bucky pulls himself upright, a move that makes his knot move inside Tony, making Tony keen. “No pain?”

“Nothing,” Tony says, then takes a second to marvel at that. “I feel…so damn good. Sore, I bet, but…good.”

“Happy to be of service,” Bucky teases, and he looks happy, hair all a mess and cheeks flushed, lips swollen. Tony wants to…well, Tony wants to make him have that look a lot more.

Bucky looks down and laughs slightly. “Thought you only had one in you?”

Tony looks down and realizes he’s half hard. “Huh,” he says. “Well, I’m old. Can’t guarantee I actually do have more than one in me.”

“Got another ten minutes ‘fore my knot shrinks down,” Bucky says. “Want me to try, or…?”

Tony leans back entirely, spreading his legs, trying to make the perfect picture of hedonism while being relatively limited in his movements. “Go right ahead.”

It turns out, Bucky’s a natural. Tony may or may not call him “dick whisperer” in his feverish, edge-riding haze, which only causes Bucky to laugh and kiss him stupid as he comes, for the second time, in one night.

Completely spent and exhausted, Tony lies boneless until Bucky’s knot slips out. Tony manages to lift his head up to look, knot receding and cock softening as Bucky ties off the ridiculously full condom and tosses it away.

Bucky stands, and Tony takes a moment to admire. He never really got a chance to see Bucky from the back yet. He admires now, and thinks he’ll need another chance when he can think clearer.

“Gonna get a cloth,” Bucky says, smiling slightly, touching Tony’s hip before moving off.

While he’s fiddling around in the bathroom, Tony’s hand rises to his neck. He knows Bucky was careful, knows Bucky went nowhere near there, that Bucky respects him and listened to Tony.

He prods around the skin of his gland. No bite. His gland is clear. Tony sighs in relief, letting the afterglow really begin.

Bucky emerges to clean him up, before settling back into bed with him.

Bucky pulls him close, spooning around Tony. “I tire you out?” Tony teases, exhaustion creeping into his own voice.

Bucky chuckles. “Baby, I am wrecked. You wrecked me.”

“Really?” Tony asks. Probably shouldn’t, probably should have bit his damn tongue a second and pulled together a flippant remark. But he has to know, if Bucky liked it as much as he did.

Bucky kisses the top of Tony’s head. “Really,” he assures him. “That was…you’re so goddamn beautiful and giving and that was amazing, Tony.”
“Well,” Tony says, awkward now, thankful Bucky can’t see his flush. “You’re pretty damn good yourself.” He swallows, tries again. “The…the best, Bucky. I’m serious. That was…that was the best.”

“M so glad,” Bucky murmurs. “Want you to get the best.”

And Tony, filled with lethargy and contentment and something that might be pure, blinding happiness, lets himself drift off to sleep.
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

A charity dinner, and then a charity.

Chapter Notes

Hello!

Here's our first late afternoon/evening post. This is how Wednesdays just have to work now, and I won't lie; some of them might be later than this.

This chapter deals with discussions of omega's right and histories. It also deals with that pervasive "it's not that bad anymore so stop complaining" thing every minority group hears.

We're still in the "this doesn't hurt too badly" stages of the fic.

Thanks for reading, all!

After his talk show recording, Tony really doesn’t have time for anything other than getting dressed and ready for the Maria Stark gala, so he locks himself in the bathroom and starts to get ready.

First, he removes the stage makeup a pretty omega named Jacqueline—two kids, husband is an alpha oversees, does makeup because it’s an acceptable enough omega job to put food on the table for her kids, polite and chatty and asks better questions about the Maria Stark Foundation than the talk show host—put on him before the show. Then he hops in the shower, letting the too-hot water soothe his back, where it aches after last night. It’s a nice enough ache, and Tony isn’t complaining, but he will be complaining if he can’t hold up through the long gala without pain.

Then he shaves, making his goatee as sharp and noticeable as ever. Once he’s done, he frantically checks the clock before running for the closet.

The suit’s not new, but he doesn’t wear it often. It’s a little loud. Not that that’s ever stopped Tony, but it’s louder than normal.

It’s gold.

But there’s really no need for subtlety. Tony pairs it with some ruby cufflinks, black shoes that cost nearly three thousand dollars, and then carefully styles his hair.

When he emerges from the bedroom, he knows he’s cutting it close on time and Pepper will no doubt kill him if he’s late. “Anyone seen my…coat,” he finishes lamely, confronted with the sight before him.
Bucky, in a tux. All classic, traditional black lines with a crisp, white shirt, filled out by Bucky. His hair’s been tugged back into a bun, and he’s even shaved. His eyes look even brighter than normal.

“Holy fuck,” Tony manages.

Bucky has the audacity to do a little spin, before smiling big and bright at Tony. “Like it? Rhodey helped me find it.”

“Yeah, and it’s the last time I play personal shopper for a guy who’s fashion sense lies somewhere between extremely retro and combat gear,” Rhodey grouses, throwing a coat at Tony’s head. Despite the whine to his words, he doesn’t smell aggravated. No, he smells fond, Tony thinks.

“Thanks, Platypus,” Tony says. “I owe you one.”

Rhodey snorts. “You owe me so many, Tony Stark. Now. Car’s waiting, I don’t want to be late.”

Tony, Rhodey, Bucky, and Vision get into the car. “So, are we, like, doing the whole thing together?” Tony asks Bucky.

“What thing?”

“This thing? The press, the party, all of that?” Tony asks, gesticulating. He sighs when it becomes clear that he isn’t getting through. “Are we going as a couple or not?”

Bucky takes Tony’s hand. “If you’re game, then so am I,” he says. “Tell ’em the truth. Show you off a bit.”

“I hope I get to see Roger’s face,” Rhodey says to Vision, and Tony successfully ignores it, staring at Bucky.

“You sure? Once you start this crazy train, you can’t get off,” he warns.

“I have already boarded the train,” Bucky says solemnly. “Let’s get it moving.”

Tony would honestly gape at Bucky for several minutes if Rhodey didn’t sigh and pull Bucky into a conversation, allowing Tony to fuss over Vision’s misaligned tie for a moment.

When the car stops, Rhodey and Vision make their way out, and then Bucky and Tony do, hand in hand.

The press goes wild, the cameras flashing brightly. Tony pulls together a press smile ad tugs Bucky down through the gauntlet.

Questions are shouted at them that Tony refuses to answer, just squeezes Bucky’s hand tighter until they make it to the step, where he sizes up the reporters. He almost wishes Christine was here.

“Mr. Stark, how have the Foundation’s priorities shifted, given the current political climate regarding omega superheroes?” Someone shouts at him. Finally, a decent question not centered around Tony’s sex life.

Tony snaps the fingers of his free hand, pointing at the reporter. “You. I like you. You get to come ask questions, chop-chop.”

The reporter, a young beta with hair that needs a cut and overlarge glasses, pushes closer. “How have the Foundation’s priorities—”
“Yeah, I heard you the first time,” Tony interrupts. “Well, the short answer is, they haven’t. The Foundation still puts money towards the same causes we know and love. Long answer is that this new team—which is still unnamed—has chosen to align themselves with the goals of the Foundation, which is pretty flattering to us. As a team, we’ve chosen to support the mission of the Foundation, to enable omegas to be equal in society and give them better access to jobs, services, and legal aid. So while the Foundation isn’t necessarily addressing the issue of omega superheroes, they are tied together.”

The young reporter nods, then bites his lip.

Tony sighs. “Go ahead and ask, kid.”

“You and Sergeant Barnes are—”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Yes, yes, we’re a thing. No, we’re not mated. No, we’re not talking about that right now. Yes, Bucky’s apparently very invested in dancing tonight. So, with that, we’re gonna say goodbye.”

Tony tugs Bucky away, up the last of the steps and away from the reporters. “Have I told you how amazing you look tonight?” Bucky asks, leaning in close. He’s full of some reckless sort of fondness, the kind of infatuation that fills you up and makes you invincible, that makes you want to take on the world. It’s kind of stunning to feel that directed towards him, honestly.

“Mmm, no, you have not, actually,” Tony says, leaning in closer himself, until there’s barely any space between them. He might have some reckless infatuation himself going on.

“Well, then I’ve failed and I need to say it a thousand more times. I like the suit.”

“Not too much?” Tony asks.

“Mmm, Doll, no. Just right.” Bucky pulls back just far enough to give him a conspiratorial look, followed by a long once-over. “Walkin’ behind you is a religious experience, whoever tailored those pants deserves a metal.”

“Well, it cost a couple thousand bucks, I think that was reward enough,” Tony says blithely, weaving them through the throngs at the door until they’re all the way inside the hall. “You want food?”

“God, yes, I’m starving,” Bucky says. “I did not think putting on a damn tux would take up so much time earlier.”

“Well, it was just a lot of time, not much work,” Tony says, approaching a waiter.

Bucky looks at the tray the waiter carries with disdain. “I thought you meant dinner.”

“Not a dinner party, Buttercup,” Tony says. “Just pass hors d’oeuvres tonight.”

Bucky sighs but picks up a blini. “We’re gonna have to get dinner after,” he says, almost mournful as he looks at the small portion in his hand.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be responsible for starving a super-soldier,” Tony teases. He looks around. “I need to mingle, talk people out of their cash, but after a few rounds, I promise I’ll dance with you. In the meantime, Vision’s probably going to hang out in the back, you can feel free to join him, don’t want to bore you to death.”

Bucky takes Tony’s hand back, clearly unsatisfying hors d’oeuvre devoured. “If you don’t mind,
I’ll stick with you.”

“Worried someone else is gonna ask me to dance first?”

“Just wanna watch you work,” Bucky says. “Maybe I can be helpful.”

Tony eyes Bucky up, takes in the pretty, well-dressed, earnest war hero alpha who probably is a good choice for talking people out of their wallets, if only he’d been coached first. Tony makes a mental note to run him through the basics, assuming Bucky isn’t scared off tonight and wants to ever come to a party like this with Tony again.

“Well, tag along if you want,” Tony says. “You might want to get a drink first, though.”

Bucky declines the drink but is perfectly charming regardless as Tony tours him around the room.

“Gosh,” he says, wide-eyed and earnest, and Tony does a double-take just at the word gosh. “It’s so sad these days, isn’t it? Charity is such an important American value, wouldn’t you say, and it really breaks my heart to see it in decline like this. I’m grateful Tony brought me here to show me that people still have goodness in ‘em. After all, think of the people who really need the money. Omegas left practically abandoned, kids to feed, no place to go. Whatever happened to the supportive family, anyways? Well, charity does as much as it can, I suppose.”

And then Mr. and Mrs. Mahoney walk off, likely to drop a bigger check, and Tony just gapes at Bucky, who is still radiating such earnest oh sucks-ness until the couple is out of sight. “You are a damn con-artist,” Tony accuses.

Bucky shrugs, then snags a crab puff off a passing tray. “Had to do something to feed us, back in the day. Turns out I haven’t forgotten how.”

“Charity is such an important American value?” Tony asks sardonically. “See a lot of charity in the thirties?”

“God no, not for omegas,” Bucky says. “Most of the time, you could see, they were just weighing how bad they could take. Then it might hit that, and, well, they’d take some more. Nowhere to go, sometimes kids to look out for. There were no jobs, and the ones that existed definitely weren’t goin’ to omegas. No shelters, no advocacy groups.”

Tony winces. “So everything you said was a fat lotta crap.”

Bucky smirks, small and secret. “Yeah, but gotta admit, it worked. People get their rocks off dreaming about the good old days being back again. I just thought, as a World War Two relic, I could help.”

Tony stares. “You are an evil mastermind,” he announces. “And you are hereby forevermore invited as my date to these things, and you cannot get out of it.”

Bucky squeezes Tony’s hand. “Good, was anglin’ for an invite back,” Bucky says. “Now. Point me to my next mark.”

“Conversation,” Tony corrects.

“I said what I said,” Bucky says serenely, snagging another crab puff. “God, I’m starving.”

“We’ll get dinner on the way home,” Tony soothes. He eyes the crowd for Bucky’s next suckers—no sense in denying it—and clears his throat. “You, uh, must think this is pretty stupid. When you’ve seen, well, you’ve seen how bad it can get, and here we are, and I own a Fortune 500
company and I’m still throwing fancy parties asking for money so I can have more.”

Bucky looks around furtively and pulls Tony off to the side, into a little alcove of the ball room. “Hey, where the hell does this come from?” Bucky asks, his voice gentle even as his words aren’t. Tony shrugs. “Just saying, omegas, comparatively, are doing fine. You saw some horrible stuff, and here we are, me having you shill for cash for my charity, and—”

“Tony,” Bucky says, cutting him off and putting a gentle hand on Tony’s jaw. “What’s brought this on?” He rubs his thumb over Tony’s cheek, which is just about the most distracting thing Tony can think of. “Someone’s said this to you, huh?”

Tony huffs. “Of course they have. It’s a pretty common refrain. Things are better now, there’s not much to complain about, we don’t have it bad these days, that stuff,” Tony shakes his head. “And you lived through the Great Depression and the War and all of it, so I thought—”

“Hey, Tony?” Bucky interrupts gently. “That ain’t how it works, Doll, okay?” He sighs. “Look, in my day, we said omegas had it easy. ’Cause they were, you know, valuable. So they tended to be mated to rich alphas, even the ones who grew up poor as me. Poorer, even. So while the rest of us were starving, they at least had food. No one looked at anything else.” He shakes his head. “People are always gonna say you have it easy now. Don’t make ’em right.” Tony can feel his righteousness, his indignation. It’s a little arousing, honestly.

Tony just blinks at him. “I never knew that, about the Depression,” he murmurs.

Bucky snorts. “That’s what you take away?!”

Tony shrugs. “History’s important and we didn’t get to write much of it.” Tony turns his head away. “So. You looking for a new mark?”

Bucky runs his thumb over Tony’s jaw one more time, and smiles. “Point me at ‘em,” he says, “and I’ll get them to open their wallets.”

After the fourth couple Bucky undeniably charms out of their cash, he steers Tony towards the bar, orders a whiskey, and throws it back. Tony’s brow furrows.

“You…okay?” He asks hesitantly, putting a careful hand on Bucky’s arm.

“Not a single one of ‘em is doing this to help anyone,” Bucky announces like it’s a revelation. Tony, who’s known this since he was a toddler, feels his heart break a bit. “They’re just…looking to rub elbows, or prove they’re compassionate, or score some goddamn points.”


“Or, let’s go charm some more rich assholes,” Bucky suggests.

Tony chuckles. “Nah, I think we’ve done enough for a bit. You know what they say, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. C’mon.”

“Or…maybe we shouldn’t,” Bucky hesitates.

“What has gotten into you?” Tony asks, stopping short when he can’t tug Bucky away from the
bar. “You’ve been all hot to go dance.”

Bucky sighs. “Rhodey told me, earlier, to let you lead,” he mumbles. “Only I got no idea how to do the steps backwards. Vision tried to show me, but I would’a stepped on him if he wasn’t, you know, floating.” He flushes. “Don’t wanna step on you and make a fool of us both.”

“Awww, Honey,” Tony says softly, unconsciously moving closer so he’s in Bucky’s space, hands on his chest. “It’s okay. I’ll teach you. Not tonight, though. Sometime without an audience. For now, I fully expect to be led around the dance floor by the expert dancer, James Barnes.”

Bucky looks less worried and more playfully affronted. “I’ll have you know, I was an expert dancer, once upon a time,” he says, and he lets Tony tug him to the dance floor. “Prepare to be amazed.”

Tony is rather amazed, as he’s carefully led around the dance floor. Bucky is talented, and a little showy for it. Tony’s smiling as they dance, knows there are eyes on them, knows there are probably cameras on them, and can’t really bring himself to care. It’s fun.

He catches Pepper’s eye sometime during the second song, and she taps her wrist. She at least looks a little apologetic. Tony sighs. “C’mon,” he says. “No rest for the wicked.”

And, regrettably, they stop dancing to find another mark.

It’s after midnight when Tony gives up and calls the car to come bring them home. He’s gathered up the troops. Rhodey looks tired and tipsy. He’s clearly been charming rich society women all night. Vision looks as unruffled as ever.

They go down the front steps again, and the press crowd has petered off, with only a few photographers left to snap final shots. Tony holds Bucky’s hand, lets them take their pictures, and then heads for the car.

“Hey, Bucky?” He says softly as they slide in behind Rhodey and Vision.

“Mhm?”

“You seemed…like you wanted to do more. Is that something you’re interested in?” He asks hesitantly.

“Course.”

“Well, if it’s really something you’re interested in…there’s somewhere I could take you tomorrow,” Tony offers.

Bucky looks at him, eyebrow raised. “Sure,” he says. “I’m up for it.”

“Doesn’t even ask where he’s being dragged,” Rhodey mumbles too loudly. “So, so gone on Tony.”

Vision pats him on the shoulder. “Indeed. And that’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Course it is,” Rhodey mumbles. “Tony deserves the best.”

Tony shakes his head fondly, but Bucky smiles and lifts his arm, inviting Tony to slide under it, which Tony immediately does.
“Go anywhere with you,” Bucky whispers, fond and soft and gentle and just for them. Tony hides his blush in Bucky’s tux jacket.

Tony makes Bucky get dressed to go out at noon the next day, then steers him towards the garage, picking out a relatively non-descript car.

Bucky stares at him expectantly as Tony navigates them out of the garage. “You gonna share where we’re headed?”

Tony lets out a huff. “You want to do more?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s a place. Well, there’s a few of them. But there’s one not too far away. It’s a shelter, basically. We do…a lot of stuff through there. Including things we maybe don’t mention to the donors.”

“Like what, the shock thing you got?” Bucky asks.

“God, no. That hurts and it’s dangerous, I wouldn’t inflict that on people. Couldn’t even if I wanted to; doing surgery randomly is illegal. We don’t have a good system to break the alpha voice. Yet,” Tony amends, because they will, someday, he’s absolutely sure of it.

“So what then?”

Tony shrugs. “Well, the numbers are bigger than my donors would ever believe. We give full educations, everything from GEDs to job training. Lots and lots of medical interventions, everything from regular checkups to cleaning up awful abuse, to pregnancy care and even terminations, if that’s what they need. Psychiatric assistance, when needed. A place to have heats not infested by creeps. Lots of stuff for the kids; lots of omegas stay because kids are in the relationship, so we make sure that doesn’t have to be a barrier.” Tony swallows, then says the one thing he’s not supposed to talk about. “Sometimes, an alpha is a truly awful human being, but they’re powerful and they have the law on their side, so…we can help an omega disappear. Like witness protection, only less legal.”

“How’s that work?”

Tony shrugs. “A rudimentary AI, basically FRIDAY’s baby cousin. That’s how we do it now, anyways; it used to be much more hands-on, taxing, and more likely to fail. Anyways, JOCASTA scrubs their old identity, forms an ironclad new one, and helps them get the paperwork they need to re-settle. If there are kids, the same thing.” Tony swallows again. “It…is super illegal and not something you can ever talk about anywhere remotely public, okay?”

“Oh, of course, Tony,” Bucky soothes. “That’s amazing.”

“It’s what people need. It’s, partially, what you raised money for last night. I mean, there are other shelters and medical clinics that money goes to, and it goes to grants that encourage companies to do job training, like SI, and there’s a couple subsidiaries we run it through that, eventually, gets it into the hands of activists and lobbyists, as well as scientists looking to make FRIDAY’s electric shocks obsolete.” Tony picks up speed as they get out of the city. “It’s kinda in an out of the way place. Not the most convenient, but we needed a lot of space. We do these pick-ups, to help offset it.”
They’re silent for a minute, Bucky watching the scenery pass by and Tony ostensibly focusing on the road, even if some of his attention is still clearly on Bucky.

“They gonna be okay with me?” Bucky asks. “Being, you know, an alpha? ‘Cause I don’t wanna upset anyone, or anything, just because I wanted to be useful.”

“Well, alphas do go through there sometimes,” Tony says. “Doctors, mostly? I don’t know, I’ve never brought one before. Obviously. So, just, read the room, follow directions. You’re good at that stuff, anyways. We’ll find you a job, nice and out of the way, promise.”

When they arrive twenty-five minutes later, Tony parks his car upfront and starts pulling boxes from the back. Bucky, bemused, comes to help.

“What’s all this?”

Tony points. “Toys,” he announces, then points again. “Clothes.” He hoists one up. “Tool box. I think one of these has candy in it, too.”

“When did you get all this in the car?”

“This morning, when you and Vision were arguing about eggs.”

“Guy can’t taste,” Bucky pouts, even as he hoists three boxes and lets Tony lead them to the door.


“Fun stuff, as always, Gen,” Tony says cheerfully. “And my friend, Bucky, who is my personal chef and ready and willing to peel a thousand potatoes.” He turns to grin cheekily at Bucky, who just smiles back.

“Nothin’ the army didn’t teach me,” Bucky says, shrugging.

“Well, lucky for you, potatoes are not on today’s menu,” she says, looking him over as she leads them inside. She does a double-take, sizing him up, but doesn’t really say anything about the alpha in their midst. Tony wasn’t lying when he said sometimes alphas came through here, but it’s always a process filled with rightful mistrust. He supposes Gen trusts him, which is buying Bucky the benefit of the doubt.

Once the boxes are set down, she draws Tony into a small hug. Then she turns to Bucky. “However, if you really do want to work, we could use some help in the kitchen.”

Tony hoists the tool box once more. “And you can point me in the direction of anything that needs fixing.”

She does with pleasure, so Tony fixes two sinks, the hot water heater, four children’s toys, one of the center’s laptops, and has a talk with JOCASTA about a weird glitch of sending every relocated omega new paperwork that, bizarrely, lists their former occupation as candle maker.

“Okay, I do not know how that one happened,” Tony defends himself to Tommy, the kid who’s watching him work with wide eyes. Kid might be a bit of a misnomer, he’s probably twenty-five or so, but he’s wide-eyed and hanging on Tony’s every word. “But it shouldn’t happen again.”

He’s a little leery about teaching anyone else how to maintain his AIs, given that even JOCASTA,
who is stripped down to the most basic programs, are free-thinking individuals. It would be easy to abuse and it makes him twitchy. That said, Tommy is a smart kid, likes to follow Tony around, and doesn’t seem keen to leave the center after he showed up two years ago. He does enough odd jobs around here to make him trustworthy and show that he’s a hard worker. Tony could show him a think or two.

Gen strolls back in, smiling. “Got another job for me?” Tony asks.

“Always, but first, take a break and come see your friend,” she says. Tony studies her. She doesn’t look harried or upset, so it’s probably not a bad thing. In fact, she looks soft, like she’d recently seen a cute puppy or something. Tony gets up to follow her.

Instead of leading him to the kitchen, she shows him to the daycare room, where Bucky is surrounded by empty sandwich bags, water bottles, toys, and small children.

Bucky wears a flower crown and a soft smile, sitting cross-legged and drinking water out of a tiny teacup. Tony stares.

“We sent him in with snacks for the kids and they haven’t let him go since,” Gen says. “First they played princess and knights—he was a horse—” Tony snorts. “And then they switched to tea party.”

Tony smiles softly while he watches Bucky pass apple slices to a little girl. “They like him, huh?” “Guy’s basically a teddy bear. You know, with guns,” Gen says lightly.

“No guns here,” Tony says. “Just the teddy bear.” Then Tony walks over and puts a gentle hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “Mind if I join you?” Tony asks the kids. “I’m famished.”

“You gotta wear a crown,” a little omega boy says imperiously.

“Will do,” Tony promises, taking a proffered foil crown of little stars.

“Tea?” a little alpha girl offers him a cup of water.

“Gross, no, you got coffee? I could really do with some coffee.” The little girl giggles, and hands the cup to him again.

“Coffee!” She announces.

Tony takes it. “Thank you,” he says, bumping his knee to Bucky’s, and grins as he takes a sip of fake coffee.

After tea party, the kids eagerly vote to play superheroes. Tony bites his lip, charmed by their actual democratic process led by the little boy with the foil crown. The little omega demands silent attention from the other kids, makes each of them vote by show of hands, and does not allow anyone to vote twice.

Tony and Bucky both end up as “helpless civilians” in desperate need of being saved, which leads to a seven year old trying to pull a “wounded” Bucky out of the line of fire with mixed results. Bucky’s trying to help without really looking like he’s helping, and all that ends up happening is both him and the seven year old land on their asses.

“Oof!” The kid grunts, then gets back up again, and Tony lets out a breath. Kids. Thank God they
bounce. He doesn’t really know what to do when they cry.

“What’s going on here?” A booming voice asks.

Tony spins and spots Andrew, an older omega who’s been working at the center since it opened fifteen years ago. About Tony’s height with none of the bulk, steel grey hair, hard eyes, and a scar down his left cheek that Tony, despite not knowing the full story, has always assumed came from a ring. He knows the look, after all.

Andrew’s eyes are like concrete walls, always have been.

Tony scrambles to his feet. “Hey, Andrew.” he says. Andrew is the type of guy who even Tony would address by last name, but Andrew doesn’t give one, ever. He refused the last name of whatever alpha he’d been mated to, and wasn’t too keen on his family name, either, by the sound of things. An omega with nowhere to go. As he once said to Tony, an omega who no one can claim possession of. So he was Andrew. “The kids were just playing.”

Andrew grabs Tony’s arm and Bucky, still on the floor with the kid, tenses like he’s about to jump up. Tony tries to use his free arm to gesture him down even as Andrew drags him away. “What on Earth are you doing, allowing that alpha around the children? Look at that, he nearly hurt Benny.”

“They were playing and Benny’s fine,” Tony says calmly. “Bucky came to help however he could today. I understand it, he helped make snack for the kids, then they asked him to play when he delivered them. He’s been their horse, their tea party guest, and their superhero bystander. I think he’s doing a good job.” Bucky still has a flower crown on, for god’s sake, Tony wants to argue. A flower crown, on the Winter Soldier, who has obediently sipped fake tea with his pinkie raised.

“He shouldn’t be around the kids anyways,” Andrew argues. “Hell, he shouldn’t be here!”

Tony takes a deep breath. Frankly, whatever he told Bucky earlier, even if the bit about the doctors was true, even if Gen was accepting, Tony wondered if they’d run into this. He doesn’t entirely fault Andrew. Tony too took his sweet time coming around to Bucky and he had ample opportunities to get to know him. “Look, I get your caution, here—”

“Do you?” Andrew interrupts. “Mr. Stark, you are not who we thought you were.”

Well, Tony rears back at that. “What do you mean?”

“First alpha to come sniffing around, and suddenly you’re all sunshine and rainbows, kumbuya with the alphas, hmm?” He accuses, and it feels like another slap. Andrew had always been polite to him. Allies, Tony had thought. Allies to take care of people here. Perhaps Andrew saw it as allies against all alphas.

Bucky isn’t the first alpha to come sniffing around, but that doesn’t seem like it will help his case right now. “You hear any of that from me?” Tony demands. “Bucky has earned my trust. There’s a world of difference.”

Andrew looks him over critically, like he’s judging Tony’s soul and finding it wanting. Tony suppresses a shiver. “And what makes you trust an alpha like that? An alpha who fought you once, no less?”

If only he knew, Tony thinks a little hysterically, incredibly glad Siberia never really leaked. “He’s earned it,” Tony shrugs. “How is my business.”

“He’s earned it for now,” Andrew corrects. “The thing about alphas is there’s always, always
something else. The other shoe always drops. Kids,” he says sharply, turning away from Tony. “Dinner is almost ready. Let’s go.”

Tony’s left reeling even as he tries to hide it, even as he high-fives kids. How many times has he thought it? How many times has he worried that the other shoe would drop?
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Summary

Tony has some stuff on his mind.

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

I am so sorry I didn't respond to a single comment this past week. Kids came back to school on Wednesday. It's been a busy week, to say the least. Last night was the first time I had a free moment, but I chose finishing chapter twenty-eight over comments. I read every single one and want to go back and reply to some of them when I have a moment. I'll try to be better about this chapter over the next couple days.

For those of you keeping score at home, I updated my outline last night, and it looks like we're looking at 34-38 chapters.

Anyways, thanks for your patience with me, and I hope you enjoy!

Tony drives them home in a conversation that, thankfully, requires minimal conversational input from him. He’s too busy thinking about Andrew.

It was true with Steve, everything Andrew said. Tony knows this. Steve was sweet almost all the time and Tony thought that Steve was probably the one he’d spend his life with, cornerstones of a superhero team. Steve argued with him and disagreed with him, but they’d had arguments and disagreements and that had meant a lot.

Steve, the alpha who had no reason to use the voice until he did. Steve, who, at the end of the day, had simply valued other things more than Tony’s choices.

Bucky isn’t like that. Bucky hasn’t been like that, won’t be like that…but then again, Tony didn’t think Steve would be, either.

Tony hasn’t wanted to think of Bucky like that, not since he’s dived into this, head first and caution thrown to the wind. Not since he’s decided Bucky just simply won’t be another mistake.

And just like that, navigating Midtown traffic, Tony’s mind strays to what Bucky would value more than Tony, what he’d use the voice for.

Things Bucky cares about…well, food, Tony supposed, although he obviously can’t picture Bucky getting so bent out of shape over fresh produce or whatever that he’d break Tony’s trust.

HYDRA, but Tony’s not going to join a literal Nazi organization to prove a point.

And then it hits Tony. Me, he thinks. The thing Bucky cares about...is me. It’s a disconcerting
feeling, leaves something softly unsettled low in Tony’s stomach, but it’s true nonetheless.

_For your own good,_ Tony thinks morosely. How many times has he heard that excuse?

Tony drives back to the Tower on auto-pilot, parks the car in the garage, and mumbles some excuse about needing to work in the lab, and puts the place on lockdown.

Historically, he knows how this goes. The first few hours are fine, indulging the crazy genius. Couple after that are more impatient than anything else. Then comes the pushing and the asking and the ordering. Tony remembers.

“FRIDAY,” he says. “Bring up the Iron Legion files, won’t you?”

Iron Legion, alpha voice filters as cochlear implants, taking a digital red pen through ten pages of their charter, none of it is particularly productive. Or rather, it feels like grinding through problems, which Tony has no issue with, except when he usually locks himself away like this, it’s because he’s been struck by genius. Time usually moves faster than he can keep up with, but now it’s a slow grind.

“Boss,” FRIDAY pipes up. “Sergeant Barnes left dinner outside the door.”

Tony blinks. “He…what?”

“I told him the place was on lockdown and he said it was fine, but asked me to let you know he was leaving food. It looks like a turkey sandwich.”

Tony just stares for a moment before shaking his head. “And is he…he left?”

“Yes, Boss.” She hesitates a few seconds. “Boss, if I can ask; why are we hiding from Sergeant Barnes?”

“Because I am an idiot,” Tony says succinctly, opening the door and taking his sandwich. Once the door is shut again, he takes a bite. It’s delicious, some sort of fancy mayonnaise, he thinks.

He feels like crap about it.

“Boss,” FRIDAY says hesitantly. “I’m still not sure I understand.”

Tony sighs. “Yeah, me either. We’re in lockdown for a little bit, though, okay?”

“Of course, Boss,” she says. “What are we working on now?”

“Boss?” FRIDAY says.

“Yeah, FRI?”

“Sergeant Barnes left…something for you,” she says, oddly vague.

“Something?” He teases. “What, can you not identify his cooking?”

“I don’t believe it is edible,” she says. “At least, most of it isn’t.”

“He burn something?” Tony says as he opens the door.
There, on the floor, right outside the door, is a little collection of items.

First, there’s a small Iron Man plushie, looking, to Tony’s eye, homemade. The little crocheted superhero has a head too big for his body, and Tony loves it immediately, picking it up and pulling it close to his body.

Then there’s a little jar of chocolate covered almonds, which Tony snatches up with his free hand.

Lastly, there’s a single daisy, which Tony just blinks it.

It’s white, pretty, the petals still perfect even as it was left on the floor. Tony, who knows next to nothing about flowers, except having an assistant who will order them as necessary, stares.

“FRI, does this, uh…mean something?” He ventures.

She’s silent for a few seconds. “Oxeye Daisies typically represent patience,” she offers.


He picks it up, and brings it to his face for a moment, before turning back into the lab and closing the door. The little Iron Man goes on his couch, the almonds on his work bench, and the daisy goes on the little kitchenette counter, standing in a clean coffee mug filled with water.

“Boss?” FRIDAY interrupts his concentration.

“Mhm?”

“It’s been forty-six hours. You have eaten four of the meals Sergeant Barnes left and have only slept a few hours on the couch. Might I suggest a break?”

Tony does feel a little tired. “Not yet,” he says, getting back to work.

Next, Bucky leaves a screwdriver. It’s one of Tony’s, he must have left it lying around somewhere. Bucky returns it with a little ribbon around it, making Tony snort. He didn’t even know that they had ribbon.

Lunch comes, and with it a little Spider Man doll to go with the Iron Man, which Tony hugs immediately. It looks good, sitting with the Iron Man on the couch.

A few hours later, there’s a framed picture of that paparazzi shot Tony was confronted with on the talkshow, him and Bucky being cute at that market Bucky likes.

Tony feels bad. The food, the gifts—it’s too much. Bucky does care about Tony, alright, but he’s not banging down the door. He’s not shouting orders through the glass, not intimidating FRIDAY into getting through to Tony.

In short, he’s not pushing in any way, shape, or form.

Honestly, it’s a little disconcerting, to realize he’s been down here a while—fifty-four hours, according to FRIDAY—and nothing’s happened.

Something that feels like hope blossoms in Tony’s chest, quickly paired with embarrassment.

“FRIDAY?” He asks. “What’s…what’s Bucky up to? Uh, generally. Don’t, like, override privacy
“Sergeant Barnes seems to miss you,” FRIDAY says, perceptive as ever. “However, he’s keeping busy, and has been helping Mr. Parker with the Twitter account for two hours now.”

“Good…that’s good,” Tony says quietly. He swallows. “Can you bring my satellite procedures back up?”

Tony closes his project. It’s as far along as he’s going to get, as tired as he is. “Hey, FRIDAY?” He asks. “How long’s it been?”

“You’ve been in lockdown for nearly sixty hours. You have slept five, in three separate attempts,” she says. She pauses a beat. “Sergeant Barnes is on his way down with a meal.”

Tony waits for a small moment. “Lift the lockdown, let him in,” he says.

“You sure, Boss?” FRIDAY asks.

“Yup,” Tony says, popping the door open as the tint in the windows lighten. He’s standing in the door when Bucky hits the bottom step, coming down from the penthouse.

Bucky does a double-take. “Hey, Tony,” he says with a smile. “Omelette?”

“Did you bring enough for two?”

Bucky looks…hopeful, Tony realizes, eyes bright in a way that makes Tony’s heart ache. “Not really,” Bucky says. “But I can make do.”

There’s no talk of him going back upstairs, making another omelette. He’s likely afraid Tony will disappear. Tony leads the way back inside the room, and Bucky sets the plate down on the workbench. He looks around. “See you got the gifts.”

“Yeah.”

“You like them?”

“Of course I did,” Tony says. “They’re…really sweet, Bucky.”

“I’m glad.” Bucky says, blushing. “They’re…uh…a Winter Soldier thing,” he admits. “It’s this…compulsion? Sort of? One minute I’m walking back from therapy, the next I’ve bought an entire plush collection from a street vendor and I’m halfway to the nearest florist’s.”

Tony chuckles, and there’s still a heaviness about him, but it’s lightening. “And you were worried about your bad side,” he teases. “Look at you, buying stuffed animals and flowers. Your dark side is a puppy dog.”

Bucky smiles softly, and Tony thinks he looks proud of that fact. “Yeah, but mostly just for you,” Bucky says. “The Winter Soldier, when I get like that…I could still rip someone’s head off. But for you, that part of me is basically all about being a good alpha. It wants to feed you and give you things and make you want to stay with me, prove that I can be good to you.”

“Like I said, puppy dog,” Tony says softly, and he breaches the space between them to touch the back of Bucky’s hand. Bucky flips it in a moment, holding Tony’s hand. It makes warmth spread through Tony, from his fingers, all the way down his arm and through his chest. Bucky’s alpha instincts, those much-touted instincts supposedly driving their biology, are all tied up in the Winter Soldier. And the Winter Soldier, apparently, is all tied up in providing and making Tony happy. It’s a heady sort of feeling.
“You get good work done while you were locked away?” Bucky asks.

Tony blinks. “Surprisingly, yes.” It’s true; he may or may not have a new missile system meant for earth orbit to launch within the month.

“Why is it so surprising?”

Tony takes a deep breath. Truth time. “I…may have not come down here strictly to work.”

“What d’you mean? I assumed somethin’ at the center sparked somethin’ for you.”

“Well, it sparked something, alright,” Tony huffs. “No, it’s…uh…this is embarrassing.”

Bucky squeezes Tony’s hand. “Go head.”

“Well, I just…at the end there, when you were helping the kids wind down, Andrew pulled me aside. And you have to understand, I’ve known Andrew fifteen years. Always respected him, and he’s always respected me. We kinda had this solidarity thing going on? But then he saw you, first alpha I’ve ever publicly been with and definitely first I’ve brought there, and he just…he didn’t like it. Said that I was an idiot, basically, and that things would backfire on me, and I should just wait. They always did.”

Tony chanced a look up. Bucky doesn’t look as mad as he thought he would. Sad, yes, but also accepting in a way that makes Tony’s stomach turn. “And since things always had backfired before, you assumed they would again,” Bucky agrees.

“That’s just it! They haven’t!” Tony says, realizing it himself for the first time with a sinking feeling in his gut. “Look at Rhody. That fucker’s been my best friend since the eighties. I was a dumb fourteen year old, and I’ve been an idiot ever since, and he’s never once used the voice on me and I shouldn’t assume every alpha will.”

“Rhodey’s been an outlier in your life,” Bucky says softly. “And after Steve…” The implication hangs heavy in the air.

“I don’t want to see you like Steve!” Tony practically shouts. “I don’t. You’re not him and it’s the last thing I want. So I…I made you prove it. Tested you.”

“How was sitting in your lab testing me, exactly?” Bucky asks.

“I thought about things you cared about,” Tony says. “Things that might push you to cross that line. Use the voice, maybe, or just get pushy. Just so…I’d know. Either the shoe drops or it doesn’t. I abandoned the most stupid ideas, the ones most likely to put me in danger—you should actually be proud of me for that, that is remarkable restraint on my part—and this is what I settled on. If I did the thing where I disappear into work and abandon all those pesky things people do to stay alive.”

Bucky swallows, throat visibly bobbing. “Someone…someone voice you for that before?”

