Edge of Fire

by TenSpencerRiedPlease

Summary

Natasha lounges across the couch in their room looking tired and a little annoyed. She shifts her position, looking over at him for a long moment. “Think I can fake sick to get out of this stupid ball thing?” she asks.

“No,” Tony tells her. She’s terrible at faking sick on account of when she gets sick she’s a mess.

“Fine, just don’t ditch me like you did last time,” she mumbles.

He sighs, “we kind of have to look like we’re putting an effort in and people don’t like us anyway, it’s not hard to scare them off.”

Notes

Alright, here's a thing!

I'm also going to warn for some consent issues (not with the pairing per se) because of the
way the world is set up, there's a lot of power imbalance. Granted Tony's good at thwarting any system he finds blocking his goals but still. I didn't tag it because it doesn't necessarily affect the main pairing (though they are both aware of it), but its a good thing to keep in mind going forward.

See the end of the work for more notes.
They all look a little nervous but Tony’s gotten good at picking out the problem children. This time there’s only one, which is nice but he gets the feeling the bald girl will be a whole lot of trouble. Tony can tell she’s suspicious, probably prickly in personality too but she’ll be right at home here with that. Tony’s not exactly the most pleasant and Natasha out and out makes herself look undesirable to anyone who comes looking. He looks over to Natasha to see what she thinks because she’s gotten good at this too, better than him almost. Actually no, she’s better at reading people than him but still. He’s pretty good at it and he’s better with the younger ones than her.

The good news is that they don’t deal with anyone under the age of fourteen and Tony’s grateful because as much as he likes kids they’re a handful. Natasha doesn’t like kids unless she can hand them back within a few hours loaded with sugar so he’s pretty sure she’s grateful they get teens too. Didn’t used to be the case, but a lot of things have changed for omegas in the last eighty years.

“Hey everyone,” Tony says, drawing the attention of the small group of teens. “I’m Tony, and that’s Natasha. We uh, tend to be in charge here.” They aren’t the ones running anything but they deal with the other omegas a hell of a lot more than the people who run this place at least outside of classes. The kids all look nervous still so he sighs. “We don’t bite,” he tells them.

“Much,” Natasha adds because she’s an asshole.

“At all,” Tony quickly adds. “Follow me,” he tells them.

From there it’s more of a matter of fitting people into beds and explaining how things go here. None of it is terribly complicated- go to classes; eat stuff in the kitchen, the illicit WiFi password, that kind of thing. When he gets to the bald girl he ends up giving her her own room, something she seems surprised about. “Thought you might appreciate your own space,” he tells her. “Just uh. Make sure you don’t break any tree branches climbing back in through the window. And don’t be surprised if other people crawl in your window too, it’s the easiest way to sneak in and out of the house.”

She looks around at the space and the room is pretty large, used to be Tony’s when he was younger. Doesn’t have enough closet space for him though and that was always a pain in his ass. “Thank you,” she murmurs eventually and he shrugs.

“Not a problem. You have a name?” he asks.

“Nebula,” she tells him, looking out the window at the tree.

“Avoid the third branch from the bottom, its hanging on for dear life and I’m pretty sure if one more person steps on it it’ll snap. Shimmy around the other side. More of a pain in the ass to get up and down the tree, but it does prevent potential death and being found out.”

“And if you’re caught?” Nebula asks, looking over.

Tony wrinkles his nose. “Extra chores and trust me you do not want to clean bathrooms several teenagers use. Or go in their rooms on days where they aren’t being checked. I’ve found shit that could be on National Geographic in them,” he says, shaking his head.

For a brief second Nebula smiles and he takes that as a victory before he takes his leave.

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Natasha lounges across the couch in their room looking tired and a little annoyed. Tony’s pretty sure the annoyed thing is just her face though. She shifts her position, looking over at him for a long moment. “Think I can fake sick to get out of this stupid ball thing?” she asks.

“No,” Tony tells her. She’s terrible at faking sick on account of when she gets sick she’s a mess. When she isn’t she’s beautiful enough that it kind of hurts to look directly at her so faking it doesn’t work so well.

“Fine, just don’t ditch me like you did last time,” she mumbles.

He sighs, “we kind of have to look like we’re putting an effort in and people don’t like us anyway, it’s not hard to scare them off.” Alphas tend to go to these places to find soft, subservient omegas and he and Natasha have never fit that bill. He’s too loud, too smart, too willing to tell people what he wants. And Natasha is flat out terrifying so people avoid her almost as soon as she opens her mouth. Her beauty might attract its fair share of suitors but people want her looks, not everything else that comes with it. Actually, Tony has that problem too. He’s beautiful, and alphas don’t really like that he knows that. Makes showering him with compliments difficult is he knows his worth.

“Do we? Because we don’t actually get out of here without an alpha,” Natasha points out.

Yeah, so he knows, but he’s been harassed a bunch of times for not putting in enough effort into finding his perfect alpha or whatever the fuck. Frankly he’d be fine with a beta, less temperamental and they get the shit end of the stick too so Tony feels like they wouldn’t be assholes as much. He wouldn’t really know, not in any kind of depth anyway, given that his contact with betas is often pretty fleeting. Everyone is fine at seeming decent for a few hours at a time, alphas included. So maybe betas suck too, but that’s not something he’d have a lot of knowledge on given that any time he leaves here its only within an allotted time otherwise he’s busted for jail breaking himself.

“What, do you not get bitched at for not socializing?” he asks.

Natasha snorts, “yeah I do, but I don’t listen. What are they going to do, kick us out? Don’t think they can.”

He’s not actually sure about that but she still kind of makes a point. He’s never heard of omegas being kicked out of an omega home though he does know sometimes they leave. Can’t until they’re twenty-one, legally, but they do choose to go. Tony doesn’t know why because he likes it here. Sure, he can do without the homemaking lessons and all the sewing but he likes being here and he likes the other omegas.

It’s nice to be somewhere… sequestered, he guesses, from most of the bullshit he dealt with before he got here. Even now if he chooses to leave he does what most omegas do and douses himself in cologne that makes him smell like a beta. Saves him trouble later. New omegas show up in January and he has an early birthday so from May until the next January he got stuck with a weird amount attention from people triple his age. He might have resented being shuffled off here if it weren’t a fucking relief to be able to walk around without people shouting sexual shit at him all the time. Or purposefully hiding his scent to avoid people yelling sexual shit at him all the time.

“I guess, but I don’t really want to stay here forever,” he says. Natasha gives him a funny look and he sighs. “I mean, the idea is great but the practice? I’d rather live in the woods with a bunch of omega friends and no sewing lessons.” All the benefits of living here, none of the drawbacks. Sounds good to him.

Natasha hums a little. “I guess you have a point there. But we don’t really get that option,” she points out.
“Sure we do. It’d be a right pain in the ass, but we could do it.” Its not like omegas can’t own land and have jobs, its just that doing either one of those things comes with a stupid amount of ‘where’s your alpha?’ questions that inevitably lead to ‘what if you end up with an alpha?’ questions because Tony guesses alphas can’t date omegas with jobs and homes in their names.

Omegas, they’re expected to be fine with alphas having jobs and homes in their names, but the reverse seems to be unthinkable to alphas. Tony doesn’t really see why he should be comfortable with something an alpha wouldn’t be, but any time he’s brought it up he gets told that ‘that’s just the way things are’ or ‘alphas like to feel like alphas.’ Tony’s sure they do, but he doesn’t see why omegas need to be subservient for them to feel that way.

“Too much work, I’ll freeload from here until I decide to go to the woods and die,” Natasha says and Tony snorts.

“Like a cat.”

Natasha nods, “exactly like a cat! Also, I want to die like a woodland sprite so dying in the forest is a must.”

Tony shakes his head and walks over to Natasha, throwing himself on her despite her loud squawk of protest. “Fine. You can die like a woodland sprite but afterwe deal with the damn ball. Get dressed and know I’m jealous that all you need to do is put on clothing to look good.”

He lets out a loud noise of protest when Natasha shoves him off the couch and he lands on his ass. “You like fine without all the effort you put in. You live up to too many omega stereotypes,” she tells him and he makes an offended noise.

“Excuse you, clearly you’ve never met an Italian man. We all do that,” he tells her.

Nat rolls her eyes, “clearly you haven’t spent enough time with Russians. We think looks are frivolous,” she says like she actually believes that. She totally doesn’t because Tony happens to know that she loves her dresses even if she prefers to wear them in situations where she’s not expected to prance around in them. He’s pretty sure she’d refer to sword fight in a dress than go to an omega ball.

“Sure, Nat. Wear the green dress, that one looks nice on you,” he tells her.

She ignores him walking over to the closet and making something of a show of picking out something else but she pulls the green one anyway. “Kind of wish I could wear armor to these things,” she mumbles. “Or any event, I’m not picky.”

“You make no sense. Dressing up is the only fun part of these things,” he says. He makes his way to his closet on the other side of the room and its stupidly small but whatever. He makes do and steals half of Natasha’s closet too.

“You don’t even have a sense of style, what are you talking about?” Nat asks and that’s just offensive, truly.

“Do so! Its not my fault omega men don’t get pretty dresses and stuff,” he mumbles. Not that most styles would look good on him anyway but still. He kind of hates being stuck with fashion that’s all the same stuff, but this time in grey instead of black.

