The trio investigate Toomes and his black market weapons, but things go wrong and Peter is hurt.

There have been so many prompts for this so sorry if I've missed anyone out. No one seems to have an account so I can't officially gift this to you guys, but know that it's for you :)

Please please write one where Peter gets seriously hurt protecting Tony and ends up in a coma and the boys don’t know if he’ll make it? - Lokabrena

Is there any chance you could do one with some serious peter whump, preferably be of something that happens on a mission, and the boys get insanely protective and like really adorably worried?? - Gf2970

I think I’d be nice to have another sick fic but this time it’s peter who gets sick and Tony and Bucky take care of him. - Sa-26
Chapter 1

The sound of the knife rocking against the chopping board was hypnotic and Bucky allowed it to soothe him. He finished chopping the carrot and picked up the board and swiped the pieces into the pot before he placed it back down and started again with some potato. A Starkpad, open to a recipe for a simple beef stew, was glowing softly on the counter next to him and Bucky hoped that his cooking skills had improved enough that he wouldn’t manage to poison his partners. It had been several weeks since they’d gotten back from their vacation together and in that time they’d hardly had any quality time together. Peter was barely keeping up with the extra work that his senior year was bringing him, as well as his regular patrols, plus helping the Avengers investigate Toomes. Tony, out of some misplaced sense of guilt, had thrown himself into the investigation into the salvage operator cum weapons manufacturer and was hardly around nowadays, always out and about meeting with people, snooping about Toomes’ associates, or checking with Friday for chatter on the web about high powered weapon sales. When he did have a spare moment free, Pepper was hounding him for signatures or getting him to attend the few meetings that his attendance was necessary at. Bucky couldn’t remember the last time they’d eaten together let alone fallen asleep in the same bed together and he missed them, dammit.

And so Bucky had put his foot down and had told them that enough was enough - it was Friday, Peter’s regular night that he came over and stayed, and the soldier expected both of his partners to make the effort to be there for dinner. He wanted that bastard, Toomes, taken down as much as they did but they could spend Saturday discussing their findings and strategising - for one night, he expected them to leave that at the door and just enjoy spending some time together. After dinner he had a movie lined up and a bottle of massage oil handy, hoping that shoulder rubs while they relaxed in front of the television would be just what the doctor ordered.

Glancing at the clock, the soldier saw that he had just enough time to get the stew simmering and have a quick shower before Peter would arrive straight from school. Tony would probably be a little later since he had finally agreed to a meeting with some military folk. It was to discuss the purchase of five of the Iron Legion who could be deployed into combat areas to administer first aid to the wounded without putting human medics in the line of fire and Pepper had been trying to pin down a time for the meet and greet for the past month. The genius was still wary of getting into bed with the armed forces again, even if it was to provide such services as aid and recovery only and so he’d been reluctant to meet. He may have agreed to have a discussion but he wouldn’t commit past that at the moment, and Bucky knew he would have some soul searching to do before he agreed to anything. Depending on how long that meeting went for, Tony might not be home until well after Peter had arrived but Bucky was sure they could keep themselves occupied until his arrival.

Bucky was just turning off the shower and reaching for a towel when Friday spoke. “Incoming communication from Peter,” she announced. “He’s requested to be patched through to both yourself and the boss.”

“Tony? Bucky? Are you there?” Peter asked over the comms

“Yeah, I’m here, doll. What’s wrong?” Bucky replied.

“I’m just leaving my meeting,” Tony piped up, “so I’m here too.”

“I’m on my way to the Tower from school but I’ve just seen those lights again. Blue this time, not purple, but they look the same otherwise,” Peter told them. “I’m going to go check them out.”

“Don’t go alone,” Tony instructed him. “Wait for me - I can meet you there.”
“But we might miss them, Tony,” Peter protested. “I’m just going to locate them, then I’ll wait for you before doing anything.”

“Just stay where you are and we’ll go together,” Tony insisted.

“Tony’s right,” Bucky agreed, quickly pulling on his clothes. “I’ll leave now so I’ll probably miss the start of the party but I’ll be there for backup.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let them slip through our fingers,” Peter said. “I’ll meet you there, Tony.”

Bucky swore as the connection cut off as he dashed through the Tower to the elevator so he could head down to the garage where Tony had several motorbikes.

“Fri, connect through to Karen,” Tony instructed. “Get audio communication back up and once I’m suited up, I wanna see the same visual as Peter does.”

“On it, boss,” Friday replied.

It didn’t take long for the AI to work her magic and as Bucky pulled out of the Tower garage onto the street, the sounds of Peter’s laboured breathing sounded over the comms.

“Peter,” Tony said in clipped tones, “don’t you dare hang up on me again. I’m on my way, so just stay where you are!”

“But I’m nearly there!” the teen protested.

“I don’t care, it’s too dangerous for you to go alone.”

“I’m not going to engage, just observe.”

“You can wait three minutes to observe them until I get there!”

“But what if they finish by then? We can’t risk it,” Peter argued. He then hissed sharply. “Found them,” he whispered.

“Fuck’s sake. Stay low, and do NOT let them see you,” Tony told him, clearly seeing the same scene as Peter was.

A flashing red dot appeared on the tracking screen attached to the bike’s dash and Bucky weaved between traffic as he headed in the direction of where Peter had stopped. He knew he was too far away, wouldn’t get there in time to do anything, he just hoped that Tony would get there before anything happened. Peter was strong and he was brave but he was still so inexperienced and the thought of him facing off with these thugs alone, thugs with high powered weapons, made the ex-assassin feel queasy. If anything happened to him...it was a thought that didn’t even bear thinking about.

Bucky thought he knew torture, thought he was as intimate with it as one could get after seventy years at Hydra’s mercy. This however was worse than anything those fascists had ever done to him - being able to hear everything, to see it unfolding in his mind’s eye, but to be stuck on his bike, going faster than the speed limit but still no where near fast enough.

“Now this is crafted from a sub-Ultron arm, straight from Sokovia. Here, you try,” an unfamiliar voice said, the comms that Tony had designed in Peter’s suit picking up the conversation perfectly.

“Shit, Tony, they have weapons built from Ultron,” Peter whispered.
Another voice. “I wanted something low-key. Why you trying to upsell me, man?”

“Okay, okay, I got what you need, right? I got tons of great stuff here, one sec...okay I got black hole grenades, Chitauri railguns....”

“I need something to stick up somebody; I’m not trying to shoot them back in time!”

“What the actual fuck?” Tony spat over the comms. “They have fucking black hole grenades?”

“Where would they have gotten those from?” Bucky asked.

“No idea, but I’m going to damn well find out.” Tony vowed.

“I got anti-grav climbers,” the first voice said.

Their buyer perked up at this. “Yo, you got climbers?”

And then the night air was pierced by the sound of Peter’s phone ringing. Bucky recognised the ringtone as the one belonging to Ned, and he flinched, even as he squeezed the throttle, urging the bike to go faster. Things were starting to go downhill rapidly as he heard the weapons dealers squabbling with their buyer.

“Okay, what the hell is that?”

“Did you set us up, man?”

“Hey, hey hey, man!”

And then Bucky’s blood ran cold as Peter piped up. “Hey! You gonna shoot at somebody, shoot at me!” Then there was the sound of one of the weapons firing.

“Peter!” Bucky cried out, cursing as a car pulled in front of him, wasting precious seconds as he dodged around it, mounting a curb and scattering pedestrians in his wake. He didn’t even spare a glance behind him, just hoping that he hadn’t hurt anyone. ‘Peter, please!”

“Peter! Answer us, dammit!” Tony barked.

“Tony, what’s going on?” Bucky demanded. “What can you see? Is he hit?”

“He was hit, but he’s back on his feet and engaging in hand to hand,” the genius relayed.

For a few moments all they could hear were the sounds of a fight, and then Peter groaned. “Ow, my butt.”

Bucky sigh of relief at hearing his voice was cut short as he heard the tyres of a vehicle squeal and Peter begin to pursue them, but not before he heard one of the men say something about calling Toomes.

“You get that, Fri?” Tony asked.

“Yes, boss, everything is being recorded.”

“That’s my girl. Pete, I’m almost there, please pull back and wait for me.”

“I’m on their tail,” the teen panted, and then there was the sound of a dog barking, and then of a crowd of people gasping. “Hey, nice party, smells good!”
“Peter, please,” Bucky begged, glancing down at the tracker, trying not to scream in frustration as he saw them moving even further away from his location rather than towards him.

“I’ve. Almost. Got. Them.” Whatever the teen was doing, it was strenuous. “Just a little fur - aaaaaaaaagh!”

“Peter? Peter!” Bucky screamed over the comms. “Tony? What’s happening?”

“He’s been snatched by someone, something, I can’t see what but he’s being lifted into the air.”

The soldier squeezed the throttle once more, but the bike was already giving it all she had and he couldn’t wring anything more from her.

“Almost there,” Tony said, but Bucky couldn’t make out the glow of the suit moving through the air so he couldn’t be that close. He squinted, just able to pick up a dark shape high above him in the sky but he couldn’t get a better look otherwise he’d crash. It was moving rapidly upwards and it appeared to be holding something, something struggling.

“Peter,” he whispered.

Peter screamed again and this time it was Friday who spoke. “Critical height reached, parachute has been deployed. Malfunction detected, boss. The chute has opened but is not slowing Peter’s descent. 1000 feet and falling.”

Bucky’s breath caught in his chest at the AI’s words, but he was simply a passenger, unable to do anything but bear witness.

“Five hundred feet.”

“Tony, please, please hurry,” Bucky begged. “Catch him.”

“I’m trying,” Tony cried.

“Three hundred feet.”

Bucky choked out a sob.

“Two hundred feet.”

“Petey, hang on, I’m coming!”

“One hundred feet.”

Bucky reached a bridge and skidded to a halt, his sharp eyes picking up the small figure caught in a tangled chute, plummeting towards the river. “Peter!” he screamed.

The teen plunged into the water, struggling against his confines. Bucky leapt off the bike, letting it clatter to the ground as he scanned the sky for Tony, knowing that he was too far away himself, that he’d never reach him in time. The sky was empty, Tony nowhere in sight and an eerie silence descended over Bucky and he dropped to his knees, a hand covering his mouth to keep his screams inside. His eyes moved back to the water but the surface was now still, with not even a ripple to show where Peter had disappeared beneath the inky depths.

His hand fell away and he screamed into the night.
Tony gasped for breath inside the suit, too sharp a turn not long ago pulling one of the muscles in his abdomen from the G forces, the pain of which had momentarily winded him. And now, now he watched on the tiny screen in front of his face as Peter struggled beneath the murky depths of the Hudson, tangled in a chute that was supposed to save him, not cause his demise. In a straight line, in open air, the Iron Man armour could break the sound barrier, but here in the metropolis, his speed was limited as he ducked and weaved between skyscrapers and buildings. Peter’s vital signs were displayed in the lower corner of his HUD and they were fading fast, faster than Tony could fly. Over the comms he could hear Bucky screaming for their young lover but he couldn’t reply, couldn’t spare the ounce of energy it would take to comfort the soldier when every little bit was being channelled into getting to the teen in time.

Suddenly he was free of the buildings and shooting out over the wide expanse of the river. His sensors honed in on the tracking beacon given off by the Spider suit and like a kingfisher swooping for prey, he dove into the water after Peter. He didn’t even bother with activating his searchlight, just trusted to the tracker to guide him, and within seconds he was laying hands on the weakly struggling teen. He ripped the chute free and grabbed Peter under his armpits before reversing course and heading for the surface.

“Bucky, I’ve got him,” Tony said as they broke free of the water. A blue light on the HUD showed him Bucky’s position on the bridge and he spotted a children’s playground not far away and made for that so they wouldn’t be so out in the open. “Your three o’clock, the park, meet us there,” he informed him.

“Copy that,” was all Bucky could manage, his voice hoarse and shaking.

Peter coughed and became more aware as they were coming into land and as soon as his feet touched the ground, he was falling forward and slumping into a heap. Tony crouched down next to him, a gauntlet on his shoulder, rubbing gently as he coughed up some more river water and dragged in deep breaths. His visor opened and he asked, “You doing okay?”

“What the hell was that thing?” Peter asked, wheezing. “It just swooped down and picked me up like some kind of monster!”

“I think it was Toomes but I can’t be certain,” Tony told him, resisting the urge to scold him until the kid could at least breathe properly. “Obviously I went after you and not him. We’ll analyse the footage I got of him when we get home.”

“I guess I’m lucky that you put a tracker in my suit, huh?” Peter said weakly, rolling over so he could sit up, face pale and turning slightly blue around his lips.

“Also lucky that I put in this heater.”

Peter half moaned as the heater was activated, wrapping his arms around himself to try to gather the warmth to him. He opened his mouth to say something else but was cut off by the appearance of a very irate super soldier.

“What the ever loving fuck were you thinking?” Bucky demanded as he stormed into the playground,
making a beeline for Peter.

“Hey, Buck,” Peter said, offering him a weak smile.

“No. No,” Bucky said quietly, coming to a halt and shaking his head. “No, you don’t get to ‘Hey, Buck’ me mere minutes after I thought I watched you die! God fucking dammit, Peter, how could you do that to me? I thought I’d lost you, I thought you were dead.” He fell to his knees, sobs ripping from his throat between his words, and Tony opened the suit so he could step out to comfort him.

“Hey, babe, it’s okay, he’s okay, he’s safe now, we’re all okay, it’ll all be okay,” the genius murmured as he pulled the soldier into his arms.

“There was nothing I could do,” Bucky cried, burying his face in the crook of Tony’s neck. “God, Tony, we almost lost him, and there was nothing I could do but watch.”

Tony made eye contact with Peter over Bucky’s shoulder, all the while rubbing soothingly up and down his muscled back. “Maybe next time, Peter will actually listen to me when I tell him to wait for me,” he grit out, trying to hold in his anger but knowing it was bleeding through anyway. The adrenaline was leaving his body almost as fast as it came, leaving him shaky and unsettled.

“I’m sorry,” Peter choked up, looking distraught.

“Next time, sorry might not be good enough,” Tony told him bluntly. “I know you thought you were doing the right thing, but I wasn’t asking you to wait for me just to be a dick or because I thought you couldn’t handle it. These men not only have weapons made from alien tech, but they have stuff from Ultron, which is essentially my tech!” He swallowed thickly, trying to keep down the bile that threatened to rise at that thought, as well as the guilt that always threatened to consume him whenever he was reminded of the Superbot that went bad. “Peter,” he began again, calmer this time, “I asked you to wait for me because it was dangerous - even with the firepower my suit has, I would have been hesitant to engage by myself as well. You can’t just run headlong into things like this without stopping and thinking first.”

“I said I’m sorry,” Peter whispered, his face flushed red with shame.

“We’ll keep that in mind when we’re having to deliver your eulogy,” Tony said, more snarkily than he’d intended. “I’m sure it’ll bring May a modicum of comfort.”

The teen blanched at this but Tony couldn’t even feel bad about it, considering that he had an arm full of weeping super soldier. He felt the same as Bucky and was close to having a similar breakdown but he wanted to be strong for him. Bucky was always the one taking care of them, being their protector, looking out for them, so the least Tony could do was keep it together long enough to be a shoulder to cry on for him - quite literally.

It didn’t take their partner long to pull himself together though and when the tears had finally stopped, he wiped his cheeks with the back of his flesh hand and then reached out, grabbed Peter by his steaming Spider suit and pulled him into a crushing hug. “Don’t you ever do that to me again,” he said, his voice hoarse and scratchy but still able to convey a commanding tone.

“I won’t,” Peter replied, his own voice cracking a little.

“Swear it, doll, swear you won’t. I meant it, I can’t take something like that again.”

“I swear, Bucky, I swear,” the teen promised, clinging to the soldier.

Tony stepped close and wrapped his arms around both of them, wincing a little as his side stretched
too far, reminding him that he’d pulled a muscle. He shuffled about, trying to get more comfortable but it was a fruitless endeavour and he resigned himself to a painful few days in his future.

Bucky suddenly stiffened and then said, “Aw, fuck it.”

“What’s wrong?” Tony asked.

The soldier sighed and shook his head. “The stew’s probably burned by now.” He pressed a kiss to Peter’s temple and added, “Small price to pay to have you safe, but still, I wanted to cook for you both tonight. Oh well, there’s always next time. Right, I vote we go home, order a pizza, and try to enjoy our night like I’d originally planned.”

Tony smiled and gingerly stood up. “That gets my vote too.”

Peter smiled shyly and asked in a small voice, “You still both want me to stay?”

Bucky just looked at him uncomprehendingly. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“Well, because you were mad at me.”

“Because we were scared, doll. If I had my way, I wouldn’t let you out of my sight for the next week! Come on, let’s go, there’s a couch calling our name.”

“And an ice pack calling mine,” Tony said, holding his side.

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Peter hovered over him as Tony pressed the ice pack to his ribs. “It’s okay, baby, just a pulled muscle.”

“It’s my fault you got hurt,” the teen said miserably.

“Or maybe I’ve been skimping on the situps during training.”

Bucky scoffed as he entered the living room carrying a stack of plates for the pizza that was due to arrive soon. “Not sure if you’ve looked in the mirror lately, sugar, but there ain’t nothing wrong with your abs.”

“Pretty sure if that were true, I wouldn’t be hurting so much right now,” Tony countered, wincing as he moved the pack to a more tender spot.

“Or maybe you just pulled more Gs than a damn fighter pilot while only wearing a tin can.”

The genius shot him his best kicked puppy look. “You take that back!”

The soldier smirked. “Sorry, I meant aluminium can. Forgot they don’t make them outta tin no more.”

Clutching at his chest dramatically, Tony slumped back on the couch. “My poor heart, you wound me, Buckster.”

“I’ll be sure to kiss you better later on.”

“You better, I’ve been sorely lacking kisses lately.”

“And whose fault would that be?” Bucky asked archly, plopping down onto the other end of the
couch and dragging Peter down with him, folding him against his side.

“Why do you think it’s mine?” Tony protested.

“Cos I’ve been here every single night for the past three weeks, sweetheart, and there’s been a distinct lack of people here to kiss me.”

“Rhodey’s been here - I’m sure he’d have puckered up for you.”

“That ain’t the first time you’ve made that suggestion, Tony,” Bucky said primly. “You keep it up, I just might do it.”

Peter squawked in indignation. “Hey, no kissing Colonel Rhodes!”

“Yeah, Bucky, no kissing my platypus or you’ll make Petey jealous.”

“Maybe Peter and I’ll throw you to the wayside and take up with the Colonel ourselves then,” Bucky mused, his eyes twinkling with mirth.

“I get one little injury and you’re throwing me aside?”

Bucky ran an appraising eye over him. “Well, we might have been considering upgrading to a shinier model.”

Tony turned to Peter. “Is this true, baby?”

Peter looked torn but the nudge Bucky gave him to his ribs was a gentle reminder that they’d already forgiven him for earlier and it was alright to play. “Maybe? I guess it all depends.”

“It depends? Depends on what?”

“On how much pizza you leave for me.”

“Are you insinuating that I’m a hog?”

“No, sweetheart,” Bucky told him, “he’s telling you that you always eat more than your fair share.”

“I do not!”

“Yeah, you do. Seriously, Pete and I have stupidly high metabolisms and yet you always eat more pizza than us.”

“You obviously don’t want it all that badly if you just sit there and let me take it,” he said. “You snooze, you lose.”

“That a challenge?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

Bucky turned to Peter. “What d’ya reckon, doll? That sound like a challenge to you?”

Peter’s answering yawn was so wide that his jaw cracked loudly. “Urgh, sorry, um, what? What was the question?”

Tony took a closer look at the teen and saw that he looked exhausted. He still hadn’t regained all of his colour and his brush with death had clearly taken it out of him. “Never mind, it wasn’t anything
important,” the genius assured him.

“Boss, the pizza delivery man has arrived,” Friday announced. “Shall I have him place them in the elevator?”

“Yes thanks, baby girl. Add a thirty percent tip when you pay him, please.”

“Will do.”

“Are you hungry?” Tony asked Peter.

Peter shrugged and then yawned again. “Not really but I’ll have a slice if you guys are eating.”

Tony exchanged a look with Bucky and they came to a silent agreement. “We’re not opposed to skipping dinner. Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

“I’ll pop the pizzas in the fridge,” Bucky said, standing and heading for the elevator. “We can have them for breakfast.”

“Don’t go hungry on my account,” Peter protested.

“We’re not,” Tony promised, holding out a hand for him to take. “Come on, let’s get some sleep.”

It wasn’t long before they were all laying comfortably in their large bed, Peter in the middle, with the older men cuddled up to either side. Tony left the ice pack behind, and found that there wasn’t too much pain when he was horizontal so he shuffled a little closer to Peter, slipping an arm over his waist. The teen was asleep almost as soon as his eyes closed and neither Tony nor Bucky called for Friday to turn the lights off just yet, both content to just gaze at the boy between them.

“How you holding up?” Tony asked Bucky quietly.

“Fuck, Tony, I still feel so shaken,” he admitted. “I can’t believe how close we were to losing him.”

“I know, it scared me too.”

“What would we have done if -”

“No, no, Bucky, don’t go down the ‘what if’ path,” Tony warned.

“But, oh God, he could have died, Tony. He could have died.”

“I know, but he didn’t and we got to him in time. It’ll be okay.”

The soldier nodded but he still clung to Peter like he was afraid that if he looked away, he’d disappear. Tony slid a hand over Bucky’s and squeezed it gently, and then called to Friday for her to dim the lights but not turn them off entirely, so Bucky would be able to see Peter whenever he needed to. His partner understood what he had done and he offered him a small smile. “Thanks, darling. G’night.”

“Night, Bucky. Love you. Everything will be better in the morning.”

Chapter End Notes
I never understood in HC why the weapons threat wasn't taken more seriously by Tony and Happy since you know, they were made from ALIEN tech...so I fixed it.
“Peter,” May called, “Ned is here!”

With one final check to make sure that there was no tech lying around or part of his suit hanging out of the closet to give away his secret, Peter headed out into the living room to greet his best friend. He still felt bad that Ned didn’t know about his secret identity when May, the Avengers, and even Flash did, but to be fair, besides May, he hadn’t actually planned on telling anyone else, they had just kind of found out or it was necessary for them to know. Peter loved Ned, he really did - they had been best friends since the first day of grade school, but as close as they were, it didn’t negate the fact that Ned couldn’t keep a secret to save his life. If it were to become widely known that Peter was Spider-Man it could potentially put his aunt in danger and he couldn’t risk that, no matter how much guilt he felt over keeping it from Ned. Some things he just couldn’t re-prioritise.

“Hey, dude,” he said in greeting.

“Hey, Peter. How’s your day been?”

“Oh, pretty busy this morning. Had my Stark Internship so I was there till about lunchtime, and I’ve just been doing homework and helping May with chores since.”

“I still can’t believe you landed that internship, man,” Ned said with a dopey grin. “Like, my best friend knows Tony Freaking Stark! It is so awesome. What did you get to do this morning?”

My boyfriends was the first thought to cross Peter’s mind but of course he didn’t say that. “I worked some more on Tik-Tok, programing an upgrade. His AI is still so limited and Mr Stark is helping me work on his learning algorithm.”

Ned flopped down onto the couch and shook his head. “I still can’t believe this is your life, saying stuff like ‘Mr Stark’ and ‘I programmed an AI’ in the same sentence. Seriously, dude, I’m so jealous!”

“Don’t be too hard on him,” May said breezily as she swept into the room to place a bowl of popcorn on the coffee table. “I know it sounds glamorous, Ned, but it really isn’t when it’s eleven PM on a school night and Peter’s still struggling to get his homework done because he’s been busy with his...internship, all afternoon. He barely gets a chance to just be a teenager anymore.”

Peter frowned. “May, we’ve been over this - I’ll let you know if it gets to be too much.”

“I know you’ve said that Peter, but it doesn’t stop me worrying.”

The look of utter love and concern that she directed at him made Peter squirm inside with guilt as he realised once more just how close he’d come to dying yesterday. He’d not wanted to dwell on the harsh words Tony had snapped at him about he and Bucky speaking at his funeral, but he couldn’t hide from such a painful truth any longer. Peter was loved and therefore if something were to happen to him, the ones that he loved would be devastated. He felt physically sick just imagining May in the state she’d been in when Ben had died, but this time without Peter there to support her because this time it was her nephew that she was grieving.

His distress must have shown on his face but May, bless her, interpreted it as Peter not wanting to have the discussion with Ned there, so she simply ruffled his hair and left them to their afternoon of...
“Want a drink?” Peter offered, long past feeling embarrassed with Ned that he could only offer water or instant coffee.

“Sure. I bought some Coke with me for us, I think May put it in the fridge.”

Peter headed for the kitchen and Ned trailed along after him, their silence comfortable even after drifting slightly apart over the last year.

“So, uh, how’s things with Michelle?” Peter asked as he poured two glasses of soda.

Ned looked bashful but he was grinning. “Yeah, they’re good, really good. I mean, we’re having to be even more careful now to keep it from her parents since they’re freaking out over the amount of work she has this year, but otherwise it’s awesome.”

Peter nodded, taking a sip of his drink, enjoying the way the liquid fizzed down his throat.

“I mean,” Ned continued, “it was scary there for a while with the pregnancy scare and all but luckily it was just a scare.”

Peter spat his drink all over the kitchen counter and stood looking horrified at his best friend. “P...pregnancy scare?” he squeaked, wiping dripping cola off his chin.

Ned was blushing deeply and he couldn’t quite meet Peter’s eyes. “Um, yeah, there was an accident with the, ah, the condom, tearing.” He cleared his throat and picked up a dish cloth, wiping up the mess Peter had made so he didn’t have to look at him. “Then MJ was a few days late and we kinda freaked out for a while.”

Peter knew that he must look ridiculous but he couldn’t stop from gaping at Ned in shock. “When did this happen?” he demanded, trying to keep his voice low so May wouldn’t hear.

“Oh, I dunno, maybe a couple of months back?”

“What? And you’re only just telling me now?”

Ned’s hand paused on the bench and he was silent for a long moment. When he spoke, he was uncharacteristically serious, his voice low and accusing. “It’s not like you don’t keep stuff from me these days,” he said.

Peter opened his mouth to reply but had to shut it, knowing that anything that came out would be an outright lie, and he was growing tired of them. It hurt that Ned hadn’t shared something so big with him, hadn’t allowed the teen to be there to support him, but Peter knew how hypocritical he was being. With a sudden clarity that ached, he realised that perhaps he and Ned had grown apart even more than he had wanted to admit. Once upon a time they had shared everything, had no secrets from each other, and spent every free waking moment together. Now, Peter couldn’t quite recall the last time they’d just hung out, and he spent the majority of his free time with Tony and Bucky. Even if he did allocate more time to spend with Ned, he still probably wouldn’t see him much since Ned spent almost all of his free time with Michelle. It was a sobering reminder that they were growing up, that their priorities were changing, but despite that, Peter valued Ned’s friendship and vowed to take better care of it.

“I’m not gonna lie,” he said, reaching over and laying a hand on his friend’s shoulder, “since there are things I’m keeping from you, but I’m not doing it because I don’t want you to know. Things are...complicated, and without trying to sound melodramatic, if things got out, I’d be in a lot of
trouble, maybe even in danger. May could be in danger. I’m sorry, I really am, but I just can’t risk it, Ned."

The other teen finally turned around, regarding him steadily and weighing up his words. Finally he nodded and offered a small smile. “Okay, yeah, I understand that, but Peter? You can talk to me if you need to, okay? If you’re in trouble, you know I’ll help, yeah?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, Ned, I know. So, um, we gonna watch a movie or what?”

“Just gotta choose which one. I stopped by the library on my way over and grabbed some DVDs, so you get the final pick.”

They went back into the living room and Peter couldn’t help the warmth that bloomed in his chest as Ned pulled the DVDs from his backpack. May couldn’t afford the streaming services that Ned used, and so the teen had signed up at the library solely so he could borrow the outdated discs from there whenever they watched a movie at Peter’s. Although he mostly pulled apart the players he found in dumpsters to use for parts, Peter had made sure to keep one of the better ones to watch actual movies on, otherwise they would have been limited to what was on free to air television. Tony had hinted that he was more than happy to pay for a Netflix account for Peter, but the teen had refused. The small amount of time he was actually home, he didn’t have time to spend watching television and May preferred to read so it would have been a little pointless. Peter loved Tony’s generosity, but he wasn’t the sort to take advantage of such offers unless it was something that he knew that he would actually use. It seemed wasteful and disrespectful otherwise.

After choosing *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, they settled down on the couch, the bowl of popcorn between them and began watching the movie. They’d seen it numerous times before, but neither minded rewatching it, loving the action and drama of it all.

Except for the fact that Ned completely stopped watching after the first five minutes.

He’d pulled out his phone and sent off a text message, the screen lighting up with a reply almost instantly. And from that point on, his eyes were glued to the phone and not to the movie at all. Peter tried not to take it personally - it wasn’t like his best friend was ignoring him during a conversation or anything. He wouldn’t miss any of the plot, since he already knew it, and if Peter wanted to discuss the movie afterwards, he’d still be able to participate, but still...it irked him. Why bother coming over if he was just going to sit there and text Michelle the whole time? Peter had made sure to keep his phone in his pocket so he wouldn’t get distracted by messages from Tony and Bucky, but maybe he shouldn’t bother now? When in Rome and all that.

Peter held off for another five minutes but when Ned didn't even look up during the attack on Starfleet HQ, he gave in and pulled out his own phone. The blinking light told him that there were unread messages in their group chat so he opened it up and read through them.

*Training in five, sweetheart, don’t forget - Bucky*

*Shit, I totally forgot. I’m right in the middle of an upgrade to Petey’s parachute. Mind if I skip out today? - Tony*

*Normally I’d say yes, I do mind, but given the circumstances, I would actually prefer you to work on that - Bucky*

*You’re the best *kisses* - Tony*

*I’m going to be sparring against van Dyne though, so just don’t forget what you’re missing out on -*
Bucky

Dammit! I was looking forward to seeing who would kick who’s arse - Tony

You wound me, sugar. You even have to guess? - Bucky

I suppose not...I’ll make sure to kiss your thoroughly kicked arse better when I’m finished in the workshop ;-) - Tony

I hate you - Bucky

No you don’t, you love me - Tony

Nope, don’t think I do - Bucky

Not even a little bit? Even after I’ve done that thing with my tongue that you like? - Tony

Pete’s tongue is JUST as talented as yours, so I don’t have to settle for yours :P - Bucky

*sigh* So long as you’ll still share Petey with me, I suppose I’ll just have to accept the fact that our love had faded and blown away on the wind like ashes. I will miss that gorgeous cock of yours though - Tony

Just because I don’t love you anymore, doesn’t mean I’m giving up your arse, sweetheart. I still intend to pound it into the mattress later on - Bucky

Oh, well that’s a relief - Tony

Peter smiled at their banter and quickly joined in.

So, just to be clear, you both still love ME, right? - Peter

Oh, without a doubt - Bucky

You know it, baby - Tony

That’s a relief. How will we do it? Shared custody or something? Can you two stand to be in the same room as each other? ;-) - Peter

Baby, if you’re sandwiched between us, I’m SURE we can manage to be civil - Tony

I don’t think it’ll be all that hard to share. One of us will take you from behind while the other fucks your mouth - Bucky

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to not let that visual get him too worked up while he was sitting next to Ned on the couch.

We’ll flip a coin for who gets what - Tony

I can handle that - Peter

Jokes aside, how are you feeling today? How’s your chest? If you’re having any trouble breathing, I want you back here immediately so we can get you checked over - Tony

I’m fine, I promise. I’m a bit sore, but nothing major. How are YOU? - Peter

Eh, all good - Tony
Yeah, that’s a lie. He’s got a massive bruise that covers his entire side and he’s hobbling about like an even older man than he already is- Bucky

Fuck. Have you been checked over? - Peter

Of course he hasn’t because he’s a stubborn SOB. I’m keeping an eye on him though - Bucky

Yes, he’s doing a wonderful job of playing nurse but I wouldn’t complain if I also had Sexy Nurse Peter drop by…-Tony

Neither would I - Bucky

“Peter, have you seen my phone charger anywhere?” May called from her bedroom.

Dropping his phone onto the couch, he jumped up and headed into the kitchen where he was sure he’d seen it plugged in. He pulled it free from the socket and took it through to her. “Here it is.”

“Oh, thank you, sweetie,” May said, accepting it with a smile.

“No worries.” He headed back through to the living room and froze as he saw Ned holding his phone.

His best friend looked up at him with wide eyes. “The screen wasn’t locked and a message came through. I didn’t mean to look but I glanced over and…Peter, you have a boyfriend?”

He closed the distance quickly between them and snatched the phone from Ned’s hand and scanned the last message.

Or you could just come by anyway...maybe it was the craziness of yesterday but I’m feeling kinda lost without you being here, baby. I love you so much, just want you in my arms - Tony

Peter was grateful that they’d chosen a messaging app that only used icons to show who was talking, and not names. They’d decided on it in case May got ahold of the teen’s phone but it also worked for nosy best friends as well. Tony’s icon was a spanner and Bucky’s was a snowflake, while Peter’s was a spider web, and hopefully no one would figure out who the other men were just from the pictures.

The message was such that there was no way he could deny it. “Um, yeah, yeah I do.”

“Holy shit, for how long?” Ned cried, his focus solely on Peter now, both his own phone and the movie completely forgotten about.

“Um, like almost eleven months.”

“And you didn’t tell me!”

“I’m sorry, but it’s really complicated and if anyone were to find out about them, they’d never forgive me.”

Ned’s eyes narrowed and he cocked his head to one side. “You already confirmed that you had a boyfriend,” he said slowly, mind ticking over as he put the pieces together, “so there’s no reason to use gender neutral terms which means when you say them and they…Peter, are you seeing more than one guy?”

He bit back a curse, annoyed that he’d not watched his wording more carefully. There was a reason that Ned also attended Midtown Tech, a school renowned for the geniuses it taught. He might be
naive and a little childish every now and then, but Ned was also super smart. He sighed, giving in and came around to sink down on the couch. “Fine, yeah, I have two partners, Ned, but I never said anything because it really is complicated and May cannot know about them.”

“Who are they? Do they go to our school?”

Peter twisted his fingers together in anguish. “I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you, Ned, I just can’t.”

His friend looked disappointed for a moment and then brushed it aside to ask, “Are you happy?”

“God, more than you could ever know but I mean it when I say it has to stay a secret. You can’t tell anyone.”

“Not even Michelle? Because, Peter, I’m not going to lie - I don’t think I can keep this a secret!”

“No, listen to me, you can’t say anything to anyone. Promise me, Ned, promise you won’t tell. I can’t have May finding out about this, she’ll freak out and I can’t do that to her, not after everything she’s been through. Swear it, Ned, please.”

“Okay, fine, fine, I swear, I swear.”

He sighed in relief. “Thank you.”

Ned grinned. “Holy shit, I can’t believe you’ve got two boyfriends, Peter, that’s insane!” he cried.

“I’m sorry, you have two boyfriends, Peter?” May asked from behind them. “What the fuck?”

Peter’s eyes closed as everything began to crumble down around him. Before he turned to face May, he glared daggers at Ned. “What did I just tell you?”
Chapter 4

Peter closed the front door behind a sheepish looking Ned (a little more forcibly than he probably should have) and took a deep breath before he turned to face his aunt. She looked livid, her arms crossed tightly across her chest, her lips pursed, eyes narrowed, and his mind whirred as he tried to come up with a convincing lie to tell May. There was no way in hell that he could tell her the truth, since she’d freak out completely, just like she had after the kiss incident. This would be ten times worse however since this time it was a proper relationship, with sex, and ‘Oh by the way, another man who is also more than three times my age is involved as well’. Yeah, that wouldn’t go down well. She would be mad enough when the truth finally came out after he’d turned eighteen, would obviously figure out that he’d been lying, but in this very moment, he needed to keep his relationship safe; he needed to lie like his life depended on it, like his heart depended on it.

“May, I can explain,” he began, holding up a placating hand.

“Peter Benjamin Parker, you sit your sorry arse down and you had better explain or so help me God, I will chain you to your bedroom wall and you will never see the light of day again.”

He swallowed hard and nodded, sitting down on the couch and waiting for her to sit as well. She took the armchair at right angles to the couch, sitting down in it like it was a throne and the symbolism of that didn’t go over Peter’s head. He would tell her a story and grovel and then she would make a ruling, and however she came down would decide his fate.

“So - boyfriends. Explain,” she snapped.

Her tone made him pause for a second and he hesitated, unsure.

“I’m waiting, Peter,” May said, impatiently.

“Are...I mean...I...you...is it the fact that there are two of them what’s bothering you or is it the fact that they’re boys?” he finally managed to spit out.

Her eyes softened just for a second but it passed and her flinty gaze pinned him once more. “I don’t care if you’re dating a guy or a girl, or two guys or two girls, or one of each, or the entire fucking football team. No, Peter, what I care about is the fact that you kept this from me. You didn’t tell me about your boyfriends - you didn’t tell me that on top of your Spider-Man patrols, on top of the Internship, on top of all the school work that you have in your senior year, you’re also juggling not one, but two relationships. You lied to me through omission, Peter, and I will not stand for it any longer. You are going to tell me everything. I want the truth from you now, do you understand me?”

He nodded. “Yes, May.”

“Good, then dazzle me with the truth.”

“I met them at school,” he lied, trying to ignore the sick, heavy feeling in his gut as he betrayed her confidence once more. “Neither of them are out yet, so we’ve not told anyone, and I’m not even going to tell you their names because if Ned finds out, then the whole school will know and I can’t risk that.”

She considered this. “You think I would tell Ned?”
“Not deliberately but maybe you’d forget and mention them in passing and then he’d know and you’ve seen first hand how badly he can keep a secret.” Peter couldn’t help but feel a little bitter that when it came to Ned’s own relationship with Michelle, he kept the truth hidden in a bunker and threw away the key.

May nodded. “Okay, I’ll allow that. How did it happen? Were they already together? Did they ask you to join their relationship?”

“Um, no, the opposite, kinda,” Peter said, trying to keep as much of the truth involved as he could so he wouldn’t trip up on his own lies. “I was crushing on one of them but ended up getting together with the other. He knew that my crush was reciprocated and kinda encouraged us to be together. During that, we figured that we all liked each other so why not give it a try.”

“Huh. That’s more mature than I’d have expected from teenagers but I guess, what’s the term, polyamory? I guess younger generations are more accepting of stuff like polyamory and open relationships than my generation is.”

She was being very reasonable but Peter could still see the anger simmering beneath the surface and knew that he was still on shaky ground. One step wrong and he’d fall. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he said to her, “but we haven’t really told anyone. It wasn’t personal or anything.”

Poor choice of words. She frowned and leaned forward. “It kinda feels personal, Peter, especially after you lied to me for so long after you got bit by that spider. I know that you’re Spider-Man; you trust me with the knowledge that you’re a secret superhero and yet you didn’t think that you could trust me with this? How little must you think of me, Pete? Do you know how that makes me feel? How hurt that makes me?”

“I’m sorry, I -”

“No,” she cut him off. “I don’t want to hear it.” She held out her hand. “Give me your phone.”

“What?”

“Your phone, hand it over. You’re grounded for a week, and since I can’t stop you from seeing your boyfriends at school, I’m confiscating your phone so you can’t speak to them after hours.”

“Your grounding me? But what about my patrols? What about my internship?”

“Missing them for a week isn’t going to be a big deal in the grand scheme of things.”

“May, no, please, you don’t understand,” he pleaded. “We’re in the middle of trying to pin down a guy who’s selling weapons made from alien tech! I can’t stop my patrols right now - someone innocent could get hurt if I’m not there to help.”

“That’s not your problem right now, Peter. I’m sure the Avengers can manage without you for seven days.”

“But -”

“I said no, Peter. Now hand over your phone.”

He glanced down at his device, his blood running cold as he realised how quickly May would discover that he’d been lying if she read through his messages. He held it close to his chest, unwilling to give it up. “Please, May, don’t do this.”
She held out her hand. “While you live under my roof, Peter, you follow my rules. Now I promise I’m not going to snoop through your phone - God knows I don’t need to read the sexts three teenage boys have sent to one another - but you will give it to me.”

He reluctantly handed it over. “Will you let Mr Stark know I won’t be at my internship?” he asked in a small, defeated voice. “And maybe arrange with Colonel Rhodes to have someone check in on the neighbourhood during the week?”

“If only you were so responsible in all parts of your life. Yes, I’ll call them. Now, go to your room please and do your homework.”

Knowing when to stop arguing, Peter nodded and got up, going to his room but not closing the door all the way so he could listen in to May’s side of the phone call.

“Hi, Mr Stark? Oh, I’m sorry - Tony. Yeah, it’s May Parker. No, Peter is fine, for now at least - I may brutally murder him soon so that could change. Oh, you know, typical teenager stuff I guess...or maybe not so typical, but still. Anyway, I’ve grounded him for a week, taken away his phone, and I’m forbidding him from leaving except to go to school, so no patrols and no internship. I know, I know, it sounds harsh but believe me, I have good reason. No, really, a week is lenient. Did you know that he’s got two boyfriends? Two! I mean, I know he’s a good looking kid and he’s sweet but I never pegged him to do something like this. I guess I always expected him to bring home some girl-next-door type, you know? Instead, he’s seeing two boys and he refuses to tell me anything about them, not even their names, just that he goes to school with them. I know, right? He won’t even tell me what year they’re in - maybe they’re younger than him! Urgh, my imagination is running rampant now. Anyway, so no patrols and I’m sorry, but no internship. He wanted me to ask Colonel Rhodes to arrange someone to keep an eye out on his regular patrol areas. You can do that? Thank you so much. I know he takes those very seriously and if he knows that you’ll arrange to have someone out there then he won’t feel the need to sneak out. Oh, I’m going to bolt his window shut, maybe get one of those ankle trackers so I know if he’s snuck out or not. Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, Tony, I’m sure it’s funny from the other side, but I’m the one who has to navigate this shit. Fuck, I suck at this parenting bullshit, what if I’m screwing him up entirely.” There was a longer pause as Tony obviously reassured her, and Peter slid down the wall, hating himself for making May feel so badly. “Thanks, Tony, I appreciate that. Look, if things are desperate and you need him, give me a call, but I’m hoping that there are no alien invasions this week. Thanks. Are you sure he’s not said anything to you about them? I would feel so much better if I at least knew their names. No? Oh well, he’s clearly keeping it close to his chest then if he hasn’t even told you.” She sighed. “Okay, well I won’t take up anymore of your time. Thanks once again and I’m sure as soon as I give him his phone back, you’ll hear from him. Okay, I will. Uh huh, thanks. Bye, Tony.”

Peter scrambled over to his bed and flipped open one of his text books just as May came into his room. He looked up and gave her a small smile, hoping to not look like he’d just been eavesdropping. “Did you get hold of him?” he asked innocently.

“Yes I did. He’ll speak to Rhodes about the rotation.”

“Okay, thanks.”

May leaned against the wall and gave him a long look, not saying anything. Peter held his tongue, knowing that she was trying to make him blurt out information to fill the awkward silence but Bucky had given him a little training in how to survive an interrogation and May had nothing on the ex-assassin. When it was clear that she wouldn’t get anything she sighed and rubbed at her eyes. “Right, well, I’m going to go and start on dinner. You’re not to leave this room, okay. You’ll be spending the rest of the weekend doing homework and once it’s all done, I’ll have chores around the
apartment for you to do. I’ve turned off the WiFi so if you need the internet for your homework, come to me and I’ll do the search for you on my phone, but otherwise your laptop is essentially a typewriter.”

“Yes, May,” he said contritely, almost impressed at how strict she was being.

“I’ll call you when the turkey meatloaf is ready,” she said, then left, shutting the door behind her.

The teen groaned, knowing that she had chosen turkey meatloaf as part of his punishment, and without anything else to do, he pulled the rest of his books to him and began one of his assignments.

The evening dragged by. Peter completed the assignment, as well as an essay, and had gotten a good start on another essay, plus he had successfully dodged questions from May over dinner regarding his partners. She would wait for a pause in conversation and then would fire off the question, hoping to catch him off guard, but Peter held firm. It was exhausting however and so after dinner he went for a shower and then bade May goodnight. He was just climbing into bed when there was a tap at the window and he looked over to see Bucky outside.

Pulling the window open silently, he stood back to allow the super soldier in, glancing nervously over his shoulder at the door. He was certain that May would be checking in soon to ensure that he hadn't made a getaway yet (since she really couldn’t bold the window shut). “What are you doing here?” he whispered urgently.

“You not happy to see me, sugar?”

“Of course I am but if May catches you here, seeing her kill you will literally be the last thing I see before she kills me.”

Bucky dug into a pocket of the tactical pants he was wearing and pulled out a phone. “We couldn’t bear the thought of not being in contact for the week and Tony had a spare lying around so I thought I’d deliver it on my way to patrol your neighbourhood.”

“You’re doing my patrol?”

“Yeah, doll, ‘course. I know you’d worry if it didn’t get done tonight and I know the area well. It’s okay, I’ll take care of it until Rhodes sorts out a roster.”

“Thank you,” he whispered earnestly.