Tony shakes his head. “No. Steve would…Steve would get pushy,” he says. “But I also almost always gave in, heading it off before it became more serious. Or we’d turn it into an actual fight and have a whole different issue on our hands. I just needed to see what you’d do,” Tony admits, covering his face with his free hand. “God, I am so fucked up.”

“Hey,” Bucky says softly. “I stalked you across the country because my instincts told me to. It’s okay.”
Tony immediately shakes his head. “No. No, we’re not trading fuck-ups, like some awful one-upmanship. I am shit at relationships, I really am, but even I know that’s the wrong answer.”

“Then how about we just forgive each other for them, where we can?” Bucky asks. “I forgive you for this.”

“I basically manipulated you for…” He trails off.

“Sixty hours,” FRIDAY supplies.

“Sixty hours,” Tony echoes. “That’s a lot to ask forgiveness for.”

“Did I pass your test?” Bucky asks patienty.

Tony sighs. “Of course you did.”

“You told me, when we started this, that I needed to know that you cared, but were half a second away from bolting. I haven’t forgotten,” Bucky says. “I knew goin’ in that we were gonna have to work out the boundaries a bit.”

Tony lets out a breath he wasn’t even sure he was holding. He isn’t sure he deserves forgiveness, but he does understand that he’s getting it regardless. “For the record,” he says. “I don’t wanna be, like, that boy who cried wolf or whatever. If I go into lockdown, it’s because I have a sensitive project I need to fully focus on. I won’t…I swear I won’t do this again. It was shitty and I’m not even really sure how I talked myself into it.”

“You wanted to be sure,” Bucky shrugs. “I get it. And I assumed that. I figured, you do damn important work. Probably could use some help with the basics like food, but you’d come up for air when you were done.”

And that’s…that very idea has been so hard for so many to get, and Tony’s gratitude catches in his throat. “…I don’t want to be like Andrew,” he says. “He’s so goddamn bitter and alone, and I’m not saying he doesn’t have his reasons, but I won’t be that. I’m not gonna go get mated tomorrow or, or suddenly start being Mr. Congeniality with alphas, but, with you. I’m. I just. I trust you.”

Bucky looks like the wind was knocked out of him, eyes wide and chest still for a moment. “Thank you,” he says softly. “Swear I won’t disappoint you.”

“I think I am the disappointing one, here,” Tony says.

“No,” Bucky says with a vehemence he hasn’t had the entire conversation. “You’re not. I ain’t gonna pretend it doesn’t hurt, but, well…you warned me. And I understand.” He squeezes Tony’s hand. “So, you got some work done. What’d you do?”

“Invented laser cannons, but for space?” Tony says. “It sounds stupid, but hear me out.” He proceeds to explain it, the satellites, how exactly they’ll be built and launched, and how they can be targeted. “At least, theoretically,” Tony says. “No one’s ever tried this before. But my math is pretty much never wrong, so…” He shrugs. “Can’t hurt, at this point.”

Bucky looks at him, that look that makes Tony fight not to squirm in his seat. “God, that’s impressive,” he says. “You did all that in…less than three days?”

Tony shrugs. “I mean, I’d already started the designs. Just had to do the math.”

Bucky’s phone buzzes, and he fishes it out of his pocket before reading quickly. “Rhodey says to come up,” he says. “And if I found you and wasn’t just lurking outside the door, to drag your ass
up too.” He looks up. “I’m not really planning to drag you anywhere; you better plan on walking.”

“I don’t know,” Tony says, pretending to think about it. “You’re a super soldier, all big and strong. You have that nice arm and everything. It’d be nice, to not have to walk anywhere anymore.”

Bucky snorts, and firmly quashes the idea by grabbing the plate, then grabbing some of the other dishes Tony’s left lying around. “C’mon,” he says. “If Rhodey wants to say what I think he wants to say, you’re gonna want to hear it.”

They’re all gathered around the kitchen table. Rhodey, Vision, Peter with his mask on, Hope Van Dyne, Scott Lang, Stephen Strange, and Wong. Tony blinks. “Is this an intervention?” He asks.

Rhodey snorts. “Not this time, Tones. No, we have news.”

“Good news?”

“We got our Charter approved!” Peter exclaims, the news bursting out of him just like all exciting things do with the kid.

Rhodey chuckles. “You ever kept a secret in your entire life, kid?”

Even through the mask Tony can tell Peter’s blushing, so he jumps in. “That’s fantastic!” He says. “It’s final?”

“Final-final,” Rhodey confirms. “We’re a real team now.”

“One without a name still,” Scott Lang says.

“Details,” Bucky says, smiling. “Trust me; the people will help us figure it out.”

Tony looks at the newcomers. “So, you guys…”

“Signed this morning,” Stephen Strange confirms.

“So it’s…”

“It’s done, Tony,” Vision says. “We are our own team now.”

It’s a major victory. Not that they’ve overthrown the Accords, or anything—or, rather, the parts that they don’t like—but it’s still a major victory to be their own team. For one thing, they get to determine the leadership structure, training, and how to appoint new members, as long as those members sign the Accords and aren’t unmated omegas. They get to determine what requirements are placed on members and who their support staff is. They get to write their own inter-team bylaws.

Tony hugs Bucky, who laughs and actually picks him up off the floor and spins him once, before setting him down and pulling him into a kiss, which Tony eagerly returns.


Hope swats him. “Shut up, you old grump.”

“Yeah, you old grump,” Scott echoes, then glances at Hope from under his lashes. If he thinks he’s going to get back in her good books that easily, he’s got another thing coming, Tony thinks.
Then he’s promptly distracted away from the woes of Scott Lang by Rhodey. “There’s one thing that’s not settled,” Rhodey says. “We need an Accords Liaison still. And…our Charter has no requirements, other than they’re elected by a majority vote. And it’s not a field position, so technically the Accords themselves don’t put any requirements on it either.”


“Think about it,” Rhodey barrels on. “I’m not saying you have to or even that you should. But they’re not going to let you in the field right now, and you know the Accords inside, outside, and backwards. And, well…we have a Charter now, the mating requirement is enshrined in the Accords—for now. We’re not going to kick you out of our team, even if you’re not allowed to fight. What else can they do to you?”

Tony sees Rhodey’s logic and mulls it over. “Doll, you don’t have to do this,” Bucky says. “You don’t have to deal with those assholes if you don’t want to.”

“It’s an official position?” Tony interrupts. “They have to let me in, give me a seat at the table?”

“Enshrined in the Charter they just ratified and everything,” Rhodey promises.

Tony thinks about it. Everything Rhodey says has merit. Tony wouldn’t exactly be hands off, with the team—there is far more to him than just Iron Man—but it would still be a little empty. Or, at empty as Tony’s crazily busy existence ever is. This would be something to do.

With a seat at the table, a seat they’re forced to acknowledge, a seat they can’t take away short out outright incompetence…

“Yeah, alright, sign me up,” Tony says. “ ‘Bout time I remind them what a pain in the ass I can be. In the meantime, social media team,” he says, turning to Peter and then to Bucky. “We’ve got work to do. Meeting with the PR team in three hours, I’ll get them on the line, chop-chop, things to do.”

The meeting seems to break up with Tony’s little command, everyone milling off to do whatever it is they do, but Bucky gently grabs Tony’s arm and spins Tony into him.

“Three hours, huh?” He asks.

“Mhm.”

“Whatever can we do with that time?” Bucky teases, running his metal fingers along the inside of Tony’s forearm in an incredibly distracting way.

“Well, the PR team, I gotta call them.” Almost without thinking, Tony’s hands grab Bucky’s sweatshirt, pulling him closer.

“So, two hours fifty minutes to kill, then,” Bucky says, leaning close to Tony, not caring who watches.

Tony swallows. “I suppose, uh, we got sixty hours to make up for.”

“That’s the spirit,” Bucky says quietly, right in Tony’s ear. Tony can’t help but shiver.

“Get a room!” Rhodey hollars.

Tony pulls back just far enough to come back to the real world, just for a moment. He shrugs. “You heard them,” he says, and leads Bucky away.
Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets his moment in the limelight, and we meet some new-ish friends.

Chapter Notes

Hello all--

No, I didn't forget you. I sincerely just got home from work. My hours are deplorable.

Warnings for a fight scene, and someone getting injured but not in a graphic or super serious way.

Enjoy, all!

Tony straightens Bucky’s tie for the fourth time. It’s not actually crooked, but it’s a socially acceptable way for Tony to have his hands on Bucky, and right now, Tony’s hands seem to be all that’s keeping Bucky from falling over.

“You got this,” Tony says soothingly. “Just like we practiced.”

“I know,” Bucky says. “It’s stupid, I just…never talked to literally millions of people all at the same time before.”

“You’re really only talking to one,” Tony muses. “The others are all just eavesdropping.”

“Not super helpful.”

“Sorry,” Tony says. “Look. I’m right here. The whole time. And if you want to stop, we stop right now, okay? I’ll go out instead, I have plenty of talking points I could use, no one will be mad or angry or disappointed.”

“No,” Bucky says quietly. “No, I got plenty of things I want to say and they wanna listen to me say them. I’m going out there.”

“Alright,” Tony says, running his hands across Bucky’s lapels. He smiles. “Tell me the truth. You pick this tie for a reason?”

“What, this?” Bucky asks, plucking at the red and gold tie and genuinely messing it up this time.

“Yeah, well. You know what a Gryffindor I am.”

Tony smiles. “Liar,” he says, and not just because he’s looking at a genuine Hufflepuff, according to the Pottermore quizzes Peter made them all take and Bucky had proudly posted on their Facebook. He fixes the tie one last time. “I’m right here.”

Bucky nods, then follows the PA to his mark, waiting to be called onto the set.
Tony watches the monitor backstage, fingers crossed but not too worried. Bucky can do this. He’s a charming bastard when he wants to be, and they’ve practiced.

Tony zones out a bit, eyes on the monitor but brain not fully focused. Bucky looks good. If you didn’t know him, you would never see the nerves. His metal hand clenches the seat cushion slightly, but his flesh hand moves animatedly while he talks.

“No,” Bucky says in response to something the host said. “No, I don’t ever think it’s appropriate to use the voice. Ever.”

“Well, then why would alphas have that voice, if nature didn’t intend them to use it?” The host challenges.

Bucky shrugs. “Evolutionary quirk. It takes a while for the stuff we don’t need anymore to fade out.”

“So you have the science background to tell us that the alpha voice is going to fade away over generations?”

Bucky snorts. “Hell no. What I can tell you is it doesn’t matter if it does or doesn’t. Human beings are supposed to be rational, and good, and compassionate. We’re supposed to have these big brains that developed morals and all that. If we really believe we’re all that, then the alpha voice just doesn’t fit in.”

“What do you say to the people who argue that you only feel this way because your time at HYDRA essentially made you an omega?”

“Well, I’d say torture doesn’t make you an omega. Say what you mean; it made me break and it made me do their bidding. That don’t make anyone an omega. Might be what people want omegas to be, but it isn’t what they are.”

“So maybe the alpha voice isn’t acceptable in everyday life,” the host says, changing tracks. “But surely you must see its benefits out in the field?”

“No,” Bucky says firmly, leaning back in his chair a little bit. “No, I think we have pretty concrete evidence about how it could go wrong,” he says. “Steve Rogers might be my oldest friend but he’s an idiot and he still hasn’t apologized for that.” Tony blinks. That was not in their rehearsal. “But even if we hadn’t seen that evidence, the fact is, you have to trust the people in the field with you. If you don’t, everything falls apart. And if you’re using the voice on an omega, then you don’t trust them. Control and trust ain’t the same thing,” Bucky says. “So you have to decide; either omegas are capable of being in the field, we can trust ‘em, or we can’t. And I think Tony’s—and not just Tony, but let’s use him as an example—given us plenty of evidence why he can be trusted. He flew a warhead into space. He took down Iron Monger. He helped save the President of the United States, along with Colonel Rhodes. He’s been willing to sacrifice himself to save others time and time again. So if you ignore all that evidence to say omegas can’t be trusted on the field, well,” Bucky shrugs. “You’re just an idiot, I guess.”

There’s some shocked laughter from the audience. Bucky flashes them a little smirk, which looks so natural, except Tony knows he practiced it in the bathroom mirror.

“So, the mating requirement—”

“Absolute garbage,” Bucky smoothly interrupts.

“Yes,” the host says after a moment. “But you have to admit…since you’re dating Tony Stark…”
“If I need a mating requirement to get Tony to look at me twice, then I don’t deserve him,” Bucky
ends, and with that, the host steers them to the commercial break.

“Goddamn right,” Tony mutters viciously as Bucky shakes hands with the interviewer and walks
off set, one final wave and smirk for the audience.

Tony grabs him as soon as he’s clear, pulling him in by the tie that, until that moment, was still
pristine. “Goddamn perfect,” he says.

Bucky’s hands come up to cup Tony’s shoulder blades. “Yeah?” He asks. “I do okay?”

“You did fantastic,” Tony promises. “People will be talking about this for weeks.” He doesn’t
rehash what the already know. That Bucky’s words count for a lot, more than Tony’s. That, now
that there are two superhero teams out there, the general public sees it as a sort of tension where
they need to decide which team is better. That they need the moral high ground, even if it’s an
uphill battle much harder than the one the other team is fighting. He releases Bucky’s tie, leaving
it a rumpled mess. “Now, pretty sure I promised you the meal of your choice afterwards.”

“Too inappropriate to say you?” Bucky asks quietly, walking with Tony to the door.

Tony flashes him a grin. “Super soldiers cannot live on ass alone, Buttercup.”


“Well, then, steak it is,” Tony promises.

Of course, their lives being what they are, they don’t get it.

Tony’s trying to bring them to a steakhouse near the Tower when FRIDAY’s voice rings out over
the car’s speakers. “Boss? The Council is looking for you.”

Tony sighs. “What do they want to yell at me for this time?” He asks. It…hasn’t been going well.
At least Tony can yell back now, figuratively speaking. It’s nice, being an official member of the
Council that they can’t boot out, able to be passive-aggressive and petty and not having to pull a
single one of his punches.

“No, Boss. There seems to be an incident, and aliens might be landing in Washington.”

Tony groans. Four days before his satellites are scheduled to launch. Of course.

“We have a green light?” He asks.

“The President himself has requested the team’s intervention.”

So Tony has to call Rhodey to get the team mobilized, and then drive them back to the Tower so
Bucky can gear up and go with the rest of them. Bucky stops for one hard, quick kiss, and then
dashes off for the newly re-designed quinjet.

Tony is left in an empty Tower, frowning.

He sighs, the rubs a hand through his hair. Might as well accept it. Iron Man is benched, long-term.
“FRIDAY, get me feeds,” he says. “I want everything; traffic cams, ATM cameras, I want their
suit feeds, I want their comms. If someone is taking an interesting cell phone video, I want it in
front of me in thirty seconds.”
The feeds are there, and Tony blinks at all the input before adapting and beginning to process it. He doesn’t usually get to view fights this way, FRIDAY sorting what’s important and what’s not when he’s in the suit, only feeding him the most vital input to the HUD, because, well, he has to concentrate on flying. And after the battle, they only ever watch the most relevant pieces.

This is…everything. This is an ATM camera showing an alien flipping a car and a traffic camera showing people running and Rhodey’s HUD camera, paired with soft, clipped orders on the quinjet.

“FRIDAY, if the old Avengers are in-coming, I need to know about it,” he says. “I don’t need all their feeds, I just need some situational awareness, here.”

He’s already mapping routes and tracking groups of aliens, watching their attack style, following their spiral patterns. He pulls up three-D models, and begins spinning scenarios.

“Rhodey,” he says. “I got a plan of attack for you.”

And, eye in the sky—far less literally than he’d like, but that’s a battle for another day—Tony talks the team through the vast amounts of information at his fingertips.

The quinjet touches down not too long after, and Tony watches through Bucky’s, Vision’s, and Rhodey’s suit cams—Hope and Scott don’t have one, and Stephen isn’t there—as they fan out and begin an attack pattern. He holds his breath as they take aliens down.

They’re outnumbered, and Tony can’t help but tracking where he’d be useful, rotations he could cover in their loops, openings he could make. They have three fliers, a sniper, and a guy who shrinks, and it leaves too many holes.

“A second quinjet is touching down,” FRIDAY informs him. A holo pops up, showing the security footage.

Wilson takes to the air, and the rest spill out immediately after. Tony bites back his frustration. They knew this would happen. They knew there’d be confusion with two separate teams, with two separate leadership structures. Technically, they shouldn’t both be deployed to the same location, barring an absolute emergency.

Aliens in Washington DC definitely count as an emergency, Tony thinks bitterly.

Cap and Romanoff are in hand-to-hand with aliens on the street, and Maximoff is using her powers to mow down anything in her path. So far, with aliens in front of her, it works out, although Tony hesitates to think of what it’s going to look like if she runs across civilians.

Barton’s found his own rooftop perch, and he and Bucky actually seem to work relatively well, both covering different angles. They’re not speaking—their comms aren’t even connected—but that’s one area Tony doesn’t have to be particularly concerned with.

The rest of them are a mess. There are entire areas not being covered, and Tony winces. “Rhodey, we’re gonna have to be the flexible ones,” he says quietly on a private comm. “Civilians are getting hurt.”

Rhodey nods, then redirects Hope and Scott to clear the area. Bucky is still picking off targets from a rooftop, and Vision and Rhodey are forming a perimeter loop, turning aliens back and keeping the issue from spreading.

“They use retroreflectors, hang on,” Tony mutters. Tony hones in on Rhodey’s suit cam and flicks
through the settings.

Heat detection, up above. Three separate blobs. “Rhodey,” Tony says. “I’m sending you a heat map. This is where you need to blow. Get Vision in on it, and Wilson if you can.”

“Got it, Tones,” Rhodey says.

Tony watches with a careful eye, which is how he almost misses Bucky jumping off the roof, using the damn fire escape as a landing point and then jumping again. He abandons his sniper rifle and pulls out a Glock. He *hurls* himself into the fray, gun blazing even as he’s throwing elbows.

Tony watches his movements, trying to track out his pattern, opts not to interrupt in case he throws Bucky’s concentration. Finally, he sees his target—Romanoff and Rogers, getting in over their heads. Getting there, if not quite there yet. Tony wouldn’t have even known to jump in yet.

It’s like Bucky just *knows*, has a sixth sense for Rogers getting overwhelmed. Tony tries not to think about that, and instead watches Bucky take down aliens.

He sees it as it’s happening, too late to stop it, his shout as ineffectual as it is desperate. Bucky, in pushing an alien away from advancing on the duo, leaves his back open and an alien latches on.

Bucky swears a blue streak that echoes around the common room Tony’s seated in, and Tony watches in horror as his arm is *yanked* and bends a way it’s definitely not supposed to.

Bucky shoots the thing, still cursing even as the alien twitches on the pavement.

Tony realizes with a deep, shuddering breath that it was Bucky’s *left* arm, that it probably hurts something awful but all the serious damage was done to metal, not flesh. He lets out a sigh of relief so loud he wouldn’t be surprised if the others picked up on it over the comms.

Left arm all but useless, Bucky returns to the fray one-handed, backing up to Steve and Natasha as the three of them try to fight their way out of the ensuing aliens.

And just like that, out of seemingly nowhere, a blur in black appears. The Black Panther, Tony realizes after a moment’s confusion. King T’Challa, followed by one of his guards, who is spearing through aliens with a speed that makes Tony frankly dizzy.

“Captain,” T’Challa acknowledges. “Move your friend away from here.”

“I can fight,” grits out Bucky. “We need to keep these fuckers pinned down. C’mon.” Guns, shield, claws, and spear, they do a remarkable job at that. Tony’s left watching, gaping.

“Got it,” Rhodey says, breaking the spell. “Good to go. On my count. In five…four…three…two…”

Tony jerks his attention away from the ground forces to watch the three planting charges on the ships. The aliens seem to have wised up to this, and Rhodey, Vision, and Sam are getting attacked, with Clint doing his best to keep them off of them.

Tony swallows, and realizes Vision has nearly twice as many on him. Maybe his ship is the most important, where whatever passes as their leader or their hive mind rests.

“One,” Rhodey finishes, and the three fliers drop out of range as the ships blow, debris raining down and aliens falling.
Wanda seems to use her powers to deflect debris, and Tony has to admire how she does it, her
careful, small force fields used strategically to protect certain areas. She’s improving, he thinks.

“Status?” Tony demands.

“Good,” Rhodey says. Hope and Scott echo him.


“Bucky?” Tony prompts when he gets no response.

“Mr. Barnes will be alright,” T’Challa says.

Tony starts. “How did you get this comm channel?” He demands.

From Bucky’s suit cam, he can see T’Challa grin. “Soon, I will have to introduce you to my sister,”
he says. “Barnes will need her to rebuild his arm, anyways.”

“How bad’s the damage?” Tony asks. They don’t have standby doctors, but he can put in some
calls. If necessarily, he can call Helen Cho and see if she’ll let them utilize the cradle.

“How impossible,” a new voice says, and while Tony doesn’t know for sure, he thinks the voice is
young. “Brother, get a little closer.”

T’Challa oblige. “This should be an easy fix,” the voice decides.

Tony lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Princess Shuri. Honor to meet you.”

“Pleasure, I’m sure,” she says over the comm. “Now. Let us get your man somewhere safe to work,
yes?”

Tony’s on the phone with the Council for the next twenty minutes, Rhodey in his ear feeding him
the information he needs to tell them. For once, there’s no jokes, no snark, no pushing. Just getting
through the task so he can re-focus on Bucky.

They arrive at the Tower after thirty minutes, due to Shuri stabilizing Bucky’s arm on the flight. It
isn’t entirely repaired, but the pain receptors are no longer misfiring, at least.

“Looks worse than it is,” Bucky says, putting on a brave face when he sees Tony.

“Mhm, sure,” he says, looking up at Shuri. “What are we dealing with here?”
She talks fast, and walks even faster, Tony barely keeping up as T’Challa and Vision help them
keep Bucky moving, the guard right on their heels. “You’re injured too,” Tony reminds Vision
when his brain catches up.

“Already healing,” Vision promises Tony, and Tony can see that it’s true, so he lets it go for the
moment.

Shuri looks around Tony’s lab with a critical eye, but just nods. “It will do,” she pronounces, then
all but shoves Bucky into Tony’s chair.

Tony watches the interaction carefully, but Bucky doesn’t look alarmed. More like resigned to
being pushed around by a kid.

Tony really looks at that kid, at Shuri, a Princess of the most technologically advanced country on
earth, their chief technological advisor, the inventor who redefined the world. The future. And then
he realizes something.

“You’re an omega,” he says, and it comes out a little more breathless than he intended.

She spares him a momentary glance. “Yes.”

Tony feels like an idiot but can’t shut his mouth. “I…I didn’t know.”

“Sorry,” Bucky says, and his words sound a little slurred. “Didn’t know you didn’t know.”

Shuri’s eyes narrow at him. “Will this be a problem?”

He shakes his head. “No, never, I just…didn’t know.”

She mutters something about broken white boys, then opens up the panels on Bucky’s arm that still open.

She looks up at him, asks his opinion. The two of them go back and forth, re-designing an arm so bent out of shape it has no right looking like a proper, functioning arm two hours later.

Bucky sighs on the table, closes his eyes and waits. Tony tries to talk to him, to reassure him, and Bucky responds enough that Tony doesn’t panic, but it’s not the most reassuring. Shuri assures him Bucky isn’t feeling pain from the arm, but that doesn’t mean he’s not feeling pain in his shoulder joint.

Just when they’re about to reconnect the arm, see if they’ve successfully resurrected it, FRIDAY butts in. “Boss?”

“Little busy here, darling.”

“Boss, the old Avengers are in the lobby and demanding to see you all.”

Tony sighs, but holds the wire steady for Shuri. “Memo to me—two words: restraining order.”

Bucky opens his eyes and sighs. “I’ll take care of it.”

“You are in pain,” Tony says sharply.

“Princess, could you do me a huge favor and re-connect those wires? I might have to go kick some ass.”

Shuri sighs, but does as he asks. Bucky makes a fist and then rotates his arm. “Back to normal,” he announces, before hopping out of the chair and leading the way downstairs.

“It’s really not quite done yet,” Shuri tries.

Tony just shakes his head. “We’ll catch up to him later. He’ll figure it out.”

Bucky attracts an audience, Scott watching him nervously. Tony supposed he can’t blame him, what with the determined strut and the angry facial expression. “Is everything…okay?” Scott asks.

“No,” Bucky growls, honest to god growls, and it’s really a miracle they’re all willing to pile into an elevator with him.

It’s the most uncomfortable elevator ride of Tony’s life, and that includes when Obie dragged Tony’s ass home after getting arrested at an omega’s rights rally when he was eighteen, or when he was twenty-seven, drunk and a little stoned, and doing the walk of shame without pants.
Thankfully, no one can accuse Stark Industries of not being efficient; the elevator is quick and they’re all out soon enough.

Bucky’s still at the helm, and he stops about ten feet from the old Avengers, arms crossed. Tony would admire him crossing his arms—the arm really shouldn’t be that functional yet—and waits for events to unfold.

“What?” Bucky says, voice deadly and low.

“Are you…okay?” Steve asks, hesitantly extending a hand and then dropping it.

“I’m fine, Steve,” Bucky says. “Tony and Princess Shuri put me back together again. You could have called.”

“Would you have picked up?” Steve challenges.

“Wouldn’t that be my choice?” Bucky asks. “Instead of forcing your way into our home?”

“You’re acting weird, Bucky,” Steve says slowly. “Going on TV, saying… things…about us. Leaving us for them. You won’t talk to us, won’t let us explain, and—”

“I saved your goddamn life today, I’ve paid my dues,” Bucky interrupts. “I love you, Steve, but you gotta listen before you get to talk.”

Steve flinches. “Bucky—”

“There you go again,” Bucky interrupts. “Listen a goddamn minute, Steve. Your head so hard my words not getting through? ‘Cause I’ve told you to leave him alone again and again. This is our space. If you want me, you damn well call and just hope I decide to pick up. That’s your only option that doesn’t end in your ass getting beat.”

Bucky surveys the group in front of them. Tony, at the very least, waits with bated breath, sure everyone else around them is also holding their breath.

“So, get out,” Bucky says. “Get lost. Tony’s generously already sold a Compound to you guys; you don’t get to invade the home he built to get away from you guys.”

“Bucky—”

“I said out,” Bucky says, and he hasn’t raised his voice once but it still makes the hair on the back of Tony’s neck stand on end. “For once in your life, Steve, listen to someone.”

Bucky waits, arms crossed and looking like a stone wall, until the old Avengers file out. Wanda throughs a worried look towards Vision over her shoulder. Steve’s the last one out the door, eyes on Bucky the whole time, brow furrowed. Bucky remains a stone wall, unmoving and unmoved by the display, until they’re gone.

“Come on,” Shuri says, breaking the ensuing silence. “You will let us fix your arm before you break it further.”

They end up in the living room, because Rhodey demands a full debrief. Shuri and Tony fiddle with the arm as Bucky rolls his eyes but twists this way and that for them.

“So, uh, thanks for coming to help today,” Rhodey says. “But I have to ask, are you—”
"We have permission to be there," T'Challa says. "We have signed the Accords, and we got permission from your President. We were meeting with him and representatives of the United Nations when the alert came."

"Good. That’s…good," Rhodey says slowly.

"Yes, your President was most cooperative," the guard says. "Seeing as this is the third alien invasion."

"Well, fourth, if you count the whole thing with Thor," Tony says absently, bending closer to Bucky’s shoulder socket.

"I’m sorry, who are you?" Rhodey asks her. "We didn’t catch your name."

"My apologies," T’Challa says. "This is Okoye, head of the Dora Milaje."

"Nice to meet you," Rhodey says.

"You are…very good with that spear," Scott pipes in, making Tony snort into Bucky’s shoulder.

"So," Hope says, seemingly back to business. "Aliens again."

"Again," Vision confirms. "We suspected."

"We knew," Tony corrects. "Satellites launch in four days."

"I would like to look at those," Shuri says.

"Be my guest."

"The point is," T’Challa cuts in, either bored of the distraction or just very well aware how scientists get side-tracked, "that aliens seem to be coming and we don’t know why."

"They are looking for something," Vision says.

"How do you know?" Hope demands.

"Because they came twice and and tested us," he says. "And so far, the damage has been minimal. It is a test, a sort of reconnaissance. They will come in larger quantities, more determined than ever when they find it."

"What is it?" Scott asks nervously, echoing the thoughts of everybody. What could they have that aliens want?

*Higher form of war.* That’s what Thor told them, way back then. That using the tesseract had signalled that they were inviting a higher form of war. Tony swallows.

Vision shrugs.

"Then we need a strategy," T’Challa says. "We would be happy to begin discussions."

Shuri closes the plate on Bucky’s wrist. "Alright, that should do," she says, patting the arm. Then she drops her screwdriver, and instead grabs Tony’s arm. "And as for you," she says, "you are coming with me."

With a surprisingly strong grip, she drags him to his feet.

"With you?" Tony sputters. "It’s my house! Hey, look—"
She stops and gives him a hard look. “We have work to do.”

Tony swallows, can’t ignore that. So he nods and lets her drag him downstairs, to his lab.

“Okay, okay,” he says, when they get down the stairs. “So, you want to see the satellites?”

“No,” she says. “At least, not right now. Later, I very much want to see them. For now, though. You and I need to have a conversation.”

Tony blinks. He didn’t expect to be in trouble with the foreign dignitaries already. He’s barely spoken with them. “About what?” He asks cautiously.

“About how fucked up your country is,” she says, face serious.

Tony blinks. “Come again?”
Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Summary

Tony learns some things about Wakanda, omegas, and himself.

Chapter Notes

Hi all.

So I think we need to admit that me responding to comments on Wednesday's chapters won't be happening. I'm working twelve hour days to stay afloat right now, but I do read and love all comments and I'll go through them this weekend if I do have time (I might not even have time for these comments; we'll see). Thank you all for your support, it means so much to me even when I'm not able to do the best job of showing it.

I'm going to be very honest about this chapter. It's pivotal to the story and we were always going to get this, but I have HATED this chapter since I wrote it. I literally decided I couldn't share it with you guys and re-wrote the whole thing this morning. So that makes it shorter than normal. It still has what I need it to and it's still here. Uhm. I try not to say things like this because I don't want to prejudice the story or make you think I'm looking for sympathy comments (I'm not!!) but yeah, this one was a pain in the ass because the balance was awful.

It is important though.

So, chapter warning that there's some talk about the ability to influence emotions here. Some stuff is revealed about omegas. The title might make more sense (a little bit; I am bad at titling).

Thanks for your support, and I hope you like it!

Shuri shrugs at him. “You know your country is fucked up,” she says. “I see you say it in the news nearly every day now.”

“Just…not usually peoples’ opening line, there,” Tony says weakly. His brain catches up. “Is…Wakanda different?”

Shuri throws up her hands. “Of course Wakanda is different! Everywhere should be different than this nonsense.”

Tony, for perhaps the first time in his entire life, feels about four steps behind in a conversation. “But…they’re not,” he says slowly. “I mean, some places are worse? Some places you can literally sell your omega like chattel, and there are purity laws, and child marriages still happen. Some places are better, but not dramatically better. The only place I’ve heard about where things are
really different is Asgard. But that’s not much better, even if it’s different.”

She makes a disgusted face. “The world is terrible. I was wrong. I made T’Challa take me to America but it sucks.”

“Yeah,” Tony says. “How…is Wakanda different? Other than the fact that an omega apparently holds a political position. And not just the one you were born with, I mean you’re in charge of the Wakandan science division.” He makes a face. “I have a barely political appointment right now. They can’t even technically kick me out, we had to sneak me into it, and they hate it.”

“My grandfather was both Black Panther and King,” she says. “And he was an omega.”

Tony blinks. “I…did not know that.”

“Well, you don’t know anything about Wakanda,” she says. She looks around the shop and clears off a chair for herself.

“How’d it work?” Tony asks.

Shuri shrugs. “He was born into our family, he became King. What is there to understand?”

“Omega kids have been passed over for the throne throughout history,” Tony says. “Historically, it’s not super common.”

Shuri exhales viciously. “His mother died, he took the throne. He was capable and a good leader. He cared for Wakanda. My father said, he was so empathic, cared for the country so much, and felt their needs so strongly. He brought Wakanda into a new age.”

Tony just watched. “That sounds…nice.”

“He was not the first,” Shuri says. “Again, America is fucked up.”

Tony lets out a kind of breathless chuckle. “Yeah, well. That part isn’t news.”

There’s a knock on the window, and Tony looks up to see Peter, masked pulled up to expose his mouth. Tony can’t actually hear the kid, but he can see his lips moving.

“Hey, Mr. Stark,” he says once Tony opens the window he had installed specifically so Peter could enter this way. Spider-door, they had called it. “I saw the news, things looked pretty bad today, and I just wanted to check in on everyone, make sure Bucky is doing okay, and…hi,” he says awkwardly, finally catching sight of Shuri.

From what little of his face Tony can see, Tony is absolutely sure his kid is blushing hot enough to fry an egg.

“Spider man, this is Princess Shuri of Wakanda,” Tony introduces. “Princess, this is Spider Man. Currently not an active superhero who knows better than to be climbing around in his suit,” Tony says firmly.

“I didn’t know who’d be here,” Peter says, and it definitely sounds a little bit like a whine.

Shuri smiles. “Hello.”

“Princess Shuri was just telling me how Wakanda had an omega King,” Tony says.

“No way! That’s so cool! Like, is this some Cleopatra thing, or what?” Peter asks, pulling up one of the lab chairs and sitting on it backwards, full attention on the Princess.
“My grandfather was an omega and a king. He took care of his people,” Shuri says.

“What about school?” Peter fires back. “Do you all go to school?”

She narrows her eyes at him. “Are you an omega? I can’t tell, through your fursona there.”

Tony is absolutely sure the kid is blushing now and takes momentary delight in it.

“I am,” Peter says defensively.

“You go to school in this backwards country?”

“I do. I mean, education is the law, but I go to a really good school. But only ‘cause my Au—my family is good about that kind of stuff,” Peter says. “It’ll be hard, to get into college still.”

“Hard but not impossible,” Tony interjects. “We’ve made progress there, at least.” And where progress hasn’t been made, money opens doors. Tony learned that himself while at MIT.

“What’s it like, to be an omega in Wakanda?” Peter asks. “Is it safe? Or more safe than here? What happens if someone uses the voice? How does mating work? What jobs can omegas have? How do parents treat their omega kids? What are heats like? What kind of schools do omegas go to? What rules do they have to follow? If you had an omega king, does that mean any omega could rule if it was their turn?”

Any person other than Tony would have told Peter to slow down, to pull it together, to ask one question at a time. Any person other than Tony or Shuri, that is.

She looks amused. “Which one do you want to know first?”

Peter looks at Tony. “Are there forced matings?” He asks.

“No! Never. It would be illegal,” she says, seemingly genuinely disgusted.

“Well, maybe not forced, but, like, forced?” Peter asks.

“Those are the same word.”

Tony intervenes. “Spider Man means how the Council gave me the choice of quitting the team or getting mated, or my father gave me the choice of getting mated or losing access to everything.”

“Never,” she says vehemently.

“Like, never-never?” Peter asks.

She makes a face. “My brother is in love with an omega,” she says. “We call them War Dogs. Like spies, for Wakanda. Nakia is the best, and when she comes home she drives my brother crazy, lecturing him and moralizing about what Wakanda should do for the world. All the work my brother has been doing is because of her, because she inspired him to do better. And every time, my brother asks her to stay with him, and she leaves again, because she isn’t ready to settle down. Maybe someday she’ll want to stay, and I know my brother will beg her to be Queen. But until then, he accepts her choice and supports her.” She shrugs. “Does that show you the difference?”

“That’s one case,” Tony points out.

“My brother is an alpha and the King,” she reminds him. “But it’s illegal, to do anything like that. And anyways, we wouldn’t do that. It is just unacceptable. Anyone who tried would be shunned.”

“Shunned?” Tony asks, sceptical.
“Cast out,’’ Shuri says. “Entirely.”

“That’s way better than here,’’ Peter says. “How about other things?”

“All citizens of Wakanda go to school,’’ Shuri says. “A good public education is the backbone of a strong society,’’ she says, voice taking on a deeper tone, clearly mimicking someone.

Tony snorts. “Your brother?”

“My father,’’ she says. “And we don’t treat heats like some taboo secret sex thing to drive alphas crazy, and no alpha would ever use the voice on an omega and say they did it for an omega’s benefit. Well,’’ she considers. “Maybe if they were about to jump off a bridge or something. But only for that one second, and they would be judged.’’

Tony has to concede that that’s a fair enough place to use it. After all, Yinsen had used his own voice to save Tony from the ten rings; as much as Tony hated the voice, it had been very useful there.

“So, things sound a lot better over there,’’ Peter says.

Shuri nods. “I’ve been to America three times now. Things are…different. But the biggest difference I see is we understand our omegas’ gifts.”

“What…gifts?’’ Tony asks slowly. “Do you consider forced obedience a gift in Wakanda?’’

“No!’’ she says. “I mean empathic gifts.’’

Tony and Peter look at each other, and Tony is at least gratified to see that Peter looks as confused as he is. “You might need to explain,’’ Tony says carefully.

“This is why I hate America,’’ she complains. “How do you know someone else is feeling something?’’

Tony’s too dumbfounded by the question to answer. Fortunately, Peter picks up the slack. “I taste it,’’ he says.

Tony blinks, stupefied. “You…taste it?’’

Peter shrugs. “Usually? Like, when Aunt May’s stressed, everything tastes a little burnt.’’

Shuri smiles encouragingly at him. “I smell it.’’ She turns to Tony. “And you?’’

Tony…hasn’t really thought about this before. “Uh…both? I guess?’’ He says. “Sometimes I feel it, like a texture or a touch. Is that not normal?’’

“Not for alphas and betas,’’ Shuri says succinctly. “Omegas have what is basically a sixth sense, for emotions. We read people’s pheromones. We tend to perceive it using our other senses.’’

Peter nods. “Like synesthesia.’’

Shuri smiles at him. “Exactly.’’

Tony clears his throat. “That’s cool and all,’’ he says. “I didn’t actually know other people don’t work that way. But how exactly is that fair compensation for what alphas can do to us?’’

“It’s not,’’ Shuri says quietly. “But at least we know we’re not hurting anyone.’’

He supposes he has to give her that.
“It made my Grandfather a good king,” she says. “Because he was so empathic, so sensitive to the people. And most omegas have some control over the pheromones they produce, the message they put out in the room. That helped him, too.”

*That* rings a bell for Tony. “Like Maximoff?” He asks. Were her powers actually unlocking some omega secret, and not so much a product of Loki’s scepter after all?