“No, men’s fashion is fine. You just don’t have good fashion sense,” Nat tells him. He sticks his tongue out at her and pulls out a suit jacket that he thinks is nice because he does have good fashion sense, thanks. “The white one? Again? You do realize most people think you’re a virgin in that,
“Look, its not my fault alphas are stupid and associate a shade with sexual activity and also don’t seem to consider that omegas can have sex with each other,” he says. “And I like this jacket.” It looks good on him and fuck what alphas think he thinks he looks nice in white. He looks better in the summer when his skin gets a little more color to it, but he looks fine without the tan too.

“Well if you get weird sex questions again don’t say I didn’t tell you so,” Nat says and Tony sighs.

“Yeah uh. Lets just hope this batch has some basic manners,” he mumbles.

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Bucky tries to kick Steve out before he says it but he fails as usual. “Look, I know you don’t like the idea but going to a ball doesn’t mean you need to court anyone and I can see that you’re lonely and—”

“Can you stop singing those damn houses praises just because you found one omega that isn’t brainwashed into being some sort of weird Stepford robot? Sam’s a freak of nature, he doesn’t count.” God, he hates Sam and Sam hates him back. Shit, Bucky half wishes all the weird homemaking training stuck on him just because he’s such a petty jackass.

Steve rolls his eyes at him. “I don’t get why you and Sam hate about each other so much. I thought you’d like each other but no, I guess I get stuck dealing with the two most important people in my life at constant war,” he mumbles.

“It’s not war, if it was war Sam would be in Argentina.” Or whatever country he chose to flee to.

“Also you know the feeling you get when you hate someone instantly so I don’t know why you’re confused.”

“Usually I have some kind of reason later on, some type of vibe I picked up and didn’t realize I did but you and Sam…” Steve trails off and waves a hand around.

Yeah, they hate each other for no reason but Sam thinks Star Wars is better than Star Trek and he’s clearly wrong and that’s all the reason he needs. “I can’t help that Sam’s the worst,” he says, shrugging.

“Just consider going,” Steve says and Bucky mentally curses himself for accidentally getting stuck on the topic he was trying to avoid with Sam’s obvious awfulness to everyone but Steve.

“I’m not going. Just because I’m by myself doesn’t mean I need to go pick out a mail order omega without the mail,” he says. He kind of likes living by himself despite what Steve thinks. He likes the solitary life, the quiet of it. It’s a welcome contrast from work.

“That is so not- Bucky, its not a commitment,” Steve tells him.

He knows that but that’s not why he doesn’t want to do it. “What is up with you? You used to hate those houses too and now suddenly you’re a fucking advocate because what, one time it worked out? Look, I’m glad you and Sam are happy, really. Even if I wish you were happy with anyone but each other on account of I hate Sam but come on. Just because that worked for you doesn’t mean it’ll work for me.” And he doesn’t want it to work for him anyway. If he choses to find someone it won’t be in some house designed to create homemakers instead of human beings.

Steve sighs. “Bucky, I just want you to do something that isn’t violent or isolating yourself. I’ve seen what that’s done to you and its not really looking good,” he says.
“One- omegas are people, not Prozac. Having one around wouldn’t solve my problems anyway. Two- if that was your issue why not take me to the county fair or something?” Like an omega is the only way to solve that problem.

“Buck, we don’t have a county fair,” he says like that should have been his take away from that.

This is an argument that could go on for hours, if he let it. Steve is like a dog with a bone once he gets an idea and it’s a right pain in the ass to deal with. “Fine, I’ll think about it. Now get out,” he tells Steve, shoving him through the door all the way and shutting it.

“Wear something nice!” Steve yells at him through the wood and Bucky flips him off. He doesn’t need to be told what to wear and he’s not going anywhere anyway.

Maybe Steve’s right about him being lonely, and it would be easy to go to some fucking omega ball and pick one out like a dog at the pound but that’s… fuck, that’s awful. A little voice that sounds too much like Steve reminds him that he doesn’t judge Steve for doing the same but he has the benefit of knowing Steve and Sam separately and together. Steve would never be the kind of guy to force Sam into something and Sam, as much as Bucky wished he would fly into the sun he hates stereotypes as much as Steve. Sam’s not really one for rules either, at least not when they don’t suit him.

Basically, both Steve and Sam are unusual and they shouldn’t be considered. Maybe Bucky doesn’t like those omega houses, and yeah he’s not really one for tradition, but he still doesn’t want to find someone there. He’s sure he can do better than that- hasn’t managed so far but he’s sure there are better methods.

He’s eating a hot pocket on the kitchen counter when his phone buzzes- probably Steve.

_There’s no shame in looking, Bucky._

Yeah, sure, maybe to him but Bucky… wants something genuine, real. He doesn’t think he can find that in a house full of omegas looking to get out of the house they’re all shoved in as children.

_You’re a loser who eats hot pockets in the closet lmao no omega would want you_

Fucking Sam. Must have stolen Steve’s phone.

_That’s not true! Sam’s just feeling prickly today_

Sam feels prickly every damn day but it’s the fact that he’s right that has Bucky sliding off the counter and into his living room to at least eat the hot pocket on the couch. This isn’t really where he saw his life at this point but shit has never really gone as planned.

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Natasha has managed to scare off enough people that they’ve spread the word but Tony’s not so good at scaring people off. He was raised rich and he keeps up with world events in a way a lot of omegas don’t. Small talk with business people comes naturally to him so it takes time to freak them out. He does manage though, because he tends to know more about any given subject than the person he’s talking to.

“These alphas are pathetic,” Natasha mumbles. “Mention _one_ serial killer and suddenly they think _you’re_ Ted Bundy.”

Tony snorts and starts laughing. “Nat you _didn’t_! You know how these high society people feel about that kind of thing,” he says. Namely they dislike anything even moderately out of the norm.
It’s almost funny because under normal circumstances Natasha would be perfect for any alpha who showed up here given how beautiful she is. She’d look nice on someone’s arm, but her personality? Not so much.

He might fair better because he’s good with small talk, but he’s smart and he knows it so that puts him back in the undesirable category.

“Yeah, which is why I brought the guy up. I don’t want people coming back for me later,” she mumbles.

“Might still happen,” he points out. Wouldn’t be the first time that kind of thing happened even if it tends to be rare. Happened more when she was younger though.

“I fucking hope not,” she says. “I mentioned some kind of awful thing to every single person I talked to today. There’s no reason for any of them to think coming back will be a good plan. You?” she asks.

He shrugs, “same as normal. Went fine for about fifteen minutes until it became clear that I knew more about the subjects they brought up than they did. Then they moved on.”

“At least one is going to come back that way,” she tells him but he shakes his head.

“I laughed outright at at least five of them for stupid opinions so probably not.” He can’t help it if they have stupid opinions on climate change, business patterns, and omegas as a whole. He doesn’t have the patience to put up with it either so he has no problem saying what he thinks. It’s worth it to note it’s also not his fault that he’s right.

They only get a moment by themselves before they’re summoned back in and Tony doesn’t much want to go but duty calls. Natasha slogs back in with much less enthusiasm as him and that’s a feat. He lingers for a moment, wanting at least another couple minutes to himself before he gets stuck in yet another conversation where someone casually mentions kids and him raising them like its something he automatically wants. And sure, he likes kids, wouldn’t mind having one or two, but that’s not something set in stone and he sure as hell doesn’t want to stay home with a kid.

In an ideal world he’d like to do something with his life, but this isn’t an ideal world and this is as good as his life has gotten so far. Its kind of pathetic, that living in a house with a bunch of omegas getting sewing and ‘how to please you alpha’ lessons is his life’s peak, but it is what it is. He’s contemplating the complications of finding a way to buy land so he and Natasha can fuck off into the forest when he notices the guy standing outside the house in all black. He kind of looks like a serial killer, except Tony’s pretty sure the nervousness that radiates off of him negates that possibility.

“Hey,” he says, making his way over because at least if he gets murdered it’ll put him out of the misery of having to deal with whatever the hell is inside. How sad is that, thinking murder is better than another damn discussion about business?

The guy ducks his head and upon closer inspection he’s got the scraggly beginnings of a beard that appears to hide a pretty face. His long hair is well kept, even if it’s in a bun at the moment so this probably isn’t his usual look. “Uh, hey,” he says, not looking at Tony.

Tony grins, “what, shy?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

That gets the guy to look over and he can see him look Tony over but something about it feels more like a way to take stock of his surroundings than being checked out explicitly. “Uh, not usually, no. I… look; I don’t know why I’m here. I hate these places, I think they’re creepy and they border on
human trafficking and—” he turns to walk away but Tony calls him back.

“Wait, wait, wait!” he says fast, “I kind of want to hear more on that.” The guy stops for a moment and half turns towards him. “I uh, don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone say that before,” he says and the guy snorts.

“You’ve *never* heard that before?” he asks, incredulous.

“Not out of someone who isn’t also an omega, no,” Tony says. “Everyone else kind of benefits from this arrangement. Omegas kind of do too.”

That earns him a look as the guy turns all the way back around. “How the *hell* could you benefit from this?” he asks.

Might be a fair question if he knew what things were like for Tony before he got here. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t love being trained to please but it’s better than what I had before. Early birthday,” he explains, “left a solid seven months of people shouting weird sexual shit at me out of car windows, trying to follow me home, and as much as I hate cooking I hate daily attempts at sexual assault more, so. I don’t care for what these places stand for, but with a house full of omegas I don’t deal with any of that other stuff. For me, that’s better. Safer.”