Bucky nodded and then peered intently at him. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m fine, I promise, and Ned and his big mouth happened. I managed to talk my way out of it without anyone finding out who I’m really seeing but it was a close one.” He glanced over his shoulder once more, his anxiety building. “May’s gonna come check on me soon so you’d better go. Sorry.”

Bucky smiled and cupped Peter’s cheek to pull him in for a sweet kiss. “Take care. Love you.”

“Love you too. See you in a week, I guess,” he said sadly.

“I’ll try and drop by when I’m out this way and sneak a kiss or two.”

Peter huffed out a laugh. “I’d like that. Thanks for the phone, Bucky. Bye.”

The ex-assassin moved like liquid through the open window and disappeared into the night, leaving
the teen alone. Peter sighed and shut the window, then climbed into bed. With another furtive look to
the door, he turned the phone on and waited for it to boot up. Tony had already played with the
settings, turning it into a stealth phone so it was silent and dim when it woke up. There were two
numbers programmed in and already a notification of a message in the group chat. Peter had to turn
his face into the pillow to muffle his laughter after he read it.

So what’s this we hear about you stepping out on us with a couple of high school boys? We’re
shocked, baby, SHOCKED - Tony

Clinging to the phone like it was a lifeline, Peter felt a little tension lift from his shoulders. He could
handle being grounded, he could handle having to do homework and chores, and he could even
handle not being allowed to do his patrols, but what he couldn’t handle was being isolated from his
lovers for a week. It would be a long seven days but with access to the phone, it wouldn't be
completely unbearable. He hit reply and began to type back.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, the part where we hear May's side of the phone call with Tony - is it too confusing to read? I tried adding elipses in to indicate the pauses when Tony was talking but it hurt my eyes seeing all of them lol but if you think that would make it easier to read, please let me know so I can edit it :) Cheers!
“You’re kidding?” Lang said, looking between Rhodes and Tony in disbelief. “Wonder Boy can’t come out and play because he’s grounded?”

van Dyne rolled her eyes at him. “Scott, you only just got off being on house arrest which is the adult version of being grounded.”

“Yeah, but house arrest sounds so much cooler! Besides, it was an international court that sentenced me, not my mom.”

“Not his mom, his aunt,” Bucky corrected him, absently, holding one of his knives up to the light to inspect the edge. He frowned, noticing that it still wasn’t as sharp as he’d like it to be, and began sliding the whetstone along the edge once more.

Although they had spent a small amount of time together when the Rogues had regrouped in Wakanda before Bucky volunteered to go on the ice again, Lang still appeared to be wary of the super soldier. They may have once been on the same side, but the most proficient assassin in living memory was just a little more hardcore than the bad guys Lang had been up against in his past. He wasn’t quite as flippant as usual when responding to Bucky as he was when replying to Tony or Rhodes. “Mom, aunt, parent and or guardian, whatever man. My point stands.” He turned back to the Colonel. “So for the next week, we gotta take turns watching over Queens? What gives? Seriously, how much crime could possibly happen in Queens over the course of a week?”

“The amount of crime isn’t the issue,” Rhodes said, crossing his arms over his chest. “The fact of the matter is that Spider-Man is now affiliated with the Avengers. The public are used to seeing him around and when he can’t make it, one of us does. It’s how it’s been when Peter’s been sick, or when he went away on a vacation, and it’ll be how it’ll be for the next seven days. Considering it’s been Queens where he’s spotted the lights of these energy weapons we’re tracking, I don’t want to give these guys the green card to do what they want because word gets around that Spider-Man is absent.” His eyes narrowed and he added dangerously, “Then there’s the fact that I’m the Team Lead and you do what I say.”

Lang held up his hands in the universal gesture of peace. “Whoa, whoa, I’m not saying I don’t want to do it, man, I was just curious as to the whys is all.”

“The fact that he told you to do it should be enough,” van Dyne said primly. She turned and nodded at the Colonel. “Just let us know when.”

“Thank you,” Rhodes told her politely. “Right, let’s get this sparring session under way so I can get to work on the roster before our meeting.”

Bucky tucked his knife back into the sheath on his belt and put the stone with his drink bottle so he would remember to take it back to his room and pack it away afterwards. He stood, tilting his head from side to side to stretch his neck as he listened to Rhodes break down who they would be partnered with today.

“Okay, Tones, you’re with Lang - give those upgraded heat sensors a whirl since we’ll need to know how much heat he gives off when shrunken down.” Tony didn’t look overly pleased, and Bucky threw him a sympathetic look when he pouted. “Vision, I’d like to work with you if I could as I’d like to be fully armoured up and you can best withstand the full force of it.”
Vision inclined his head. “Of course, Colonel, anything I can do to be of assistance.”

They’d lived together for almost a year now but Bucky still wasn’t quite sure if he really could say he really knew Vision or not. What was obvious to even a blind man though was the guilt that he carried over the accident in Berlin. He was always quick to offer any and all assistance to Rhodes, seeming to want to make amends. Bucky had never once seen Rhodes angry at Vision or hold him accountable, putting it down to a battlefield incident, but the super soldier was an expert in intellectually understanding that something wasn’t your fault simply because it was your hands that did the deed, and actually believing that. He himself, of course, was an expert at guilt as well.

“Barnes, that leaves you and van Dyne together. Let’s work on getting her up to speed to fight a super soldier.” He clapped his hands together. “That’s it, people, come on, let’s get to it.”

As the group separated into their pairs, Bucky caught the rather frustrated look on van Dyne’s face. They had sparred together twice now and both times she had come no where near to being a match for Bucky, even when using her suit’s full capabilities, something that was clearly getting to her.

“I don’t understand,” she said as they moved over to one of the mats. “Why can’t I get the drop on you? You have the superior strength but I’m faster.”

Bucky shrugged. “Experience,” was all he offered.

“Experience?” she repeated, a touch of anger colouring her tone. “I’m not some damn kid taking karate classes, Barnes - I’ve been fighting for years, I’m proficient in several martial arts, I’ve taken on opponents bigger and stronger than me and won, all without my suit, and I have a head for tactics. By all rights I should be able to beat you.”

He regarded her for a few moments, then sat down on the mat, gesturing for her to do the same.

“Why are we sitting?” she asked, even as she did so.

“Because I have a feeling you don’t really know much about me. In fact, I’d hazard a guess that all you know is what has been in the media, a few tidbits from Lang - all of which I’ll bet are wildly inaccurate - and the little you’ve picked up from your time with us.”

“Okay, that may be true,” she admitted, “but what does that have to do with anything?”

“It means that although you know exactly how experienced you are, you have no real clue about my experience. Against any regular person, you could beat them, hands down, bigger and stronger, doesn’t matter - you’d find a way. I’m different though. I was given a bastardised version of the serum that was used on Captain America, I was tortured and beat down to try and make me comply and in the end even that wasn’t enough - they had to wipe my mind constantly to take away every little part of me. I fought though, always fought to return, and if they left me too long without putting me in the chair, I’d break through the surface, forcing them to wipe me again.” He paused, trying to figure out how to phrase the next part. “That word - wiped - it isn’t quite accurate, however. I mean, I wasn’t in control, it wasn’t me, but I was still there. I remember every single person that Hydra forced me to kill, but it’s almost in a detached manner, like I was watching it on the television, that I wasn’t actually present.”

“If you weren’t present, then who was?”

He gave a wry smile. “I’m sure you’ve heard of the Winter Soldier.”

“So you’re not the Winter Soldier?”
He smiled again, but this time it was sad as he shook his head. “No, I was trapped beneath the surface, just a witness.”

“But you said that you remember every person Hydra made you kill.”

“If you skid on an oily road and hit someone with your car and they die, it’s you that killed them, not the car.”

She considered this. “Yet, it was the oil that set it in motion. Neither you nor the car would have killed the other driver if the oil hadn’t directed you that way. Hydra was the oil.”

Bucky shrugged. “An apt description, yet the person still died. Anyway, we’re digressing - the original point I was trying to make was that although I wasn’t in control, I not only remember every person who died at my hands but I also remember the how. Those skills, with a gun, a knife, my hands, a Goddamn orange peel, I still have them, and I’ve been using them cumulatively longer than you’ve been alive. I was in and out of cryo for over seventy years but the time they had me out adds up. You are a skilled fighter, and an even better tactician, but I was forced to fight, to kill, to survive for so many years that even if you live to be a hundred, you simply will never gain the experience that I have.”

van Dyne sighed. “Okay, I see your point.”

“There is a silver lining however, van Dyne,” he told her.

“Oh?”

“You may not be able to gain my experience, but you can learn from it.”

She smiled, more genuinely than he’d seen her smile before. “I’d like that. I’d also like if you’d call me Hope.”

“Allright, but then it’s Bucky.”

“Okay, Bucky - you have yourself a deal.”

He grinned and jumped to his feet, holding out a hand and pulling her up as well. “Let’s get to it then.”

The training session went for well over two hours and they were both exhausted afterwards. Bucky was impressed by Hope’s stamina, not tiring nearly as much as he’d have expected for an unenhanced human and it enabled them to push on for longer. She was a fast and attentive learner and now that she realised that she couldn’t beat him because she was lacking in any way, she excelled even more, amalgamating his tips and hints into her own style to be more effective. She thanked him earnestly when they parted ways, both the last ones left with everyone else having finished up an hour earlier. Bucky was feeling very happy with the outcome of not only their sparring session, but the talk they’d had prior to it. He’d been apprehensive of their new team mates but was much more confident that he’d be able to work well with them, especially Hope. He headed to the showers on the training floor, humming to himself as he shed his clothing.

As the hot water fell in heavy sheets over his head, Bucky tipped his head back, his eyes closed, and combed his hair back from his face. He’d had it trimmed once or twice since he’d shaved it, Tony insisting that it be given some sort of shape so it didn’t just grow back into a shaggy mop. It was now long enough for his partners to grasp a handful during sex, something that he hadn’t realised he’d miss until they hadn’t been able to do so. Peter especially liked to play with it, to card his fingers through it and then tug gently at the roots, then afterwards when they were lying in bed, sated and...
drowsy, the teen would scratch lightly at Bucky’s scalp, sending him drifting off to sleep.

He sighed, keeping his eyes closed against the spray, and tried not to think about how long the next week would feel. He’d seen so little of Peter lately, and now he’d get a stolen five minutes at best with his lover in the foreseeable future. It felt distinctly unfair but really, they had to consider themselves lucky that Peter had been able to convince his aunt that he was seeing two boys from school. Once upon a time, May would have easily guessed the truth, especially as she’d already been suspicious about the soldier’s intentions towards her nephew. Since she’d witnessed Bucky have a flashback, she had been much warmer and friendlier towards him, and had seemed to accept the lie that he and Peter were just friends. Bucky couldn’t help but feel guilty at how they were deceiving her and he knew that when the truth did eventually come out, she would likely never speak to Bucky or Tony again. She wouldn’t be able to forbid Peter from seeing them since he’d be an adult, but they would be risking irreparable damage to the relationship between Peter and May. During the darkest hours of the night, Bucky sometimes wondered if he was worth the sacrifice.

He heard the door to the shower room open and quickly identified Tony’s footsteps as they came inside. He kept his eyes closed, pretending that he couldn’t hear his lover pause outside the cubicle to undress or open the door to slip inside. Fingers slid around his waist and the warmth of his body pressed against Bucky’s back even as his hard cock nestled itself between the super soldier’s arse cheeks. “Hello there,” Bucky murmured in greeting, covering the hands on his stomach with his own and squeezing gently.

“Hey, babe,” Tony murmured, dropping a kiss onto his shoulder blade.

“Whatcha doing?”

“Miss you,” the genius whined.

“I’ve missed you too, sweetheart.”

“There’s too many people around the Tower today, thought I’d jump you in here so we’d have some sort of alone time together.”

“You know I’ll never say no to you jumping me in the shower, sugar.”

“Awesome.”

Tony dropped one of his hands down lower to palm at Bucky’s awakening cock, working it to hardness with only a few strokes, continuing to pepper his back in kisses all the while. Then he leaned over, reaching further around the soldier to grab the bottle of conditioner off the shelf. He squirted some into his hands before he pulled away slightly to put some space between them and a moment later, Bucky felt the slippery skin of Tony’s cock press between his thighs. He shifted his feet, closing his legs to create a tight space for his partner to thrust between, and took hold of his own cock, stroking himself lazily as Tony grasped him by the hips. They knew that they didn’t have much time - someone would be looking for them soon since they had a meeting with the team planned, so they chased their own pleasure, neither speaking, just sharing the odd touch or kiss, reveling in the closeness and the sweet feel of the other’s skin. It had been much too long since they’d been intimate and they both came much quicker than usual. Bucky grunted and painted the wall tiles with his come, his legs trembling at the force of his orgasm and Tony followed shortly afterwards, spilling over the backs of the soldier’s thighs.

Turning around so they were facing each other, Bucky wrapped his arms around Tony and held him close, nuzzling into his wet hair. “Needed that, thank you.”
“Thanks for indulging me.”

“Anytime.”

Tony sighed then, slumping a little in defeat. “I miss Petey.”

“I know, baby, I know. I miss him too.”

“How did he look when you saw him? Was he really upset?”

“He wasn’t happy but he’ll live, Tony. May isn’t keeping him in an iron maiden or anything, just his room.”

The genius paused for a long moment but from the tense set of his shoulders, Bucky knew that he was trying to find the words to say something. Eventually he said, “Do you think we should have told her?” he asked hesitantly. “May, I mean. Do you think we should have told her about all of us? She took the Spider-Man news okay.”

Bucky was shaking his head before Tony had even finished speaking. “No, bad idea, trust me on this, she can’t know yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because we would be dead before the words left your mouth. Trust me - I’ve been on the receiving end of her wrath just for kissing Peter and I’m surprised I survived. If she finds out that we’re sleeping with her nephew, neither the serum nor your armour will save us.”

Tony tilted his head up to look Bucky in the eyes and quickly squeezed his own eyes shut as he got a face full of spray. “Bleurgh.” He wiped at his face and then hid it once more against his partner’s chest. “You do know that she’s not dumb, yeah? She’s going to put it all together when we finally come out anyway so maybe we should get ahead of the eight ball and just level with her now?”

Bucky pursed his lips, cheeks puffing with air and then he let it out in an explosive breath as he considered this. “Maybe. I dunno. Look, we need to have this discussion with all three of us, sugar, we can’t make any decisions without Peter’s input.”

Tony nodded against him. “I know, I just wanted to plant the idea in your head for now.” Then he latched his lips around the soldier’s nipple and sucked hard.

Bucky squawked at the attack, his nipples sensitive after his orgasm and he playfully pushed Tony away. “Quit that, you little jerk.” He laughed and then pulled him in for a proper kiss, their first since Tony had slipped into the shower. Bucky closed his eyes, concentrating on the feel of Tony’s lips, the scratch of his goatee against his own five o’clock shadow, the lingering taste of coffee on his tongue. His arms tightened around his genius, holding him close and not letting him go as he deepened the kiss. Water from the shower kept getting in their mouths but Bucky just let it dribble down over his chin, not wanting to stop now that they’d started.

It was Tony who finally broke the kiss. “We should get out,” he murmured. “We’re probably already late and platypus will be looking for us soon.”

“If we have to. Let me wash this gunk off the back of my legs first - it’s already congealing in my leg hair and I think I might have to shave to get it all off.”

Tony grinned cheekily. “Oops.”
“Uh huh, I’m sure it wasn’t deliberate at all,” Bucky accused teasingly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Tony pressed one more kiss to Bucky’s lips and with his hand on the shower door said, “I’ll see you up there?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Tony stepped out of the shower and Bucky reached for the shower gel, pouring a generous amount into his hands before lathering it over the back of his legs, the razor mounted on the wall mocking him silently as he got to work.
Chapter 6

Peter shoved his books in his locker and rummaged around for his gym gear that he’d need third period, ignoring the presence he felt at his back. He was sure that it would be Ned with some genuine apology for outing him to May, but as much as he knew that his best friend hadn’t done it deliberately, Peter wasn’t feeling very forgiving today. Yesterday had dragged by for him, having spent most of it in his room, avoiding his aunt as best he could and secretly messaging Tony and Bucky. As wonderful as it was having the phone that Bucky had snuck him, it was just another reminder of how he was forbidden to leave the house for a week.

There was the sound of a throat clearing a few moments later, and he startled as he realised that it wasn’t Ned. Peter spun around and came face to face with Flash. “Oh, it’s you,” he said stupidly, then spun back around to close his locker before the books he’d unbalanced by yanking out his gym shorts could fall out.

“Expecting someone else, Parker?” Flash asked.

“Um, yes actually. I thought you were Ned,” he admitted, closing his locker and spinning the dial.

“I saw him in the library with Jones ’bout five minutes ago.”

“Oh.” Peter said, trying not to be disappointed that Ned wasn’t actually trying to apologise, even though he didn’t want one. He zipped his backpack closed and shrugged it onto his shoulders, the silence stretching awkwardly between them. “So, um, what did you need?” It wasn’t that he didn’t want to talk to Flash - they’d been getting on much better ever since that night at Liz’s party, but they weren’t exactly buddies.

“Have you got a partner yet for the English assignment?”

“Oh, um, no, not yet.” Ned and Michelle had teamed up so they would have another excuse to give Michelle’s parents about why she was spending so much time with him, but since Flash wasn’t aware of their relationship, Peter couldn’t exactly say why not.

“Okay, so how ‘bout it?”

“How about what?”

Flash rolled his eyes. “Don’t make me regret this, Parker. Do you want to be partners for the assignment or not?”

It was a kindness that Peter wasn’t expecting, but it was one that he appreciated. He hadn’t been looking forward to begging one of his classmates to partner with him, and he knew that Flash was a hard worker so Peter could be guaranteed that he wouldn’t end up carrying the majority of the workload. “Yeah, that’d be great actually,” he said and offered a smile.

“Great. Are you doing anything before the first bell?”

Peter looked at his watch and saw that they still had twenty minutes before their first class. If Ned and Michelle were seconded away in the library together, then he knew he wouldn’t see either of them until he saw them in class. “Nope, looks like I’m free.”

“Did you wanna go over the assignment and break it down, figure out what we’ll each do?”
“Yeah, sure.”

They wandered down the hallway together, migrating subconsciously to the cafeteria since it was raining outside and there would be plenty of empty tables for them to use. “So, how’s things with you?” Flash asked casually after a while. “You know, in general?”

“Um, okay I guess.”

Flash raised a brow. “Really? Because you look like someone kicked your puppy.”

“Oh, um, it’s a long story but May kind of overheard Ned talking to me about me having two boyfriends and though she doesn’t know who they are, she was pissed that I hadn’t told her, so she grounded me.”

They reached the cafeteria and sat down at a free table. “Wait, so Leeds knows? You know that that’s the fastest way for word to get out, right?”

Peter nodded glumly. “Yeah, I know, trust me, I know. I didn’t tell him deliberately, he read a message on my phone.”

Flash winced. “Dude, that’s not cool. I thought he was your best friend?”

“He is.”

“Yeah, friends aren’t supposed to be dicks like that.”

Peter bit back the instinct to reply with something cutting about Flash being an expert in being a dick, since at this very moment he definitely wasn’t being one and Peter didn’t want to destroy whatever this actually was. “Yeah, well, it’s done now and May knows half the story and so for the next week I’m not allowed to leave the apartment for anything except school.”

Flash looked furtively around before saying, “Really? Not even for...you know, your extracurricular activities?”

Peter couldn’t help it - hearing Flash try to allude to him being Spider-Man without giving it away made him burst out laughing. If only Ned had been so considerate...He finished laughing and cleared his throat, surprised that Flash wasn’t even looking annoyed. Times really had changed. “Yeah, not even for that. Of course, she then called Tony and told him why she’d grounded me.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, she said that it was because I was seeing two guys at school and I hadn't told her.”

“Shit. I’m guessing that he figured out what had really happened? Because they seemed to be the possessive type so if not, I’d assume they’d have shown up and dragged you back to their cave.”

Chuckling, Peter nodding, totally being able to picture his partners doing something like that. “Yeah, he figured it out and then Bucky dropped me off a phone to use since she confiscated mine.”

“You lead a ridiculously frantic life, Parker.”

“Yeah, yeah I do,” he agreed. His eyes settled on the table, and as fast as his mirth had come, it fled and left behind a bitter melancholy.

“What’s on your mind?” Flash asked, sounding genuinely worried.
He shrugged. “It just seems so petty, you know? Getting grounded. Like, obviously Tony and Bucky are both aware of how much younger I am than them but with the whole superhero thing and all, I think that maybe sometimes they forget.” Peter was keeping his voice low but he still glanced around nervously, to make sure that no one was eavesdropping. “Having the fact that May grounded me shoved in their faces is going to be a stark reminder of that.”

“And? Trust me, Parker, if it was an issue, I’m sure that they would have noped the fuck out by now.”

“I guess, but what if this is the straw that breaks the camel’s back?”

Flash had been flipping through the book the assignment was based on but he closed it and pushed it to one side, giving Peter his full attention. “Look, I don’t know them well - I hardly know you, when you think about it, but from what I’ve seen? They love you, Parker. Like, full on, till the end of days kind of love, the sort you only ever dream about. If your age was a problem, it would have been raised by now. They clearly think that you’re mature enough to be in a relationship with them, so I really think that you’re worrying over nothing.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

He managed another smile, more grateful to his ex-bully than he thought possible. “Thanks man, I really appreciate that.”

“You feeling better?”

“Yeah, actually, yeah I am.”

“Great. Now how about we move on from your daytime soap-opera life and give you something to be bored about and start dissecting this assignment?”

“Sure thing.” Peter agreed and pulled out his own book. It was a surreal feeling, sitting with Flash after actually being comforted by him, but it was nice. Peter looked at the other teen and for the first time ever, he genuinely considered the possibility that they might even become friends and it wasn’t as scary a prospect as it once would have been. He opened the book and then gave Flash his full attention, and they got down to business.

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As Peter sat alone at lunch, he seriously considered the fact that Ned and Michelle were being some grade A arseholes. They had caught him at the entrance to the cafeteria, told him that they were going to spend their lunch period behind the locker rooms (the go to spot at school for making out though how they planned to not be seen by anyone remained to be seen) and had run off before he could even say anything. They were ditching him more and more lately and as much as he understood the desire to spend time with each other, Peter hadn’t thought that it would be at the expense of their friendship. It had already been a shitty start to the week (no thanks to Ned) and it was only getting worse.

His phone buzzed and, grateful for the distraction, he unlocked the screen.

*How’s your day going? - Bucky*

Peter stared at the screen for a long moment before replying. Flash’s assurances that morning had helped, but the teen was now second guessing everything that he sent to his lovers, not wanting to
draw attention to his age. Bitching about being abandoned alone at lunch seemed a sure fire way to do that so he lied instead.

Yeah, going great, thanks. How’s things there? - Peter

We’re missing you, doll. Tony has already set up a reminder in the lab of how many hours it’ll be until we get to see you. In usual Tony style it’s big, bright, and in your face. I get blinded by it every time I walk in the door - Bucky

What’s he telling the guys who don’t know about us? - Peter

He’s not allowing Lang in his workshop but he did invite Hope down there and he told her it was how long until his library books are due back - Bucky

And did she believe him? - Peter

Of course she didn’t but it was fun listening to him ramble on about the archaic forms of torture the local librarian would inflict upon him if he didn’t get *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* back in time - Bucky

Lol what did she say? - Peter

She asked him which House he’d be in and then they spent the next half an hour debating if it would be Ravenclaw or Slytherin - Bucky

Peter grinned at his phone, remembering the numerous times after they’d watched one of the wizarding films on movie night that they’d had this very discussion.

I still stand by the fact that although he has several Slytherin qualities, the Ravenclaw side of him wins out - Peter

I agree. She then said that she thinks I would be Gryffindor… - Bucky

I can see how people who don’t really know you would think that but those who do know you know that you’re a ‘puff through and through - Peter

Takes one to know one ;-) Okay, sugar, I gotta go. Love you - Bucky

Love you too. Please give Tony a kiss from me - Peter

Will do. Bye - Bucky

Peter locked his phone and took a bite of his sandwich, chewing mechanically and staring into space, his mind on both his partners and how much he missed them. He was interrupted before he could fall too deeply into the ‘wallowing in self pity’ well by Liz sliding into the chair opposite him.

“Hi, Peter,” she said brightly.

“Liz! Hi! So, uh, what are you, um, what are you, I mean, what can I do for you?” She had been the last person he had expected to join him.

“I needed to ask a favour,” she said, absently twirling a strand of hair around her finger.

“Yeah, of course, anything.”

She took a deep breath and blurted out, “I need you to go to Homecoming with me.”
He frowned. “Uh, sorry, what?”

“Look, I know that you’re seeing someone who doesn’t go to this school, Brad told me and I don’t think you would have lied to him about something like that. So since it’s not like you’ll be wanting to ask anyone from here to go with you, and I just really don’t want to go with someone as a date, I figured that if we went with each other, we’d both have a great time without dealing with the hassle.” He hesitated, shocked, and she reached out and took his hand. “Please, Peter? There’s a few guys who I know are going to ask me and they’re getting a bit creepy since I’ve already turned down offers to go out with them already. You’d be doing me such a big favour. Please?”

He hadn’t really given any thought to even going to the dance, wasn’t even sure if he wanted to, but as he looked at her, watching him hopefully, he thought of her father and wondered if Liz had any idea of what he really did for a living. Maybe going to Homecoming with her would give him the opportunity to talk to her about her family and get some answers?

“Sure, Liz, I’d be happy to go with you,” he told her.

“Really? Oh, thank you, Peter. You’re a lifesaver!”

“No worries. I’m sure we’ll have fun.”

She beamed at him and then stood up from her seat. "I'll message you!" and then with a happy little wave, Liz headed back to her friends, and Peter was once again alone.

He sighed and woke his phone to check the time, then seeing that he still had more than twenty minutes left of the lunch period, he pulled out his English book and decided he may as well make a start on that assignment.
Chapter 7

Tony had barely finished asking Friday to dial Peter’s number before the call was accepted, Peter’s face coming onto screen, bright and eager. “Hey, Tony,” he said, beaming at his lover.

“Hey, baby, how are you?” he asked, sitting down in the chair at his workbench.

“Yeah, I’m good. May has just gone in the shower so you have perfect timing since I’ll be able to talk freely for a bit.”

“Good. I miss you.”

“I miss you as well. How’s everything there? Is Bucky around too?”

“We’re fine. The Buckster should be down in a second, he was just talking with Vis. How was school?”

Peter’s face instantly closed off and he mumbled, “Yeah, fine,” before he changed the subject. “Have you had any more leads on Toomes?”

“Hold up there, Pete - let’s go back a sec. What’s wrong? Did something happen at school?”

“Nothing happened, it’s all good.”

“Then why don’t you want to talk about it?”

“Uh, no reason.”

Tony frowned. “Pete…”

“Tony, it’s fine, nothing happened.”

“So why not tell me about your day?”

“Because it’s not important.”

“You always tell me about your day when I ask.”

“Yeah, well, today I don’t want to bore you.”

Tony pursed his lips and let out a long breath, staring at the teen in consternation. Something was clearly wrong but he simply couldn’t figure out what. Peter didn’t look like he’d been roughed up, and he sounded honest enough when he said nothing bad had happened, so there seemed like there was no good reason for him to be so evasive. The three of them always shared the small, trivial details of their days - it was something they’d started doing right at the beginning so none of them felt like they’d missed out or feel disconnected. Before he could say anything, Bucky walked into the lab.

“Hey, doll,” he greeted the teen, coming over and flopping down onto the couch next to Tony. “How was school?”

Peter just shrugged and looked away, causing Bucky to turn a worried look towards Tony. “What’s going on?” he asked.
“Your guess is as good as mine. He’s refusing to tell me about his day but he says nothing bad happened.”

“What the hell? What happened, Peter?” the soldier demanded.

Peter sighed sadly. “I just didn’t want to talk about school is all.”

“But why not?” Tony pressed.

“Because it’s just another reminder of how young I am!” Peter cried, clapping a hand over his mouth and glancing behind him to the door to ensure his aunt hadn't heard his outburst. He listened a moment and then turned back and said in a much quieter voice, “I’m just paranoid that with the whole grounding thing and then telling you about my classes and homework, you’ll suddenly realise that I’m just a kid and then you’ll question why you’re even with me.”

“Oh, baby, no, that’s never going to happen,” Tony promised. “You being seventeen isn’t a surprise to us - we knew what we were doing when we all got together. Why would that change now?”

“I don’t know,” Peter mumbled dejectedly. “I just feel like such a little kid right now and I don’t want you both to think that I’m not worth the trouble.”

“Like Tony said, it’s not gonna happen, sugar,” Bucky assured him.

“Why are you feeling like a kid? Because you’re grounded?” Tony asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did you know that Pepper essentially used to ground me when I was pissing her off? If I skipped out on too many meetings or was out partying too much and she needed me to do something, she’d team up with Jarvis and lock me in my penthouse.”

Bucky grinned. “Did a prince ever come and rescue you from your tower?”

The genius shook his head sadly. “Alas, no. My princes came later, and they rescued me from myself.”

Bucky squeezed his thigh and then turned his attention back to Peter. “So, now that we’ve cleared that up and you know that we’re not gonna leave you because you tell us about your day, will you please tell us about your day?”

The teen looked slightly happier but Tony wished that he could see him and give him the hug that he so clearly needed at the moment. Before Peter could begin to speak, Tony jumped in. “Hey, what are you wearing right now?”

Peter frowned as he looked down at himself. “Just what I wore to school. May isn’t going to take too long in the shower so I don’t really have time to play with you two.”

He shook his head. “No, I’m not trying to have phone sex. I was going to suggest that you get into your pyjamas - it might make you feel better.”

“Oh! Yeah, yeah, that’s a good idea.” They waited a moment as he got changed and soon he was sitting back down on the bed, now dressed in the red Henley of Bucky’s and the pale blue sleep pants of Tony’s that he’d taken so many months ago.

“Better?”
Peter smiled, soft and shy as he fiddled with the hem of the Henley. “Yeah, thanks. They always make me feel like I’m closer to you both.”

“Good. Right, now tell us about your day.”

Peter began to talk, telling them about how Ned had avoided him the entire day and as much as Peter hadn’t wanted to hear an apology, he was more upset by his best friend avoiding him for the entire day by the time school got out. He’d seen Michelle briefly but she’d just shrugged and didn’t offer an explanation, and he figured that she didn’t want to get in the middle of it. He then moved on to telling them about the nice surprise he’d had with Flash offering to partner with him for his English assignment and Tony couldn’t help but grin. The kid was the perfect example that people could change their ways. He’d gone from a spiteful bully to a reluctant ally and if things continued the way they were, he might even end up being a good friend. It was something that Peter needed more of and Tony was delighted with the development, and judging from the happy look on Bucky’s face, so was the soldier.

The next part of Peter’s story, not so much.

“And then at lunch Liz asked me for a favour - you know, Toomes’ daughter? Anyway, some guys have been harassing her, and aren’t really taking no for an answer so she asked if I’d go to Homecoming with her. I figured it would give me a good opportunity to try and get some information out of her that we can use against her dad.”

“Wait, so you said yes?” Bucky asked, sitting up a little straighter.

“Well, yeah.”

“Didn’t you used to have a crush on this girl?”

“Ages ago, yeah. She’s like, the prettiest girl in school so I think every guy’s been into her at one point or another.”

“I see.”

Tony turned to face the soldier when he caught the hurt tone in his voice and saw that Bucky was staring at the floor, avoiding Peter. “Hey, you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, yeah I’m fine,” Bucky lied. “I have to go.” He got up from the couch and hurried our of the lab without a second glance back.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked, confused.

Tony sighed and rubbed at his eyes. “Petey, remember that whole thing with Liz’s cousin?”

“Duh, how could I forget it? Bucky was pissed at me for a whole week!”

“Do you remember why?”

“Yeah, he was jealous.”

“Now put two and two together for the win, baby.”

“What? He’s jealous? Of Liz? But why? She asked me as a favour, I don’t even like her like that anymore!”

“But you used to, Peter, and who knows, Liz might like you in that way.”
“But she knows I’m taken,” he protested.

“And so did Brad but that didn’t stop him from kissing you at that party. Can you see why Bucky might be upset?”

Peter frowned. “What about you? Are you upset?”

“I’m gonna be honest, Pete - I’m not overly happy about it, no.”

“But...but, I can get information about her dad! I can help us find those weapons!”

“I understand the sentiment, Peter, I do, but it stings a bit, knowing that you’ll be going as someone else’s date.”

The teen’s soft brown eyes hardened and his jaw jutted out a little, showing his anger. “What should I do instead? Huh? Are you and Bucky going to be my dates? Are you both going to show up to Homecoming on my arm? Is that what’s going to happen, Tony?”

He had a point. “Okay, well, no, you know we can’t do that.”

“So I’m just not supposed to go at all?”

“You know we’d never stop you from going, Peter.”

“But if I do, I have to go alone? You want me to look like even more of a loser than I already do?”

Tony sighed again, and rubbed at his temples this time, feeling a headache coming on. “How far away is the dance?” he asked.

“A couple of weeks - why?”

“Can we put this conversation on hold until we can have it in person?”

Peter looked like he wanted to protest but a sound from deeper in his apartment made him cock his head to one side and listen. May must have been finished in the shower. “Fine,” he said in a huff.

“I take it you gotta go?”

“Yeah, I do. See ya.”

“Peter, wait!” Tony cried, before the call could be disconnected.

“What?” he snapped.

“I love you.”

The teen hesitated for a moment and then muttered, “Love you too,” before the holoscreen blinked off.

Tony groaned and leaned back against the couch, hating the fact that he still had five days until he could see Peter again. This week was going to be the longest of his life.
“I don’t mean to be *that guy*, but do you think that maybe you overreacted just a little?” Tony asked from the doorway.

Bucky kept his face resolutely buried in the pillow, refusing to look at him, and mumbled, “Maybe.”

The bed dipped as the genius came over and perched on the side of it and the soldier felt a warm hand begin to stroke up and down his back. “I get it - it was a bit of a shock and the primitive side of me didn’t like it and I told Pete so, but really, babe, we have nothing to worry about.”

“I know that. I think. Maybe. Urgh, my head just won’t stop spinning enough to think straight.” He rolled over, Tony lifting his hand and then placing it back down on Bucky’s stomach once he was on his back, and he caught it in his flesh hand, holding onto it like it was a lifeline. “I know Peter won’t do anything with this girl, I do, but I can’t help but hate her so much for getting to be his date, even if it is entirely platonic.”

“Okay, I get that, but why not be mad at her then? Why did you walk out and not even say goodbye to Petey?”

Bucky grimaced, knowing that he’d behaved badly but unable to help it. “It’s almost like I’m split in two,” he tried to explain. “I can say the words, or hear you say them, and I *believe* them, and yet my chest hurts and I feel like I’m gonna be sick and I have this urge to publicly claim him and make sure everyone knows that he’s ours!” His voice had risen at the end and he snapped his mouth shut, overwhelmed with shame. “Oh, God,” he whispered, turning over, unable to face Tony, “I’ve turned into some sort of possessive arsehole.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Tony said soothingly. “Look, our intellects and our emotions don’t always line up together, trust me, I get it. And you didn’t threaten to break up with him if he goes to Homecoming with Liz, or forbid him from going, or anything like that so you’re not as big an arse as you think you are, but we *have* upset him with our reaction. He’s pissed at us, has a right to be, but at the same time, I think we also have a right to be upset. It would have been nice if he’d talked to us first, given us the heads up before saying yes. Anyway, I asked him if we could talk about it in person since it’s too easy to yell and say things you don’t mean via text or phone.”

Bucky smiled sadly. “How did you get to be so wise in matters of the heart?”

Tony gave him a sly wink. “Obviously my years and years of one night stands and questionable sexual conquests accumulated to allow me to level up.”

“Oh, God,” he whispered, turning over, unable to face Tony, “I’ve turned into some sort of possessive arsehole.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Tony said soothingly. “Look, our intellects and our emotions don’t always line up together, trust me, I get it. And you didn’t threaten to break up with him if he goes to Homecoming with Liz, or forbid him from going, or anything like that so you’re not as big an arse as you think you are, but we *have* upset him with our reaction. He’s pissed at us, has a right to be, but at the same time, I think we also have a right to be upset. It would have been nice if he’d talked to us first, given us the heads up before saying yes. Anyway, I asked him if we could talk about it in person since it’s too easy to yell and say things you don’t mean via text or phone.”

Bucky sighed again. “I should apologise,” he said. “I might wait for him after school tomorrow and hope that he’ll let me talk to him.”

“I’m sure he will,” Tony said, “but just remember to avoid an audience if you guys end up having a make-up make out session.”
The soldier rolled his eyes and smacked at his partner’s arm. “Are we ever going to live that down?”

“No, I’m going to milk this for years to come.”

“Jerk.”

“You know it. Now, come on, let’s go hunt and gather something for dinner - I’m starving.”

Bucky loitered in an alley across the road from the main entrance to Midtown Tech, keeping to the shadows as he waited for the final bell to ring. He’d sent Peter a message via their group chat to say good morning and had gotten a brief reply, but that was all either he or Tony had heard from their young lover that day. He’d not messaged either of them separately, nor had he participated in any of the conversations in the group chat, staying worrisomely quiet.

Bucky felt terrible for upsetting Peter, and wished that he could gain some sort of control over his jealousy. It was far from attractive, he knew this, and yet as much as he trusted both his partners, he couldn’t help but worry. In a vulnerable moment after the whole ‘Brad’ debacle, he’d actually confided to Stephen Strange about his insecurities (managing to not give away any information about who he was seeing, just keeping it generic) and the sorcerer had been surprisingly helpful. He had said that given the amount of torture and trauma that the soldier had experienced over the years, it was expected for him to have trust issues. When Bucky had protested that he did trust his partner (he’d of course kept it to the singular so as not to give away), Strange had said that it wasn’t that simple, that his experiences would have likely impacted on his sense of self worth. When the soldier had been confused at that, Strange had gone on to explain that people who had been taken hostage or kidnapped and then held for long periods of time would sometimes subconsciously begin to believe that they hadn't been rescued or saved because they weren’t worth the time or effort it would take. That would grow into them believing that they weren’t worth anything at anytime, and so as much as he might trust his lover, deep down he probably harboured the belief that he’d ultimately be betrayed because they would find someone better, more worthy.

It had gone a long way to explaining a lot of feelings that Bucky had and he definitely saw the truth to the theory. Strange had been surprised that the soldier’s therapist that he’d seen for the six months after his arrival hadn’t picked up on it, but further urging to perhaps see someone else had fallen on deaf ears. Bucky had always found the therapy process awkward and uncomfortable and wasn’t keen to revisit it. He also hadn't spoken to either Tony or Peter about the revelation, not wanting them to think that they had to go out of their way to prove how much he meant to them. He knew that he was loved, and declarations and displays that didn't occur organically would probably be worse and maybe even make him doubt them. No, not everything had to be shared or spoken of, some things a man just had to deal with by himself.

From within the building across the road, Bucky heard the shrill tone of the bell ringing and shortly afterwards wave upon wave of students spilled from the doors. It wasn’t much longer before he saw the familiar mop of chestnut curls amidst the crowd, and Bucky took a step forward, ready to call out and wave to grab Peter’s attention when he froze, icy shards piercing his heart. Someone had called Peter’s name and the teen turned, smiling widely at the tall, slender girl who was hurrying towards him. Liz pulled Peter in for a hug and kissed his cheek, whispering something into his ear, and then she pulled away just far enough to link her arm through his and they continued down the stairs and out the main gate, passing within metres of where Bucky stood, still half concealed. They were talking quietly together, Peter laughing at something that Liz had said and then they were gone, turning the corner and disappearing.

Swallowing heavily, Bucky melted back into the shadows, needing a moment to gather his racing
thoughts. Reason told him that there would be a logical explanation for what he had just witnessed, but his heart was crying out in anguish at seeing the proof of his worst fears. It was suddenly so hard to breathe and before he knew it, he was on his knees in the alley, clutching at his chest and gasping for air. Since he clearly wasn’t suffering enough, his mind helpfully replayed the scene he’d just witnessed over and over. It lingered over the press of Liz’s lips against Peter’s cheek, the way he’d smiled so broadly at her, and had hugged her hard, the easy, familiar way in which they walked together, arm in arm. With a broken cry, he forced the images from his mind, trying to replace them with ones of he and Peter together, but all he could picture clearly were the times that the teen had been upset with him, or angry, or disappointed. His chest ached even more and he crumpled in on himself, trying to keep his heart from shattering into tiny fragments.

Bucky wasn’t sure how much time had passed when his phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and saw that it was Tony calling and he cleared his throat, hitting answer and holding it to his ear. “Hi, Tony,” he said, trying to sound casual.

“Hey, Buckaroo, where are you? We’ve got confirmation of a deal going down between Toomes’ men and some mob guys downtown.”

“Um, I’m just outside of Midtown Tech. I’ll wait for you here?”

“I’m enroute now. ETA three minutes.”

“See you then.” He ended the call and tucked his phone away, then took a moment to wipe his eyes and hide as best he could all evidence of his distress. The last thing that they needed was Tony being distracted by an upset ex-assassin whilst fighting guys with deadly energy weapons. When Iron Man landed in the alley several minutes later, he’d pulled himself together and was in full Super Soldier mode.

“Here you go,” Tony said as he tossed a bundle to him, then moved to the entrance to the alley to stand watch as Bucky quickly changed.

“How far away are they?” Bucky asked as he did up the straps on his vest, tugging them tight. “Can I run there, or do I need to catch a ride with you?”

“It’s too far to go on foot,” Tony told him, “but I’ve arranged a ride for you so I can hit them straight from the air.”

As if in response to that statement, a car squealed to a halt on the street, Hope at the wheel. She leaned over and flung the door open and Tony shot her a salute before activating his thrusters and taking off. “See you there,” he said in parting.

Bucky grabbed his discarded clothing and rushed to the car, throwing it into the back seat as he flung himself into the front. He flashed Hope a smile as she took off, the tyres squealing on the asphalt and then deftly inserted his comm piece into his ear.

“Do we have a sitrep?” he asked his companion.

Hope shook her head. “We don’t know much. Friday picked up an energy spike which sent us running but all she can tell us is that there are up to ten men on the ground, four of which are known associates of Toomes, and the others are all well known mobsters. Stark has somehow managed to convince the NYPD to stay out of it but Lord knows if the FBI has been alerted. Hopefully we can get it all sorted before they show up so no one gets hurt.”

As they neared the scene, a blue beam shot into the air and Bucky looked up to see that Tony had
arrived, the Iron Man armour weaving and dodging around the beams. Without having to be asked, Hope gunned the engine, pushing the car to its limits to get them there a fraction of a second faster and Bucky was eternally grateful. She threw the car around the final corner, skidding across the street and Bucky had the door open and was rolling from the vehicle before it had even come to a stop.

Pulling out one of the handguns that Tony had designed specifically for fights in a public area, Bucky clicked it into what they affectionately called ‘stun’ mode and began shooting. Electrical charges, very similar to what the repulsors shot from the Iron Man suit, flew through the air, taking out two of the closest men and sending the rest scattering. Hope jumped into the fray, sliding along the ground and bringing down another man, a powerful blow from her legs knocking him out, following through with a solid punch to the temple to keep him out.

A large man with a shaved head eyed Tony in the air and he lifted a large gauntlet to aim at him, firing some sort of electrical pulse at him. Tony changed direction and missed the pulse, but the man fired it again, hitting him on one side of the suit.

“Shit, watch that weapon, especially you, Bucky,” Tony told them over the comms, as he twisted away, avoiding another hit. “It packs a punch and the Wasp suit will probably absorb most of it but you’re vulnerable.”

The man holding the gauntlet dodged a returning repulsor blast from Iron Man and when one of his friends began firing a different weapon at Tony, he turned his attention away, seeming to realise that Bucky wasn’t protected like the others even though Tony hadn’t projected his voice out from the suit and had kept the transmission to their secure line. Throwing himself into a roll to avoid the blast, Bucky fired blindly towards the man, unsure if he hit him or not as he had to immediately dodge a punch thrown by one of the mobsters. He parried several blows with the skilled man before he spun and landed a kick to the man’s jaw, sending him crashing to the ground. He then turned around to find the man with the gauntlet advancing quickly, his weapon arimed right for Bucky’s face.

“No you don’t,” a voice cried and a red blur flew through the air, snatching the man from the ground and flinging him into a wall.

“Peter?” Bucky asked, not able to wait for a reply as Hope shoved one of the mobsters in his direction and he pistol whipped him with his gun. After ensuring the man was out cold, Bucky spun around, his eyes frantically searching for Peter, and falling on Tony instead. A large, winged creature had arrived on the scene and he was dueling with Iron Man, the razor sharp tips of his metal wings gouging deep scratches into the titanium alloy. There was a cry of pain and Bucky turned to see Peter facing off with three opponents as Hope fought the last man. The teen had webbed one of the men’s legs and the cry had come from him as Peter had yanked his feet from beneath him, sending him sprawling to the ground.