Shuri shrugs. “My best guess is that, whatever natural gifts she had, the magic amplified them. But it’s magic, so who knows?”

Tony wants to stop and agree with that—*magic*, seriously—but is a little distracted by the bigger picture here. “So, she’s unnatural. Sure. I can’t do…whatever the hell this is.”

“Of course you can,” Shuri dismisses.

“Uh-uh. I am emotionally obtuse. People tell me all the time. I am not competent at figuring out emotions.”

“Yeah you are, Mr. Stark,” Peter says. “When you pay attention. Like, you have to want it? You’re not touchy-feely like my guidance counselor is or whatever, but you always know.”

Shuri nods, and then she points at Tony. “You use emotions like a magician’s trick,” she says. “Look over here while I slip under your notice on this side.”

That…does not feel entirely inaccurate.

Peter snorts. “So, you’re the pretty assistant *and* the magician?” He asks.

Tony thinks about the shows he puts on, the masks he wears, how deeply people buy them. How people will believe his masks *forever*. And all this time, he’d talked about reputations and how easy they are to gain and how hard they are to lose, how Stark men are made of iron (and yes, dammit Howard, that includes the omega), how he’s just that good at making sure no one ever sees him bleed.

“So it’s a defensive mechanism,” he says, mostly to himself.

“*You* use it as a defense mechanism,” Shuri corrects. “And who can blame you, seeing this country? But not everyone uses it that way. Sometimes, it just makes someone…calming to be around, or energizing, or depressing, or…or whatever feeling they have, I guess.”

Peter nods. “I could see that. So, tell me more about Wakanda. What kind of jobs can omegas have?”

“Any,” Shuri says, which is good to hear, but Tony’s honestly a little focused on the idea that there’s this massive secret about himself that he didn’t even know.

“You alright?” Bucky asks him later that evening, the two of them on the couch in their little sitting area. “Is it today’s fight? ‘Cause I know, it looked bad, but I swear I’m fine, and—”

“It’s not that,” Tony interrupts. “Although I don’t love watching you get hurt.”

“Is it that you couldn’t be there?” Bucky ventures. “I swear it’s temporary. We’ll do whatever it takes to change this. I’ll go on TV every single day, if that’s what it takes.”
Tony chuckles at that. “Careful, don’t make me promises you might not want to keep,” he teases. “It’s not that, either.” He takes a deep breath, and explains everything Shuri told him and Peter.

“So you’re telling me it’s been this big secret that omegas can, what, do stuff with emotions?” Bucky asks.

“I don’t know if secret is the right word. Something we’ve all forgotten, I guess? I didn’t even know the way I feel emotions isn’t normal.” Tony squints at him. “You sure you don’t taste feelings?”

“Very sure,” Bucky confirms. “My senses are better than the average alphas’. I can smell Peter and you through your suits. Still don’t taste emotions.”

“Oh. Huh,” Tony says. He honestly never even thought to bring it up before. It just… was, and he never even thought about it. Emotions, when he did spend the time to pick up on them, had a taste or a smell or a texture, some identifiable, quantifiable thing. Sometimes, that thing was more clear than the actual emotion.

An emotionally obtuse omega who apparently existed in a reality where omegas were emotionally intuitive. Never let it be said that Tony follows rules.

Bucky tilts his head. “I can see it, though,” he says. “You an’ Peter…it’s like whatever you’re feeling, it’s infectious.”

Tony jolts. “It doesn’t… make you do anything, or feel anything, right?” He double-checks.

Bucky kisses his cheek. “You’re not Maximoff.”

“What if I am? What if you’ve just never noticed and I’m secretly, like, making you want me or something, and—”

“Pretty sure I made the first move there,” Bucky interrupts. “And you’re not.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know everything.” Bucky sighs. “Because it’s just pheromones. It’s like…when someone smiles, an’ it makes you wanna smile back.”

“It’s a little deeper than that.”

“Not much,” Bucky says. He sighs again. “Look, if you were turned on and…projecting, or whatever it is, would it make me horny? Well, I mean. Assuming I wasn’t already. ‘Cause you know, I’m hot for you pretty regularly.”

“Flattering,” Tony says dryly. “Your point?”

“Right. If you’re turned on, might make me turned on to feel that. But it doesn’t stop me from walking out or taking a cold shower or whatever. ‘Cause Tony, we live in a house with two other people, sometimes three, sometimes more. An’ Vision hasn’t come in here asking to join in. Hell. No one but me’s even implied that you’re makin’ them feel something like this.”

Tony wrinkles his nose. “Don’t bring that up ever again.” He thinks about it though, and sees the point. “Okay, I—okay. So I’m not Maximoff.”

“No,” Bucky agrees. “You’re not Maximoff. You do got a cool new trick though. So. Speaking of
you being horny…wanna test if just your pheromones can really turn me on?”

The next morning, he tells Vision and Rhody about what he learned. Vision looks at him with passing academic interest but no more, considering that pheromones don’t really affect him. Rhody just nods.

“I think you did that, when you were dying,” Rhody says. “I just remember being so annoyed, all the time. Aggravated by you. It’s like every time I saw you, I felt aggravated all over again.”

“To be fair, I was being obnoxious,” Tony says, but…it’s a fair enough point. Tony had wanted them to leave him alone, wanted Rhody and Pepper and Happy to distance themselves from him, wanted them upset and aggravated so him dying wouldn’t drag them down. And he’d nearly gotten what he wished for, there.

He’d made himself obnoxious in action and chemical feelings, and it had worked exactly as intended.

*Defense mechanism*, indeed.

Later that day, T’Challa, Okoye, and Shuri return graciously to the Tower at Rhody’s invitation.

“What can we do for you?” T’Challa asks, surveying the team there. Even Peter showed up, mask firmly on, which does absolutely nothing to hide the looks he keeps darting at Shuri, much to Tony’s absolute delight.

“You said yesterday, you signed the Accords?” Rhody asks.

T’Challa nods. “Yes. But we will not join your team, Colonel. We have to put Wakanda first.”

“No, no, we know that,” Rhody says. “We had something different in mind.”

“Like what?” Okoye asks.

“Well, you’re essentially your own Accords-aligned superhero team. Part of our charter was having a liason on the Council. We were thinking you could do the same thing.”

“What would that accomplish?” T’Challa asks, but Tony sees Shuri’s eyes light up.

“It’s a non-voting position,” Tony says. “But I do get to make myself heard on issues, bring concerns to the table. And they can’t kick me out of the room. There’s a lot of things to talk about, but one of the big ones is omegas in the field.”

“And, since Wakanda is so tolerant of omegas, we thought, maybe you could help,” Peter says, bouncing a little in his seat. Tony might tell him to play cool, but the way Shuri’s smiling, lighting up her whole face, Tony thinks Peter might be more on the right track.

T’Challa raises an eyebrow. “We’ll…consider it,” he says. From anyone else, it would sound like a brush-off. But Tony sees the light behind T’Challa’s eyes, sees the wheels turning in his head.

He also smells the lightness bubbling from Shuri, like sweet champagne, like sugar. If the siblings’ relationship is anything like Tony thinks it is, T’Challa will give this serious thought.
Rhodey talks to the Wakandan delegation for a while before T’Challa thanks them and tells them they have a flight to catch. Shuri demands the schematics for the satellites, which Tony promises to send today, seeing as they’re launching in three days.

Once they leave, Tony turns and pulls Peter aside, who’s busy watching Shuri walk out the door. “Tell me,” he says. “Is it ‘cause she’s an omega or because she’s smarter than both of us combined?”

Tony can taste the sourness of his embarrassment as he stutters and no doubt blushes furiously under the mask, and he walks away laughing while Peter tries to work out the words.
Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Summary

Time passes, and everything is...good?

Chapter Notes

Hi all--

Guys, I am /so close/ to finishing this fic. Honestly if I didn't have to, you know, work, I could get it done in like a day.

So, this chapter has NSFW parts. It may be the last NSFW section of this fic, not 100% sure yet. If you want to skip it, stop at Bucky's line "what're you after?"

Warnings for this chapter: NSFW section obviously. Tony tops here, don't know if that matters or not. Also, there is talk of surgeries and Tony exaggerates how dangerous it can be (he talks about how it could kill him but that's totally not true).

Also, this is the last chapter before we enter the Infinity War arc. So we're getting into the movie on Saturday.

Enjoy all, and thanks for reading!

Tony Stark’s satellite defense system is now entirely in orbit. Click here for inventor’s explanation of technology—

Queen Mother Ramonda of Wakanda has officially taken a seat as a non-voting liason to the Accords Council, on behalf of Wakanda’s superheroes. The omega former queen says she is here to keep the Accords just and fair, especially for other omegas—

Sergeant Bucky Barnes appears on comedic news program The Daily Show to explain just why we should care so much about omegas in the field—

Due to mounting pressure, these four colleges have pledged to admit a larger percentage of qualified omegas next semester—

‘Right to work’ march being held next month, demanding equal work and equal pay—

Forty-two ways to alien-proof your home, click here—

Tony snorts. “That last one is junk, FRIDAY,” he says, eyes flicking over his newsfeed. “It’s clickbait.”

“You said anything about the team, aliens, the Accords, or omega’s rights,” she says petulantly.
So Tony spends a few minutes defining the perimeters of clickbait with her, before he feels arms wrap around his shoulders. The metal fingers play with the buttons on his shirt.

“If you’re planning on undressing me, I would recommend we leave the kitchen,” Tony says, taking a sip of his coffee, eyes still flicking over the news of the day.

“Nah, I’m just sitting here, letting you do all the work so I can figure out what we’re talking ‘bout online today.”

“This one, maybe?” Tony gestures, using his free thumb and pointer finger to blow up the holographic news feed, watching Bucky out of the corner of his eye to see how he reacts.

Barnes uses Stark fortune to buy Stark a 1.5 million dollar dildo; ‘he just can’t keep up with me’ Stark cries—

Bucky snorts. “Is this your way of saying I got room to improve, doll?”

“No, no, I am very satisfied,” Tony says, stretching in his seat. He’s glad they can make a light joke out of it, because otherwise he would spend time getting upset that they think Bucky has access to all his money. Not that Tony won’t give him any amount he asked for, really, but it’s the principle of the thing. He’s not Bucky’s omega, and Bucky doesn’t control the finances.

“FRIDAY, you and I need to have a talk about useless tabloid trash.”

“You did not specify filtering out tabloids,” FRIDAY says primly.

“Yeah, well, gotta admit, it is funny,” Tony says. He minimizes the article. “Maybe try this one?”

New study finds omegas just as rational as alphas in high-stress situations, all other factors being equal—

Tony’s read the study. It’s not quite as simple as that, considering it’s hard to find situations where all factors are equal. Nevertheless, the study is significant, and it’ll get buried if they don’t get it out there.

Water is wet, omegas may be rational beings, and they need the world to figure that out.

Bucky move around the table so he’s sitting next to Tony instead of using him as a convenient armrest. “I like it,” he says, flicking his fingers so the entire article opens. He scans through it and nods. “I’ll get this up today.”

“You know you’re not my PR department, right?” Tony double-checks. “Like, I can find you an article about what a great team we are or stopping alien invasions or something.”

Bucky plays with the fingers on Tony’s left hand. “This is what we want to be talking about,” he says firmly. “This is an issue we care about, that affects the team. So I’m gonna talk all about it online. What better thing to do with twenty million followers?”

Tony leans in to kiss Bucky at that, a move that is quickly and easily reciprocated. “Mmm, what’s on your agenda for today?” Bucky asks.

“Got a meeting with Pep, then I have a video conference with Shuri. Peter’s coming.”

Bucky’s surprise is palatable, sharp and tangy. “As Peter?”

“Mhm,” Tony says. “He decided last night.”

“How much of that is due to his crush on her?” Bucky asks.
“A lot, probably, but we talked about it. He’s not making the choice lightly,” Tony says.

Bucky smiles, soft and slow, private and just between them. “I know, Doll, ’cause he’s got you looking out for him.” Tony starts to feel a warm glow building up inside of him. “So what are you meeting with Shuri about?” He asks.

Tony turns to look at him, trying to hide his smirk. “Turning your arm into a multi-million dollar sex toy,” he says.

“Can you actually do that?” Bucky asks, and Tony laughs and laughs.

After introductions are done—”I’m Peter Man, uh, I mean—Spider Parker— fuck , Peter Parker”—and Tony’s done finding Peter too adorable for words, Tony clears his throat and gets the meeting to order.

“I’ve been looking for a way to block the alpha voice,” he says.

Shuri tilts her head and studies him. “From what I’ve seen, you’ve found a way.”

“A stop gap,” he says. “Electrocution. Hard reset for my brain. Technically, it could stop my heart one day, which I would prefer not to happen.”

“You didn’t tell me it was that bad,” Peter says, staring at him.

Tony shrugs. “It hurts something awful, but it’s saved my ass a few times.” Like forty-six people in Boston, Tony thinks. “So, I want something better. I’ve been fiddling with this.” He sends Shuri the design image the same time he projects it for himself and Peter. “I think it could work. The issue is implanting it.”

Shuri looks it over for a minute, then smiles. “Well, it’s a good thing you met me then, isn’t it?”

“You willing to work with us on this?” Tony asks.

“Of course,” she says. “We haven’t worked on this technology in Wakanda. We haven’t needed it. But if we’re opening up to the rest of the world, we will. And people like Nakia…” She shudders. “We should have been protecting her. Let’s get to work.”

It takes months for them to work things out. Every detail is carefully considered. Tony’s original design is worked over again and again, the microchip becoming more of a cochlear implant. Vibranium is added to the mix, something that worried Tony because it makes this item all the more unattainable to the average person outside of Wakanda. They begin to examine nanoparticles, and what they can do.

They’re all busy with other things during that time. Peter has junior year to get through, in addition to the very real portions of his internship Tony is making him undertake, mostly to keep him distracted from hero-ing. Shuri has a country to maintain.

Tony has an Accords Council to argue it out with. Queen Ramonda is an absolute blessing. The woman is made of steel with eyes that penetrate the soul, and she doesn’t let a single Council member off the hook easily. She’s adept at reading the room, clearly more in touch with that omega trait than Tony will ever be, and often runs emotional circles around the Council members.
Having seen what other superheroes are doing, the Avengers rework their charter to send their own representative to the Council. Tony expects Natasha, or maybe Sam, but Steve himself shows up.

He doesn't try to speak to Tony. He barely even looks his way.

The topic of the day is one Tony and Ramonda have fought hard to bring to the table; they want omega superheroes to be able to consider themselves on an emergency reserve status, without regards to mating requirement. Tony—and Peter, and Maximoff, and any other omega hero—would be able to join the fight, but only if it was deemed an absolute, aliens-have-invaded-doom-is-nigh emergency by their team leader or the Council.

It’s not enough, but it’s a good start.

Queen Ramonda says her piece, then an “expert” is invited to speak, the same one who condescendingly explained pack structure to Tony. Tony then gets to say his piece. Finally, all eyes turn to Steve. Tony holds his breath.

Steve shrugs. “I don’t see any reason why omegas shouldn’t be in the field. Tony and Wanda have done a lot of great work; their records speak for themselves. There’s a fight coming, and we’re going to need all hands on deck.”

There’s some back and forth for a little while, but at the end of the day, it’s grudgingly put down on paper. The Accords now hold emergency provisions, allowing Tony, Peter, Wanda, and any other omega to serve in case of a true, global emergency, with or without a mate.

The members of the Council file out, and Steve looks up the table at Tony hopefully. He’s eager, his attention cloyingly sweet, enough to make Tony choke on it.

Tony knows Steve wants to say something. Probably wants a pat on the head. Look, I’m not the worst one here.

Tony offers his arm to Ramonda and escorts her out.

That night, Stark Tower has a party like it hasn’t seen in years. Of course, this time the party is dry, and the food is pizza, and they watch PG-13 movies in deference to Peter’s presence. Still, it feels good to have something to celebrate.

With at least some progress on the Accords, Tony turns his full attention back to the alpha voice blocker. They consider a nano-particle delivery system, which makes Tony start thinking about other potential nano-delivery systems.

He gets to work on a new suit.

*Steve Rogers of the Avengers pushes for omegas presence in the field, says he hopes it will bring about team re-unification—*

Tony rolls his eyes and takes a deep, calming breath. Then he gets Roxanne to book him on a morning show so he can explain just exactly why the teams won’t be reuniting.
“Whether or not they want to allow omegas in the field isn’t really the major issue,” Tony says to a barely-interested host. “They never expressed not wanting me in the field before the mating requirement. They just thought they were allowed to abuse power over me there. This gesture is nice, but it doesn’t change things.”

Concerns raised about superhero readiness in likely event of an alien attack—

Tony and Rhodey book a rushed tour of evening news segments to explain what exactly the new team is doing to prevent this impending apocalypse. They never quite outright say it, but they don’t shy away from the fact that only one team has implemented any readiness measures with even a chance of working.

His new suit is finished on a Friday, tested on an all-night, no-sleep binge. Bucky leaves him plates of food outside the lab, which Tony actually never gets to because he’s left the building, using the spider-door, once he has proof his concept works.

It feels good to fly again.

Clint Barton temporarily leaves Avengers?—

All of Tony’s sources say it’s true, that Clint’s once again attempted retirement to be with his family. Tony wonders how it works out the second time around.

However Clint Barton feels about Tony, Tony just hopes he treats his wife with the utmost respect.

It takes five months, but eventually, they have a working product.

Or theoretically working; it’s never been tested on a living person before. Tony is going to be the first.

Shuri talks him through the procedure, which Tony will undergo in Wakanda. Tony, never one for the squishy side of science, is a little apprehensive. “This sounds like a lot.”

“It’s safe,” Shuri defends.

“I’m not arguing that,” Tony says quickly. “Just that it’s a lot to undergo. Not easy. Not something the average omega could get.”

Her face softens. “Nakia said the same thing when I told her,” she says. “And I told her, and I’ll tell you; one step at a time. First, we need to know it works.”

So Tony is scheduled to go to Wakanda for surgery. Bucky, somewhat familiar with the country, will escort him.

“I have surgery tomorrow,” Tony announces in bed that night.


“I have surgery tomorrow,” Tony repeats. “It’s experimental and could maybe kill me.”
“It’s not going to kill you,” Bucky says. “Princess Shuri wouldn’t make anything that could kill you. I’ve sat in on your meetings. From what Peter told me, it’s a pretty minor surgery.” His eyes narrow. “What’re you after?”

Tony looks down at the bedspread. “So, remember you can tell me no to anything.”

“Mhm.”

“And I know this isn’t really an alpha thing, at least not for male alphas, but, well. Thought I’d ask.”

“Tell me, Tony,” Bucky urges.

“I was wondering, uh, if you’d let me fuck you?” Tony says in a rush. “Like I said, I know it’s not an alpha thing and I know it’s probably not something you actually want to do, but, uh, thought I’d ask, and—“

“Yes,” Bucky interrupts, voice form and sure. “Yeah, Tony, let’s do that.”

Tony looks up. “You sure?”

Bucky moves quick, so Tony’s back is pressed into the bed and Bucky hovers over him, flesh hand supporting his weight and metal fingers tracing Tony’s jawline. “Yeah, Tony. Fuck me. But not ‘cause you’re pretending you might die tomorrow. But because we want to.”

“You sure you want to?” Tony asks.

“You always ask this many questions when you’re getting your way?” Bucky asks.

Tony’s eyes narrow. “I do when it’s too good to be true. I look gift horses in the mouth.”

“Look, I don’t slick,” Bucky says. “But neither do male betas and it seems to work out fine. So, as long as you use plenty of lube, I don’t see why it should be a problem.”

“But do you want it?” Tony presses.

“I want you,” Bucky emphasizes. “Every single damn way I can have you.”

Gift horse thoroughly inspected, Tony shrugs. “Well, then,” he says. “Let’s turn over.”

Bucky moves them real quick, then pushes Tony off of him so Bucky can start tugging at his own clothes, lifting his hips to work his pants off without sitting up.

“Slow down, Buttercup,” Tony says. “Leave me some work to do.”

Bucky grunts and kicks his pants from around his ankles. “You’re going to have plenty of work to do opening my ass up,” he grunts. “Never had anything up there before. So. Don’t feel too bad.”

Tony’s mouth is wet, his cock hardening even faster at the admission, his hole slicking lightly in anticipation. He’s never been anyone’s first. Hell, his first lover was a beta, almost five years older and wiser than him. The idea of opening Bucky’s eyes to something new, because Bucky welcomes him in, wants this with him, is intoxicating.

Tony’s been fucked and done a lot of fucking. Somehow, with Bucky, it always feels…different.

He gets with the program and starts pulling off his clothes.
“Turn over, then,” Tony says. “Make it easy on us, okay?”

Bucky grunts and turns out his stomach. Tony uses the plethora of extra pillows lying around to position Bucky where he wants him, beautiful ass up and on display. “Gorgeous,” he says and, because he can’t resist, gives it a kiss.

Bucky seems to let out a full body shudder, and Tony studies him with careful eyes. He wants this. The best parts of him say it’s because he wants to give to Bucky this way, make him feel a thing that Bucky’s never felt before.

The worst parts say it’s because he wants Bucky to feel like he does, to give him this experience male alphas don’t partake in, and Tony wants to see what it’s like, just for a moment, to be the one with the power. That he wants to fuck a male alpha, to be in control, to transgress this last boundary.

Except Tony doesn’t feel powerful. At least, he doesn’t feel any different than when he’s riding Bucky, slow and teasing, or when Bucky grins and gives into Tony’s faster faster faster, pushing Tony’s ankles up to his ears. He wants this to be good, which means it has to be about the two of them, not just about him, just like it’s never just about Bucky.

It feels, Tony realizes, almost close enough to flying.

A tandem flight, two interweaving forces, two pieces that fit together and create symmetry.

Tony’s momentarily caught up, wondering if Bucky would accept flight capabilities, before Bucky thoroughly distracts him with a moan.

He cups Bucky’s ass, spreads and then squeezes the cheeks. Bucky’s hips buck a little. “Tony…”

“I’ll get to it when I get to it,” Tony says. “Ever thought about this, Bucky?”

“Never before you.”

“I’m flattered,” Tony teases, then leans down to pepper kisses along Bucky’s spine, working his way up and towards the head of the bed, where the bedside table and the lube is. “What kinda thoughts?”

“Mostly about your fingers in me,” Bucky admits. “Have you ever seen your hands?”

Tony holds one up and looks. “Nothing special.”

“You’re blind,” Bucky accuses mildly. “The things your fingers do…put one of ‘em in me.”

“Magic word?”

“Please.”

Tony opens the lube and drizzles it onto his hand, being more than generous, knowing Bucky’s going to be tight.

Tony traces Bucky’s rim with a lube-slicked finger, a gentle, teasing touch while his clean hand strokes the small of his back. The moment Bucky’s hole starts to relax, Tony pushes a finger in.

The surprise has Bucky jerking his hips. “Bad?” Tony asks.

“Let me know if it’s bad.”

Tony carefully starts to move the one finger, then when Bucky relaxes, he adds a second. He finds Bucky’s prostate—supposedly not as sensitive as Tony’s, but then again Bucky’s seems to cause enough of a reaction to be satisfactory. Tony does it again, and again.

Sweat beads on Bucky’s back, and Tony spares a momentary thought to be pleased—he made the peak of human perfection break a sweat—before taking in the rest of Bucky.

Gorgeous, long and well-muscled, Tony doesn’t think he’s ever seen Bucky like this. Laid out like a hedonist’s wet dream, draped across the bed, body coiled with desire. His lust hits Tony in waves, deep and savory, way, way past the sweet little puppy love into something filling.

Tony can’t help but lick his lips.

“Goddammit, Tony, give me more,” Bucky growls, the threatening tone not at all quashed by the fingers in his ass, the jerks of his hips.

Tony kisses the base of his spine. “You said you imagined my fingers. I will be overwhelmingly happy, Honey, if this is as far as we get.”

Bucky turns his head, cricking his neck so he can see Tony. “Tony,” he says slowly. “I expect you inside me tonight. I want to fucking feel you then entire plane ride tomorrow. Fuck, the entire time we’re in Wakanda. Make me feel it.” He grins. “After all, you might die tomorrow.”

“Shut up,” Tony grumps, but obliges, removing his fingers from Bucky to find a condom. He has some meant for pensises without knots, way in the back of the drawer. It takes a moment, and Bucky whines the whole time.

“Couldn’t wait?” Tony asks as he turns back around. Bucky’s worked himself up onto hands and knees, supporting himself with his left arm while his right jerks himself off, paying special attention to the growing knot. Tony’s mouth waters a bit.

“Not really,” Bucky grunts. “So get in me.”

Tony smiles and gets the condom on quickly, adding more lube and then lining up, teasing the rim with just the tip of his cock. “You’re sure?”

“Really fucking sure,” Bucky responds.

Tony was right. It feels like flying.

Bucky opens up so sweetly under him, slow and gentle, taking all of Tony’s focus to get his body to yield, to welcome Tony inside. It feels like being given a gift.

He bottoms out and reaches around to tease Bucky’s cock with one hand, fingers teasing the head while Bucky strokes his knot. “I’m inside you,” he says. He wants it to be teasing, but it comes out more like wonder.

Bucky rolls his own hips, experimentally. “Damn right you are. Gonna do something ‘bout it?”

Tony, never one to back down from a challenge, pulls back and fucks into him once more, long and slow and steady.

“Goddammit,” Bucky groans.
Tony stops. “Too much?”

“No, no, don’t fucking stop,” Bucky growls, so Tony obliges, wiggling and readjusting until he finds Bucky’s prostate.

Bucky whines and moans and growls at Tony for more, sweet sounds filling the entire room, a crescendo building as his emotions peak. Tony can barely keep his eyes open, too blissed out as he moves inside Bucky, who is tight and hot and liking coming home.

Tony nudges Bucky’s hand out of the way so he can take his knot, stimulating it in time with his thrusts. It grows in his hand until Tony can’t fit his fingers around it at all anymore, doing his best to keep teasing it.

Bucky’s orgasm seems to hit him unexpectedly, the emotions building and crashing, his voice catching on a half-uttered warning before he comes. His back arches, head tilting upwards. Tony catches a hint of him, eyes closed and mouth open, hair a mess, so beautiful Tony almost wants to cry. Tony spares half a second to think that they should have put a condom on Bucky—alphas make such a mess—before coming himself.

Tony comes to full awareness draped over Bucky’s back, grateful for Bucky’s bulk and strength to keep them upright. He feels so contented and slow, lethargy and peace running through his veins.

He knows right now that he has to pull himself together though. That Bucky might need him.

He strokes his free hand over Bucky’s back, pulling himself so he’s kneeling upright behind Bucky, softening cock starting to slip loose. “Hey, you okay?” He asks.

Bucky’s response is more of a grunt than an answer. Tony kisses between his shoulder blades, then carefully reaches around with his free hand to add it to Bucky’s cock, now two hands working his knot.

Bucky’s still coming, making a mess of the sheets, and Tony just nurses him through it, letting Bucky grind his knot into Tony’s hand as he presses kisses to Bucky’s neck and spine. “That was so good,” he coos to Bucky. “So fucking good, Honey. Feel good for you?”

Even if Bucky says it was fine but not great, even if he says it was an experiment and he won’t repeat it, Tony will be fine. He will. He’ll accept it and move on.

What they have is fine. It’s better than fine. It’s like flying, he repeats to himself.

“Mhm,” Bucky grunts, lazily grinding against Tony’s hand, in that soft, slow way he gets post-orgasm but before his knot goes down. “So good, Tony.”

“Yes?” Tony asks. “You liked it?” He squeezes the knot. It’s starting to go down, he thinks. It’ll be a few more minutes.

“Mhm.”

Tony doesn’t press even though he wants to. He just holds Bucky and helps him finish, until Bucky’s spent, satisfied, exhausted and slightly overwrought in their bed.

He presses a few more kisses to Bucky’s back before getting up. He gets a cloth and washes the two of them clean before making Bucky stand up while he changes the sheets.

Bucky flops, lethargic and boneless, back into bed the moment Tony finishes. Tony chuckles softly
and joins him, hesitant at first until Bucky turns, opening up his posture and inviting Tony in.

“Seriously, was it good?” Tony checks.

“Yeah,” Bucky says. “Wrung me right out.”

“Yeah, it can do that,” Tony says. He kisses Bucky beneath the chin, down onto his neck, where he still never allows Bucky to kiss him.

Bucky doesn’t have a mating gland, doesn’t even have skin that can scar, but Tony imagines biting down there anyways.

Bucky tucks his head over Tony’s, so Tony can mouth at his neck all he wants. He presses a kiss there, takes a deep sniff, and settles against Bucky’s neck and shoulder, eyes closed and enjoying the afterglow.

“Everything you wanted?” Bucky asks, a little insecurity creeping into his voice.

“Always is, with you,” Tony murmurs quietly, and just that seems enough for Bucky to relax, then hold him a little tighter as they drift off to sleep.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Summary

Tony knew this was coming.

Chapter Notes

Hello all!

Okay, this chapter is LOADED with warnings. PLEASE read them first.

First thing. We have reached Infinity War. That means canon (TEMPORARY) character deaths. I'm not tagging major character death because I promised happy endings, but I did throw a tag on for temporary character deaths.

And just as a point of interest; I wrestled with this long and hard, but ultimately I decided the Earth side of the IW fight (so what we don't see in this fic) needs to go down essentially the same. I don't love that--I think bringing the fight to Wakanda was a moral failing of the film--but I need things to happen (i.e. Vision needs to die so Thanos gets the stone). As a result, I decided not to mess with the Earth stuff. The only change is that presumably less people die in the battle because of Tony's Iron Legion and laser satellites.

This is kinda a chapter spoiler, but I 100% feel you need to be warned in advance. Thanos is an alpha. He does use the voice on Tony. He does have bad intentions. Tony makes a choice in regards to this, choosing to play into what Thanos wants to some extent to get what he wants. I updated the tags for one sided Tony/Thanos. That only starts in this chapter--we see the voice and Thanos takes Tony--but I will put more warnings on the next few chapters because they will 100% be necessary. Just to pre-warn you on the arc; Thanos is the worse kind of alpha who takes what he wants and is very inappropriate towards Tony. However, it doesn't escalate to full-on rape (but not because Thanos doesn't want to).

I think that's the big stuff for this chapter. Welcome to the Infinity War arc, folks. Remember, happy endings are promised, always.

“So, are you going to mate him?” Pepper asks as they walk through the park, cooling down from their jog.

Tony sputters and nearly falls over. “Excuse me?” he demands.

It’s been three weeks since the operation, which had been a roaring success and not put Tony in a fraction of the danger he pretended. They haven’t tested it yet, Shuri insisting Tony get a chance to fully heal. Tony’s relatively sure it will be accidentally tested sooner or later, anyways.
The week Tony spent in Wakanda was a truly eye-opening, life-changing experience. Shuri showed him what she could of the lab—there were many things off-limits, but Tony understood, because after all everything Shuri did was technically a state secret for a state Tony did not belong to—and T’Challa and Ramonda even stepped in to take him around the city.

It’s enlightening, to see what Shuri and Ramonda have talked about in action, the respect shown to them by the citizens, no variation for their designation.

Ramonda had explained it as people bringing different natural talents to the table, and using them however they best saw fit to benefit their people. An omega might legitimately be more emotional, might be driven to provide care, but there are many ways to do that. A black panther can provide for the needs of his people. So can a homemaker, a king, a scientist.

America has a similar perspective, he supposes, preaching that all dynamics are different and can play a part. Those parts might be different, but they’re all equal, all equally important and necessary to a functioning society. After all, omegas are the foundation of a pack.

It’s all a load of horse shit, in a way Wakanda’s philosophy has never once felt.

Back in America, he’s dived deeply into his responsibilities, dividing his time between SI and preparations for the incoming invasion. His suit is cutting-edge, beyond what any—outside of Wakanda, most likely—have ever seen. The Iron Legion’s ranks have grown, their power improved.

Tony doesn’t know what else to do besides wait. And waiting makes him antsy.

It doesn’t help that Roxanne and Bucky agreed to Bucky doing a series of interviews out in LA, hitting a selection of shows they haven’t touched yet. Tony’s happy to see Bucky that independent, willing to be alone on the other side of the country, and he’s overjoyed that Bucky’s willing to do this for the team and their beliefs, but he didn’t realize how lonely he’d be.

He didn’t realize he’d get used to having someone in his bed so fast.

“I said, are you going to mate him?” She asks impatiently.

“I—where did that come from?” Tony demands.

Pepper shrugs. “It’s a next logical step. You clearly love him. You’re lonely without him.”

Tony stutters. “I’m not lonely,” he protests.

Pepper pins him with a look. “You came jogging with me.”

Tony shrugs, because, fair enough. “I don’t want to mate,” he says. “Not now and maybe not ever. It’s archaic and it’s binding and it says things to people.”

She studies him. “What does it say to you? Forget about other people.”

“I can’t,” Tony says, and he tries to be patient because he knows she doesn’t understand. “Maybe it’d be one thing if you and I worked out. You’re a beta, the bond is more symbolic than anything. But an alpha-omega bond comes with real fucking consequences.”

“You can’t think Bucky—“ she says, aghast.

“Bucky knows I’m a paranoid bastard,” he shrugs. “He’s accepted it. But I don’t really think he’d
do anything, no. I think I’d get all the physical benefits I could from mating, with Bucky.”

“But…”

“But I’d get all the public reaction, too,” Tony says. “I’d be that omega who was finally tamed. People would talk to Bucky instead of me. Technically, he could legally make a play for SI and people would start putting pressure on him. You know what people would say.”

“Yeah,” she admits. “I can guess. But, aside from all that, do you want to mate him?”

Tony thinks about it. He can’t separate out all that, but he can maybe try. Just for a moment. Just as a thought exercise.

“I want to be with him,” Tony says slowly. “For a long, long time. I don’t know if I want to mate him. I don’t like it. Forget about what it says, what people will say. I don’t like what it means.”

He doesn’t want a bite scarring the side of his neck with a long, long history of making him someone else’s. He doesn’t want a symbol he can’t return.

“Going to let him take you through your heat, at least?” Pepper asks.

“Got a while to think about that one, at least,” Tony says flippantly.

Pepper stops to look at him. “No, you don’t. Tony. It’s…I don’t know exactly how often you get them these days, but it’s been almost eight months.”

Tony does the math. “Son of a bitch,” he says. He side-eyes her. “You know, as my not-assistant, it’s not your job to keep track of that anymore.”

“Someone has to,” Pepper sighs. “Tony, you wrote and published a very successful app for this purpose.”

“I like to live in the moment,” Tony says flippantly. Honestly, he loses track of time, forgets to keep track of things his body needs that might not be urgent. Until, of course, they become urgent.

“So, are you going to let him?” Pepper asks.

“Probably,” Tony says. “In fact, I’d say…yeah. If he wants to.”

Pepper smiles at him softly. “Is he the first alpha…”

Tony nods. “Except for Rhodey.”

Tony hasn’t really thought of it before, but it almost seems like a no-brainer. Bucky will be there, if he’s up for that. Judging by his performance last time Tony was in heat, he’ll handle it like a champ. Judging by his super soldier stamina and infinite gentleness when it’s what Tony needs, they’ll be fine.

Tony swallows. That’s…a fucking lot of trust, there.

Before he can really debate the ramifications of this line of thought, a portal opens up. Tony tenses. He’s seen this before, thanks to Stephen Strange’s and Wong’s provisional team member status. Still, Strange hunting him down in the middle on Manhattan is probably never a good thing.

“Tony Stark,” he says, with all the forced gravitas an asshole wizard requires, “I need you to come with me.”

Tony swallows, looks at Pepper once, and nods.
Bruce is there. *Bruce*, who disappeared *literally* off the face of the Earth more than four years ago. Tony half can’t believe his eyes.

But it’s Bruce, and Tony knows it is. Magic couldn’t duplicate his friend, couldn’t duplicate that odd mix of emotions, fast and turbulent and always just slightly muted, like Bruce has the lid on the pot.

Wong explains the Infinity Stones. Bruce explains Thanos, and Tony’s breath catches.

*Thanos*. That name sounds so familiar, echoing and haunting. Tony knows he’s never heard it before, and yet…

He knows he *has*, too. That it weaves into his nightmares, into his anxiety, into his feverish rush to protect. Into his soul, if he’s honest.

*Thanos*.

Tony shakes it loose. “The stones…If Thanos needs all six, why don’t we just stick this one down the garbage disposal?”


Bruce’s eyes go wide as he focuses on Tony. “Where is he?”

“Not around,” Tony says shortly.

“Where?”

Vision hadn’t exactly said. Tony has guesses.

“I can get in contact with him,” he says impatiently. “We need to…we need to figure out how to get that thing out of his head without destroying him.”

*If we can* remains unsaid. Tony doesn’t want to think about it. Not yet. Tony’s already had one child sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Vision is the last he has left of JARVIS.

“Tony, where’s Steve?” Bruce asks hesitantly.

Stephen Strange is the one to snort. “You’re behind the times.”

“We…had a falling out.”

Bruce shakes his head. “Tony, do you think now is the time for your lover’s quarrel? We’re about to be invaded.”

“He used the voice on me,” Tony says ruthlessly. “Three times, now. He became my *guardian* under some bullshit restrictions and sure, he could have been worse, but nothing says *I don’t trust you as a human being* quite like Steve Rogers’ attitude. This isn’t a quarrel, Bruce. This is a fundamental disagreement about rights.”

Tony studies him carefully. Even if Bruce doesn’t care enough about him anymore, he knows Hulk will. Hulk never liked the alpha voice, never liked people attempting to treat Bruce that way.

“You know, he’s publicly tried to apologize, to make things right,” Strange cuts in.
“Boo-hoo,” Tony responds. “Too little, too late. He doesn’t even really know what he apologized for.”

Strange inclines his head, and Tony takes the concession for what it is and turns back to Bruce.

“We need to get Vision,” Tony continues. “We need Vision and Princess Shuri, and Helen Cho if we can get her in. And Bruce, if you’re going to be here, I kinda need you to sign the Accords.”

Bruce stares at him, uncomprehending, and Tony feels a blinding, brief flash of anger over what Bruce missed. He understands why he left, but it hurts, that his biggest ally left him alone to take the brunt of the fall, for years.

“Otherwise, you can’t act during the invasion,” Tony says. “You’re an omega, but I think an invasion is going to count as emergency circumstances…Doc, you moving your hair?” Tony asks.

“Not at the moment,” Strange says cautiously.

Tony sucks in a breath. Peter calls it his Spider Sense, that yet another additional sense that tells him he’s in danger. Tony doesn’t have that, not really, but he can always feel it now.

Something’s coming.