The comment earns him a wince as the guy sighs. “You know that shit should be normal, right? Not a place where you get to feel safe while people throw parties to pimp you out?”

Tony shrugs, “ideally, yeah. But this isn’t an ideal world; it’s the one I live in so this is the best of what I get. So far.”

“Yeah? And what are your aspirations?” he asks but its not condescending like it seems to be from most everyone else. It’s genuine, curious. Like he expects an actual answer rather than asking an obligatory question.

“Don’t know, but I don’t really want to stay here forever. Technically I could leave now but that would require a level of effort I don’t feel like putting in at the moment,” he says, shrugging. He’ll get to it when he gets to it.

“What, no marriage, kids, white picket fence?” he asks, smiling a little.

Tony wrinkles his nose. “White picket fences are hideous, kids are alright but I sure shit don’t want any any time soon, and I don’t think I’m marriage material. But the tax benefits would be nice so maybe.”

“Guess you plan on having a job if that’s something to consider, tax benefits.”

“Obviously. I’d go insane without something to do and I figure I might as well make money off of whatever I end up doing.” Seems like a good trade off to him anyway and why hasn’t this guy been scared off yet? Usually its around now that people start backing away because they realize he has intentions on living life for himself, not for someone else.

“And what around here could possibly keep you entertained enough to stick around?” the guy asks, sounding a little amused. And interested in the answer, crucially.

Tony considers lying or skirting the truth but this guy doesn’t seem the type to rat him out anyway so he figures fuck it. “Finding pretty much any way to break any and all rules. Mostly internet access—we aren’t supposed to have it but what kind of fucked up rule is *that*? We should be able to keep up with the damn news if for no other reason than conversation but alphas like they’re omegas dumb
“and naïve. Makes them easy to control. No offense,” he adds without really meaning it.

That earns him a ‘what the fuck’ look and finally, a person who reacts correctly to that information! “You aren’t supposed to have internet access? No fucking shit that makes you naïve and easy to control, you don’t get pretty much any access to the outside world that way for at least four years,” the guy says, rolling his eyes. “Wait, eighteen is the age you can get married here, right?” he asks like it’s occurred to him that other places have a younger age limit.

They do, but that’s a state-by-state basis thing. New York doesn’t care for child marriage though so Tony was safe from the prospects of marriage for more than two years when he got here. “Yeah. We get a say too. Don’t look so horrified- in Alabama you can get married at sixteen so long as your parents consent. Omega doesn’t need to consent, though. So here its basically utopian,” he says. “I’m Tony, by the way.”

“I’m Bucky and… Jesus fucking Christ, I’m just gunna go and simmer in the fact that these places are more horrifying than I thought,” he mumbles.

“Wait, wait, wait. This is probably the best conversation I’ve had all night, please don’t leave me to talk with some other goddamn moron who thinks talking about flow charts is a real way to connect with someone on any meaningful level,” Tony says. “Seriously. You have no clue what I’ve been subjected to.”

Bucky looks slightly horrified, “yeah, I’m sure that’s true and that’s… not a good thing at all. Don’t you like… resent being here?” he asks, gesturing to the house.

He shrugs, “sometimes. But mostly only when things aren’t going my way, otherwise I do actually like it here. I have friends I’d miss if I were gone.” Well, friend but Bucky doesn’t need to know he has the social skills of a demented goat. He’s already got enough proof of that talking to him and Tony needs him to stick around long enough to keep him from getting stuck with literally anyone else. “Also, if you uh… hate the idea of these houses so much how’d you find yourself here?”

That earns a long sigh and Tony senses a story so he grins and leans in, curious. “I have a… friend, brother really, who seems to think I’m lonely and this worked for him and to be fair Sam isn’t what I would expect out of this kind of environment but Sam is also probably the spawn of Cthulhu so I don’t feel like he should he counted but I um. Mostly wanted to prove myself right about this being a shit option to solve that problem. The loneliness thing,” he says.

That earns a long sigh and Tony senses a story so he grins and leans in, curious. “I have a… friend, brother really, who seems to think I’m lonely and this worked for him and to be fair Sam isn’t what I would expect out of this kind of environment but Sam is also probably the spawn of Cthulhu so I don’t feel like he should he counted but I um. Mostly wanted to prove myself right about this being a shit option to solve that problem. The loneliness thing,” he says.

It’s a surprisingly sweet, honest answer that Tony’s sort of surprised he got it. “Did you? Prove yourself right, I mean?” he asks.

Bucky sighs, “I don’t know.”

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Natasha watches Tony outside talking to some guy that straight up looks like a serial killer but he must be some type of charming because Tony continues talking to him. He gets animated too, talking with wild gestures and bright eyes the way he only does when he’s not faking it. Natasha’s never seen him talk to anyone who isn’t also an omega that way. Usually his actual personality is hidden behind a layer of suspicion, intelligence, and a desire to not actually be in the conversation.

But she knows he’s enjoying himself with this guy and the alpha seems to respond well to Tony not that they don’t usually. At least until he proves smarter than them, or too outspoken, or some other thing that makes him into a hassle. It happens more with her than him, but that’s because she intentionally sabotages things from the start where he doesn’t. Sometimes she wonders if he actually
wants some random alpha to take him home like one of those weird and kind of messed up fairy tales they’ve all seen. He claims that’s not what he wants but why else does he put effort into these things? He manages to screw them up every time but Natasha views that as more of a test for his suitors.

Tony has never taken kindly to anyone who doesn’t properly appreciate him, a trait Natasha admires, but she doesn’t really think any of these people will appreciate him the way they should. He’s got high standards, or she assumed he did before she started watching whatever the hell is going on outside, so that usually makes him some level of undesirable. Which is why this entire… things is confusing to her. Why’s Tony even bothering with this guy? Also its cold outside and Tony hates the cold, claims he’s from a Mediterranean environment so he was never meant to be in it, so the fact that he’s putting up with things weird too.

By the time he comes back in Natasha has a whole questionnaire of things to ask but Tony beats her to it. “I think that might have been the only conversation that I’ve had here with an alpha that I’ve actually liked,” he says, taking off his jacket.

“He looked like a serial killer,” she says in place of something supportive maybe because she’s a little selfish. She doesn’t want Tony to go. She doesn’t want him to be unhappy, but she doesn’t want to be abandoned here either.

“Yeah, kind of. But he’s nice and doesn’t care if I have opinions.”

“Is that really the standard we’re holding alphas to?” Natasha asks, squinting. Because she feels like those standards should be higher.

Tony sighs, “Nat, my standards for alphas are ‘showers, doesn’t think rape is an ok thing to do.’ The fact that Bucky wasn’t intimidated by the fact that I’m smart and don’t feel like hiding it isn’t a standard, it’s a bonus.”

Yikes. But he’s got a point. “Well, all the alphas who show up here usually shower except the rich hippie types who make money selling pot brownies or whatever. So I feel like you should make your new standard ‘can have opinions, doesn’t think rape is an ok thing to do.’ Or you know, normal relationship standards.” She doesn’t get why omegas are so picky with each other but alphas? If they aren’t immediately shit and they don’t smell like they’ve rolled around in garbage they’re fine.

Maybe its that ‘if you don’t get married you’ll die alone and an utter failure’ mentality that only seems to affect omegas and sometimes betas. Alphas in their forties who are single? Living their best life. Omegas in their forties who are single? Horrible swamp creatures, probably have a lot of cats. Natasha doesn’t get that but whatever.

“Fine, Bucky still meets my standards so. Not that I think he’ll stick around but uh. It was nice while it lasted.”

“Bucky is the name someone gives to their cousin brother,” Natasha mumbles.

Tony snorts and starts laughing. “Yeah okay, I’ll give you that. Its short for ‘Buchanan’ though so that’s not as bad.”

“And he doesn’t go by ‘Beau’?” Who raised this guy?

“Nah. Best friend nicknamed him ‘Bucky’ when he was five and for some reason everyone decided this was the name they were going to call him for the rest of his life.”

Natasha doesn’t think it bodes well for her that Tony even knows that ridiculous information even if, for whatever reason, Tony doesn’t think Bucky will turn back up.
I don’t know why these chapters came out SO damn long but here is the second one! Probably should have waited but I have poor self control so.

Also the Misha Sue thing is this universe’s version of Mary Sue, but changed to be at least somewhat more gender neutral sounding.

Also also, chapter featuring Sam and Bucky’s legendary hate for each other!

Nebula sits across from him with her fingers held out in the shape of a goal post. Turns out she doesn’t sleep well either and Tony’s long since learned how to pass the time so he figures he’ll give her a few tips. He flicks the puzzle piece at her hands and she catches it, making a noise of frustration. “You don’t need to do that,” he tells her. “You’re just keeping the goal. You try,” he says, tossing her a puzzle piece and making a goal himself.

She flicks the piece and it goes through his hands. “So we’re even. Pass me that puzzle piece,” he says, gesturing to the piece she’d caught earlier. She passes it to him and sets her fingers into a goal post. He flicks the piece and it goes wide, “that was terrible,” he says.

For a half a second Nebula smiles, leaning over to pick up the piece. Tony makes a goal post with his fingers and Nebula flicks the piece. It hits one of his fingers but falls through his hands. “Now we’re even,” he tells Nebula. “Your turn.” Nebula considers for a moment as he settles his hands into a goal post. She flicks the puzzle piece and it goes through Tony’s fingers. “And you’ve won, congratulations,” he tells her. A brief, baffled expression crosses her features and Tony smiles. “See, its fun. Did you have fun?” he asks.