The man Hope was fighting was one of Toomes’ and he had an alien looking spear that he was using against her. Hope flickered between her wasp size and her human size as she avoided the blade, but her opponent was faster than she anticipated. Before she could shrink once more, he whipped out the spear and sliced into her stomach, causing her to cry out in pain. Bucky darted forward, firing his gun and stunning the man, causing him to fall forward, crashing to the ground on top of Hope.

“Hey, it’s okay, I got ya,” he said as he rolled the man off of her and quickly examined her wound.

“Forget about me, help the others,” she gasped, her face pale and wan.

Bucky looked up to the sky but Tony was nowhere to be seen, the aerial fight having moved
somewhere else, then over to Peter. “I don't think he needs my help,” he told her wryly, pressing down firmly to staunch the flow of blood.

Wincing, Hope twisted around so she could see and she cursed softly, clearly impressed. Peter wasn’t just dominating the fight, but was toying with the men, probably in an attempt to prove once more to the rest of the team that he was more than capable despite his youth. The poor suckers had no idea what they had signed up for that evening as they were webbed, thrown around easily, and then battered away as if they were human sized cat toys. It was only when Tony appeared again that Peter decided that enough was enough and webbed them up properly, immobilising them.

“Spider-Man, fancy seeing you here,” Tony said dryly after he’d surveyed the scene and noted that all ten bad guys were down for the count. “Here I was thinking that you were grounded. Whatever will your aunt say? Bucky, is Hope going to be okay?”

“Yeah, she’ll need to be stitched up but it’s not too deep. We should probably take the spear though and test the blade for any poisons or chemicals though, just in case.”

Peter stood to one side, watching them, and even covered by the suit, Bucky could read the tension in his shoulders. The image of Liz’s lips brushing his cheek flashed once more through Bucky’s head and he turned away, unable to continue looking at him.

“I’m gonna go before May gets home and finds me gone,” Peter said, his voice stilted with anger and hurt.

“Peter,” Tony began to apologise but with a tilt of the teen’s head towards Hope, the genius closed his mouth.

“See you.”

“Okay, I’ll call you later for a debrief,” Tony said but Peter had already shot out a web and was gone, with no indication that he’d heard him.

As much as Bucky hurt from what he’d seen earlier in front of Midtown High, it was nothing to the pain of watching Peter leave them now. Before he could dwell any more on it, Hope moaned in pain, and he turned his attention back to her, for now having to leave his broken heart to its own devices.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't hate me...
Tony paused outside medical as he heard van Dyne and Lang arguing from within, not exactly wanting to get into the middle of an argument.

“I should have been there! This wouldn’t have happened if I’d been there!”

“Really, Scott? Inflated ego, much? The guy was good and he was too fast for me so he would have trumped all over you.”

“Not if we were fighting together. I know you’re still pissed at me, Hope, but even you gotta admit that we work well together as a team. I just really wish you’d called me in.”

“You were with Cassie! You get so little time with her as it is, and none of us what to interrupt that unless it’s urgent. We thought we could handle it.”

“Yeah, and you got hurt, Hope! I should have been there.”

Deciding to come back with the news later, Tony turned to go but paused as he heard Bucky mentioned.

“I just wasn’t fast enough, Scott. I’ll work more with Bucky on it, building my speed, I’m sure I’ll improve.”

“Oh, since when did Barnes become Bucky?”

van Dyne huffed. “Maybe since we became teammates!”

“I’m their teammate and I don’t feel like calling them by their pet names.”

“For fuck’s sake, Scott, it’s a nickname. Don’t make this into something that it isn’t.”

“Are you sure it isn’t anything? You seem pretty chummy with him, maybe you both want more?”

van Dyne made a frustrated sound somewhere between a groan and a snarl. “There’s nothing going on between Bucky and me, okay. God, are you that blind? Can you not see that he’s taken?”

“Barnes is seeing someone? Who?”

“Honestly, Scott, your eyes are wide open but you’re completely oblivious. If you can’t figure it out for yourself, then it’s not my place to tell you.”

“Awww, man, come on, Hope, don’t dangle gossip in front of me and then hold out on me!”

Tony was pretty sure that van Dyne wasn’t going to voice her suspicions, and as much as he really wanted to know if she was right or not, now wasn’t really the time. Maybe she would confide to Bucky about what she thought was going on but for now, he needed to stop Lang from prying further. He stepped into the room, offering their patient a smile and essentially ignoring Lang.

“How’re you feeling?”

“Better, thanks. Still sore, but better.”

“Good to hear. Let me know if the pain gets worse or if you start feeling dizzy.”
“Gee, Stark, I didn’t know that you were a doctor,” Lang said, dripping sarcasm.

“He actually has three doctorates,” van Dyne told him primly, “so technically he is a doctor.”

Lang rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean. He’s not a medical doctor.”

“Yes, but I am the one who keeps an entire medical team on staff,” Tony explained, finding himself liking van Dyne more and more, maybe even enough to get away with... “so I need to know if Hope requires their attention.”

Neither missed the change in address and Hope gave him a cheeky smile while Lang just glared. “I’ll let you know if I need anything... Tony.”

“Excellent! Right, all the tests I’ve run on the spear have come back negative for any nasty chemicals or poisons so it doesn’t look like we’ll run into any complications there. You just gotta rest up and let your body do its thing.”

“Thank you,” she told him sincerely. “I really appreciate this.”

“Hey, we’re teammates, we have to take care of each other.” Tony patted the metal railing at the foot of the bed and then hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “I gotta go now but if you need anything, just hit that big red button and one of us will come running.” With a final smile to Hope and a nod in Lang’s direction, Tony sauntered from the room, and went in search of his partner.

Something hadn’t been quite right with Bucky that afternoon, even taking into consideration that Peter was still pissed at them, but given the whole ‘dodging energy blasts from alien tech’ thing, Tony hadn’t had a chance to talk to the soldier about it. They needed to get to the bottom of this, and they needed to make things right with their young lover too. It was rare for the three of them to be at odds with each other and it made the genius queasy just thinking about it. Being Avengers meant that they were constantly in dangerous and potentially life threatening situations and with that looming over them at all times, they couldn’t afford to stay mad at one another. If something happened and they hadn’t made things right...well, it didn't bear thinking about.

Bucky was in their bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed and holding a framed photo of the three of them. It was the selfie they’d taken in the park on Christmas day and since the bedroom was their safe place where no one, not even the cleaning staff, could come, they had risked printing it out and placing it on the bedside table. A metal finger traced gently over Peter’s wide grin, and Tony smiled as he sat down next to his partner. “I love how happy we all look there,” he commented.

“We were happy,” Bucky replied in a soft voice. “Fuck, I don’t think I’d ever been so happy.” He looked up, his stormy grey eyes meeting Tony’s, and the genius was shocked to see that they were wet with unshed tears. “We were so happy, Tony.”

“Hey, babe, what’s wrong? What is it?” He reached up and cupped Bucky’s cheek, rubbing gently across the skin just above where his stubble began.

“I saw Petey today, with Liz. She hugged him, kissed him, and then they left school together.”

Tony ignored the feeling of being punched in the stomach, his utter faith in Peter telling him that there must be an explanation. “When you say kissed?”

“Just on the cheek, but it was so affectionate,” he said, his voice cracking.

Letting out a long, slow breath, Tony tried to recreate the scene in his head, exploring the possibilities. “Were there other people around?”
Bucky frowned. “Well, yeah, school had just let out so there were crowds of people.”

“Okay, and did you see Liz with anyone before she got to our boy?”

“I didn’t see, I was looking at Peter.”

“So there’s a possibility that those creeps Peter told us about had been bothering her? Maybe she used Peter as a way to get away from them?”

“Oh.” Bucky bit down on his lower lip and looked away, ashamed. “Yeah, I suppose that could be what happened.”

Tony wrapped an arm around Bucky’s shoulders and pulled him against him, rubbing a hand soothingly up and down his arm. “I know you’re upset, babe, but Peter is loyal to us, he’s not going to leave us for anyone else, okay?”

“I know that, I do, but I can’t help it when I see him with other people, people touching him in such a familiar way, I know he wouldn’t be petty but he’s mad at me and I keep on wondering if he’d do something just to prove a point, to prove that he can have anyone he wants. I know he wouldn’t, he’s not like that, I swear, but it’s like I’m having a waking nightmare - those thoughts just won’t stop.”

“He’s mad at me too, you know,” Tony offered, unsure of what else he could say to banish the irrational fears Bucky had.

“But you’re not the one who had a meltdown over the whole Brad thing. This is a fucking pattern with me! Peter deserves so much better than me, he shouldn’t have to put up with me.” A sob broke free and Tony could feel him shaking against him. “I should walk away and let him just be with you, so he’s only treated the way he deserves to be treated, but I can’t, I can’t lose him and that’s so selfish. I don’t want to ever lose him, I can’t.”

Tony held Bucky as he cried harder, rocking him gently and whispering words of comfort. He hating seeing him so broken like this, hurting so much, and longed to just fix it. The soldier had suffered so much over an unimaginably long time, and Tony wanted nothing more than to see him happy and content. That couldn’t happen though, not without Peter. The three of them were equal parts of a whole and without one, the others just didn’t fit.

Bucky soon succumbed to his emotional exhaustion and once he’d cried himself to sleep against Tony’s chest, the genius managed to maneuver him onto his back and under the covers. He spent a few more minutes just gently stroking Bucky’s face, and then quietly left the room, heading through the penthouse and out onto the balcony. “Fri, if Bucky wakes up, let him know I’ll be back soon, ’kay?”

“You’re the best, baby girl.” He called the armour to to him and then once he was encased, he took off into the night sky, heading for an apartment in Queens.

Peter was in his room when Tony silently came to hover outside his window, sitting at his desk, one hand holding up his chin as he stared at an open text book before him. His other hand held a pen and it was tapping out a rhythm against the pages.

Tony tapped at the glass and watched as the teen spun around in his chair, his eyes widening as he saw that he had a visitor. He hurried across to the window and pulled it open, allowing Tony to awkwardly climb inside after the suit opened and continued to hover in the air outside the window.
“What are you doing here?” Peter whispered once he was inside.

“Needed to see you, baby,” Tony told him, just as quietly. Before Peter could reply, he had pulled him close and was covering his mouth with his own, devouring the boy. Peter let out a needy little moan, kissing back with enthusiasm, his hands coming around to clutch at the back of Tony’s t-shirt. Knowing that they didn’t have much time, that May could come in at any moment, Tony reluctantly broke the kiss, but hugged Peter hard to his chest. “Are you okay? You didn’t get hurt in the fight?” he murmured into his hair.

He felt Peter shake his head under his chin. “No, I’m okay, Tony. You didn’t have to come here to ask, though, could have just texted.”

“I didn’t know if you’d reply.”

He heard Peter swallow heavily and then the teen sagged against him. “I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t be ignoring you, it’s just so much is going on right now and I’m confused and it hurts.”

“I know, Petey, I know. I’m so sorry that we upset you, that we got mad.”

“There’s nothing going on with Liz, I promise, Tony. We’re just friends, and we’re going to the dance as friends, nothing more, I swear. I wish I’d never said yes, though, since I hate that we’re all angry at each other.”

Tony sighed and pressed another kiss to the teen’s temple. “I was upset that you didn’t say anything before you agreed, but I don’t have a problem with you going to Homecoming with Liz. We just have to work on our communication a little better, that’s all, otherwise we all end up miserable and upset.”

“How’s Bucky doing?” Peter asked in a small voice.

“I won’t lie, he’s not great. He came to talk to you after school today and saw you with Liz and that upset him even more.”

Peter stiffened in his arms and then pulled back, anger maring his angelic features. “He was spying on me?” he hissed.

“Wait, what? No, God, no, Peter. He came to apologise, not to spy on you.”

“I never saw him, he didn’t let me know he was there, so he what? Just watched me from the shadows?”

Tony furrowed his brow, unable to understand why Peter was so angry all of a sudden. “Peter, he was waiting for you, then Liz joined you and then you left with her. He didn’t get a chance to tell you he was there without making a scene.”

“He’s the world’s greatest assassin, Tony,” Peter whispered angrily. “If he really wanted to get my attention, he could have!”

The genius rubbed a hand over his face, not knowing where he’d gone so wrong tonight. “I don’t know what to say, Petey. He’s upset, you’re upset, and I’m just here in the middle, trying to hold us together.”

Peter deflated at this and fell back against Tony’s chest. “I’m sorry, I’m not mad at you, I promise, and I know this is hard for you.”
“But you’re mad at Bucky?”

“Yeah, yeah I am. Look, I’ll get over it, but I just need some time to process everything that I’m feeling, I guess. I still love him, and I don’t want to lose him, but I’m allowed to be angry at him when he’s acted like a dick.”

“That’s fair enough, okay, but baby, he’s also allowed to be upset with you, okay? His feelings are just as valid and he’s hurting. So take some time, I understand, but please don't wait too long? It hurts me to see you both at odds with one another.”

Peter nodded. “Thanks, Tony.” He leaned up on his tiptoes so they could share a kiss, his lips warm and soft and damn, how Tony had missed him. It had been a crazy, eventful week and it wasn’t even halfway over yet. The sooner it came to an end and their routine could get back to normal, the better. Tony was confident that this falling out wouldn’t have escalated so quickly if they’d been able to all sit down and talk it out, to look into each other’s eyes as they explained. They coped okay with distance and time apart when things were good, but when there was tension, it only made things so much worse.

Peter moaned into the kiss, pressing close against Tony, his erection hot and hard against the genius’ thigh. Before they could even think about taking it any further, they were interrupted by a shout from deeper inside the apartment.

“Peter Benjamin Parker, you get your arse out here right this instant. You have some explaining to do, young man!”
Pressing one last desperate kiss to Tony’s lips, Peter dashed from his room, hurrying to find out just what he’d done to piss May off now. It felt like all he did lately was disappoint and upset her and after the fight that he’d had with his lovers, he was seriously beginning to question if he could actually do anything right. She was standing in the living room, hands on her hips, and if it was physically possible, he was sure that she’d have steam venting from her ears. “May?” he asked, shrinking in on himself in response to her anger.

She didn’t say anything, just stepped to the side, revealing the television, which had been muted but clear as day on the screen was shaky video footage of Spider-Man subduing three mobsters while the other Avengers fought off Toomes’ men. Her eyes narrowed further as she glared at him.

“Oh,” was all he could manage, not having realised that someone had recorded the fight.

His aunt’s foot tapped angrily against the cheap carpet. “Yes, oh. Just what exactly do you have to say for yourself?” she demanded.

Suddenly, Peter was angry too. All the tension and upset from the previous half a week had built up and May questioning his actions as Spider-Man pushed him over the edge. He glared back at her, jutted out his jaw and retorted, “I told you, we’ve been tracking these weapons dealers for a while now. I saw the lights on my way home from school and stopped to help.”

“I explicitly told you that you were to come straight home from school, you’re grounded, Peter - what part of that do you not understand?”

“They needed my help!” he yelled, throwing his hands up in the air. “What part of that do you not understand? I can’t just stand by and do nothing, May!”

“Yes, Peter, actually, you can. There was a whole group of other superheroes who were dealing with the situation.”

“And they weren’t coping without me! The Wasp got injured and if I hadn’t have stepped in, the others might have been too.”

“They could have called for reinforcements.”

“I was already there! I’m reinforcements! What did you want me to do? Walk straight past and not even help?”

“Yes!” she screamed, red faced.

“Well I can’t do that, I have responsibilities!”

“You’re seventeen, Peter, these sorts of responsibilities are over your head!”

“No, they’re not. For fuck’s sake, May, I’m Spider-Man! I didn’t ask for these powers but I have them and if I chose not to use them, then the bad stuff that happens is on me.”

“No, it’s not - it’s on the people who are doing the bad things! Just because you have the strength and power to stop them, it doesn’t mean that you have to be the one to step up.”

“Seeing something bad happening and choosing to do nothing is just as bad as being the one doing
it, especially when I can help. I saw these men attacking today and I chose to help - that’s what I do!”

“Well it damn well isn’t when I’ve grounded you!”

“Fuck it, you don’t understand!”

“If you swear at me one more time young man, you’re going to regret it. And I understand perfectly well that you’re grounded for another week.”

“You can’t stop me from being Spider-Man!”

“You are under my care, Peter, and while you’re still living under this roof, you will do as I say!”

“Well then maybe it’s time that I moved out since you clearly don’t accept me for who I am!”

They both froze, shocked, and the words hung in the air, ugly and painful. Peter was trembling, he was so angry at his aunt and he could see that same anger reflected back from her, as well as a deep sadness at the words he’d flung at her. She opened her mouth several times, closing it each time when no words came forth. Peter knew that he should take them back, apologise, say that he didn't mean it, but he was too mad to do so, stubbornly holding his line until she understood what being a hero meant.

Eventually she found her voice. In an oddly calm manner she said, “If that’s the way you feel, then by all means, leave,” and she pointed at the door.

He nodded and then before he could think better of it, he walked to the door and left, shutting it quietly behind him.

Adrenaline seemed to be the only thing propelling Peter forward as he made his way down the hall towards the stairs. His mind was reeling, playing back the words they’d shouted at each other over and over, but no matter what the consequences, he couldn’t take anything back. He loved May, more than anything, but she simply did not understand. Ben had died in front of him back before he’d been bitten and Peter had watched helplessly as the man who had attacked him had run away, while Ben bled out in his nephew’s arms. If it had happened six months later, when Peter had become Spider-Man, he would have been able to prevent his uncle’s death, would have been fast enough and strong enough to stop the thug from slipping a knife in between his ribs. May had lost her husband and Peter had lost the man who had raised him like a son, and he swore that so long as he could, he wouldn’t allow anyone else to suffer the way they had suffered. Not being able to do his patrols, to help the little guy, to keep his neighbourhood safe was something that Peter simply could not accept. He’d tried to respect May’s wishes but when push came to shove, he’d been unable to stand back and withhold his assistance.

He made it to the bottom of the stairs and headed out the front entrance, pausing only when he stumbled out into the cold night air. He didn’t have the phone that Tony had given him, didn't have his wallet, nor his suit, had nothing but the clothes on his back. He knew that he would be welcomed with open arms at the Tower but he was reluctant to go there since he was still so upset with Bucky. He’d need time to cool down before he could see him again, not wanting his short temper to lead to an argument that was blown completely out of proportion. Despite being a deadly assassin, Bucky was a sensitive soul and words shouted in anger would cut him deep. No matter how angry the teen was at him, Peter didn’t want to hurt Bucky, and as he well knew from very, very recent experience, it was easy to say things that you didn't mean in the heat of an argument. Going to the Tower would mean having to try and avoid Bucky until things had calmed down and that would only serve to put Tony in an awkward position of referee and so he would save that as a last resort.
Peter considered Ned, who once upon a time would have been his first port of call as a place of sanctuary but the teen really had no idea where he stood with him nowadays. He still considered the boy his best friend but the distance that had grown between them belied that fact. He was sure that Ned would help him, but Peter wasn’t sure if he wanted that on his ledger right now. Michelle was also out, simply because she and Ned were a package deal these days, and the only other person who sprung to mind was, surprisingly, Flash, but Peter didn’t even know where he lived so it wasn’t like he could even show up on his doorstep if he got desperate enough.

As he mulled over his options, Peter’s feet began to take him down the sidewalk, away from his apartment building. His only realistic option was looking like the Tower and he wondered if Friday would sneak him in and alert Tony that he was there without letting Bucky know. It was a long walk to from his place and so he would have ample time to think over how he would deal with the situation. Maybe he’d just have to suck it up and talk to Bucky, work things out? Tony had said that the soldier was upset too and that he also had a right to be, so maybe Peter would just have to accept that he was also to blame? It would be a hard pill to swallow, especially around the dense lump of anger that had seemed to have settled somewhat permanently in his throat, but he loved his partner and was holding onto his anger worth the slim possibility of losing him entirely over this stupid fight?

He’d almost reached the corner when he heard a shout from behind him and he turned to see May running down the pavement towards him. “Peter! Peter, stop, please, please come back,” she cried.

Seeing the genuine distress on her face hit him like a punch to the solar plexus and he didn't even hesitate to return the hug as she threw herself into his arms.

“I'm sorry, please don’t go,” she sobbed, clinging tightly to him. “Please, let’s just work this out. I can’t lose you, sweetie, please, I can’t. I’ve already lost Ben, I can’t lose you too.”

They held each other in silence for a long time, and soon his shoulder was soaked through with her tears, but Peter then realised that he was getting her clothing just as wet from his own tears as well. He was suddenly hit with how much he would miss her if he didn't get to see her everyday, if he were to disappear from her life, and the fight seemed petty and childish in the new light. “I’m sorry I left,” he whispered sincerely. “I shouldn’t have gone, I shouldn’t have said those things.”

She stepped back and clasped his face between her hands, her eyes searching his “Please, just come back? We can sit down and talk about it, come to some sort of agreement. Please?”

“I can’t stop, May, I can’t stop being Spider-Man,” he said, unable to agree until she accepted that.

“I know, and we’ll work that out, figure out a way that you can keep doing that while you’re grounded.”

“Wait, I’m still grounded?” He wasn’t sure why that came as a shock.

“You bet your arse you are, Peter, but you can still be the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man as well. We’ll just have to set some boundaries.”

“So, I’m grounded for an extra week?”

“Yep.”

He sighed, but didn’t press the matter, the cold chill of how close he’d been to leaving still running through his veins. So long as he could still help people, then he could accept his punishment from his Aunt. “Okay, May,” he acquiesced, “that’s fair.” He noticed that she was shivering and he wrapped an arm around her shoulder as he began to guide her back up the street. “Come on, you’re freezing -
let’s get you home.”

She nodded and they walked in a companionable silence back to the apartment, back home.

*Home.*

It wouldn’t always be where he resided, but Peter knew that he would always have a home with May, even if there were other places that he called home as well. It was a comforting thought, one that finally allowed his anger to drain away entirely and by the time they reached the apartment, he was calm enough to have a rational discussion with his aunt. He’d always been so concerned about proving to his lovers that he wasn’t a kid, but perhaps first he had to prove to *himself* that he wasn’t one? As he sat and worked out the terms of his punishment, negotiated for time to patrol, and came to an amicable agreement with May, he actually started to believe it himself.
“Do you think these disappearances are connected to this Enhanced?” Bucky asked, swiping through the information that Colonel Rhodes had sent through to his Starkpad.

“We can’t be sure,” Rhodes replied, easing down into a chair and rubbing at his thigh with a small wince. His session with his physio that morning had been brutal and it was clear that he was feeling it more than usual. “The people disappearing are the very scum of humanity but with mentions of an Enhanced running about, the public are getting antsy. We just need you to check it out, track down the Enhanced and figure out if they are involved, and then make a judgement call on whether they just need a stern talking to, or if we need to take further action.”

The soldier nodded. “Anyone tagging along or is it just me?”

Rhodes gave a shake of his head. “With van Dyne injured and Parker out of commission for now, I can’t really spare anyone else to accompany you, not with the issues we’re having with Toomes. Hell, I can’t really spare you going, but we need to have this investigated before it reignites the whole Enhanced debate again. It’s only just starting to calm down and we don’t need another Sokovia on our hands.”

“It’s fine, I’m happy operating alone, I just need to know so I can plan ahead.”

“I’ll have Friday help as much as possible from this end, checking security footage and connecting the dots,” the Colonel advised. “If you don’t have any luck after a week, come on back and we’ll revisit it later.”

“Will do.”

After getting a few more details from Rhodes, Bucky headed upstairs to pack, keeping it to a minimum so he could move fast and stay under the radar. It was something that he was good at, had a lot of practise at, and he knew that that was the reason that Rhodes had chosen him for the mission. He was confident that he’d be able to track down the Enhanced and get to the bottom of the matter in the allotted time.

He heard a movement behind him and turned to see Tony in the doorway, a pout on his pretty lips. “San Francisco?” the genius whined. “Why is my honeybear sending you so far away?”

“I won’t be gone for long, sweetheart,” he told him.

“First Peter gets grounded for another week, and now you’re abandoning me for a mission. I’m going to be so lonely!”

“I’m sure you’ll survive, Tony. Stop being so dramatic.”

Tony came over to the bed and draped himself over Bucky’s back, arms snaking around his chest. “But I’ll miss you,” he moaned.

Bucky huffed out a laugh and patted one of his hands. “And I’ll miss you, but I’ll be back before you know it.” He paused and then added sadly, “You never know - maybe by the time I get back, Petey won’t still be mad at me.”
“We’ll get it sorted, babe, he just needs some time.”

“I just hate that I won’t have the chance to talk to him face to face before I go.” He twisted around and then sat on the bed, pulling Tony into his lap. “I hate that we’re fighting, that I’ve hurt him, especially because of my own insecurities.”

Tony looped his arms around Bucky’s neck and pressed their foreheads together. “It’ll be okay. Get your mission completed and then by the time you get back, Peter’s grounding should be over, Homecoming will be over, and we can all kiss and make up.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“You love him and he loves you, babe - that’s as simple as it gets. We can figure out the rest but that’s the important part.”

“I hope so. I just hope that he doesn’t change his mind about the whole ‘loving me’ bit,” Bucky said glumly.

Tony pulled back a little to regard him. “Do you honestly believe that he could change his mind so easily or is that just your mood talking?”

The soldier shrugged, sheepish. “Just the mood, I think.”

“Right, well, go and track down your target, work off the mood, and when you come back, we’ll fix everything, ‘kay?”

“Yeah, yeah okay.”

Tony kissed him and then asked, “So, what is it that they think this Enhanced is doing over in San Fran?”

Bucky gave the genius one last squeeze and then moved him off his lap so he could continue packing. “Dunno if it’s actually them doing it or not, but there’s a lot of bodies turning up with no heads.”

“No heads, huh? Why do they think it’s an Enhanced and not just a serial killer?”

“Because they appear to have been bitten off.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.”

“Well, that sounds like fun.”

Bucky took a moment to think about what he’d need to do to track this person, to hunt them on their own turf, to follow them without being caught, to spy on them to ensure that they were the correct target, and how much of a challenge that was going to be. “Yeah, yeah it will be,” he agreed, smiling.

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“And he’s been spotted on CCTV near where all of the victims have been found?” Bucky asked Friday over a secure line, staring at the grainy image of a man on the screen of his laptop.

“Indeed, Bucky. He’s quite good at avoiding most of the cameras, but I’ve managed to access some
from private businesses that aren’t actually pointed at the street but just happen to capture some of it. As you can see from these images -" several flashed up on the screen, the angles differing and some clearer than others, “- they are all of the same man.”

Bucky peered at the photos, taking him in. He was average in almost all regards - height, weight, hair colour, even the way he was dressed in jeans and a hoodie, but there was something about the way that the man moved that set alarm bells off in the soldier’s mind. He might look innocuous, but this man was dangerous. Extremely dangerous. “Do we have an ID?”

“Edward Charles Allan Brock, more commonly known as Eddie Brock. He’s an investigative reporter, best known for The Eddie Brock Report from which he was fired for an interview he did with Carlton Drake, CEO of The Life Foundation.”

“They were in the news recently, yeah? Wasn’t there an explosion with one of their rockets? Drake was killed, wasn't he?”

“He was, yes.”

“Did the cops think that Brock had something to do with that?”

“He was involved insofar as he had began investigating Drake and the Foundation off his own back, but detectives found no connection between him and the explosion of the rocket. It was concluded that Drake suffered from a mental break and thought that he could pilot the launch himself, which led to the explosion.”

Bucky hummed thoughtfully, clicking through the background information Friday had pulled on the journalist. “What was Brock looking into? It must have been pretty bad if he was doing it without the backing of a network behind him.”

“He was investigating allegations of unethical human testing with led to numerous deaths, all of which were covered up. These claims have since been substantiated and Brock was awarded quite a hefty payout from the Life Foundation, as well as receiving several job offers.”

“Did he accept any of the offers?”

“He did, but none of the more lucrative ones. He turned down offers from several large networks to revive The Eddie Brock Report and instead took up one from a small, free-to-air station which is allowing him free reign in what he reports on.”

“I see. Do we have any idea of what he’s investigating at the moment?”

“Not as yet, however it shouldn’t take me long to access his personal computer if you’d like?”

Bucky considered this. On one hand, if Brock was innocent then they would have violated his privacy for nothing, on the other if he was the one behind these deaths then this would help them track his movements and apprehend him. In the end it was an easy choice. “Yes please, Fri.”

Even with Friday gaining access to the entirety of Brock’s digital activity, it was another six days before Bucky actually tracked him down. The man was good and seemed to disappear into thin air whenever the soldier thought he was getting close. It was exhilarating, the chase, and he didn’t get frustrated like most would when Brock once more slipped through his fingers, he just became more determined to find him, to catch him. He’d yet to see any evidence that the man was enhanced, but the skillful way in which he evaded Bucky was proof enough that he was.
They had discovered that Brock was investigating a local youth minister, Tuarn Delaney, who had been accused on multiple occasions of inappropriate behaviour with several children under his care, but before police could prosecute, the child in question would either retract their statement or disappear entirely. The minister had charmed his way through a host of local reporters, convincing them that the claims were false and that the missing children had simply moved out of the area, and Bucky had felt his own anger rise as he had watched those interviews, able to see the truth for what it was. Only Brock seemed to believe that the man was guilty and was trying to find the evidence, to bring him to justice. He appeared to have no problems following Delaney as well as evading Bucky and the ex-assassin had to admit that he was impressed. There really weren’t many people who could evade Bucky for so long, and his admiration for the man only grew the longer it took.

No matter how good Brock was though, Bucky had seven decades of experience as Hydra’s pet hunter under his belt, plus the years prior as a sniper in the war. He knew that he would catch him, it was just a matter of when. It was the middle of the night, there was no moon and a heavy drizzle was falling, only serving to make the fog that rolled in from the bay even thicker. Brock had met with a member of Delaney’s congregation earlier that day and was given information about his planned whereabouts for that night, as well as what appeared to be a packet of documents that the man promised would ‘put that piece of scum away for good’. An underground gambling den with topless waitresses who served lines of blow alongside their alcoholic beverages didn’t strike Bucky as the sort of place that a man of faith should frequent, but considering that he had lost his own faith about the same time that he’d fallen from that train all those years ago, well, he wasn’t really one to judge.

Brock was lurking in an alleyway across from the entrance to the gambling den when Bucky arrived, melting into the shadows to wait and watch. The journalist stirred, looking around and he muttered something quietly to himself, too quiet for Bucky to hear. He swung his gaze around the area, passing over the place where the soldier was hidden several times, but eventually he deemed that whatever had sent his hackles rising was nothing of consequence and he turned his attention back to the doorway.

It was roughly an hour later that Delaney emerged, stumbling slightly as he exited the dark doorway. He looked up at the night sky, wiped rain from his face and then after stuffing his hands deep into his pockets, he turned and made his way down the street. A beat later, Brock left his hiding spot and began to slink through the foggy night behind him, and Bucky followed soon after, remaining in the shadows. They followed the minister further down towards the docks, the broad street turning into twisting alleyways between industrial buildings. What the man was doing here when he lived in an upper class suburb clear across town was anyone’s guess, but he didn’t seem to be in a hurry and he didn’t seem to be concerned about being out by himself in such a neighbourhood. He finally reached the waterfront but turned and walked along the front of some warehouses, not seeming interested in the docks, now looking like he was expecting someone or something.

Delaney came to a halt under a streetlamp and Bucky couldn’t help the soft snort that escaped his throat at the idiocy of the man. Whatever business he was conducting at this time of night wasn’t likely to be legal but here he was, standing under a damn spotlight. Bucky looked back around to see what Brock was doing but the man was gone, disappearing into the night. He didn’t have to wait long however to find him again as he just as suddenly appeared in front of the minister.

“He’s not coming,” Brock said conversationally, sauntering out into the light.

“Huh?” Delaney replied.

“I said, your man isn’t coming,” the journalist repeated. “I’ve come instead.”

“And who the fuck are you?”
Brock smiled, sharp and toothy. “Your worst nightmare.”

Delaney narrowed his eyes. “Hang on a second, you’re that reporter! Black?”

“Brock. Eddie Brock.”

The minister sneered. “That’s the one. You got fired, didn’t you? For making up lies about that company.”

“Oh, it wasn’t lies,” Brock corrected him. “I got the truth in the end. I’m good at finding out the truth, getting to the bottom of things.”

“Your mother must be proud. Well, there isn’t a story here for you so why don’t you fuck off.”

“Why, you have quite the filthy mouth for a minister, don’t you?” Brock drawled. “You’re wrong though - we both know that there’s a story here, the truth about what you really did to those kids.”

“It’s all lies. What does a washed up loser like you think you’re gonna get from me?”

Before Bucky could even blink, Brock had transformed, inky darkness moving like liquid over his skin, increasing his size, more than doubling his height, muscles rippling from the broad chest and a mouth full of sharp, pointed teeth grinning from his smooth, black head. “What do we think we’ll get from you?” he rumbled, his voice deep and gravelly. “Why, dinner of course.”

In one swift move, the creature that had been Brock darted down, his jaw gaping open, and enveloped Delaney’s head. His massive jaw closed and with a swift jerk of his head, he separated Delaney’s from his body and crunched down. Even from this distance, Bucky could hear the sound of teeth grinding against bone.

“Tasty, though not many brains to speak of.”

A voice answered, one that sounded distinctly like Brock, and it seemed to be coming from within the creature. “Urgh, less talking, more chewing. You know I find this part gross so let’s get it over with.”

“He was a bad man, Eddie - maybe the worst we’ve come across. Even on Klyntar he would be despised for his actions against the juveniles. He was bad and we eat bad men, that was the deal.”

“Geez, I know, but man, would you hurry up and swallow, this shit tastes terrible.”

“No it does not, it is delicious.”

“Yeah, well we beg to differ.”

Bucky stood, frozen, as he watched the creature continue chewing even as he bickered with the voice of Brock, before he swallowed theatrically.

“Is that better?”

“Thank you. Was that too much to ask?”

“I don’t know - was it?”

“Urgh, let’s just ditch the body and head home. I’m spent.”
“You do not want dessert? The pancreas is tender and juicy.”

There could be no doubt remaining that Brock and, whatever the hell this was, were behind the recent deaths, and so Bucky sprung into action. He silently launched himself at the creature, a knife in one hand even though he wasn’t sure how much help it would be.

The creature sensed his attack and spun around, easily batting Bucky from the air. He rolled, vibranium hand digging into the asphalt to bring himself to a stop, sparks flying, and he crouched, assessing the situation.

The creature stood, ready, but not moving, and then one side of his face seemed to melt away, revealing that of Brock underneath. “Man, I don’t know who you are, but this is not a fight that you want to pick,” he warned.

“Don’t have a choice,” Bucky told him and then jumped forward, knife slashing. He managed to hit the creature but his knife only seemed to sink into his inky skin like butter, inflicting very little damage. The creature shook him off and then a tendril of black swung out from his body and wrapped around Bucky’s legs. Before it could get too tight a hold, Bucky flexed his legs (Tony didn’t wax lyrical about his thighs for nothing) and broke free, darting around the creature and aiming a kick to the back of what appeared to be its knees. It had little effect, only causing it to snarl and spin around, more tendrils darting out and trying to catch the soldier.

They fought in such a manner for the next few minutes - the creature trying to trap Bucky and Bucky using his speed and skills to evade capture. No matter how many times his knife found its mark, the creature didn’t seem perturbed, and he tried to think outside the box, to come up with some way in which he could overpower the creature. He allowed his instincts to take over, the skills he’d developed over the years at Hydra coming to the fore, continuing the fight as his mind ticked over. He had other weapons on him, more knives and several guns, but from what he could see, they would have just as little effect.

The creature grew more and more angry as Bucky evaded him, and eventually it roared and then opened his jaw wide and jumped directly at Bucky’s head. Acting on instinct, Bucky threw up his mechanical arm and winced as he heard the scrape of those sharp teeth digging into the vibranium, sparks flying through the fog.

And then an unearthly howl echoed through the night as he was suddenly released and fell backwards onto the wet ground.

“It hurts! Eddie, it hurts our teeth!”

“Well what did you expect you dumb moron! He has a metal arm!”

“I was trying to bite his head off, not his arm!”

“Well that’s a lesson, isn’t it. I tried to tell you not to eat him but you didn’t listen!”

“He was trying to hurt us!”

“But he’s not a bad man! We had a deal!”

“Eddddddie! It hurts!” the creature whined.

“There’s not much I can do about that right now.”
“But Eddie -”

Bucky cleared his throat, looking up at the creature from his place on the ground, unable to keep in his laughter as the bickering immediately ceased. “Did you forget that I was here?” he asked.

“No!” the creature snarled, going on the defensive again.

“V, just cut it out, would you. Come on, man, let me back out. I don’t think this guy is gonna hurt us now.”

There was what appeared to be an internal struggle and then the inky skin rippled and shifted, seeming to drain away, revealing more and more of the man beneath. Bucky watched closely and noted that the blackness was actually *sinking into* Brock himself until the creature was gone entirely, leaving only the man behind. He held a hand out to Bucky and with a slightly sheepish look said, “Hey, I’m Eddie Brock. Nice to meet you.”

He hesitated for only a second before he accepted the hand, allowing himself to be hauled to his feet. “Bucky Barnes. Nice to meet you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

I’d been toying with ideas of introducing Venom to this ’verse in a future installment but I was coming up with a blank for a mission for Bucky and this fit perfectly so here they are :) Just a cameo for now, in this chapter and the next, but we’ll see more of them at a later date.

Also, can I just reiterate the tags for this story. Seriously, it's an angst fest but there's a reason for it. PLOT is coming!
They went to an all night diner that Brock knew of so that they could talk. It was supposedly a throwback to the 50’s, with lamps hanging low over booths made of shiny red vinyl, but Bucky had only a passing recollection of the 1950s and it was mostly blood and screams so he didn’t feel any sense of nostalgia for that time.

“Come on, we usually sit down the back, means V can come out and play without causing a shitstorm,” Brock said, leading them to a booth in the very far corner. It was busier than Bucky would have expected a diner to be at 3am on a Friday morning, but the other customers were mostly sat at the counter or at the booths along the windows at the front.

Sliding into his seat, Brock immediately slid over a menu, and Bucky raised a brow in question.

It was Venom who answered, a small, snake-like head forming from Brock’s shoulder, his toothy grin no less disturbing at this reduced size than when he was larger. “We are hungry.”

“You’re always hungry,” Brock said, eyes still on the menu, and he sounded...fond? “Seriously, you just ate.”

“Yes, but you didn’t let me have dessert. I want chocolate, Eddie.” He extended further from Brock’s shoulder, coming down to peruse the menu, and he nudged at Brock’s hand until he flipped it over to show the desserts. “I want the triple chocolate fudge sundae,” he announced.

“Does it matter what I want?”

“You can get something as well if you’d like,” Venom said magnanimously, “but it might make you feel sick if you eat too much.”

Brock rolled his eyes and then sat back in his seat. “Looks like the triple chocolate fudge sundae it is then.” He noticed Bucky watching them curiously and he shrugged. “I’ve had to learn to compromise.”

The waitress appeared to take their order before the soldier could respond and immediately Venom melted away, but he didn't disappear back inside of Brock, instead he settled around his neck, morphing into a convincing scarf. If Bucky hadn’t known that it was...the creature, then he’d never have guessed.

They placed their orders (Bucky figured the sundae sounded good and got one too, as well as coffee) and then he asked, “So, what exactly is Venom?”

“He’s an alien symbiote,” Brock explained, reaching up and patting the black mass affectionately. “He can’t survive without a host and apparently I’m the perfect host for him.” He rolled his eyes. “I know, right? Me? I’m not perfect for anything.”

“Yes, you are, you’re perfect for us, Eddie,” Venom piped up, and Bucky was struck with the idea that this was far from the first time that they’d had this conversation, that it was a circular argument they had over and over again.
“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say,” Brock retorted.

Before they could begin to bicker, Bucky jumped in with another question. “So he likes to eat things other than heads?”

The journalist nodded. “There’s certain elements and chemicals that he needs to survive. When he first joined with me, well, it wasn’t quite consensual and I didn’t know what he needed, so I wasn’t getting them and in order to survive, well, he was kinda eating me, I guess. From the inside.”

While Bucky looked on in shock, Venom formed into the small head again and he managed to look hurt. “I told you, I was going to fix you.”

“I know, V, I know - now. Anyway, so there’s certain human foods that are better for him, things like chocolate and fried potato - his favourite is Tater Tots - but he also requires fresh meat.” He pulled a face. “Brains, especially. Gross, huh?”

Grimacing, Bucky nodded.

“Trust me, I was not happy about it.”

“You bitched like the little pussy you are.”

“Well excuse me for not enjoying being a fucking cannibal, V!”

“I’ve compromised as well,” the symbiote replied sulkily.


“We swim in the bay and find sharks to eat, and a couple of times we’ve gone out and found some deer. Ultimately though, he still requires the odd human head to survive and so I have a rule that it’s only bad people.”

“Like Delaney?”

“Yeah, like him. He molested so many children and he killed at least three of them, but the law was failing and so we took matters into our own hands.” He looked resolute. “I’m not gonna apologise for that, he got what he deserved and by way of that, V got what he needed. You said that the Avengers sent you? Well, if they wanna try and stop me, I’d like to see them try.” He had sat forward, putting himself protectively between Bucky and the symbiote, who seemed happy to just watch proceedings.

“I ain’t taking you in,” Bucky said. “Why do you think we’re having coffee and ice cream and aren’t still fighting?”

“Because your puny human flesh would have succumbed to my teeth by now?” Venom sneered.

Bucky held up his arm. “You want another mouthful of vibranium? No? Then shut it.” The alien shrunk back, and pleased, Bucky continued, “I just needed to understand your motives, to find out if you were a threat to civilians. Colonel Rhodes left the call in my hands and I’m calling it that you’re not. Trust me, I know that sometimes there ain’t nothing you can do but take somebody out, that it’s the only justice that will be done.”

Brock tilted his head, his gaze piercing, and Bucky could understand how unnerving that must be for the people he investigated. “I heard about you, when you were pardoned. How much of what they
said was the truth and how much did they withhold?"

“We wanted to be transparent, to be honest, so we were, but that doesn’t mean we said everything there was to say.” He swallowed hard and looked away. “The things that I did, that they had me do as The Winter Soldier, the public doesn’t need to be exposed to those horrors.”

Brock immediately looked apologetic. “Nah, I get it, man. Sorry.’

“What? What were you made to do?” Venom asked. When neither of them answered, he melted back under his host’s skin, and a full body shudder went through Brock.

“Dammit, V, you’re gonna break something in there if you’re not careful.” He caught Bucky’s questioning glance. “He’s rooting through my memories, finding the information that he needs. Sorry, I can’t keep anything from him.”

“Sounds invasive.”

“It is, especially when someone is acting like a bull in a china shop!”

The little black head formed once more from Brock’s shoulder. “You didn’t tell me so I had to dig it out myself.” His long tongue came out and licked a stripe up Brock’s cheek, causing the man to grimace, but he couldn’t hide the blush that followed from Bucky’s sharp eyes. Then the symbiote turned to the soldier. “You were used as a weapon,” he stated. “Forced to do someone else’s bidding, for their gain.”

“Yes,” Bucky confirmed, though it hadn’t been a question.

Venom pulled further away from Brock, moving to close the distance over the table and Bucky remained as still as possible, allowing the alien to do whatever it was that he was doing. His face came to a stop a mere inch from Bucky’s and this close, his big, white eyes took up the majority of the soldier’s vision. He could just make out a tendril of inky black snaking towards him before he felt a feather light touch against his cheek, tickling its way up until it found his temple.

And then a shock like icy cold pierced his skin as it sank beneath the surface.

Bucky jerked backwards, but not before images of his years with Hydra flickered before his eyes. “What the fuck?” he snarled, the sounds of his targets begging to be spared lingering in his mind.

Brock looked shaken. “Jesus, V, what was that?” he demanded, wincing as he rubbed at his own head, clearly having been exposed to the same visions through their link.

“I wished to see.”

“We talked about boundaries, you dick!” He looked over at Bucky. “I am so sorry, man. He’s never done that before, not when he’s been bonded with me anyway.”

“Sok, just a shock is all,” Bucky muttered, feeling disorientated and thrown.

Venom nuzzled against Brock’s face, leaving Bucky to wonder just what kind of relationship the two shared, before he said, “We like him. He is like us.” And then he sank back into his host’s body just as their waitress arrived with their order.

After thanking the waitress, Bucky took a gulp of hot coffee and then followed it with a cold spoonful of ice cream. The contrasting sensations helped to clear his mind and shake away the last echoes of the memories he had seen. “What did he mean? That I’m like you?”
Brock paused, almost listening to an internal conversation, and then shrugged. “No idea, he’s not expanding on it. I’m guessing the fact that you were once considered to be ‘bad’ but now you’re doing ‘good’? We’ve had more than a few conversations about that since we bonded.”

“Ah, okay.” He took another spoonful of his ice cream, enjoying the richness of the chocolate and immediately thought of how much Peter would enjoy it.

Now that the coast was clear, Venom remerged and he addressed Bucky once again but kept his distance this time. “**You look sad. What is wrong?**”

“You’re rather nosy, aren’t you?”

“We are, but we are okay with that.”

“Do you always speak in plural?”

“We are one, we are Venom - plural is correct.”