As if in a trance, Tony moves outside, watching the world outside burn. He helps a woman up off the ground, gets her to her feet and moves forward. “FRIDAY, call Rhodey,” he instructs. “Help them,” he points to a car.

“Tony?” Rhodey sounds panicked; likely, he’s already seen what’s going on.

“I know we’re a few members short right now,” Tony says. “But I could really use some assistance.”

“We’re on our way,” Rhodey promises.

“And, uh, Rhodey. Think this qualifies as an emergency,” Tony says.

“Damn right it does. Go for it. I’ll back any play you make, you know that.”

“And I have Bruce here.”

“Bruce Banner? Where the fuck did you dig him up?” Rhodey demands.

“Long, long story we’ll definitely have to explain later. For now, though. He hasn’t signed but I want Big Green.”

Rhodey sighs. “Better to ask forgiveness than permission, here. I’ll try to grab the Council on my way over. Tony. Do what you have to.”

“Got it,” Tony says, still moving through the crowds. Right now, he’s just being a good Samaritan. Until he puts on the suit, that’s all he is, really.

“And, Tony?”

“Yeah?”

“You better be goddamn careful. Come back to us, alright?”

“Do my best,” Tony says, the best promise he’s willing to make. The line cuts out. “FRIDAY, what am I looking at?”
“Not sure yet,” she says. “I’m working on it.”

Then, faced with aliens definitely a class or six above the Chitauri knock-offs they have been fighting, Tony feels the panic welling up. He quashes it down, firmly, because there is no time to lose it now.

“I’m sorry,” he manages. “Earth is closed today. How’d you even get through the satellite system?”

“They sacrificed another ship to take the fire,” FRIDAY informs him in his ear.

Tony swallows. That…is one way around his system, he supposes, and while he’s technically glad that it cut down on the number of invaders present, what does it say about an enemy who sacrifices their own so easily?

Things move fast, and before Tony knows it, Peter’s there, and his heart catches in his throat, because Peter. Because he always knew they’d need the kid but he wants him a hundred miles away from this fight at all times. Too bad the fight is going to hit the whole globe.

And then Peter went after Strange and Tony went after Peter, and he sends his kid home but knows he doesn’t have the same luxury.

He closes his eyes, and knows the time is short. “FRIDAY, call Bucky,” he says quietly.

“Tony? Tony? Tony, where the hell are you?” Bucky demands.

“Hey,” he says. “You know how I was going to pick you up at the airport and take you on an extravagant date I hadn’t told you about yet? I think we need to push those plans.”

Tony can hear the breath leave Bucky. “Tell me you’re not on that ship.”

Tony swallows. “Yeah,” he says. It’s about all he can manage.

“Oh, God. I’ll—just wait. I’m coming,” Bucky promises frantically, despite the fact that they both know that Tony has minutes here, not enough time for Bucky to make it across the entire continent.

“Hey, hey… Bucky?” Tony says. “We both knew—we knew this was coming, alright? And we’ve got jobs to do. So—I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Tony, I love—” The connection cuts, and Tony closes his eyes, holds on to that moment for a second longer. And then he gets to work.

They take the fight to Thanos, hoping to draw some of it away from Earth. Tony wishes everyone he loved was left behind, but here Peter stands, determined to help and with an actual role in their plan.

It kills Tony, to see this kid here, to see him literally millions of miles from home, to see him in a fight he should have no business being in.

*When you can do the things that I can, but you don’t…and then the bad things that happen, they happen because of you.*

Tony wishes he took a little longer to disabuse his kid of that idea.
He doesn’t want his kid to have anything to do with these losers, doesn’t want much to do with them himself, but then again, beggars can’t be choosers.

They’re a motley bunch. Star Lord who seems to be some version of human, if a human grew up not knowing anything about life on earth. He’s a beta and seemingly running his own crew, with some sort of weird swagger. The crew is a mess, but Tony has to admit the plan isn’t terrible.

The muscle-guy, Drax, throws Tony, Strange, and Peter off. It’s not just that he talks in absolute literalism. He has no dynamic, something Tony has literally never seen outside of Vision before, but, as far as he can tell, Drax is organic life. His complete, casual disregard for taking this seriously until he chooses to drives Tony nuts, but Drax seems on board.

The bug-girl, Mantis, is so clearly an omega, and one description of what she can do sends Tony back to that conversation in his workshop with Shuri. She’s like Wanda, except her powers aren’t magic. At least she doesn’t seem malevolent.

And then there’s Nebula, a cyborg who Tony would love to talk to if they were in better circumstances. Tony tries to see through the accessories, something he would usually never do, because it’s fascinating. Tony doesn’t know if it’s the cyborg accessories or just her natural way, but, like Drax, like Vision, he can’t feel a dynamic from her either. Tony wonders how much os organic and how much is machine, then thinks that’s probably the type of thing you’re not supposed to ask about.

And this is what Tony has to work with. Not the Iron Legion he built, not the full range if Iron Man armors, not his team. This.

Tony cannot deal with magic, except for that his whole world seems to be infested with it, so of course their plan is guided by Strange’s magic tarot card reading. It’s not a bad plan, Tony has to admit, uses everyone’s strength and has the value of having the element of surprise.

They hold their own, may even be pulling ahead, until Quill loses it. Tony wants to blame him, does a little but can’t really. He knows what grief does to a person.

Well, if Tony ever needed the proof that he doesn’t have the power to generate emotions that don’t exist, he has it right there. He can’t calm Quill, can’t get him to think rationally and see the plan. His grief is too strong, and Tony’s projected calm, calm, calm means nothing in comparison.

They begin a downhill battle then, and Thanos throws a fucking moon at him, of all things. Tony spares the briefest millisecond to wonder at how the hell his life ended up here, then to think about how it’s really a good thing they kept the fight off Earth. Thanos can pull an entire moon down. On a populated planet, that is a cataclysmic, life-ending event.

“Stark.”

Tony swallows. “You know me?” Thanos. It’s been echoing in his head, a faint little yet-unformed word, for years now. He wonders what he inadvertently shouted into space, when he dropped that missile. When he showed the Earth as ready to fight and win higher forms of war.

“I do,” Thanos confirms. “You’re not the only one cursed with knowledge.”

“My only curse is you.”

The fight ensues, and Tony knows he’s hopelessly outgunned. What was it Fury said? Hilariously outgunned. A drop of blood, at the end of the day, means nothing. This isn’t a playground fight, it’s not about first blood. It’s about winning the damn war.
He’s almost out of time, out of nanites. He uses his limited supplies for one last desperate attempt.

Thanos stabs him with his own suit. Tony knows it’s the end, knows that this is it, that he’ll die here, a failure and so incredibly far from home.

Thanos places his hand on Tony’s head. “You have my respect, Stark,” he says, almost crooning. “When I’m done, half of humanity will still be alive. I hope they remember you.” He feels almost grieved as he walks away, the feeling rancid, similar enough to how he felt when he told Quill what he’d done to Gamora.

Just when Thanos raises the gauntlet, Strange interrupts. “Stop.”

They haggle over Tony, and Strange gives away the Stone, worth a thousand—a million, trillions, how do they calculate the comparable life lost?—of Tony. Tony swallows, still tastes his own blood.

Quill comes storming in, and Thanos is clearly done with them. Before he goes, he pets Tony’s head one last time. “Wait for me,” he orders, his voice soft but unmistakably carrying an alpha voice command.

If Tony wasn’t dying, wasn’t desperate and hopeless and so viciously, violently angry, he might be interested to know if the voice actually works between species.

Thanos disappears with one last pet to Tony’s head, Quill coming storming in, guns blazing.

Tony sews up his wound with nanites on autopilot, then turns to Strange. “Why did you do that?”

Strange’s ominous proclamation makes him feel, if anything, worse. “We’re in the end game now.”

From there it’s waiting. Waiting to see if he’ll ever be able to stand, if he’ll even live. His nanites make a great glue but can’t re-knit organ damage.

Peter helps him to his feet. And then, Mantis dissolves. Then Drax. Then Quill.

Strange calls for his attention. “Tony,” he says, the most soft, sympathetic tone Tony’s ever heard from the alpha. “There was no other way.” Then he too is gone.

“Mr. Stark? I don’t feel so good.”

“You’re alright,” Tony says, voice on autopilot and he frantically reaches for his kid.

“I…I don’t know what’s happening, I don’t…I don’t wanna go, I don’t wanna go…”

Tony grabs his kid, hauls him close as if with just his two arms he can hold this kid together. As if he can protect him against the end.

And then his kid dissolves in his hands, ashes left on his fingers.

“He did it,” Nebula announces, before collapsing alongside him.

Tony can’t let that hand go, one hand cradling the other, holding his kid’s ashes close.
Nebula seems more focused on survival. “Come on,” she says. “This rock will fall out of orbit soon enough. We need to get going. I can fly Quill’s ship.”

Part of Tony wants to stand and follow her, re-group in the air. The other half is very loudly telling him to stay.

He shakes his head. “Thanos gave me an order.” It’s true, Thanos did. *Not how we planned to test this*, Tony thinks.

“So what?” She snaps. Tony knows she has no dynamic, or at least he can’t feel one form her, but he can’t help the bitter surge of anger when she doesn’t understand what the issue here is.

“So I’m an omega and an alpha walked up and told me to stay here,” Tony lies. He doesn’t know what part of him this is. Maybe the part that knew Thanos was coming, maybe the part that’s been ready for this. He just knows he has to play along.

“You leave,” he says, eyes closed. “Didn’t look like Daddy Dearest was welcoming you with open arms. No sense on him finding both of us here.”

“What makes you think he’ll come back?” Nebula challenges.

“Because he told me so,” Tony says. He closes his eyes, wonders if he’s making the biggest mistake of his life. “Look. Take the ship. Head to Earth, okay? There have to be some of us left alive. Ask for Colonel James Rhodes. I’m sure someone will point you in the right direction. Uh, try to hail them before you get too close. I might’ve set up lasers before I left.”


Tony winces. “Yeah, you and me both,” he mutters, watching her go towards the ship, the only working way off this rock.

Tony retracts the suit to save his nanites, because now they’re a precious resource. He leaves the ones healing his wound, and settles back to wait.

It takes Thanos an entire day to return to him. If Tony’s self-control was any worse, he might’ve commented about how an omega doesn’t like to be stood up.

Thanos kneels down in front of him, examining Tony before scooping him into his arms without so much as asking.

“My omega,” he rumbles, one purple hand stroking Tony’s head as the other, still covered in the gauntlet, cradles Tony’s body.

Tony shivers. So it begins.
Chapter Twenty-five

Chapter Summary

Tony's new life with Thanos.

Chapter Notes

Hi all--

So I'm close enough to done now that I feel comfortable giving out bonus chapters. I might even up the posting schedule. Either way, I didn't want to leave you hanging, although I don't know if the ending of this one is much better.

Warnings for this chapter (PLEASE read). So, Thanos is the creepiest creep who has a very firm idea of what Tony's place is. There is no sexual content here, but I would say there's definitely a creepy sexual lens that Thanos views Tony through. Thanos spanks Tony. I didn't put that in the main fic tags only because I didn't want to draw out people looking for that as a kink who would find this instead. They're pretty different, lol. Thanos does it to be domineering and to remind Tony he's bigger and more physically powerful than him; it's humiliating and trapping and awful. Also, there is a dead animal that they butcher and eat. It's not super graphic but it is a bit of a sticking point for Tony. Obviously, this whole chapter is in a very uncomfortable place for Tony. He does not want any of this, but makes choices to stay based on a plan to get the result he wants.

Okay, I think that's it; if you need more detailed warnings/descriptions, please reach out to me, I'd be happy to talk.

Hope you enjoy, and thanks for reading!

Thanos orders him to sleep, and then takes him away.

Tony has to feign sleep, which is a challenging enough task—he wants to move, he wants to study, he wants to fight—but it gives him time to observe. Thanos putters around his ship, which is seemingly on auto-pilot. Once in a while, Thanos will come by and stroke Tony’s head.

He’s still wearing the gauntlet, Tony notes, his eyes slits and watching the room. It looks destroyed, the metal tarnished and warped, although the stones look as intimidatingly bright as ever.

Tony’s stomach aches with a sharp sort of pain, but Tony doesn’t dare “wake up” enough to add more nanites. For one, he doesn’t want to show Thanos the only resource he has left. For another, the longer Thanos thinks that the alpha voice works on Tony, the better.

He wants to tell Shuri that the implant works. It’s been tested twice now, and both times, he’s kept
his wits. The blinding, instant emptiness of his mind that he remembers so vividly, the fear of a full, bursting brain suddenly being empty, none of that ever happened.

The ship stops. Tony suppresses a shudder, wishes he knew at least the vaguest notion of where they landed. What if he can’t breathe the atmosphere?

“I know you’re awake, little omega,” Thanos rumbles. Tony tenses. “It’s alright. We’re home now.”

Tony opens his eyes, seeing no sense in pretending now. He looks around.

Green. It’s green, and vibrant, and lively. Like the best parts of earth, and Tony can see why Thanos likes this, after seeing his vision of Titan.

“Welcome home,” Thanos says.

He doesn’t set Tony down, which Tony finds beyond annoying. “Where’s home?” Tony asks, looking around.

Thanos uses his free hand—Tony hates that he can hold him up one-handed—to gesture expansively. “Here,” he says.

Tony wrinkles his nose. “I don’t see anything,” he says. “Haven’t you heard? I’m spoiled. Going to at least require walls. And a roof.”

Thanos chuckles. Tony’s feeling out the barriers; at least he hasn’t inadvertently gotten himself killed. He feels…satisfied, Tony thinks.

“I heard you were mouthy,” Thanos says. “It’s okay. I like it…when appropriate.”

“How do you know anything about me?”

“I’ve been watching you,” Thanos says. “You weren’t the only one cursed with knowledge. Knowing my omega was out there, and that we were on opposite sides of this struggle—no more of that.”

“Your omega?” Tony demands, trying to keep the hysterics at bay. “What makes you think I’m your anything?”

“Little omega,” Thanos croons. “I knew the moment you destroyed my army. The omega with the bomb. Who else could be meant for me but the destroyer of worlds?”

Tony swallows. “Not worlds.”

“You destroyed an entire species,” Thanos says. “My loyal soldiers, wiped out at the hands of the omega I knew was destined for me.”

Tony stares at the alpha, clearly half-mad but also undeniably powerful. The gauntlet might look like an ancient relic but it’s clear the stones still work. He smells sickeningly sweet, so sweet it saturates the air, drowning out the scents of nature around them.

Lust, Tony thinks with revulsion. Puppy love, infatuation. The desperate, consuming kind.

The kind that means Thanos will be easily distracted, Tony thinks. The kind that means he’s vulnerable.
Tony swallows. He knows why he’s here. Knows what he has to do.

If Thanos is watching the infatuation in Tony’s eyes, then he’ll never see the knife in his hand.

*Look over here, the magician says. Pay no attention to my other hand*, Tony thinks before schooling his expression.

“I never intended…I didn’t want…”

“Liar,” Thanos says, almost fondly. “You knew you were killing the Chitauri and didn’t care. You knew you could die in the process and didn’t care. You are made of ruthlessness, omega, and very few could match you.”

“And you could?” Tony challenges.

“You and I both know what it means to do what has to be done, for the good of all,” Thanos says. “You are unlike other omegas. I’m sure you have been lonely, unable to be matched. But no more. I am the alpha that can tame you.”

Tony swallows back his disgust.

“You tried to kill me,” Tony protests.

“You and I both know about the casualties of war,” Thanos says dispassionately. “I sent my children to war for my cause. I killed my most precious child for this. Before my mission was complete, anything could and should be sacrificed. What I wanted didn’t matter.”

“But it does now?” Tony ventures.

Thanos strokes Tony’s hair, then down his neck, making sure to trail one large finger over Tony’s mating gland. Tony shivers. “You are my reward, little omega. I have struggled and I have sacrificed, and now, I have finally won.”

“What do you want from me?” Tony asks.

Thanos reaches the top of a hill that overlooks the valley below. He sets Tony on his feet and keeps a large purple hand on his shoulder. “Everything,” he says. “Welcome to our new life, little omega.”
Thanos turns to look at him. “The power of the stones isn’t meant to be used trivially, little omega.” He looks at his still gauntlet-ed fist. “The work is done. Now all that’s left is to guard the power from misuse.”

Tony blinks. “You mean you won’t use them again?” He looks around. “Is this some kind of stronghold?”
“Clever omega,” Thanos says, propping up another log. Tony watches; Thanos has made a lot of progress. He wonders how long it’ll take him to complete.

“Is anyone else on this planet?”

“Not anymore,” Thanos grunts. He looks at Tony. “But even if there were, don’t worry, little omega. Even without the stones, I can protect you.”

Not exactly Tony’s main concern, although he supposes it is nice to know that no one is going to come kill him, even if he doesn’t want to think about why not.

“My surviving children will make their way here. They’ll be excited to meet you.”

“Children? Like Nebula?” Tony asks.

Thanos’ lip curls. “A waste of parts,” he says. “She survived, then? And left you alone?”

Tony shrugs, not willing to engage with him on this. He wonders how far Nebula’s made it.

“My real children will be coming,” Thanos promises.

“And, what, I’m their new step-father?”

Thanos just looks at him, and Tony feels nerves building inside his gut. There’s definitely a horror movie about this, the ones that villainize race or mental illness or whatever, where the “defective” alpha kidnaps the pure, ideal omega and just plants them in some creepy family structure, pretending everything is normal. Tony tries to remember how that movie ends.

He’s pretty sure it ended badly.

Thanos’ structure isn’t done by night fall, so he comes under the tree with Tony. The first thing he does is chain Tony’s leg to the tree, and it’s a short leash.

“You used the voice to keep me here,” Tony protests. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Consider it an abundance of caution,” Thanos rumbles. “For your protection as much as anything, little omega.” Tony grimaces. “Now, let me see your wound,” he says, and, without giving Tony any warning or chance, he tears his shirt off.

The wound is still sealed by nanites, but definitely not healed. It still hurts.

Tony holds his breath. Thanos is close. Too close, absolutely invading his space. It might be possible to use the nanites, to make a knife, to use the element of surprise.

Then his eyes dart to the gauntlet. Even unfocused, Thanos is a threat while awake. All it takes is a finger twitch to trigger the power of the cosmos, whatever he may or may not say about their use.

“Poor omega,” Thanos croons, stroking one finger near the wound in Tony’s stomach. “Brave
omega. Willing to suffer and die for your cause. That’s over now. I’ll take care of you. There is no more fight.”

Tony juts his chin out. “What if I don’t want to give that up?”

“You’ve never had an alpha who could truly care for you,” Thanos notes. “I can show you your place, little omega. I can give you what you need.”

What Tony needs is a knife to run through Thanos’ brain, but he doesn’t say it.

Thanos taps the pseudo-arc reactor, the housing for the nanites. Tony winces.

“What’s this?” he asks. “Humans don’t have this.”

“This one does,” Tony says. He has to remind himself that it’s not surgically inserted all the way into his sternum anymore. He won’t die if Thanos messes with it.

Well, he might, considering it would leave him defenseless, but he won’t die of shrapnel to his heart.

He bites his lip, looks away. Vulnerability, he reminds himself. The goal is to look vulnerable. “I need it,” he says, voice quivering. “It helps keep me alive.”

Thanos studies him, touches the arc reactor again. “Alright, little omega,” he concedes.

“You going to tie me up forever?” Tony asks.

“No,” Thanos assures him. “Just for now.” And with that, he pets Tony on the head like a particularly cute dog, and moves to the other side of the tree, just out of reach.

Tony sleeps. He’s exhausted, so beyond exhausted, and if he doesn’t sleep, then he’ll cry. He doesn’t want to cry in front of Thanos, doesn’t want Thanos to see that.

Thanos sleeps too, and he wakes up feeling…calm, Tony thinks. Soft sea-breezes and clean linen, soft and gentle. He feels like a man relieved, like a vacation.

Tony doesn’t think—can’t think—that the logical conclusion is that Thanos only feels like that because too many people Tony cares about, and trillions he’s never heard of, are dead.

Tony’s never wanted to be the survivor, but here he is. They say it’s not what you have but what you do with it. If Tony’s going to be punished in this way, if he’s going to be made to live again and again and again, then he might as well do the most with it.

Don’t waste it, Stark. Don’t waste your life. Tony’s tried again and again, to find the right thing to die for so his life will have been well-used, so he’ll have fulfilled the single most important promise he ever made. But every time, he’s left alive. The universe is never quite done wringing all it can from Tony Stark, and he’s apparently never quite done paying it back. In a way, Thanos is right; Tony’s history is bloody and unbecoming.

Thanos is wrong about everything else, though. Tony doesn’t want that to be his legacy.

Don’t waste it, Stark. Don’t waste your life.

Tony grits his teeth. There’s work to do.
Thanos leaves and comes back, dropping a dead animal at Tony’s feet. Tony looks up, lip curled. “What do you expect me to do with this?”

“You’re clever, you’ll figure it out,” Thanos says, pulling out a knife. He begins to skin the animal. Tony looks away. “Watch,” Thanos orders. “I expect you to be able to do this in the future.”

Tony grits his teeth and turns back. Thanos uses the alpha voice more than any alpha Tony’s ever met. It’s grating on his nerves. He has pretty solid evidence it won’t work anymore, but every time, his whole body tenses, whether anticipating the shock or the blankness, Tony’s not sure. It doesn’t happen, but Tony’s sure it’ll take a while to break the habit, if he ever manages to.

Tony watches the bloody scene. Thanos is quick about it, dispassionate as he moves his knife. He leaves Tony a semi-neat pile of usable meat.

Thanos leaves and comes back, leaving a pile of wood near the stripped carcass, and a cup of water, which he hands to Tony. “Cook,” he grunts, then leaves Tony, still chained to a tree, to work out the meal.

Thanos gets back to pulling apart trees to build his little fortress, and Tony’s left to stare at the meat and logs.

He’s hungry. Starving, actually, not quite sure when he last ate. He’s still not going to cook a pile of unknown alien animal meat over an open flame that he only theoretically knows how to light.

He drinks the water eagerly after only a brief thought of hoping it won’t make him ill or dead—then again, at this point, does he really care?—but doesn’t touch any of the rest of the supplies.

Thanos ignores him and keeps working, and Tony wonders if this is some sort of psych-out, or if Thanos is giving him a chance to get his act together, or what. He still doesn’t cook.

Thanos breaks at what Tony assumes is midday—Tony’s still not clear on what the exact measure of a day is here—and comes over to Tony, sitting down opposite of him.

“I expected lunch,” he rumbles. Tony looks him over. He barely looks sweaty, even with the work he’s been doing all day.

“Tough luck,” Tony returns. “I expected something different that what I got too, you know.”

Thanos makes a rumbling sound when he’s upset, low and deep inside of him. It reminds Tony of a volcano about to erupt, a more physical sign of the brewing anger Tony knows from almost every alpha he’s ever known.

(He deliberately doesn’t—can’t—think of the others right now. Not when he doesn’t know, not when he can’t find out, not when the odds suck and he can’t do this—)

“I’m disappointed,” Thanos says. “I thought you were ready to learn without relying on my voice. Perhaps I was wrong. Still, if I give you the comfort and ease of orders forever, how will you learn your place without that crutch? You need to learn, little omega.”

Tony swallows. “What’s you gonna do, beat me?” He challenges.

It’s the same chin tip, hard eyes, clenched jaw he’s used hundreds of times before, but he has a feeling Thanos is going to call him on this bluff.

Thanos moves closer quicker than a body so large should be able to, then rips Tony’s flight suit
further, exposing his ass to the world.

“Not a beating.” Thanos disagrees. “A reminder.”

Tony struggles as Thanos positions him over his lap, struggles as Thanos uses a large arm to pin him into place. No one has ever done this to him before, not even his own father, who preferred a quick backhand in the moment when he deemed it necessary that the protracted idea of a spanking.

Thanos’ hand is huge and hits most of Tony’s ass at the same time, catching his thighs. Tony tries not to shout, tries not to give Thanos the satisfaction, but it’s difficult.

He’s taken worse, he reminds himself firmly. He can handle this.

But it’s not just the pain. It’s the humiliation, the knowledge that even if it's true and nothing lives on this planet any longer, Tony is out in the open, bare-assed and over Thanos’ lap, getting his ass turned red because Thanos decided to be some archaic authoritarian parent to a disobedient, naughty child.

Tony’s over forty. He’s an adult who helped build one of the most successful companies in the world. He’s revolutionized science, he had friends and family and a life. He’s saved the world.

Thanos strips that all away in moments, making Tony feel like less than nothing, because none of that matters right now. Tony’s an object, broken and not operating quite properly, that Thanos needs to set to rights.

By the time Thanos stops, Tony knows there are tears running down his face, as loathe as he is to admit it.

Thanos scoops Tony up and cuddles him to his chest, again like a disobedient child being offered comfort. “There, there,” he says, voice rumbling and deep and making Tony’s bones shake. “It’s over. You’ve learned your lesson, yes?”

Tony doesn’t respond. Thanos doesn’t seem to need the input.

“I know there were none on your pathetic homeworld who could match you,” Thanos continues. “So you’ve grown wild and uncontrolled. That’s alright. It made you strong and I like that. But I can match you, little omega, and I will, every step of the way. I’ll help you find your place. You don’t have to do it alone. But you must trust me.”

Tony grits his teeth and wonders if this is an appropriate time to stab Thanos, who seems relatively distracted justifying what he just did. But Tony waits. All it would take is Thanos closing his hand to reverse it and take away Tony’s last chance, after all.

Thanos strokes over Tony’s back, still covered in his torn flight suit so at least he doesn’t have to feel those hands on him. Then, he carefully pulls Tony’s pants back up. Tony’s not too proud to admit that it hurts.

“So, little omega. I still expect lunch.” Thanos sits there, cross-legged and watching, like some sort of impassive god. Tony hates him more, a vicious, burning thing that takes over his whole body.

He takes a deep breath, tries to calm himself. He’s the magician and the assistant. The magician can hate Thanos. The assistant has some work to do, setting up this trick.

“I…I don’t know how,” Tony admits, trying for acquiescent and vulnerable, not sure he hits the mark entirely, but it’s clearly close enough for Thanos. His expression doesn’t soften but
something about his eyes do, something about his smell. Affection always smells delicate, Tony thinks.

“Just this once,” Thanos allows. “I’ll show you. Pay attention.”

He actually starts to make a fire by rubbing two sticks together, and Tony feels his anger flare even hotter. “I saw your memory of Titan,” he protests, trying to keep his attitude soft and delicate, not sure if he’s succeeding, “It wasn’t… primitive like this. Why can’t we just use technology?”

“This isn’t Titan,” Thanos rebukes. “Titan is no more.”

“But we’re not in the stone ages,” Tony argues, not caring if some of his phrasing doesn’t translate. “We have technology. Why do we have to live like this?”

“Technology is what tore the universe apart,” Thanos says. “We developed too far, showed too much hubris, grew too much. We couldn’t support ourselves as we grew, and we over-populated. Died. I have repaired the universe. We won’t make that mistake again.”

Tony jerks back. Did Thanos not know who Tony was, or did he not care? And did he think the rest of the universe was living like this? Sure, he assumes the universe is in disarray right now, but definitely not to the point where they’re living like this.

It doesn’t make any sense, except as some sort of weird statement. The trouble is, Tony thinks Thanos buys into his own statement a little too far.

He shifts, then winces as the pain in his ass flares up. He tries to watch Thanos—not that he wants to give the giant purple murderer what he wants, but Tony would also appreciate avoiding another beating as long as he’s here—as Thanos finishes up cooking the meat from this morning.

“We can use the rest of the carcass,” Thanos continues. “Bones, skin—it’s all useful. There will be no more wasting of resources.”

Thanos serves lunch and Tony just has to hope that whatever this animal is isn’t something humans would find poisonous. He’s starving.

When he finishes, he looks up and steel himself for what he knows he has to do next. “Water?” He asks, hating to beg but knowing Thanos softens at his wide eyes.

Thanos pats him on the head as he ambles to his feet, leaving Tony’s sight for a few moments. Not that it matters. Tony’s chained to the tree with only a few feet of leeway, and Thanos takes the gauntlet everywhere with him.

Thanos comes back with his hands cupped together and full of water, and Tony’s face burns with shame at what he’s expected to do.

He does it, though. Humans can only go three days without water, and they start losing full control of their mental faculties long before that.

It’s uncomfortable and awkward. The human mouth really isn’t meant to drink from that angle. Thanos is at least patient with him, waiting for him to get it all.

When he’s done, Thanos pets his head again, stroking his hair. “Good, little omega,” he murmurs. Tony squeezes his eyes shut, but knows what he has to ask for next. “Bathroom?” He asks.
“Ask again.”

Tony forces himself to count backwards from ten, to not do something rash and stupid that will get him killed and leave Thanos with the stones. “Please, can I go to the bathroom?” He asks.

Thanos unchains him and walks him to the tree line, giving Tony a modicum of privacy behind a tree as he takes care of himself. He’s still flushing bright red as Thanos walks him back to the tree.

After Thanos re-attaches the chain around his ankle, he looks up, inspecting the sky. “They should be back by now,” he muses.

Tony’s heart jumps. Could they have managed to kill all of Thanos’ most ardent supporters? Could they have at least achieved that small victory?

He doesn’t say it. What he does instead is make his voice small, forces himself to relax, to not show any sign of stress or anxiety or anger, nothing. “Space is huge,” Tony says as calmly as he can. “Maybe they’re taking a little bit.”

“Perhaps,” Thanos agrees, patting him on the head once more, cupping his jaw, before going back to his work, seemingly done with Tony for now.

Thanos works until after the sun sets, then comes back with more water for Tony. They eat the last of the cooked meat, cold now.

Thanos then inspects Tony’s wounds again, cooing over his bravery. “I’m proud of you today,” he says to Tony. “You’re learning.”

Tony swallows, and closes his eyes for what he knows will come next.

Sure enough, Thanos tugs Tony’s pants down once more, and inspects his ass. “Barely bruised,” he announces. “The sting will fade but the lesson will stick, yes?”

Tony nods tiredly. Yes, the lesson will stick. The lesson that Thanos needs to die extra hard.

“Goodnight, my little omega,” Thanos rumbles. “Tomorrow will be better still.” He stand up to move to the other side of the tree.

“You’re not going to…you won’t…” Tony gestures to the space beside him, but it doesn’t even encompass what he means. “I don’t get why you dragged me here and won’t stay next to me, ever.” He doesn’t get why an alpha like Thanos takes an omega and doesn’t touch him beyond these oddly possessive strokes.

Thanos leans down and strokes his head. “The task is not yet complete,” he says, jutting his chin towards his fort. “There can be no pleasure until the job is done.”

Tony swallows as Thanos walks away. He looks at the fort.

If Tony had to guess—except he’s an engineer, a guess isn’t a guess when an expert makes it—he would say he has another three days.
Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Summary

Tony takes matters into his own hands.

Chapter Notes

Hello, welcome back!

If you missed Monday's update, go back a chapter. Then come back here.

This chapter is a lot, so pay attention to the warnings, please.

Warning for violence. It's not super graphic but it is there and not glossed over. Death. Non graphic dismemberment. Warning for sexual violence and using sexuality as a weapon. It does not progress to rape but only in the sense that it's not allowed to get to clothing off stages. The creepiness, the awfulness, the cornered-ness (I coined this word), that all is still 100% there. Take care of yourself.

If you want to skip all of that, start on "he moves out of the fortress." Feel free to ask me for a summary.

This is the end of the Thanos arc, at least. Things aren't instantly better but that nightmare isn't going to haunt us anymore

Thanks for bearing with me through the rough parts, and I hope you enjoy!

It becomes clear to Tony as he sits and observes and studies the Titan that, even if he could convince Thanos to lie with him, it wouldn’t be enough.

He couldn’t honey-pot the alien and wait for him to sleep, then steal the gauntlet and murder him. The gauntlet anywhere near Thanos is just too much of a risk, too much of a chance Thanos can undo the damage.

Some part of him is intensely relieved, that he doesn’t have to make himself do that. Of course, it doesn’t really matter. He’ll end up there either way, he thinks bitterly. At least if he was a honey-pot, he could make himself believe that it was for a good cause, that he chose to do this.

So now, he watches the fortress go up and waits.

Thanos gives him a little more room on the chain, a few more feet to move around. He brings water in his cupped hands three times a day, escorts Tony to the bathroom when necessary. Tony cooks a midday meal with whatever Thanos brings him. He doesn’t want to, he wants to rebel and throw things and refuse, but he needs food and he needs Thanos to keep softening up to him. Besides, in the privacy of his own head, he can admit he doesn’t want Thanos to spank him again.
His ass has just started to feel normal again, but the humiliation of being treated like a disobedient toddler, of being treated like that in public, of being treated like an object to be molded, will never wear off. An effective punishment, indeed.

Thanos keeps inspecting him, touching his head and throat, and Tony’s come to realize that it’s Thanos resisting temptation, proving that he’s strong enough to resist while he still has a task to complete. Tony wants to sneer at the very idea.

Thanos talks about Tony’s progress and taking care of Tony and Tony’s place in this pack, and Tony works hard to pretend, to pretend this is acceptable, that he’s receptive to this, that he’s anything but enraged at all times.

It doesn’t help that he usually uses his emotional defenses to piss people off on purpose. Going in the opposite direction isn’t easy.

Thanos watches the sky, and every hour no one shows up, Tony feels a little thrill of hope. Maybe they killed them all. Maybe that’s one thing he doesn’t have to worry about, at least.

On the fourth day, Thanos finishes early. He has a rough structure now, with a large footprint and a rough roof. Dirt floors, still, but Tony supposes it goes with the whole “rustic” theme.

Tony braces himself, but Thanos doesn’t come to him. Instead, he builds a box, sitting down half a dozen yards or so from Tony, using finer, more precise tools and more attention.

The box takes a whole day, at least. Tony hates to admit it, but he dozes while Thanos works. There’s not much to do to keep his attention other than cooking their meal, and he refuses to put an ounce more attention into that than necessary.

Plus, Tony’s body needs to heal. The nanites might have done remarkably well holding him together for something he had never tested that way before, but he almost died on that rock, and his body knows it.

He doesn’t miss it when Thanos finishes that stupid box, though. Mostly, he doesn’t miss the fact that Thanos makes sure he has water at an atypical time of day, strokes his hair a few times, and then walks away, leaving Tony on high alert.

He’s absolutely alone, chained to a tree. While he’s never defenseless, Thanos doesn’t really know that. The world seems bigger, swallowing him as a small speck up on this hill.

Thanos doesn’t take long to return. This time, he’s not carrying a dead vaguely deer-like animal. Instead, he’s carrying what Tony realizes quickly is a bio-metric lock.

It’s the most technologically advanced thing Tony’s seen other than his own chest since Thanos hauled him out of that space ship.

He fixes it on his box and then opens it with his handprint. Once he tests it twice more, he looks triumphant.

“Little omega, look,” Thanos says. He removes the destroyed gauntlet from his hand, then lays it carefully inside the box, the stones’ light shining through until he closes and locks the lid. “My task is done.”

He unchains Tony from the tree and uses the slack of the chain like a leash to drag Tony towards his fortress.
Tony hasn’t been inside yet, hasn’t even been close, so he studies it with a critical eye. The structure is solid enough, but it’s also basically just trees driven deep into the ground and occasionally a nail or two. Tony could take this down in a minute.

There’re no windows so it’s dark inside, with only one hole in the ceiling, presumably to facilitate a fire. Right now, it’s acting as a skylight and the room’s only light source beside Tony’s chest.

He’d forgotten how useful the arc reactor had been for that. One of its more useless useful features, but it had been a decent flashlight.

The structure isn’t huge and there aren’t interior rooms. Tony feels like he’s in some primitive American frontier drama, where he’s the little house omega waiting for his big strong alpha to bring home food for him to cook, doing the mending and the wash and waiting for his alpha to come take care of him.

Thanos drops his chain for a moment, and Tony has a sudden flashback to dogs he’s seen, where the owner’s trained the animal to not move even if no one is actually holding the leash. He grits his teeth.

Thanos walks to the corner that’s furthest away from the door and sets the box there, pushing it against the wall. “At last,” he rumbles, pride a strong, potent scent on the air, “it is done.” He steps back to Tony’s side and puts his hands on Tony, a big hand on his back, possessive and domineering and making Tony cringe. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for decades. Everything has been building to this moment, and at last, I’ll have my reward.”

Tony’s out of time.

“You know,” Tony says, knowing he can’t quite entirely cover up the nerves, “I think I deserve some sort of bed.”

Thanos pauses for just a second, hand on Tony’s shoulder tightening as he considers. “I’ll build us a magnificent bed, worthy of what we’ll do in it,” Thanos agrees. “But not right now. That can wait.”

Tony swallows. So much for that.

He has to...he has to pull himself together. He has to make a plan, make Thanos bring his guard all the way down. And it seems the most immediate way to do that involves his body, something Tony categorically doesn’t want to do.

Just the purely practical aspect gets to him. Thanos is so much bigger than him. It hurts when a human fucks him without the right amount of care, nevermind an alien nearly twice his height.

And emotionally? Tony’s trying not to think about people back home, trying not to think about the odds and the chances, not when he’s so deep up shit creek. But he’d like it if, when—if—he makes it home, he doesn’t have to tell Bucky he slept with an alien.

Hell, he’d like it if he never had to live with that memory.

_Magician and the assistant, Tony_ , he thinks, pulling himself together. _Make him look one way, then fucking kill him_.

“Gonna fuck me against the wall?” Tony asks, trying to project disappointment instead of pure terror.
Thanos eyes him hungrily at the word *fuck*, lust filling the air around them. Tony tries not to gag.

“Don’t you think I deserve better than that?” Tony presses. He takes a step backwards, as far as the chain will allow him. Tries to look coy. Leads Thanos further away from his little box of unlimited cosmic power.

“I think,” Thanos says, advancing on Tony, following him and letting the chain drop through his fingers, giving Tony more room to move, “That it’s about the person, not the place.”

Well, he’s right on that account, at least. Unfortunately, Thanos is oh for two on the right person/right place business.

Tony takes a deep breath to center himself. He needs to drag Thanos after him, away from the box. Needs to captivate his attention and get him to lower his guard entirely.

He needs to use some of these defenses he has.

*Watch the pretty omega,* he thinks viciously. *Chase after the pretty omega. Lust for the pretty omega.*

No one ever expects the pretty omega with the knife, after all.

He’s not like Mantis, definitely not like Maximoff. He can’t influence Thanos’ mind, can’t blind him to reality, but he can see something clouding Thanos’ eyes, his judgement compromised.

Well, Obie had always said the two universal motivators were sex and money.