Nebula settles in her spot for a moment, still confused. “That was fun,” she decides, nodding a little.

“What’s fun? Breaking laws, doing drugs?” she asks like she’s done either one of those things. Tony’s dabbled in both, wasn’t really all its cracked up to be and coming off drugs sucks. Natasha’s not one for drugs but crime? Probably.

“We’re not committing crimes or doing drugs, no. Sadly,” he adds, wrinkling his nose a little.

Natasha rolls her eyes at him, “like you need to be into drugs anyway. Crime though, we can work on that. I vote we rob a bank or ten. Get plenty of money, buy an island, live there for the rest of our lives.”

“I already have a bunch of money,” Tony points out. “And islands aren’t that expensive.”

“By whose standards?” Nat asks and okay they’re probably expensive to poor people.

“You know what I mean,” he mumbles.

Nebula frowns, looking between them. “What does he meant?” she asks.

“That he gets the luxury of being rich,” Nat tells her, sitting down beside him.
The answer doesn’t seem to satisfy Nebula, who gives him an incredulous look. “Then why would you stay here? You can actually leave.”

Yeah, he doesn’t bother with the long battle that led to him getting that money because she doesn’t really need to hear his sad tragic backstory. Instead he focuses on the question at hand. “I like it here. Don’t love the parties, love sewing lessons less, but you don’t actually have to do classes after you’re eighteen so I don’t really have that concern anyway.”

“I have to wait four years before I can give up the sewing lessons?” Nebula asks, looking a little dead behind the eyes at that.

“Less, if you’re good,” Tony tells her. “Which I was on account of I fucking hate sewing and figured I’d master it so I could get out of classes.” He spent his spare time on science, not that they get a bunch of that here. Normal high school stuff, probably, not that Tony can remember from his previous curriculum. He learns fast, once the knowledge is there when he learned it isn’t much relevant. Too bad he couldn’t have stayed in MIT, he’d already earned a fucking degree but no. Can’t do that without parental permission and Howard’s a fucking cockbite.

“I’m leaving as soon as I can,” Nebula mumbles.

“Gunna be a long seven years,” Tony tells her. “Unless you plan on getting a hot date at eighteen but fair warning taksie backbies. creates more problems than it’s worth.” He’d considered that, just accepting some random alpha’s attentions and fucking off but getting out of here requires signing a contract similar to marriage and it’s a pain in the ass to break contract. Internet access- quite helpful to one’s predicament.

“I’m fairly certain no one will want me,” Nebula says and that’s… sad, harsh.

“Well, no one really wants me either,” Natasha says, shrugging like that doesn’t bother her. It does, but mostly because she’s tired of being viewed as beautiful without anyone making the effort of looking deeper rather than the idea of not being wanted. Nat genuinely doesn’t care about physical desirability, a trait Tony admires about her.

“Everyone wants you. Do you even own a mirror?” Nebula asks, baffled.

Natasha shakes her head. “No, people want my body. Me? They want nothing to do with that. Same for him. People think he’s fine until they realize how smart he is,” Nat says, nodding at Tony.

“I noticed that last night,” Nebula murmurs. “But there was that guy outside. Kind of looked like a serial killer, though.”

“Thankyou! This idiot thinks he was fine.” Natasha waves an arm around in mock frustration and okay, weird.

“You need better taste. This place has given you bad standards,” Nebula tells him.

Tony lets out a sigh. “He’s different, at least give him that. At least he didn’t walk in like he owns the place and everyone in it.” Some alphas do that and Tony’s gotten good at picking them out before they even speak. He tends to warn the younger ones about them before some random alpha whose way too good to be true chats them up and spends the next four years making them think they fell into a fairy tale only for it to end up a nightmare. He’s seen it happen too many times to stand by and let it anymore. He figures if nothing else Howard was good for something- anyone who acts like Howard did after he lost his shit yet again isn’t to be trusted and his instincts have always pointed him in the right direction.
“He’ll probably wear your skin like a pelt,” Nebula says and Natasha bursts out laughing.

“Oh Christ, the guy isn’t Buffalo Bill. Can we like… find another topic? Crimes sounds good, we haven’t snuck out in awhile Nat we should do something Friday. Go see a movie or something,” he says.

Nebula squints, “you’d sneak out of here to see a movie? That’s boring,” she says, judgmental in a way only a teenager can manage.

Tony sighs. “Look, I shouldn’t be around alcohol. Or anything else deemed ‘fun.’” He tends to overindulge and he’s learned the hard way that doesn’t really end well. So he figures he’ll just stay away from that kind of stuff.

“We should find somewhere with a pool table, I want to clean people out of their cash,” Nat says, rubbing her hands together gleefully.

Sometimes Tony wonders why he’s friends with her- lovingly, of course.

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Most of the time Bucky doesn’t really care that Steve knows him as well as he does because it’s convenient. Knowing someone your whole life means you get to use a level of shorthand with them that no one else understands. The problem is that Steve’s used all that shorthand to figure out his stupid ass went to one of those god damn stupid balls and now he’s harassing him about it and Sam isn’t helping. Of course Sam isn’t helping, its Sam, worst human on the planet.

“Well, how did it go?” Steve asks, phrasing the question in a slightly different way than the last five hundred times he asked. Bucky refuses to answer because he doesn’t think that question should be dignified with a response.

“It went well,” Sam says finally, giving him a vindictive little smile that Bucky wants to smack off his face.

“Shut up, Sam,” Bucky mumbles.

“Don’t talk to him like that,” Steve tells him and Bucky rolls his eyes.

“You can shut up too, I don’t see why this matters to either one of you.”


Bucky glares at him. “Where the hell are you even getting this?”

Sam grins, clearly happy Bucky asked and fuck sake, he’s opened a can of worms. “If it went badly you wouldn’t have missed an opportunity to rub it in Steve’s face so my guess is that it didn’t. Given that you didn’t decide a neutral experience that still put you off still isn’t a reason to rub that you were right the whole time in Steve’s face I’m guessing whoever you met wasn’t what you expected and you won’t fess up because you don’t like that you were wrong and now you’re conflicted,” Sam says, self satisfied.

There’s a lot of days Bucky thinks murder should be illegal. This is not one of them. Especially since Steve immediately knows he’s right thanks to that pesky knowing Bucky entirely way too well. “Told you it would be fine!” Steve says and Bucky debates on slapping him too.

“It wasn’t fine, Steve the guy lives a fucking dystopian life and has made peace with it because
that dystopia is less shit than what’s outside that damn house. What the fuck am I supposed to do with that?” he asks. What’s anyone supposed to do with that? It’s no way to start a relationship and Bucky refuses to try. If he wants a relationship he’ll go make one with someone who’s on more equal footing with him.

“I think you should go for it,” Sam tells him and Bucky gets the feeling that Steve’s look of surprise mirrors his own.

“Really?” Steve asks, shocked that Sam would encourage Bucky to do much of anything. Frankly Bucky’s surprised too.

“Hell yeah, I want to see him get rejected!” Sam says excitedly and Bucky’s surprise disappears.

“Sam, don’t be rude,” Steve tells him.

“Just saying anyone with standards would want nothing to do with him,” Sam says, inspecting his nails like they’re suddenly fascinating. They aren’t, and they aren’t even a good shape.

“Are you saying I have no standards?” Steve asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Explains why you’re with Sam,” Bucky says before Sam can get a word in edgewise.

“Only because being around your stupid ass wore him down,” Sam counters.

“Please, you were a moment of weakness Steve kept around because he’d feel bad for ditching you. He’s done it before.” Steve’s never been good at dumping people and this is all this is- Steve not wanting to hurt Sam’s two and a half feelings. Assuming he has that many.

“Would the two of you stop that? Why can’t you just sit in a room and get along for five damn minutes?” Steve asks, irritated.

“Because Sam gives me hives,” Bucky mumbles.

Steve throws a hand up, “he does not give you hives, Bucky!”

“If the bubonic plague had a humansona it’d be Bucky,” Sam says and Bucky flips him off.

“Oh for fuck-” Steve cuts himself off. “Can you two behave for a moment?” he asks.

“No,” Bucky and Sam say in sync, giving each other dirty looks for speaking in tandem accidentally.

For a moment it looks like Steve might try and harass him anyway but he eventually deflates. “Sam, you wanted to go to the farmer’s market, right?” he asks and Bucky snorts.

“That’s what your life is now? Farmer’s markets? Look man, that’s not for me. I’m happier single than I am picking out tomatoes from some random old man who may or may not be checking me out,” he says, shaking his head. Steve looks like he might argue that too but thankfully Sam saves him, kind of.

“Yeah, well unlike some people we don’t shamefully eat TV dinners in our beds and jerk off to the feeling of an empty room,” Sam tells him.

“I jerk to porn Sam, the fuck,” he mumbles.

Steve wrinkles his nose, “I’m not about to listen to Bucky’s porn habits Sam, lets go,” he says, prodding him towards the door. “Bucky, I’ll talk to you later.”
Bucky waves him off; happy to have Sam removed from his home so he can get it exorcised. As soon as they’re gone Bucky goes over to the fridge and he doesn’t really want to admit it but the first thing he grabs is left over macaroni from the night before. The good news is that no one but him has to know about his bad eating habits.