“Fair enough.” Bucky sighed, and then thought ‘fuck it’, deciding that he may as well open up to the odd pair sitting opposite him. “Just having some issues with one of my partners, is all, and I miss him.”

“Partners?” Brock asked, perking up at the gossip.

“Um, yeah, there’s the three of us.”

“What did you do to make him mad at you?” Venom asked before Brock could ask who they were.

“What makes you think it was me in the wrong?”

“Because you are feeling guilty.”

Okay, fine, that’s true. I got a little jealous that he arranged to go with a girl he knows as a date to a dance. It’s all platonic but I still got upset. We’ve not really seen each other since and although he says he wants time, I think the distance is making it worse. I should have apologised right away but I didn’t and I think he’s just gotten angrier and angrier at me.” His voice cracked a little as he added, “I’m worried that I’ll lose him.”

“You love him?”

“More than anything.”

“Then you need to make it right. When you get back, you need to do what needs to be done so that he remains yours. We like you, you are like us and you should be happy like us.”

“Huh, never thought I’d be getting relationship advice from an alien.”

“It’s a little hard to swallow, isn’t it?” Brock said. “Especially since he’s a possessive bastard himself.”

Bucky shrugged. “Yeah, well, he still has a good point. Pete will be at the dance tonight when I get home but I’ll fix it first thing tomorrow.”

“So, you’re heading back? You’re really not going to cause trouble for us?” Brock asked.
“Nah, so far as I’m concerned, you’re doing a community service.”

“Will your boss see it the same way?”

“Rhodes doesn’t have to hear the whole story. I’ll leave out the bit about seeing you actually bite a head off.” He paused, knowing that he was blurring the lines somewhat when he added, “So there’s no evidence left behind, any chance you could eat the whole body?”

“Yes.”

“No!”

He chuckled and scooped up a large chunk of chocolate fudge. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out between the two of you.”

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It was early evening by the time Bucky finally made it back to New York. He was tired and weary and all he wanted to do was curl up with both of his partners like they did every Friday night, but tonight Peter would be at the Homecoming dance with Liz instead. He wandered through the common floor, not finding anyone about and so he made his way up to the Penthouse, looking for Tony. He found the man in the living room on the couch, scrolling through his phone. “Hey,” the genius greeted him, his smile warm and welcoming.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Bucky said, slumping down next to him and melting against his side. “It is so good to see you.”

“You too,” he murmured, giving him a kiss. “I missed you. So everything went okay over there?”

“Yeah, we won’t be having any problems, and I’m pretty sure we’ve now got an ally.” Tony had been in a meeting when Bucky had finally crawled into bed that morning and he hadn’t had a chance to really go into depth about what had happened before he got on the plane.

“An ally? Sweet.”

“Yeah,” the soldier said, smiling, “and I think I made a friend as well. Actually, better make that two friends.”

“That’s awesome, babe,” Tony said, leaning in for another kiss. Before they could deepen it, his phone chimed with the custom tone for Peter and he quickly checked it. He turned the screen to show Bucky the photo attachment with was a snap of Peter looking suave in a light grey suit. “Gosh, he looks great,” he said.

“He always does,” Bucky agreed, drinking in the sight of their young lover.

“Yes he does.”

“Yes he does.”

“Yeah,” the genius said, typing out a reply and hit send.

_We both think you look gorgeous. Have a great night and we’ll see you tomorrow? - Tony_

A moment later they got a reply.

_Thanks, Tony. See you then - Peter_

Bucky tried to ignore the sharp flare of hurt that shot through him at the message only being addressed to Tony but the genius could tell that he was upset. He hugged him tight and whispered, “It’s okay, I told you before you left, we’ll sort it.”
“I know,” Bucky replied, miserable. “I just want to make it right, to get over this stupid fight. I miss him, Tony, I miss him so much.”

“I know, babe, I know.” He tucked a strand of hair behind the soldier’s ear and stroked over his face. “You look tired.”
“You know I don’t sleep well without one or both of you by my side.”

“How about we have some dinner and then have an early night?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Come on then, let me take care of you.”

Tony did as promised and after a quick meal, Bucky was back in their bed, asleep almost as soon as Tony’s arms wrapped around him. He was still being held by his partner several hours later when an alarm sounded through the building, startling them both from sleep.

“Boss!” Friday’s panicked voice came over the speakers, “Peter’s in trouble!”

Chapter End Notes

That's all for Venom in this fic, his cameo is done and dusted now. I hope you enjoyed his interactions with Bucky :) He'll reappear sometime down the track in a future installment though.

Unseen scene fun fact - Eddie added Bucky to Facebook. I wanted to include that they were keeping in touch and were FB friends but it didn't fit in anywhere. Hopefully that will distract you all from yelling at me for the cliffhanger :-)
Peter didn’t think he could be any more nervous that night. First he’d dodged questions all afternoon from May about why he wasn’t going to Homecoming with his boyfriends (“I told you, May, they’re not out yet,”), then he’d had to explain to her just why Tony Stark had had a bespoke suit delivered for him (“He does stuff like this for everyone, May, it’s just who he is and it’s much better than the horrible old suit I was going to wear,”), and finally he had sent a photo of himself in said suit to Tony, only to find that he’d shown it to Bucky as well. Peter hadn’t wanted Bucky to see the photo, didn’t want him to be reminded of the fact that Peter was going to the dance with Liz, he really just wanted the night over and done with so they could make up and get back to normal. He was sick of fighting, sick of being mad at his partner, and he just wanted to kiss and make up. But then he was standing at the front door of the lavish house where Liz lived and her dad was there, opening the door, the entire reason that Peter had agreed to go with her in the first place and holy heck, he was so much more intimidating without Bucky and Tony by his side.

Toomes smiled at him, like a shark, and welcomed him in, offering him a hand. “Peter, nice to see you again, put her there. Ooh, nice firm grip you’ve got, come on in, come in.”

Peter followed him inside, stuttering out a hello and then another as Liz’s mom fluttered about, calling him handsome before she scurried off to find her daughter, leaving them alone. Peter swallowed hard, nerves sending his stomach dancing.

“You okay there, Pete?”

“Yeah?”

“No, sir, I’m not old enough to drink.”

Toomes pointed at him and grinned. “That’s the right answer!”

Before he had to find something to reply with, Liz descended from upstairs, dressed all in pink. She looked lovely and as much as he’d had a crush on her once upon a time, Peter found that she just wasn’t all that attractive to him anymore. He definitely was more of a genius-in-a-suit or a super-soldier-in-a-Henley kind of guy these days.

“Doesn’t she, Pete?”

“Yeah, yeah you look really good,” he told her.

“Once again, that’s the right answer,” the man said, thumping Peter on the back.

After awkwardly handing over the corsage and standing (just as awkwardly) for several photos, Toomes announced that he was their ride since he was on his way out for work anyway, and then Peter found himself in the car, watching the man in the rearview mirror from the backseat. From what Tony had told him, they had picked up hints that Toomes and his men had a big job planned, and the fact that the man had told his family that he was going to be away for a couple of days
screamed at Peter that it was going to happen tonight. He’d come prepared to gather information, nothing else - he hadn’t brought his suit, only one of his webslingers that he could get away with as it was disguised as a bracelet, so he really wasn’t geared up for a fight. He needed backup, needed to let his partners know, and he pulled out his phone, hiding it next to his thigh so he could try and send a message without being obvious about it.

“So, Pete, what are you gonna do?”

“What?” Peter startled and his phone slipped from his grasp, rolling down under the front seat.

“When you graduate - what do you think you’ll do?”

“Oh, I, uh, I don’t know.”

“Dad, don’t grill him,” Liz said, but didn’t look up from where she was Snapchatting her friends.

“Just saying, you know, all you guys who go to that school pretty much have your life planned out, don’t you?”

“Yeah, no, I haven’t really thought much about it yet.”

“He’s got an internship with Tony Stark, remember?” Liz commented. “I think Peter’s gonna be fine.”

“Oh, right, yeah, I forgot about that. Interesting man, Tony Stark. Playboy by night, Iron Man by day. Must be pretty interesting working with him.”

“Oh, um, I guess. Mostly we just work in the lab, so that can get pretty boring.”

“Really? Boring?” Liz scoffed. “Peter, you get to hang out with superheroes all the time. I know that you’re friends with Bucky Barnes too, and you must know Spider-Man and Ant-Man.”

“Oh, well, yeah, we’ve met. Solid dudes, those insect guys.”

They pulled up to a red light and Toomes met Peter’s eyes in the mirror. “It really does sound like you lead an interesting life, Pete. Doesn’t it make you want to try it?”

“Uh, try what, sir?”

“Being a superhero,” Toomes replied. “I mean, you hang around them all the time, you must want to try it for yourself, huh? Be the hero, take down the bad guys?”

“Oh, yeah, no not really. Not really ‘me’ I don’t think.”

“Really? Cos from what I’ve seen, you really seem the type. Takes a certain kind of person and you seem to tick all the boxes.”

Peter couldn’t look away, his gaze locked with that of Toomes and he was certain that the man knew that he was something more. He was smart, had to be to build such an empire and then keep it from those closest to him, and with the amount of time Peter spent with the Avengers, it really wasn’t much of a stretch to come to the right conclusion. He stretched out his leg, trying to hook his phone with his toe, to drag it close so he could send the message to Tony, but he couldn’t quite reach it.

“Dad,” Liz said, looking up from her phone, “the light.”

Toomes held Peter’s eyes for one more moment, then pulled away from the intersection. He didn’t
say anything else for the rest of the drive and they were soon pulling up in front of the school. “Here we are, end of the line,” Toomes said, and Peter was sure he wasn't imagining the menace in those words.

“Thanks, Dad,” Liz said, completely oblivious to the tension thrumming through the car.

“You head on in, gumdrop - I’m gonna give Peter the ‘dad’ talk.”

She rolled her eyes but seemed happy enough to do as her father said. “Don’t let him intimidate you. Love you, Dad, have a safe flight.”

“Love you too, gumdrop.” They watched as she ran up the path, finding her friends, and then Toomes shifted in his seat so he could see Peter face to face. “Does she know? Does anyone know?”

“Know what?” Peter asked, in one last ditch attempt to play innocent.

“So she doesn’t.” He nodded. “Good, close to the chest, I admire that. There’s not many of the Avengers whose alter egos remain unknown. Stark is of course Iron Man, War Machine is their fearless leader, Colonel Rhodes, Doctor Strange is actually a doctor named Strange.” He shook his head, chuckling. “Who would have thought? There’s only really two that I can think of who you could be, but it’s easy enough to narrow it down to just the one.”

Peter stayed silent, but tried once more to reach his phone.

“Yeah, it’s either Spider-Man or Ant-Man, and I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting Ant-Man officially. You see, Pete, judging from the fear in your eyes, you know me, know well what I can do, which leads me to conclude that you’re the one and only Spider-Man. Good old Spider-Man.”

Still he said nothing.

“Did you enjoy your little swim in the Hudson? I’m surprised you survived from the height you fell from.” He pursed his lips as his eyes bored a hole into Peter’s very soul. “Nothing is more important to me than family, Pete,” he continued, getting to the crux of the matter. “Everything that I’ve done, I’ve done for them, to make them happy. Now, your my baby girl’s friend and nothing makes her happier than her friends. So I’m gonna give you one chance. Are you ready?”

Peter swallowed, trying to bring some moisture to his dry throat, and nodded.

“You walk through those doors and you forget that any of this ever happened, and don’t you, or your Avenger friends ever, ever, interfere with my business again. Because if you do, well I’ll kill you, and everybody you love. Kill you dead. That’s what I’ll do to protect my family. Do you understand?”

Peter nodded.


“Thank you, sir,” Peter responded, surprised that his voice didn't crack.

“Atta boy. Now you go in there, and you show my daughter a good time - I’d say not too good but she made it clear this is a ‘just as friends’ date so I don't think I have to worry about that. Now go.”

Peter got out of the car, watching as Toomes gave him a salute and then drove off. He turned, mind racing a million miles an hour, trying to figure out what to do next. He ran into Liz and he brushed her off, unable to even feel bad about it in his near panic. He ran through the hallways, bursting out
of a rear door and into the parking lot at the back of the school. One of Toomes’ men was there, the one with the shaved head and a heavy gauntlet on his hand.

“He gave you a choice,” the man said, stalking towards him. “You chose wrong.” He swung his arm back, the gauntlet charging and sparking with energy, and Peter flipping backwards, avoiding the blow.

The man advanced again and Peter ducked and dived away, trying not to use his webbing, knowing that his supply was limited to the one slinger. He really needed his suit, he should have bought it with him, but he couldn’t waste time berating himself now about that, not when the energised gauntlet had just missed his head and had slammed into one of the school buses, denting the side of it. He flipped over the bus, ducking away, but the man kept coming. He seemed to be entirely human, not enhanced in any way, relying on the weapon and so Peter knew that he couldn’t just throw a damn bus at the man, otherwise he’d kill him. He looked around, trying to find something he could use to restrain the guy, but there was nothing.

Nothing easy anyway.

Peter jumped clear over the man’s head, rolling on the asphalt behind him and coming to a crouch next to one of the light poles. He took hold of it and flexed his muscles and then ripped the pole from the ground. The man paused, taken aback at the blatant display of strength and that was all Peter needed - he quickly bent the pole into a U shape and then pounced at the man, trapping him within the bend of the pole before he quickly twisted the metal, tying the man up in a knot so heavy that he fell to the ground as soon as the teen stopped supporting the weight of the pole. Once he was on his arse, Peter pulled the gauntlet free of his hand and threw it far away so he’d be unable to use it.

“What the fuck are you?” the man wheezed, struggling against the metal wrapped snugly around his torso.

“I’m the guy who’s gonna bring your boss down,” Peter promised, and then turned and darted off.

He skidded to a stop as a car pulled into the lot, shading his eyes against the glare of the headlights.

“Parker?” a familiar voice asked.

“Thank God! Flash, I need your help!”

“My help?” the other teen asked as Peter rounded the side of the vehicle.

“Yeah - long story, Liz’s dad is a real bad dude, he’s got a job on tonight, something big, and I gotta stop him.”

“What the hell? What do you need my help for?”

“I need your car and your phone.”

“What? Parker, this is my dad’s car!”

“Flash, please?”

He handed over his phone easily enough, not even giving that a second thought, but it was a long moment until he grumbled under his breath and then got out of the car, handing over the keys.

“Dammit, Parker, do not make me regret this.”

“Thank you, Flash, thank you!” Peter opened a new tab and quickly brought up the site for tracking a lost phone. He punched in the details and after an agonising moment of the little loading circle
taunting him from the screen, a map appeared. “Yes! Thanks, Flash, I owe you!” he cried, sliding into the driver’s seat.

“You bet your arse you do,” Flash told him. “Wait, do you even know how to drive?”

Peter crunched the gears, causing both of them to wince and he shrugged. “In theory. How hard can it be?”

The answer to that was extremely fucking hard. Peter alternated between bunny hopping down the street and making the gears scream in protest as he cornered the car, forgetting to brake at the same time, all whilst holding a phone in one hand and following the tiny dot that was his own phone. He needed to call Tony and he was just about to minimise the app and make the call when it struck him - he didn't know Tony’s number. In fact, other than his own, he didn't actually know anyone’s number off by heart. They were all just saved in his contacts list, he never had to actually dial the numbers. He swore, trying to figure out what the hell he could do, when he spotted his answer.

The car skidded to a stop in front of the bank and Peter jumped out, running up to the dome mounted above the ATM. He waved his arms at the camera and yelled, “Friday! Tell Tony I need help! Friday, please, please see this. I need help!”

Hoping that the AI would see him during her regular scans of CCTV, he jumped back into the car, and after glancing at the screen, noting that Toomes had come to a stop at a warehouse not far away, Peter over-revved the engine and took off, tyres squealing.

He had a bad guy to catch.
How he managed to get to the warehouse without a) attracting the attention of the police and b) crashing the car, Peter had no idea, but he was grateful to both. As much as he knew that going up against Toomes without his suit was crazy and he should wait for backup, regular cops would only be in harm’s way, then there was the fact that Flash had done him a huge favour, one that could lead to him getting into all sorts of strife with his dad, so he was glad that the car hadn’t been damaged. He parked it a short distance away from the warehouse, hoping that it would be safe on the street and then he jogged the rest of the way in, slowing as he entered the building, on the alert for Toomes’ men.

He found Toomes himself in the main part of the warehouse on the ground floor, leaning over a table, looking at some plans. The space was empty but marks in the dust showed that until very recently, crates had been stored there, and behind the man was his metallic winged suit. Peter didn’t bother to try and sneak up on the man - there was nowhere to hide and besides, after his friend failed to check in, he probably knew that he was coming.

“Oh, hey, Pete,” Toomes said, sounding almost friendly as he looked up from the plans to see the boy there. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“It’s over, I’ve got you,” Peter said, knowing the man wouldn’t give up so easily but not really knowing what else to say.

“You know, I gotta tell you, Pete, I really, really admire your grit,” Toomes said, standing up and arching his back, nodding in satisfaction as he heard his spine crack. “I see why you’re Liz’s friend,” he continued casually. “I do. When we first met in Westlake, I wondered what she saw in you, and then when you came to the house, I still wasn’t sure. I thought, ‘Really?’ She usually likes them feisty, full of beans, ya know? And I didn’t see that in you, but I do now, I oo see that in you.”

“How could you do this to her?” Peter asked, unable to comprehend his lack of concern for the danger he placed his family in when he sold weapons on the black market.

“To her? I’m not doing anything to her, Pete, no, I’m doing this for her.”

“Uh, huh, sure.”

“Pete, you’re young, you don’t understand how the world works.”

“I think I understand well enough. Selling weapons to criminals is wrong.”

“That’s funny, Pete, because you seem to be pretty good friends with a man who man his career on selling weapons. How do you think your buddy Stark paid for that tower? Or any of his little toys? Those people, Pete, those people up there, the rich and the powerful, they do whatever they want. Guys like us, like you and me, they don’t care about us. We build their roads, and we fight all their wars, but they don’t care about us. We have to pick up after them. We have to eat their table scraps.
That’s how it is. I know you know what I’m talking about, Peter.”

“Why are you telling me this?” the teen asked, knowing firsthand that the bad guys rarely monologued in real life, never explained the hows and why, just did the deeds.

“So I want you to understand,” Toomes said, and then grinned. “Oh, and I also needed a little time to get her airborne.”

The vulture suit rose up of its own accord and flew towards Peter, sending him jumping and flipping backwards. It swooped around him, smashing into pillars as he evaded it, dust flying and coating the back of his throat. He shot web after web at it, trying to disable the machine but the razor sharp edges of the wings sliced through the webbing like a knife through butter. It suddenly stopped, coming to rest next to Toomes and he reached out to pat it affectionately, as if it were a real bird.

“What are you talking about?” Peter grit out defiantly, trying not to cough from the dust, trying not to sound defeated. “That thing hasn’t even touched me yet.”

“True,” Toomes said, and then turned his back on Peter. “Then again, I wasn’t actually trying to.”

There was an ominous rumble from above and Peter looked up just as the ceiling above came crashing down around him. The air was forced from his lungs as a slab of concrete slammed into him, crushing him into the ground. More and more debris fell around him, pinning him, trapping him, and it became harder and harder to breathe. It was perhaps a full minute later that the dust settled and nothing else was falling onto him, and Peter struggled against the weight on top of him. He couldn’t hear Toomes anymore, was sure that the man was gone, and even if he was there, he probably wouldn’t help him anyway. It didn’t stop Peter from crying out, calling for help. “Hello? Hello! Please, hey. Hey, please. I’m down here. I’m stuck. I’m stuck. I can’t move. I can’t breathe. Please…” He trailed off, not wanting to waste anymore of his precious air when it was clear that help wouldn’t be coming in the form of a criminal mastermind or his minions.

The rubble pining him was so heavy and he struggled weakly against it, but it wouldn’t move an inch. He lay there, in the dark, breath coming in shallow gasps, his chest getting tighter and tighter as he pictured the concrete sinking lower and lower, crushing him little by little. Would he die here? Is this how it ended for Spider-Man? Would they find his body? Who would find him? Probably Tony and Bucky. Peter had faith that Friday would see his plea on the CCTV feed, it was just a matter of time, and then his lovers would come for him, but unless they arrived in the next minute or so, Peter knew that he would suffocate, that his air would run out or the concrete would shift and finally do him in. His chest tightened even more as he gasped, picturing their faces as they pulled his lifeless remains from the debris. Fuck, Tony was so consumed by guilt as it was, this would be the final blow for him. Self hatred flooded Peter for getting into a situation where Tony would be subjected to that, knowing that it would kick off a downward spiral for the genius. And Bucky? They hadn’t made up, hadn’t resolved anything after their fight. Peter would die with Bucky thinking that he was still mad at him. How petty it all seemed now, such a trivial thing to be angry over. Peter loved Bucky so much, more than the soldier could ever possibly know, and he wished that he had made it right, had told him one last time that he loved him. He had kept telling himself that he needed time, that he’d make it right tomorrow, but Peter had run out of time and now Bucky would never know.

The pain of that threatened to overwhelm him and Peter choked out a sob, questioning why life was so unfair, why things couldn’t be different. He’d tried to make a difference, tried to be a hero, but he’d failed, and in doing so, he’d failed Bucky.

No. No, he hadn’t failed yet. Damn it, he was Spider-Man and he wasn’t going to give up so easily! Not only did he have people who were counting on him, counting on their friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man to keep them safe, to patrol the streets, but he had people who loved him, who needed
him. May, and Tony, and Bucky. Buckybuckybucky. He had to get out of there, had to tell Bucky that he was sorry that he’d gotten mad, that it was going to be okay, that he loved him.

“Come on, Peter,” he said to himself, wriggling as much as he could to try and get some leverage against the slab. He heaved with all his might, feeling the concrete move just a little. “Come on, you can do it, come on, come on, you’re Spider-Man.” He pushed again, a cry wringing from his throat as he put every ounce of his strength behind it. “Come on, Spider-Man, come on Spider-Man.” With one last shout, he shoved even harder, pulling on reserves of strength that he didn’t even know he had, thinking of Bucky and Tony, thinking of being together with them once more, thinking of being in their embrace and not the cold, deadly embrace of the debris.

His cry echoed around the space and then there was a deep groan from the rubble as it shifted and Peter shoved it to one side, pushing it off of him. He huffed out a relieved little laugh as he dragged in a deep lungful of air, not even caring that the dust burned his throat, just enjoying the sweet rush of oxygen as it hit his bloodstream, making his head spin just a little. He took a moment to just relish in the feeling of nothing on top of him and then he painfully climbed from the crater left from the collapse, knowing that he had to get out of there, had to find Toomes and stop him.

Peter staggered through the dark hallways of the part of the warehouse that had been turned into offices, moving towards the exit, and he pulled out the phone of Flash’s, wondering if Friday would hear him if he called 911? The phone was crushed, the screen completely obliterated and he hoped that Flash wouldn’t be too mad at him. They were on the brink of becoming friends and he hoped that his classmate wouldn’t hold it against him. He slipped the phone back into his pocket, at least so he could return the SIM to Flash and then, spotting the exit, he made his way outside.

The alleyway in which he came out in was deserted and he paused, trying to figure out what to do next. Toomes would have left in his suit and so even if Flash’s phone wasn’t crushed, the tracker wouldn’t have helped him, so how else would Peter find him? He needed Friday, that’s what he needed and so he decided to get back in the car and head for the Tower, hoping that he would either intercept Tony and Bucky on the way, or he could at least contact them and tell them that he’d returned.

Before he could move, he heard a noise and he looked up, his eyes searching the darkness above him. The neighbouring building was several stories high, dwarfing the warehouse, and he squinted as he searched the outline for the source of the noise. Then he spotted it, a darker shape against the building, and it was descending fast. He threw himself to the side, narrowing avoiding the sharp wingtip of the Vulture Suit.

“Are you sure that you’re not actually Roach-Man?” Toomes asked, landing heavily at the head of the alley, blocking Peter’s exit. “Because you just won’t die.”

“I’m gonna stop you,” Peter vowed, standing up again, feeling exposed and vulnerable but trying not to show it.

“No, you’re gonna go down and you’re gonna stay down,” Toomes told him.

“Yeah? How do you think you’re gonna manage that?” Peter demanded.

“Easily,” came the reply and Toomes held up a small remote. “Apparently one little roof isn’t enough to crush you like the bug you are. Let’s try a whole building.”

He clicked a button and explosions rocked through the building next to the alley. Peter looked up and just managed to raise his head above his arms before the entire thing came crashing down on him.
Bucky threw the SUV he was driving around a corner, narrowly missing an oncoming car and in the passenger seat, Lang grabbed the roof handle. “Woah, slow down, man, you’re gonna get us all killed.”

“I do believe that with the serum, Mr Barnes would survive a crash at these speeds, and such a collision would do no harm to myself,” Vision supplied helpfully from the back seat.

Lang paused and then threw a dirty look over his shoulder. “That doesn’t make me feel any better! Fine, you’re gonna get *me* killed.”

“Shut up,” Bucky snapped. “We’re almost there.”

He could see twin streaks of light in the air as Iron Man and War Machine flew towards their destination and he urged the car on faster towards the warehouse that Friday had tracked Peter’s phone to.

Up ahead there was a big explosion, a burst of flame and then dust everywhere. “Tony?” Bucky cried over the comms. “What was that?”

“I’m not sure, I’m almost there.”

Ignoring the squeal from Lang, Bucky drove even faster, pushing the car to its limits, trying but failing at ignoring the sense of dread at the deja vu he was feeling. The last time he had driven fueled with such panic, Peter had almost drowned, and now there was the possibility that he’d been caught in an explosion.

“That’s the Vulture!” Tony cried.

“I’ll go after him, you look for Peter,” Rhodes instructed.

Bucky pulled to a halt beside a silver convertible and leapt from the SUV, sprinting towards where Iron Man was hovering over a mound of rubble, all that remained of a multi-storey building. “Peter?” he cried, half a question for Tony and half a call for the teen.

“Friday, do you have the tracker on Flash’s phone?” Tony asked the AI.

“That phone is switched off, boss, but this is where the last signal came from.”

“Scan the debris, Fri - I need thermals, now. Peter might be trapped.” He flew up a little higher and then the entire area was bathed in blue light.

“Shit!” Rhodes swore over the comms. “I’m gonna need backup, guys! Toomes has loaded a plane with weapons and is about to take off.”
Bucky threw the keys to Lang. “You two go, I’ll stay with Tony.”

Lang nodded and Vision clasped Bucky’s forearm briefly before he left. “You’ll find him, I know you will.”

“Heat signature located, boss,” Friday said. “Six degrees to your left and down approximately five feet.”

Not a word was said as both Bucky and Tony jumped in to begin digging through the rubble. They worked together in perfect synchrony, helping each other with the larger pieces of concrete while Bucky cleared the smaller stuff as Tony used one of his lasers to cut through steel beams. It felt like it took an eternity as they dug deeper and deeper, but finally Bucky spied frayed grey cloth and they soon uncovered Peter.

He was breathing, just barely, but it was laboured and sounded bubbly. Bucky carefully scooped him into his arms and climbed down from the pile of debris, a crushed phone and a set of car keys falling from Peter’s pocket as he moved. Laying him down gently on the ground, he started to do a quick triage but he could tell instantly that the boy was beyond his limited field medic skills. “We have to get him to a doctor,” he rasped out. “Now.”

“I’ll take him,” Tony said, “you follow.”

He nodded. “Which hospital?”

“None - I’m taking him to the Tower’s medical bay. Helen’s his best shot.”

Bucky nodded and before Tony could pick up the injured teen, he pressed a kiss to the bloodied forehead. “Love you, Petey,” he whispered, hoping that it wouldn’t be for the last time.

“I’ll see you soon,” Tony said, and then he was disappearing into the night sky, Peter’s limp form cradled against his chest.

Feeling suddenly hollow, Bucky moved on autopilot, picking up the phone and the keys and heading for the only car around. The lights of the convertible flashed as he clicked the button and he slid into the driver’s seat, and turned over the engine.

He didn’t remember the drive back to the Tower, only remembered pulling into the underground parking lot and Friday telling him which floor Peter was on. It was like he was a puppet, with someone else pulling the strings, making his legs move towards the elevator, pressing the button, watching the doors slide closed. His mind was blank except for the suffocating fear that Peter was injured beyond repair. He stumbled out and into the hallway of the med bay, moving towards the place where Tony was standing, watching through a glass window.

“It’s bad,” the genius said in a small voice.

Bucky looked into the room and saw Helen Cho and her team working on Peter. His clothes had been stripped away, leaving him in his boxers, and numerous sensors and wires were attached to his body. Helen made them all stand back as the arm of a scanner slid down the bed, over Peter, and she watched the screen of her Starkpad intently, getting instantaneous results. Bucky couldn’t help but linger over the injuries he could see: the unnatural angle of the teen’s left leg, the cuts and scrapes that covered him from head to toe, the bruising across his chest and stomach that was almost black. It looked horrible from the outside, and he feared what internal injuries Peter had suffered. He felt a hand creep into his and he squeezed it hard, trying to draw strength from Tony. “We never made it right,” he said in a small voice, unable to look away from the broken body on the bed.
“You will,” Tony assured him.

“But what if - “

“No, please, Bucky, don’t go down the what if path. Please.” Tony’s voice broke at the end and Bucky nodded, shoving the thought down as deep as it could go.

It wasn’t much longer that Helen exited the room, her face grave. “How bad?” Bucky asked.

“If it wasn't for his accelerated healing, he wouldn’t have survived this long,” she said, not bothering to mince her words. “He has a punctured lung, a head injury, five broken ribs, a fractured sternum, a broken leg, and he’s bleeding internally.”

“Fuck,” Tony swore softly.

“We’re prepping him for surgery,” she continued. “I need to remove the piece of bone that has pierced his lung before his body heals over it, set his leg, and take a look at where else he’s bleeding. It’s gonna be a long night, and you should call his aunt. She should be here, just in case.”

“Oh, God,” Bucky whispered, biting down on his lip, hard.

Helen left and he slumped into a chair, listening as Tony made the call to May, telling her he was sending a car. She arrived within the hour, hair mussed from running fingers through it repeatedly, looking distraught. “What happened?” she cried. “He was supposed to be at a dance!”

“We’re not sure,” Tony told her, taking hold of her hands in his. “The man we’ve been tracking, the one selling the weapons, well, he was his date’s father.”

“What? Why would he go with her, unless…”

“Yeah, we think he was using the situation to try and get information.”

“Oh, Peter, you stupid, stupid boy,” she said, sinking into a chair. “What happened? How did he get hurt?”

“Peter was trapped under some rubble of a collapsed building, and we -”

“Wait, a building fell on him? ” She looked sharply at Bucky, who had been unable to hold back a sob, and he turned away, trying to hide his expression.

Tony grimaced and sat down next to her. “We think so, yes.”

“Is he gonna be okay?” she asked.

“We don’t know, May, he has extensive injuries. I have my best people on it, though, okay. He’s going to get the very best of care and they’re gonna do everything they can.”

She nodded, tears slipping down her cheeks and Tony put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in close. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Hours passed and the three paced the hallways, not wanting to leave the med bay. At one point Rhodey returned, letting them know that they had brought down Toomes’ plane, crashing it on the beach at Coney Island and that the man had been taken into custody. Tony had had to restrain May, holding her back as she screamed at them to let her at Toomes, to let her face the man who had so injured her nephew. Bucky had left to get coffee, unable to stand and watch her raw emotion lest he begin to scream as well.
He went down to the kitchen at the end of the hall and found a coffee pot and began the process of brewing a pot. He got ready three cups and then took a moment to just take a breath, to breathe in deeply and try and pull the fraying edges of his mind back together. Tony was right - he couldn’t dwell on the horrible things that might happen, he had to have hope, to trust that Peter would come back to him. When the coffee was done, he scooped up the three cups in both hands and headed back to where they had been waiting.

May was lying across three of the chairs, her head on Tony’s lap, tears drying on her face, and she looked to be asleep. Bucky went around and sat on the other side of Tony, passing him over a cup. “Thanks, babe,” the genius whispered so as not to wake May.

“Any news?”

“No, not yet.”

“How much longer can it take?”

“I’m not sure. Helen knows what she’s doing, we gotta have faith in her.”

He nodded glumly and sipped at his coffee, and they lapsed into silence.

“Our anniversary is coming up,” Tony said suddenly.

“O...kay,” Bucky replied. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just trying to distract you,” he replied impishly. “I’ve been trying to come up with fun ways we can celebrate.”

“What have you come up with so far?”

“Well, not much yet, to be honest. It’s hard to make sure it’s not Christmas themed.”

Bucky shrugged, and drained the last cold dregs of his coffee. “It was Christmas when we all got together, so it’s only fitting that we celebrate that.”

“True. I guess it all depends on if we get to see Peter on the day or not, what with May being home for it this year.”

“Yeah, I forgot about that. I hope we get to see him.”

“I’m sure we can wrangle something.”

Bucky let out a shuddering breath, unable to hold back his fears any longer. “Tony, what if we lose him? I don’t know how I’d go on, if we did. I just can’t imagine my life without him, without us.”

“I know, babe, I know, but we’re not there yet.”

“Tony, God, I love him so much, I can’t lose him, I can’t go through that.”

“Bucky, he’s so strong, stronger than anyone else I know, he’s going to make it, I just know he will. You know that he’s never gonna leave us, not while he has any say in the matter. He loves us, more than anything, and he’s not going to let something like this get in the way of coming back to us.”

“I had a hunch that it was you two,” May croaked from Tony’s lap.

Bucky winced and met Tony’s wide eyes, knowing that he must look just as startled. “Hey, May,”
the genius said, as casually as possible, “how long have you been awake?”

“I never fell asleep, Tony,” she said, sitting up and rubbing at her eyes.

“Shit,” the soldier cursed softly.

May shook her head. “Don’t look so worried, Bucky. I had my suspicions when I found out Peter was dating two guys, so this just confirmed it.”

“Wait, so you’re not pissed?” Tony asked, surprised.

“I was, when I first suspected, but come on, Tony. In the grand scheme of things, does it really matter who Peter has fallen in love with?” She gestured around the room, looking tired and worn out. “We’re waiting for my boy to get out of an operating theatre where he’s fighting for his life and his two partners are out here talking about how much they love him! Who cares if there’s an age difference, God, you’ve made Peter happy. I can’t ever be angry about that.”

“Truly?” Bucky asked, unable to comprehend that the truth was out and May didn’t seem phased.

“Truly, Bucky. We can talk about it later, when Peter’s better, but for now? Well, I’m just glad that he’s got people who love him just as dearly as I do.”

He reached out over Tony and clasped her hand, squeezing it tight. “Thank you,” he said, his voice cracking.

Helen Cho appeared at the door and they all jumped up, eager for news. She looked exhausted, dark circles under her eyes a sign of how hard she’d been working. “The operation was a success on all counts, and he’s stable for now,” she announced. “However, due to the trauma his body has suffered, we’ve placed him into a medically induced coma to facilitate the healing process. I’m still concerned about the head injury and I suggest calling in Stephen Strange to examine him as well, but for now, rest is his greatest ally.”

“Helen, thank you,” Tony told her earnestly.

“I’ll check on him in the morning, but for now, I’m going to go and grab some sleep.”

“Of course.”

It wasn’t long before Peter was transferred back to one of the rooms and they all filed in to see him. Bucky rushed to the bed, his face crumpling as he took in the evident injuries and he gently stroked the teen’s cheek. “Oh, doll, look at you.”

Tony slid an arm around his waist and leaned his head against his shoulder. “He looks so small in that bed,” he murmured.

Suddenly the adrenaline that had been running through his veins all night burned away and Bucky felt himself crumpling against Tony, and tears began to stream down his face. He buried his face in his shoulder as he cried and strong hands stroked his back soothingly.

“How about I grab us some more coffee?” May said from behind them, then without waiting for an answer, she slipped away, giving them some privacy.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky choked out once she’d gone, “I just can’t help it, seeing him this way.”

“I know, baby. Shhh, it’s okay.”
“I can’t lose him, Tony, I just can’t.”

“We’re not going to, Buck, I promise. Peter will come to us and it’s all going to be fine, I promise.”

Tony knew that he should never have promised. As usual, the universe seemed to conspire against him, shredding the promise and sending it flying off into the wind. The shrill beeping of the machine as it announced that Peter’s heart had ceased beating was loud in his ears and he moved both himself and Bucky away from the bed as a team of medical staff rushed into the room. May was on the other side of the bed, a hand covering her mouth and her eyes wide with fear and grief as the team pulled out the defibrillator paddles. “Clear!”

Against his side, Bucky stopped trembling suddenly and he went still and stiff, but Tony didn’t spare it a moment’s thought, watching on in horror as the doctors and nurses fought to bring Peter back. They injected him with adrenaline and shocked him again and again, his small body jerking under the electric pulse.

“Come on, Petey, come on,” he whispered, pleading with his love to return to them. It was too soon, they hadn’t had enough time together and he sent prayers up to whatever deities were listening that they’d give them more time.

Another injection, and another shock, and then finally the green line jerked, picking up a heartbeat again.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” Tony muttered, letting go of Bucky and rubbing at his eyes. He looked over to his partner, planning on giving him a reassuring smile but it froze on his lips as someone else stared back at him. In a flash he had activated his wrist watch and a gauntlet formed over his hand and he aimed it directly at the man beside him. “Who the hell are you?” he demanded of the stranger.

Bucky’s head tilted to one side, as if considering the question, but it wasn’t Bucky who answered in a flat voice. “I am The Asset. I am the Winter Soldier.”

Chapter End Notes

*digs a bunker to hide in*
Now I can say that I really wanted to call this fic 'Winter is Coming' but that would have given it away :( Oh well.

What the actual fuck was going on? Tony stared at Bucky...no, no, this person wasn’t his Bucky. He was wearing his body and his clothes but that look in his eyes? The expressionless face? That wasn’t Bucky. He’d said he was The Winter Soldier, had stated in that monotone voice that he was Tony’s worst nightmare, although given that the genius had just watched Peter flatline, maybe his worst nightmare should be redefined. Nonetheless, he had fallen from one shitstorm into another and after the emotional rollercoaster that the past two weeks had been, Tony was not sure he could handle it. Was it too much to ask for a damn break, just for once? He needed Bucky right now, couldn’t go through this alone, but alone was what he was. His body was thrumming once more with adrenaline, throwing him into fight or flight mode, but when it all calmed down, when he had a moment to process, he knew it was going to hurt, hurt deep. He had thought that with being in love with two men, he would never have to face anything by himself again, but once more the universe was playing him for a fool. Perhaps he was destined to be alone? Did he have too many sins against his name to ever be happy? Was heartbreak and loneliness all that his future had in store for him? Those self pitying thoughts threatened to swamp him so he shoved them to one side, knowing that he couldn’t give in to them right now. He had to focus on the here and now, to figure out what the hell was going on and most importantly, how he could fix it.

Maybe it was all an elaborate joke? Unlikely, but not entirely out of the realm of possibility. Sure, it would be in extremely poor taste, but given the alternative, that could be forgiven, couldn’t it? The chances were next to nothing but it was worth at least a shot. “Hey, Bucky? Babe? If this is just a prank, please can we just drop it? You’ve had your fun, but now isn’t really the time, don’t you think? Right, Bucky?”

Those grey eyes, which were normally so expressive had never seemed so lifeless. “Bucky is not here.”

So much for that. He took a deep breath, analysing the situation in front of him, whilst also trying to keep one eye on the medical team that were still working valiantly to stabilise Peter. The soldier didn’t appear to be a threat at the moment; he stood there, turning to watch the team working on the teen, face blank. Just because he wasn’t murdering anyone right now though, didn’t mean that he wasn’t going to start at some stage. Tony had to get him out of here, had to keep May and the doctors and nurses safe, had to keep Peter safe.

Deciding to take a chance on the fact that the man didn't seem prone to violence right now, he said, “Okay, buddy, I’m not sure what’s going on but you need to come with me. So we can talk’’

The soldier glanced back at Tony and his eyes fell on the gauntlet, still aimed at his face. “I will come,” he stated, “but I mean you no harm. Your weapon is not required.” His voice was accented but stilted, like he wasn’t quite used to speaking.

“That’s nice but yeah, I’m gonna keep it ready to go.”
“Affirmative.”

Tony backed out of the room, throwing May a reassuring smile as she watched on, confused and also a little frightened, but much too worried about Peter to really care too much about the situation. So long as one of them could focus solely on Peter, Tony couldn’t complain. Happy when the soldier followed him out of the room and into the hallway, he said, “Friday, can you please let Rhodey know that I’ll be in the meeting room on the east side of Medical? If he could join me ASAP that would be great.”

“Of course, boss.”

He turned to the super soldier who had followed along, thinking it best if he explain everything he did so that he didn’t spook the man into violence. “Friday is an artificial int -”

“I know who Friday is,” he said, cutting Tony off.

“Oh.” He wanted to ask how he knew but that could wait the few minutes it would take to get to the meeting room. The corridors were empty at this late hour, all the staff who were still there were all working on Peter and so they didn't meet anyone on their way. Tony kept his hand raised, repulsor still aimed at the assassin, refusing to take a chance.

They arrived at the meeting room and Tony ushered him inside, then gestured to a chair on one side of the long table in the room and the soldier obediently sat. He himself took a seat across the table from him, the doorway immediately behind him, keeping his exit open. “So,” he began and then stopped, unsure of what to ask first.

“You do not wish to wait for the Colonel to arrive?”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “The Colonel?”

“You summoned him. Colonel Rhodes.”

“You seem to know a lot about us. How exactly is that when up until five minutes ago, you had been dead for over a year, vanished from Bucky’s mind thanks to a combination of Wakandan tech and my own?”

The soldier said nothing, but his cool gaze never left Tony’s face.

“Okay then, how about you tell me what you’re doing here and what you’ve done to Bucky?”

Still nothing.

Tony sighed and rubbed at his face. “Is Bucky okay?”

Silence.

Tony started to get annoyed. “Look, you gotta give me something here, okay. Peter just fucking died in front of me, and he could go again anytime soon and the only reason I’m not in there with him is because I had to get you away from there before you start murdering people, so if you don’t start giving me answers, I swear to God I will fucking beat them out of you.”

The soldier cocked his head to one side as he looked at Tony. “No, you will not - you will not harm me as doing so will also cause Bucky harm.”

“So there’s still a Bucky left in there? He’s not gone entirely?” The flare of hope in his chest at that
burned bright.

“He is hidden.”

“Hidden? What the hell does that mean? What have you done to him?”

“I did not do this to him.”

Tony scoffed. “Uh huh, sure, I’m sure you’re entirely innocent.”

“Of this? Yes.”

“Look, just cut the bullshit and give me Bucky back so we can go back to being there for Peter.”

The soldier looked...sad? “I did not do this to Bucky. He is the one who retreated.”

Tony stared at him in shock. “What?”

Before he could answer, Rhodey appeared in the doorway. “Tony, what the hell is going on? Friday said you marched Bucky out of medical with a repulsor aimed at him!”

“I wasn’t aiming at Bucky.”

He looked down and saw the genius still had the gauntlet activated. “What the hell, man? You still are”

“This isn’t Bucky.”

“The fuck, Tony?”

“He says he’s the Winter Soldier.”

Instantly on alert, Rhodey spun to face the soldier but continued to speak to Tony. “How is that possible?”

“You have excellent timing, platypus - he was just going to explain that himself.” He glared at the assassin. “Go on then. Explain.”

The soldier hadn’t by any means been relaxed but he straightened, almost as if to attention, ready to report. “The emotional toll was too great, Bucky retreated.”

“And what do you mean by ‘reatreated’?”

“He ceded control and I took it.”

Tony frowned, trying to comprehend what this meant. “So he was aware of your existence?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“I don’t understand - if he didn’t know that you were there, what would have happened if you weren’t? If you didn’t take control?”

“I believe he would have been rendered catatonic.”

“So you’re saying that Bucky suffered from some sort of mental break?” Rhodey clarified.

“Yes.”
Tony couldn’t help the gasp that escaped him at this confirmation.

Rhodey scrubbed a hand over his face and then turned to Tony. “Can I have a word outside?”

The soldier didn’t seem inclined to try to escape so he nodded. “Of course.” Tony followed him out into the hallway and then asked Friday, “Keep an eye on him, baby girl. I also want you to do every scan that you’re capable of doing on him without taking him to the lab.”

“On it, boss.”

“So,” Rhodey said, “you think he’s telling the truth? You think he’s really the Winter Soldier?”

“Well he sure as hell isn’t Bucky,” he said bitterly.

“So you think that Bucky was really that close to breaking?”

Tony sighed and leaned against the wall, sliding down it until he was sitting on the floor. “Yeah, yeah now that I think about it, he probably was. People don’t realise how sensitive he is, ya know? They think that because he was a sniper in the war and then spent years killing for Hydra and even now he’s still got those skills, so he couldn’t possibly also be human, could he? He and Pete had had a fight, nothing really major, but because Pete then got grounded, and Bucky went to San Francisco, they never really saw each other to sort it out. It was eating away at Bucky that Peter was still mad at him. We were planning to get it all sorted tomorrow but then Peter went after Toomes and got hurt and then we watched his damn heart stop.” His voice caught and he took a moment to gather himself, clearing his throat. “So yeah, I guess he really was that close to breaking.”