Thanos pursues him closer to the opposite wall, boxing him in until Tony doesn’t have anywhere to go. All he can do is watch Thanos slowly advance on him, big from a distance and bigger up close, looming over Tony’s entire field of vision.

Tony has to be fast.

He doesn’t have many nanites to spare, too many of them lost in the long battle that was, in actuality, just a handful of days ago. He’s only going to get one shot, and it’s going to cost him essentially his entire supply. No Iron Man armor for him.

The nanites creep across his chest and down his arm. Thanos doesn’t seem to notice, looming closer and closer.

Finally, he’s there, boxing Tony in with big arms pressed against the wall next to Tony’s head. Tony swallows. He’s rarely ever felt so cornered in his life, which is really saying something.

Thanos might say he knows Tony, might say he’s been watching. If that’s true, he hasn’t done a particularly good job on the research, because people who pay attention would know. If there is one universal truth about Tony Stark, is if you paint him into a corner, he will *kill* to get out.

Tony takes a deep breath, and then there is a knife sticking out of Thanos’ throat.

Thanos stumbles back a step, true shock overtaking his features. His hand twitches, but there’s no gauntlet there to use. He stares at Tony, full of deep, bitter surprise as he sinks to his knees, holding there for a moment before collapsing to the ground.

“D...don’t,” Thanos begins, clearly an attempt at the alpha voice that doesn’t work, not with a hole in his throat, not with so little breath. Tony frowns. He didn’t drive the knife quite deep enough,
then, not if he can still speak at all.

“Then, not your fucking prize,” Tony says viciously, stepping neatly out from where Thanos had him boxed in. “I’m not something to be ordered around, or fucked when you feel like you deserve it. Even if I was, you don’t win a prize for destroying the universe, you fucking asshole.”

“S…saving,” Thanos manages.

“You have the logical processing of a toddler,” Tony says disdainfully. “But you’ll bleed out before I can explain exactly how wrong you are, you sack of shit. So I’m going to take your sparkly rock glove and go fix the universe. Congratulations, Thanos. You built yourself one lovely rustic tomb, on a deserted planet no one will ever come find you on.” He grins, sharp and vicious, shark’s teeth ready to tear flesh from bone. “And your fucking prize put you there. How’s that for you?”

“Won’t…won’t work.”

Tony frowns, looks down at the giant hunk of alien barely clinging to life. “I should twist that knife, really make it stick,” he mutters. “What won’t work?”

“Soul stone…sacrifice.”

Tony pulls together the pieces of what Nebula and Quill said, of what Thanos had admitted. “Right, your daughter. Gamora, right? Nebula’s sister. You sacrificed her in your quest to ‘save’ the universe. How fucking noble, right?” he sneers, crouching down to make sure Thanos sees him. He takes the knife and twists it. He shouldn’t hear from Thanos again. He pulls the knife out. Wounds bleed out faster if the wound is open.

“I’ve lost and I’ve sacrificed and I’ve given everything to taking you down,” Tony snarls. “I gave up relationships, sanity, reputation. My kid turned to ash in my hands. I let him fight, I allowed him to be there. That’s on me, on my soul. My family is probably dead now, because of this. And I, I let you drag me here, sacrificed my freedom and my life so I could have this moment, fucking kill you myself. I’ll let you in on a secret. Your orders don’t work on me. I’m immune. I chose to let you bring me here. I chose to put myself in harm’s way, to let you do what you would to me, so I could be the one to kill you. Really make sure it takes.”

Tony smiles again, smells blood on the water. “So honestly, the soul stone can kiss my ass, ‘cause I’ve sacrificed everything to get here.”

The light is fading from Thanos’ eyes, but Tony keeps talking. Wants to watch the light leave Thanos’ eyes in a way he’s never wanted to before.

Tony’s killed before. Tony’s killed a great deal of people before. He’s never wanted to so damn badly.

For his kid. For his family on earth, Schrodinger’s family, alive and dead until he gets word. For himself.

He’s not Thanos’ fucking prize. He’s his conqueror.

“I hope you know how happy I am to watch you die,” Tony says conversationally. “You saw me. You knew me. You knew what I was capable of, what I’d done. But you were so goddamn arrogant you thought you could, what, alpha that out of me? Push me into some little box? I am what I am, Thanos, and you’re not strong enough to change that.” He swallows. Thanos is almost gone, but Tony wants to make sure his voice is the last thing Thanos hears. “You were right about some things though,” he admits. “We are similar. The only difference is I’m smarter than you
could ever hope to be. That I see hope and a future and development, and all you know is how to conquer and destroy. But I promise you. I will not rest until I fix what you did. You can die knowing it was all for nothing.”

Thanos’ body seizes, then releases. Tony stares for a second at the carcass on the floor, then sighs. “I hope those deer creatures are actually vicious carnivores and come for you,” Tony mutters. “See how you like that circle of life bullshit then.”

Tony looks at the knife in his hand, still dripping from Thanos’ blood.

*All that for a drop of blood?* Thanos had asked mockingly. Now, Tony has a pool of it, getting everywhere, seeping back into the earth, into his skin, into his clothes.

“There’s about to be more,” he says grimly, flipping the knife for a better grip and them setting to the task of removing Thanos’ hand.

When Tony has the appropriate limb, he stands up and leaves the corpse to rot. Covered in sweat and blood—it’s not easy, to sever a limb—he crosses the room to the little box filled with untold power.

Tony can imagine what kind of fight this would be on Earth, if he was there. No one would ever throw Tony’s name in the ring to wield such power.

Tony unlocks the box, then drops the severed hand as quickly as he can.

Slowly, carefully, he pulls out the gauntlet.

“Well,” he says lowly, no one to hear but himself. “How about that.”

He moves out of the fortress, wanting to put some distance between him and Thanos. Once outside in the sunlight, he observes the gauntlet.

The damage looks even worse under close inspection. The stones look fine, but the gauntlet looks destroyed, definitely different than how it looked on Titan. How it looked before Thanos really used its power, Tony supposes.

It probably won’t work right anymore, then. Not for the serious stuff, not for grand-scale, putting the universe back together magic.

Tony tries anyways, slips the awkward-sized glove on and just stands there, staring at the gauntlet. “Uh, hi?” He tries. “Undo this bullshit?” He snaps his fingers.

Nothing happens.

He didn’t really expect it to, honestly. “Well, that sucks,” he says. Then again, he never thought it’d be easy.

It’s quite a trek to get to Thanos’ ship. Thanos carried him away from it, so Tony really doesn’t have an accurate measurement, but the terrain is rather rough. It’s only made rougher by the bulky weight of the gauntlet, far too large to fit on Tony’s arm, so he’s left carrying it around.
Tony finds the ship. Once he’s inside and he’s figured out how to close the door, he settles down in the front seat, tossing the sparkly rock-glove onto the seat beside him.

The ship is meant for someone much bigger than him, and this time, Tony doesn’t have Peter to help him out.

Peter, who he’s firmly not thinking about right now.

Thankfully, he has enough nanites left to make a prehensile hand, something he can control enough to manage this ship. It essentially uses up the last of his supplies, but, barring emergency, they should be salvageable. He hopes.

Lift-off is rocky. Tony’s never exactly had the opportunity to use an alien shuttle of unfamiliar design to break atmosphere of an unfamiliar planet before. There are too many variables to even attempt an effective calculation. He does his best.

Once he’s off that godawful planet, he begins to flick around, looking for anything that resembles any sort of communication device. Tony’s a little thrown when it looks pretty straightforward.

“Please don’t be a fucking bomb, please don’t be a fucking bomb,” he mutters, but braces himself and flicks the switch.

It will be the most anticlimactic ending ever, if he dies in an explosion in space.


Static.

“This is Tony Stark, looking to make contact with anyone left against Thanos. Nebula, or James Rhodes? Anyone out there.”

Silence.

Tony knows it’s logically just a connection problem, that no one’s listening right now, but he begins to feel panic welling up in his gut. Thanos said half the world, right? There’s no chance that everyone is gone, right?

No. At the very least, Nebula’s out there, somewhere. Hopefully near earth, at this point. Hopefully rallying whoever’s left alive there, because someone has to be left alive there. They just have to be.

Tony swallows. “Hello?”

Nothing still. Filled with bitter anger, he takes his hand off the device and moves about the cabin.

The place is large, larger than Tony’s MIT era apartment, even. There’s food stocked—freeze-dried MREs, mostly—and space blankets, a bunk across from a bathroom definitely designed for someone far larger than Tony.

Tony rips into an MRE. He probably should ration, he technically already ate today, but damn, it feels good to eat something that’s not stupid knock-off deer meat he had to cook himself.

He finds a water hookup and doesn’t think about it too hard, because, considering this is a ship, it has to be on some sort of holding tank. Maybe a recycling system. He could run out.
He takes a long drink. He doesn’t have a cup, but, fuck it, from his own hands is refreshing. Anything is refreshing when Thanos isn’t involved.

Then he tries the radio again. “Anyone listening?” He knows he sounds like he’s begging, but he can’t help it. Alone in space. Everyone he loves dead. And it’s his fault.

If Stephen hadn’t given over the stone to spare Tony, none of this would have happened. Strange seemed to imply that this had to happen, that he’s seen this and he knows what’s coming, that this is how they win.

He just wants to know why the fuck he had to be the one to live.

Fury’s words from so long ago echo in his mind. The worst part is you didn’t.

Tony would like to die for a cause instead of be the one left alive and forced to scrape up the remaining pieces. Just once. Just one time. He deserves to rest.

He knows why he had to live, really. Why no one else could do what he did, why he was valuable. Thanos’ prize, his possession, his conqueror.

Brought down by his own hubris, by his determination to see Tony not as a strong omega but an omega who maybe hadn’t been broken yet, but who would break under the right pressure.

What Thanos didn’t know was that Tony’s been broken time and time again, beaten and bruised and cracked. But he’s always come up stronger, and his enemies have always come up equally dead.

He’s shaken out of his thoughts by a crackle on the radio.

“—Hello? Hello?”

Tony’s breath seizes in his chest. He knows that voice.

“Tony? You hear me? Tony?”

Jubilation fills every inch, every pore, every molecule of his body. His hands fumble as he tries to depress the button to talk.

“Rhodey?”
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Summary

Tony has a team, and he explores some magic sparkling rocks.

Chapter Notes

Welcome back, all.

Today, Tony is going to explore how the Infinity Stones actually work now. We're also going to hear some familiar (and yet unknown voices).

So, welcome Gamora, Thor, and Carol Danvers.

Quick note on Carol; when I wrote this, I was still operating under the "Carol was an Air Force Captain in the 90s who went through Some Shit TM and now is Captain Marvel," which was kinda a popular thought. But the movie trailer makes it out to be different than that. It's vague enough it could still work, I suppose, but just know that was my thought process.

I don't think you need any particular warnings for this chapter, except for grief, I guess.

Enjoy, and thanks for reading!

Tony can practically hear the sigh of relief over the shaky radio. "I distinctly remember telling you to be careful," Rhodey says shakily.

"I said I’d do my best!" Tony protests. "All things considered, I think I did okay!" He smiles, hands shaking as he clasps the radio.

"Where are you?" Rhodey asks.

"Fantastic question. Wish I knew," Tony says.

There's a scuffle at the end of the line, then Nebula's voice comes across. "Stark? I can give you some coordinates to program in. We can meet you."

"You found them, then," Tony says, relieved.

"I did," she agrees, before rattling off coordinates. Tony stumbles around for a moment, but gets them put into the autopilot.

"Uh, so...tell me this doesn’t run on gas," Tony begs, looking at the dials like he’s going to see a fuel meter, like in his car.
“Ionic energy,” Nebula says shortly.

There’s another little scuffle, and then Rhody’s back. “Tony? You okay? Nebula told us what happened. I thought the surgery, that implant…”

“Yeah, it worked,” Tony interrupts. “So if Shuri is there worried, tell her it worked. But I knew…Thanos is dead,” Tony says abruptly. “I had one shot at him and I took it.”

Tony can hear the sharp inhalations at the other end, and not just from Rhody. “He’s dead?” Someone asks sharply. Bruce, Tony thinks.

“Dead. Very dead,” Tony says.

“You’re sure?” Thor asks.

“Hey, Thor, long time no see. And yeah, I’m sure. Watched him bleed out myself. Stabbed him through the throat.”

“Yes, but his gauntlet…” Thor frets.

“Already removed,” Tony replies. “I have it here too. Figured we’d need it. You know, to fix what he did.”

A discernible pall falls over the conversation. Even tens of thousands of miles apart, Tony can feel it. “How…how bad is it?” he asks tentatively.

“You want the good news or the bad news first?” Rhody asks after a moment.

Tony closes his eyes. “Bad news first. I assume Nebula told you all about us.”

“Yeah,” Rhody says. “Tony, I’m sorry about—”

“I know,” Tony interrupts, not wanting to hear his name said. “Is, uh. May?” Not the most eloquent statement he’s ever had to say, but it gets his point across.

“She’s gone, Tony,” Rhody says gently.

Well. At least she never had to know that her beloved nephew that she worked so hard to protect, that she loved so damn much, had died a truly awful death on a foreign planet, Tony supposes.

“And…everyone else?” Tony asks hesitantly.

“Well, you heard me, Bruce, Nebula, and Thor,” Rhody begins slowly. He sounds like the words are being dragged out of him, like it takes torture to get him to say this. Tony sits back in his seat, knowing he’s going to need the support. “We have Rogers, Romanoff, Barton, Rocket, Carol, and Nakia here.”

Tony swallows. “And…everyone else?” He asks again. He closes his eyes.

“Pepper’s alive,” Rhody begins. Tony sighs deeply with relief. “Happy…Happy’s gone.” There the relief goes. “Lang, Hope, Wilson and T’Challa didn’t make it,” Rhody says, the words harsh even as his tone is as gentle as he can physically make it. “Shuri did. She’s…well, she’s a queen now. She has responsibilities. Okoye is with her.” Tony nods, even if no one can see. “Maximoff dissolved too. Vision…Tony, Thanos took the stone from him. We tried to re-wire him around it, but we ran out of time. He’s gone.”
Tony closes his eyes. His child, really, even if Vision wasn’t quite the same as Peter.

“Tony,” Rhodey says, very gently now. “Bucky, he…he didn’t make it.”

Tony bites back the moan he nearly makes, grief and horror bubbling their way up. He knew, some part of him did, that it had to be true. That Bucky would have been on the radio right after Rhodey, if not before, if he was still able to do so in any way at all. That Bucky wouldn’t leave him waiting, not ever.

“I’ll…I’ll call you back in ten minutes,” Tony says shakily.

“Tony…”

“Look, I’m not going to cry on the party line, I need a few minutes,” Tony says bluntly. He disconnects, then sits back in the chair and pulls his knees to his chest.

Despite what he said to Rhodey, he doesn’t cry.

He wishes he could, wishes he could force the tears out, get some catharsis. Sadly, the tears refuse to come. He’s beyond tears, so inconsolable it doesn’t seem real, even as he deeply, intrinsically knows that it is.

Rhodey wouldn’t lie to him. But more than that, he knew this could happen. He knew the rest of the universe was Schrodinger’s box, and when he opened that box, he was going to find some people dead.

“Tony, I love—”

Bucky was going to tell Tony he loved him. Bucky was going to say it and Tony never got a chance to say it back, never got a chance to fully hear it, never got the chance to experience it not under the gun of the end of the world. Tony squeezes his eyes shut, squeezes his fists and wishes he could just disappear too, disappear alongside them and not be the one left behind, just once.

Tony was going to spend his heat with Bucky. Hell, he was going to spend the rest of his life with him.

For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Tony curses loudly, then hits the console. It doesn’t really make him feel any better, his gut still hollowed out and empty, scooped out and cast aside like so much waste.

He leans forward and, with shaky fingers, depresses the button to speak again. “Okay. I’m back.”

“Tony?”

Tony swallows. Rogers.

There’s a scuffle, a “get out of my way, Rogers,” and then Rhodey’s back on the line. “Tony?”

“I’m here.”

“How…how are you?” Rhodey asks hesitantly.

“A basket case, how do you think?” Tony says simply. He can’t muster anger, or frustration, or
anything, really. Just…emptiness. “You said you had good news?”

“Yeah, uh. A couple things. Your defenses worked.”

Tony snorts. “Clearly, they did not.”

“Well, there were designed assuming the main attack was centered on Earth. We never planned for a target on a different planet. But they had to sacrifice significant troops to get past the lasers, and the Iron Legion was a godsend during the fight. They were cannon fodder basically, but it kept people alive.” He hesitates. “Well, until…you know.”

“Yeah,” Tony says quietly. “So, it helped?”

“Kept us fighting,” Rhodey confirms. “And, uh. One other thing.”

“What is it, Rhodey?” Tony asks.

“Remember that woman I was in love with, back in, like, 1992?” he asks carefully. “Carol?”

“Yeah. Danvers, right?” Tony asks, even though he knows full well it was Danvers, because Rhodey had not shut up about her for a solid six months.

“Yeah. Remember how she left me, and I thought it was ‘cause she couldn’t handle the stigma of two alphas dating?”

“And you stayed in bed and cried for like two weeks, yeah,” Tony agrees. “The point?”

“The point is she says if I ever assume her major decisions are because of me again, she’ll kick my ass,” Rhodey says, the most cheerful Tony’s heard him since the day began.


“Long, long story,” a voice Tony hasn’t heard in twenty-five years says. “Pretty good one, but it’s long.”

“Hey, Captain.”


“Nice. Congrats. How, exactly?”

“I’ll tell you when we see you in person, how’s that?” she says.

“Right. When will that be?”

“The Milano moves fast,” Nebula says. “And you’re headed towards us. It won’t be too long. Then we can plan.”

“What plan?” Tony asks.

There’s a beat of silence. “We were hoping you could tell us,” Rhodey admits.

Tony hates admitting that he doesn’t have much of a plan, but he thinks he’s done pretty well. Kill evil alien, steal magic glove. That’s his job done, honestly. It’s someone else’s turn.
Unfortunately, no one else seems to have any strong ideas.

“The gauntlet still holds the stones?’’ Thor asks.

“Mhm.’’

“Then why not use it?’’

“It doesn’t work,’’ Tony says. “Ever since he did what he did, it’s damaged.’’

“He used it to disappear from Earth,’’ Thor argues. “After he snapped.’’

“Well, I tried it already. Got nothing.’’

Barton snorts. “Yeah, Stark, ‘cause you’re an expert on using magic objects now?’’

“Barton, long time, no dig,’’ Tony says as calmly as he can, a feat considering his still raging emotions. “Look, I’m no expert, but neither are you. I put it on, I did what Thanos did. Nothing.’’

“You could have made it worse!’’

“Now you want me to do nothing?’’ Tony asks incredulously. He huffs. “Don’t fuck with me. We need a solution.’’

“When you meet us, we can test it,’’ Natasha says with that pseudo rationality she loves.

Tony huffs. “Fine. Doesn’t affect me any if you all wanna try Cinderella’s shoe on. The point is, none of us are the Princess and we need a better plan.’’

It’s silent for a minute. “We’ll go to Nidavellir,’’ Thor says eventually. “Eitri might have some ideas.’’

“Sold,’’ Tony says, and it’s only then that he realizes how exhausted he is. “Nebula, this thing fly itself?’’

“For now,’’ she says shortly.

“Then I’m going to catch some Zzzzs,’’ he says. “Catch you all in the morning.’’

There’s silence for a few seconds. “Tony,’’ Rhodey says firmly. “Don’t let yourself get overwhelmed, okay? We’re—I’m—here for you. No matter what.’’

It smacks too much of the emotional omega can’t handle the tough situation, even though Tony knows never in a million years would Rhodey mean it like that. Still, no one else is getting made the offer.

He closes his eyes, doesn’t respond. “Talk to you in the morning,’’ he says again. “Or…whatever passes as morning, I guess.’’

He ends the connection and leans back in the chair and, finally, lets himself cry.

Tony hopes it was quick for Bucky. Hopes he didn’t really realize what was happening, that he didn’t have time to panic like Peter did.
It wouldn’t really matter, at the end of the day, except to comfort Tony, he supposes. Which is selfish, because either way, Bucky’s dead.

But after a few minutes, Tony’s crying stops. He’s too overwhelmed to cry.

People always talk about the uncountable, about numbers too large to understand. Conceptually Tony’s understood that there are numbers that big, but it’s never felt real to him. He’s had billions of dollars. His mind thinks in numbers both larger and smaller than most humans can even think of. Infinity might still be conceptual to him, but Tony thinks he has a better grasp on it than most.

But these numbers, this scale of mass destruction, is completely incalculable to him. He can’t fathom three point five billion humans gone—not countering casualties affected after the fact. He can’t fathom that whole halving of the entire universe.

He’ll have to ask what Earth looks like now. If heads of state disappeared, did military governments rise in response? How many drivers, captains, and pilots disappeared on the job? How many parents disappeared, leaving their kids unable to care for themselves?

Does Earth even still have operating infrastructure?

He can’t think about it. Can’t do anything about it, not right now. Shuri and Pepper are still on Earth, which is frankly a shitty place to leave them, but he’s never met two people more capable of getting things done. He’s never met two people more capable of keeping Earth turning.

He opens his eyes and takes in a deep, shaky breath. He can’t…he has to keep moving.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the gauntlet.

“You have some magic secret password?” He asks curiously. “Cause if you do, I kinda need it. Right now.”

The gauntlet, naturally, doesn’t respond.

Tony heaves a sigh and reaches out for it, drawing it into his lap. His fingers skim over the stones, one at a time. He skips the mind stone, unable to even contemplate it.

The soul stone. Tony’s not sure if it’s his imagination or not, but it seems to be glowing brighter than before. He peers closer, than runs a finger across it.

He opens his eyes and has to blink a few times, trying to sort out where he is. The landscape is a deep red. Blood red, he thinks, unease only growing. Blood red and wet, like he’s sitting in water.

Only he’s not actually getting wet.

He glares balefully at the water. “I don’t like places that don’t obey the laws of physics,” he says. “You’re not him.”

Tony jerks, eyes frantically swinging around, trying to find the intruder. The voice is young, high and clear.

His eyes lock onto a little girl, standing in the distance under some sort of arch. He raises an eyebrow. “You are…”

“Gamora,” she says. Tony stares in shock. No one told him the woman Quill went after Thanos for,
Nebula’s sister, was like seven years old. He assumed she was a grown woman. “You’re not him.”

“No,” Tony agrees. “Uh, if you’re looking for Thanos, well. He’s not here.”
Her head cocks to one side. “Did you kill him?”
Tony swallows. Is there a right answer? Is she some sort of vengeful ghost, who will lash out at him?

“Yes,” he admits.

She smiles. It changes her face dramatically. “Good.”

“Not his biggest fan?”

She gestures to the arch she walked away from. “This is my home world,” she says. “He killed half the people here. Including my mother.”

Tony swallows again. “Sorry, kid.”

She tilts her head. “You didn’t do it.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“Who are you? How did you kill him?”

Tony shrugs. “My name is Tony Stark. I’m from Earth. Like Quill is? Thanos let his guard down. Didn’t think an omega was dangerous. So I stabbed him in the throat.”

Her head tilts. Tony stares at her. Is it just his imagination, or does she look older? “You’re an omega?”

“Yeah. Can’t you tell?”

“No, I never can,” she says matter-of-factly, too matter-of-factly for a child. “My people weren’t like that. It’s never made much sense to me, except for how people reacted to Thanos. I think it frustrated him, that he couldn’t affect me that way.”

“There, uh…a lot of species like that?” Tony asks. “It’s weird for me, to think you don’t have… that dynamics are irrelevant to some people, when they define our whole lives.”

“Not your whole lives.”

“Pretty damn close,” Tony says. “Omega means less than on my planet, in most places. So. Yeah.”

“Sorry to hear that,” she says, studying him. She’s definitely taller, he realizes. Her face losing a little baby fat, maybe. “You took the gauntlet from him, obviously.”

Tony’s eyebrow quirks. “Obviously?”

She definitely looks older now. “Well, we’re here, aren’t we? We’re inside the Soul Stone.”

“We’re… inside a rock?” Tony asks, half-strangled.

Her eyebrow quirks, even as it takes on more of an arch naturally. Her whole face begins to elongate and narrow. “Where did you think we were?”

“Hadn’t gotten that far yet,” Tony admits. “So…we’re inside the rock?”

Her shoulder quirks, then raises as she grows. “Magic.”
“You’re…getting older,” Tony says finally, no longer able to ignore the elephant in the room.

“Thanos is dead,” she says simply. “And so is his little girl. His idea of what Gamora should be can die with him.”

Within another minute of just watching, she looks more like an adult. Skin still green, hair still black, but face and body longer.

“Feels good,” she says, shaking out one arm. “Thought I’d be stuck like that forever. So. Tell me how you did it.”

“Did what?” Tony asks, although he’s pretty sure he knows.

“Killed him.”

“He let his guard down. He had an idea of what omegas were for and pursued it, not seeing the knife before it was too late,” Tony says simply. “I stole the gauntlet on my way outta dodge.”

Her head tilts. “You talk like him.”

“Who? Thanos?”

“No,” she denies. “Peter. Peter Quill. Also from Earth.”

Tony feels a lump in his throat. “Uh, I met him.”

Her eyes close. “He disappeared, didn’t he?”

“Yes.” Tony doesn’t know what to say.

She shudders for a moment, then visibly pulls herself together. “I knew it was a fifty/fifty chance.”

She closes her eyes again.

“Thanos says he sacrificed you for the soul stone? How exactly does that work?” Tony asks after giving her a minute.

She laughs coldly. “He threw me over the edge of a cliff to get what he wanted. It was the protection on the stone. You had to sacrifice something you loved. *Some love,* ” she scoffs.

Tony knows the feeling. “Does this mean…I’m not up for killing any of the last few people I even have left in order to make this rock work, even if it can fix things.”

If it’s the only way…

No. He couldn’t do it. Tony’s is the most pragmatic pragmatist to ever live, but he *can’t* do it. *Won’t*.

*I think I’d find a way to just cut the wire.*

Gamora shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t understand magic. What’s your name again?”

“Uh, Tony Stark. And you’re Gamora? I met your sister, too.”

Her eyes lock onto his. “Is she alive?”

Tony nods. “We were…we were the only two left on Titan, at the end of the battle. She’s not with
me right now. But I talked to her a little while ago. Like half an hour ago. Well. Assuming time moves the same here.”

“How long’s it been since Thanos did it?” She asks.

“A few days.”

“About the same, then,” Gamora nods. “How…how is she?”

Tony shrugs. “I…probably not good, considering. But she’s kinda hard to read.”

She nods again. “Yes, she is. You said she’s not with you. Are you going to her?”

“Soon,” Tony promises.

Gamora hesitates. “Could you…let her come see me?”

“Of course,” Tony promises immediately. It’s only after he says it that he thinks through the ramifications. That means handing Nebula the gauntlet, of trusting a virtual stranger with the most powerful artefact in the universe, one Tony put himself through a lot for.

He’ll do it, though. Sure, he’ll be watching like a hawk and ready to kill if anything untoward happens, but he’s not going to deny Gamora and Nebula each other.

“You’re sure he’s dead?” She asks again.

“Positive,” Tony says firmly. “Killed him myself.”

She takes a ragged, shaking breath, then nods. “Good. I wish I could have…that’s good.”

“You sure you’re dead?” Tony returns. “Only I don’t usually talk to dead people and we’ve been having quite the conversation.”

“Thanos threw me off the edge of a cliff,” she says. “I died. But I’m…stuck here. I thought I might move, when he died, but…I’m still trapped here.”

“Anything I can do for you?”

She tilts her head. “You already did it. You killed him.”

Tony feels a sudden jolt, and suddenly, he’s out of the hallucinogenic dream world of the stone, and back in his stolen space ship.

From there, he drifts into a kind of half sleep, the kind littered with dreams, the fragments of which are so vividly remembered even if the connecting plot tissue is instantly forgotten. It’s that half dream world of the stone, the non-wet water, the red sky, the arch. It’s Gamora, morphing from child to adult. It’s Nebula. It’s Peter and it’s Bucky.

He remembers Bucky cradling his face, and wakes up aching so deep inside it feels like he’s been stabbed.

It’s only after the feeling doesn’t disappear in a few minutes that Tony realizes that it’s not psychosomatic.

And then he remembers what Pepper told him, what feels like a million years ago.
Fuck.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Summary

What's the purpose of a heat, when there's absolutely no one around?

Chapter Notes

Hello--

Another Monday update. This one is incredibly late (I should already be in bed), but here it is.

Warning for heat, grief, brief mention of sex/masturbation (non explicit).

Enjoy!

Tony presses the radio with shaking fingers. “Hello? Hello? Rhodey, you there?”

There’s static, but then the distinct sound of someone picking up. “He’s asleep, Tony. What do you need?” Natasha asks.

Tony grits his teeth. “Get him.”

“He’s—”

“Get him right the fuck now,” Tony demands.

There’s some scuffling, but after a moment, a tired and clearly still half asleep Rhodey comes on the line. “‘Lo?”

“Rhodey, I…I think I hit my heat,” Tony admits quietly.

There’s a sort of pregnant silence. “Come again.”

“I…I definitely am starting my heat,” Tony says. It’s building inside of him, still early but undeniably there. The burning, the ache, Tony swears and curls up a little tighter.

Rhodey curses, an eloquent string of profanity that sounds nice but isn’t much of a comfort. “I…Nebula, how long is it going to take us to meet him?”

“How long are Terrain heats?” She asks.

“Usually about five days,” Tony says.

“Too long.”

Tony curses now. “So I’m…I’m gonna be alone for this one. No big deal. I’ve done it before,”
Tony says.

Tony’s an emotionally compromised wreck. Tony’s lost more than half his family, and here he is, stranded on a spaceship alone after going through trauma. It’s not the best line up for a heat, a time he needs comfort and connections above all else.

“I…I’m gonna hunker down,” Tony says. “Make a den. This thing’ll fly itself, right?”

“Yes,” Nebula says.

“We…Tony, I’m here,” Rhodey says, partially frantic.

“Yeah,” Tony agrees. “And I appreciate it. But it’s a party line, and…” He leaves the sentence trailing. Any other passing spaceship could pick this up. Hell, Rhodey’s ship is full of people Tony doesn’t trust.

There’s a rustling over the line. “Stark?”

“Who’re you?”

“Nakia, of Wakanda,” the newcomer’s voice says.

“Oh,” Tony says. He heard them say her name yesterday but didn’t really process it, too distracted by…well, everything else, he supposes. “Sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” she says softly. “Stark, have you ever had a heat alone before?”

Tony snorts. “Yeah. Don’t worry about that part. I’m used to it.”

Wakanda’s different, Tony knows. While there are a lot of options for spending a heat there, and none seem to be judged more than another, alone would still be a weird choice. But in America, in order to protect himself, Tony was alone for the majority of the heats more often than not.

“It will be harder,” she says. “Because you’re…”

“Traumatized?” Tony offers. “Grieving? Pick an option, really. I know it’ll be rough. I still have to do it.”

She sighs. “We’re here,” she says firmly. “I know we don’t know each other, but I can be here too. Sometimes, with another omega, it can help.”

“Don’t know much about that,” Tony says. “But I’m about to go radio silent to ride this out as much as possible. Put Rhodey back on, okay?”

“Tony?”

“Rhodey, I just…” Tony sighs. “Get to me soon, okay? We have work to do.”

“Take care of yourself, you hear me?” Rhodey demands. “I just… promise me.”

Tony swallows. “I promise,” he says.

Tony tries so hard to avoid those words, because once he says them, he has to keep the promise.

His heat gets worse for a few hours, and then finally drags him under.
It’s a deep, painful ache because there is nothing to settle it. No hug, no contact, no sex, not even his imagination and masturbation. Not that his right hand doesn’t work anymore, of course. Just that…well, the very thought makes him want to vomit.

There’s bunk on the back of the ship, and it’s essentially on auto-pilot, so Tony curls up in the back and just hopes they don’t hit anything. There’s a pillow clearly meant for a Titan, which means it’s basically a body pillow. Tony curls around it, tries not to think about how Thanos had almost certainly slept on it, and closes his eyes.

He should be with Bucky right now. He should be in his bed in the Tower with Bucky, everyone else steering clear of them because they’re loud and obnoxious and riding the heat out together. Bucky would’ve held him, would have stroked Tony’s hair back and would’ve grounded Tony with his touch, somehow been that perfect remedy for needing touch but feeling so sensitive that he could vibrate out of his skin.

Bucky would make sure he ate and make sure they both slept. He’d let Tony sleep as long as he could and just hold him through it. He’d fuck Tony if Tony asked, careful and slow and probably teasing, because that’s who he is.

Maybe Tony would’ve asked for things he shouldn’t, the heat compromising him like it can sometimes. And Bucky would have ignored it, would have just smiled and distracted Tony, because he is good and kind and sweet to his very core.

Tony cries, the tears hot and painful as they run down his cheeks, soaking into the pillow he holds close, like some sad facsimile of another person.

Tony’s spent heats alone before, but Nakia is right. This is more painful than normal. There is nothing to ground him. Hell, half the people in his little family—his pack—are dead now, so much ash in the wind, scattered across half the known universe. He can’t even pretend they’re here, can’t even trick his body into some semblance of relief, without breaking down with fresh grief.

What’s the evolutionary purpose of a heat when the pack is gone, Tony wonders. To attract a new pack, Tony supposes, although he imagines biology never anticipated a scenario when the omega is literally entirely alone in the universe. No new mates to attract, no new pack.

He closes his eyes, and wishes, not for the first time, that he wasn’t the one always left behind.

Tony wakes up absolutely curled around the pillow, arms and legs pulling it close. He lets go in disgust, seeing himself so desperate and pathetic to cling to someone else’s pillow.

A moment later, he hesitantly re-clings. It helped.

He tries not to think of the pillow as anyone in particular. Tries not to let himself slip back into “what-ifs.”

Like, what if the universe wasn’t actively out to ruin his life?

He groans, and just tries to bury himself in the pillow. He almost buries his nose in it, but then quickly remembers why that’s not a good idea. Even a whiff of a person he cares about right now would be immensely beneficial, but the last thing he wants is to smell Thanos, the only person who could reasonably be on the pillow.

Sleep is slow in coming.
When he wakes up again, his eyes scratch like they're full of sand and his throat feels swollen. Everything that would indicate sick if he didn’t know it was just his heat.

Or, more precisely, his body thrown into absolute chaos, not knowing what to do with this heat, how to react, how to function.

They say that in the old days, about half of all omegas died when their mate did. That they couldn’t survive the grief, that their bodies gave out or they helped it along. That those who survived were shells.

Tony always considered it ridiculous historical revisionism. If nothing else, omegas struggled to survive because they were taught not to provide for themselves and their provider was gone.

But now…Tony doesn’t believe it’s true, doesn’t believe it should be true. But he and Bucky weren’t even mated, weren’t even together that long comparatively, and yet…

The very idea of getting up and moving forward with his life seems like an insurmountable obstacle. The very idea of living through the next ten minutes seems unimaginable.

Tony takes a breath as deep as he possibly can, holds it for a few seconds, then releases it. Tries not to remember Bucky doing this with him after a nightmare. He repeats the process twice more, then pushes himself to a seated position.

He can’t just lie in this bed. If he does, he may very well just die, of a broken heart or whatever.

He looks around the stupid ship, tries to ignore the giant windshield showing the immense vastness—and absolute horror—of open, unbroken space. He sees the little bathroom and the little food supply closet. He sees the controls and the gauntlet sitting in the passenger’s chair.

Well. He wonders if his heat can follow him into that dream world.

He opens his eyes into the dim world of red. Gamora watches him, head tilted to one side. “You look terrible,” she announces.


Her eyebrow shoots up. “Tell me you don’t expect me to do anything about that.”

“No!” Tony says, then sighs. “Why does everyone ask that? It doesn’t make me crazy for sex, you know.”

She shrugs. “I’ve heard stories. Mantis just wanted to hold everyone when she was in heat,” Gamora says. “Is it the same for you?” She steps closer, her whole body screaming discomfort. Even though she’s dead, Tony can still taste it, sour and off-putting.

“I want to hold my pack,” Tony says. “But as almost all of them are dead now…”

“I’m sorry, Stark,” she says, so unbelievably soft, tender, that it pierces into Tony’s heart. “My…pack…is gone too now.”

Tony can’t really resist. She might not have a pack like he does, but she had a family and that’s the same thing, really. They’re both alone in the universe now, both utterly alone with only each other.
At least Tony will have company in a few days, if everything goes according to plan. Gamora is trapped in this rock.

He can’t resist. Tony Stark, Mr. Don’t-hand-me-things, Mr. No-unsolicited-physical-contact, lunges forwards and grabs her in a hug.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, when he realizes she’s stiff and uncomfortable and smells a little bit like confusion and terror are mixed together, a cocktail Tony doesn’t particularly ever want to drink again. “I shouldn’t have—” He goes to untangle himself, but she chooses that moment to bring her arms up around him, to pull him close.

“It’s okay,” she says softly, and then is quiet. That’s fine. They don’t need to talk for this.

They end up seated in the water, holding onto each other through the pain and the sorrow. Tony thinks he dozes, for a little while.

“How long will your heat be?” She asks eventually.

“A few days,” Tony shrugs. “Feels better now.”

“Good.”

Tony looked around at the barren landscape, no hint that this is a memory of a real world other than the arch. “Tell me a story,” he says.

“A story?”

“Mhm. Anything to pass the time.”

She thinks for a moment, and Tony starts to feel like she’s ignoring him, but then she clears her throat.

She tells him a story about “a bunch of a-holes,” about what they had done together. About how they made her want to be something.

“They sound great,” Tony says, smiling slightly. They were pretty great. Incompetent buffoons, right up until they weren’t. Seems like a pretty great team.

God, he had just started to have a team again.

“How’re you feeling?” She asks.

“Good enough,” Tony says, forcing himself more upright. “And right now, good enough is good enough.”

“Good,” she says. “Now it’s your turn to tell me a story.”

“Uh, alright,” Tony says. “What do you want to hear?”

She thinks. “Kevin Bacon and Footloose ,” she announces. “I want to know if it’s like Peter tells it —told it,” she corrects, a tremor creeping into her voice.

Tony racks his brain for the plot of Footloose , because after that, he’s not going to deny her. “This a common story with you guys, or something?” Tony asks once he’s done.

She shrugs. “Quill loves dancing.”
Tony nods and goes to make a comment, but a rush of heat, has him catching his breath. “Fucking hell,” he murmurs.

“Sorry,” she says. “Do you…well, I don’t really have anything to help.”