He does give himself a moment to consider Tony though, his opinions on Bucky’s eating habits. But something tells him Tony would probably eat just as bad as he does assuming he doesn’t already. Probably not though, Bucky doubts they’re allowed to have bad diets in his… well, it sure as hell isn’t a home but Bucky’s got nothing better to call it. With that horrifying realization he drops all thoughts of Tony because yeah, sure, maybe they clicked. But he doesn’t want a relationship with someone who’s grown up in all that. Call him crazy but he actually cares about choice in the matter and he’s not really sure Tony gets much of any.

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Natasha paints her nails casually on their bed, “Batman is awful I refuse,” she says.

“I agree, Batman is awful,” Nebula adds from the floor. Poor thing has been saddled with extra work because she hates cooking more than most. Tony doesn’t know how an essay on food safety is supposed to make her like it more but whatever. He doesn’t make the rules, he just breaks them.

“You two hate fun,” Tony mumbles at them. Sure Batman isn’t his favorite, but what else is good that’s in theaters? Some stupid spy movie that looks so dumb even Tony thinks looks ridiculous and Tony will admit he has no standards for movie watching so to actively make him disinterested is difficult. Then there’s some god awful Disney thing and Tony’s seen too many Disney movies with hapless omegas to give a shit about them anymore. There’s three whole horror movies, which obviously interested Natasha but Tony’s normal okay, he doesn’t like being scared like some type of freak. He watched Nightmare on Elm Street as a child and that was it for him. So that leaves Batman and Tony likes comics alright, might as well. Better than horror anyway.

“We don’t hate fun, we just think spending money on movies should result in enjoyment, not watching two hours of some traumatized alpha work out his deep-seated parental problems by adopting a fursona and beating the hell out of people. If Bruce Wayne wanted to save the world he’d fund education and omega’s rights,” Nat says and yeah okay, she’s not wrong but come on. The other options are shit.

He sighs, “but I heard there’s a Wonder Woman cameo and you guys know how I feel about Diana Prince,” he says.

Nebula frowns, “I don’t know how you feel about Diana Prince.”

“She’s my wife and I love her,” Tony says with maybe too much enthusiasm because it freaks Nebula out. She side eyes him for a moment before glancing back at her essay. She must decide it’s not worth it because she abandons it again.

“Hmm. I assumed you had a preference for alphas,” she says and Tony wrinkles his nose.

“I don’t discriminate. Well, actually I do have a preference for alphas but fuck, at what cost? Proof sexuality isn’t a choice,” he says, shaking his head. He might not care about ABO score but alphas do smell the most appealing even if everything else about them proves that they’re the actual worst.

Natasha’s in the same boat, prefers alphas but they suck. Nebula considers, then shrugs. “I would like alphas more if they weren’t you know. Like that,” she says.
“Wonder Woman isn’t worth Bruce Wayne’s mommy issues,” Natasha says. “We should go to a bar.”

“We’re not going to a bar,” Tony says, giving her a look.

She rolls her eyes. “Control yourself for a couple damn hours while I clean everyone out playing pool,” she tells him. “Spending money,” she reasons.

“Sell the jewelry you get, that’ll give you a whole hell of a lot more spending money,” he points out.

“And none of the satisfaction. A couple hours and then we can do something you want to do,” she says. “But no Batman.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Next time I’m making the plans. Nebula, mind if we come through later?” he asks.

She shrugs, “at this point no one else even knocks anymore so whatever. Come back at a stupid time in the morning and I’ll end you,” she tells them.

“Is three okay?” Natasha asks, snickering and ducking when Nebula throws a book on food safety at her. “Fine, you make a persuasive argument- four thirty it is!”

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Who goes to a bar and doesn’t drink? Tony he guesses but at least he’s found a corner dark enough that no one has noticed him. Wouldn’t necessarily matter given that he currently smells like beta but some people don’t much care, or they decide he’s pretty enough that they’ll deal. So far he’s had good luck while Natasha is trying to fend off people hitting on her regardless of scent while she wins pool games. Tony’s not sure when she acquired that talent but he’s impressed with it regardless.

He lets her have her fun while he sits in the corner with water watching the crowd with not much interest. This is more Nat’s thing and even if he hadn’t decided maybe alcohol isn’t for him this isn’t the scene he’d prefer anyway. He’s more of a club person- fast lights, good dance beats even if the music itself is shit, and a lot of people and drugs. This is calmer then anything he’d normally seek out but this is more for Nat’s benefit than his anyway plus he long ago proved he shouldn’t be in club spaces.

Nat is good too, exceptionally so and he can see the confusion and frustration on the faces of her opponents. Tony doesn’t know how she makes those shots either and he doesn’t know where she learned. They got to the house at the same time so he knows there’s no time for her to have picked up the game there and that’s not the kind of thing they’re allowed to do anyway. Anything too close to gambling is banned so they stuck with shit like Bingo and boggle. Old people games, at least to him. He’s sure the older people have a great time and all the power to them but that’s not really the kind of game he finds any fun. Games of numbers and chance? Definitely more his speed even if gambling is banned. But he learned cards before he got to the house and counting them comes easy to him. Maybe Nat perfected pool as a kid, he doesn’t know. Must have because she’s been freakishly good at it since he started sneaking out with her at fifteen.

He’s almost too engrossed in trying to figure out how the hell Nat is making those shots that he just about misses someone new walking into the bar. He might have missed him anyway given the number of people milling about if Tony didn’t happen to feel someone’s gaze on him. It’s a slightly uneasy feeling, a prickle at the back of the neck that has him looking over and low and behold of all the people he could have found looking back its Bucky. For a split second he gets a choice in whether or not he wants to react- if he doesn’t Bucky may very well chalk his presence up to a weird
look alike. He considers it, but dismisses it eventually in favor of lifting his hand a little and wiggling his fingers in a hello. He grins when Bucky looks even more baffled.

The bar tender leans into the space in front of him, occupying this attention and its clear they know each other from the way they talk. It’s easy, familiar, and the bar tender also picks up on Bucky’s distraction easily, giving Tony a half a glance before he grins and clearly encourages a mortified Bucky to walk over. A good twenty seconds tells Tony he’s not going to move so he looks over to Nat, who’s noticed him noticing Bucky and still hasn’t managed to break her game. So she knows where he’s gone, great. That makes this easier.

He picks himself up and walks over to Bucky, who goes from looking mortified at his friend in the corner of the bar giving him kissy faces to confused presumably because Tony doesn’t smell like himself. “Please ignore Morita I don’t know him,” Bucky says.

Tony grins, “well if you don’t know him how come you know his last name?” he asks. Bucky’s cheeks turn adorably pink at that and Tony grins wider. “Didn’t expect to see you here,” he adds.

Bucky seems to appreciate the shift in conversation. “Didn’t expect to see me here, you’re supposed to be legally kidnapped,” he points out and Tony throws his head back and laughs.

“I mean yeah, but you can’t exactly stop people from sneaking out,” he points out.

“Uh, security systems,” Bucky says, raising an eyebrow.

Tony snorts, “child’s play, hacked the system forever ago. Automatically replaces any footage of people sneaking out with loops of nothing happening. Saves a whole lot of trouble.”

“Something tells me that causes a lot of trouble. Do people do that often?” he asks.

Tony gives him a look. “Do teenagers and young adults under way too strict of supervision regularly find ways to do what they want? Hell yeah, Bucky. Sneaking out’s the first thing most kids learn to do when they get to whatever house they’re in. Teens will be teens regardless of where they are.” Or at least that’s his experience, but he’s seen his fair share of cycled in and out omegas. Sometimes they get shipped off to other houses pretty much because they expect too much autonomy. Tony got good enough at skirting rules and manipulating footage before he fell under too much risk of getting the boot. By the time he kept getting dragged into various offices he had already made friends with Nat so he needed to figure out how to stick around stat. Hence all the precautions he has to avoid getting busted for shit. And if it benefits everyone else too, great.

“So what are you out doing? Not drinking,” Bucky says, nodding at the glass in his hand. “Seems counterintuitive at a bar.”

He shrugs, “learned I probably shouldn’t drink the hard way. I’m with a friend, actually,” he nods to Nat, who’s still watching them closely. Someone who doesn’t know her wouldn’t have guessed that though so when Bucky clearly picks up on her surveillance he’s surprised.

“She’s a suspicious one,” Bucky says. “But I guess all omegas kind of are. You tend to move in groups.”

Tony snorts, “we learned moving alone doesn’t get you anything good, so yeah. Also in my experience we tend to have deeper friendships than alphas at least. I swear you guys only tolerate each other’s presences.”

“We do. What? I have a friend, Steve, people think our relationship is weird pretty much because we like each other. Personally I think they’re the ones that are suffering but whatever,” he mumbles,
almost too quite to hear under the music.

“Same friend who encouraged you to go find yourself an omega, I presume?” Tony asks, getting a nod of affirmation. “Well, didn’t seem to go well for you,” he says.

It’s more of a tester than anything because Tony’s curious to see if Bucky actually liked him any or if he’s just that good at making conversation. He doesn’t think he is but its not like Bucky did anything about any interest he had so maybe he hadn’t felt the spark Tony had. Or at least that’s what Tony would have thought if not for the way Bucky looked at him.

“No, went fine minus the fact that we’re living in a fucking dystopia,” he says.