“Okay, right, we’re going to deal with this,” Rhodey said and slid down the wall to sit next to Tony, “but first of all, are you okay?”

He barked out a laugh. “Do I fucking look okay?”

“No, you look like shit, but there’s a difference between feeling like shit but managing to cope and being entirely unable to deal and shutting down.”

“What, just like Bucky did?”

“Yeah, like that. So which is it?”

He let his head bang against the wall. “I feel like curling up in a ball in the corner and rocking back and forth for eternity, but I know that I can’t. There are people relying on me and as much as I don’t want to be strong, don’t know if I can be strong, I kinda need to be.”

"Tones, you’re stronger than you think.”

He smiled sadly. “Maybe when I’ve got the others for support but it’s just me now.”

“No it’s not - you’ve got me, Tony. You’ll always have me.”

“Thanks, Rhodey.”

“So, what are we going to do with our visitor? Is there anywhere secure in the Tower anymore to keep him?”

“I’ve still got that room here set aside for Bruce, you know, the one with the...precautions.”

Rhodey nodded. “Yeah, that might be best for now. Look, why don’t you go back in and sit with
May since she probably shouldn’t be alone right now. I’ll take the Winter Soldier down to Bruce’s old rooms and we can deal with him in the morning.”

Tony nodded. “Okay.”

Rhodey got up and helped pull Tony to his feet, then pulled him into a hug. “It’ll be alright, man.”

“I hope so. Do you really think Bucky’s still in there?”

“Definitely. He was hurting and it was too much but he wouldn’t leave you, not for good. He’ll be back, I’m sure of it.”

“But what if the Winter Soldier doesn’t let him come back?”

“Then we do what we do best and we get him back. Now go and be with Peter. Let me know if anything changes.”

Chapter End Notes

Life is crazy busy now for me for the next few weeks so I'll be dropping back down to posting twice a week now :)
Chapter 17

The soldier followed Colonel Rhodes to the elevator, ensuring that he stood a respectful distance away once they were inside so as not to alarm the man. The Colonel’s mechanical braces moved soundlessly, supporting his weight and allowing him to walk, but the soldier knew just how dangerous the man was, crippled or not. He knew that the braces had been built with detachable parts that could be used as weapons, he knew that even without those, that Rhodes could dispatch of a threat with his bare hands, and he knew that he would not hesitate if he thought that the soldier was a threat to those that he loved. They reached Banner’s floor and Rhodes led him down a long corridor, one that the soldier was familiar with, towards a solid steel blast door at the end. He knew what was beyond, was familiar with the layout, but he made sure that he didn't reveal that, just followed obediently as he was led into the comfortable, but secure, room beyond.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on but I’m going to get to the bottom of it,” Rhodes told him. “Tony needs me right now though so you’re going to have to wait. There’s a hatch in that wall - I’ll have food and water sent down shortly, and I’ll be back tomorrow. Any questions?”

He stayed silent, mostly from habit, but not wanting to aggravate anyone anymore than he had to, simply shook his head once.

Rhodes grunted and headed for the door, pausing before he left. “Bucky is my friend,” he said softly, “and if I find out that you’re doing him harm, your years as Hydra’s pet assassin and the skills that you acquired won’t mean anything. I will come for you and I will make you suffer, do you understand me?”

Knowing Rhodes would require a verbal response to this, he said, “Affirmative.”

“Good.” The heavy door didn't make much noise as it closed, too well designed to clank like a dungeon, but the air pressure changed as it locked into place, feeling just as ominous.

The soldier crossed to one of the plush armchairs and took a seat, not caring that he would be watched via the cameras hidden in the roof, not bothering to keep up pretenses. He curled up into it, his legs folded beneath him, running a hand over the soft furnishing, marveling at the feel of it beneath his hand. It was so very different when he wasn’t experiencing it secondhand, through Bucky’s consciousness.

The soldier did know a lot about the Tower and its inhabitants, more than they would ever suspect. He knew just as much as Bucky did because, unawares to everyone, including Bucky himself, the soldier had been present the entire time. Watching, learning, getting to know the inhabitants.

He hadn't always existed, he knew this, but much like anyone’s birth really, he didn't recall the moment that he came into this world. His earliest memory was of pain, and fear, and terror, but at the back of all of that, always there, the comforting presence of another mind. Bucky was the one who controlled their shared body, who fought against what Hydra had them do, and their handlers didn't like that. Their scientists came up with the trigger words, and after such a long period of time where all he could recall was pain, so much pain, the words activated, snapping around his neck like a collar with a leash attached. When the words were not in use, the soldier stood by Bucky’s side, or just behind him, but always with him. Looking out from his eyes, seeing what he saw, feeling what he felt, not in control but always there. When the words were said, the leash yanked him forwards,
dragging him out from behind Bucky and to the front, their positions reversed and the soldier now in control.

He was so young, and had none of his own experiences to draw upon, no strength of his own, and so without Bucky in charge, he did exactly as he was instructed. At first he didn’t know that what he was doing was wrong, it was only when the leash went slack and Bucky took control for a few precious moments before they were once again put on ice that his horror and disgust at their actions was screamed into their mind. It was never for long and so it took many, many years, brief moments at a time, for the soldier to learn, to develop his own sense of right and wrong, and to know that he had been committing atrocious acts for all that time. He tried to reach out to Bucky, to speak to him directly, but the other man would shie away, retreat from the violent being that shared a consciousness with him and the soldier could not blame him.

It was lonely, being shunned like that, but the soldier wanted to prove himself worthy to Bucky, to prove that he was learning, that he could do good. He fought against the words, fought against their control, but they were too deeply ingrained, the leash snapping tight and dragging him forward no matter how much he tried to resist.

Like anything, the words’ effect faded over time and so if they were not said again, or if the soldier and Bucky weren’t put on ice, Bucky’s presence would start to claw its way back to the forefront. The more Bucky fought, the stronger his resolve became, and the shorter the time period in which the words had to be renewed became. The soldier wondered if his own battle against their control played any part, and he liked to think that it did, but the sheer breadth and depth of Bucky’s willpower was so awe inspiring that he wouldn’t have been surprised if it didn’t and that the sniper had done it all himself.

After the battle of the Triskellion, the words’ effect on Bucky snapped and the soldier was shunted to the back once more, but he didn’t mind it. Away from Hydra’s control, away from the pain and the torture, it was pleasant to sit back and watch as Bucky escaped, to share the same experiences, albeit through Bucky’s eyes. It was...relaxing. And so the soldier settled comfortably at the back of Bucky’s mind, taking everything in, learning more about the world and, if not how to be a good man, at least how not to be a bad man.

There was only once more that the words were said and the leash snapped tight, spoken by Zemo. The soldier fought them, screamed just as loud as Bucky did, but it was no use. Even as he was forced to comply, forced to attack people that would one day become his friends, the soldier fought the words and their control. He could feel their grip on his will loosening but no matter what he did, they wouldn’t let go.

The words’ hold were eventually broken by what Rogers called ‘cognitive recalibration’, or a heavy blow to the back of the head. It was a testament to how the power of the words had faded over time as something so simple would not have worked previously, but the soldier didn’t care - the leash had gone slack and he curled up back in the safe place that was Bucky’s mind, and he became a happy spectator once more. He wondered if it would now be possible to reach out again, to try and speak to Bucky, to form an alliance. He was hesitant after the previous rejections, but perhaps he could explain how he was just as much Hydra’s victim as the sniper was, that Hydra may have created him, but he was just a pawn like Bucky was, forced through pain and torture to do their bidding. He longed to tell Bucky that he had learned from him, was still learning and that one day, maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow, but one day, he could become a good man as well.

The fight in the bunker dashed the soldier’s hopes. As Tony was forced to watch the footage of his mother being killed, the soldier was overwhelmed with the hatred that Bucky felt for him, under the belief that he was Hydra through and through. He had wanted to scream, to rally against the incorrect
assumption, but it was like a steel door had slammed down, shutting off any chance of communication between them. He could still see, could still hear, but whereas before Bucky had rejected his attempts to speak, now the soldier was voiceless.

They had gone to Wakanda next and back on the ice. The soldier welcomed the sleep, not wanting to deal with how much it had hurt to be disconnected from Bucky. He had thought that he had known pain, thought that the handlers at Hydra were the most skilled in the world at making one scream, but they had nothing on this. This pain seemed to pierce his very soul, and if he had a voice, he would have screamed into the void. Instead, he embraced the cold, embraced the nothingness he fell into as the door to the cryogenic chamber closed shut over them.

He wasn’t sure how long the nothingness lasted but it couldn’t have been long as when he became aware once more, the pain was still there, searing and torturing him. He tried to ignore it, to focus on what the Panther was saying, that they had a way to remove the trigger words from Bucky’s mind, but it was always there. The king explained the procedure and Bucky agreed to it, and his thoughts were clear - once it was done, the soldier would be no more, he would be banished from his head.

With no voice, the soldier was unable to correct him. The leash would be cut, but the soldier would still be there, he wouldn’t just fade away, as much as he wished that he could. He had been created by Hydra but he had existed before the words and he would continue to exist after the words, and he would be one with Bucky until the day the sniper died. He tried to pretend that the happiness that flooded Bucky when he thought that he would be rid of him didn’t hurt but it did, and he could do nothing but absorb it, add it to the pain that he already felt.

And so life went on, the soldier a silent witness to the new life that Bucky forged for himself, being pardoned and welcomed back to the United States, and into the lives of the Avengers. He saw and he experienced all that Bucky did, and although his emotions were his own, they always seemed to parallel those of the sniper. He felt happiness at the friendships that were forged, anger at the actions of Captain America, and joy when Bucky was cleared to officially become an Avenger too. He watched, and he learned, and he fell in love…

Because how could he not? Peter and Tony were everything to Bucky and although they were completely separate identities, the soldier wasn’t Bucky and Bucky wasn’t the soldier, Peter and Tony also became everything to the soldier. He experienced second hand the highs and lows of the relationship, saw the love in their eyes, and longed for it to be directed at him as well. He had been content to sit back and to watch from inside Bucky’s mind, but for the first time he began to wish that he was in control. Not to hurt and kill, but to love and to cherish. He wanted to reach out and feel the two beneath his hands, he wanted to taste their skin, he wanted it to be himself who felt the rush of endorphins as the three of them climaxed together, wanted it to be his voice they heard as he whispered endearments.

He wanted to love and to be loved.

What a cruel joke that the universe played on him to give him the opportunity to be in control like this - that Bucky had retreated because he simply couldn’t deal with the possibility of losing Peter. The soldier had felt Bucky’s anguish, had screamed silently as he had snapped, as that steel door had crumbled and Bucky had fled to the void behind it, pushing the soldier to the forefront as he went. As much as he wanted to be able to touch and kiss and love, instead he had arrived as Peter was dying and Tony wanted Bucky, and had nothing but suspicion and hatred for the soldier. It was in itself its own torture, but torture was something that the soldier was good at enduring and so he would. He would bear it and he would do all he could to show Tony that he was loved, and he would be there for Peter when Bucky couldn’t.
Love didn't stop being love just because the sentiment wasn't returned and so the soldier would do all he could to demonstrate his love for these two men. He uncurled from the armchair and looked up at the nearest camera. “Friday? Are you there?” he asked, his voice raspy with disuse but getting stronger the more he spoke.

“I am.” Her voice was neutral, lacking the warmth she held for Bucky, but also missing the disdain she held for Captain America.

“Are you able to tell me how Peter is? Is he going to be okay?”

There was a long silence and the soldier couldn’t be sure if it was because she was seeking approval or if it was because she hadn’t expected such a question. Finally, she responded. “He’s been stabilised.”

He let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you,” he told her, immensely grateful for the news. “Are you able to tell me if that changes?”

Another pause. “I believe that I can.”

“Thank you, malyshka.”

“You’re welcome, Mr Winter.”

_Not Asset, or Soldat, but Winter._ He smiled up at her camera, the name suddenly making him feel complete, like his very own person. “Winter. I like that. It’s nice to finally meet you in person, Friday.”

He wasn't sure if he imagined the warmer tone as she said, "Likewise, Winter.”

Chapter End Notes

_Malyshka: Baby girl_
Tony startled awake at the feel of a hand on the back of his shoulder, his neck cracking as he straightened up from where he’d been slumped over Peter’s bed. He looked around, blearily noticing that May was asleep in the chair on the other side of the room, her long hair falling over her face, obscuring the dark circles under her eyes. He twisted his neck around and saw Rhodey behind him, frowning down at him. “Have you been here all night?” his friend asked, although his tone made it evident that he knew the answer.

“If I’ve kept you awake, honeybear,” Tony congratulated him, his eyes darting back to the button to Bruce’s floor. He felt torn, wanting to go there, just so he could see Bucky’s face, but knowing that if he did, he’d be left wanting more. He was trying so hard to be strong but he just wanted Bucky to be by his side, to offer him a comforting hug, to be someone he could draw strength from. He understood the pain that his partner was going through but he still felt the sharp sting of betrayal that Bucky would leave him when he needed him the most. Everyone always left him…

They headed to the common floor and to the kitchen there, empty at present, and Rhodey went to the coffee machine to pour them both a cup. Tony sank into a chair at the table, his body aching from not only the adrenaline letdown from yesterday but also the night spent sleeping hunched over. He yawned and nodded sleepily as the cup was thrust into his hand and Rhodey sat down next to him.

“Thanks, honeybear.” He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer, but he asked anyway, “How’s our new house guest?”

“He’s quiet enough - he’s just spent the night sitting in an armchair, but he did speak to Friday a little.”

Tony raised a brow at this. “Really? Fri, baby girl, what did you speak about?”

“Winter asked about Peter’s condition, boss. He wanted to know if he was okay.”

“Wait, Winter?” Tony asked.

At the same time, Rhodey spluttered, “He was concerned?”

“Indeed,” she answered both of them.

“I’m confused,” Tony said. “Friday, why have you given him a cutsey nickname?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
“What was I supposed to call him?”

“I don’t know, anything but Winter!”

“Well ‘The Winter Soldier’ seemed rather formal, boss.”

“Are you sassing me?”

“Of course not - simply explaining his name.”

“He doesn’t need a name! He’s not a real person!”

“I beg to differ.”

Tony was getting angry now. “No, he’s not - he’s a damn parasite that has taken over my partner and I want him gone! You only name things that you’re going to get attached to!”

“Boss, you asked me to run scans of him,” Friday told him patiently. “I did, and he’s a real person.”

“No, he’s using Bucky’s body - that doesn’t make him real!”

“His brain scans show activity that is vastly different to Bucky’s, boss. His body releases different amounts of hormones and chemicals compared to Bucky’s baseline. His heart rhythm is different, beating at only 42 bpm as opposed to Bucky’s 56 bpm. He may share a body with Bucky, but for all intents and purposes, he is a different person.”

Tony stood up abruptly, shoving away his mug, sending the liquid spilling across the table. “No he isn’t!” he shouted and then turned and fled the room, ignoring Rhodey’s shout from behind him. He headed for the stairs, not bothering with the elevator, running up them until he reached the Penthouse. He didn’t stop running until he hit the bedroom and he flung himself onto the bed, pulling two pillows towards him - Bucky’s and Peter’s. The soldier’s scent was stronger since he had only slept in the bed the night before last, but Peter’s scent lingered faintly. Tony breathed in deep, inhaling the traces of his partners, feeling an overwhelming sense of loneliness. He choked out a sob and hot tears spilled over his cheeks, soaking into the pillowcases. He just wanted to be held by them, to know that they were here and that they were safe and well, but neither of those things were true and he was alone.

It had been a while since he’d last cried this hard, but it was all too much and he needed some sort of release. What he didn’t realise was that crying alone was so much worse than crying when you had strong arms wrapped around you, when you had someone whispering sweet nothings into your ear and assuring you that it was all going to be okay. He craved that sort of comfort now, and it hurt that he couldn’t have it, that the ones he wanted were so close but so far away. He curled up into as small a ball as possible, the pillows hugged tight to his chest as his body shook with his sobs.

Then there were arms wrapping around him, holding him tight, but as much as he appreciated Rhodey’s gesture, it wasn’t the same and the contrast just made the pain bite into him even harder. His best friend held him in his embrace as Tony allowed all the hurt and terror and uncertainty and fear of the past twenty four hours to flow from him in the form of hot, salty tears, his body shaking and shuddering, his throat burning, and his jaw aching. It hurt but it was also cathartic and by the time the waterworks had ceased, he felt a little better. Not a lot - he still felt lost and alone, but the edge had softened. “Okay, sorry, I think I’m done now,” he mumbled, wiping the last bit of wetness from his cheeks.

“You sure? I’ve got all the time in the world,” Rhodey told him.
“Bullshit - you’ve got that meeting with the Accords committee at eleven, then you have lunch with Pepper, followed by a meeting with an Airforce representative at three to discuss new ideas to recruit from high schoolers not going onto college, and then I’m pretty sure that I heard you discussing coming in to see Jenny after all her other appointments are done for the day to have that filling looked at. You’ve got maybe an hour, tops.”

Behind him, he felt Rhodey shrug. “Yeah, well, it’s the thought that counts.”

“Platypus, you put maybe point five of a second’s worth of thought into that sentiment.”

“Allright, alright, so maybe it’s more that the amount of thought put in correlates directly to how much I like you?”

Tony darted his elbow backwards, digging it into his best friend’s ribs but he was chuckling as he climbed off the bed. Rhodey got off as well, rubbing at his side and wincing. “Damn, I forget that for someone so small, you pack quite the punch.”

“There’s more where that came from if you don’t start being nice to me.”

“Sorry, you’ll have to project your voice upwards, sound doesn’t travel well from all the way down there.”

The genius poked his tongue out, but was grateful for Rhodey’s silliness and how easily the man managed to break him from his funk. He then sobered and sighed. “I guess we should go and see what the Winter Soldier has to say for himself this morning.”

“You sure that you’re up for it? I can go alone if you’d be more comfortable not speaking to him. You could go and get a new cup of Joe.”

“Nah, it’s okay, but thanks for the offer. I can wear my big boy pants and deal with it.”

Rhodey pursed his lips as he looked at Tony. “Okay, but only if you’re sure.”

“As sure as sure can be. Come on, let’s not make Tastee Freeze wait any longer for us.”

After confirming first with Friday that there had been no change to Peter’s status, they headed down to Bruce’s floor and checked the video feed before they let themselves into the secure apartment there. The Winter Soldier was curled up in one of the plush armchairs and it was such a ‘Bucky’ thing that Tony couldn’t help the whine that escaped his throat. He’d not expected the man to look so...vulnerable. He was a trained killer, he’d assassinated Tony’s parents for Christ’s sake - the last thing to cross Tony’s mind should be that he looked small and adorable.

Straightening his back and making a concerted effort to pull himself together, Tony took a moment before he hit the button to unlock the door. The soldier heard the door release and by the time that Tony and Rhodey got inside, he was standing upright in the centre of the room, arms held loose at his side, looking for all intents and purposes to be completely relaxed. The genius however knew that body almost better than he knew he own - the muscles in the soldier’s back and legs were coiled tight, ready to spring into action if the need arose.

Tony had no idea what compelled him to say, “At ease, soldier.” Perhaps it was not wanting to cause Bucky’s body any unnecessary strain, it certainly wasn’t because he wanted the Winter Soldier to be comfortable at any rate. He strode up to the man and peered into his stormy grey eyes, looking for any signs that Bucky was present.

“He’s still silent,” the soldier answered the question on everyone’s lips.
His breath was warm against him cheek and and Tony felt his throat tighten as loss washed over him. He took a deep breath, hoping the oxygen rush would clear his mind but all it served to do was give him a noseful of air scented with Bucky’s aftershave. Against his will, he felt his face crumple slightly and he forced himself to take a step back, pointedly ignoring the way the soldier half reached for him, as if to offer a steadying arm. He was a killer, he wasn’t concerned, dammit! “You need a shower,” he said in a hoarse voice as he stepped away.

If this demand sounded off to the soldier, he didn’t react, simply nodded, his eyes flickering to the bathroom door in the corner.

“What are your intentions?” Rhodey asked, folding his muscled arms across his chest as he stared down the assassin.

“What are your intentions?”

“Yeah, intentions. What the hell are you doing here?”

The soldier’s brow furrowed and Tony resisted the urge to reach out and soothe out the wrinkles with a soft touch. This wasn’t Bucky and he’d best start remembering that if he wanted this situation to get any easier.

“I explained yesterday, I didn’t come by choice.”

Rhodey raised a brow. “You expect us to believe that?”

“It is what happened - I cannot control if you believe it or not, Colonel.”

“So what happens from here? We’re stuck with you until Bucky comes back?”

The soldier nodded.

“Have you tried finding him?” Tony implored, not even caring that he sounded weak and desperate.

The Winter Soldier met his eyes and Tony knew that he wasn’t imagining the sympathy he saw in those eyes. Or the sadness. “He has never responded when I’ve called to him before. But I shall try again.”

He nodded. ‘Thank you,” he said, rather gruffly.

Rhodey met his eyes. “I guess there’s nothing to do for now but wait.”

Tony nodded. He’d left a message for Strange to come and check on Peter so he’d ask him if he’d mind looking into this as well, but their guest didn't need to know that yet. He turned to leave and then paused by the door. Without looking back he asked, “Do you have everything you need?”

“No, no change. I’ll have Friday advise you if there is.”

Even with his back turned, Tony could tell that the pause that followed was a surprised one. “Thank you, dorogoj.”

Tony nodded once and then left the room, hitting the button to lock the door behind him. He replayed the soldier’s reply back in his mind and there was no mistaking it - the Winter Soldier had called him dear.
The Winter Soldier wasn't the only surprised one.

Chapter End Notes

The Russian I'm getting from good ol' Google so if there are any native speakers and you notice I'm stuffing it up, please let me know :)

EDIT: A huge thanks to for their help correctly the Russian. You're the best, sweetie!
Winter watched as the door slid shut, cutting off his view of Tony and he had the sudden urge to cry out, to make the man come back so he could be in his presence once more. The genius hadn’t been so wary and suspicious of this body since the time in Siberia, and ever since Bucky had been pardoned, Tony had been nothing but polite and forgiving. That it grew into friendship and then love...Winter considered himself grateful to have experienced that even second hand. He wanted so badly to experience it for himself but it was clear that Tony wanted nothing to do with him, that he only wanted Bucky back. Winter remembered so vividly the words that Tony had said to Bucky when they were on vacation. Peter had pushed Bucky into the lake and he’d returned to the cabin, soaked and freezing, and Tony had urged him to have a shower and warm up, saying, "I fell in love with you, not the Winter Soldier."

Winter had suspected even before then that Tony thought of he and Bucky as separate identities, but now it had been confirmed and he’d made it clear that he had no love for the soldier. Only Bucky. It had hurt at the time, more than he’d thought it would, but at that stage Winter had never thought that he would ever be in control again. He’d been able to accept it since he would always be just one step removed, experiencing Tony’s love through the sniper. Now though Bucky had retreated, thrusting Winter into the driver’s seat and he also got to experience that pain firsthand. It was exquisite torture - hurting so badly due to how much you loved someone.

Deciding to have a shower so that he wouldn’t become overwhelmed by the rush of hurt and longing coursing through him, Winter headed for the lavish bathroom. He stepped carefully inside, wary of the delicate looking canisters and containers around the place, filled with soaps and creams and any other toiletry one could desire. He knew that they would be less breakable than they looked - this room was designed for the Hulk of course, but he was careful all the same. A small ray of hope began to shine through the darkness towards him as he considered his surroundings. Tony had designed this space, had created it to contain Banner in case he ‘Hulked out’. The genius could have made a cage or a prison, but instead, he’d created a room of luxury. He hadn’t done this for Banner, he’d done it for the Hulk, and it proved that Tony thought of the green alter ego as an actual person, one who he cared about just as much as Banner. After all the destruction and death that the Hulk had caused over the years, Tony had forgiven him, had come to think of him as a team mate, as a friend, and maybe, just maybe, he would be able to do the same for Winter.

Stripping off the clothes that this body had been wearing for two days now, Winter turned on the faucet in the huge shower. The size of the area needed to accomodate the Hulk should have made the shower feel cavernous and impersonal, but the intricate tiling on the walls and the fact that the entrance was still covered by a shower curtain made it feel more like a regular bathroom, only bigger. He played with the temperature, finding out what felt best. Hydra hadn’t gone so far as to simply hose him down since he had to be clean and presentable enough to blend in but the showers in their change rooms were unpredictable and would run from freezing to boiling within a heartbeat. Showers had been an exercise in efficiency - in and out in the amount of time it took to thoroughly scrub down and not a moment more. Winter had never had the opportunity to linger, to simply stand under water of the perfect temperature and enjoy the sensation of it falling against his skin, to try out different body washes and find one that he liked, not just one that worked. That was something that real people did and now that Winter felt like a real person, he wasn’t going to let the experience of the past ruin this for him. He was going to savour it, enjoy every moment.
Once the water was deliciously hot, he stepped out under the spray, feeling like he was caught in a heavy downpour that just happened to be hot. The shower head was a large grid, high above in the ceiling, and if he closed his eyes, he could imagine that he wasn’t even in a bathroom. After a while, he moved over to the shelf along one wall, stepping out from under the water, and began to open several of the bottles of shower gel, sniffing at each one. He decided that he liked the coconut one best, the happy, tropical scent reminding him of Peter’s smile, and he took a large puff and poured a generous amount onto it, getting it nice and foamy.

What happened next could be likened to a religious experience.

Having never been able to take his time and savour the experience, the soldier wasn’t prepared for how damn good it felt. The puff was thick and soft with lather and it felt divine as he ran it along his limbs, chasing after it with his flesh hand, rubbing the gel into his skin. He made sure that not even an inch of skin was missed, contorting in various ways to ensure that his entire back was reached. He rinsed the puff off and then found a matching shampoo, lathering up his hair and massaging at his scalp, all the while inhaling the intoxicating scent that reminded him so much of Peter. Once he was done, he stood back under the water and washed away the soap and shampoo, amazed at how soft it left his skin feeling. With his eyes closed, he trailed his fingers over the planes of his chest in awe, certain that he’d never felt anything similar.

The pad of his flesh thumb brushed over his nipple and a spark, almost like electricity, shot through him. His eyes flew open and he stared down at the nub that was pebbling to hardness. He was aware, in a somewhat distant manner, that Bucky had sensitive nipples, but besides having his body armour chafe against them, he’d never experienced it personally, let alone in a positive manner. He gingerly reached down and brushed over it again, hissing at the pleasure that coursed through him at the touch. He looked around, half expecting a handler to rush from the shadows and hurt him for straying from the directive, but he was alone. No one was there to hurt him, no one was there to tell him to stop, and Bucky was silent. Winter had time to experiment.

He began to rub and pinch gently at both of his nipples, playing with how hard he could twist them before pleasure morphed into pain. His left nipple was slightly more reactive than his right, and he preferred thumbing at them than gently stroking them.

Other parts of his body began to react to his experiment, most notably his penis. It started to get plumper and fill out, hanging heavy between his legs. He trailed his fingers gently down over his ribs to his stomach, sending goosebumps chasing the digits and when he shivered at the sensation, more blood rushed to his cock and he was soon erect. He knew what an erection was of course, had experienced them second hand through Bucky, but as far as he could recall, he’d never been the one ‘present’ when he’d gotten one. He allowed his hand to drop lower and stroked one finger up along the silky skin there.

“Svyatoye der’mo,” he swore, as his cock twitched and screamed for more. He danced his fingers over the shaft once again and then wrapped his entire hand around it, the girth pressing hot and heavy against his palm. He knew what movements Bucky liked when he masturbated and so he began to emulate that but quickly found that he preferred a firmer grip and a faster pace. He couldn’t describe the feeling if he tried, just held on for the ride and his pleasure built and built. The movement of his wrist became more and more erratic as he hurtled towards the end, not really knowing for sure what he’d find there but wanting so badly to experience it for the first time, to be the one to cry out, to feel that pleasure. There was no going slow now, no taking his time to savour and experiment, just a need for release that was building inside of him, causing his legs to begin to tremble and his breath to hitch.

Suddenly it all came to a head and he was crying out, hunching over as wave after wave of pleasure
coursed through him, hot seed spilling over his hand, only to be washed away immediately by the water. It was like someone describing the taste of chocolate cake and then actually trying it for yourself - it didn't matter how many orgasms he'd witnessed Bucky have, either by himself or with his lovers, experiencing it for himself was entirely different.

Winter finally straightened up but he was still breathing hard and he wasn’t sure if his legs would hold him, so he moved over to the wall and leaned against the cool tiles. He felt oddly relaxed but keyed up at the same time, but his mind was clear. He took a minute or two to allow the rush of hormones to fade and once he thought that he could walk without stumbling like a newborn colt, he turned the water off and exited the shower so he could dry off.

The towel was soft but he still winced as it rubbed over his nipples and his spent cock and he made note of how they were left sensitive after an orgasm. Looking in the mirror he could see that his chest and neck were flushed a deep red and that there were twin spots of colour high on his cheeks. He felt good, if a little sleepy, and depending on how long he would be in control of this body, he promised himself that he’d do that again.

When he returned to the main room, he looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it had only gone just midday. New clothes had been left for him, the tags still attached and although they were his exact size, he knew that they were not items that Bucky would normally wear and so F.R.I.D.A.Y. had likely ordered them in for him. He quickly dressed and then stood, towelling his hair dry and considering his options.

“Friday?” he asked, turning to look directly at her nearest camera.

“Yes, Winter?”

“How is Peter doing?”

“There has been no change. Boss gave me permission to tell you if there had been and so I would have interrupted your shower to advise if anything had happened.”

He nodded to himself. “Are Tony and May still sitting with him?”

“Not presently. Boss convinced May that she needed to have something to eat and maybe even a nap in a proper bed. I doubt he’ll convince her of the second but he has managed to get her to the kitchen on the common floor and they’re awaiting a delivery of Thai food.”

“Good, I wouldn’t want to scare either of them.”

“May I ask what you mean by that?”

His lips quirked into a half smile. “It means that I’m going to go and visit Peter and I don’t want to startle them.”

“I’m very sorry, Winter, but I’m unable to allow you to leave this room,” she apologised.

“Friday, I know that Tony is a genius and that this room was designed to keep the Hulk inside, but he relies mostly on brute strength, not Banner’s intelligence. I’ve already identified four ways to escape, and could come up with half a dozen more if need be. I don’t want to embarrass you, or your programing, but I’m leaving this room to go and see Peter and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

“Is that so?”
“It is. I suppose all you have to do is decide if you’re going to let me go or if you’re going to tattle on me to Tony.”

She was silent for a moment. “You say that you’re just going to visit Peter?”

“I am. I want to see him with my own eyes, tell him that I’m here for him. He hasn’t met me yet but I love him, Friday I’m going to visit him and that’s all there is to it.”

Another pause. “Boss will be mad if you damage any of the wiring while you escape so I believe that it’s best if you were to just leave via the door.”

There was a change in atmosphere and the door clicked open. “Thank you, malyshka,” he said and then Winter left the room and headed for Medical.

Chapter End Notes

Svyatoye der'mo: Holy crap
Malyskha: Baby Girl
Tony shut the door to the guest room quietly after finally having convinced May to get some rest. She’d protested but was clearly exhausted and had succumbed quickly to his persuasions and to sleep. The teen was stable for now, the worst seeming to have passed and he was resting comfortably. Tony knew that he should probably try and do the same but he also knew that he wouldn’t sleep right now, no matter how much he needed it. He’d arranged for Strange to pop round in a few hours’ time and he would spend the entire time he was supposed to be resting fretting about what the man would say. No, his time would be better spent sitting by Peter’s side, just in case the teen could somehow sense his presence.

The elevator doors slid open onto the medical floor and he started to make his way towards the room Peter was in. He hadn’t gotten far when Friday spoke. “Um, boss? Where are you going?”

The odd question made him pause. “To see Pete. Why?”

“Oh, no reason...but are you sure that you need to see him right this very instant?”

Cold fear flooded his veins as his imagination ran rampant, throwing up all the possible scenarios that would cause his AI to try to convince him not to go into the room. Was Peter flatlining again? Had there been complications? Was something wrong? He didn’t bother replying, just sprinted down the hall towards the room, ignoring her cry of protest. He burst into the room and froze as he saw the Winter Soldier sitting by the bed. “What the fuck are you doing here?” he grit out, activating his watch gauntlet once more.

“Boss, please,” Friday begged. “Don’t hurt him!”

“What the hell, Friday? You let him out?”

“Only because he was going to get out anyway.”

“Then you should have alerted me and I could have made sure he was restrained properly!”

“He’s not causing any harm, please, just leave him be.”

“Not causing any harm? Not causing any harm? Are you blind, Fri? Hes -” He trailed off then as he forced himself to look through the veil of panic and anger and actually see what the assassin was doing. Which apparently was sitting calmly by the bed and holding Peter’s hand. Wait, what?

“Don’t touch him!” he snarled.

The soldier held his gaze for a long moment and then very slowly let go of Peter’s hand and held his own out in front of him. “I’m not hurting him,” he said softly.

“Why are you here?” Tony demanded.

“I needed to see him, with my own eyes.”

“See him? Why? You don’t even know him!”

“Yes, I do.”
“You do not! I want you out of here, back to Banner’s room, now.”

“Please, Peter is -”

“Don’t you use his name, don’t you fucking dare say his name! I don’t know what sort of sick obsession you have with him but he is mine and I will keep him safe!”

“Tony? What’s going on?” a voice asked from behind him.

Tony turned to see Hope standing there, her face still pale having not recovered fully as yet. She was wearing sweats and a t shirt and her dark hair was falling around her face making her look softer than usual. “Hope, stay back, this isn’t Bucky.”

“I know, Colonel Rhodes told me what happened. I thought he was in Banner’s room?”

“He was and the Winter Soldier will be returning there now.” His voice was hard, making it clear that there would be no argument.

The assassin nodded and stood up but he took a moment to smooth back Peter’s hair and tenderly pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Be well, malen’kiy pauk.” He walked towards the door, pausing in front of Tony, his grey eyes searching out something in the genius’ face, but whatever it was that he was looking for, he didn’t find it. Sighing sadly, he left the room, nodding once at Hope.

“Friday, if he even thinks about leaving that room again, I want to know. If you don’t follow that order to the letter, then I swear to God I will disable you and implement another AI.”

“Yes, boss,” she replied contritely.

“I mean it, Friday - you’ve disappointed me.”

“I understand,” she said, and it wasn’t his imagination that her voice sounded choked up.

“Tony,” Hope said, speaking cautiously, “you need to calm down.”

“Excuse me? Calm down?” He glared at her and pointed out the doorway. “The fucking Winter Soldier was just in this room, with Peter, alone and you want me to calm down?”

“It didn’t look like he was intending to hurt him, Tony.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Look, I know that you feel like you have to protect Peter at all costs, I get that - he’s precious to you, but he wasn’t in danger.”

“Maybe you’re not fully up to speed on what that bastard is capable of, but trust me, I am, and I will not let him anywhere near Peter.” He took a shuddering breath in. “Especially since he seems oddly obsessed with him.”

“Have you ever spoken to Bucky about his time with Hydra?”

“Not a lot,” he admitted. “It’s upsetting for him so I don’t bring it up if I can help it.”

Hope gestured to the chairs next to the bed and once Tony had sat down, she too sat. He automatically reached out to pick up Peter’s hand in his but paused, remembering that she wasn’t aware of their relationship.
“It’s okay,” she told him, a knowing smile on her face. “I’m not here to judge you.”

“You’re not?” he asked.

“I fell in love with a master criminal, Tony, and a stupid one at that. The heart wants what the heart wants.”

He hesitated for a second and then continued, clasping the slack fingers in his own and rubbing at the cool skin.

“Besides, you’re not being very subtle about it,” Hope added. “If you don’t want word getting out then you might want to refrain from yelling that he belongs to you within earshot of the medical staff.”

“Huh, okay, fair point,” he conceded. “Thanks,” he then added. “It means a lot to us that there are people so accepting of us.”

“I understand. It’s not just you and Peter though, is it? Bucky is also involved.”

He nodded.

“You’re a lucky guy.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Now that I’ve hopefully convinced you that I’m on your side,” Hope said, smoothing out a wrinkle in the fabric of her shirt, “I want to say that maybe you’re being too harsh on the soldier.” She held up a hand as he began to protest. “Just hear me out. Look, Bucky and I spoke, once, about his time with Hydra, about the years he was forced to kill for them. He remembers all of those people, everyone.”

“I know.” Now it was Tony’s turn to choke up. “He told me.”

“Have you ever thought about how that’s possible?”

“What do you mean?”

“From what Colonel Rhodes told me, the Winter Soldier is a completely separate person, not just an emo version of Bucky. Even with conventional DID, the main person is usually unaware of what goes on when another takes over. It’s one of the symptoms they use to diagnose it - lost time. What Hydra did to Bucky triggered his creation and somehow their scientists managed to assert control over him through a series of words, spoken in a particular sequence. For all intents and purposes, Bucky should have no recollection of that time when the Winter Soldier was in control, but he does. Maybe it’s because of the serum, maybe it’s from something Hydra did, maybe it’s not even DID but something entirely different, but the fact of the matter is, Bucky remembers. He was present, at least in some capacity, watching from the sideline.”

Tony tapped his foot impatiently on the ground. “So? what’s your point?”

“My point is that if Bucky was present when he wasn’t the dominant one, then in all likelihood, the Winter Soldier was present when it was Bucky in control.”

He blinked slowly. “You mean…?”

“I mean that you keep saying that the soldier is obsessed with Peter but you’re not wondering why.
Why does he seem to genuinely care? Why was he so gentle? Why did he sound so protective of him? Tony, it’s like he knows Peter. I think he’s been there in the background this entire time.” She bit her lower lip before she added, “I think he’s experienced everything that Bucky has and that might include growing fond of Peter.”

“Are you serious?” he spluttered. “You think that the Winter Soldier has what? Fallen in love with Pete? Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

Hope shrugged. “I’m not saying that that’s definitely the case, Tony - I’m saying that maybe you have to consider the idea. It sure as hell would explain what I saw when I walked in here.”

She was crazy, that was the only explanation. Hope van Dyne had lost her marbles. The Winter Soldier was a mindless killing machine, a ruthless assassin, the man who had murdered Tony’s parents. He wasn’t the wildcard in a romantic comedy for fuck’s sake! Why the hell was the universe playing such a cruel joke on him? Hadn’t he atoned for all the horrible things he’d done? Didn’t he deserve a break? Just once, was that too much to ask?

“Look, I just wanted to come and see how Peter was doing,” Hope said, standing up. “I know that you’ve got a lot to think about, and I know that you’re not wild on the idea, but please, just keep it mind. I’ll be back upstairs if you need me.”

He nodded and watched as she slowly made her way over to the door. “Hope,” he called before she made it there. She turned back around to look at him. “How are you anyway? I haven’t seen much of you lately. You doing okay?” He waved in the general direction of her abdomen.

“Yeah, I’m doing fine. It’ll take a while since he sliced through so many layers of muscle. Doctor Cho says it’s a bit like after a woman has a C section, and you know how it is, being a regular old human with no fancy healing abilities. I’ll get there.”

He gave her a genuine smile. “I’m glad to hear that, Hope. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will. Thanks, Tony.”

“No, thank you, Hope.” He gave her a wry smile. “You’ve given me a lot to think about. I appreciate that you didn’t try to sugarcoat it.”

“Isn’t that what teammates are for?” she asked. “To tell it like it is?”

“No,” he disagreed. “No, I think that’s what friends are for. Thanks for being a good friend, Hope.”

She looked shocked and then returned his smile. “Anytime, Tony.”

“In the spirit of not sugarcoating it, you look shattered. Go and get some rest.”

“You don’t look so flash yourself,” she retorted. “You should take your own advice.”

“Maybe I will,” he said.

Hope nodded, neither of them believing it for a second. She turned and left the room, leaving Tony alone with Peter.

He hunched over the bed, lowering his lips to graze a kiss over the teen’s knuckles. “Peter, if you can hear me, please come back to me. I need you, baby, I need you here so bad right now. I can’t do this alone.”
There was no reply except for the steady beep of the heart monitor.

Chapter End Notes

Malen'kiy pauk - Little spider

Oh, and I forgot, I made a quick little moodboard for this.
Chapter 21

"My name is Doctor Stephen Strange."

"I know," Winter replied to the tall man who had appeared in the doorway.

"May I come in?"

"Of course."

Strange walked inside, his cloak flowing behind him more than the motion would naturally cause and Winter watched it, filled with curiosity. He knew that the Cloak was sentient, had its own personality, was even aware that Tony and the Cloak had some sort of teasing relationship and he couldn’t help but feel slightly envious of it. A garment was a real person to Tony, but Winter appeared not to be. It both frustrated and saddened him at the same time. He was probably being unfair to the genius - Tony was dealing with a lot of traumatic things right now and he couldn’t be expected to be accepting of everything, but it still hurt and he couldn’t help but wish that it were otherwise.

Flicking his cloak out rather melodramatically, the sorcerer sat himself down in one of the armchairs, that immediately looked like a throne. There was no denying the authority and power that oozed from the man, but Winter didn't care about any of that. He cared about the man’s previous profession. "Have you examined Peter?" he asked, finding that the more he spoke, the easier it became, the less raspy his voice was.

"I have."

"And?" He grit his teeth, promising himself that he wouldn’t beat the information from the man.

"It’s complicated."

"Then uncomplicate it."

The doctor raised a brow. "That’s a very Bucky thing to say."

"I’m sure there are a lot of characteristics that we share. We’re bound to pick them up from one another."

"Is that right? So Bucky has adopted some of your mannerisms as well? Like what?"

Like what Peter and Tony affectionately called his ‘murder strut’ but Winter wasn’t going to go into that right now. He hadn’t even examined his feelings on the matter himself as yet (though he couldn't ignore the flutter in his stomach at the thought). "You were uncomplicating things."

Strange regarded him calmly. "You’re very single minded."

"Comes with the job. Now tell me about Peter."

"And if I don’t?"

"Then you can leave because you’re of no use to me."

"Interesting."
“What is?”

“I was half expecting you to respond with a threat of violence.”

“Oh, trust me, I am picturing all the ways in which I could kill you with that pet cloak of yours,”

The sorcerer looked amused at that admission and the cloak itself jerked backwards as if it were offended. Strange reached up and stroked the material soothingly. “But you won’t?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know after you’ve told me about Peter.”

“Very well. Mr Parker’s situation is grave. His advanced healing is taking care of most of his injuries and in that regard he’s healing well, although it will take some time since they were so severe, however, his head injury is another matter.”

Winter swallowed hard, almost too afraid to say, “Explain. Please.”

“He had a building collapse on him,” Strange said bluntly. “He suffered a bad concussion as well as a cerebral contusion - severe bruising of the brain. For some reason, his body isn’t healing that like it is the rest of him.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea.”

“What’s your best guess then?” Winter snapped.

“It could be a range of things - maybe there’s just too many injuries and his body is prioritising the ones to fix first, the punctured lung for example. Maybe the brain is an area that his accelerated healing doesn’t affect. Maybe it’s just too bad for that to even help with. We simply don’t know.”

“Can you do anything to help him?”

“If he didn’t have his accelerated healing then I could certainly help with most of his injuries but I won’t risk using magic on his brain, it’s just too delicate to use it on.”

“But you’re the Sorcerer Supreme,” Winter said, slightly mocking. “I thought you were all powerful?”

“Would you trust Stark to use his repulsors to burn a loose thread off Peter’s shirt? It could be done but it’s dangerous. Once upon a time, I would have been arrogant enough to try, but now? I’ve learned that not everything can be fixed with magic; some things are best left to time and patience.”

His fear was making him tetchy but Winter knew that nothing good would come from getting angry so he took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. “Do you think that he’ll recover on his own?”

“I believe that Mr Parker will make a full recovery but it’s not going to happen overnight. I’m recommending that they keep him in the induced coma for longer than they initially planned to to aid his recovery, but it’s going to take -”

“Yeah, yeah, time and patience,” Winter said wearily.
Strange gave him a small smile. “Indeed. Now, you said that you would tell me everything. Do you intend to uphold your end of the bargain.”

“Sure, though if you literally want everything then you’re gonna need a whole lot more time.”

Strange placed a hand over the golden disc hanging around his neck. “Time is of no issue,” he assured him, and then smirked. “However, let’s start from the beginning and see how far we get without using condensed cosmic forces to manipulate our evening.”

“What did you want to know?”

“Why did you choose not to attempt to strangle me with my cloak?”

Winter shrugged. “The practical answer is that you’re a sorcerer. I’m fast and I’d get a jump on you but eventually you would overpower me with your magic and it wouldn’t accomplish anything.”

“And the not so practical reason?”

He sighed. “I know that people think of me as a monster, that I’m a ruthless killer and that’s all there is to me but I’m not. Hydra created me, yes, and they controlled me, but I had as little choice in the matter as Bucky did. Afterwards, when Bucky was the one in control, I had just as little choice in what actions he took as I did with Hydra - I was merely a passenger. Now he’s gone and I’m the one in control and what I do, I do by choice. My choice. I don’t want that to be what people believe me to be. I want to be what I chose to be.”