“It’s fine,” Tony says, giving up any semblance of sitting upright. His body hates him, wants him to get the hint, wants him to bond himself to a pack. Any pack, probably. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” she says, looking hom over.

“Yeah, well,” Tony says, shrugs. “It could be worse.”

“How?”

“It could have happened two days ago.” He sees her confusion. “When Thanos was still alive and probably wanted nothing more than to fuck me in heat. So. At least I avoided that.”

She grimaces. “Yeah.”

“Do you think, like, he wanted me to be the step-parent of his little group of messed up kids?” Tony asks. “Uh, not that you’re a messed up kid.”

“I’m not his kid,” she says. “So no, I don’t think you mean me. Did you meet any of the others?”

“He was waiting for them. None showed up. I think we managed to kill them all. I know I got one, at least.”

“Good,” she says quietly. “At least they’re not a problem.”

“You know what is a problem?” Tony asks. “How we fix this…mess we’re in.”

“You’re in heat, we can work this out later, and—”

“I’m capable of working this out right now,” Tony interrupts. “Nothing but time on my hands. So. Do I need to kill anyone to use the magic?”

She’s silent for a minute. “I don’t know. Thanos did—that’s how I got here—but you’re here. You have the stone in your possession, too.”

“But the magic doesn’t work,” Tony complains. “How important is the gauntlet?”

“Important,” she says. “Mortals can’t hold the stones. That allows them to be used.”

“It’s broken,” Tony explains. “So, maybe that’s why…”

“Let’s hope,” she says quietly. “The soul stone is a trap. No one I would trust with the stones could actually retrieve it.”

“Thor said the stones still worked for smaller magic, after Thanos used them,” Tony muses. “I guess I could try that. If it works, then the stone works. If not, then I’m fucked.”

“No,” she says, softly. “We’re all fucked.”

Tony dozes again soon after, not willing to leave the dream world and his company, even to test the
most powerful object ever known in the entire universe. His heat is a low, constant throb, his whole body overheated, his gut pulsing heat.

He wakes up, still filled with a low heat, but it feels more manageable. Like a low-grade fever, he supposes, the ones he’s worked through a million times before. He slowly moves his arms, then his legs. His body aches, but it’s nothing he can’t handle. “Alright,” he says. “I’m going back. I gotta get things set up. Gotta find your sister.”

“Thank you,” Gamora says. “You’ll let her come?”

“Of course,” Tony says, and it’s the last thing he gets to say before he wakes up blinking in the ship once more.

“How does that even fucking work?” He asks no one, too used to an AI presence to shut himself up now. “I fucking hate magic.”

He reaches out and touches the gauntlet, hesitant and slow. “Hi, powerful magic glove,” Tony says. “That’s filled with powerful magic shiny rocks. Uh, do you work? At all? Like, what if I asked for a ham sandwich?”

Nothing happens. Tony actually slides the gauntlet onto his arm. It’s too big, so the sizing is awkward, and he has to use his free hand to hold it in place. Nevertheless, it’s on.

“How ‘bout that,” Tony says, eyebrow raised. He lifts it to his mouth and takes a bite. It tastes real enough.

“You are definitely breaking scientific laws,” Tony informs the gauntlet. “Namely, the conservation of mass.” He eats the rest of the sandwich anyways.

“Mmmm, okay. I’m convinced,” Tony mumbles. “Fuck it, I give up. Magic it is.”

And soon after, he falls asleep.

When he wakes up, his heat feels like it’s fading, just the last lingering whispers in his body. He’s exhausted, physically and mentally, and wants a damn cup of coffee and—

And to wake up to Bucky, he supposes, but he shouldn’t think that.

Still, lacking everything he wants, he’s forced to blink himself awake and walk off the stiffness.

Once he returns to the front of the ship, he looks over at the gauntlet again. The stones sparkle, and Tony finds himself momentarily captivated. They’re spell-binding, he’ll give them that, luring him in. He wants to touch, to test, to use…

He shakes his head. No.

He’s not Thanos. He’s not like Thanos, no matter what Thanos said. Although he will admit they have one thing in common; neither of them think the Infinity Stones should be casually used. The difference is that Thanos only came around to that way of thinking when it was convenient to him.
Whatever *some* people might say, Tony has an actual moral backbone.

He eyes it again. If Thanos could teleport off of earth, then surely Tony can…

No. If he uses it—and right now, that’s a big *if* —it will be one time, and one time only.

He flicks the radio on. “Rhodey?”

“Rhodey’s coming, Tony,” Bruce says after a moment. “I…how are you?”

The delicate omega shorthand for *how bad was it this time?*

“Okay,” Tony tells Bruce, hoping he doesn’t have an audience on the other end. “I’m a little sore. Shaky, still.”

“Sorry to hear that,” another voice says. Nakia, Tony realizes. Well, at least if he was overheard, it was by another omega. “Is it over?”

“Ending,” Tony says succinctly. “Is it just you two there?”

“Mhm. Everyone else is trying to come up with some sort of strategy. Thor is telling them about Nedavellir. Where the gauntlet was made. And his new axe-thing.”

“Thor has an axe thing?”
“His hammer broke,” Bruce explains. “His sister.”

“Thor has a sister?”

“Long story. We destroyed Asgard to kill her. And then Thanos killed most every surviving Asgardian,” Bruce says, and Tony swears the temperature drops just mentioning the monster.

“Tony, did he—” Bruce asks slow, hesitant, like he’s not sure he’s welcome to ask. Probably a smart move. It’s a question Tony would only want to discuss with another omega, but after the absence of the last few years, Bruce isn’t high up on his list.

Come to think of it, though, no one is, and Bruce is what he has.

“No,” Tony says shortly. “He tried. It distracted him enough to stab him in the throat. I’m okay.”

“Untouched and Okay do not mean the same thing,” Nakia warns.

Tony swallows, but is thankfully saved from mustering up a reply when he hears scuffling again. “Tony?”

“Rogers, give the mic to literally anyone else,” Tony says sharply, then thinks. “No wait. I take it back. I don’t want to hear from you, Barton, or Romanoff right now. Anyone else.”

“Tony—”

“Goddammit, I am emotional and tired and angry and sore,” Tony snaps. “I just went through something that would make you weep for your mother five minutes in, and I’m not even *talking* about the awful reality that is a heat, which is just the shitty cherry on the shitty sundae, okay? So get off the line without saying another word, just this once.”

There’s scuffling once more. “Tones, I’m here.” A pause. “Well, so is everyone else.”
Tony closes his eyes. “Someone please tell me we’re set to intercept soon,” Tony says. “I’m getting tired of being alone in this hunk of metal.”

“We’ve been orbiting you for four hours, Stark,” Carol says. “Just waiting for your all-clear.”

Tony swallows. “Well, consider this my all-clear.”

“You sure the heat is cleared, Tony?” Natasha asks.

“I’m sure I know my body better than you do, yes,” Tony says shortly. “Alphas, just keep your hands to yourselves.”

“Of course everyone will,” Rhodey says, the underlying threat so obvious Tony is surprised it didn’t grow legs and punch Steve in the knot.

Tony takes a deep, ragged breath, then grabs for the gauntlet. “Alrighty, beam me up,” he says.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Summary

Tony is at last reunited with the survivors.

Chapter Notes

Hello all!
It's been a hell of a day, so I'm glad I'm here with this now.

Warnings: Discussion of omegas, basically. Tony talks about things that are basically microaggressions even if he doesn't name it, and talks about that deep, institutionalized ingrained prejudice people don't even fully comprehend that they participate in.

Also, talk of Asgard and omegas. I don't know if it's fully clear in the fic, but the vibe I was trying to get across is Asgard also has a very binary alpha/omega dichotomy, but in there system, omegas are "cherished." Like omegas are precious and beloved and all that. This is in a response to fics where omega runs away with alpha from a society where omegas are treated like they're precious and that "fixes" all their problems, and the fic just ignores that, by all accounts, omegas still don't really have much rights and are still very much pigeon-holed, no matter what fancy words you put on it.

Okay, I think that's it. Enjoy, and thanks for reading!

It turns out there’s no beaming involved, and moving ship to ship in the middle of deep space is cumbersome. Nebula comes over to help him.

She looks him over, seemingly devoid of any emotion, but Tony can feel it. She has a slight, distant tang of sweetness. She’s happy to see him still here.

“Your sister…” Tony begins, then ends, not sure how to explain it. “Your sister’s ghost, I guess, is stuck in the soul stone. I, uh, talked to her. She wants to see you.”

Disbelief, Tony thinks, paired with the lightest, most fragile of hopes.

“When?” Her voice cracks.

“As soon as we’re over there, if you want,” Tony offers.

The hope in Nebula’s eyes might as well be a flaming beacon. She moves them over quickly.

Of course, the process is slightly interrupted by Rhodey grabbing Tony into the tightest hug ever, refusing to let him go for several minutes. Carol and Bruce both clap him on the shoulder. Everyone else keeps their distance.
Tony blinks. “You have…a raccoon in a jump suit on your ship,” he observes.

“Why does everyone call me that?” A surly-voiced raccoon responds.

Tony just blinks again. “You know what. I’ve decided that I accept this. I give up. Nothing is weird anymore.”

“Wise move,” Rhodey agrees. “The world gets weirder every day. For instance, my best friend almost died in space.”

“Psssh. I already almost did that one,” Tony waves off. “Besides, a lot of other people died this time, who are not me. So. There’s that,” Tony says awkwardly. “Including Thanos, by the way. Because I killed him.”

“Yeah, how exactly did you do that?” Romanoff asks, arms crossed over her chest.

Tony blinks over at her. “Well, Natasha, I thought you of all people would know,” he says.

Barton gapes at him. “You fucked him?”

Well, that’s crude and gross and not accurate, he wonders how many times Natasha has had her career put like that. “He believed certain things about omegas, and I let him believe that until I got the opportunity to stab him in the throat,” Tony says cooly.

Nakia—Tony assumes she has to be Nakia, given everything—smiles softly at him.

“Now,” Tony says delicately, patting Rhodey’s arm as he passes, “If you excuse me. I promised Nebula I’d let her see her sister.”

The raccoon—not a raccoon? Tony’s pretty unclear on what actually is going on right now—starts. “You said Gamora was dead,” he accuses Nebula.

“She is,” Nebula says. Her voice sounds empty, dead, but Tony can feel the turmoil under it. “Thanos killed her to get the soul stone.”

Tony nods. “He said…it was a sacrifice.”

The raccoon’s lip curls.

“But the result is her…ghost? Image?” Tony shakes his head, frustrated. “Whatever’s left over. I guess it’d be a soul, considering the soul stone thing. It’s left an imprint in the stone. I’ve spoken to her.”

Tony hands the gauntlet to Nebula. All eyes track it. “I don’t really know how it works. I just…touched it, and then I was there.”

Nebula hesitantly touches the soul stone, one metal finger trailing lightly over the rock. Tony watches, wondering if it’s just his imagination, or if it’s sparkling less.

She looks up at him, grief in her eyes. “Nothing. You said…”

“I…” Tony stares. “Try again. Other hand?”

Nebula does, and the grief turns to anger when nothing happens again.

“Give it here, come on, let’s see,” Tony instructs. He takes it in one hand and reaches out to touch the stone, which is definitely sparkling more now.
He opens his eyes in the soul world, looking at Gamora.

“I…” He stops. “Shit, I wasn’t supposed to be the one here.”

Gamora cocks her head.

“I…I found Nebula. The stone, it didn’t…it didn’t work for her.”

Gamora’s whole face changes, stricken by grief. She closes her eyes tight for a moment, and then relaxes. She nods.

“Well, I suppose that answers your question then.”

“What question?”

“If the stones are only working for you, then…your sacrifices do count. You’ve earned the soul stone. It’s yours, and you can use them.”

“Without murdering anyone?”

“It looks like it.”

Tony lets out a sharp exhale. That’s good. A sharp, heavy weight off his back, honestly.

“So, if I get a new gauntlet…” Tony begins.

She nods. “You could potentially undo this all. You’d have the greatest power in the universe at your fingertips.” She hesitates, looks like she’s going to say something, and then stops herself.

Tony doesn’t ask. “I…well, that’s something to think about, I guess.”

He opens his eyes back on the ship, surrounded by people watching him. He flinches back, and thankfully finds Rhodey, which helps ground him.

“What happened?”

Tony doesn’t look over to acknowledge Clint. “I got sucked into the soul world,” he says. “I spoke to Gamora.”

He does seek out Nebula’s eyes, hopes she can see his guilt and regret. She looks like she’s made of stone, but she smells…like grief, Tony realizes. Like the funeral home he went to to arrange for his parents’ services. Like sickly-sweet flowers and tears and deep, underlying misery.

“What did she say?” The raccoon demands.

Tony just stares at the little thing, then decides he has to accept this craziness. “Okay, first; you have a name?”

“Rocket.”

“Cool. Rocket. She said…she said the stones are mine.”

There’s a sharp intake of breath, a beat of silence. Broken by Natasha, which Tony expected, but it still hurts. “Tony…”
Tony bristles at the doubt, at the soft redirect. “I can’t help that I was the one on that rock who Thanos chose to want to fuck. I can’t help that I am the one who sacrificed enough for this rock to recognize me.”

“We’ve all sacrificed, Tony,” Steve says, voice soft in that disapproving way that, once upon a time, could soften Tony in just about any circumstance. “We’ve all sacrificed, so—”

“You think she hasn’t sacrificed?” Tony asks, jerking his head to Nebula. “Cause she just tried this, and it didn’t work for her. But sure. I was joking when I said we should try on Cinderella’s shoe, but go for it. Everyone give it a try.”

Tony passes the gauntlet with a little more force than necessary to Steve.

Everyone tries. No one gets any results. When the gauntlet returns to Tony, Tony knows that he isn’t the only one making note of how it glows a little brighter.

“So,” Tony says. “We’re in agreement. It works for me.”

“Some cosmic fuck-up, there,” Clint says. It’s probably supposed to be quiet. It carries through the room anyways.

Rhodey bristles, but Tony speaks before he can. “What the hell is your issue?” Tony demands. “You’ve been on my ass since this whole fight started. I swear to god, if it’s because I’m an omega…What the hell would your wife say?”

“It’s not because of that!” Clint protests. “I’m not prejudiced against omegas.”

“No?” Tony challenges. “Cause it sure looks that way to me.”

“Not everything’s about being an omega. Ever stop to think that maybe I just really don’t like you?” Clint snarls.

“Sure, plenty of people hate me,” Tony shrugs. “But usually, it comes back to me being an omega. What was it for you, Clint? Didn’t bow to the will of the pack? Not nurturing enough? Didn’t take care of the home? Not emotionally intuitive to your needs?”

“You abandoned us,” Clint snarls, emotions sour and rotten. “You locked Wanda in a room, fought us, had us arrested. You tried to kill Steve, jerked us around since we came back. You’re an arrogant son of a bitch who thinks he’s god’s gift to the world, no matter how many times you almost ruin it. That clear enough for you, Stark?”

Tony nods. “Didn’t bow to the will of the team, then,” Tony says. “Face it, Clint, I had a different opinion than your alpha over there,” he says, jerking his chin at Steve. “I didn’t want to fall into place and join your pretty little pack. I am smarter than you, just accept it. And when things go bad, it’s easy to pin the blame on me, the non-compliant omega, the sore thumb in the pack, but it wasn’t just me. I didn’t build Ultron alone. I didn’t write the Accords, and I definitely am not the one who told one hundred seventeen countries to go fuck themselves, and I didn’t keep a life-changing secret from someone. There’s plenty of blame to go around in this clusterfuck of a group, but it all comes back to me because I’m the easy fucking target.” Tony’s standing now, fists balled and chest heaving. “So shut up and sit down. Accept the way things have worked out. I didn’t choose for these rocks to pick me, but fuck it they have, so lets come up with a plan.”

There’s silence for a minute, before Steve, always unable to read a room, decides to put his two-cents in. “Tony,” he says softly, “Clint…we’re all…just worried about this type of power falling to one person.” He closes his eyes. “It could…it could hurt, and—”
“You’re worried about it falling to me,” Tony snaps. “Don’t play this game with me. Everyone here would have been fine if it was you. Hell, almost any one of you, you’d prefer to me. But I but I bet you’d like an alpha in charge, huh? You or Thor or Carol or Rhodey, holding the most powerful object in the universe, ready to change the fabric of reality? The right hands, the trustworthy hands. Well tough shit. It chose me. And I didn’t ask for it, but I’m going to do my damned best to live up to it. So piss off. We need a plan.”

It is absolutely dead silent for over a minute, everyone looking around uneasily while Tony glares. Thor speaks up at last. “Nidavellir…The dwarf planet. Eitri could make a new gauntlet.”

“Sold,” Tony says. “Whoever’s driving this hunk of junk, let’s get going.”

Tony’s exhausted, ready to collapse after all of that, but then Rocket pipes up. “Hey! Don’t call my ship junk.”

“Your ship?” Nebula asks, tone mildly scathing.

“You see anyone else to fly her?” Rocket asks, tone scathing but emotions cold, empty. Like Tony felt that night in Tennessee, alone in the woods, dragging Iron Man to civilization. The Guardians were almost entirely devastated by Thanos.

Tony looks over at Thor. From what Tony’s heard, his people were entirely eradicated.

He strokes the gauntlet, ignores its glow. He has to find a way to fix this.

Nebula comes to find him first. “When you see her again,” she says quietly, “tell her…tell her she was stupid, to do what she did, for me.” She pauses a moment. “And tell her she’s always been my sister.”

Carol comes and finds him next, of all people. “Been a long time,” Tony says. She really doesn’t look any older.

Rhodey’s definitely aged since the nineties. Nothing against him, he still looks great, but he doesn’t look twenty anymore. Carol…still does.

He’ll have to ask, later, how this is working out for them.

“It has,” she agrees. “See you didn’t stay out of trouble.”

“Did you expect me to?” Tony asks.

She snorts. “Never. I’m happy about it.”

They sit in silence for a moment. Tony is watching space outside the window, waiting for the panic that never comes. Honestly, his body is just too exhausted for that.

“I’m glad it’s you,” she says suddenly. “I wish you didn’t have to do it but I’m glad it’s you.”

Tony shrugs away. “You don’t even know me anymore, Colonel. I could be exactly what they say.”

She snorts. “You’ll do what has to be done, Tony,” she says, clapping him on the shoulder almost
hard enough to knock him over, and then gets up and walks away.

Thor comes next. Tony’s almost surprised to see him; it’s been awhile. “Thor.”

“How are you?” Tony asks. “I, uh, heard. About your kingdom.”

Grief is potent and cloying, Tony thinks, so deep he feels like he could fall into it. “I…” Thor begins, then loses his thought. “I don’t quite know how to go on, except for revenge.”

It’s different than how Thor speaks to the others. It always had been, and it had taken Tony a long time to figure out that it’s Asgard’s version of an omega thing. Omegas are emotional, ergo, they can do the emotional labor, take the burdens a warrior society like that might not want.

Tony doesn’t say anything about it. Not yet. “Well, we’re gonna get you that,” he says hesitantly. “But…we’ve got to find you something else, Point-break.”

“I was meant to provide for a kingdom,” Thor says morosely. “And now I have nothing, except my revenge.”

Tony doesn’t want to make promises. He doesn’t know how, but he hopes he can save the people of Asgard. He’s not sure how that would work, considering they didn’t die in the snap. Could he bring back everyone Thanos killed? What about Gamora’s people, who died decades ago?

His brain hurts. He tries not to think about it.

“But, my friend, tell me how you’ve been,” Thor says, projecting a smile that looks like it hurts. “The team…I did not expect to see it like this.”

“Really?” Tony asks, bitterness creeping up that he can’t help. “After Ultron, you didn’t expect to see this?” He can’t shake the memory of Thor’s hand around his throat. Thor’s easier to forgive than many of the others, what with his lack of artifice or lingering malice, but Tony will never forget that moment, not as long as he lives.

Thor waves a big hand; Tony tries to pretend he’s not watching it closely. “Water under the bridge,” Thor dismisses. “What alpha and omega don’t have obstacles? The important thing is they come back together, always. Eternally, bound by the norns. But you and Steve…”

Tony shakes his head. “Not in a long, long time. And never again. And, uh, I don’t know about that fate business, because honestly, that’s what it felt like, and it didn’t feel good. I moved on.”

Thor manages something more akin to a smile. “Who?”

“He’s dead now,” Tony says.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Thor ponders this for a moment. “I cannot imagine how the Captain let you go.”

“Real easily,” Tony says. “Seems like he was pretty damn happy to be rid of me. Until, you know, he realized that meant actually not having me anymore.”

Thor cocks his head, working that statement out, then nods. “Alphas and omegas fit together,” he
says. “Two halves of a whole. It would be impossibly hard to surrender another half.” He looks wistful. “On Asgard, it would never be done.”

Never. Not even if, as in his and Steve’s case, it was really in everyone’s best interests.

“I have never understood how Midgard views omegas,” Thor continues. “The names they have, the disdain they show…on Asgard, we would never…”

Tony’s heard it before. On Asgard, things are different, which was possibly the best thing a naive, younger Tony had ever heard. It turns out to be wrong, though, because different doesn’t mean better. Sure, no one’s going to call him a fuckhole or openly degrade him on the street. He can have a job and a role. But that doesn’t fix everything.

“My mother is an omega,” Thor had explained. “And Asgard loves their Queen.”

“Great,” Tony said, cautious from well-learned history. “And, like, what about other omegas? What do their rights look like?”

“We have omega warriors,” Thor said. “Few, but they exist. Like my brother, for instance.”

“Loki’s an omega?” Tony asked.

“Aye,” Thor nodded. “He is…he is unmated, half of a whole. He is unbalanced, acting out.”

Tony stared at that assessment. “Unbalanced?”

“Alphas and omegas are soul-halves,” Thor explained. “Fated to come together. It can drive one mad, to be alone.”

“You’re fine,” Tony muttered, half petulantly.

Thor pretended he didn’t hear him. “It is a tragedy. And Loki will be helped.” He gave Tony such a combative look, like he wouldn’t hear any challenges to it.

Tony didn’t make any, although he well wanted to. Omega or not, jail should be the outcome for attempted genocide, to say the least.

“How…will he be helped?” He asked hesitantly, because really, that was the sticking point.

So Thor described Asgard. He described a world where omegas were treated differently than on Earth—on Midgard—but substantially, nothing changed. Sure, there were omega warriors, but in magic, most definitely thought to be a lesser, specialized field often looked down on. Sure, omegas had some substantive freedom, but they were still expected to mate. And yes, alphas saying that they did everything in an omega’s “best interest,” that they loved and treasured their omegas, that they were two halves of the whole, emotional and physical providers, changed nothing.

At the end of the day, omegas were glorified kept objects. Treasured, yes. Beloved, yes. But a gilded cage is still a cage, at the end of the day.

“On Asgard, you would’ve had Steve and I mated no matter how miserable I was, and let him run the show.” Tony says, ruthless, perhaps unfair to the grieving king and not caring. Hell, he’s grieving too. “As long as it was in my best interests, right?”

For your own good.

Thor stares at him for a moment. “Alphas and omegas are halves,” he stresses. “They need their
second half.”

“That is utter bullshit,” Tony declares, getting fired up in a way he realizes only now he’s desperately needed. “I’m not half of anything, and neither was your mother, or your brother, or Nakia or Bruce, or any other omega.”

“Alphas are halves too,” Thor says gently. “It’s not meant to be a thing of shame.”

“Maybe you could take care of your own emotional needs for five minutes,” Tony suggests. “Instead of expecting an omega to do it. And trust us to, you know, decide for ourselves what we want to eat and wear and do and all that.”

It feels like the fight leaves him as soon as he looks at Thor. Gutted and already vulnerable, the man probably can’t take too much more.

Then again, if not now, when?

Tony takes a deep, deep breath. “I…we can talk about it later,” Tony offers.

“If there is a later,” Thor shrugs. He sighs. “I…will consider what you say. And ask Bruce what he thinks.”

“Bruce?” Tony asks. “What does Bruce have to do with…you know what, nevermind, don’t answer that,” he says hurriedly. He sighs. “Sure, ask him. The guy who gave himself the Hulk in an attempt to make him less omega-like.”

“Yes,” Thor says solemnly. “A tragedy.”

“Is it?” Tony asks rhetorically, then stands up. “I’m gonna go see how long it’s gonna take us to find this hunk of rock.”

Rocket snaps and throws Tony out of the cockpit, so Tony drifts back towards the gauntlet, which sparkles when he approaches. He touches it and opens his eyes in the soul world.

“Finally getting used to this,” he mutters.

He looks around and sees Gamora in the distance, under the arch. He makes his way over to find her looking out into the distance. There’s nothing there, at least nothing that Tony can see.

She sighs and turns to him. “You’re back.”

“Yet again,” Tony agrees. “Your sister…she has a message for you.”

Gamora nods and seems to brace herself. Tony passes it along and turns to take his own turn staring off into the distance—still nothing there—while she pulls herself together.

“We’re going to Nidavellir,” Tony says. “To get a new gauntlet. So I can…well. Fix things.”

She nods. “Good.”

“How do I…”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t know how to work the stones; I just exist in one of them.”
“Afraid you’d say that.”

“From what…he…said,” she begins cautiously. “You have to know what you want.”

And that…that’s the question. So seemingly obvious, but not quite. He doesn’t want to undo the snap—what about the person in an airplane at the time, the airplane that’s no longer there? He doesn’t want to bring people back from the dead, considering the sheer amount of room for zombies there. He’s seen enough horror movies. The scope of this is larger than even Tony can comprehend. He has to make sure the entire universe is correctly affected by whatever he chooses to want.

“Right,” Tony agrees. “I have to think about that.”

“Well,” she says, looking around again. “I have nothing but time. I can help.”

Tony looks at her. Wonders how the hell he can work bringing her back to life into this. “Thanks,” he says instead of mentioning it.
Chapter Thirty

Chapter Summary

Things are moving forward. Confrontations are had, and new company is met.

Chapter Notes

Hello, all!

Happy Saturday. I hope you enjoy this.

Just want to let you know that there won't be a Monday update unless I get chapter thirty-four (the final chapter) done between today and tomorrow. Considering I'm grading 100 essays and somehow managed to make myself sick again, not 100% sure that will happen, although I have made progress. Not that I think any of you will be upset if there's no Monday update or anything; just wanted you to know not to necessarily look for it.

Tony and Steve get to talk here. It's uncomfortable and grief-filled and nothing is resolved, ever, between them, because frankly I don't know if anything ever really can be. In this chapter, we also non-explicitly discuss mutilation that happened in canon.

Thank you, everyone. I hope you enjoy it!

When Tony comes back to the real world, Rhodey’s there waiting.

He’s sprawled by Tony’s side, legs stretched straight out in front of him.

“Man, that’s freaking me out,” Rhodey says. “I’m not gonna get used to that.”

“See the braces are holding up to space,” Tony says, ignoring the comment.

“So far so good,” Rhodey agrees. “Honestly, Tones, I don’t think anything could break them down.”

Tony groans. “See, now you’ve invited them to break.”

Rhodey side-eyes him. “You don’t believe in luck.”

“No, but I believe in technology failures,” Tony says. He rolls his neck a bit, trying to work out a kink.

“When did you last sleep?” Rhodey asks.

“No idea,” Tony admits. “During my heat I guess, but I wasn’t keeping great track.”
“How did…”

“How did…” Tony says. “Absolutely miserable. Considering…well. Considering. Hey. We know when we’re going to get there?”

“Rocket seems to think we’re only a day or so out,” Rhodey says. He makes a face. “Our lives have gotten…really weird.”

“No kidding,” Tony says. “So, when we get there…” He shakes his head. “I guess I…try to fix things?”

“Isn’t that what you do?” Rhodey asks lightly, nudging Tony’s shoulder. Tony has to admit that it’s a fair enough point.

Nakia finds him next. She drops into an easy crouch next to him, both of them crowding around the gauntlet. She studies it carefully, but doesn’t reach out to touch.

“Sh—My Queen said you received an implant. To prevent the alpha voice.”

Tony nods. “I did. Did, uh, did you get one?”

She nods. “A week after you did.”

“Did The Prince—The Queen?” Tony asks. He thinks about her, on a throne far too young, in a world destabilized. Thrust into that, grieving and not entirely prepared, with a giant, glaring vulnerability like a target on her head.

Nakia seems to know his thoughts. “Not that Okoye would ever let anyone near her with poor intentions,” she says, “But yes.”

Tony breathes out. “Good. That’s good. It works. So she’s safe.”


Tony knows what she’s asking without further explanation, knew someone would ask. Hell. Clint would have sneeringly brought it up the moment Tony made contact if he knew it was even the faintest possibility.

At least it’s an omega bringing it up. Tony doesn’t think he could answer calmly even if Rhodey was the one to ask him.

“I didn’t influence him to chose me,” Tony says. “No pheromones. I’m not that creative. Or skilled.” He closes his eyes. “But after…”

She pats his shoulder. “You did what you had to do.”

“I lured him in close, got him to let his guard down,” Tony agrees. “He…basically assaulted me but I…wanted…” —an inadequate word, completely wrong while also being true— “it to happen, knew it was my chance, and I…well, I stabbed him in the throat.”

She touches his shoulder again, this time lingering there, light and undeniably present. “You did what you had to do,” she says again.

Tony nods. Yeah.
It’s been long enough that Tony thinks he got away with it. They’re close enough to landing that Tony thinks he’s going to get away without a single encounter.

No such luck.

Steve sits opposite of him, ginger and slow, which is at least wise of him. Like he knows he’s not really welcomed into Tony’s space. “Hey, Tony,” he says softly. He even manages a bit of a smile, soft and crooked and so achingly familiar Tony has to look away.

“Rogers,” Tony says coolly. He can’t help it. He barely has the energy to focus on how furious he still is at Steve. It’s honestly not a priority. But it still simmers, lingers under his skin, bubbling up with the slightest provocation.

Some things just become ingrained into bone, Tony figures.

“What do you want?” he asks.

Steve has the gall to look upset. “Just to…” He sighs, shakes his head. “I don’t know what I expected.”

Tony snorts, cold and empty. His mind has already moved on, back to his and Gamora’s last conversation. About magic words. “I don’t know what you expected, either, Rogers.”

Steve lets out that huff that Tony got used to over their time together. Privately, Tony thinks of it as the sound of heels digging in. “I just…I figured, since we both loved him—”

Tony cuts him off, unable to handle this. “What, you thought Bucky’s death would be a good prop to bring us back together?” Tony snarls, letting the anger bubble up, lest he let Steve see him cry. “Thought you could use that to worm your way back in? I don’t know about you. Maybe knot-headed alphas just genuinely can’t process emotions or whatever, but fuck. I’m fucking grieving here, so fuck off with that, and—”


“And you thought, what, it’d be me?”

“Who else?” Steve challenges.

That draws Tony up short for a minute, because it’s a fair point. Steve’s support system is limited. Sure, he still has Natasha left, but Natasha isn’t much for cuddles and feel-good pep-talks.

Steve is alone, and he’s once again lost the critical connection to his past. Whether Bucky wanted to be that or not, Steve had staked everything on Bucky, and the man out of time was once again moorless, lost at sea.

It’s also not his problem, Tony thinks ruthlessly. Steve is not his problem. Steve has done enough to make himself radioactive to Tony.

The parts of Tony that are still soft to the man—despite everything, goddammit—can be quashed and locked away in a steel lock box.

“You want the truth?” Tony says harshly. “We’re all lonely collections of dust and carbon drifting
through space and, someday, we die. There it is. I’m not your emotional dump. Find someone else.”

Steve huffs again. “I…don’t know what I expected,” he says, and he sounds so disgusted that Tony can’t physically stand it, can’t take this being heaped back on him, even if just in Steve’s judgy tone.

“I don’t either,” Tony says, caustic as he can be. “Maybe you should sort that out before you come back.”

“Well can’t…are you seriously saying our issues can’t be set aside for this?” Steve asks, indignant and pungent with it, letting it coat the grief he constantly exudes. Tony wrinkles his nose.

“I’m on a spaceship with you, aren’t I?” Tony asks rhetorically. “That’s a lot, right there. So. Yeah, that’s it.”

Steve shakes his head. “I miss him,” he confesses. “And I thought you’d understand.”

“I miss him,” Tony says, eyes narrowed. “Don’t make this out to be something it’s not.”

Steve just shakes his head again. “Guess I’ll just…go,” he mumbles, walking away. Tony pretends he doesn’t keep a curious eye out as he goes.

It’s three in the morning next time they meet. Or roughly, Tony supposes. Time doesn’t exactly move the same way in space, given their lack of orbit or, hell, a clear sun to be tracking, but Rhodey’s ancient aviator’s watch is still keeping time, so Tony has a decent enough approximation.

He can’t sleep. The bed—a narrow bunk, really, but Tony doesn’t complain anymore—is too empty. He would go find Rhodey, but, well, he’s pretty sure Carol’s already claimed that space.

He is so, so happy for them. So happy he told Rhodey off all those times he offered himself as some sort of stand-in alpha for Tony, that he made Rhodey wait. Not that he thought Rhodey would ever actually find Carol again, but he always knew there would be someone for Rhodey.

That she’s a buff pilot who could kick all their asses with some of the tightest morals Tony’s ever seen seems just about right, Tony figures.

So he doesn’t crawl into their bed, and instead roams the ship. He’s pretty sure Thor is at the helm right now, Rocket getting his rest. The raccoon has been oddly protective of the ship, but then again, from what Tony can gather he’s the last one left. So maybe it’s not so odd.

Steve’s there, looking out a window at the blackness of space. Tony swallows, forces himself to look. He can handle it now.

He no longer hears Thanos’ name, indistinct and broken, echoing in his brain. Space is just space, really, once you’ve seen everything Tony has.

It’s Steve that takes a moment longer to adjust to. He debates turning around, but will probably go stir-crazy back in the bunks. He sighs, braces himself, and moves forward.

“Steve.”

Steve flinches, like he didn’t know Tony was there. Maybe he didn’t.
“Tony.”

They stand in silence for a minute or so. “Bucky wouldn’t have wanted me to sit and mourn with you just because he was dead,” Tony says.

Steve flinches, full-on flinches. “Yeah. You guys were pretty clear on what you thought of me.”

“Like I didn’t have reasons,” Tony snorts. “Three times, Steve. Three times, you used the voice on me. And then you helped put me in that vulnerable position. I agreed to the stupid guardianship because you promised nothing would change, that you wouldn’t use it against me.”

“I—”

“You absolutely did,” Tony says, defensive and angry even if Steve hasn’t gotten a word in edgewise yet. “You absolutely took the idea that you had the ultimate power to heart. Maybe you and Maximoff enjoyed those little games, but I don’t.”

“I don’t know what you expected of me,” Steve says. “I mean, there’s…well, there’s a way things are done, and I didn’t hurt you. I gave you your way, was patient with you. What did you expect?”

“I expected Captain America to stand up for the people in need of a champion,” Tony says. He pauses. “No, I take it back. Captain America might mean a lot to them, but he means jack shit to me. After listening to any story whatsoever from Aunt Peg, I expected Steve Rogers to care about the marginalized.” Tony shakes his head. “Don’t live up to your hype, there.”

“What did you expect of me?” Steve asks. He doesn’t sound angry, not really, not in the way that’ll either make Tony put distance between them or square the fuck up. He just sounds like he’s ready to throw his hands up. “I’m only a person, you know?”


“I never…” Steve swallows, seems to think about his words. “Don’t act like I’m the worst person you’ve ever known.”

“You don’t get prizes for not being the worst, Steve,” Tony says, and it’s almost, shockingly, gentle. He clears his throat, tries to harden his voice. “Tell me the truth, though. Was any of it real?”

“Any of what?”

“Any of…us?” Tony asks.

Steve visibly swallows in the glowing light of a passing star, his throat bobbing. “I…yes, Tony. Of course it was. I…I loved you.”

“Might not have liked me, but you loved me, huh?” Tony asks sardonically, so incredibly bitter that he and Bucky never got the words out, but here Steve is. “How about everything else, huh? Everything you said. Was it just to get me in bed, or did you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“Was I ever a person to you, Steve, or just a convenient omega?”

“Of course you were a person,” Steve protests immediately, adamant. “I don’t think omegas aren’t people or something. Omegas are people and they deserve opinions and all that. Tony, when have I
“Just as long as they don’t disagree with your opinions,” Tony interrupts.

“Tony, we disagreed all the time.”

“Sure,” Tony agrees. “Until we ran into things you actually cared about. Because you were dead inside, didn’t give a fuck. Of course I could have my way then, what did it matter? But then it became real to you, and suddenly it was important. Like the Accords, or like telling one hundred seventeen countries to go fuck themselves. Or like…like Bucky,” Tony finishes, stumbling over the words.

“Bucky was—”

“How’d that work out for you?” Tony interrupts.

They both flinch. Low blow. Neither of them has to say anything about it.

Tony takes a deep, shaky breath, and steers them back to safer waters.

“I don’t want to fight,” he says.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Steve mutters petulantly.

Tony sighs. “I don’t wanna fight. That doesn’t mean I want to be friends. Don’t mistake the two.”

“What do you want, Tony, then?” Steve challenges. “Cause it seems like I can never get that quite right.”

“Honestly?” Tony says. “I want to get to Nidavellir and reverse this. I want Bucky back, and Vision and Peter and May and Happy and everyone fucking else. And then I want to never have to work with any of you again.”

“That’s it? Just like that?” Steve asks, almost incredulous.

“That’s it. I’m done with second chances,” Tony says. “Now. Maybe I’ll go sit up front in the cockpit, to wait out the insomnia.”

And he leaves Steve there, can feel him staring after him, confusion and a deep, bitter sorrow clinging to the air.

They land on Nidavellir about twelve Earth hours later, with Rocket and Thor both haggling over the controls of the ship.

Tony waits with bated breath. When they disembark, he carries the gauntlet with him, practically glued to his side.

Bruce, Rhodey, and Nakia form what is practically an honor guard around him. Whatever they might face here—Thor assures them that the only living creature is King Eitri, a friendly, but they can’t be too sure—they can be well assured that the gauntlet is well protected.

Almost immediately, they’re greeted by a figure who Tony is pretty sure is not Eitri, King of the Dwarves.
It’s a short beta woman, with long hair and a sword. She runs straight towards Thor, which makes most of them turn and tense, but Thor seems to be ready for her.

“I have been waiting for you,” the short woman accuses Thor, jamming a finger into his chest. “I have been searching the damn galaxy for you, and it has been weeks.”

“I’m here now,” Thor offers.

She looks like she’s ready to start a fight, then bites her lip. “Half of them disappeared in front of me, Thor.” Her eyes cloud over. “Children.”

Thor looks bowled over with grief, and Tony does feel bad for the guy, who should not physically be able to take this much misery.