“Sometimes shitty circumstances can still result in something decent. Once had a heinous three hour conversation with a woman who decided to send me an entirely new wardrobe as a present. She was nuts and had some bizarre ideas about omegas but I will give her credit where its due, she has good taste in fashion,” he says. Obviously he turned the offer down but he did get some great pieces out of that ordeal so it was almost worth his suffering.

Bucky considers that for a moment and starts laughing. “What kind of courting gift is that?” he asks.

“The kind of expensive thing that grabs a person’s attention,” Tony says.

“Didn’t work on you,” Bucky says, “so clearly it didn’t do its job.”

Oh it did its job fine, his attention was grabbed but for all the wrong reasons. Sure the gift was nice, but it’s not the kind of thing that tells Tony that his suitor actually paid attention to anything he said or did. A gift that could go to anyone isn’t really that great of a gift, in his opinion.

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God, Tony’s easy to talk to and Bucky wishes he weren’t. That’d make things easy but no, nothing in his life ever fucking goes right for longer than five damn minutes so now he’s talking to someone who’s just… great. Tony’s smart, so smart, and passionate, and on a rant about why he thinks Wonder Woman is clearly the best member of the Justice League and honestly Bucky’s partial to Batman but he’s prepared to agree with Tony because he obviously knows more about the characters than Bucky does.

“I kind of like Batman,” Bucky confesses and Tony makes a noise of offense.

“Of all the characters you chose you have to chose the fury? And here I thought I liked you,” Tony says, nose in the air.

Bucky shakes his head, “oh, you do not get to make fun of me when I could have said Aquaman. That’s worse, admit it,” Bucky says.

Tony looks like he’s going to admit no such thing but he eventually sighs. “Okay, I’ll give you that. But Flash is the second best so you still aren’t even in the top two,” Tony tells him, nose in the air.

“Flash is my second favorite so there’s that,” Bucky says, smiling.

Tony looks even more offended, “where is Wonder Woman! She’s clearly the best and this is slander!” he says, hand pressed to his heart in mock offense.

“She’s third so relax about it. I’ll be honest though, I’ll take Aquaman over Clark fucking Kent. Dude’s boring, I don’t see why Steve likes him so much.” That’s his favorite character of all time
and it’s the one thing he and Sam agree on- Clark Kent isn’t that great. Except Sam likes the character well enough and the appeal is completely lost on Bucky. But Sam’s a freak with no taste so it makes sense that they only half agree. Who the hell is as all powerful as him and turns out apple pie sweet with no damn personality flaws? Scratch that, who turns out like that period?

“Yeah, can’t say I get the appeal of the world’s first and most well loved Misha Sue. Seriously, if I had his powers first thing I’d do is villain shit,” Tony says and Bucky starts laughing.

“Yeah, not gunna lie I’d probably do the same,” Bucky says. Steve would be offended but it’s not Bucky’s fault he’s the only person on this planet who would probably not immediately blow up public property just to test his powers. Bucky figures the world will survive with less paid parking if he blew up a couple of those meters. “Also if I could fly in space I’d just fuck off and live on the moon, like why not? Seems like a good time to me,” he says. Only the occasional astronaut dropping in and there’s a whole moon to avoid them on so great, that’s barely even a concern.

Tony hums, “I’ll give Superman his fortress of solitude- that’s the most angsty name known to man but I would also fuck off from humanity for awhile.”

He leans into Bucky and he’s pretty sure its unconscious. Its not the first time he’s done it but it’s the first time he hasn’t swayed away after a few moments of contact and why’s he got to do that too? Bucky doesn’t need more mental dilemmas in his life, he’s got enough at work and also Steve gives him more than enough stress acting like a dumbass. He should maybe focus his energy on saving Steve’s stupid ass from his own bad decisions instead of the way Tony’s leaning into him like he belongs there.

He opens his mouth to respond and he doesn’t even know what he’s going to say because he’s kind of lost the ability to think and that’s ridiculous when Natasha interrupts. “Yeah, hate to ruin your fun but I think I’ve overrun my limits and I’m not looking to get into a bar fight. I mean I’d win, but I don’t want to put in the effort,” she says casually except Bucky knows she has some kind of training. She’s rusty on it sure, that’d happen if you only used your skills for a couple hours at a time over six or so years, but that doesn’t explain how an actual child would know how to survey things the way she does. She’d have to have had her skill set before showing up at that omega house but that honestly creates more questions than answers.

Tony sighs, pulling himself away and Bucky kind of wants to pull him back but he doesn’t. “Nat, why can’t you just steal people’s money without pissing them off,” he mumbles.

“Taking their money does piss them off and I can’t help it if I’m better at pool,” she says. Too good at it, Bucky doesn’t even know how she made those shots and he’s pretty good at pool.

“Fine. Can we watch Batman now?” Tony asks, disgruntled.

“Oh so now Batman’s good enough?” Bucky teases and Tony rolls his eyes at him fondly.

“Only because I hear there’s a Wonder Woman cameo,” he says and Bucky laughs.

“You’d watch a two hour movie for a five minute scene?” Tony shrugs and Bucky shakes his head. “That’s dedication.”

“Yeah, great, Tony loves Wonder Woman lets go before I end up having to punch some people,” Natasha says, glancing over her shoulder.

Tony sighs, “I guess,” he says in a fake put upon way, “see you later, Bucky,” he adds, grinning at him as he lets Natasha drag him off into the crowd.
Alright, Bucky generally doesn’t have a problem with being pathetic because sometimes eating hot pockets with the microwave door open is a valid life choice. But this is a new low and he knows he shouldn’t but Tony’s scent, his *actual* scent, not whatever the hell he was wearing that made him smell more like a beta then an omega, rubbed off on his sweater and it smells *nice*. He stares at it for a long moment and he *shouldn’t*, he knows he shouldn’t.

He drops the sweater on his pillow and stares at it for a few seconds more before he drops his face onto it and inhales. So he’s pathetic, he might as well dive headfirst- literally- into it.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Oh hey, a chapter that's not 5 years long!

Bucky’s eating eggs directly out of the pan when someone knocks on the door. He gives his sad meal a once over and sighs, dropping the pan on the counter and walking over to deal with Steve, probably. Most likely back to harass him about Tony even though he knows nothing of him so he’s more than a little surprised to find Morita behind the door. “Hey Barnes, didn’t know you were into betas but you’re an idiot for not getting that guy’s number,” he says and Bucky blinks for a moment, confused.

“Uh. Hi?” he asks more than states as Morita walks in, making himself at home in Bucky’s space.

“Well, spill it Barnes, what’s the deal with the beta?”

First things first he isn’t a beta but Bucky’s not about to tell him that. “Nothing much,” he says honestly.

“Why the fuck not? You two have more chemistry than that time I was an idiot and decided Falsworth was a good chemistry partner and he blew all that shit up. You aren’t normally shy so what’s going on?” Morita looks suspicious and Bucky forgot how observant he was because yeah, Bucky’s not usually all that shy. He’s good looking and he knows it, he doesn’t typically have trouble picking people up but he’s also exhausted with that at this point in his life.

“Yeah, I’m looking for a relationship, not a hookup,” he says and Morita laughs.

“The great Bucky Barnes wants to settle down? Never thought I’d see that,” he says like they didn’t all see that coming.

He rolls his eyes, “did so. Why are you here harassing me anyway? Did Steve send you?” Because it does seem like the kind of thing he’d do given that he knows dispatching Sam will only result in the two of them antagonizing each other until they get bored.

Morita frowns, “no, I came on my own because your life is sad and you’re eating eggs directly out of a pan,” he says, gesturing to the remains of his meal on the counter. Like he gets to judge, he lives in a bar and Bucky knows he sometimes sleeps on the floor. Pan eggs are less sad than that. Or they would be if Morita had any shame but he doesn’t so Bucky’s pretty sure he’s still on the losing end of this battle. “I get bars aren’t a great place to find love but shit, go speed dating or something. Your life is depressing to look at and I’m not exactly looking in all that often.”

That’s rude, Bucky thinks, because his life is fine mostly. “Why does everyone think a relationship will solve my problems? Relationships create problems, they don’t solve them.”

Morita rolls his eyes, “fine, get a roommate then. Clearly you need someone around to judge your life choices. There’s like six Hot Pocket boxes in your recycling, do they even have nutritional value? Trust me, roommates are a great way to shame yourself into eating a vegetable once and awhile. And cleaning the bathroom. Do I even want to know what it looks like in there?” he asks.
Bucky frowns, “bathroom’s fine, Morita. I know how to clean and I don’t need to be shamed into eating a vegetable, I just go to Steve’s if I want actual food.” Helps that the poor bastard can’t eat like shit. His whole body seems to reject junk food vehemently and he’s missing out, but it does mean Bucky doesn’t need to cook things on his own. The downside is Sam so Bucky mostly only shows up if he’s desperate and sometimes even then he avoids Steve’s for awhile. But eventually the need for a veggie wins out and when it does there’s Steve’s cooking. The Hot Pockets are fine.

“Buddy. If I look in that fridge will I even find food or does it just have like… a container of butter and a bottle of ketchup?” Bucky doesn’t dignify that with a response because there’s also mustard in there and he doesn’t know why because he doesn’t even like mustard. “You need some kind of reason to get your shit together, man. Get a plant if that helps but you are living the life I wanted when I was fifteen and that’s not a compliment.”