“You want to follow your own destiny?”

“That’s a fancy way of saying it, but yeah.”

“Alright then. So you don’t have any violent urges, no desire to inflict harm?”

“Not at the moment, no. I’m sure I’ll have them eventually but from what I’ve learned, that’s rather normal for the human race.”

“But you don’t think you’ll act on them?”

“I’m not a dog on a leash anymore. If I hurt someone, it’s because they deserve it.”

“And what gives you the right to be the judge of what they deserve?”

“What gives you the right to judge who is misusing magic?”

Strange quirked a brow. “There are guidelines in place, a code of conduct that, if breached, give a good determination that they’re deserving of it.”

“Exactly. If I was out and someone knocked down an old lady and stole her purse, I’d feel justified in restraining him until the cops arrived. If someone was attacking those that I cared about, I’d step in to protect them. These ideals seem to align with what is determined to be ‘good’ so I feel justified that anyone breaking them deserves it.”

“So you’re saying that you’ll be some sort of vigilante?”

Winter rolled his eyes. “You’re twisting my words and you know it. If you’re trying to get a rise out of me, it won’t work.”

Strange chuckled. “What can I say? You caught me.”
“What is the purpose of this visit?” Winter asked. “To determine if I’m a threat?”

“That, amongst other things.”

“What other things?”

“What you are exactly. To figure out if this is a case of DID or something else, something caused by the serum.”

“Can’t it be both?”

“Possibly.”

“I thought you were a neurosurgeon? Do you have other degrees that make you qualified to determine if I’m suffering from a mental illness?”

“I did take a few units in university but no, I’m not a specialist. I’m the best they have at hand though.”

“Fair enough. Whatever you think this is though is beside the point.”

“How so?”

“You can stick a label on it, say it’s one thing or another, but it’s not going to change the fact.”

“What fact would that be?”

“That I’m real, and I’m here, at least until Bucky makes a comeback.”

“If he does, will you fight him for control?”

He considered this. ‘I’m not sure. It’s been...nice, in a way, to be able to experience things for myself. I don’t believe I have a right to be in control at all times but it would be nice if we could...take turns.”

“You want to use that body as a timeshare?”

“Timeshare? I’m not familiar with that phrase but if it’s what it sounds like, then yes. I’m not going anywhere; I’m not going to just disappear once he’s back. I was always there, just hidden. I don’t want to be locked away with no way out again. Whether he likes it or not, this body is just as much mine as it is Bucky’s and I hope we can come to some sort of arrangement.”

“If he comes back,” Strange said.

“You don’t believe he will?”

“Do you? You said that when he was in control, you had an awareness of Bucky and your surroundings. Was he aware of you? Can you feel him now?”

“I think he was aware of me,” he mused, "however he chose to ignore the fact, to pretend that I wasn’t. As for if I can feel him...” He closed his eyes and tried to turn his consciousness inwards, to poke around and see if he could feel Bucky at all. He couldn’t really explain what it had been like when he had been the one in the background but it was almost like being in another room and looking through a window. There was a distance there, he was removed but still present, and voices and noises sounded almost like an echo. He tried to find that ‘window’, to look through it from the other side but when he did, it was dark and he couldn’t see anything. He opened his eyes and found
Strange looking at him intently. “I can’t feel him anywhere but I have the feeling that that’s because he’s hiding, that he doesn’t want to be found, not because he isn’t there.”

Strange hummed at this. “I see. Perhaps I could return tomorrow and help you through some meditation techniques, help you focus your mind so you can reach deeper?”

Winter shrugged, not believing that the sorcerer could help him look any deeper but not wanting to appear like he was actively avoiding looking for Bucky. “If you think it may help.”

“I do. I’ll return in the early afternoon - does that work for you?”

“It’s not like I’m going anyway,” he replied dryly.

“Really? Because Stark said that you’d already had an excursion outside.” His voice was tinged with amusement.

“And the principal was most upset with me,” he quipped. “I’ve been placed in detention.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” Strange told him. “If you genuinely try to locate Bucky, to bring him back, I’ll try and wrangle you some time at Mr Parker’s bedside.”

His jaw dropped open. “Really?”

“Really.” The sorcerer stood up, the cloak swirling around his legs regally. “Until tomorrow... Winter? That’s what you prefer, yes?”

“I do, yeah.”

Then “I’ll see you then, Winter.” He made his way to the door, the cloak’s collar fluttering around his face enthusiastically and as the door was swinging shut, Winter clearly heard him say to it, “Yes, yes, I like him too.”

Once he was alone, Winter pulled his feet up under him, curling up in the armchair in his favourite position. He closed his eyes again and this time, he not only tried to turn his sight inwards, but also his voice. “Bucky, I don’t know if you can hear me or not, but we need to talk.”
Tony tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Rhodey had chased him from Peter’s room, threatening physical bodily harm if he didn’t “get some damn sleep in a proper fucking bed, Tony, I swear to God”. Tony had only agreed to go if Rhodey stayed with Peter since he wanted someone he trusted there at all times and May was still passed out from exhaustion. With his platypus keeping watch, he’d staggered up to the Penthouse and found Bucky’s sleepwear, pulling on the too long pants and the long sleeved shirt that came down past his wrists and had fallen into bed, but that’s as close as he’d come to actually getting some shut eye. His mind just wouldn’t stop whirring. His worry for Peter, his longing for Bucky to be by his side, Hope’s words on repeat…

Could it be true? Could the Winter Soldier have been present all along? A real person, hiding in the background? And not a threat? Was he just as blameless in the death of his parents as Bucky was? If pushed, Tony had been able to admit for a long time now that it was Hydra who killed his mom, but in his mind, Hydra and the Winter Soldier were one and the same. But what if he wasn’t? Tony had been able to forgive Bucky, and that was before he’d even gotten to know him. When he’d invited the ex-assassin to come live at the Tower, to have a shot at becoming an Avenger, he’d never even considered that he would fall for the man. He’d been so consumed by his immoral longing for Peter that he’d not had a thought to spare for anyone else. He’d fallen hard though and his life had changed for the better.

It was easy enough to accept that the Winter Soldier had been simply a pawn in Hydra’s plans, just as much a victim as Bucky was. The hardest part for Tony was thinking of him as an actual person. It wasn’t that he was against the idea - he’d been creating artificial kids of his own since he’d built Dum-E when he was sixteen and if anyone had the audacity to suggest that his bot kid wasn’t a real boy, then they’d be on the receiving end of one of Tony’s lectures. No, it was more the challenge of accepting that somebody else, a whole other person, was inhabiting the body of one of his loves.

It felt almost like a violation. Tony had grown up in the media spotlight, was used to the flash of a camera and nosy reporters shoving a microphone in his face, and so when he did have a moment of privacy, he cherished it, put a value on that that couldn’t be matched. It was jarring then to discover that all of the things that he had shared in private with Bucky and Peter had been less private than he’d believed. The declarations of love, the whispered sweet nothings, the sensual caresses - they’d had a spectator the entire time and they’d never known it. The times that they’d thought they’d been alone, they hadn’t been - the Winter Soldier had been there as well.

He’d had just as little choice in the matter than the trio’d had, though, hadn't he? That was an undeniable fact that Tony couldn’t ignore. It wasn’t like the Winter Soldier could have slipped on his shoes and popped off to the store when things got steamy in the bedroom. Tony was a scientist; rational thought was the core of his foundation and his grief and fear had been preventing him from applying those principles to this situation. In the dark of his room, alone, he came to the decision that the soldier deserved just as much of a second chance as they’d all been given.

He slipped out of bed and made his way down to Bruce’s floor, the Tower silent and empty at this time of night. It might have been eerie to others but to Tony it was home and he felt safe and protected here. Friday was there to watch over him and keep him safe…

He came to a halt as he was struck by that epiphany. Friday was always present, his baby girl who he considered to be as much a person as anyone else, and so all those times that he’d considered ‘alone time’ with his lovers hadn’t been ‘alone’ at all. Apparently it was a damn freaking orgy with the amount of people in the room. Peter, with his not-so-secret voyeur kink was probably going to
nut himself when he found out that they'd been watched the whole time. Some genius Tony was, only realising this after almost a year. His heart ached at the fact that he couldn’t share this thought with the teen right now, that Peter was laying in a coma, fighting for life.

He paused at the door to the secure room and then lifted his hand and rapped his knuckles against it, not wanting to just barge in. If he was going to acknowledge that the Winter Soldier was his own person, then he deserved the same common decency as everyone else. Obviously the man couldn’t open the door himself but at least he had the option of telling Friday that he didn’t want to speak to Tony.

There was a short wait and then the door slid open. Tony took a single step into the room and saw that the soldier was curled up once again in the armchair, his knees tucked under him and a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He was struck once more by how innocent and adorable the man looked but this time he didn’t get angry at the thought, just accepted it. “There’s a perfectly good bed over there you know,” he quipped, leaning against the door frame until he was invited properly in. “You don’t have to sleep on the armchair.”

If the man was taken aback by Tony’s sudden change in demeanor, he didn't show it. He shrugged, rubbing at his collarbone with his metal hand and replied, “Who said anything about sleeping?”

“Sleep is kinda important, you should try it.”

The soldier snorted. “What’s the saying? Pot meet kettle?”

“I don’t really use a kettle so I’m not familiar with them,” Tony said airily.

The Winter Soldier laughed and it was such a different laugh to Bucky’s that Tony was thrown for a second. “Did you want to come in?” he asked the genius after his chuckles had faded. “Since neither of us are sleeping?”

Tony nodded. “Sure, thanks.” He went and sat on the armchair opposite and took a moment to study his houseguest. Now that he was more open to the idea, he found that the differences between how Bucky ‘wore’ their body and the Winter Soldier did was startling. If it wasn't for the fact that Tony knew every inch of that body, every scar, and every freckle, he would have said that they were twins since other than superficial appearances, they held themselves differently. Bucky was fluid, graceful, and confident whereas the soldier appeared to be hesitant, almost timid, as if he was scared of hurting those around him by accident. Bucky tilted his head just so when he spoke, yet the soldier did not. Bucky’s leg jingled when he was nervous, but the man before Tony seemed to fiddle more with his hands. They could both be dangerous, deadly, ruthless, but when at ease, in a safe place, they relaxed differently.

The soldier sat calmly, not speaking as Tony studied him, not appearing offended at all. After the silence had stretched out for several minutes, he broke it by asking, “How is Peter?”

“There’s been no change,” Tony told him, and couldn’t help but admire how dedicated he appeared to be to the teen. Since the subject had been raised anyway, he figured he may as well explore it a little more in depth. “So, you, um, care about Pete?”

Those stormy grey eyes were sincere as he said, “I do.”

Neeeeding to know if Hope had been right, he asked, “How? How is that possible?”

“He’s pretty lovable, it wasn’t hard to fall for him.”

“That’s not what I meant.”
The soldier’s mouth quirked into a little bit of a smile. “I know.”

“Wait, you’re teasing me?”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

He ran a hand through his hair, trying to sort his thoughts. “I don’t know, maybe? I guess it just seems like something that Bucky would do.”

“We might be different people but we’re similar in many ways.”

“So what, you share characteristics?”

He held up a hand and tilted it back and forth, indicating that it was partially true. “From what I’ve seen, it happens to everyone who spends a lot of time together. There are traits of both Bucky’s and Peter’s that you’ve picked up on over time so it’s not unusual for the two of us to share some.”

“I guess.” He played with the hem of the shirt, unable to make eye contact. “So, back to the original point, you’re what, in love with Pete?”

“Let’s just say that Bucky and I share the exact same taste in men so it seemed inevitable that I’d fall in love with Peter.”

“I see.” Tony wasn’t sure if he was reading between the lines correctly or not but he had an inkling that the Winter Soldier had just confessed that he also had feelings for him as well. It was a little too much to take in and so he pushed the thought to one side, to examine later. “Do you have everything you need in here?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Yes, I do thanks.”

“Boss?” Friday piped up, sounding cautious.

“Yeah, Fri?”

“Not to overstep my boundaries, but Winter was telling me earlier that he prefers tea to coffee so maybe I could arrange to have an electric kettle ordered?”

Tony looked to the soldier. “You don’t like coffee?”

He glanced over to the fancy machine in the corner. “Um, not really. I don’t like herbal teas but a regular English Breakfast is nice.”

“Huh. I’ll arrange a kettle right away. Why didn’t you say anything? I asked for a reason.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t want to be a nuisance. I’ve been trying to find Bucky, to coax him back, so I hopefully won’t be here for long anyway.”

“You’ve been trying to find him?”

“Yeah.”

He couldn’t help it -Tony teared up. His grief and sorrow were just too much and he was tired of trying to hold it at bay. “I miss him,” he admitted. “I miss him so much. I just want him here with me, by my side through all of this.” His eyes welled over and the tears slipped down his cheek and through his blurred vision, he saw the soldier get up from the armchair and approach him hesitantly.
“I’m trying, dorogoj, I’m trying to find him.”

Tony closed his eyes and nodded in acknowledgement and a moment later, strong arms were being wrapped around him. He suddenly didn't care that it was the Winter Soldier, it felt so much like Bucky that he gave in and slumped against him, pressing his face against his chest and sobbing brokenly. A hand rubbed up and down his back in comfort and he even felt lips brush against his hair. It was so nice to be held, to not have to be strong for a moment, to be the one being comforted that a little bit of the tension eased from his body and suddenly he was exhausted. The hand continued to rub soothingly and Tony’s eyes got heavy, and he felt himself drifting off to sleep. He knew that there were a hundred reasons why he shouldn’t be accepting the comfort that was offered but he no longer cared, the embrace was simply too nice. His breathing slowed and his eyelids drooped and soon he was asleep.
Chapter 23

Peter seemed to float, knowing that he was dreaming, but unsure of how to wake up. He was alone in his dreamscape, a dark grey place, the edges not quite clear, an almost shimmering veil separating him from the outside world. He paced the area, calling out for May, Bucky, and Tony, sometimes thinking that he could hear their voices, other times sure that he could feel the warm clasp of their hand in his. Every now and then he could even make out the shapes of people moving on the other side of the barrier, but they were blurred, indistinct, and he couldn’t tell if they were the people that he loved or shadowy threats.

Sometimes he would curl up on what passed as the floor - not quite hard, not quite soft, not warm but not cold, and would try to sleep, but how could he sleep when he was already dreaming? He shifted restlessly, wrapping his arms around his body and hugging himself tight, pretending that it was his partners’ arms around him. He would close his eyes against the constant dusk of his dreamscape and for a brief moment he could almost convince himself that he wasn’t alone, that Tony and Bucky were with him and he would feel warm, encased in their love. The moment would pass all too quickly, and the warmth would dissipate, leaving him once again in the disturbingly neutral feeling of the void that he was trapped in.

Every now and then he would manage to rest - not quite a doze but his body would relax and he would be at peace. He could feel within slight twinges and he knew that he was injured, knew that he had come close to death, but he did his best not to think about that, to ignore how bad it must have been that he was trapped in this place. He just silently willed his body to heal quickly so he could return once more to his loves. It was the thought of them that brought him those moments of peace and he lost himself in memories of their time together. They may be superheroes independently of one another but together they were strong, stronger than anything that could be thrown at them. Peter placed his trust in that strength and had faith that it would see him through to the other side, would guide him back to Bucky and Tony. It would simply be a matter of time.

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Winter came awake, instantly alert thanks to years of training, and yet he remained as still as possible. Tony was still in his arms, fast asleep with his face squished against the assassin’s broad chest and Winter tried to not even breathe deeply so as not to disturb the genius’ slumber. He was still reeling from the fact that Tony had allowed himself to be so vulnerable in front of him, especially given his suspicions about him, especially that he had sought comfort from him, from Winter - well, it was almost too much to process. So he froze, not wanting to disturb the genius but also half terrified that when the man did eventually wake, he’d react with anger or disgust. The reaction was possibly even worse.

Bucky generally slept in later than Tony did and so Winter had very little experience with watching him wake up. He shifted slightly in his sleep, his nose twitching adorably and he made a soft, indistinguishable noise. He began to move more as his body rose from slumber; he shifted his leg around, he reached up and scratched at his face, then slipped his arm back around Winter’s waist and hugged him close. His breathing wasn’t as shallow and soft and his eyes moved more rapidly behind his closed lids.

Then he nuzzled against Winter’s chest, sighed happily, and then, in a blissfully happy voice he said, “Bucky,”

Winter had never cried before - at Hydra he’d never had the chance as the control words left no room
for deviation from the mission, and he’d never been present long enough without them to have need.
He’d watched Bucky cry but he wasn’t prepared for how his eyes stung and his throat felt tight and
suffocating. It was so much harder to swallow suddenly and he had to force his throat to work even
as he felt hot tears streak down over his cheeks for the first time. He loosened his arms from around
Tony so as not to present a threat and in a voice that sounded just as wrecked as he felt, he managed
to whisper, “No, not Bucky.”

Tony froze for just a moment and as his reality filtered back into his consciousness he simply said,
“Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” Winter added, expecting Tony to get up and leave immediately. He didn’t want him to
go, didn’t want to lose the contact or to have the man see him with tears in his eyes. It wasn’t Tony’s
fault that he didn’t love the Winter Soldier, didn’t feel the same way about him as he did for Bucky
Barnes, and he didn’t want to be an added burden to him. As much as it hurt, he would rather be hurt
himself than cause Tony any unnecessary pain.

Then Tony slumped back down against him, and Winter was certain that he wasn’t the only one
surprised by the move as Tony quickly asked, “Is this okay? I’m...I’m kinda touch starved lately, I
guess.” He sounded like he wanted to say more but he never continued.

“Of course,” Winter assured him, hoping that he didn’t sound too desperate as he gingerly allowed
his arms to settle back around Tony’s body.

“Just tell me if I get too heavy. Wouldn’t want to give you a dead leg or anything,” the genius joked
to try and ease the awkwardness of the situation.

“You are not too heavy, dorogoj,” he said, the endearment slipping from his mouth before he’d
realised.

If Tony noticed, he didn't call him out on it. “So you've, uh, you've really tried to find Bucky?” he
asked, hesitant, like he was making a gross faux pas but his desire to know overrode the social
niceties. Winter didn’t think that there would be set conventions for what to do if your boyfriend
disappeared inside of a Hydra assassin but there was much that he didn’t know and the world seemed
to be a complex and confusing place, so maybe there was?

“I’ve tried,” he promised, “but he’s not answering.”

“But he’s there?”

There was so much hope in Tony’s voice that Winter didn’t dare confess that he’d not had any
indication whatsoever that Bucky was around, but he also didn't want to lie outright. Instead he
settled for, “I’m sure I would know if he was gone for good.”

“Would you miss him at all?” Tony asked. He probably wasn’t aware that he was doing it, but he
had several folds of material from Winter’s shirt in his fingers and he was twisting and playing with
them, his fingernails scratching softly against the soldier’s chest. It was a mesmerising and shiver
inducing touch and Winter hoped that his body wouldn’t give away just how much he was enjoying
the sensation. “How do you feel about him? I mean, do you even like him? Do you get on?”

Winter had to swallow another lump in his throat but this time it was from joy. Tony was admitting
that he was his own person with his own likes and dislikes, his own opinions, his own hopes and
dreams. It was more than he expected after the genius’ initial reaction, more than he’d even dared
hope for and yet it was happening. He’d not expected such a fast change of mind but he wasn’t
going to question it, just cherish his change in fortune. He cleared his throat, hoping that his voice
wouldn’t crack as he explained, still not quite used to talking so much. “It’s hard to explain how I feel about him - I mean, I exist because of him, and other than our time at Hydra when the words had been said, he’s always been in control. I’ve always been there though, in the background, so I feel invested in what’s going on. I’ve not always agreed with how he’s felt or what he’s done, but I like him well enough. How could I not?”

“Strange says people with DID don’t always like their alters.”

“Is that what you think this is? Dissociative Identity Disorder?”

Tony’s fingers paused in their playing with Winter’s shirt and he twisted his head around so he could look at him. “You don’t think it is?”

Winter let out a noisy sigh of frustration. “I don’t know. It’s just me, how it’s always been. Friday gave me some information on this DID thing and I guess I can see how it might fit this situation, although from what I understand, the fact that I’m fully aware of what’s going on when Bucky is in control isn’t normal. But I think, given time, if - when - Bucky returns, that things might develop differently.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Once, back when we were at Hydra, when Bucky was gaining more control and before they’d wiped him, I tried to speak to him. He ignored me, never answered back, but I know he heard me. I think that it’s entirely possible for us to communicate directly.”

“Okay, yeah, that is different.”

“Does it matter though? Really, at the end of the day does it actually matter what it’s called?”

Tony shrugged, and Winter suppressed a shiver at the way that his body slid over his own. Tony didn’t return his feelings and so it wasn’t appropriate for him to be taking so much enjoyment out of their proximity. “Knowing what it is can help us to understand, gives us something to work from, to help you both.”

“And what if it is something entirely new? I still think you’d try to help.”

“Of course I would, but I’d be on the back foot, learning as I went.”

“And you don’t like not knowing things.”

Tony chuckled. “I guess that’s more proof that you’re telling the truth - you do seem to really know me.”

“I feel like I do,” Winter admitted quietly.

“So,” he said haltingly, trying to find the right words, “when you said that you were always there, in the background...does that mean always?”

“Yes.”

“So, even during...you know.”

“Yes.”

“...I see.”
“I’m sorry, for breaching your privacy.”

“No, it’s okay, you really don’t have to apologise.” They fell silent and Tony once again began playing with Winter’s shirt as they both got lost in thoughts about what that meant. One of his fingers brushed over one of Winter’s nipples, causing it to immediately pebble and it sent a thrill through the soldier. A small gasp of pleasure escaped Winter’s mouth and they both froze, eyes locked. The light reflected off Tony’s lovely dark eyes, making them appear almost amber, his pupils were dilated, and his gaze flicked down to Winter’s mouth. Swallowing hard, Winter stayed perfectly still, fighting the urge to lean in and to close the small gap between them, his body screaming to press even closer. His tongue darted out to wet his lower lip and he watched, awed, as Tony’s pupils blew even wider and without realising it, they drifting closer and closer to one another.

The reality of their situation suddenly seemed to occur to Tony and he immediately pulled back and sat up, running a hand through his hair. “Um, right, well, I’d better be going,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I need to check up on Peter, see how May’s doing, and if I don’t have something to eat, Rhodey will kill me.”

“Oh, okay,” Winter said, unable to keep the disappointment from his voice. “Could I maybe come and see Peter later? Sit with him a bit?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, yeah, I think that’ll be okay.” He didn’t seem able to make eye contact, looking resolutely over at the door. “Right, well, I’ll be going then. Um, I’ll let you know through Fri when you can go down to medical.”

Okay.”

“Great.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

“Sure.”

“Right.”

Winter stared at Tony through the drawn out, awkward exchange, wondering why the man hadn’t just left yet since he now seemed so uncomfortable. He opened his mouth to ask if he was okay when it snapped shut in shock as Tony darted forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you,” the genius whispered, “for last night. For being there for me.”

His cheek tingled from where Tony’s lips had pressed against it and he fought the urge to reach up and press his fingers against the spot. Later, when he was alone. “Anytime,” he whispered.

Tony nodded, and then jumped to his feet, hands slapping against the front of his thighs as he fidgeted “Okay, well, I guess I’ll, um, see you later.”

Okay.”

“Right. Well, see you, then.”

“Goodbye, Tony.”

With one last glance over to Winter, Tony opened the door and left, leaving the soldier wondering what the hell had just happened.
Shit.

Shit, shit, shit, fuck, shit.

Goddamn fucking shit of fucking shits!

Tony paused in a hallway halfway to medical and banged his head on the wall, the litany of curses bouncing around his head increasing in volume. “What the actual fuck, Stark?” he muttered to himself when the silent berating inside his head failed to be enough. “Did you seriously just almost do that?”

There was a movement nearby and he turned to see one of the med staff watching him with concern but at his glare she scurried away, almost slamming into Colonel Rhodes in her haste. “Tones?” Rhodey said, looking between the departing woman and his best friend. “Is something wrong?”

“You could say that,” he said, followed by an almost hysterical chuckle.

“What the hell happened, man?” He strode down the hallway and grasped Tony by the upper arms, peering into his face, checking for injuries.

“Oh, you know, just your usual, run of the mill shit. One of my boyfriends is in a coma, the other has had a major mental breakdown, and I almost just cheated on both of them.”

“What the hell?” Rhodey hissed. He looked around and then dragged the genius into a nearby examination room, shutting the door behind them. “Explain,” he demanded, folding his arms over his chest.

“I almost just kissed Winter,” Tony admitted, head hanging low.

“Okay, back up a second because it almost sounded like you said that you almost kissed the Goddamn Winter Soldier!”

“Oh huh.”

“And you’re calling him Winter now.”

“Yep, since that’s his name and all.”

“Because he’s not Bucky.”

“No he’s not.”

“And yet you almost kissed him.”

“I did.”

“Which is why it would be cheating.”

“Your talent for stating the obvious is second to none.”

“How the hell did that happen?”
“Well I didn’t mean to!” he cried, arms flailing in his angst. “It just sort of almost happened.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the excuse most people use when they cheat.”

It might have the truth but Tony couldn’t help but flinch from the pang of hurt that shot through him at that, and the way Rhodey was looking at him. He wasn’t judging, he never judged, but he was disappointed which was much, much worse. “I’m pretty sure most people aren’t in the situation where the person they shouldn’t be with is in the same body as the person they’re actually with; the body that they’re already attracted to and are familiar with and have done every damn thing under the sun with! I’m sure that those people have never had to look into their lover’s eyes and see somebody else looking back! And I’m sure as fuck that no one else has ever been in this same damn situation as this so give me a fucking break why don’t you for once in my life!” He was yelling by the end, too confused, and anxious, and frightened to care right now that of everyone on the planet, Rhodey was the person who had given him the most breaks of all.

His best friend realised immediately of course the cause of his outburst - he knew Tony better than he knew himself - and his posture changed, became open and comforting instead and he reached out and squeezed Tony’s shoulder gently. “I’m sorry, Tones, I didn’t mean it like that. I know that this whole thing is all levels of crazy fucked up. I’m just surprised is all - you love Bucky and Peter with a passion that I’ve never seen before so I’m just confused as to how you went from ‘he’s the enemy’ to ‘almost kissing’ in the space of a single night.”

Tony felt all of the fight go out of him and he slumped down onto the examination bed, rubbing at his eyes wearily. “He remembers everything, Rhodey, every single thing that Bucky experienced. It’s not just....not only Peter who he has feelings for, but, well, for me too. I figured last night that he deserves a chance, that he’s just as much a victim here as we all are, so I went to talk to him, to extend the olive branch. When I actually started talking to him, well, it was kind of unreal. He’s sweet and sincere and a little bit cheeky but it’s the way he looks at me, ya know? Like I’m something, I don’t know, something precious.”

“So just like the way that Bucky looks at you?”

He nodded. “Yeah, exactly like that. I was upset and I was missing Bucky and Pete and had a bit of a breakdown, but he comforted me and I ended up falling asleep in his arms. I woke up this morning and at first I thought it was Bucky who was holding me but it wasn’t, but I didn’t want it to end, Rhodey. It felt too good, to have someone else comforting me.” He gave a wry smile. “You know, since you’re not available to cuddle me twenty four seven.”

“Yes, well, we both knew that if I cuddled you all day, every day, Bucky would get jealous of you since we both know that he wants a piece of this.” He gestured down at himself as he teased.

“Yeah, yeah, no need to rub it in that my sexy boyfriend is actually secretly in love with you.” He immediately felt better, knowing that if they were now joking about cheating, Rhodey wasn’t mad anymore.

“Okay, so what are you going to do now?”

Tony pursed his lips and let out a noisy breath. “Right now I’m gonna go and see Pete and sit with him for a bit, then after that when Strange comes round I’ll chat to him about if there’s anything he can do to help get Bucky back.”

“You know that’s not what I meant, Tony. What are you going to do about Winter?”

“What can I do? I just have to be extra vigilant that my stupid brain remembers that it’s not Bucky so
I don’t almost do anything like that again. Bigger picture though, I think maybe there’s no need to keep him locked up in Bruce’s room anymore.”

“You want to give him access to the rest of the Tower?” Rhodey’s tone was neutral, no hint of surprise or anger, just a desire to hear what his best friend explain his reasonings.

“I really don’t think that he’s a threat, and Strange agrees. I mean yeah, he’s dangerous but I don’t think we’re in any danger from him if that makes sense. It’s not his fault that this has happened and I feel like a real dick keeping him locked up like he’s a prisoner.”

Tony squirmed under Rhodey’s scrutiny and he knew that his friend was wondering just how the hell he’d done such a one eighty in regards to the assassin who had killed his parents. When he spoke, he didn't mention any of that though. “I have to disagree. We don’t know enough about him as yet to make the call on if he’s a threat or not. I don’t feel comfortable exposing the non-powered people here to a super soldier who could snap at any moment. However I’m amenable to giving him more space and not keeping him in the containment room. Do you want to keep him on Banner’s floor or more him to a different one?”

“Um, I think we’ll use one of the others. The containment room is one thing but Bruce might come back one day and I know he values his own space so I don’t want someone else to have been living there. I had several floors remodeled after...well, after all of that went down. We can use one of those.”

Rhodey reached over and gave his shoulder a squeeze, understanding how hard it had been for Tony when he’d been so thoroughly betrayed by the Rogues. Having those floors that he’d so generously offered to his old teammates gutted and then renovated hadn’t been as therapeutic as Tony had hoped. The plus side was that he now had numerous floors that could be used for unexpected guests - like the Winter Soldier. “We’ll put him on the closest empty floor to medical,” the Colonel said. “I’m assuming you want to give him visiting rights to Peter as well?”

“Yeah, yeah I do.”

“So long as they’re supervised, then I’m okay with that.”

“Thanks, platypus.”

“Okay, well I’ll arrange to have the floor readied for him and I’ll ask Strange when he gets here to do something so Winter can’t sweet talk Friday into letting him out again.”

Tony frowned at this but at the end of the day, Rhodey was in charge and the safety of the team was his responsibility, one that the genius wasn’t going to challenge. He didn’t like the idea of a magical prison either but he knew that compromises had to be made. “Okay, do what you have to do. I’m gonna go and see my boy now.”

Rhodey pulled him into a hug, squeezing him tight. “I know it’s a crappy time right now, Tones, but it’ll get better, okay? I know it will.”

“Have you been dabbling in fortune telling?” he quipped but burrowed his face a little closer against his best friend’s chest.

“No, I’m not abandoning the military in favour of setting up a tent at a psychic fair, but I have to believe that the universe is going to give you that break one of these days. You’re good people, Tony, and you deserve to be happy.”

“Thanks, sour patch.”
Tony made his way down to Peter’s room, May looking up as he walked in. “How is he?” he murmured, laying a hand on her shoulder.

“No change,” she said, watching Peter with a sad look on her face.

Tony sighed and then moved over to the spare chair on the other side of the bed. Before he sat, he smoothed back the hair from Peter’s forehead and pressed a kiss against the cool skin, his fingers gently tracing over the vivid bruising on his face. It was a stark reminder that even without his advanced healing, Peter’s body was broken and his injuries severe. “I’m here again, Petey,” he whispered, kissing him again before sitting down. He looked over to see May watching him.

“How did it all happen?” she asked. His brow furrowed, not understanding the question and she added to clarify, “You three getting together.”

“Oh, um, are you sure you want to know?” The last thing he needed was to have May throw a punch.

She smiled ruefully. “I meant it when I said I’m not angry, Tony. I’ve seen how much you love my nephew and you obviously make Peter very happy. I know you well enough by now to know that you only have his best interests at heart and you’d never have coerced him into anything.”

Warmth bloomed in his chest at that, and he could feel himself blushing. “Thanks, May - that means more to me than you’ll ever know.” He picked up Peter’s limp hand and linked their fingers together as he gathered his thoughts, wondering where to begin. “I guess I’d already had feelings for Peter for quite some time, ones that I’d told myself I’d never act upon because of the age difference, thinking he’d never be interested in someone as old as me. But then the kiss happened…”
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Apologies for those thinking the last chapter ended on a cliffhanger...it was more supposed to be one of those ‘fade to black’ moments, you know, where we're left with the image of Tony regaling May but we all know the story so there seemed little point in rehashing it. I guess I suck at endings...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rubbing at his aching temples, Winter sat in the comfy armchair that Tony had made sure had come with him from the containment room to his new quarters, staring out over the city through the floor to ceiling window. It had been almost a week since he’d been moved to the massive apartment and every day he got to spend at least several hours at Peter’s bedside. There had been slight improvements in the teen’s condition - he’d been taken off the ventilator once his collapsed lung had fully healed and they were considering bringing him out of the induced coma if those improvements continued. There was no guarantee that he’d wake up - his own body may keep him in that unconscious state for longer, but at least they were heading in the right direction.

The time that the assassin did spend in the grand living quarters (really, he’d seen no need for such luxury but Tony had told him that all the guest floors were equally as lavish) had not been spent alone. Strange came every second day and had spent much time with him after he'd installed a magical force field over the exits as per Rhodes' request, leading him through a series of meditation exercises to try and locate where Bucky was hiding. It had been to no avail but the sorcerer had gained valuable information about Winter’s disposition while they were at it which had gone a long way to convincing Colonel Rhodes that he wasn’t going to snap and go on a murder spree anytime soon. He may be the Winter Soldier but he was no longer The Asset, a ruthless killing machine with only the mission in mind.

Hope van Dyne had visited several times, not bothering to explain why, just bringing with her a chess board and seeming content to sit and play, offering the odd anecdote or comment. It was peaceful and Winter appreciated the gesture, and he began to look forward to her easy visits.

Not so easy visits occurred frequently from Colonel Rhodes. The man may have accepted that Winter wasn't a threat to them but he was still cautious and suspicious. Rhodes wasn’t one to pass on an opportunity that presented itself however and his visits were spent going over information that Winter had stored away about his former captors. Hydra may have suffered a major blow but no one was stupid enough to think that they were gone entirely. Fanatics such as they didn't just give up and go back to their day jobs if the hierarchy fell. They was bound to be small clusters of them hiding away, gathering their strength, preparing for the day when they would be ready once more to try to dominate the globe in the name of Hydra. It turned out that Winter didn’t have a lot more information than Bucky did, which surprised the Colonel somewhat. “So it’s true - Bucky was present as much then as you were afterwards?” He left that day with a pensive look on his face as he pondered this revelation.

By far, the visits that Winter looked forward to the most were those from Tony. The genius came everyday, sometimes more than once, despite his other commitments and the initial hostility towards the assassin had long faded. Instead of claims that he was doing Bucky harm, now he would listen
patiently as Winter described what he’d been doing to try and find his partner, and would make suggestions based on research he’d done or advice received from colleagues. He didn’t push the entire time though, making sure that Winter took breaks, and he would spend some of that downtime with him instead of simply leaving after another failed attempt at locating Bucky. Those moments were the most precious to Winter because Tony stayed because he wanted to, not because he wanted something. The genius kept his distance - there had been no more cuddling and definitely not another ‘I’m pretty sure he’s about to kiss me’ moment, but there was a softness about his eyes that Winter began to crave, a tiny little sign that proved that he wasn’t just nothing to Tony.

He received even more proof one day when, frustrated with the silence that had met him once more when he’d gone searching for Bucky (a silence that was so absolute that he was certain that it was fabricated, that it was because Bucky didn’t want to be found, not because he wasn’t there) that Winter burst out that, “Maybe we should get Maximoff to look inside my head and see if she can find him.”

Tony had instantly paled and he’d been frozen in shock for a moment before, in a voice pained beyond imagining he uttered, “No. There is no way in any universe that I’m letting that witch near your head, Winter. No damn way.”

Tony hadn’t objected because he was afraid for Bucky, nor because he simply didn’t want anything to do with the Scarlet Witch after she’d messed with his own mind mind - no, he had said that he didn’t want her anywhere near Winter, like he’d been worried about him, like he wanted to keep him from harm’s way. It had sent warmth blooming through his chest and so Winter had easily agreed and promised not to raise the matter again.

Most times, their conversations weren’t anywhere near as heavy - Tony idly telling him about projects he had ideas for when he had time again (his most pressing concern was how to reinforce Peter’s suit so it could keep him from being crushed if he ever found a building collapsing on him again and the genius had some interesting ideas regarding nano-tech), recounting stories about his past (it was so much different to hearing them from the man himself instead of via Bucky), and exploring all the things that Winter liked that Bucky didn’t and vice versa (Winter wasn’t fussed about almond chocolate, preferring savoury food, he’d discovered via more exploratory showers that he didn’t mind the taste of semen, and for some reason he couldn’t quite put a finger on, he wasn’t overly fond of Bucky’s great niece, Melanie). He enjoyed Tony’s company immensely and he found himself falling even further in love with the man. He’d found himself at the beginning questioning if the feelings had really been his own or were simply Bucky’s bleeding over but there was absolutely no doubt in his mind now that he loved both of the superheroes.

It made it that much harder to watch as Tony left the room, knowing that he was unable to follow unless he was wearing the bracelet provided by Strange to allow him to safely pass through the magical force field that he’d erected around the apartment. Even with the protective amulet clasped around his wrist, leaving the floor was uncomfortable, an energy similar to electricity but somehow different pulsing around him, buzzing like a million wasps, not quite biting but making his skin prickle in warning. No one else was affected, the spell having being keyed into his individual energies, and so he had to watch, time and time again as Tony exited, the low humming noise increasing the closer he got to the door, an ever present warning.

Now he sat, looking out over the city that was achingly familiar but also totally foreign to him at the same time, counting down the minutes until someone would come to fetch him for his evening visit with Peter. Sometimes Tony would sit vigil with him, sometimes he was alone, but he was never left with May - hadn’t even laid eyes on the woman since that first day. He understood that it was for her safety but he wished that he could get to know her like Bucky did, to feel just that little bit closer to Peter by way of his aunt. The sun was slowly sinking over the horizon, throwing a rainbow of
colours over the steel and glass of the city, pinks and purples and oranges gleaming back at him. Far, far below, traffic crawled along the streets, horns blaring as commuters battled peak hour traffic, and cyclists weaved through the vehicles that stood at a standstill.

Suddenly the quiet of the apartment was broken by an alarm blaring through the entire building. Winter was on his feet in an instant, body on alert and his eyes scanned the immediate area, looking for a threat. When he found none, they settled on Friday’s nearest sensor. “Friday? What’s happening?”

“I’m unable to provide that information at this time,” she replied, but not instantly. Winter had the feeling that she had asked Tony for permission before responding.

“Is it an Avenger’s alarm? Or is the threat more localised?”

“I’m unable to.”

“Dammit, Friday!” he snapped, not liking being kept in the dark. “Do I need to prepare for an immediate attack or not?”

She paused and then answered. “It would not hurt to be prepared,” she hedged. “This is an Orange Alert, meaning to get ready as a threat has been detected but we are not under attack. I will alert you if we go to Red Alert.”

Cursing under his breath, he scoured the apartment, looking for anything that could be used as a weapon. There was not much to choose from but he tucked every single butter knife in the small kitchenette onto his person, assured in his own skills that he could easily kill an assailant with the cutlery. Once he was armed, however basically, he crossed to the windows, requesting that Friday tint the glass so he could see out but anyone outside would have a hard time seeing in. His eyes scanned the area around the Tower, lingering on the upper floors of surrounding buildings, looking for the telltale glint of a sniper scope, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. He wished he knew exactly what the threat was so that he had some idea of what to look for but he was used to dealing with little intel and he was the best at being reactive.

The blaring alarm had quietened so it wasn’t so shrill, but it was a constant noise in the background, which Winter tuned out. It wouldn’t be important unless it changed in pitch, indicating that the threat level had either escalated or they’d been stood down.

“Mr Winter, incoming video call from Mr Stark,” Friday announced.

Winter strode over to the large television screen when it flickered to life, showing Tony’s face, looking drawn with worry. “What’s happened?” he demanded.

“You know Adrian Toomes, the Vulture who dropped a fucking building on Peter?”

Winter grit his teeth. “Of course,” he replied, terse.

“He’s escaped custody and his crew have rallied to him. We believe that he may be planning an assault on the Tower.”

If it were anyone else, Winter would have thought that they’d underestimated the defences of the Tower, but he knew just how much of a threat Toomes could be. He had a grudge with Tony and he seemed eager to take it out on anyone near and dear to the genius. “Let me out, Tony - I can help.”

“Sorry, Tasteefreeze, no can do. This is officially an Avengers matter so Rhodey makes that call and he wants you kept in lockdown.”
“Why? It’s ridiculous to not make use of my skills.”

“If we were anywhere else, I might agree with you, but we’re at Stark Tower, home of the Avengers. There’s more than enough superheroes on hand to take care of this guy.”

He didn’t agree but knew that pushing the matter wouldn’t change Colonel Rhodes’ mind. “Keep me posted?” he asked instead.

“I will.”

Tony made to disconnect the call but Winter cried out, “Wait!” Tony cocked his head to one side in a silent question and Winter struggled to find the words to say what he needed to say. In the end all he could manage was, “Be safe.”

“I will,” Tony promised and the screen went dark.

The next several hours dragged by, with Winter only getting the odd update from Friday and all of them were ‘no new news’. Darkness fell over the city, but it fought back with its millions of lights, chasing it away and bathing the area in the endless twilight of the metropolis. He didn’t pace, conserving his energy, but he was on alert the entire time, ready to face any attacker.

Then the alarms changed pitch and got louder and Friday announced, “Toomes’ men have breached the Tower at the basement level. All Avengers bar Ms van Dyne are enroute.”

“Where is the Vulture himself?” Winter asked,

“No sign of him so far.”

Winter cursed, immediately recognising the breach as a diversion. His mind immediately went to Peter, alone and undefended in Medical and his instincts were screaming at him that Toomes would be heading there. “Friday, I have to get to Peter,” he told her. “Can you drop the force field?”

“I’m sorry, Winter, but only Doctor Strange can disable the device.”

He crossed to the door, feeling the thrum of the invisible field under his skin. “Is there anyone who can bring me the bracelet?”

“All available personnel are engaged in our defences.”

He took a deep breath and relaxed his entire body, pushing away his emotions and allowing the spirit of The Asset to infuse his body. The words hadn’t been spoken but the persona was like a second skin and he melted into it, a calm falling over him as he surveyed the doorway in an almost detached manner. He took a deep breath and then marched forward steadily, directly into the barrier, the deep buzzing noise getting louder and louder.

Pain lanced through Winter as he came into contact with the force field, an orange haze filling his vision, but he grit his teeth and pushed even deeper into it. He knew that it wasn’t even two feet deep from his observations of the sensation of passing through it with the exit amulet but right now it felt like it might reach to the moon. A burning sensation seared his skin, seeming to penetrate down to his very bones and a cry tore itself from his throat as he pushed further and further in. He tilted his head down, shielding his face but the pain assaulted him from all sides and it made little difference. All around him now was the unnatural orange light, and the buzzing sound, warning him away, but there was no turning back.

It felt like his skin was melting, and Winter’s mouth had fallen wide open in a silent scream, his vocal
chords seizing up from the agony shooting through his veins. His body screamed at him to turn back to safety but he couldn’t, he wouldn’t. Peter was beyond the barrier, laying helpless in a hospital bed, unguarded and vulnerable. Winter had to get to him, had to keep him safe from Toomes, no matter what he had to endure to make it there.

Time seemed to stop and Winter wasn’t sure if he was making any headway, but he pressed on regardless, keeping the image of Peter’s face in his mind’s eye, a reminder of what was at stake. Every nerve ending was ablaze, and his body was thrumming with magical energy, but he was almost there, he had to be, he had to be through the worst of it by now, he simply had to be. Somewhere in the distance, far far away, he thought he could hear Friday, calling at him, begging him to stop, to return to safety, but he ignored her, ignored the pain, ignored everything but the need to keep Peter safe.

Then he was suddenly free, falling through the other side of the force field and onto his knees, his chest heaving as he clawed in huge gulps of air. His skin still felt like it was on fire and he reached up to feel his face, almost certain that he would find a melted mass but instead all he felt was firm skin under coarse stubble. He’d survived, and there was no time to waste. Forcing himself to his feet, he disregarded the pain, and the way his muscles spasmed from the aftershock, concentrating on the mission, only the mission.

Keep Peter safe.

Chapter End Notes

I *do* seem rather good at actual cliffhangers though so have one of those! :P
Ducking the blast of an energy weapon, Tony skidded to a halt in one of the stairwells near the basement level, trying to stay out of the line of sight of Toomes’ men. He only had his gauntlets on - the Iron Man suit was too bulky to run around in indoors and he really needed to do something about that - and he really didn’t want to take one of those beams to the chest. His purpose right now was to distract their invaders, keep their attention focused on him so Lang and Vision could get in behind them for a surprise assault. Rhodey had taken cover on the landing above where Tony was now, staying out of the fray since he too was without his suit and his braces didn’t offer anywhere near the maneuverability of his armour, but still close enough that he’d be able to provide backup. If there was anyone Tony wanted to have his back while Bucky and Peter were out of commission, it was Rhodey. He was a crack shot and he’d be sure to keep the genius safe.