“Where are they now?” Bruce asks.

She turns to him. “I settled the ones that survived down. They’re safe. Then, I went looking for you.” Her eyes flash. “I found The Statesman.”

“I’m sorry, who are you?” Carol finally asks.

Thor turns to face the rest of the party. “This is Brunhilde,” he says. “The last of the Valkyrie and a fine warrior.”

“How did you find us?” Rhodey asks.

“Thor would come here eventually,” she says. “Eitri said you’ve been here already. I was about to leave.”

“Is Eitri available?” Tony asks. “‘Cause this is nice, but I kinda need to see him.”

“He’s over here,” Brunhilde says, jerking her head. “Come on. Not sure what he can really do for you, though.”

Eitri is about fourteen feet tall, with hands encased in metal. Tony swallows when he sees it, disturbed to think of how that happened.

His eyes flash dangerously when Tony explains what he wants. Once upon a time, that look in an alpha’s eyes might have made Tony step back. “What would you need with that?” he asks.

Tony hefts the gauntlet he has as a model. “I need something strong enough to let me undo this mess,” he says.

The dwarf studies him, then nods. “I suppose I could...Yes. I’ll do it.” He studies Tony. “He’s dead?”


Eitri nods. “Good.”

That seems to be a common enough refrain.
Tony watches Eitri work. “I could… I mean, I’m not you, but I’m not exactly a slouch in metal work myself,” Tony says. He taps his chest to show off what’s left of his nanites, making sure to preserve them carefully. “I could help. With your hands.”

Eitri looks down at his mangled limbs. “I think they’re beyond help.”

“That’s thinking small,” Tony criticizes. “Metal can do a lot for us, you know.”

Eitri looks at him, and Tony thinks it’s almost amused. “Okay, then.”

So they split the work. Eitri makes a gauntlet worthy of the Infinity Stones. Tony builds some prosthetics.

Bruce looks over his designs. “Just to check. You expect me to pry the guy’s mangled hands out of that so we can attach new prosthetics, without really having any idea what kind of condition the surviving tissue is in?”

Tony shrugs. “You see any other doctors around?”

Bruce gives him a half smile. “This is what I missed about you, Tony.”

“Me making you do medical work you’re not specialized in?”

“You pulling me into schemes for the greater good,” Bruce corrects, then peers closer at the charts.

Most everyone avoids Tony while he works. Rhodey finds him a few times a day, prompting him to eat or sleep or even just have human interaction. Carol’s usually hot on his heels. Nebula’s swung through a few times, giving off a general confused feeling, like fabric pushed the wrong way, everytime she does it. Tony gets that he’s the closest connection to her sister, even if Nebula doesn’t seem to have worked that out yet. Nakia and Bruce find him upon occasion, Nakia because she’s seemingly keeping an eye on everyone, and Bruce because Tony’s where the work is.

Otherwise, they seem willing and happy to leave him alone, which Tony’s grateful for. He’s not in the mood for Clint’s sniping or Natasha’s particular brand of needling. He can’t handle Thor or Steve right now.

So he works. Because frankly, work is the only option for him right then. If he doesn’t, he might very well combust.

When he’s not working, he travels into the soul stone to talk to Gamora.

“You know what you’re going to ask it for yet?” she asks, sitting on the watery ground under the arch.

Tony tilts his head. He’s been thinking as he works. “I’m only gonna get one, right?”

“Probably.”

Tony sighs. There are… lots of things he would like to change. How omegas are treated. Poverty. Disease.

It’s probably good he only gets one, he thinks morosely. One to deal with the biggest problem.
Because even with good intentions, power can go to someone’s head. Besides, it’s far too easy to upset the balance of the universe.

Tony blinks, then plays that thought back.

“Yeah,” he says, thinking it over again and again. “I think I got it.”

He wakes up in the little temporary workshop he’s set up, the one Eitri gave to him with a long once over and a shrug, a “not like anyone else is left alive to use it.”

And then he finishes the prosthetic.

He and Bruce do the procedure the next morning. Eitri watches them dispassionately, even when Bruce reveals his mangled stumps of hands.

Tony tries not to let anything show on his face. Eitri doesn’t need pity, doesn’t need disgust. He needs hands.

Once they’re attached, he flexes them slowly. “Thank you,” he says. “I’ll make your gauntlet.”

“That’s not why I made these,” Tony says.

“I know,” Eitri says. “You’d make a passable dwarf, Stark. Would you like to stay?”

Tony swallows. “Not if we can make this work.”

Eitri just gives him a long look, nods once, and then walks off.

Eitri presents him a gauntlet the next evening, plopping it down in front of Tony. It looks different, no longer made from a mold meant to fit a Titan. Now, it’s just for Tony.

It’s done.

Eitri bows his head, then steps away from it. “Fix this,” he rumbles, before leaving altogether.
Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Summary

The gauntlet is done. They're ready.

Chapter Notes

Hello, happy Monday!

As some of you may be able to deduce by me posting this...yes, this means I finished. Empathic Responses is now 34 completed chapters, all ready for posting. I'll actually be done posting the main body of this fic next Monday, which feels mind boggling to contemplate.

Anyways, this chapter. Things happen.

There's some shit being thrown around in this chapter. It all needs to be said, but it's also a lot and some of it you're like "really, dude? Now is when you bring this up?" I couldn't find a way to completely work it into the chapter, which probably means I failed as a writer, but I 100% believe the mind stone is influencing them here, just as it did in the first Avengers. That is, they're saying the stuff on their mind, even when it's not appropriate, and it's antagonizing each other.

Other than that, we should be good for this chapter.

Enjoy, and thank you so much for reading!

Transferring the stones from one gauntlet to the other is, apparently, not an easy task.

"Just one of those can kill ya," Rocket cautions. His eyes go a little distant. "They ain’t meant to be touched by normal hands. Certainly not a human."

"I can help," Thor says.

Bruce shrugs. "Can’t hurt the Hulk."

Carol raises a hand. "Pretty sure I can take it."

Brunhilde sighs. "Yeah, okay. Me too."

Tony makes a gauntlet out of the last of his nanites, then waves. "Lookit, that’s five. We’ll be okay."

They do it about an hour later. There are six stones. The five of them pry one loose each and replace it.
Bruce turns a little green, but the Hulk doesn’t come out. Everyone else looks uncomfortable, but no one’s flesh melts from their bones, so Tony considers it a win.

It feels…immensely powerful in Tony’s hand. He’s touched the stones, used them a bit, and he’s always felt their low thrum of power. It’s nothing like this. Physically possessing one is like holding lightning.

Tony’s about to offer to move the sixth—his hand tingles a bit, even under the nanite gauntlet, but it’s nothing unmanageable—when Nebula steps forward and holds up her metallic hand. “Let me,” she says.

And so she picks up the soul stone and replaces it in the new gauntlet. Her fingers trail over the stone, like she can will it to let her in, like Gamora can feel it, know she’s there, thinking of her.

When it’s carefully placed in the gauntlet, the whole thing glows so bright Tony actually has to look away for a moment.


Eitri seemingly gleefully melts down the old gauntlet, leaving the rest of them staring at the new one.

“Alright, Stark,” Nebula says, bitter with fear. “It’s time.” She can’t keep her eyes off of it.

They still don’t know what will happen to Gamora, when Tony does this. Tony doesn’t bring it up. Nebula knows full well what may or may not happen.

Nakia nods. “Do it.”

Tony reaches out hesitantly. “Wait,” Steve interrupts. Everyone turns to stare at him. “Do we…do we have a plan?”

“A plan?” Carol asks slowly. “Like, Tony puts on the gauntlet, undoes this, we all go home?”

Some eyes turn to look at Tony. He tries not to bristle under their judgement.

Rhodey does it for him, because Rhodey always does. “Anyone have something to say?” He demands.

“It works for Tony,” Bruce says, wringing his hands and looking very carefully over anyone’s shoulder. “And only Tony.”

“Are we just going to accept that?” Clint asks.

“What else would you suggest?” Nakia asks. Tony watches her hands move towards her weapons. He tries to subtly shake his head—there are literally not enough of them left to have yet another Civil War, not with tensions and grief and animosity as high as they are. He doesn’t know if she sees him, but she doesn’t escalate, just waits, eyes narrowed.

“We haven’t really talked through all our options,” Natasha says, in that pseudo-rational voice.

“Options? What endgame are you aiming for, exactly, Romanoff?” Rhodey demands. “If you want the universe fixed, then butt out.”
Natasha’s eyes are hard. Tony looks around. He knows Natasha is…normal. Human. Capable of feelings, more than she ever wants to show. But she doesn’t do loyalty, not really. And everyone she’s deeply, sole-deep loyal to—Steve and Clint—survived. She likes other people. She likes Clint’s family, half wiped out by the stones. She likes Wilson and Maximoff. But she’s not desperate like some of the rest of them, for people back. So she just stares back at Rhodey, still mired deep in her pseudo-rationality.

“Avengers Initiative,” Tony says suddenly. “That’s what Fury called us, right? Avengers Initiative. I told—I told Loki,” he says, trying hard not to look over at Thor. “I told him if we couldn’t protect the Earth, we’d avenge it. Well, I did. I gave my all to protect it and I gave everything left to avenge it and I did it. Thanos is dead, left in an unmarked grave on an unknown, deserted planet and I sincerely hope the local wildlife is stripping the meat from his bones while we speak. I avenged us. But it’s not enough. So let’s fucking move on, ‘cause most of us have people we’re missing. And even if we don’t—the universe can’t survive this.”

Tony reaches out for the gauntlet again. The tension in the room could be cut with a knife. The hairs on the back of Tony’s neck stand on end.

“What makes you so afraid of me, anyways?” Tony demands, angry again. “Do you think this is my idea of a long-con, that I’d, what, set this up so I can secretly get the ultimate power of the universe to have my wicked way with?” The stones seem to almost spark when Tony speaks. Tony does his best to ignore it.

The tension doesn’t lessen. Steve, being Steve, clears his throat. Steve’s never seen a situation he doesn’t want to barrel into head-first, but he should really learn his lesson before he gets into something he can’t handle. Like Tony.

“Tony, I…we…you can’t deny, you’ve had, uh, an interesting history, and…”

“Ultron wasn’t just Tony,” Bruce says, chin up and actually looking directly at Steve, hands balled into fists. “But you know that, don’t you, Captain?”

“Say it,” Nakia hisses. “Say it’s because he’s an omega. Be honest.”

“It has nothing to do with that!”

Tony shrugs. “Ultron was three omegas, but I take all the blame. What was it, can’t play nice with others, or can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it? I can’t remember which insult goes where anymore. Bottom line, though, is I am an easy fucking target to heap them on.” His eyes go hard. “I’m not the only one who’s kept secrets, here.”

Nakia jerks a hand at Thor. “You destroyed a city. You destroyed London. We’ve heard about you in Wakanda.” She turns to Natasha, curling her lip. “The judgemental spy, unable to stay loyal for long. You betrayed my King. You put your government’s secrets on the internet, putting operatives in danger. Operatives like you or me.” Next, she turns to Clint. “You broke the law on a whim and blame Stark for the consequences.” Her eyes find Steve’s. “Who among us has not done harm?”

“I…”

“You destroyed the Avengers,” Rhodey picks up right where Nakia left off. “You tore apart the team because you couldn’t rely on the omega to keep it together. You destroyed cities in your narrow-mindedness. Do I need to list all your sins, Rogers?”

Tony thinks the air is so thick he might legitimately choke on it.
“No one here is blameless,” Rhodey continues. “But you make sure Tony can’t forget it because it is easy to leave it at his feet. He bothers you and he’s there and you take it out on him. Tony’s not here to destroy the universe. He might be the last one alive who can save it.”

Rocket watches him curiously, head tilted. “When we had a stone, we all had to use it,” he announces. “Or it would kill us. I was gonna bring that up, but I can see that that idea is worthless trash.”

Steve turns to him. “Why?”

“Besides the fact that it only responds to Stark?” Nebula asks. “Because this isn’t a team.”

The words reverberate, giving the air a distinctive flavor.

“Hear that?” Tony asks, full of false cheer. “This could kill me easily, so. Might still get your way.”

Steve looks anguished. “Tony, no one wants—”

“Speak for yourself, Steve,” Tony says, eyebrow raised.

Steve’s anguish doesn’t fade. “Tony, no one wants you hurt. It’s the opposite. It shouldn’t be you, taking this on. You’re…well, you always hated us saying it, but face it. You’re vulnerable. You’re human, Tony, you shouldn’t take this on!”

Tony raises an eyebrow. Sure, it’s true. But Rhodey is just as vulnerable, and so is Clint, and Natasha, and Tony would bet his entire fortune they wouldn’t be having quite the same conversation if the positions were reversed.

Steve—and Clint, and Natasha—probably genuinely think this isn’t an omega thing. They don’t understand how the omega thing colors every interaction, every gaze, every moment sometimes. That it’s insidious and poisonous and creeps into things those less aware would never think it would touch. That even seemingly innocent remarks can be used to strangle.

That care can be a chokehold and expectations poison, that Tony’s heard it all and he knows he wouldn’t hear ninety-five percent of it if he was just born different.

Thor butts in with much less artifice than the others, inadvertently making Tony’s point for him. “It’s not right, to put an omega at that kind of risk, we cannot expect—”

“Shut up, Thor,” Bruce says, with enough bite that Tony does a double-take, and so does everyone else.

“Hey,” Natasha says sharply, eyes squinting at Bruce, clearly trying to get a read and failing.

Bruce shakes his head and gives his little sardonic laugh. “Oh, here we go.” He looks over at Tony. “I told you. We’re a time bomb.”

“Long since exploded, buddy,” Tony says, careful eyes on the crowd. “This is just the shrapnel.”

“Know a lot about shrapnel, huh?” Clint asks.

Tony taps his chest absently. “Sure you wanna go down that road, Barton? ‘Cause I can read SHIELD files as well as anyone with an AI and a deep seated sense of paranoia.”

“Oh you can, could you? Missed some snuff, I guess.”
Tony blinks, unsure how they’ve gotten so epically off-track. “Pot. Kettle.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Carol barks, and silence ensues, everyone looking around uneasily. There’s a strange glow around her. “What. The fuck,” she seethes. “Fury called me back for this mess?”

Rhodey shrugs helplessly.

“You’re stupid little sniping is obnoxious,” she says. “And it’s getting in the way. In case you forgot, we’re trying to bring back literally incalculable numbers of people from the dead, because a genocidal alien destroyed half the universe. You’re either here for that, or you can go through me.” Her fist glows. No one moves an inch. “Now. Tony has killed the man who did this, and taken the tool he used to do it. It only works for him. We’ve gotten it working again. So Please explain to me why the hell we are preventing Tony from fixing this so we can all move on.”

There’s a palpable silence in their circle for a minute.

“We’re just concerned,” Steve says finally.

“For what?” Carol asks. She sounds pleasant now, but her hand is still glowing. It might even be brighter than before. No one takes their eyes off of it.

“It is a lot to expect of an omega,” Thor says.

“Stark has a history of fucking things up,” Clint adds.

“We don’t have a plan,” Steve says. He pauses. “Tony could die.”

“This isn’t a committee,” Tony says. “There is no vote here. We are here to fix the universe. Here’s the tools we have. Take it or leave it.”

“We’re not against you, Tony,” Steve says.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Rhodey snaps.

Steve sighs. “You’ve never wanted to protect an omega, Colonel?”

“There’s about five miles difference between protecting and stifling, Rogers, and you crossed that line a long time ago.” He shakes his head. “Don’t pretend this is all about protecting.”

“I—”

“You’ve been looking for reasons not to trust Tony since you woke up in this century,” Rhodey continues. He jerks his head to the rest of them. “And you, since you met him. Because he doesn’t meet your definition of what’s acceptable. You look and look and look for something wrong, and pick at any perceived failing, and drop more at his feet, and wait for him to prove you right. Tony’s here to save the world. It’s you all who’re holding us up.”

Some tension seems to dissipate. Tony looks over at the gauntlet. Where it was previously glowing, it’s dulled slightly.

Natasha looks at Tony. “What are you going to do?” She asks.

He juts his chin out, shoulders back. Strong. “I’m putting the universe back how it was intended.” Literally. He knows what he wants to ask for. Put the universe back as it was intended to be. It’s a
strange choice, given that Tony’s never believed that there was any sort of higher power who could intend anything. But the universe itself has a pattern, intentions. Things *work*. Like a finely tuned machine, either the pieces fit together or they don’t.

The universe, like a decent machine, can course correct for minor issues. If half the machine goes missing, though, then the whole thing collapses.

Tony looks down at the most powerful object in the universe. It might be the tool needed to course-correct. Whatever that means. Whatever that looks like.

Tony’s not here to play god, not here to mess with this power. He’s too small to work out all the details. He can’t fathom the numbers lost to Thanos, so he would be unable to fathom getting any more specific to bring them back. Let the magic rock handle it. He’s just the conduit, the one who can use the tool. He’s not here to choose who comes back, or who doesn’t. He’s just…here.

Natasha must see some of that in his eyes. She nods.

He looks around. Barton looks away, but seems to jerk his head. Thor nods grudgingly, eyes contemplative on Bruce even as he does that. Finally, Steve nods, eyes never leaving Tony.

Tony turns away from them all, looking at the gauntlet. “Well,” he says slowly. “Guess we’ll see what happens.”

“Tony…”

“I don’t want the speech, Rogers,” he says coolly, not even looking up until he gets the gauntlet onto his hand. Then, and only then, does he look around, eyes lingering on Nebula, Nakia, Carol, Bruce, and, finally, Rhodey.

Rhodey nods to him, slowly. He swallows and bites his lip to keep from talking.

Tony closes his eyes, thinks *Put the universe back how it was intended to be*, and snaps.

It’s very… *dark*, Tony supposes, is the way to put it. Empty, maybe.

There’s nothing, like he’s thrown into the great vortex of space, alive and well but abandoned, nothing around, not a single star, not a single point of light.

And then, his hand starts glowing.

He’s captivated by the bright lights, so bright they should be blinding. He can’t look away.

They’re…humming. Calling, he thinks. *Inviting*.

*Put the universe back how it was intended to be*, he thinks furiously. *Put the universe back how it was intended to be*.

The glow gets brighter, and then brighter again. He doesn’t look away, but he doesn’t stop thinking his mantra, either. He doesn’t stop to think about what exactly the stones are inviting him towards.

They burst from his gloved hand, floating in the space around him, like he’s the sun and they’re little planets, orbiting him. Each one is a flash of color on its way by, spinning faster and faster.

Suddenly, the vision changes. It’s like the stones explode, taking up his whole field of vision with a
blinding white light before something else is there.

Something else that has Tony blinking, then looking even more closely.

It’s Earth, he thinks. Knows.

It’s Earth but not. It’s a world where poverty is eradicated. Where drinking water is always safe, where food is plentiful for all. Where medical care is always accessible. Where children don’t die in infancy and their mothers survive giving birth. Where education is universal.

It’s a world where technology flourishes.

Where omegas, alphas, and betas are essentially distinctionless, where omegas run companies and lead universities and hold office, where alphas can stay at home with kids if they choose, where dynamic doesn’t equal destiny.

Tony’s mouth actually waters, as he watches the image play out.

And then…it’s him. It’s him and Bucky, who’s alive and well and seemingly happy, and they’re there with Peter and May and Rhodey and Vision and Pepper and Happy and even Carol, their own little family. Peter’s older. He has an MIT sweatshirt on. Pepper and Happy are mated, judging by the way they’re curled up together. Pepper might be pregnant. Carol and Rhodey look happy. Honestly, they look like they did, way back in the day.

He and Bucky look…he has to look away.

Tony closes his eyes. No. He can’t. Can’t watch, can’t dream about it.

*Put the universe back how it was intended to be.*

He has a job to do here, and he can’t get distracted. He has exactly one chance to make the entire universe work as intended again, and he can’t waste it by wishing for things. By focusing on his life, on the smaller details. That’s thinking small, and that’s not what a futurist does.

Even if it looks like his literal dreams.

*Put the universe back how it was intended to be.*

Power corrupts, and Tony knows it. Knows how wanting sinks into your bones, takes you in and then spits you out, broken and missing what you set out for in the first place.

The bottom line is, this isn’t about Tony. It’s not about his family. It’s not even about Earth.

It’s about a universe worth of people he doesn’t know.

So Tony shakes his head, squeezes his eyes further shut. No. He can’t get distracted.

There seems to be a hum, and Tony can make out words if he strains his hearing.

*Are you sure?*

*Put the universe back how it was intended to be.*

The vision flickers, dies, and Tony’s left once again stranded in space, surrounded by the darkness of the Infinity Stones. For a minute, he’s captivated by their brightness, and then, they shatter, and Tony’s world *burns*. 
Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Summary

It's over, now. Now they move forward.

Chapter Notes

Hello, all!

Okay, so here we see how it's all gone done.

Warnings: A few uncomfortable conversations, but Tony definitely comes out on top, and they aren't that bad. Also, I suppose some strange form of non-consensual body modification, but it's not body horror or anything like that.

Enjoy!

Tony wakes up burning. For a moment he can’t see anything besides the incredibly bright colors of the stones. He blinks, clears his vision, and sees Rhodey’s face slowly coming into focus on front of him.

Rhodey’s a few feet away, very carefully not touching him, and his face is deeply creased with worry. As his senses wake up, Tony get a hit of the sour-sharp smell of Rhodey’s panic, louder than ever before. He blinks, and things slowly come more together.

The whole crowd is several feet behind Rhodey, with Carol at his shoulder and Thor between them and the rest. Tony frowns. They almost look like...

Shields.

“What happened?” He asks.

“You...you were glowing, Tones,” Rhodey says. “Lifted straight up in the air and started glowing. The stones. They, uh, exploded. And...they went inside you.”

Tony freezes. “Run that by me again.”

“Inside you,” Carol echoes. “Sparkling lights just...straight through your skin. Made you glow real bright.”

Tony looks down at his hand. The gauntlet is cracked, and the stones are just gone.

“Well, how ‘bout that,” Tony whispers.

“Tony...” Bruce begins. “You’re still glowing.”
It’s true. His free hand, his arm, are emitting a soft aura, golden and clear. Tony just stares.

“How…”

“You have absorbed their magic,” Thor says softly. Almost reverently, Tony thinks, and Tony looks up to see what is definitely reverence in his eyes, feel it in the air. “You absorbed the strongest power in the nine.”

Tony turns over his hand, looks at his softly glowing palm.

“What the fuck,” he murmurs, looking around. Everyone just stares.

He takes a deep, shaky breath. Realizes with a sudden, irrational bout of humor that it’s the deepest breath he’s been able to take since 2008.

So he might be…fixed?

He laughs hysterically for a moment, unable to keep it in, body shaking along with his warbling, humorless laugh. Of course. Of course.

He soberes up on shaky breaths. He’s dealt with worse, he reminds himself.

“Think it worked?” He asks the crowd.

Everyone looks at the destroyed gauntlet, and the lack of stones. If it didn’t, they are out of chances.

“We’ll find out,” Nakia says heavily.

Tony goes to find Eitri, to tell him what happened. He runs into another Dwarf first, who gives him a long look.

“Oh, hey?” Tony says, swallowing, looking up at the man, shorter than Eitri but still towering over Tony. “Know where Eitri is?”

He grunts. “King Eitri is in the forge.”

Tony follows, and sees literally dozens of dwarfs.

He looks down at his now-bare hand, holding the gauntlet, and smiles.

Eitri is using his new prosthetics to bang out some metal. He looks up, puts his hammer down, and crosses his arms. “What do you need now?” He asks. “Change your mind about staying?”

Tony shakes his head. “Think we did it,” he says. He holds out the gauntlet.

Eitri blinks. “What’s this for?”

“Melting down,” Tony says simply.

Eitri looks it over, frowns. “The stones are gone.”

“Yeah,” Tony says, offering no explanation. “I think we’re best off making sure all parts of this are gone forever.”
I’d say you’re right,” Eitri says, and then throws the gauntlet straight into the fire.

Thor and Brunhilde leave first. She takes him by the arm and all but steers him away. “We need to see who is alive,” she says. “We need to find them.”

Thor opens his mouth to say something, but she levels him with a look. “Yes, you’re right,” Thor sighs. “Take me to where you brought the survivors. And then we’ll find The Statesman.”

Brunhilde frowns. “Thor, they were not lost in the snap.”

“We will find them,” Thor says firmly. “We need to...we need to...”

“You should,” Tony interrupts. “You should definitely look. And Thor? Bring whoever survived to Earth. We’ll find you a spot.”

Thor looks at him, mouth hanging slightly open. “Tony…”

“Why?” Brunhilde interrupts. “Why should we look?”

Tony shrugs. He can’t really explain it either, but it’s like his blood is singing, like he’s a compass wildly spinning for magnetic north, but getting closer every second. “I just…a feeling,” he says lamely.

“A feeling?” Barton snorts.

Before Tony can say anything, before Rhodey can, or Bruce or Nakia or Carol, Thor turns on Clint. “Watch yourself,” he warns. “Tony Stark is the most noble hero in the nine realms, the most powerful man in the universe. As warriors it is our duty to follow him.”

Tony swallows uncomfortably at the strong about-face. Thor would have never said this, never in a million years. But now, Tony wielded the infinity gauntlet. “Thor…”

“No,” Thor says firmly. “Tony Stark is a great warrior. No other warrior could do what he did today; certainly none of us did. He was left to carry that burden alone and we all owe him apologies and our gratitude. I know I do.” And with that, he actually bows to Tony, bending at the waist and holding it for a long moment before straightening, nodding to the rest, and leaving with Brunhilde.

Tony just stares after them, shocked by the abrupt about-face, the turn on a dime.

Then again, Tony realizes, he’s still glowing.

“Think we’ll see him again?” Rhodey asks.

Tony stares after him, half convinced this is some strange fever dream. He nods.

They set off that day.

Nebula twitches uncomfortably near him in a way he’s never seen her do. “I...I need to...I need to go,” she says.

Tony looks at her, tilting his head and appraising the situation. “Gamora,” he surmises.
Nebula nods. “She’s alive,” she says softly. “I know she is.”

Tony closes his eyes. He knows it too. As much as he hates intuition and unscientific gut feelings, he knows it.

He nods. “Wait,” he instructs, then impulsively takes her metal hand.

His own hand starts to glow. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, some deep instinct guiding his movements, allowing him to keep going. The glow travels to her hand, momentarily lighting her up.

She blinks. “What was…”

“I know it too,” Tony says, dropping her hand. “The soul stone, it’s…in here, now, I guess,” he says, using his free hand to jab at himself. “And I can feel her. We’re…connected. She’s out there. Voramir.”

Nebula nods, touching the hand Tony held. “Voramir.”

Her hand glows, the glow almost seeming to light up as she moves. “I think it’s…a compass,” Tony says, then realizes compasses might be an earth-based concept. “It’ll guide you to her, even if she moves on.”

She stares at her still softly-glowing hand. “Thank you,” she says, more genuine emotion in her tone than Tony’s ever heard from her, and the waves she gives off almost bowls him over.

“We’ll drop you off at the next planet you can get a ride from,” Tony says. “And you should go find her. But hey. Stop by earth someday, yeah?”

After they drop off Nebula, Rocket follows Tony’s directions back towards Titan. Tony waits with bated breath—his kid is there, his kid—and paces the ship. But as the day widdles away, he finds himself distracted.

Rhodey, as always, knows exactly when to intrude on Tony’s thoughts. “Wanna talk about it?” He asks, plopping down right next to Tony.

Tony shakes his head, then bites his lip, reconsidering. “I, uh. I did magic earlier.”

Rhodey’s lips quirk into a small smile. “You did.”

“And not just the fancy-schmancy gauntlet thing,” Tony continues, steam-rolling through. “With Nebula. That was magic.”

“Yup,” Rhodey agrees.

“I, uh, got a feeling inside of me and used some weird magic to feel where Gamora is and passed that on to Nebula,” Tony says.

“Yup.”

Tony makes a disgruntled huff. “A little more here, Rhodey. Please.”

Rhodey shrugs. “Tones, we know magic is real, as much as it pains your little physicist’s heart to admit it. You used the most powerful magic in the universe yesterday, and it seems like it…chose
Tony closes his eyes. “That’s…”

“Good,” Rhodey finishes firmly. “It’s gone now, Tony. No one else can use it.”

“Except me,” Tony says.

Rhodey shrugs. “I trust you.” He looks down at Tony’s hands, then smiles at Tony. “You’ll be fine.”

Tony has always, always appreciated Rhodey’s unwavering confidence in him, even when he doesn’t have it in himself.

Tony’s hands still glow though. He can still close his eyes, think really hard, and see Gamora. She’s on Voramir, at the top of some cliff. She sits there, eyes closed, still as a statue.

Wait, Tony thinks. Nebula’s coming.

There’s a momentary pause. I know.

Tony blinks, then settles himself so he’s sitting. You can hear me?

He sees her lips quirk into a small smile. We’re connected, now. Through the soul stone.

The soul stone broke.

I know, she says again. I’m here, aren’t I? But it’s in you now, right? And a piece of it will always be in me.

Tony looks around the ship furtively, even though he knows none of them can hear him. Gamora, I can…I can do magic now.

Tony sees her shrug. We…the stones chose you.

What the hell does that mean? Tony demands.

She shrugs again. The magic, it was…it was too much. To really set the universe back how it was intended, that power couldn’t exist. It shouldn’t exist. Not for just anyone to use. So the stones, they…they took it away.

I still have it.

Not all of it, she disagrees. It can’t exist the way it did, inside of a mortal vessel. Some of it dissipated, bled off to fix what was broken, loose and uncontrollable in the universe, now. And besides…she hesitates for a second. It will die with you. Which is the whole point.

Tony swallows. So I’m… Holding the ultimate cosmic power, he thinks but doesn’t say.

Yes, she agrees anyways, probably able to hear his thoughts regardless. And responsible for that power.

Why me?
The universe has faith in you, Tony Stark.

Tony takes a deep, shuddering breath, which breaks his concentration, brings him back to the inside of the Milano for a short second. Well, he thinks, That’s...a lot.

She smiles. You made the sacrifice. She hesitates a second. Tony.

Yeah?

When you see Quill. Tell him...Tell him I’m coming.

Will do, Tony thinks, and then severs their connection.

Steve catches up to him, which Tony should have frankly expected. It’s not a large ship.

Tony can feel whatever this is prickling under his skin, and tries to temper it, ignore it. “Rogers.”

Steve sighs. “Tony. Can we, please, just...leave the animosity behind? Just for right now?”

Tony tilts his head. “No, I don’t think I can do that,” he says.

“Tony...”

“No,” Tony interrupts firmly. He thinks his hands spark a bit. Steve certainly stares at them. Tony tampers it down firmly. No matter how mad he is, no matter who he’s with, he won’t be Maximoff. “See, I’m the wronged party here. I’m the one who’s been treated like disposable trash for years. That means, I get to decide the future tone of this interaction. Just because you’re all scared of me now—just because the power dynamic has switched—doesn’t mean we’re friends again.”

Steve’s brow furrows. “The power dynamic...?”

Tony shakes his head, holds up his hand. “I have the mind stone inside of me,” Tony says. “The one Loki used to turn people into puppets. The one Maximoff used to turn our minds inside out. And that’s just one of six cosmically unstoppable forces of energy that now call this decrepit body home.”

“Tony...”

“I can feel your eyes,” Tony says. “That’s a skill of mine. Practice and a lot of it. But more than that, I can feel your emotions. They stink up the place, Steve, and you’ve all been awful worried about what I’d do with this power over you. Well I’ll tell you right now. I won’t ever use it. But the fact you all are worried sick over me doing what you did to me, about the power you have always had over me, the power I casually had to live with...well, that says a lot.”

“I just...I just wanted to come tell you you’re a hero,” Steve says, half-desperately. “And I’m...proud of what you did.” It’s true. Steve’s worried but he’s also awed, Tony can feel it, can feel the way his—and Thor’s when he was here, and just about everyone else’s—scent has shifted, the subtle admiration.

But the thing is, there have been people who admired Tony since the beginning. Tony didn’t have to literally save the world to earn a place at their table. And he won’t forget that.

“I don’t need your pride,” Tony says. “Not from you all.”
“Will I ever be able to say the right thing?”

“No, probably not,” Tony says, truthfully, simply. He doesn’t mean it to hurt, as much as it probably does. “Steve. When we get back to Earth. No matter what we find, good or bad, you and I are done.”

“Forever?”

“Yes,” Tony says firmly. He doesn’t say what he’s thinking—that Steve somehow worms his way in, that he has before and if Tony gives him even the smallest opening it could destroy him, because they are never good together. Like oil and water, Tony supposes, because opposites supposedly attract, but, more often, they clash.

“Yeah, Steve, we’re done,” Tony says. He takes a deep breath. “I don’t think you’re a terrible person. I think you’ll be a fine Avenger. I left that team name, that team, and the stupid compound to you. If I didn’t trust you with that much, trust me when I say you wouldn’t have it. But I don’t trust you with me and I’m not about to start, so we’ll take some distance and call it good enough.”

Steve’s silent for half a second, then nods. “For what it’s worth—maybe nothing, but let me say it—you’re a hero, Tony. You saved us and I’m sorry. You really are Earth’s best defender.”

Tony doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t tell him the apology is too little too late, because anyone with half a brain knows that. Doesn’t tell Steve that Tony is too far past loving people who can’t accept him even when he’s not on top of the world.

He turns away then, half because he’s run out of words, and half because the magic is sparking and he doesn’t want Steve to see.

Tony finds a corner and stares at his hands. It’s not easy to find a spot of privacy considering how crowded their ship is, but Tony manages.

The power of the infinity stones, the power the universe fought and killed over, all of it resting inside of Tony.

It makes his blood sing, his skin prickle. There’s something extra inside of him, something that doesn’t quite belong.

Well. Tony’s an expert at turning unwanted additions to himself into positives, he supposes, tapping the nanite casing on his chest.

As his finger touches it, its soft glow strengthens just slightly.

Tony’s watching in fascination when he hears a throat clearing. He looks up to find Natasha watching him.

She comes in with careful steps, posture purposefully demure. “Can I…can we talk?”

Tony just stares at her for a moment. “I suppose so,” he allows. He doesn’t want her near him, but he also can’t avoid it forever.

She comes in and sits a few feet away, maintaining a careful distance. “Testing your new… powers?” She asks, clearly struggling with the words.
Tony shrugs. “I guess so.”

“And…how is that working?” She asks.

Tony sighs. He wonders how he ever found her hard to read.

She’s really very simple. She wants to make sure she survives, and does what she has to along the way.

“Well, my body holds the power of the infinity stones,” Tony tells her calmly.

She starts a little bit, then tries to control her reaction. Her scent is carefully neutral, but Tony squints a little bit. Right there, he gets a glimmering of an aura.

Afraid.

The auras are new, but they sound similar enough to how Maximoff had once on-record described her powers, that Tony was pretty sure it would work for him, a combination of the magic and an omega’s gifts.

“So…how are we going to fix that?” She asks, so neutral she might as well be Switzerland.

Tony tilts his head carefully. “Not sure I follow,” he says.

“Well, it’s not safe, is it?” She asks. “For you to have…all that…in you. Don’t worry, Tony. We’ll come up with a plan.”

Tony barely holds back a snort. Of course. Of course, they’re going to come sweeping in, save Tony from his own poorly thought out choices. Of course they are.

“You don’t get rid of this,” Tony corrects. “This is the solution. The power lives and dies with me, tempered by the limits of a human body. No one can ever do what Thanos did again.”

“Except you,” she says quietly.

“Not really sure I could,” Tony says. “The stones broke. They don’t work the same. But even so, if you really think I would, you’re the worst profiler SHIELD ever turned out,” Tony says.

She sighs. “Tony, you’ve never meant to hurt anyone, but you can’t deny that you try to help and aren’t ever really prepared for the consequences.”

“I think we all fit into that boat,” Tony says mildly. “But if anyone on this ship gets to talk about the dangers of unchecked powers, it’s definitely not you and yours.” Tony abruptly stands up. “I have no intention of using it to hurt you, or even using it. I know what’s at stake here. Whatever you might have said about me, Natasha, I have lines in the sand.”

She just looks at him, long and hard, eyes piercing. She opens her mouth to say something, closes it again, and just nods.

“If you…if you can’t…you’ll reach out, if you need help?” She checks.

“Of course,” Tony agrees immediately. “Just…not to you.”

Before she can answer that, Bruce approaches, steps just shy of a run. “We’re approaching,” he says, looking at Tony and not even acknowledging Natasha.
Tony blinks, then dashes for the cockpit. “How long?” he asks, sliding into a seat.

Rocket glances over. “That’s Gamora’s seat.”

“Yes, well, she’s inside my brain, so we’re fine,” Tony says flippantly.

“Inside your... what the hell did I miss?” Rocket demands.

“She’ll tell you all about it,” Tony says dismissively. “How long?”

“’Nother few minutes,” Rocket says. His brow furrows as he focuses on landing them.

As they get closer, Tony sees blurs on the ground. His breath catches.

The magic inside of him *sings*.

Rocket lands expertly. Tony’s out of his seat even before the ship fully settles, running for the ramp, pushing the button to open it frantically.

As soon as there’s even the slightest opening, Tony runs for it.

A little blur on the horizon runs towards him.
Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Summary

Finally, they're re-united.

Chapter Notes

Hello, all, happy Saturday.

Guess what, I have "walking pneumonia." Yeah. I'm going to be fine, but my chest hurts like a mother fucker.

Anyways, welcome to the last real chapter. Monday will be an epilogue, which is still important and I like it, but this really...the end of this chapter is a real focal point, you know?

Here are the reunions you've been waiting for, all. Also, a semi-serious discussion of what Tony's gone through, and a different semi-serious look at what this magic means for Tony, both of which would be really interesting to look at as bonus chapters some day.

Enjoy, all. Thanks for taking this journey with me. I know we're not done yet (truly, we won't even be done on Monday, but still) but I still just really want to thank you all. It's been a trip, y'all.

Tony catches Peter in his arms. The kid clings tight, arms constricting Tony’s breath. Tony’s not much better, grabbing the kid and actually lifting him off the ground a bit.

“Mr. Stark, Tony, I—”

He’s crying, Tony can feel it through his flight suit, can hear it in his voice. “I got you, I got you,” he whispers, trying and probably failing to project calm.

They fall to the ground, but Tony hardly notices, too busy holding his kid. “I got you, I got you.”

“Tony, I—”

Shadows fall over them. Tony’s alert in a second, scrambling for purchase, ready to defend Peter to the death. It takes him a second to realize it’s Quill, Mantis, Drax, and Strange.