Yeah he’s pretty sure he didn’t need to be told that living like a teenager when he’s a grown damn man is insulting but okay. “I’ve killed every plant I’ve ever owned.”

“Get a cactus, those are impossible to kill,” Morita tells him. “Amateur,” he mumbles.

“Yeah, I’ve killed those too.” Three of them and Steve didn’t look more baffled than Morita and Bucky didn’t want to find out Steve held back on that this way.

“You’re literally less nurturing than a desert. Get therapy and buy a damn veggie. And use bowls,” he says, gesturing to Bucky’s food.

“A pan is a bowl, saves time on dishes,” he reasons.

“It’s sad and no one looking for a relationship wants to date an alpha that lives worse than a rat. You want to settle down get a grip on yourself, buy a palm tree,” Morita tells him.

Bucky frowns, “wouldn’t that need a lot of work?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never had a palm tree. Go get one and find out.”

* 

A relationship sure shit isn’t going to solve his problems, of which there are many and probably even more he hasn’t chosen to acknowledge yet, but he does genuinely like Tony. Probably more than he should but Morita is right, there’s something there and for the first time in a long time Bucky actually wants to do something. He figures maybe romance isn’t a cure all for anything but it’s probably not a bad plan to pursue the first thing in a long time that’s made him want to put some effort in.

Maybe it’s been too long since Bucky has just sort of… let life happen to him and yeah he’s pretty sure this’ll end in disaster but it’s a start on something. The rest of his life? Probably needs more work than he’s able to give right now so he figures this pretty meaningless thing, picking out some type of courting gift or whatever the fuck, is a pretty easy way to take action in his life in some kind of way. Low risk too, worst that can happen is that he never sees Tony again and yeah that might suck but there’s no real sting to it because he’s not properly invested enough to care if this doesn’t pan out.

The problem is that he has no fucking clue what the hell to get someone for a courtship gift and it’s not like he knows Tony all that well. Plus he’s not a fucking idiot; he saw the rest of the people at that party, omega ball, whatever the fuck it’s called. He sure shit can’t keep up with that but he wonders if he has to. Tony hasn’t shown any real interest in the material outside of whatever direct benefit it has to him and he wasn’t wearing jewelry. Clearly he doesn’t like it much because Bucky
doesn’t need to know Tony well to know he doesn’t do anything that won’t benefit him in some way. If he wanted to wear jewelry Bucky’s sure he’s gotten plenty.

So that’s out, but that doesn’t really lead him in much of a direction either because ‘not jewelry’ leaves a whole hell of a lot to the imagination. He doesn’t really want to send flowers either, they die and he doesn’t know what kind Tony likes anyway. If he likes them. He could send some stupid shit like chocolates but so far everything he’s listed could be sent to anyone and the fuck is the point of a gift if it can be sent to anyone? Ideally it’d be something personal, or something related to their relationship not that they have one so that’s kind of out already too so okay. Its not exactly like they’ve spent a huge amount of time with each other though, not enough to know what kind of shit Tony likes but then he realizes that’s not exactly true.

Fuck, his idea is stupid but at least there’s a personal touch to it and it can’t be the worst gift Tony has ever gotten. That, he figures, is probably like… shit, he doesn’t know, but he’s sure that his gift idea probably don’t crack the top three worst gifts Tony’s ever gotten so fuck it.

* 

Tony likes Nat, really, but days like this he questions himself and his life choices because she’s changed his music to some bullshit boy band again and it’s actually on the approved list of artists. Obviously none of the shit Tony prefers is and he thinks its stupid that some dumbass assumes that if he listens to AC/DC he’s going to reenact ‘you shook me all night long’ or something. And if he does its not because he listened to a three minute song, that’s ridiculous.

He reaches out and changes the music again, earning a dirty look from her before she reaches out and changes it back. “Natasha, if I have to listen to another fucking second of this shitty boy band drivel I will die,” he tells her.

“Then buy a casket,” she tells him and oh fuck off, that’s rude!

“What’s wrong with my music?” he asks her.

She wrinkles her nose and he knows whatever she’s going to say will make him want to die but he hopes he’s wrong. “This stuff sounds way better than your shitty old bands except that one guy played by Rami Malek,” she says.

Holy fuck he doesn’t even know where to start with that mess. “Freddy Mercury,” he tells her. “The guy is Freddy Mercury and he’s one of the most talented singers of all time and you called him the guy played by Rami Malek?” The fact that she thinks boy bands sound good is an insult, the fact that she thinks they sound better than his music is a slap in the face, and the fact that she apparently doesn’t know who Freddy fucking Mercury is outside the guy who played him in his biopic is the most offensive shit he’s ever heard.

Natasha smiles, “I love how easy you are to work up. I know who fucking Freddy Mercury is, Tony. I’m not an idiot. Boy bands still sound better than your eighties garbage,” she tells him.

Yeah, he might need new friends. Its bad enough that everyone else in this house is younger than him, making a fulfilling friendship basically impossible on account of teens are smart and all that, but he’s in a different place in life then them. But then, then, Natasha has to come in here and insult him by claiming boy bands, a category of bands that is inexplicable and shouldn’t exist, are better than eighties rock. Nothing is better than eighties rock, including the fucking Beatles. Music freaks can eat his ass they weren’t even that good.

He pulls himself out of their bed and Natasha gives him an offended look. “Oh my god your music is
not so good that you have to actually get offended about it,” she tells him.

“I can’t tell a single member of One Direction apart,” he hisses at her and she gasps.

“Not even Zayn?” she asks.

He will never admit to another living soul he actually knows who she’s referring to because yeah, that’s the one he knows from the rest because Natasha went on too many rants about the time he left the band. “Nope,” he lies, walking away to let Natasha stew in her own filth. Fucking boy bands, he doesn’t even understand how that came to be a brand of bands. He hates them though, they sound too similar and they all look the same. Doesn’t even matter the band, he can’t fucking tell them apart.

As he passes Nebula’s room she gives him an odd look while she opens the door. “What crawled up your ass and died this morning?” she asks and does he actually look that pissed off?

“Natasha claims that boy bands are better than eighties music,” he tells her and Nebula wrinkles her nose.

“Kill her,” she says with such a straight face that Tony bursts out laughing.

“Yeah, I’ll keep that on the back burner,” he tells her as he makes his way downstairs. Might as well check the mail, he’s sure he’s got a bunch of it from alphas who want his face but not his personality. Nat probably has at least one weirdo interested in her too, someone who either chose to overlook her odd interests or someone who’s probably a panty sniffer. She really doesn’t attract anything decent.

He finds a bunch of other people in the mail room too and he’s kind of surprised none of the younger ones look impressed. Usually there’s at least one who thinks they’re special because they’ve caught someone’s attention but this batch seems less enthused than a lot of others that have come before them. Good for them. He pulls open the door that corresponds with his and Nat’s room and he’s not really surprised to find a bunch of stuff in it. He sighs and pulls it all out, identifying more than half of it as jewelry before he makes his way back upstairs with it.

Natasha is still on their bed shamelessly listening to the shittiest music known to man so he throws a box with her name on it at her head. She catches it long before it gets there but it still makes him feel better. “Jewelry,” she says as soon as she catches it.

Tony nods, “probably. I’ll bet this probable Rolex that that’s either a necklace or a bracelet,” he tells her, lifting one of his own boxes. He hates watches, finds them tacky and utterly useless. He’d prefer a phone but he’s not allowed to have one. God damn rules.

“Necklace or bracelet, you can’t have two,” she tells him

He rolls his eyes at her, “fine, necklace. Dainty,” he says. Box is long enough for it, though it could be a bracelet laid out flat.

Nat shrugs and pulls it open. “Necklace, dainty,” she says, pulling a thin silver chain from the box. “Want it?”

“Why the hell would I want an ugly little silver chain?” he asks.

“Why the hell would I want it? Do I look like I like dainty jewelry?” she asks.

No, she doesn’t. She doesn’t wear jewelry at all not that anyone who comes through here every notices what they do or don’t do. “Since when to I wear watches?” he asks, tossing the box to her. She catches it and he’s not surprised when she pulls out a watch. He even got the Rolex thing right.
These people are stupidly predictable.

The rest of the stuff is his so he pulls it all apart, finding mostly jewelry and one suit jacket he actually likes quite a bit though he’s certain the deep red is a coincidence. He doesn’t even recognize the name attached to it though and he figures good gift or not if the name doesn’t ring a bell you’re out. His last gift is wrapped in brown paper, which doesn’t much help its ability to blend in with the rest of the fancy jewelry packages but Tony finds charm in that. Ugly color choice but whatever, he’s not going to complain about originality even if its likely to only come in the form of paper. He figures there’s some kind of shit thing inside that he’ll hate so he’s surprised that when he pulls the paper off the colors underneath look familiar.

He’s shocked more than anything and no, that can’t be right there’s no way- but when Tony pulls the paper off there is, in fact, a Wonder Woman book in his hand. Not a comic, which he finds weird until he reads the title and finds it’s a book on the history of the character, and huh. That’s a weirdly specific lucky guess.

Natasha looks up from swinging her ugly little necklace around to entertain herself and frowns. “Who the hell got you that?” she asks, as surprised as he is.

Tony looks over the paper and finds nothing, no note and no name. Well that’s disappointing. He shrugs, “don’t know,” he tells her, cracking the book open to look at it and oh, turns out the note was inside.