From what he could tell, there were three men at the bottom of the stairs, but none of them were Toomes. They’d taken out all of the cameras, leaving Friday blind but she’d gotten some intel before it had gone dark for her. Normally three unenhanced humans would be a cakewalk but with the firepower they were packing, they needed to lean more on the cautious side, especially since one of the weapons was doing an awesome job of melting the wall. If he made it upstairs with that thing, more than just the Avengers would be in danger.

The absence of Toomes however was grating at Tony’s nerves. He knew that this was a set up, it was screamingly obvious, but what else could they do? They’d left Hope in with Peter to offer him protection, and May and the majority of the medical staff had been evacuated (the exception being Helen who refused to leave her patient), but as Rhodey had reminded him, he had responsibilities and he couldn’t just dash off to protect Peter when others were also in danger. They had to deal with this immediate threat and then afterwards he could stay by Peter’s side while the others tracked down Toomes. He wished that their team leader hadn’t immediately dismissed the help that Winter could have given them. Tony understood Rhodey’s reasonings, he truly did, but he didn’t agree with them. He knew that the assassin would never harm Peter and he would have been able to keep him much safer than an already injured Wasp. Rhodey had been more than understanding of the current situation however and so Tony wasn’t going to push him. The medical floor was on lockdown, the Tower’s security was ramped up, and Hope was kick-arise, even when not at one hundred percent. Tony just had to have faith in those things to keep his lover safe until he could be with him.

Something buzzed by his head and Tony deliberately didn’t allow his attention to stray to Lang and his ant companion who were whizzing through the air down the stairwell. Before the intruders could lose interest in Tony and chance a glimpse of their stealth team member, Tony decided that now was the time for a diversion and what better way to distract and annoy the enemy than with his big mouth? “So, uh, hi again,” he called out. “Nice weather we’re having, isn’t it?”

“Fuck off, Stark!” one of the men called back and it was followed by an electric blast from a heavy gauntlet.
Tony recognised the weapon, if not the man’s voice, and he cheerfully replied, “If it isn’t our good friend, Shocker! You know you didn't have to sneak in the servant’s entrance - you could have come in through the front door!”

“Oh? You wouldda greeted us with a welcoming embrace?”

“God no, it just would have made it easier to shoot you in the face!”

“I’m not the one who’s gonna take a blast to the face, Stark. We’re gonna take you out and then we’re gonna make out way up to your little cock warmer upstairs and make sure that he never wakes up again.”

He growled low but quickly regained his composure, knowing that they wanted to emotionally compromise him. “You’re not getting anywhere near Peter,” he promised.

“Oh really? That gun that Dan has will melt through you just as easily as it’s melting through your stupidly expensive wall,” Shocker threatened.

“Yeah? I’d like to see him give it a go. I doubt that you incompetent dicks could hit me even if you tried.”

“Tony!” Rhodey hissed from behind him. “You don't have to be so antagonistic!”

The genius threw a wink at him and then turned his attention back to Shocker and his friends, who was rather pissed. “So, come on then, what are you waiting for, Dan my man? Or are you having performance issues? Is that it? Can’t quite follow through? Not used to handling such a big weapon, huh? It’s okay, not all of us are ready for big boy toys.”

“Oh, just for that, we’re gonna make sure that your little boy slut suffers,” a new voice, presumably Dan, yelled back. “Maybe I’ll see just how much of my big boy toy he can take down his little throat! I bet your whore would love that, Stark.”

Anger and rage flared in Tony’s gut at the things that they were calling Peter but he didn’t take the bait, didn’t rush forward, yelling and cursing like they wanted him to do, forgetting in his wrath that he would be running directly into their line of sight. Instead he peered down to see if he could catch any sign that Vis and Lang were in position. He caught a brief glimpse of red behind the men before he was ducking back, yelping as a green blast hit the metal railing of the stairs, immediately turning it into a goopy, melted mess.

Then there were shouts of surprise and the sounds of bodies colliding with a solid, concrete wall, the echo of another blast being fired, and then he heard Lang’s voice and he snuck another look, seeing him standing over not-Shocker-so-probably-Dan, holding his weapon. “You size queens always make me laugh,” Lang said, eyeing the weapon. “Bigger isn’t always better, ya know?”

“We have them secured,” Vision called out to Tony and Rhodey and they both hurried down the stairs to find him tying the last of the three up.

“Any sign of Toomes?” he asked, ignoring the urge to kick his men while they were down just because of the things they’d said.

“He's not here,” Lang told him. “I got a good look around before I embiggened myself.”

Scowling, Tony muttered, “I still can’t believe that that ridiculous word is actually legit,” before he stalked over to Shocker. “Where is he?” he demanded.
The man smirked up at him, and if his hands weren’t tied behind his back, the genius was certain that
the man would mime zipping his mouth closed. It was Melty Dan who opened his big mouth, which
was bloody from having his face smacked against the wall. “You’re too late,” he sneered. “Boss will
have already finished him off by now - he’s probably smoking a cigar over your boy slut’s corpse as
we speak.”

Tony didn’t bother swearing or yelling or lamenting the fact that he’d known this damn ruse was a
diversion, instead he simply turned and bolted further into the basement, heading for the bank of
elevators. The door slid open as he arrived, Friday deducing his plan of action and he threw himself
into the car, not even having to tell her to take him to medical. Before the doors slid closed, he caught
a glimpse of Lang and Rhodey hurrying towards the elevators but he couldn’t wait, couldn’t waste
those precious moments and he left them to take the next one. He felt his stomach lurch as the
elevator began to move, and he knew it wasn’t his imagination that it was moving faster than usual.

Friday loved Peter too.

“Does Toomes have him yet?” he asked his AI, bracing for the answer.

When it came, it was an unexpected delight. “Mr Toomes has not yet breached Peter’s room. He’s
unable to enter due to the Winter Soldier giving him a total arse whooping.”

Tony had seen the Winter Soldier fight before, had been on the receiving end of that power and
precision, but to see it as an outsider, when the assassin was on their side, was a thing of beauty.
Toomes wasn’t wearing his winged Vulture suit - it was even less convenient to wear inside than
Tony’s Iron Man armour - but he was far from defenceless. He was armed to the teeth with small,
close combat weapons, but he wasn’t only relying on his weapons. The man wasn’t a martial artist,
wasn’t fast and graceful, but he was a brawler and he fought with brute strength and viciousness.

Which would have given him a chance against most people. Not against Winter though.

Over the past week, Tony had learned a lot about Winter and his differences from Bucky. He’d also
learned that the man had a hatred for The Asset, the emotionless killer who couldn’t be reasoned
with, was unresponsive to begging or pleading, and was absolutely ruthless. If it wasn’t for the anger
simmering in those grey eyes, Tony would have had all reason to believe that he was seeing The
Asset in person. Winter moved with precision and deadly accuracy, not fighting with any
showmanship, not bothering to try and intimidate Toomes, simply batting away his attempts at
defence and landing blow after blow.

One kick from those powerful legs sent Toomes bursting through the door of Peter’s room, tumbling
over the floor under he rolled to a stop at the foot of the bed. Hope had placed herself between the
door and the bed and she ducked out of the way, hovering protectively over Peter. Tony watched,
frozen in awe, as Winter stormed over to the Vulture and grasped him about the throat with his metal
hand, picking him up like he weighed nothing. Toomes’ feet kicked out as his hands came up to
clutch at Winter’s, trying to pry them from their death grip. “Peter is under my protection and you
will pay for what you did to him.” His eyes flickered over to Tony and he asked, “The others have
been stopped? The threat is contained?”

“Yeah, it has. They’re not gonna be getting up to any more mischief today.”

Those glorious eyes moved back to Toomes, red faced but still struggling as his oxygen ran out, and
the anger seemed to flare even brighter. “This one isn’t going to cause mischief ever again.” And he
began to squeeze even tighter.
Tony watched, unable to feel even an ounce of pity for the man who had caused them so much pain, who had tried to kill Peter three times and had come far too close to succeeding. He didn’t take any particular pleasure in watching Toomes slowly suffocate under that crushing grip, but he did feel a sense of justice. The man had tried to kill his Petey, the boy who was wonder and light and joy and love. That could not go unpunished and so he was content to watch in silent support as Winter doled out his punishment.

Then there came a voice that Tony had been begging every god known to man to let him hear once more. “Stop,” Peter croaked, “don’t kill him.” Winter’s eyes snapped over to the teen who was struggling to sit up, one hand coming up to tug at the nasal tube attached to his face. “Whoever you are, please, don’t kill him.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m posting this quickly before I head to work so I’ll reply to everyone’s comments on the last chapter later today when I have a second.

Also, with all the shit going on over at Tumblr, I’m looking for another platform to use, which will probably end up being PillowFort or maybe Dreamcast. I’ll keep you updated xxx
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was gradual, but slowly the voices that Peter could hear became clearer and clearer. Instead of being in a locked room, listening through the window, it first felt like the door was cracked open, and then like it was wide open, and then like he was in the same room with them. May’s voice was soft and gentle and she spoke quietly, telling him stories of how she met Ben and their early life together. Tony’s voice was smooth like honey and was always accompanied by warmth spreading up Peter’s arm and he knew that the genius was holding his hand. He tried crying out into the void where he was, needing to have his love hear him but he was still voiceless. He tried to squeeze his fingers, to assure Tony that he could hear him, that he knew that he was there, but his muscles wouldn’t work.

Then there was another voice, one that was so similar to Bucky’s but at the same time…not. He was sometimes present when Tony was, and during those times he never spoke much, but then he would be there when no one else was and he would speak more often. He spoke of fear and of being caged and how he longed for something more but didn’t know how to dream. He confessed that he loved Peter, spoke passionately about the goodness of the boy and how that had helped shape his own sense of self, how it made him want to be good. He was earnest and gentle and made Peter feel wanted and he wished that he knew who the man was. He could feel a hand smooth his hair back and then warm lips press to his temple and he would will his eyes to open so he could see him, but they never did.

Throughout his time in the void, the one voice that Peter missed the most though was Bucky’s. He was scared and lost and out of everyone in the world, Bucky made him feel the safest. He’d been drifting, untethered, for a while now, even before he came to this place, ever since he and the ex-assassin had had their falling out. It had been thoughts of Bucky that had given him the strength to push the rubble off of him when Toomes had collapsed the warehouse roof down on him, a promise to himself that he would make things right with Bucky, to leave their petty fight behind them so they could move on. Peter missed Bucky so terribly and he knew that the soldier loved him dearly, and would never abandon him...so where was he? Why was his voice the only one that the teen didn’t hear? He longed to hear him, to have that sweet pet name fall from his lips, to feel safe and secure, knowing that Bucky was there. But he wasn’t.

Then came a voice so clear and startling that Peter was sure he managed to twitch his fingers just a little. It was that of Hope van Dyne and she was speaking to May. “You’ve got to go with Scott, he’ll take you somewhere safe before he heads down with Tony. Toomes’ men have breached the building.”

“Will Peter be safe?” May’s voice was steady but Peter could hear the fear thrumming beneath the facade.

“I’m staying with Peter, he won’t be alone but I highly doubt these guys will make it past the others.”

Even in the void, Peter’s spidey senses were going haywire, alerting him to oncoming danger and he began to throw himself at the hazy walls, trying to find a way out. They seemed even more indistinct than before and hope flared that they were weakening, that he could escape this place. He pulled all of his determination to him as he set about the task, ignoring the wave of exhaustion that began to ebb over him, concentrating his efforts on the most translucent spot of the walls. Over and over he threw himself forward, willing them to fall, to set him free. He could still hear voices from the other
side but they were fewer now - May saying a hurried goodbye, what sounded like Helen Cho ordering a nurse to leave with May, Hope speaking to someone on the comms, getting an update. Peter let it play in the background, not ignoring it but not letting it distract him either as he pounded against his prison.

Suddenly he heard a roar and for a moment he thought that it was Bucky but when he began to speak, Peter realised that it was the Not-Bucky voice that he’d been hearing. They were shouting at someone and it sounded more distant, and the teen understood that they weren’t in the same room as Hope was, but close by. Then he heard another voice reply and his blood ran cold. Toomes. Toomes was here and that meant everyone was in danger and Peter had to stop him. With renewed vigour, he threw himself at the walls, feeling them weaken with each blow.

It happened without any fanfare, no dramatics, no movie special effects - suddenly Peter was no longer in the void but was laying in a bed, and he knew that he was in Medical.

The door burst open and Toomes came tumbling into the room, and Peter saw Hope scramble to place herself in front of the bed. Bucky stalked into the room and Peter’s breath caught in his throat as a feeling of longing threatened to overwhelm him. Then Bucky spoke and the teen recognised the voice - it wasn’t Bucky at all but the person who had been speaking to him while he was in the void.

Not-Bucky grasped Toomed around the throat and easily hefted him up. “Peter is under my protection and you will pay for what you did to him,” he told Toomes, his voice low and dangerous. Then he looked over to the doorway and asked, “The others have been stopped? The threat is contained?”

“Yeah, it has.” Tony! Peter struggled to move, to sit up so he could see his other lover. “They’re not gonna be getting up to any more mischief today.”

“This one isn’t going to cause mischief ever again,” Not-Bucky promised and he began to choke Toomes in earnest.

An image of Liz flashed before Peter’s eyes and he knew that she would be devastated if her dad was to die. As an orphan, Peter knew intimately how that felt and he wouldn’t wish it upon anyone, let alone a friend. He managed to push himself up into a sitting position and with a voice raspy with disuse, cried, “Stop! Don’t kill him. Whoever you are, please, don’t kill him.”

Not-Bucky’s eyes widened in shock and he immediately dropped Toomes and Hope darted forward to restrain the man. Tony’s face lit up with joy and he threw himself at the bed, wrapping his arms around Peter gently and holding him close. “Petey? Fuck, I thought I’d lost you, baby, oh God, you’re back, you’re back.”

Peter clung to Tony, wincing as pain lanced through his body but he ignored it, content to feel his partner’s arms around him. “Tony,” was all that he could say before he buried his face in the crook of the genius’ shoulder. From the corner of his eye he saw Colonel Rhodes and Vision enter the room and haul Toomes to his feet. He didn’t spare another glance as he was taken from the room by the three Avengers - he’d begged for the man’s life for Liz, not Toomes and he didn’t much care what happened to him now.

“It’s okay, you’re safe, I’m here,” Tony murmured, pulling back slightly so he could cup Peter’s face. He then pepppered small kisses over his brow and eyes and cheeks and lips. “Love you so much.”

“Love you too,” the teen replied, his eyes filling with tears. He glanced over at the man who stood at the foot of the bed, watching them cautiously. “Where’s Bucky?” he asked, his voice catching.
“Why isn’t he here? What happened?”

“Oh, baby, it’s a long story,” Tony said. “I’m not even sure where to begin.” He gestured for the man to come over and hesitantly, Not-Bucky complied. Once he was close, Tony took the man’s hand and pulled him over the last couple of steps. “This is Winter,” he introduced, and Peter noticed that he gave the man’s hand a squeeze before he let go.

“Why does he look like Bucky?”

“Winter...sort of lives within Bucky. He came into being when Hydra had Bucky and he’s been there this whole time, in the background so to speak.” Tony sighed and Peter realised that he looked sad and broken. “We almost lost you, baby. You, uh, you flatlined, and they were struggling to get you back. Bucky, he couldn’t handle that, and he, well, he retreated into his mind and pushed Winter forward.”

Was that pain that shot through him from his injuries or from his heart breaking? Peter wasn't sure. With a trembling voice he said, “So, he left me?”

Tony pulled him gently against his chest once more, cradling him close. “No, he didn’t leave, Petey, we’re sure he’s still there. He just needs some time.”

“But he’s not here,” Peter mumbled, hot tears spilling down his cheeks.

“He’s not, but I am,” Not-Bucky -no, Winter, - said. “I’ll watch over you until he’s back.”

At that moment, May burst into the room and Peter immediately went to pull out of Tony’s embrace. The genius held him firm and murmured, “It’s okay, she knows, we don’t have to hide anymore,” before May was throwing her arms around both of them, crying hard.

For a few moments, Peter forgot about Winter as May fussed over him, allowing her to scold him for scaring her and relishing when she held him close. His eyes were drooping, he was so tired and then Doctor Cho was there, admonishing them all for tiring Peter out and demanding that everyone leave so she could examine him. May kissed his forehead and Tony kissed him on the lips, both of them promising to wait just outside. Winter lingered by the door, and then he said, “I’m sorry I’m not who you want me to be. I’ll always be here for you though, malen’kiy pauk,” and then he left the room.

Peter leaned back against his pillows as Doctor Cho examined him, fighting the urge to sleep. He was exhausted but after being in the void for so long, he didn't want to waste any time sleeping. It was a losing battle though and his eyes were closing against his will.

“You need to rest, Peter,” Doctor Cho said once she finished examining his sternum (she'd explained that he had fractured it but it appeared to have healed now).

“I’ve rested enough,” he told her, his voice slurred.

“It may seem that way but your body has suffered a massive trauma. There’s no such thing as too much rest in this scenario.”

“What did he mean?” he asked.

“What did who mean? That was a little too cryptic for me to decipher.”

“That man, Winter? He said something in, was it Russian? Malenkypo or something?” He was sure that he’d heard him use the phrase before, but already the details of his time in the void were fading. All he knew was that it was familiar.
“Oh, yes, it was Russian - malen’kiy pauk.” She smiled at him and Peter wasn’t surprised at all that the brilliant doctor was fluent. “It means ‘my little spider’.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll allow May and Tony back in the room now as long as you promise to get some sleep. If you don’t, I will ban them from visiting until you behave.”

“I promise, I’ll sleep,” he said, willing to agree to anything just to have them by his side.

“Alright then.” Cho left and a moment later his aunt and partner were back in the room.

May smoothed his hair back from his face and kissed his temple once more. “Sleep, Peter. We’re both here and we’ll watch over you.”

He nodded, curling his fingers around Tony when the man took his hand and didn't fight it this time as his eyelids began to close. Very briefly, before he slept, a wave of longing so strong that it was almost painful washed over him and he wished more than anything that Bucky was by his side as well. It wasn’t May’s soft assurances, or the feeling of Tony’s fingers tangled with his that soothed it, however. It was a softly spoken promise from a complete stranger.

“I’ll always be here for you though, malen’kiy pauk.”

Hey guys, will everything that's going on at Tumblr I've set up a PillowFort account as a backup. I'll still be posting to Tumblr as well but just in case!
Chapter 28

Now that Peter was awake, Tony pushed everything else back so that he could spend as much time with the teen as possible. It meant postponing a few meetings and delaying some R&D projects but he had experienced more than enough time with Peter gone to know how horrid it was. He had his boy back now and he wasn’t going to waste a second. Pepper had been an absolute saint about it, bringing him only the most urgent items that required his attention, but keeping everyone else off his back. She had been doing it for so long now, wielded her authority like a pro, but there were some things that not even the CEO could do, but only Tony Stark himself. Those items were luckily few and far between presently and Pepper even managed to sweet talk her way into having some them postponed as well, giving him more time with Peter.

The first couple of days, Tony hardly left the room, and between he and May, Peter was never alone. The teen slept on and off for the first twenty four hours but after that he was alert for much longer periods of time. The three of them would play cards together, or watch movies, or simply talk, and there was hardly a moment where Tony wasn’t in some form of physical contact with his partner. He’d either be sitting on the bed, pressed up against Peter, or holding his hand, or even simply laying a hand on his knee. He craved the touch, almost as if to reassure himself that Peter was alive, that he was awake.

By the third day, Peter had improved so much that Helen decided that he could leave Medical so long as he remained in the Tower and now that he was no longer in any life threatening danger, May returned to work. Tony had tried to persuade her to stay, promised that he could cover the rent while she was away but she had simply said that her team had been short staffed for long enough and that it was time that she went back. She still visited before and after work, bringing with her cards and flowers from Peter’s classmates, but Peter said he still wasn’t up to a visit from his friends as yet and so she made sure that they didn't come.

Tony arranged it so that Winter spent several hours a day with Peter too, since the teen seemed to enjoy his company, but it was hard, both of them keenly feeling Bucky’s absence. The loss seemed almost sharper now that Peter was back - before Tony had been so worried about Peter not waking up from the coma that he’d not concentrated on the details of Bucky’s retreat, but now he could no longer hide from it. Winter was sweet and shy and took an almost child-like delight in the world around him, and as fond as Tony was growing of him, he simply wasn’t Bucky.

The ex-assassin’s absence was hitting Peter hard and Tony knew that the teen was feeling guilty, putting the blame on himself for causing this mess in the first place. No matter how often Tony told him that it wasn't his fault, he knew that he didn't believe him. Often Tony would arrive and find Peter staring off into space, his face pinched in sorrow and no matter what he did, he couldn’t cheer him up. That always left Tony feeling like he’d been punched in the gut and as much as he tried his best, he couldn’t help but feel a little resentment. He had been the one to have lost both of his partners, even if it was for just a short period of time, and yet Peter seemed more concerned over Bucky still being gone than for any distress Tony had suffered. He knew that he wasn’t being fair and if he was in Peter’s shoes, the guilt would be crippling him as well, but his feelings weren’t rational and he couldn’t help but feel that pang of pain each time he found Peter longing for Bucky.

He did his best to tune it out, to concentrate on their shared grief and on Peter’s recovery, but it left Tony feeling exhausted. He began to withdraw slightly, not physically but verbally, speaking very little when they were together. If Peter noticed Tony’s long periods of silence, he didn't mention it, just curled up in the genius’ embrace. Tony tried to take comfort in their closeness, tried to believe that the moments where they held each other made him feel less lonely, but eventually Peter would
Almost a week after Peter had been released from Medical, he was given the all clear by Helen to return home, but since it was the weekend, he opted to remain at the Tower, not wanting to be too far away in case Bucky returned. The couple had gone to bed, but Tony couldn't sleep, he simply lay there with Peter in his arms, staring up at the ceiling. He recognised that he’d fallen into somewhat of a depressive slump, and that his mind was blowing things out of proportion, but he couldn't help but feel crushed by the loneliness that he felt. The rational part of his mind knew that Peter didn’t love Bucky more than him - the three of them had always been so evenly balanced and perfect for one another. It also knew that Peter was simply worried about Bucky and since he’d disappeared due to the teen flatlining, it was perfectly natural that he felt like it was his fault. Tony was there and so of course Peter’s concern would be more for their other partner, the one who was missing, who had suffered such an emotional blow that he’d suffered a complete mental break. A large part of Tony’s genius was made up from that rational part of his mind and yet right at this very moment, it had decided to abandon him.

Tony loved Peter and he adored Bucky but right now he was lonely, and scared, and he needed comfort. He felt that all he was doing was giving and not getting anything in return. He so badly wanted someone to take him in his arms, to hold him close and assure him that everything would be okay. He wanted someone to be a shoulder to cry on, to wipe away his tears and soothe him as he let it all out. He wanted someone else to be the strong one, so he didn't have to be. He wanted to feel safe and protected and be able to let down his guard.

He’d only felt that way with one person lately and so he slipped quietly from the bed, leaving Peter deep in slumber and he went in search of Winter.

The assassin was in the living room of the floor he’d been assigned and after having Friday ask if it was okay to drop by, Tony headed that way. The elevator doors opened and he wandered in, knowing that he probably looked like a lost puppy, feet bare, hair untidy, and pyjamas wrinkled and creased. Winter got up from the armchair he was sitting in, watching Tony curiously as he came inside, waiting for him to explain what he was doing there in the middle of the night.

Tony chewed on his bottom lip as he tried to find the words, and then his face crumpled and he hugged himself around his waist, at a complete loss. Winter held his arms open and Tony stepped forward and fell into the embrace, feeling the strong arms wrap around him, and suddenly it felt like a weight was lifted from his shoulders. He could forget about the pressure of having to be the strong one, the one to hold it altogether, and allow himself this moment of weakness. Winter was a solid, comforting presence, someone who would stand between Tony and the rest of the world while he was vulnerable, who would keep him safe. The genius let the rest of his walls crumble, allowing all his pain and hurt and fear flow from him in the form of wracking sobs, and not once did the man who was holding him tell him that he was being silly or that he needed to be strong. He simply was there.

Once the initial wave of his tears had passed, Winter led them back over to the couch and he pulled Tony down with him, let him sprawl across his lap. Tony settled his head against the broad chest, sniffling a little as he wiped at his eyes, which closed in bliss as he felt fingers begin to card through his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. “You must think that I do nothing but cry,” he said after a while.

“You forget, dorogoj, that I have known you longer than these past few weeks. I am more than aware that you do much, much more than cry.”
Tony huffed but didn't contradict him. “Still, I’ve been a fucking cry baby lately.”

“There’s no weakness in it, Tony.”

“Thanks,” he whispered. “For not judging me, and for being here when I need it.”

“I’ll be here for as long as you need me, I swear,” Winter whispered back.

Craning his neck up, Tony took in the completely earnest expression on the man’s face, wondering if he was reading him correctly. “That’s true, isn’t it? You really do care for me.”

Winter smiled, a little sadly and replied, “Tony, I...shit, I’m just going to say it - I love you.”

A myriad of emotions ran through Tony at those words, overwhelming him completely. He couldn’t separate them out, they ran over into one another, meshing and merging into a jumbled, confused mess in his mind, but rising to the top, light and pure was the glorious feeling that he wasn't alone, that someone cared. Not allowing himself to overthink, Tony surged upwards, crushing their lips together, needing to feel a deeper connection.

Winter’s hands came to cradle the back of his head but he didn't move overwise, allowing Tony to control the kiss. He instinctively knew that the assassin wouldn’t chase after him if he pulled back, but would be willing to deepen it also, and so Tony licked across the seam of those plush lips, making his intentions clear. Winter whined softly as his mouth parted, allowing Tony to flick his tongue inside and his hands dropped, tugging Tony upwards until he was straddling his lap. Tony’s hands gripped the front of Winter’s shirt tightly as he kissed him deeply, urgently, passionately. He needed, he needed so damn much, to feel wanted, desired, loved, cherished. Tears dripped down his cheeks, and he was unable to stop them, but he was also unable to stop the kiss. He knew that it was wrong, that he was betraying both Peter and Bucky but at this very moment his need was so much greater. He loved them, loved them both fiercely and he knew that this could very well cause him to lose them, but it just couldn’t bring himself to pull away.

Winter was kissing him back feverently, like he couldn’t quite believe this was happening and worried that he’d never get another chance, and so they clung to one another, taking, taking, taking but also giving so much of themselves, tangled up in wrongwrongwrong but also rightrightright.

Tony rocked up onto his heels and then pressed back down, feeling the hot, hard length of Winter’s cock against his arse. His own cock twitched in his pants, and he pushed his hips down, moaning as they rubbed against one another, trying to find some much needed pressure. One of Winter’s hands snaked its way up under Tony’s sleep shirt, his fingers dancing along his spine, and goosebumps chased after his touch. There were too many clothes in their way and so Tony pulled back from the kiss and hooked his hands under the hem of his shirt, pulling it up and over his head, throwing it to the side. He looked back down and froze.

Bucky was staring up at him.

“I’m so sorry, Tony,” he said and then in the blink of an eye he was gone, leaving a shell shocked Winter in his place.

They stared at each other, eyes wide and the heat from their shared desire dissipating instantly. “What the fuck is going on?” Tony asked, brokenly.
“You saw Bucky?”

Peter’s voice was so hopeful and excited as he clung to Tony that Winter couldn’t help but draw back in on himself a little. He and Tony had hastily made themselves presentable, knowing that the teen wouldn’t want to wait until morning for the news and as Tony had pulled his sleep shirt back on, the guilt had begun to creep up on both of them. Winter had never intended to enable Tony to be unfaithful to his partners, and from the way that Tony was having trouble meeting Peter’s eyes, he hadn’t either. Circumstances had simply converged and things had gotten heated but at least they had stopped before they’d gone too far.

“Yeah, just for a second, but it was definitely him,” Tony said.

“How did it happen? What prompted him to come out? Did he seem okay? Do you think he’ll be back?” The rapid fire questions did nothing to assuage Winter’s guilt.

Tony looked like he was going to cry and his eyes flickered over to Winter, asking a silent question. They’d spoken briefly before they’d come up, the genius admitting, ‘I don’t think I’m going to be able to lie to him. I can’t keep this from him.’ The super soldier had agreed, not wanting to hurt Peter but also not wanting to lie to him either and so he nodded his head in solidarity, preparing himself for the teen’s wrath. “Maybe we should sit down?” Tony told Peter, and led him over to the couch in the Penthouse living room.

Peter’s delicate brows furrowed. “What’s wrong? Did he sound hurt?”

“No, baby, it’s not that. He only said, ‘I’m so sorry, Tony’ so it wasn’t exactly a lot to go on, plus I wasn’t really expecting him to just appear like that. By the time I realised that it was him, Winter was back.”

Peter turned to Winter, who had perched on the edge of one of the armchairs. “That must have been weird for you - I bet you were really thrown by him just taking over for a second, huh? Did it hurt? I’m sure it can’t be comfortable to be shoved around in your own head.”

Could he get any more perfect? Winter already loved Peter just by getting to know him via Bucky’s interactions but to have that kindness and consideration directed at him personally just reiterated his feelings...and yet it made it all the more difficult. He shook his head and replied, “No, it didn’t hurt. It’s odd but it’s not painful or anything, malen’kiy pauk.”

“Oh, that’s good anyway. So, what were you guys talking about? It’s like, almost dawn. Did something bad happen? Did Toomes escape?”

“No, baby, nothing like that,” Tony told him.

The way that the genius’ voice cracked a little had Peter peering at him. “Tony, what’s wrong?”

He sighed and ran a hand through his already mussed hair. “Pete, I gotta tell you something, but I want you to know that I’m truly, truly sorry.”

“You’re scaring me, Tony. What is it?”
“I uh, well I went to just talk with Winter because I was upset and -”

“Wait, you were upset?” the teen interrupted. “Why didn't you wake me up?”

“Because, baby, it was...gah, this is hard to explain, and I don’t want to make it sound like I blame you because I don’t, but I was kind of upset because of you.”

His soft brown eyes went wide with concern. “What? Tony, what did I do? I’m so sorry, you know I hate it when I upset you!”

“Oh, sweetheart, no, no don’t be sorry - I swear, it’s not really your fault at all, it’s all me.” Tony took Peter’s hands in his, and rubbed his thumbs over the backs of them.

“Tell me, please - what upset you?”

It looked like Tony was going to try and deflect again, but instead words burst from his mouth in a tumble. “God, Petey, it’s been so hard lately, you have no idea! First of all you got hurt, and then Bucky up and left, then Winter was in his place and I didn’t know if he was dangerous or not and it was all so stressful and I’ve had to hold it all together since it’s just been me, all by myself, worrying about both you and Bucky and everything else when I was scared and worried and so, so lonely!”

His voice caught on a sob but he pushed on. “Then you came back and it seems that all you can think about is Bucky and I get it, I do, because I miss him like crazy too and I’m terrified for him. It’s just so hard though, to be feeling the way I do and no one seems to care! No one except Winter, that is.” Peter opened his mouth to speak, but Tony hurried on, not letting him. “I didn’t want to burden you with my stupid feelings, especially since you’ve done nothing wrong - I’m just stressed and scared and it was all too much. But Winter has been someone I’ve been able to talk to and so tonight I went to see him and I got upset and I was crying and he just held me and it was so nice and I needed that human contact, to have someone comfort me and one thing led to another and I kissed him and I’m so sorry, I know it was wrong and I know you’ll hate me and I don’t want to lose you, Petey, I really don’t. I know there’s no excuse for what I did and you have every right to be upset but I need you to know that I never meant to hurt you, and neither did Winter, I know he’s just as cut up about this as me and then Bucky appeared but he didn't sound angry, just sad, and I just -”

Peter’s hand shot up and covered Tony’s mouth, cutting him off. “Would you just...stop, please,” he said softly. “I don’t think you took a breath that entire time.” Only after Tony nodded did he remove his hand. Winter watched on, breathless, not wanting to move and draw attention to himself just yet, needing to hold off just a little longer for Peter to be angry at him. “So, you were upset?”

Tony nodded.

“Upset enough that you were crying?”

“It feels like that’s all I’ve done lately.”

“And Winter comforted you?”

“Yes, and I know it went too far but -” Peter’s hand found Tony’s mouth once more.

“Tony, I’m not mad.”

“Wait, what?” Tony’s eyes were wide in shock as he looked at the teen and Winter was sure that he was wearing the same expression. “Why not?”

“Do you know that I could hear people talking to me when I was in the coma?”
“I don’t understand, what does that have to do with anything?”

Peter reached up and gently traced a finger over Tony’s cheek. “It means that I know that you hardly left my side, that you were there with me and spoke to me as often as you could. I heard you beg me not to leave you, and I heard you tell me over and over how much you loved me.”

Tony nodded dumbly. “Okay…”

“I also heard Winter.”

“You did?” the assassin asked with a gasp.

Peter turned those glorious brown eyes to him. “I did. I didn’t know who you were, just that you were similar to Bucky but not- Bucky. I heard you though, telling me how you loved me and that I made you want to be good. I didn’t know how you knew me but you already loved me and that made me feel...I don’t know how to describe it, I’m not really not ready yet to think about what I want.” He shrugged. “When I came to, it was all a bit crazy so I’ve not really thought much more of it, and I’m really not ready yet to think about what I want.”

He turned to look back to Tony and smiled softly at him. “Tony, I’m so sorry that I neglected you. I am worried about Bucky and I want him back, but I shouldn’t have taken you for granted like I did. You’ve been through so much and I can’t even imagine how horrible it must have been for you. I totally understand why you would have sought comfort from Winter, so please believe me, I’m not angry at you, at either of you.”

Tony closed his eyes and tears slipped down his cheeks. “You have no idea how happy I am to hear that, baby.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m really sorry for my part in it,” Winter told him.

The teen smiled at the assassin. “It’s okay, really. Um, I guess you’ve got the best idea, since you’ve shared a mind with him and all, but do you think that when Bucky comes back, he’ll let you come out every now and then?”

“I hope so,” Winter replied around the lump in his throat. “I don’t think I could go back to just watching anymore now that I’ve experienced life without the trigger words. I just have to pray that he will be willing to share.”

“I hope so, too,” Peter told him. “I was thinking that maybe once he’s back and we can talk about it with him, maybe he’d be willing to talk about us involving you in our relationship?”

“Are you serious?” Winter asked, shocked.

“Really, Pete?” Tony echoed.

Peter nodded and leaned against Tony who automatically wrapped an arm around his waist. “It’s not like we’re not in a weird enough relationship as it is. You and Winter obviously like each other, and I’ve already told you how you make me feel,” Peter directed to the assassin, “which I’d like to explore more once I get to know you better, so long as Bucky’s on board.”

“Is this just because we share the same body?” Winter asked, afraid of the answer but needing to know. “I don’t want it to just be physical.”

It was Tony who assured him, reaching over and taking his hand. “We can’t deny that we find you sexy as fuck, Snowflake, since that’s kinda a moot point, but I like you for you, not the convenient
fact that you share a body with Bucky.”

“Oh. Wow.”

“Come on, you don’t think that little of me, do you?”

Feeling a little chagrined, he shrugged. “Well, I wasn’t all that sure...I mean, I hoped but there was that little bit of doubt that it was really Bucky you wanted and you were just pretending.”

“If we hadn't agreed to wait until we’ve talked with the Buckster about this, I’d kiss you right now to prove you wrong,” Tony told him.

He was probably blushing to the roots of his hair but Winter didn’t care, he was so damn happy. “I can wait.”

“Can you feel him at all?” Peter asked curiously.

He took a moment to turn his focus inwards. It didn't feel as empty as it had done previously but Bucky still wasn’t present. “Not really,” he admitted.

The teen sighed. “I’d hoped that maybe a conversation like this would have coaxed him out.”

“Looks like we just have to wait, baby,” Tony said, sounding glum.

“Can’t Doctor Strange help?”

“No, he’s already said that magic is too dangerous to use on the mind, especially on someone like Bucky and Winter who have already had Hydra messing with them for years.”

Peter’s lip trembled and Tony pulled him close, tucking the boy’s head under his chin as he hugged him. “I just wish that there was something that we could do,” he said, sniffing.

“Actually, I think I have an idea,” Winter said, hesitantly.

“Really?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, it’s kinda crazy but hear me out. So we met a guy in San Francisco…”

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, I said that we wouldn't see Eddie and Venom again in this fic but I changed my mind - I want them to help bring Bucky back :)
The next two chapters will be from Eddie and Venom’s POVs. A few notes about their dialogue:

- When Venom is speaking internally to Eddie, his dialogue is in **bold**
- When Eddie is speaking internally to Venom, his dialogue is in *italics*
- When Venom is speaking aloud, his dialogue is in "**bold with quotation marks**"

I hope this helps :)”

Eddie got out of the cab and stood on the pavement, looking up at Stark Tower. *I’ve got a bad feeling about this, love* he spoke internally to his symbiote. They were getting much better at the silent communication between them, however when they were alone they still tended to speak out loud as it was their preferred method. Talking aloud in public however simply garnered too much attention.

**Why, Eddie?**

*Not sure, I just don’t like the idea of walking us into Avengers headquarters after that investigation.*

**You think they were lying?**

Eddie sighed and rubbed at his face, feeling the several days of regrowth scratching against his palm. *Maybe*. The message had said that Bucky was in trouble and needed help and since they rather liked the super soldier, they had come, but Eddie would feel better if the message had come from Bucky. They kinda, sorta, maybe trusted him a little, but instead the call for help had come from Tony Stark and he was an unknown. Sure, Eddie knew the stories, but he knew from personal experience that mainstream media didn’t always tell the truth if twisting it a little would get more subscribers, more advertisers, and more hits. Based on the work he’d done as Iron Man and the sheer number of times that he’d saved the planet, he couldn’t be *that* bad of a guy. Sure, he might be arrogant and entitled, but he shouldn’t be too morally dubious. Still, it was risky and Eddie just hope that if it all went to shit, he and his Other would be able to escape without either of them getting too injured.

**Will keep us safe, Eddie. Won’t let anyone hurt you.**

*I know, love, but I don’t want YOU getting hurt, either.*

**We could just leave? We don’t owe them anything.**

*I know we don’t, but I also don’t wanna fuck off if Bucky really does need our help.* He stood there, oscillating over the options, whether to leave or to head up, until he felt his symbiote give a mental huff and his legs were propelled forward by themselves.

**Pussy.**

At least Venom was happy for them to go up by the elevator this time...Stark Tower was *really* tall
and he really didn’t want to take the risk of being separated from his Other when the ground was that far away. Eddie signed in at reception and was surprised at how smoothly the process went, and he was still leaning towards this entire thing being a trap as he was shown over to a bank of private elevators when the doors opened and Tony Stark himself stepped out. He wasn’t as immaculately dressed as he was in the footage Eddie had seen of the billionaire on the news, but generally that was from galas and functions and so he couldn’t be expected to be decked out in a tux all the time, however there was a certain rumpled quality to his appearance; the t shirt he was wearing under his blazer was wrinkled and there was a coffee stain on the collar, he had dark circles under his eyes, and he looked worried. Eddie’s time as an investigative reporter had honed his instincts and he was very good at reading people and Tony Stark was clearly distressed, which swayed his opinion from Trap over to In Need Of Genuine Help.

“Eddie Brock? I’m Tony Stark, thanks so much for coming,” Stark said, holding out his hand and shaking it firmly.

“No worries,” Eddie replied as he was ushered into the elevator.

The billionaire said, “Fri, take us up, baby girl,” and then kept his eyes on the doors until they closed at his command before he turned to Eddie and added, “And thank you for coming, Mr Venom. I’ve heard a lot about you from Bucky.”

Eddie was impressed that Stark had directly spoken to Venom, even more so that he’d waited for the privacy of the elevator and hadn’t outed them in a public space. He hadn’t expected such discretion from the man who had announced on live TV that he was Iron Man, but he was grateful for it nonetheless. Venom too was impressed and he formed a small head and neck out from Eddie’s shoulder so he could meet Stark’s eyes.

“Only good things, I hope.”

Stark’s eyes widened a little (Eddie couldn’t blame him for that - seeing V for the first time was always a bit of a shock) but he recovered quickly. “Only the best.”

“What has happened to Bucky?”

“Ah, well, it might be better if you just see for yourself. We’re almost there and it’s a bit complicated to explain. If that’s okay with the both of you, of course.”

“Yeah, sure,” Eddie agreed.

The elevator came to a stop at the very top of the Tower and they stepped out into the lavish penthouse. Wealth didn’t impress Eddie but the sense of hominess did. Sure, the furnishings were clearly expensive designer brands and the area had more creature comforts than were probably necessary but it was the small things that caught Eddie’s eye - the worn sneakers that had been kicked to the side of the entryway, the jacket draped over the back of a chair, the smell of freshly brewed coffee floating from the kitchen, and the way that a lanky teen was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the sitting room with a short, rotund robot in front of him. “Well done, Tik-Tok, that’s awesome,” he said before the visitors caught his eye and he scurried somewhat cautiously to his feet. “Hey,” he said, giving a little wave.

“Hi there,” Eddie said.

“Uh, Petey, this is Eddie Brock and Emo Slimer on his shoulder is Venom. Guys, this is Peter. Don’t let the angel face fool you, he’s stronger than all of us put together and the only reason we’re not bowing down before him is that his super-villain instincts never survived puberty.”
The teen’s eyes widened at the sight of Venom, not in shock, but in wonder. “Holy crap, you’re really an alien symbiote? That is so cool!” he told Venom.

“Uh, hi,” Eddie said once again. He wondered which hero the teen was - Stark had made it clear that he was enhanced, but didn't give away his identity. Interesting.

“Emo Slimer?” Venom’s head twisted around to glare at Stark, baring his teeth enough that drool dripped down onto the carpet. Eddie could tell that Venom didn't understand the reference but was assuming that they had been insulted.

“Don’t mind him,” Peter assured Venom. “He gives almost everyone some sort of pop culture nickname if he likes them. Have you ever seen Ghostbusters?”

“We have not.”

“Actually, I have, V, and Emo Slimer is kind of a good description for you - goo creature, big teeth, drools everywhere. We’ll watch it together when we get home.”

“Okay, Eddie, but if it turns out to be an insult, we will come back here and we will eat both of his arms and both of his legs and maybe even his head.”

“We’re not eating Tony Stark because you don’t like the nickname he gave you.”

“Listen to Lois Lane - no eating me,” Tony stated.

Eddie rolled his eyes at that. “Keep that up, Stark, and I might just let him.”

Stark gave him a cheeky grin but it fell off his face rather quickly. “So, now that we’ve broken the ice, and hopefully have agreed to the no eating Iron Man policy, do you might if we get down to what we asked you here for?”

“Of course,” Eddie agreed, noticing the sudden shift in atmosphere in the room. The teen, Peter, almost instantly lost the look of wonder he had on his face over seeing V, and now looked a mix between guilty and sad, and on the verge of tears. Stark just seemed exhausted as he excused himself for a moment and left the room.

I like the young one and do not like seeing him sad. We must help him.

Same here, love but we don’t actually know what’s wrong yet or if we can even help.

Stark returned a moment later and on his heels was Bucky - but an instant later both Eddie and Venom saw that it wasn’t Bucky.

Told you that he was like us.

Yeah, you did. I guess they know now too. Out loud, Eddie said, “Uh, hi there. Again. Sorta. We kinda met back in San Francisco.”

The man held out his hand to shake, meeting Eddie’s eyes and then Venom’s. “Thank you so much for coming. I’m Winter.”

“Wait, you asked for us? I thought Stark did?”

Winter shrugged one shoulder. “Technically he did but I was the one who suggested we ask for your help.”
Venom extended further from Eddie’s shoulder, his face coming to hover an inch in front of Winter’s and his eyes searching. “**Something is wrong. You are separated.**”

“Yeah, it’s kind of a long story,” Winter told them. “We probably need to start from the beginning.”

“How about everyone has a seat,” Stark suggested. “It really is a long story and some of it might be hard to swallow so you might want to be sitting for it.”

“Oookay.” Eddie dropped onto an armchair and Venom curled up on his lap almost like a cat, watching the others intently.

The three of them sat down on the sofa opposite, Stark in the middle, Winter to his left, and the teen, Peter, sat on his right and immediately curled up against him. Eddie wanted to raise an eyebrow at that but then Stark turned and pressed his lips to the boy’s curls and murmured something low that they couldn’t hear, and Peter nodded and closed his eyes briefly, sighing softly as he relaxed against the older man. The expression on Stark’s face as he looked at the teen was one of utter love and devotion and Eddie got the feeling that he would do anything to protect Peter.

Stark then turned his attention back to the duo across from him, noticing the way that Eddie was watching them and began, “I guess first things first - yes, Peter and I are romantically involved, and we’re also in a relationship with Bucky.” He jutted his chin out a little in defiance. “We all love each other and have chosen to be together - no one has been forced or coerced, so if you can’t accept that, we may as well deal with that right now.” Stark’s brown eyes flashed with determination and his arm around Peter had tightened protectively.