Strange watches him with mournful eyes. “Tony,” he says, and his voice is softly wondering.


“I’m sorry,” Strange says. He closes his eyes. “It was the only way.”
Tony swallows, but nods. “It’s done.”

Strange just stares for a minute, then nods.

Drax interrupts. “He’s dead?”

“Ran him through myself,” Tony says.

Drax stumbles off, seemingly to decide how he feels about that. Tony’s eyes find Quill next.

“Gamora’s alive,” he says simply.

He blinks, then lurches forward. “How…I, how…”

“When I reversed what Thanos did. She was freed from the soul stone. She’s on Voramir. Nebula’s on the way to her.”

He sinks to his knees, and Tony turns back to Peter to give Quill his privacy.

“Tony, you okay?” Peter asks quietly.

Tony pulls out a tremulous smile. “Me? I’m fine, Pete. No issues here.”

“Tony.”

“Yeah, kiddo?”

“You’re glowing.”

“Shit,” Tony says, then lets go of his kid until he can control the glow, even if it’s evidently not hurting him. “I, uh. It’s been a little while. I’ve done some stuff.”

“Radioactive waste?” Peter asks.

“Broken Infinity Stones,” Tony says. “Absorbed into my body as their living host, apparently.”

Peter blinks, opens his mouth, then shuts it. His curiosity is brimming, bubbling over, but the scent of it is nearly drowned out by his care. “Okay,” he says, shrugging. “You’ll have to tell me about it. Later.”

“Later,” Tony agrees. “How do you feel about heading back for Earth?”

Tony and Peter share a bunk that first night, the kid barely letting go of Tony. They don’t sleep.

“I’m gonna be in so much trouble when I get back,” Peter says. It’s been four hours, and he seems a little better. At the very least, his grip is no longer a death grip. “May’s gonna kill me.”

“I am still debating how angry I am that you stowed away,” Tony says. He pushes Peter’s hair off his face. “But, uh, you got some points with me for being alive, so. Maybe it’ll work for May, too.” He closes his eyes. “Not that—what happened to you would have happened if you were on Titan or Earth or Asgard. But please, Peter. Don’t do it again. I can’t—I cannot lose you.”

Peter pulls back and looks at him seriously. “I can’t promise that, Mr. Stark.”

Tony’s throat constricts. “Peter —”
“No,” Peter interrupts. “I’m seventeen years old, almost eighteen, and I know that’s young. I know I can’t vote or enlist or anything yet. I can’t live alone or manage my own money. But I know what’s out there. And I can do stuff that no one else can.”

Toony closes his eyes. “Not at the cost of your life,” he says.

“Even then,” Peter insists. He sounds unsure, but keeps going. “I…I don’t wanna die, Tony, but I know… I know what I can do. And I know what needs doing.”

Tony can’t even respond, his throat is so constricted. Peter is too young, so goddamn young, really just a baby still. A seventeen year old baby who died in Tony’s arms already.

“Just…we’ll talk about it later,” Tony allows.

And then he grabs his kid tight again, and tries to pretend he can keep him safe forever.

Peter takes a break from Tony in the morning. Or, more accurately, he takes a shower. Tony tries not to feel like there’s a hole in his side all over again.

Strange finds him. “I am sorry.”

“You already said.”

“I think you should hear it again. What I did—it was too much to put on anyone.” Tony listens closely, but doesn’t hear it. Doesn’t hear the undertone of too much to put on the omega.

Tony juts his chin out anyways. “I survived.”

Strange smiles, a small half-smile that looks almost unfamiliar. “You did,” he agrees.

“Was there any other way?” Tony asks.

Strange shakes his head. “I saw fourteen million futures. We only ever won in one of them. This one,” he says, as if that was unclear.

“Then you did the right thing,” Tony says.

“Yes,” Strange agrees. “But that doesn’t make it easier to live with.”

“You reading my mind, Doc?”

“No, just…thinking out loud,” Strange says. “Besides, out of the two of us. You’re the one with mind-reading powers.”

Tony flinches. “I think the purpose is to not use them. Or at least not misuse them.’

Strange studies him. “One positive outcome in the entire known universe, and it only ended when you gained control over the stones.”

“You see how this ends?”

Strange shakes his head. “I also no longer have the power to do that. You do.”

“I don’t want it,” Tony says immediately. “I didn’t ask for this and I don’t want to have it.”
“They never would have chosen you otherwise,” Strange agrees.

The bathroom door squeaks. Tony looks over, but Rhodey walks over and intercepts Peter, insisting that he eats.

“I don’t really know how to control it,” Tony says privately.

Strange smiles slightly. “You’ll work it out.”

Tony *hmmphs*. “I’m a scientist, you know that?”

“Welcome to my world,” Strange says dryly. He pats Tony on the shoulder. “You’ve impressed me, Tony. Now, get some sleep. I might not be a surgeon anymore, but I can still see you’re running yourself ragged.”

“Hey,” Tony says suddenly, gears grinding away in his brain. “You were a neurosurgeon.”

“How astute of you.”

“Shut up,” Tony mumbles. “How would you like to work on a once in a lifetime project?”

“What is it?” Strange asks, the sweet, slightly sour taste of gummy candy signalling his amusement.

“We built these, uh, alpha voice blockers. And they’re awesome, but kinda cost prohibitive for the general public. Wanna help build the second generation?”

Strange just stares at him. “Tell you want,” he says slowly. “We’ll negotiate when you’re more awake.”

“Hold you to that,” Tony mumbles, and then takes the advice and tries to sleep.

He wakes up screaming, sweat-soaked and trembling.

Rhodey’s there in a few seconds, hovering close but not touching while Tony frantically tries to get his breath back. There’s no FRIDAY, no Bucky, the people who have lately been critical to helping him after a nightmare. Instead, he’s left to breathe through it, barely keeping himself together.

“—Tony? Tony?” Rhodey asks frantically. His face swims in and out of focus. Tony realizes they have an audience.

He takes a deep, ragged breath that burns as it goes through his lungs. He squeezes his eyes shut, then opens them again, and shakes his head. “Nothing,” he says. “It’s nothing, I’m fine, I’m—”

“Alright, show’s over,” Rhodey barks, then waits for everyone to leave. “It’s not nothing,” he says quietly.

Tony closes his eyes again. “No, but it’s not that bad, so—”

“Is it Thanos?” Rhodey interrupts.

“Of course it’s Thanos,” Tony says. He can still feel it. Breath, on his neck. That stupid hair stroke he did over and over again. Hands ripping his clothes, moving him. Knowing that he was trapped,
cornered, knowing Thanos could hurt him, knowing that Thanos wanted things from him.

He shakes his head. “I’m fine.” It’s a bald-face lie, but maybe if he repeats it enough times, it’ll become true. It’s worked for him before.

“Tony.”

Tony takes another ragged breath, sharp as glass through his lungs. “I don’t regret it,” he says, opening up his eyes so he can make eye contact, so he can show just how firm he is. “I won’t ever regret it.”

Rhodey tilts his head, seemingly considering it. “You’re allowed to not regret it and wish it didn’t happen at the same time.”


“You saved the world, Tony,” Rhodey says. “But you…he hurt you, huh?”

“Not that bad.” Nothing Tony couldn’t survive.

“Any amount of bad is bad.”

“I killed him,” Tony says fiercely.

“And I’m goddamn glad.”

Tony hesitates for a moment. “I know you and Carol—you probably want to get back to sleep, and—”

“Tony.”

Tony takes a deep, grounding breath. It doesn’t hurt as bad this time. “Will you stay with me?”

“Yes,” Rhodey says, pushing his way into the bunk. “Don’t even have to ask.”

Quill calls him up front the next day. “Approaching Earth,” he says tightly, eyes narrowed as he drives.

“You ever been back?” Tony asks.

“Nah. And I’m not stayin’ this time, either. Just here to pick up Groot and get you all off my ship.”

Tony, who has no idea who Groot is, just nods. “Well, you’re always welcome. Or, well. Ask first? I kind of set up some lasers. But in general, you can visit.”

Quill grunts. “So, lasers?”

“When we get close enough, we’ll call them to let us through.”

“Can’t you, like, deactivate them?”

“Don’t know if you know this, but I’ve been travelling light,” Tony says dryly. He squints, estimating the distance to Earth. “Alright, gimmie the radio.”
Quill hands it over and Tony fiddles with it for a moment. “Calling Earth, this is Tony Stark.”

With no response, he flicks the mic a few times. “Tony Stark, coming through.”

“Uh, Roger,” a hesitant voice says. “Stark?”

“That’s me,” Tony says, injecting as much cheer in his voice as he can. “Say. Did everyone just re-appear about a week ago?”

“Uh…yes Sir.”

“Great,” Tony says. “So. Mind disabling the lasers so we can land.”

“I, uh…I need to get clearance for that.”

“You do that,” Tony says. “Ask the Queen—Princess, is she Princess again? I don’t actually know how monarchies work—ask the Queen or Princess Shuri of Wakanda, okay? She’ll know what to do.”

The line goes dead. Tony drums his fingers on the dash. “Guess we wait,” he says.

The line clicks back to life. “Tony?”

“Shuri?” Tony asks. He’s nearly vibrating out of his skin, holding himself together by the skin of his teeth. “How are—how are things?”

“They’re back,” she says. “Should I assume you had something to do with it?”

“Yeah,” Tony says. “So, uh…everyone?”

“Everyone,” she confirms. “Even people who did not die in that direct moment. Those who died in the battle, or after.”

Thanos was a scourge on the universe, never intended and never anticipated for. They have now course-corrected around him. It’s as it was intended to be.

Tony closes his eyes and sighs in relief. It’s over. It’s really done.

“Hey, so, requesting permission to land?”


“Glad to be here.”

“Come to Wakanda,” she says. “There are people waiting.”

Bucky is waiting, right outside where Shuri directs them to land.

He looks good, Tony absently notes. He’s got a beard growing in that the jury is still out on whether Tony finds appealing or not, and he looks like he hasn’t slept in a week. But good.

Good, here, a miracle, really, and all of that is good.
Tony only thinks about that after, after he already has his arms around the man, and Bucky is holding him back, arms tight and sure and home.

Bucky buries his face in Tony’s hair, sniffing deep. Tony gets his face in Bucky’s neck and might cry a little bit, there.

“I fucking love you,” Bucky says into Tony’s hair. “You didn’t let me finish, I didn’t get to say it and I just—I just needed you to know, and I fucking love you.”

“I know,” Tony says into Bucky’s neck, but he knows Bucky can hear him. “I know you do. I knew you did then, too. And I—goddammit, Bucky, I love you, too, you know that, right?”

“It’s really, really good to hear it,” Buck says, voice a low rumble that echoes through Tony’s body. “An’ I’m damn glad you’re alive to say it.”

“Tony, you’re glowing again,” Rhodey’s voice cuts through their private moment, and it’s not that Tony doesn’t want Rhodey around—Rhodey is always a welcome addition to Tony’s life—but he wishes Rhodey would just butt out for another five fucking minutes.

But she enough, he is glowing.

“New accessory, Tony?” Shuri asks, seemingly amused.

Tony flushes, then pulls back from Bucky. Bucky stares at him, then blinks. “Your eyes.”

“What about my eyes?” Tony asks, blinking self-consciously.

“They’re…you have specks, now,” Bucky says. “All these colors. Blue an’ red an’ purple an’ green an’ shit.”

Rhodey comes closer, takes a look. “Huh. You’re right, Barnes, he does.”

“The color of the stones,” Strange says. “Since he absorbed them, it stands to reason.” He snorts. “You always did show everything in your eyes, Stark.”

“You…did what?” Bucky asks, half-strangled.

Tony looks back at him, really looks. Bucky died several weeks ago, and yet here he stands, brought back to life, unaware of what went on, for his boyfriend to still be missing and a good chunk of the people he know to have gone missing too. His eyes are wild, his scent fluctuating wildly.

Tony tries to project calm, and runs a hand through Bucky’s hair. He shrugs. “I fixed it,” he says. “And the stones…they’re too much. Not meant to be used. So to fix it, I had to…well, they broke. Back out into the universe. But I got what’s left, inside of me.”

Bucky makes another strangled noise. “Are you… okay? He asks.

Tony shrugs again. “So far so good. Wasn’t exactly the plan but…mmmph!”

Bucky grabs Tony close again, pulls him in with a metal and flesh arm alike locked around his back, like he can cocoon Tony to him so nothing bad can ever happen again. “You terrify me, Tony Stark,” he murmurs.

“In a bad way?”
“Sometimes, but no,” Bucky admits, heaving a deep sigh. “You’re…” He shakes his head. “Goddammit, Tony. Are you gonna be okay?”

“It’s me,” Tony says flippantly.

“Yeah.”

“He has more power inside him than has literally ever existed in the same place in the universe,” Strange says dryly. “Even accounting for the power that leached off into the universe, he is still brimming with untempered energy, and Tony’s body and mind is the only cork on that bottle.”

The space goes silent. “So…”

Strange sighs. “It’s Stark. I’m sure it will be fine.”

There’s some restless shifting, but Bucky at least seems to settle.

“See? I’m all good,” Tony says. “You know me. I take what’s thrown at me and I handle it. Glowing aside. Uh. That happens.”

“Mostly when he’s happy,” Rhodey puts in.

Bucky strokes through Tony’s hair. “You happy, Doll?”

Tony didn’t realize how fucking badly he missed that word.

“What’s not to be happy about?” Tony quips, but leans into Bucky’s chest and shoulder. “Yeah,” he says softly. “So fucking happy.”

_This_ is why he has to be the survivor, because nothing keeps Tony Stark down, and he’s not going to leave his people behind.

There’s a scuffle behind them, and Tony turns his head just enough to realize they have an audience. Many eyes are on them, although Rocket seems distracted by—

“Is that a _tree_?” Tony asks.

The tree turns. “I am Groot,” it announces.

Tony blinks. Apparently, the universe has some more weird left to give him.

“He’s a decent—_tree_,” Bucky says quietly.

They take in the rest of the crowd. “Hey, Your Majesty,” Tony says, smiling to T’Challa. His eyes finally land on Shuri, who takes a second to pull her eyes away from Peter.

“Pepper is in America,” she says. “With Happy.”

“Good,” Tony says. “I assume I’m headed that way soon.” He looks over at Bucky, and nods.

“Wherever you want, Doll.”

There’s a strangled noise. Bucky looks over at the crowd there. “Hey, Steve,” he says. “Romanoff, Barton.” He nods to them. “Glad you’re all okay.”

He then pulls away from Tony, just enough to take his hand, metal wrapping around flesh. Tony
realizes he’s still glowing, but Bucky doesn’t seem to care.

Bucky tugs slightly, and Tony takes the hint. “Can we…would it be okay if we crashed for a bit?” Tony asks.

“Of course,” T’Challa says, then breaks away from their little gathering to show them the way.

They’re shown back to the same room they stayed in following Tony’s surgery. “Can you just…hold me?” Tony asks, sounding needy and not even caring. He needs Bucky right now, but he’s also pretty sure Bucky needs him. “Nothing else, just…I’ve been really fucking alone.”

Always, Doll,” Bucky says, practically tripping over himself to get them both in bed, cuddled together.

They stay like that for hours, sometimes silent, sometimes working through things.

“We’ll head back to America tomorrow,” Bucky says. “May’ll want Peter home, and Pepper and Happy miss you.”


“Some of them, I’d guess,” Bucky says.

Tony hesitates. “I…I don’t care, what you do. But I’m done with them.”

“That’s fine,” Bucky soothes. “You know, it’s always been fine, Tony.”

“They’re not…I don’t hate them,” Tony tries to explain. “I’m just…done.”

Bucky nods. “You can only dig a hole so deep, yeah. I get it.”

Tony’s not sure if he fully does, but he accepts it. The message got across, anyways.

Bucky kisses him after the third hour. It’s soft and slow, and ends up with Tony gently pushed onto his back, Bucky carefully hovering over him and kissing him, free hand cupping Tony’s face.

When Bucky breaks the kiss, Tony blinks up at him lethargically. “What was that for?” He says.

Bucky smiles softly. “Got time to make up for. Plus, you know. I love you.”

They kiss a lot, after that.

Tony still hasn’t told Bucky what happened to him. He will, he knows it’s not something he can really avoid. At best, word will leak out. At worst, Tony’s own mind will torment him until it gets dragged out in the worst way possible.

But he doesn’t have to tonight. Tonight, they can bunker down, inside this room, inside each other’s arms and, just for a little while longer, it can be enough.
Tony knows their time is almost up. The air is charged, smells different. Sound and smell from the outside starts to creep in.

They still have a few minutes more, though, and Tony’s not going to waste them.

He sits up in bed and looks at his hand, which is still softly glowing on and off. He has a hunch it really is linked to emotions, because every time Bucky makes him feel soft and gooey, he glows.

“I’ve got the power of the Infinity Stones inside me,” Tony mentions cautiously.

Bucky rolls, then props himself up. “I heard,” he says dryly.

“I mean, not, like, all the power? Some of it seeped off I think, and anything left is tempered by my body being fleshy and very mortal. Thor described it as…when I die, the power dies with me. So I’m like it’s last guard.”

Bucky makes a noise, some sort of grunt, that Tony tries hard not to read any emotion into.

“I could use it,” Tony muses. “I mean, for something big. One real, big change. Probably only got one shot at it, though.” He doesn’t say why, doesn’t say it’d likely kill him, destroy his body just like it destroyed the gauntlet. It would burn, Tony knows.

Bucky makes that noise again, only this time it sounds like a wounded animal. “Why would you want to?” He demands.

Tony shrugs. “The world is broken in a lot of ways. I mean, people are starving, children are dying from disease and bad water. Poverty is everywhere. Omegas are treated like shit. I could…I could fix it.” He could. His life wouldn’t be a waste, then. “I could…the alpha voice. If this thing can wipe out half the universe, even powered down it could just…render the alpha voice meaningless.”

Bucky makes that noise again, only this time it sounds like a wounded animal. “Why would you want to?” He demands.

“Magic never works like you want it to,” Bucky announces sagely.

“How many magic movies has Peter made you watch?” Tony demands, slightly incredulous.

Bucky huffs. “My point is, you won’t get what you want from that? Or would you get a bunch of asshole alphas who just find another way?”

Tony opens his mouth, and then closes it. It’s a fair enough point. Sure, it would change something. It would take away one weapon. But alphas would still be alphas, society still be society.

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“What do you mean?”

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“What do you mean?” Tony asks again, feeling slightly off-footed.
“I mean you always want some cause, Tony, an’ I admire that. So fight for it, just like you always have. You ain’t gonna fix it with this glowing shit. You’re gonna fix it by, well. By being you.”

Tony’s pretty sure he’s glowing again, pretty sure he can’t avoid it. He definitely knows his cheeks are glowing red, anyways.”I…alright. I have some ideas,” he hedges.

Bucky grins, then pulls him close. “Knew you would. An’ you don’t have to fight it alone anymore. Got a whole team behind you. So, Doll. Tell me how we’re gonna fix the world.”

Tony…thinks about it. Thinks about all the things he’s ever wanted to do, everything he’s ever wanted to say. All the changes that need to happen, and not just for omegas.

He’s pretty damn sure no one is going to seriously stand in his way now.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Afterwards

Chapter Notes

Ya'll, I can't quite believe we're here. I honestly cannot.

Thank you so much for everyone who supported me in any way along this journey. This is literally the longest thing I've ever written. Getting started on this broke a year's worth of writer's block. It was important and a long time in the making and I am just so grateful to all of you who made it feel good.

I don't think you really need notes for this chapter. One thing; I ended up naming Tony's new superhero team Earth Defense Force. Don't love it, but I also don't love naming things.

For the first time, there are more notes at the end, so, when you're done, stop by down there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stark speaks out, demanding equal protection under the law—

Avengers called out for disaster relief in Indonesia, while EDF addresses arms trafficking concerns—

Asgardians settle into new temporary home provided by Stark, King Thor to speak publically for the first time—

“Thor,” Tony says patiently. “You can’t just go and tell people what happened.”

They’re sitting around in a hall on the small island Tony’s essentially purchased for the remaining Asgardian survivors. They’re a small bunch, and most of their warriors have been wiped out.

Buying an island that could fit them isn’t the hard part, not when Tony has a say in it. It’s convincing the people of Earth they should be allowed to stay here, even temporarily while they sort out their lives.

“And why not?” Thor asks indignantly. “They should know you saved them. They should honor you, praise you—“

“Not the message I was going for,” Tony says dryly. “Look, I don’t need the world to know my body is pumped up on super juice here. It would just put me in danger, frankly.” Tony hasn’t told
anyone who wasn’t there or who didn’t need to know. Frankly, Tony hopes he gets to live and die without breathing another word of it.

Tony Stark is already the magic solution for too many world ills. He doesn’t need to be the literal magic cure-all. Not to mention, the fewer people who know what Tony can do, the safer they all are.

Thor opens his mouth to argue, but Loki rolls his eyes and interrupts. “Listen to him, brother,” he says curtly. “Stark has asked you to do this.” He sits on the same couch as Thor, dressed in a black suit that makes him look like a washed-out wannabe YA novel vampire. But Thor, surprisingly, listens to him.

“He saved them.”

“Then do him the courtesy of listening,” Loki says crisply. He looks over at Tony, and nods once, before getting up and leaving the room.

Tony eyes him as he goes, a little curious. Not so curious he’d willingly throw himself into this bag of crazy family drama, but curious nonetheless.

 “…Fine,” Thor concedes. “I will…listen.”

Tony doesn’t thank him. Thor has to learn that respecting Tony’s wishes isn’t a gift. He does smile, though. “That’s the spirit, big guy,” he says. “Just go out there and assure the nice people that Asgardians mean no harm and are looking to set up their own place sometime soon.”

Thor nods and sweeps out, cape once again fluttering behind him.

If he extols the virtues of the “noble, generous” Tony Stark at his press conference, well, Tony’s not going to complain about that.

MIT, for the first time, admits a record class of twenty-five omegas, all of whom are receiving financial backing from the Stark scholarship—

The September Foundation had a record number of job placements this year—

Stark to travel to Wakanda—

Tony and Peter get off the plane in Wakanda to be met by Nakia. “I didn’t know you’d be here,” he says, doing a double-take.

She smiles, lifting her sunglasses. “There are many things you don’t know.”

“True,” Tony easily admits. “What’s the occasion?”

She shrugs. “Sometimes, I come home.”

Tony wonders if what happened with Thanos changed anything, but doesn’t ask.

They meander towards a car. “Shuri is waiting for you,” she says. She looks at Peter out of the corner of her eye and smiles. “Both of you.”

Peter’s…older now. A little more rigid. He died, Tony knows, and he suffered first. Most people
just disappeared, didn’t get a chance to struggle with fate, but Peter died terrified and slow. And it has left its mark.

So he doesn’t bounce in his seat, the way he might once have. He does smile though, and for Tony, that’s more than enough.

In the center of Shuri’s lab lies what remains of Vision. They’ve used vibranium—Vision’s base—to fix the damage Thanos did to his skull. Shuri and Tony have re-worked a significant portion of his code. The framework is all there, the familiar body laying on Shuri’s table.

All that’s left is that little spark.

“Reduced to being the magic guy,” Tony mock grumbles. “Don’t even need my engineering, just here for the pizazz. Now I know how Strange fucking feels.”

Shuri’s eyes light up. “Is he almost done the research?”

“He says he’ll have the notes back on Monday,” Tony says absently. He traces one hand over Vision’s forehead. Once, the Mind Stone interrupted his skin. Now, it’s smooth. Still gray, lifeless.

Tony closes his eyes and lets a spark escape him.

It’s enough to make him feel drained, enough probably to give him another gray hair or two, which he would be getting a complex about if Bucky didn’t call them “distinguished.”

Vision’s skin takes on a red hue, and his eyes flicker behind closed lids.

Spider-Man officially signs Accords as reserve hero—

The Vision spotted out and about for the first time in eight months—

Barnes and Stark, out on the town: Is a proposal coming soon?—

“‘M just sayin’,” Bucky says, slinging an arm around Tony’s shoulder, “we need to do this more often.”

Tony chuckles and tucks himself closer to Bucky’s side. He’s had a couple drinks with their dinner, not enough to be drunk but definitely tipsy, trusting Bucky to keep them safe for the evening.

“Yeah? In all our spare time?”

They both have their time filled, and the team isn’t even the half of it. Sure, the team takes on disaster relief and occasionally stamps out regular human misery—HYDRA has started to creep up again, for instance—but they both have schedules more than a little full.

Bucky kisses Tony’s temple, squeezes around Tony’s waist. “Yes,” he says firmly. “We don’t get time, then we need to make time.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Tony concedes. “We’ll make time.” Bucky smiles at him, soft and slow and sweet, enough to put an ache in Tony’s chest.

A camera flashbulb catches them. Bucky rolls his eyes. “C’mon, Doll,” he murmurs. “Let’s go
somewhere more private.”

“I hope you don’t mean home,” Tony says dryly. “Cause that place is packed tonight.”

“We’ll find somewhere,” Bucky says, grinning mischievously and making Tony’s heart beat a little faster as they duck into an alley, making an abrupt turn of direction.

Let the paparazzis report on that.

Alpha who coerced mating sentenced to ten years in prison—

Wakanda considering cultural exchange program for omegas—

September Foundation team releases new alpha voice blocker to public market—

Tony has never felt more proud than he does standing on that podium along with Shuri, Pepper, Strange, and Peter.

It’s taken nearly a year, it’s taken literal blood, sweat, and tears, but at last they have a product.

It’s not as good as what sits in Tony’s brain still. As they predicted way back then, that much vibranium simply isn’t sustainable.

But it’s now a nanite-based, surgery free option that targets specific centers of the brain—Strange’s careful research—and it works well enough at the job at hand.

It’s not a miracle cure, but it is a safety measure, as Pepper’s carefully told the press.

She smiles at him from the other side of the stage, and Tony sends her a quick, private smile back.

“Stark Industries is excited to be involved in this project,” she tells a reporter. “We’re even more excited to be selling such an important, world-changing product at cost. After all, we as a company know more than anyone what omegas can do if they’re not shackled by alpha’s expectations.” All eyes shift to Tony.

Tony leans forward. “And for those who can’t afford it, the September Foundation has set aside resources and has plans to raise half a billion dollars more this year alone.”

“Wakanda has also committed resources,” Shuri says. “Both in labor and money.”

There’s stunned silence for about five seconds, and then a hundred hands shoot into the air.

Tony leans back as Pepper starts fielding questions, feeling something like satisfaction building in his gut.

Implants to block alpha voice sell out by the thousands—

These five major corporations have signed the SI pledge to hire 50% more omegas by 2022—

Avengers, Earth Defense Force to officially meet at benefit gala—
“You don’t have to go,” Rhodey reminds Tony.

Tony jerks his chin up and squares his shoulders, a move even more pronounced by the fitted tux. “Yes, I do.”

Things might be better—word may have leaked that Tony saved the universe, even if details are a little sparse on the ground, and people respect that about Tony, considering everything—but Tony is still unwilling to show weakness in the face of the hungry masses.

Bucky wraps his metal arm around Tony’s waist. “We’ll be with you the whole time,” he promises, voice low.


“Might be a tad drastic,” Tony cautions.

“Is it?” She asks rhetorically.

Rhodey shrugs. “I’m on her side, here.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Of course you are,” he grumbles half-heartedly, then sighs, adjusting his bowtie. “Alright, let’s get this shit show on the road.”

The party is very glitzy, everything Bucky hates and Tony is well used to. Bucky pulls out his “conning strangers” face before they even get out of the car.

Tony rolls his eyes. “What’s your target donation tonight?” He asks out of the corner of his mouth as camera bulbs starting flashing in their faces.

“For disaster relief? Let’s see if I can personally talk ‘em outta more than a million.”

Tony looks for a second, then blinks and turns back to the cameras. Bucky looks like a million dollars, hair tied back and tux carefully tailored. “Bet you can,” he admits, and then steers them inside and begins to help Bucky pick his targets.

“I recognize that voice,” a deep, too-familiar voice says from behind them about half an hour later. Tony’s whole body tenses.

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Rhodey finds him, unerringly, within the minute. “Water, please,” he asks the omega behind the bar crisply. She hands him an unopened bottle, and Rhodey passes it to Tony, who takes it from him without comment. “He say anything to you?” Rhodey asks.

“No,” Tony says, scanning the room and picking out all the Rogues—all the Avengers, just
Avengers now, he’s given up the name and any claim to it, he supposes. He doesn’t like being snuck up on, and it calms something inside of him to get eyes on all of them. The sparks from his free hand calm. “He was there to see Bucky. Just…didn’t want to see him.”

“Good,” Rhodey says, approvingly. “You don’t need anymore of that shit.”

“Whose shit?” Carol asks, coming up behind Rhodey and hooking her chin on his shoulder as she wraps arms around him.

Tony points before looking himself. Bucky looks okay. Not miserable, at least, so Tony’ll let it play out.

“Got it,” Carol says. “C’mon, Tony. Dance with me.”

By the time the dance is done, Bucky is there to swoop in and take Carol’s place, smoothly reversing the steps so Tony can lead.

“Everything good?” Tony asks.

Bucky shrugs. “As it can be, I guess.” He hesitates. “It bother you, that we’re in contact?”

“Long as you don’t expect me to be there, I think we can make it work,” Tony says. He checks his watch, dropping Bucky’s hand for just a moment. “Think we’ve been here long enough. You must be hungry.”

“Starving,” Bucky says, immediately pulling out the big eyes. “‘M a damn super soldier an’ I’m gonna die of starvation, Doll, gotta save me.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Can’t have that,” he says. “Let’s go.”

And really, he knows it’s petty and vindictive to feel happy as all eyes watch them go—including the Avengers—but Tony can’t help it. Let them see that, whatever else may happen, Bucky leaves with him.

*Rogers calls Stark ‘the hero earth’s always needed’—*

*EDF, SI helps with mudslide cleanup—*

*Rumors of Stark biography being released—*

Christine tilts her head when she finally turns her tape recorder off. “No second thoughts?” “Oh, plenty,” Tony says with ease, leaning back in his armchair. They’re sitting on the fortieth floor of the Tower, in Tony’s office. They’re takeout lunch is long devoured, containers left on the low coffee table between them. “But that doesn’t exactly change anything. I’m doing this.”

They’ve been at this for a month now, and Tony never thought he’d be so damned tired of his own voice. He’s answered most every question as honestly as he can, even most of the ones he doesn’t want to think about. He’s left very few parts of his life off-limits.

She smiles that little smile she has when she gets her way. “Sounds good, Tony,” she says, then
hesitates. “You know once I submit this, it’s out of your hands.”

“I know,” Tony says. He does, has wrestled with the idea of this spinning out of control, weighed the pros and cons. “It’s…people need to know this. What it was like. To grow up, like this, and to…well, they just need to know.”

They need to know what the most famous omega in the world has gone through to get here. What it means to be an omega in America.

And if it’s his name on the cover, they might actually read it.

She studies him for a moment. “Yeah,” she agrees. She moves to stand, tucking the recorder into her purse. “Thanks, Tony. Good to do business with you.”

Bucky’s waiting when Tony comes back upstairs and opens his arms practically immediately, and Tony moves into them without hesitation.

Bucky wraps his arms around Tony, and Tony buries his head in Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky rubs his face against the top of Tony’s head, beard rubbing Tony’s hair the wrong way.

“You okay?” Bucky asks gently, one hand stroking Tony’s spine.

It’s been hard. Tony’s told stories to Christine he’s only told to a handful of people before. Hell, he told her about Afghanistan.

Tony sighs, relaxes into Bucky’s grasp. “Yeah,” he says. “Gonna be fine.”

Tony Stark to speak in front of Congress—

March on Washington planned—

Christine Everhart’s book premiers at number one on the New York Times bestseller list—

“Booo!” Tony calls, throwing popcorn at the screen.

Rhodey rolls his eyes. “You’re such a nerd.”

“I’m sorry, says the man who picked this travesty of a film, you do not get to judge,” Tony jabs, getting another handful of popcorn for throwing.

Honestly, it’s a good thing. It gives the roombas something to do in the morning, which is very necessary. They have too many roombas. DUM-E finds them cute and Tony can’t resist giving into his bots.

When Tony throws his next handful, the popcorn multiplies, Bruce and Peter happily joining him in his derision, boos heard all around.

Bucky chuckles lowly and pulls Tony closer. “Nerd,” he says fondly.

“I’m in good company, then,” Tony says, looking around their sitting room.
Bucky takes the bowl of popcorn from him, which Tony would protest if Bucky didn’t haul Tony into his lap, then grab his own handful of popcorn for throwing.

When the movie ends—and the floor is positively littered with popcorn—people start breaking off, one by one and two by two.

Bucky stands, stretches, and offers a hand to Tony, who takes it more out of habit than anything else. His bones don’t exactly creak anymore, and he doesn’t get stiff.

“Good night?” Bucky asks as they make their way up the stairs to their bedroom.

“Mhm,” Tony says, maybe slightly distracted, watching Bucky’s ass beneath his jeans as he leads the way upstairs. “Very good. Glad it’s just us now.”

“That so?” Bucky asks, turning to send a wicked look over his shoulder. “What plans d’you have, I wonder?”

It turns out, Tony’s plans involve energetic sex before having a nightmare and waking up mid panic attack at three am.

The night before that had been…great, really, and if there was any sort of justice in the universe, it wouldn’t be followed by such a travesty. But, as Tony knows better than most, the universe doesn’t work quite like that.

He was leery, at first, of being in bed with Bucky when he has a nightmare. Tony is…Tony isn’t used to being the intimidating one, unless you count that one time with the suit and Pepper. But the fact is that there is power brimming under his skin, waiting for a chance for him to lose control.

Bucky doesn’t exactly let himself be kicked out though, and by now, Tony’s pretty confident he’s not going to hurt Bucky. Spark a bit, sure, but not cause any actual damage.

“Got’cha, I got’cha,” Bucky murmurs.

Tony keeps his eyes closed, lets himself be wrapped in Bucky’s arms and his scent, lets himself feel Bucky’s hair scratching his cheek, let’s himself take in Bucky’s calming emotions, his worry, his care, his love.

“I want to be done with this,” Tony mutters eventually, his breathing more even, his heart slower, but everything still so raw and sensitive around him, like the slightest twitch will send it all cascading down.

“Not sure it works that way.” Bucky says softly. “But hey. Nightmares are just…just a part of who we are, right? God knows, I got mine.”

“I’m gonna try BARF,” Tony says quietly, then pauses a minute. “Maybe therapy. If I can…if I can find a therapist not seeped in dynamic essentialist bullshit.” He shivers, thinks of some of the therapists Obie and even Howard had directed him towards.

“Think that sounds good,” Bucky says after a moment. “An’ I’ll help you however I can. Includin’, by the way, bein’ here every night you got nightmares.”
“Thanks,” Tony says, and he fights back a yawn. He’s just so goddamn tired.

Bucky seems to pick up on it. “Go back to sleep if you can, Doll,” he says. “I’ll watch over you, okay? And make breakfast in the morning. Whatever you want.”

Tony drags Bucky back down with him, settles himself as close to Bucky as he can, and curls into his chest and sleeps.

*Rally numbers predicted to be over half a million people—*

*Stark and Barnes mated? Couple seen being awfully cosy lately—*

*Stark arrives in Washington ahead of packed weekend—*

Tony looks out over the crowd. Definitely topped the half million estimate, and his microphone is definitely not loud enough. It’s okay. Hundreds of cameras are pointed at him. The message will get out.

Tony’s speaking at the rally today, then doing a round of the news shows tomorrow before speaking in Congress in the afternoon.

No one thinks today alone will change things, but Tony’s been laying a lot of bricks for this foundation since he returned from space. Hell, his whole life, really, has been leading to this point.

They want an equal protection amendment. They want it enshrined in law that they don’t have to fight for basic protections, not ever again.

Tony doesn’t think they’ll get it. Not this weekend. What he will get, though, is a conversation, which is far less satisfying but is easily the next building block in the plan.

“They call me a futurist because I see the future,” Tony continues once the applause dies down. “And let me tell you, the world we live in isn’t sustainable. It’s not sustainable to have one quarter of the population limited from contributing. It’s not sustainable, because I know the cure for cancer, the key to solving world hunger, peacemakers, explorers, inventors, doctors, superheroes, educators, politicians, thinkers—it could all rest inside omegas. And we’d never know because we cut off a quarter of the world.”

Tony pauses for effect. “Thanos destroyed half the world because he thought the universe would only thrive that way,” he says. “We know how full of shit he was. The universe crumbles when members are excluded. He wasn’t wrong, to say things aren’t working. But we can’t change it for the better without all hands on deck.

“I’m a futurist,” Tony continues. “And I see what needs to be done but I can’t do it alone, and I can’t do it at all if the law is set on holding me and everyone like me back. We need to demand change, here, because the simple fact of the matter is, this isn’t working.”

Crowds cheer when Tony finishes, and he flashes his signature peace sign before departing the stage. He has a packed day ahead of him.

A day that, it turns out, can be paused just long enough to find Bucky at the bottom of the stage steps, to grab his boyfriend and pull him close.
Bucky smiles and pulls off Tony’s sunglasses. Once a defense mechanism, they’re now practically ever-present, to hide the weird, colorful glow of his eyes. People have gotten glimpses, but no one’s really confirmed it yet, and Tony would like to keep it that way as long as possible.

Bucky practically rips them off his face the moment they’re out of the public eye, every single time.

“Nice speech,” Bucky murmurs.

“You liked it?”

Bucky snorts. “Always do, Doll.”

Tony closes his eyes and sinks into Bucky.

He can feel the emotions of the crowd outside, building and spilling over like ocean waves, just a strong and just as inevitable. The fabric of their society is the sand, and the tide always, inevitably, comes back to wash it clean.

More closely, he can feel Bucky, soft and fragrant and sweet, a calm bay in a storm, and Tony lets Bucky hold him close, lets him ground him.

There’s seven million things to do, seven million things on Tony’s to-do list if he really is going to save the world. But he thinks they can wait.

Just for a moment.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's it, all. I hope you enjoyed.

I don't want this to be the end of the verse, though. I have an alternative ending precisely no one asked for that I'll be putting up soon enough. In addition, I'm taking requests for things you guys want to see, and I'll write the ones that speak to me. Things I've thought of include Tony's first heat with Bucky, some alternative perspective stuff, filling in the blanks in the epilogue, etc. But I'm sure you all have stuff you want to see. Let me know, here or on Tumblr.

In addition--if anyone gets even the remotest inclination to do art for this, please share with me! I'll link the hell out of it, and it would be so so sweet.

Thank you all for joining me on this journey. It's been a trip, ya'll.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!