Eddie held up both his hands to placate him, the pieces of the puzzle that Bucky had hinted at when they were at the diner falling into place. “Hey, woah, it’s all good, yeah?” He dropped his hands down and ran a hand lovingly over Venom’s back and then scritched the back of his head, causing the symbiote to make a happy chittering noise. “I am the very last person who should judge who people love.” He tilted his head in Venom’s direction. “Not many people would be supportive of our relationship and so we don’t make it widely known either.”

Venom made a small ‘harumph’ noise. “**We should just eat them if they don’t accept us.**”

“How many times have I told you? Eating people is **not** the answer to all of life’s problems.”

“**It should be.**”

“Well it’s not, so can you maybe just tone it down a little, otherwise these nice people are gonna think that we’re an insatiable beast who is a **danger to society.**” He mentally sent a warning to his Other as well, really not wanting Bucky’s recommendation that they weren’t dangerous to be overturned.

Stark however just seemed to be amused, not concerned. “Hey, if it works. So, right, now that that’s out of the way - how much do you know about Hydra?”

Eddie listened as Tony explained their story. He discovered that it revolved mostly around Bucky and gave a backstory to the images that he had seen when Venom had merged briefly with the super soldier a fortnight ago. Winter seemed content to allow the billionaire to explain, only offering further explanations when the occasion arose. He shuddered when Tony detailed the things that Hydra had made them do under the influence of some trigger words, including the assassination of his parents, Howard and Maria Stark. Peter reached across Tony’s body and took Winter’s hand in his own and the man managed a small smile for the teen.
“So Hydra had thought that they’d created the perfect weapon, but the control that the words had over Bucky was growing weaker. Of course, the one thing they hadn’t expected was that their experiment would also lead to the creation of Winter.” He placed his hand on top of Peter’s, which was still joined with Winter’s. “Winter tried to communicate with Bucky but Bucky shied away, thinking that he was a part of Hydra that was trying to control him, so Winter stayed hidden. He’s been there the entire time though, seeing everything through Bucky’s eyes.”

“Not so hidden - we saw. We knew.”

Winter smiled at Venom. “You did. I was so happy when someone finally saw me.”

“The night that Bucky got back from San Francisco, Peter was severely injured in a fight with a man called Adrian Toomes - also known as The Vulture because of the flying suit he used. Toomes, uh, he -” Stark paused here, unable to go on and his eyes squeezed shut even as his breathing began to quicken.

“It’s okay, Tony, I’m here, I’m safe,” Peter assured him, his other arm coming up to rub against the billionaire’s back.

“I know, I know.” He took some deep breaths, the air rattling from his lungs as he tried to control his panic. Finally he opened his eyes again and nodded, “I’m okay now, sorry.”

“It’s okay, Tony,” Peter told him.

“So, sorry about that.” Stark’s cheeks tinged pink but he soldiered on, steeling himself for what he was about to say. “Toomes collapsed a building on top of Peter, crushing him. Bucky and I found him but it was touch and go and he very nearly didn’t make it.”

“I WILL KILL HIM!” Venom roared, startling everyone, including Eddie. He grew up from the small head and neck to almost his full, intimidating size, connected to his host by only by a thin strand. “SHOW ME THIS MONSTER AND I WILL DEVOUR HIM FOR HURTING THE YOUNG ONE!”

“V, calm down, love,” Eddie pleaded. “Peter’s safe now, he’s okay.” Eddie couldn’t see the others now with Venom’s bulk in the way but he fervently hoped that they weren’t aiming weapons at him.

Then Eddie heard Peter’s voice and through his bond he could feel the teen touching Venom’s arm. “It’s okay, Mr Venom, I’m not in any danger anymore. Toomes has been arrested, he’s locked away where he can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

“He deserves worse! Should be dead for what he did to you!”

“Amen,” Eddie heard Stark mutter.

“Hey, I tried,” Winter told him.

“What is wrong with all of you?” Peter exclaimed. “We’re the good guys! We don’t just go around killing people!”

Eddie stood up and peered around Venom’s body so that he could see the others. “Okay, so how about we move this along before half of us get out torches and pitchforks and the rest of us try stopping you from going on a murder spree?” Peter shot him a grateful look and Eddie grinned crookedly at him, then he concentrated on coaxing Venom down to a more reasonable ‘indoor size’ (not that it really mattered in the high ceilinged penthouse but it was the principle of the matter).
Once his Other was back to roughly cat size, he sat back down and gestured at Stark to continue.

“You were saying?”

The billionaire looked like he didn't want to relive the next part but he pushed on. “We got Petey back here to Medical where Helen Cho - best doc in the world - could work on him. At one point he uh, he flatlined -” he paused, taking a deep breath, “- and I guess that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Bucky couldn’t handle it and he...left. He’s retreated somewhere and pushed Winter to the front. We know he’s there - he’s shown himself once, but Winter can’t find him. Doctor Strange - he’s the Sorcerer Supreme, arrogant guy but knows what he’s on about - won’t use magic to meddle in people’s minds, says it’s too dangerous, but we have to do something. We need Bucky back.”

“That’s where you come into it,” Winter said, his eyes on Venom. “What you did last time, you could see me, when not even Bucky could. I think you could do it again, you’re our only hope.”

“Wait, what are you asking of us?” Eddie asked, looking between all three of them.

Tony reached out and linked one hand to Peter’s and another to Winter’s and, in unison, they replied, “Find Bucky.”
Chapter 31

“What exactly do you mean, find Bucky?” Eddie asked, watching the trio carefully.

“Remember when Venom got curious when Bucky told him that he was forced to do certain things?” Winter said. “He was inside Bucky’s head and he saw me, even though I was kinda hiding. Well Bucky is definitely hiding and I can’t find him alone. I need Venom’s help, he’s the only one who can reach him.”

“Woah, woah, woah - hold up a second.” Eddie held up a hand whilst shaking his head. “You’ve just spent the last twenty minutes explaining to me about how Bucky was brainwashed into becoming an assassin and you want me to root around inside his head? That’s all sorts of messed up!”

“We know,” Tony admitted, “but we’re desperate. We all want Bucky back and the fact that he’s not come out yet...well, we’re getting worried that the longer we leave it, the harder it’ll be for him to return.”

Venom’s pearlescent eyes honed in on Winter. “You say that ALL of you want Bucky back, but is that true? Do YOU want him back?”

“Of course I do!” Winter cried.

“But you are aware that there is the possibility that he will not allow you control again. You may be trapped inside once more, this time for good.”

Winter swallowed hard. “I’m aware that that’s more than likely,” he said softly, “but I can’t trade my life for mine. It’s not right. At the end of the day he’s got more of a claim to this body than I do, so there’s no argument.”

Eddie frowned. “And you two are okay with this?” he demanded of Stark and Peter. “You both seem pretty fond of Winter.”

“We are!” Peter’s voice was trembling. “But we can’t not try this - we need Bucky back. Winter is willing to take the risk and we’re hoping that we can convince Bucky to share his body with him. We don’t want to lose Winter but we can’t give up on Bucky, we simply can’t.” He blinked back tears. “Please, we need him,” he pleaded.

Eddie couldn’t imagine how hard this decision had been for the three of them to come to, and knew that if he was in their shoes, he’d be struggling just as hard. They’d only just met Winter but both he and Venom had taken an instant liking to him - much as they had with Bucky. Neither of them really wanted to see him locked away at the back of Bucky’s mind forever.

Do you think Bucky would be amenable to sharing with Winter? Eddie silently asked Venom. You got a much better idea of his thoughts than I did.

Maybe. Hard to say - he didn’t know Winter existed so there were no hints.

He seemed like a reasonable guy but sharing your head with someone else isn’t exactly for everyone.

Takes someone special, like you. You’re special, Eddie.
“Thanks, love - let's just hope that Bucky is special too.

“What’s it like?” Peter asked, his voice still raw with emotion but imbued with curiosity.

“What’s what like?”

“You were just talking to him, weren’t you? In your head? Even though he’s kind of outside you right now but it looked like you were talking.”

“We were conversing, yes,” Venom confirmed.

“What’s it like having someone in your head all the time?” He cast a rather guilty look over at Winter. “Tony and I are asking a lot of both Bucky and Winter and although I don’t think there’s much of a choice, it would be good to know what they’ll be in for.”

The adolescent is sweet, Eddie. Can we keep him?

No, love, we can’t.

He could feel Venom mentally pouting. Spoilsport.

“It’s kinda hard to explain,” he told the others, “but in a way, our situations are quite similar. V bonded with me without my consent and at the time I didn't know what had actually happened. I thought I was sick - I was sick actually, since all my organs were atrophying.”

“I told you, I was fixing that! How long are you going to moan about it to everyone who asks?”

“Forever, love so get used to it. Anyway, as I was saying, it’s quite similar to this situation. Winter seems to have popped into existence because of the fuckery that Hydra did and Bucky wasn’t aware of it. It’s a lot to deal with at the start, and I’ll admit, I was fucking terrified. It’s scary to not always be in control of your body, and to have a voice in your head who talks to you constantly. There’s no such thing as privacy anymore and you have no secrets.”

“That sounds, well, horrible to be frank,” Stark said, aghast.

Eddie shrugged and gently ran a hand up Venom’s smooth skin, petting him reassuringly. “It’s overwhelming and freaky but it’s also one of the most amazing experiences. When you set aside your differences and work together it’s in perfect harmony. We’d only been bonded for about twenty four hours when we went up against Drake and his symbiote, Riot, at the Life Foundation but we were like an extension of each other, knowing what the other was thinking before they’d even thought it, moving as one, being better backup than any team member you’ve ever had.” He tilted his head down until his forehead touched Venom’s face and smiled softly. “It’s a feeling like none other. I’m never lonely and once you grow comfortable with each other, the lack of privacy isn’t an issue. There’s an intimacy between us that can never be replicated between two people, and our bond is unbreakable. I thought I’d lost Venom, that he’d died after the explosion and I have never felt such emptiness or loneliness in my life. I’d rather die than ever feel that again.”

“Never leaving you, Eddie. Will be together forever.”

He pecked Venom’s cheek and pulled back, making a conscientious effort to not be embarrassed by the way the others were watching them after their little display of affection. Stark still didn't look convinced, Peter appeared to be swept up in the romanticism, and Winter looked thoughtful. “You don’t have any regrets?” he asked.
None whatsoever."

"Do *you* both think it would work between Bucky and I?"

"I don't know for sure, man. Look, at the end of the day, all you can do is try - it’s better than the other option, yeah?"

"I suppose so."

**"We can speak to Bucky when we find him, try to explain,“** Venom offered.

The three exchanged a look and came to an unspoken agreement. Winter nodded and said, "Okay, let’s do this then."

"You’re sure?" Eddie asked, giving him one last chance to back out even though he was certain that he wouldn't take it.

Winter stood up from the sofa, looking resolute. "I am."

"Wait!" Tony cried, jumping to his feet after the assassin. "Just, fuck, in case this goes wrong and I never see you again, I just need to…” He pulled Winter to him, crushing their lips together in a desperate kiss, and Eddie looked away to give them some semblance of privacy, trying to pretend that he didn't see the tears that were streaming down the billionaire’s cheeks.

"I love you, Tony.‘ Winter murmured as they broke apart. "If I don’t make it back to you, remember that I’ll always be there. I’m not leaving you. I fell in love with you from afar and I’ll keep loving you from afar, dorogoj."

Tony nodded, trying to smile but it came out as a grimace as more tears spilled down his face.

Peter stood up as well and Winter reached up and cupped his face. "I love you too, malen'kiy pauk. I wish I’d gotten to spend more time with you."

"I don’t think this is goodbye,” Peter told him. "I know Bucky and I honestly believe that he’ll be happy to have you with him. We’ll get more time together, Winter, I know we will."

"See you soon then,” he whispered and gently pressed his lips against Peter’s. He then turned to Eddie and Venom. "How do we do this?"

They got up and stepped over to him and a black tendril extended out and caressed Winter’s face. **"Easy,”** Venom said. **“Just like this,”** and the tendril sank beneath the surface.

Eddie gasped as he was overcome with thoughts, emotions, and flashes of memory that not only didn't belong to either himself or Venom, but belonged to more than one other person. There was pain, so much pain and he screamed inside his head as he felt himself trapped in a chair, strapped down as volt after volt of electricity scoured through him. Then there was the searing pain of ice, the split second of excruciating pain as the cryo chamber activated and everything went dark, only to wake and never managing to shake the cold from his limbs, to feel warm, before he was being placed in the chamber once again.

Face after face flashed before Eddie’s mind - all of the targets that the Winter Soldier had been sent after and he watched each and every one of them die, all a different death. Some from a distance, some up close, some fast, some slow, some bloody, some made to look natural. Eddie watched them all die, caught up in a loop of violence and pain and ice.
Eddie.

The voice echoed around him and Eddie’s head darted this way and that as he tried to find it, knowing that that voice meant safety and love.

Eddie, I’m here.

A black tendril snaked its way around his wrist and suddenly the images faded into the background, allowing him to breathe. *Shit, V, what was that?*

You got swept away but I’m here now. I can guide us.

He looked around, seeing thoughts and memories and emotions swirling all around the bubble of calm that Venom had pulled around them. *Is this what it’s like for you? Inside of me?*

A little but your minds are very different. Yours is home.

*How do we find Bucky?* It felt like it would be impossible in the comotion and he felt an ache for the soldier if he had been hiding here, surrounded by memories of his torture.

No, Eddie, he’s not here, this is misdirection. I know where he’s hiding. Come - I’ll show you.

There was movement but it didn't feel like they were moving but Eddie didn't dwell on the mechanics of it all, knowing that he wasn’t really here; he was just tagging along with Venom’s mental connection. It was like they were passing through a crowd of people as they moved through Bucky memories. Soon they left behind the pain and the madness from Hydra and were walking amongst more recent memories. There was a genius teen girl who was smiling at him as he woke, the King of Wakanda was also there, watching closely. A young warrior girl with a shaved head was laughing with him, and then hugging him goodbye at an airport. A red haired woman with a kind smile who welcomed him to his new life. Then there was a flood of TonyPeterTonyPeterLoveLoveLoveLoveLoveLove. Eddie gasped as he was overwhelmed by the emotions of the memories and he reached out for his symbiote, needing his steady presence.

I got us, Eddie.

Images began to flash by, a little slower than before: watching in horror as Peter fell from the sky and impacting the water, thinking he was gone forever; the look of love in Tony’s eyes as they shared a kiss; Peter’s face scrunched up in pleasure as a vibranium hand caressed him; the shock of seeing the tall girl kiss Peter on the cheek and then having them walk past where he was standing, not even seeing him; a fight with men with energy weapons; a fight with Peter; Tony’s arms around him, holding him close as he cried; then a pile of rubble as they searched frantically for the teen, digging, digging, digging; the little green line on the monitor levelling out into a flat line as Peter’s heart stopped.

*No! Stop!* A voice cried out and Eddie whipped around to see a man on his knees, his face anguished.

*Bucky!*
Bucky would like to be able to say that he was the sort of person who didn’t run from his problems, that he was someone who faced them head on with courage and bravery, but that would be a lie. He was good at standing up for other people, would jump into the fray in an instant to defend someone that he loved, and he was the first person to offer himself as a sacrifice if need be (it was how he’d managed to get captured by Hydra the first time round, so the other Howling Commandos could escape). He knew that in general he was brave and courageous; it was why he was so well suited to the Avengers, but when it came to himself, he was a miserable failure.

When he left Wakanda, he could have easily tracked down Rogers and the others to explain where he was going, but he knew that his at-the-time-still-best-friend would object and try to convince him to stay and so he’d quietly accepted T’Challa’s offer to pass along the message. That had ended badly, with Rogers storming the castle and Tony being hurt.

When a silly teenage boy flirted with Peter at the Decathlon championship, instead of trusting to their relationship and acting like a goddamn adult, he’d stormed off and sulked, upsetting them all in the process.

He thought he’d grown, that he’d emotionally matured the stronger their relationship had become but as soon as Peter had announced that a friend of his had asked him to attend the dance with her as a favour so she’d not be harassed, Bucky had run once again. If he’d just stayed and talked it out, he wouldn’t have fallen out with Peter, wouldn’t have even seen Liz kiss the teen on the cheek so an emotionally stunted super soldier could read too much into it. Their separation with Peter’s grounding would have been tough but manageable. Instead, they’d all been miserable and so when Peter was injured, there was still the rift between them.

Perhaps the more concerning example of all however, was the fact that Bucky had been aware of another presence within his mind for quite some time and yet he’d done what he was best at and had ignored it, not wanting to examine it at all, preferring to pretend that there were no long lasting side effects from his time with Hydra. To be fair, at first he had shied away from it because he’d known deep down that it was the Winter Soldier who had taken up residence in his mind, and he’d been terrified. After a while though it had become obvious that the presence wasn’t dangerous per se, but when it tried to speak directly to Bucky, he had panicked and shunted it as far into the back of his mind as he could, shuttering it off. He could still feel it, knew that it was there, but over time, as it became more and more clear that he had some control, that he could keep it from speaking to him, he’d started to even forget that it was there. He’d successfully managed to run from himself and at one point he may have considered that the pinnacle of cowardness, but then the very worst thing imaginable happened.

Watching Peter’s heart stop, knowing that his last words to the teen had been ones of hurt and anger - well it was just too much. Guilt and regret had overwhelmed Bucky and he knew that he couldn’t stay, that he couldn’t watch as Peter’s life faded from his body, not when they’d not made it right. His need to hide, to flee, to run had been so great that it obscured all else, even the grief of the other man at his side. He’d been so scared that he’d decided to run, leaving Tony behind to cope alone.

Bucky was an unforgivable coward.

He’d retreated inwards, finding that place in his mind that he’d done his best to pretend didn’t exist and he’d flung himself inside. As he did so, he felt that presence with him and he forced it out, needing to be alone, not wanting anything at all that reminded him of what he’d lost. He’d thrown the barrier up behind him, locking it down so no one could get in and he couldn’t get out.
Then he had drifted into oblivion.

He wasn’t aware of how much time was passing, or what his body was doing, he just floated in a
dazed state. He tried to draw around him the warmth of the love and affection that his partners had
for him, those fuzzy emotions that he’d never get to experience again, but they were fragile and
intangible here and they broke apart into tatters whenever he tried to gather them, leaving him empty
and alone. He supposed that he deserved that, to lose everything, to get his comeuppance for his
cowardice. It may be his penance but it still hurt, his heart still ached with loss.

After a while he heard a voice calling to him and almost against his will he was drawn from his self
imposed exile. He ventured to the barrier that he had slammed closed behind him and peered out, not
wanting to expose himself, but his curiosity getting the best of him. He heard the words that the
Winter Soldier spoke to him, heard the news that Peter wasn’t dead, but in a coma, and though he
was overjoyed to know that Peter was still holding on, he was overcome once more with guilt. He’d
left Tony, he’d run, left behind the man who had always been there for him, who, despite being the
strongest person that Bucky knew, needed someone to be there for him. Even if Bucky emerged,
came back to himself, how could he ever look Tony in the eyes again? The genius would surely hate
him and at least here, he had the memories of his love. If he went back, he would be faced with the
horrid reality that he had lost everything that he’d ever had.

So he stayed silent and hidden but now that he’d been pulled from his insensate state, he stayed close
to the barrier and found that if he concentrated hard enough, he could see through the Winter
Soldier’s eyes, could observe what was going on. He watched as the soldier (Winter, he apparently
liked to be called) sat by Peter’s bedside and held his hand. He saw Strange coming to speak to him,
and Hope with a chessboard. He also saw Tony and as he watched over time, he saw the suspicion
and pain on Tony’s face give way to wary friendship and then even fondness. As Tony broke down
and sobbed, he felt the ghostly presence of the genius in his arms as Winter comforted him; as Winter
explored the body he was now in, he felt the echoes of self pleasure and was even sure that he could
taste the saltiness of his own release; the conversations that the soldier had with the people who had
become Bucky’s family sounded like faint strings of music drifting in through an open window on a
gentle breeze.

Bucky watched as Winter became more and more accepted by the residents of the Tower and
although he was happy that his shoes were being filled, it ached that he had been so easily replaced.
He knew that he had no right to feel jealous or resentful, that he had chosen this path and now he had
to deal with the consequences, but the pain still lingered. He watched with a bittersweetness as Tony
and Winter became closer and closer and when they fell into one another, need and desire turning
into passionate kisses and frantic touches, he knew with a finality that he was no longer needed. He
could retreat for good and those that he loved would be taken care of. He wished that he could have
done better by Tony, by Peter, that he could have been better for them, but hopefully Winter would
be all the things that he couldn’t be.

“I’m so sorry, Tony,” he whispered and somehow the genius heard him.

Turning away, he made his way back, further behind his barrier, making sure to close it off for good
behind him. Tony, and Peter when he woke, would be better off without him and he didn’t want to
plague them with flashes of his presence if his will weakened again. His loves would be happy and
that’s all that mattered.

“...”

“No! Stop!” Bucky cried, as his mind was assaulted with memory after painful memory. His barrier
had been breached and he was no longer alone, the invaders rifling through his memories like
someone searching their drawers for matching socks.

“Bucky!” a familiar voice called and he looked up from where he had sunk to his knees to see two figures coming closer through the swirling mist of his memories.

The air around them cleared and he found himself looking up at Eddie Brock and a hulking black figure - Venom. “What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice raspy with lingering pain.

“We’ve come to bringing you home,” Venom told him.

Bucky shook his head as he stumbled to his feet. “I have no home, not anymore. Please, leave me be.”

Brock looked at him with deep skepticism. “That’s bullshit, man, and you know it. You have people waiting for you to return, who need you.”

“No, they’re better off without me. Better off with him.”

“You really didn’t strike us as the self pitying sort,” Brock said harshly.

Bucky just shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“No, it fucking isn’t! Dammit, man, you have no idea how much those two miss you, how upset they are that you’re not there.”

“The juvenile especially seems very distraught.”

Bucky’s head snapped up at this. “Peter’s awake?”

“He’s been awake for over a week, made almost a full recovery.”

His heart clenched at that. “Tony must be so relieved.”

“He would be even more relieved if you were to return to him,” Venom told him. His black mass seemed to ripple and shift, and his sheer size would be intimidating if it wasn’t for the compassion in those opalescent eyes.

“I’ve caused them nothing but pain,” Bucky said in a broken voice.

“Look, we can’t comment on that since we weren’t there for it,” Brock said, “but everyone makes mistakes. The last time we met, you seemed pretty hellbent on making things right with Peter. What’s changed between then and now?”

“I left Tony when he needed me the most,” he admitted quietly. “I wasn't there for him.”

“No, you weren’t, but that hasn’t changed how he feels about you, man. Staying away longer is only making it more painful for him.”

“But he has Winter now. He deserves their love more than I do.”

“He does, but so do you,” Venom told him. “You can make this right.”

“I don’t think I can.”

Brock huffed and ran a hand through his short hair and a one of Venom’s huge hands came down to gently rub at his back, calming him. “Has anyone ever told you that you are a stubborn fucking son
of a bitch?”

Bucky smiled sadly. “A few times, yeah.”

“Well, I’m going to out-stubborn you. You are coming back with us, whether you like it or not.”

“Dammit, can’t you see that I’m no good for them!”

“And haven’t you been listening? They want you back and it’s time for you to stop being so fucking selfish and put them first for once!”

Bucky winced as if struck, the truth stinging.

“Look, you’re not entirely wrong - Winter is good for them, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t all work something out. You thrust that poor guy out into the world with no warning after he’d been a passenger within you for all these years and instead of running and hiding, he’s made the most of it, has made connections. It wouldn’t be fair to either him nor Tony and Peter to just try to go back to how it used to be.”

“What are you saying?”

“We’re saying that you should explore a bond like we have - two souls in one body.”

“It’s not going to be easy but both you and Winter are smart - we’re sure you can come to come sort of arrangement.”

Bucky bit back the smart arse retort that naturally came to his lips and forced himself to consider this. He’d been thinking in black and white, thinking it had to be all or nothing. He’d not considered the fact that perhaps he and Winter could, well, *share*. He wasn’t sure how he would cope with that, given his past predilection for jealousy, but considering that he had been willing to give Tony and Peter up completely to Winter, would that really be an issue? If he was honest with himself (and really, wasn’t it about time he stopped running even from himself?) he couldn’t deny that he didn’t want to lose them. He loved them more than anything in the world, the proof of that was that he would give them up if it meant that they would be happy. But what if he didn’t *have* to give them up? What if this was a viable second option? Could they make it work? How would it work?

One thing was for certain - he wasn’t going to find any of the answers here.

“Okay then,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “Take me home.”
Guys, check out the gorgeous moodboard that AThousandSuns made me! It's gorgeous!

Tony watched as the tendril retreated back into Venom and then blue-grey eyes opened to reveal Bucky, hesitant and scared, looking back at him. “Bucky?” he whispered, unsure if he was really seeing him there or if he was imagining it.

“Hey, Tony,” Bucky replied, then his eyes darted over to the teen standing next to the genius, still holding Tony’s hand in a death grip. “Petey.”

Venom’s opalescent eyes moved between the three of them and he announced, “We’ll give you some privacy. Come, Eddie.”

“But...”

“No being nosey, Eddie. Come, let’s go find chocolate.”

“Urgh, fine.” Brock rolled his eyes and then gestured at the door. “We’ll be raiding your chocolate stash so you’ll know where to find us when you’re done.”

Tony nodded. “Thank you both so much.”

“Anytime, man.”

They all watched as the odd couple left the room and then they were alone. Bucky looked like he was ready to bolt at any moment, and Tony’s heart cracked a little, not ever wanting to experience him running ever again. He lifted up his right hand and beckoned forwards. “Come here, you silly idiot.”

Bucky’s face crumpled and he threw himself forward into the combined embrace of his partners and Tony felt like a missing part of him had clicked back into place. His throat was tight with relief and his eyes stung as he clutched at the broad back of his lover, his face buried against his shoulder.

Peter was a mess, his chest heaving as he sobbed and when his legs gave out on him, the three of them sank to the floor, still wrapped around each other. “I th...th....thought I’d nev...never se...see you again,” he wailed, clinging to the super soldier.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Bucky whispered, his own voice thick with emotion.

“Why?” Peter asked the question that Tony wanted answered as well.

It was an all-encompassing question that covered a lot of ground, but Bucky understood what he was asking. “At first because I broke - I couldn’t watch you die, doll, and so I just ran. Then I stayed away because I thought you’d be better off without me.”

Peter pulled back and the outrage was evident on his face. “Better off without you? Better off without you? ” He rained his fists down on Bucky’s chest to emphasise each word. “No! You don’t get to
decide that, you hear me? Only Tony and I get to decide if we’re better off without you and news flash! That’s not ever gonna happen so don’t you ever do anything so fucking stupid again or so help me God, Bucky, I will end you!”

Tony stayed quiet, watching. He would need to be part of the conversation at some point but he knew that his partners needed to work through this first and foremost. Bucky’s voice was barely above a whisper when he replied. “But you didn't want to see me, didn't want me around.”

“Because I was upset!” Peter almost roared and his outburst shocked all of them, including himself. His face was red from crying but it flushed a deeper shade with embarrassment. He cleared his throat and wiped away the last remaining tears that were wetting his cheek. “I needed space, Bucky, time to think, time to be upset. That doesn’t mean that I thought that it was over or that I never wanted to see you again. I love you, you dumbarse, and that’s not gonna change because of one fight.”

Hope flared in the soldier’s eyes but he also looked sheepish. “You still love me?”

Peter huffed and turned to look at Tony. “Urgh! Tony, please talk some sense into this thick head of his, maybe he’ll listen to you.” He turned back to Bucky. “I honestly can’t believe that you would even question that!”

“Petey, maybe go easy on him, huh?” Tony suggested, and rubbed a hand over the small of Bucky’s back. “He might have been off the mark, but that doesn’t mean that his feelings at the time weren’t real. Bucky was absolutely devastated after all we went through.”

“And I wasn’t?” the teen asked indignantly.

“You were in a coma for most of it,” Tony chided. “I know that you said that you were aware of voices and people being present but that’s not the same as living it.”

Peter’s hackles immediately dropped as he was reminded of the talk they’d had earlier. “I’m sorry, Tony.”

“I know you are, baby. We’re all upset and we all have valid feelings about this, but can we just take a moment to just be.” He took in a deep breath, his eyes wandering between the two of them. “I was scared that I would never have this again but here you both are, alive and well in front of me.” His face crumpled as he began to cry, the terrible ‘what if’ scenarios that had plagued him for the past couple of weeks too much to even contemplate now. “You’re both back here, where you belong.”

“Oh, Tony.” Bucky pulled him close with one arm and tugged Peter in with his other and they sat in a three way huddle for the longest of times.

After a while, Tony’s back began to ache and he saw that Peter was squirming as well - he might have been given a clean bill of health by Helen but sitting on the floor for long periods of time probably wasn’t the best for his recently healed body. “How about we take this to the couch?” he suggested.

“Sure thing, sweetheart.” Bucky got to his feet first and pulled the others up and then went willingly when they positioned him in the middle so they could cuddle him from both sides. He was tense though and Tony could guess at why.

“What’s up?” he prompted.

He chewed on his plump lower lip while he thought about what he wanted to say and it was clear that he was hesitant to speak. It was Peter who assured him. “Bucky, just say it - we can’t keep things from one another anymore, can’t leave things unsaid. We’ve all experienced what it’s like
now to think that we’ll never get another chance to say what’s on our minds, so just get it out there.”

“But you might be mad at me,” the soldier said in a small voice.

“Then we’ll deal with those emotions and move on,” Tony said. “Look, we all love each other to the moon and back, and we’ll been through so much together, and yet we still love each other. I think it’s safe to say that none of us are going anywhere, none of us are ever going to give this up so no matter how upset we get, how mad or disappointed we are, that will never be stronger than our love for one another and so we just gotta work through it, deal with it, and then move on.”

Bucky huffed out a small laugh. “You sound like Doctor Phil.”

“Yeah, well, don’t forget that I was actually seeing a therapist when you came to live here. She had some good points.”

“Was she psychic too?”

“Hah! No, no she was actually telling me this stuff to help me understand why my relationship with Pepper was never going to work out. The hurt and the anger that we shared was stronger than our love. I just reversed the polarity for us.” He linked his fingers with Bucky’s cool metal ones, and saw Peter take his flesh hand. “So come on, babe, full disclosure. What’s on your mind?”

He sighed. “I believe you when you say that you wouldn’t be better off without me, but at the same time, you fell for the Winter Soldier. I don’t think that you’re better off without him. I think that you need him. I don’t want to lose you two but I don’t think either of you want to lose him either.”

And wasn’t that just the kicker. It must be so confusing for Bucky, who had never actually met Winter, simply knew him as the ruthless assassin who took over his body and did Hydra’s dirty work for them. He didn't know that Winter wasn’t the bad guy, didn't know that without the control words, he was just a poor soul like Bucky, forced to obey. They were part of one another but they didn't know one another, and the worst part was, for one to flourish, the other had to be hidden. It was a cruel, cruel twist of fate and Tony wished that neither had to suffer through it, but that was the hand that they had been dealt. He was confident that they could work something out, however - they were two of the most remarkable men that he had ever met and if anyone could do it, they could. “I think I speak for the both of us when I say that no, we don’t want to lose Winter, and we sure as hell don’t want to lose you. I guess the thing is, this is something that you two need to work out between the both of you. Venom and Eddie are in a similar situation and they’ve come to a workable compromise - symbiosis they call it. Maybe you could talk to them and get some ideas but at the end of the day, it’s you and Winter that need to find the common ground. No one else can dictate the terms of your agreement because it’s your lives, no one else’s, and no one else should get a say, even Peter and I.”

“But you don’t want to lose him,” Bucky said sadly. “What if I decided that I didn’t want to give up a part of me? What if I never wanted to cede control to him again?”

It hurt, hurt so much, just the thought of never seeing Winter’s shy smile again, but Tony knew that this wasn’t about him. He leaned forward and kissed Bucky sweetly, a jolt going through him as he realised that this was the first time they’d kissed since he’d gone. “Babe, whatever you decide will be what’s best for you.”

“But you’ll hate me,” he whispered.

“Oh, Buckaroo, I could never hate you - I love you more than you’ll ever know. Don’t make this decision for us, make this decision for you.”
“When do I have to decide?” he choked out, his breathing getting heavier.

“Whenever you want, babe. You take all the time in the world.”

“I just want to have a little time with you both. Can we go to bed so I can just hold you two? I’ve missed cuddling with you so much.”

Tony looked over to Peter and wasn’t surprised to see tears in his eyes. It seemed that the waterworks weren’t going to stop anytime soon but that wasn’t exactly surprising given the emotional toll the situation was wringing from them all. “I think snuggling together is an excellent idea.” He got up from the couch and held out both his hands. “Come on, let’s go to bed.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was late, somewhere in the very early hours of the morning, and Bucky hadn't slept a wink. Tony and Peter were curled up on either side of him, and they were fast asleep, both exhausted from everything that had happened. The trio had spent a few hours just holding one another, trading sweet, lingering kisses, often bursting into tears as a painful thought intruded on their minds, and comforting one another. Then had come the talking.

Tony had taken charge, telling them that before they left this room, they needed to have everything out on the table, needed to have discussed and worked through the series of events that had occurred prior to Peter getting injured. It was difficult, and confronting, and painful but they did it, digging deep to find the words that would explain what each had been feeling without flinging accusations and hurtful words. More tears had been shed and voices had been raised once or twice, but Tony played mediator and helped them come out the other side.

Bucky had admitted that he had issues with jealousy that he needed to work on, and that it all stemmed from a deep seated fear that Peter would find him too damaged and would leave. Peter admitted that he was worried that both of his partners would suddenly realise how young he was and also leave. He also apologised for not talking through his decision to accept Liz’s invitation to the dance, especially since he was aware of the difficulties that Bucky had.

They’d cried, they’d kissed and made up, they promised that no one was leaving, and then they’d turned to Tony and had an even more difficult conversation. Bucky had said that he could never apologise enough for leaving Tony at such a hard time, and although the genius forgave him, had said that no one could control when circumstances finally became too much and someone just snapped, he still wanted to make amends. Peter then apologised to Tony, saying that he was sorry that he took Tony for granted, that he treated him like a permanent fixture rather than someone who might also need support.

There had been more tears, and more kisses, more whispered apologies and soft assurances. They’d stayed in bed for the rest of the evening until the two younger men had fallen asleep, and they were so exhausted that Peter didn't even talk in his sleep. Bucky couldn’t get enough of the sight of them, snuggled next to him, and he sometimes wondered if it was real or if he was hallucinating. He’d gotten to the point where he’d thought that he’d lost them forever, had given them up, thinking that they would be happier without him. To have them in his arms now, with promises made that they weren’t going anywhere, it made his heart ache with the sheer love that he felt for them. He wanted so much to make them happy, to see them smile, and he knew that he would move mountains if he had to just to see them laugh.

The elephant in the room stirred and Bucky knew that he could no longer avoid having the hardest conversation of the day - the one with himself. He’d not felt angry or upset when he’d watched from his hiding place as Tony had slowly, slowly began to develop feelings for Winter. He’d watched with some regret sure, but it was mostly sadness that he wasn’t there when Tony needed him the most, that he’d chosen not to be there and instead, someone else was. He couldn’t blame Tony for his feelings, and he didn’t feel betrayed or hurt - he simply had thought that maybe Winter could make both Tony and Peter happier than he could and perhaps it was time to go permanently.

Now that his partners had dispelled that notion, Bucky had to come at it from another angle. He was back, his partners wanted him back, and now he had a different choice to make. Did he willingly
give up control over his body to the Winter Soldier for parts of the day? Or did he lock Winter away forever and live his life as simply Bucky?

He knew that Winter made his partners happy, and for that alone, Bucky should decide in the man’s favour. But it wasn’t quite that simple. Bucky didn’t know Winter himself, and besides, was he really who he said he was? Hydra had messed with him so much that Bucky wouldn’t be at all surprised to find that they’d left a ticking time bomb inside of him, one in the shape of the world’s most feared assassin and master spy, someone who could lie with the best of them and fit in, lulling you into a false sense of security, waiting to strike. Was that what was happening? Or was Winter simply as much a victim in this whole clusterfuck as Bucky was?

Really, there was only one way to get this all sorted and that was to meet the man for himself. Bucky wasn’t sure how that would work - he thought that he could remember hearing someone try to speak to him once in the past, back when he was with Hydra, but he had shied away from the voice, not wanting to be any more insane that he already was. Would it be that simple? Just talking inside his head?

_Are you there?_ he tried.

Nothing. Was he really expecting anything? He tried to remember what it had been like in the ‘void’, the time that he’d spent behind the barrier he had erected in his mind. Though that wasn’t quite true, was it? He hadn't erected it when he’d locked himself away - it was already there, a remnant from a time past. And didn't he remember pushing someone _out_ as he had fled _in_? Was that the place where Winter lived when Bucky was in control? It seemed likely, but the barrier locked behind him when Bucky passed through - both in and out, and maybe Winter was unable to unlock it for himself?

Right, well, here went nothing.

Bucky closed his eyes, concentrated on his breathing and then he sent his awareness inwards, searching his mind for the barrier. It was deep inside, buried far at the back where his everyday awareness and more recent memories never ventured. He’d feel silly looking for something like this if he hadn’t spent so much time on the other side of it and so he pushed onwards, ignoring the ghosts in his mind that whirled around him, echoes of voices and memories.

He’d almost given up, thought that maybe he'd shut the door so firmly behind him that the barrier had locked away for good, when he finally came upon it. As soon as he saw it, it seemed to solidify in front of him, becoming real, and he was no longer laying in bed but standing before a shimmering fog. If he concentrated hard he could still feel the mattress underneath him, the warmth of Peter’s back pressed against one side, the damp patch on his arm where Tony was drooling on him, but when he blinked, he was standing in front of the very-real looking barrier.

_Hello_, he called, his voice echoing around him. _Winter?_

It felt like an eternity, and he was just beginning to think that he’d banished the Winter Soldier for good when a split appeared in the fog and a doorway opened before Winter stepped out. _Hello, Bucky._

_Holy crap, this is...weird._

_It is a little, isn’t it?_

_You have long hair here. This is how ya see yourself?_

Winter reached up and felt around his head, pulling a strand of long, dark hair in front of his face.
Oh. I never realised. I guess I just picture myself here how I always was.

That’d explain the armour then. Bucky gestured to the tactical gear that Winter was wearing, looking every inch the Winter Soldier.

Your hair is a little bit longer in real life, Winter pointed out and Bucky reached up to feel his own hair, which was suddenly threatening to fall into his eyes as his brain corrected the image.

I guess I missed the appointment for my haircut while I was...gone. I’m growing it out but Tony insists on having it styled so it doesn’t just grow out into some sort of mane.

Winter’s face pinched at the mention of Tony and he asked hesitantly, How is Tony? And Peter?

Bucky smiled sadly. Missing you.

I’m sure they’ve hardly thought of me since you’ve been back.

That’s not true and you’d know it if you’d been watching.

Winter shrugged. It was too painful to watch. After seeing their joy when you returned, I figured that they had everything that they needed and I should give you all some privacy for a while.

I appreciate that but we’ve talked and we’ve worked through the issues we had and now all that’s left to do is to come to an arrangement with you.

Winter looked surprised. With me?

Rolling his eyes, Bucky nodded. Yes, you. Why do you think I’m here?

Being completely honest? I thought that you were here to lock me away and throw away the key.

You really thought that I would do that? A pang of hurt pinged through Bucky at the idea of being thought of as so callous.

The assassin shrugged again. It’s your body - I’m just a hitchhiker. I know I have no right to it. Besides, after escaping Hydra, I wasn’t sure if you’d want a constant reminder of them. Winter, my entire life is a constant reminder of them! I’m faster, stronger, and deadlier than regular humans. I have skills that no good man should have; I will always carry the memories of all those people that we were forced to kill. Having you along for the ride isn’t going to make that worse.

So what are you saying?

The hopeful look that flickered over Winter’s face struck Bucky deep in his heart. I’m saying that I’m willing to share. Look, it’s going to be hard - ceding control to you, well, I don’t really know you, don’t know if you’re a good man or not, and I don’t want to end up regretting giving control over to someone who might still be Hydra. But on the off chance that you’re not, then I’m willing to try. It might be hard, and I can’t guarantee how I’ll react when you take over for the first time - I might fight you every step of the way, but I’m willing to try.

I don’t need much, Winter told him. Tony likened it to shared custody of children after a divorce, but I don’t need fifty percent or every weekend and a night during the week. I’ll take what you’ll give me, even if it’s just the chance to see Tony and Peter one last time, to touch them with my hands.

To kiss them?
Winter blushed and it contrasted glaringly with the tactical gear, looked too soft for the assassin. I won’t lie, don’t even know if I could lie to you - I love them, so, so much and if they’re willing to be with me like that, then I want that. Is that going to be a problem? He left unsaid that they both knew that it was Bucky’s jealousy that had caused the fight with Peter in the first place.

Bucky thought about this, thought about what he’d seen when he’d been the one locked away, watching through Winter’s eyes. When Tony had kissed Winter, he hadn’t felt jealous, just guilty that he wasn’t there for Tony to offer him the support that he’d needed. He wasn’t sure what the difference was - afterall, Peter hadn’t actually done anything with Liz, it was all in his imagination, so why was seeing Tony actually kiss someone else not a problem? It wasn’t because Winter was using Bucky’s lips - they felt like entirely separate people and Bucky hadn't felt at all like he was being kissed himself, so what was it? He really couldn’t say, but did he even need to know? Maybe he would have to figure it out eventually, but he clearly didn't have all the facts now and Tony would slap him across the back of the head if he theorised without having all of the facts.

I can’t say if it’s gonna to be a problem or not, he said slowly, but I’m willing to give it a try if you are.

Really?

What do we have to lose? he asked, ignoring the whisper that said ‘everything’. He had another voice inside his mind right now and it was louder than the whisper.

Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Winter whooped and he ran forward and picked Bucky up, spinning him around. It was the oddest of sensations since neither of them had corporeal bodies here, but his stomach still dropped as he was lifted up, and he could feel his hair fluttering as he was moved.

Bucky found that he was laughing at the sheer joy on Winter’s face and he could see why Tony would have been interested in him. The assassin finally put him down and Bucky was surprised to find that he felt a little dizzy.

How will we work this? Winter asked, his cheeks flushed, this time with happiness.

I’m not too sure. I’m guessing that you weren’t able to get passed the barrier before?

Winter shook his head. No, not until you called for me. I could see through it, like before, if I wanted to, but I couldn’t leave. Couldn’t take control was what he meant.

Right, okay, well we need to fix that.

What do you mean? Like, leave it unlocked all the time?

Well, yeah. It ain’t fair if it’s always me who makes the decision when you can come out and play.

Winter just stood there, stunned. Y...y...you wouldn’t be mad if I chose to take control?

Bucky shrugged. I don’t know if I want you to take it without giving me some warning, ya know, but maybe if you told me that you wanted out, then you could come out?

Wow.

Bucky smiled a little nervously and scratched at the back of his head. I guess we’re not gonna know how it’s all gonna work until we try it, ya know?
Yeah, yeah I guess.

Okay, well, are you ready?

What? Winter squeaked. Right now?

No time like the present, huh?

Oh, right, okay, sure, sure.

Bucky smiled and turned to look at the shimmering barrier. He concentrated hard, urging it to not fall away, not wanting to take away a safe place for Winter or himself to retreat to if they needed, but to weaken the locks, so they could both come and go as they pleased. It didn't take much in the end, simply him willing it to be so and he knew, deep down, that it was because this is what he truly wanted. He turned to Winter and clasped his forearm. *Don’t keep them waiting.*

Winter swallowed hard, blinking back tears. *I won’t, but I won’t keep you away for long either.*

*Whenever you’re ready.*

Winter nodded and then leaned in and brushed a kiss against Bucky’s cheek, startling him. *Thank you, moya dusha.*

And then Bucky was alone.

oOoOo

Tony’s nose tickled and he reached up to scratch it, and then he burrowed closer against the warm body he was pressed against, not quite ready to wake up the rest of the way just yet. A hand came to softly stroke through his hair and he sighed happily, leaning into the touch.

“Morning, dorogoj.”

Tony’s eyes flew open and he stared up into sparkling blue eyes. “Winter?”

“Yes, Tony, I’m here.”

Laughing with sheer joy, Tony reached up and pulled Winter in for a kiss, and just before their lips met, he was almost certain that he saw Bucky smiling out from within. Feeling happier than he ever had, he pressed his lips to Winter’s and basked in the glow of his joy.

Chapter End Notes

* Moya dusha - my soul
  Dorogaj - dear/darling

So, this is going to be it from these boys for a little while. There is much more of their story to tell, especially with Winter along for the ride now, but, after a few hundred words shy of 300K, I just need a little break from them. I love our boys to death but they have been part of my daily life for the past 8 months and I need to write some other stuff for a while, clean out the cobwebs and make sure that when I come back, I'll be refreshed and rejuvenated to give you the best stories that I can.
I know there are a couple of people who jumped aboard this train with this fic, so if you enjoyed it and want the backstory so this makes more sense, why not check out where it all began, back in The Tangled Webs of Redemption?

Have a wonderful new year everyone and if you haven't yet, subscribe to the series so you know when I post another installment :) 

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!