_I have no idea what I’m doing-_ B

“Scratch that, it was Bucky,” he tells Nat and then smiles. It grows wider as he abandons the rest of the gifts and crawls into bed with the book because he’s curious. Sure he knows plenty about comics but he doesn’t know the history behind the character so he figures this’ll be fun, interesting.

* 

She might be more offended that she’s been ditched for a book if not for the fact that Tony’s gift is actually interesting. Natasha hasn’t gotten anything that indicates that people have paid any attention to what she’s said to them so its nice that Tony has, she guesses. She wants to be happy for him, or happier for him, but she can’t get past that gnawing feeling that she’s going to be abandoned soon and for some asshole named Bucky no less.

And its worse because Tony looks so happy curled up with his book and she knows how much he loves Wonder Woman. No idea why on account of she thinks comics are boring but whatever. It’s Tony that needs to like the book, not her, and he’s clearly in love. She feels bad for hoping he finds out some heinous face that makes him put the thing down and never pick it back up again but she doesn’t want to be stuck here alone. She thinks she’s more comfortable in this house than Tony but Tony doesn’t really do well with rules and authority figures and that’s all life is here. She knows he’s cooped up like a bird in a too small cage but she’s selfish okay- misery loves company or however the hell that saying goes.

And its worse because Tony looks so happy curled up with his book and she knows how much he loves Wonder Woman. No idea why on account of she thinks comics are boring but whatever. It’s Tony that needs to like the book, not her, and he’s clearly in love. She feels bad for hoping he finds out some heinous face that makes him put the thing down and never pick it back up again but she doesn’t want to be stuck here alone. She thinks she’s more comfortable in this house than Tony but Tony doesn’t really do well with rules and authority figures and that’s all life is here. She knows he’s cooped up like a bird in a too small cage but she’s selfish okay- misery loves company or however the hell that saying goes.

She wonders if Tony would feel the same about her if she got a gift she actually liked. She doubts it because Tony, for all his brash personality and asshole tactics, is actually a genuinely nice person. Natasha’s fine with admitting that she isn’t, never has been and probably never will be. Its rare she even finds a person she finds tolerable let alone one she likes. Tony happens to be that rare person she genuinely enjoys being around or maybe he’s the rare kind of person who didn’t immediately judge her based on looks alone.

Curse of her life, being as beautiful as she is. She knows she could open a lot of doors for herself
with a face as pretty as hers but that mostly only pisses her off. First of all she finds judging people harsher based on being less attractive is total bullshit, but being judged on her beauty doesn’t even mean people see her. What they see is the package she comes in and what’s underneath never seems worth it to people. Sure, she’s beautiful but she’s also gruesome and harsh and a bunch of other things pretty omegas aren’t. That often leaves her in the dust and she doesn’t mind, not exactly, it’s just that she wishes people would at least consider the possibility that she has a personality under her pretty face.

Sometimes she thinks her lack of desirability should bother her more, like it does Tony even if he doesn’t admit it. But she knows it irks him when people don’t seem to pick up on the hints that he drops, or don’t seem to accept that he’s smart- more than likely smarter than them. That doesn’t bug her much at all though, that people don’t want to date her. Seems like a lot of worthless effort on her behalf anyway- its just that people assume things about her based on appearances that gets her. She figures she might get a decent conversation or two out of a person every once and while if they weren’t so set on assuming things about her based on their ideas of beauty.

It’s a stupid thing to concern herself with though so she turns her attention back to Tony not that he notices. She sighs to herself softly and she knows she’s a bad person for hoping Bucky botches this whole thing but that’s where she sits on the matter.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

In which I guess these chapters are meant to be MONSTER long (sorry!), Natasha's aromanticism becomes straight up obvious, and Tony and Bucky go on a date!

Tony’s pretty sure he’s surprised at least a few people and he’s not really sure why. Well okay he is, he’s got a reputation for being overly picky but he’s not. He just wants someone to put thought into it when they send a fucking gift. Half the time people trade trinkets they receive based on who likes the damn things more and if you can give the gift to anyone what’s the point? The whole thing with courtship gifts is to demonstrate an interest but its like alphas have a stock of gifts to send off to whomever with no thought in it at all its sad. If you want to show you’re interested send something that person would like, not something all omegas like according to stereotypes. He’s not even sure he’s met an omega that likes jewelry.

So yeah, he doesn’t think its surprising that he decided to take Bucky up on his offer but everyone else seems to think the world has shifted minus Natasha, who isn’t much shocked.

“I thought you’d live here forever,” Harley says and Tony flips him off. He doesn’t care if Harley’s a child, he’s also a prick and he should know it.

“I’m not that much of a hassle,” he says in his own defense and Peter squints a little.

“Eh,” he says, obviously siding with Harley and oh that’s fucking rude.

“You know what, when you two get stuck dealing with even shittier gifts you can talk,” he tells them. Right now they get passing attempts, nothing terribly in depth given their age but once they hit eighteen, well.

“I’m gunna be honest, I’d be sold with some good memes and a hot pocket,” Harley says, high fiveing Peter, who apparently would marry someone over memes and Hot Pockets.

Tony stares at them for a long second and usually he doesn’t feel the age difference too much talking to them, teens are smart these days, but holy hell then there’s moments like these. “Yeah, I love you guys but I need to go talk to adults,” he says, shaking his head and leaving the room. He ignores the loud insisting protest that they’re adults because ha, no. They certainly are not. Hot Pockets and memes, he can’t believe that’s the bar but what’s worse is that not one alpha would pass that low, low bar.

He makes his way up to his and Nat’s room and he must look some confused because she raises an eyebrow. “What, get another Louis Vuitton condom?” she asks and oh fuck, he forgot about that.

“No. I discovered that teens these days would sell into marriage for memes and Hot Pockets,” he tells her.

She considers that for a second and nods. “Yeah, I could be persuaded if the memes were good,” she says and Tony lets out a long sigh.

“I came up here to get adults, not slightly older child,” he tells her.
She rolls her eyes at him, “you say this like you didn’t sell off a bunch of jewelry to fund your secret door project. Yeah, I know about that,” she says but it wasn’t even a secret he literally told her about it.

“A secret room is cool, memes aren’t even a standard,” he tells her.

“It is when not a single alpha who’s ever inquired about anyone in this place could pass that test. Which is the most depressing news I’ve gotten all week,” she says, slumping a little. Yeah, no shit.

“You know what, that Louis Vuitton condom was a better choice of conversation. Shockingly less depressing,” he says.

“Who the hell was that again?” Nat asks. “He had a stupid name, I remember that much.”

“Justin Hammer,” he says. “And he also sent a solid gold goose statue. I have no idea why he thought I would like a statue of a goose but okay.”

“You look like you could be a goose person,” Nat tells him, head tilted to the side.

He squints, “who the fuck is a goose person?” Geese are the worst- they have creepy beady eyes and they attack people. He’s pretty sure that bird people don’t even like geese and they’re already freaks for liking birds so he feels like that’s extra important.

“ Probably your creepy serial killer looking boyfriend,” Natasha says and Tony rolls his eyes.

“Bucky doesn’t like geese,” he says.

“You don’t know that, you haven’t asked,” she points out.

“ No one likes geese, Nat. And I don’t see what you’ve got against Bucky, he’s fine. Better than anyone else that’s shown up,” he points out.

Natasha rolls her eyes, “Tony we literally just established that alphas who show up here are so god damn bad at wooing us they can’t even pass the ‘memes and Hot Pockets’ bar we’ve set and the bar is underground. That is not a point in Binky’s favor.”

“Bucky,” he corrects.

“Whatever, I’m just saying selling out to Blinky because he’s the first idiot to have sent you something you actually like is a bad plan,” she says, “at least find a couple and narrow it down.”

Tony raises an eyebrow, “in a world where alphas can’t even send anemeto catch our attention? Nat I’ll be dead before that happens.”

“That’s not so bad,” she says and Tony squints.

“I’ll be dead, Nat.”

She throws a pillow at him. “Not the dead part dumbass, the living out your days without romantic attachment part. Don’t be dramatic,” she tells him like she didn’t buy a silk robe with fur trimming just so she can walk around pretending her non-existent alpha has died and left her all their money.

“I kind of like the idea of romance,” he says, a little offended.

Natasha wrinkles her nose. “Ew. Why?”
Why? Tony stares at her for a moment, wondering if this is some weird attempt at a joke because what? Yeah, sure he’s fine without a relationship obviously but its kind of a nice idea, sharing your life with someone. Beats what he’s living in now though he’s not looking to leave this situation without something that makes it worth his time to leave. Contrary to Nat’s beliefs he didn’t decide to give Bucky a shot just because he sent something Tony liked, that’s happened before plenty of times. It’s the conversations he’s had with Bucky that make him appealing, and the way he treated Tony. The gift was a bonus, not a reason.

He figures that Bucky might have what it takes to make him consider leaving here. However much he likes living with other omegas he doesn’t want this forever and its getting a little tiring with teens hanging around. They’re great, really, and damn smart too- in ways Tony hasn’t really seen in a lot of other groups before the last couple years- but they’re still teens and he’s still not. There’s a certain point where talking to them becomes a little tedious because they aren’t in the same place in life. Will Bucky solve that problem? Realistically no, Tony doubts it. But he’s the first one Tony feels has ever had a shot and he wants to see where it goes.

“Nat, I don’t want to be here forever. And living here is easier than attempting to find a place without an alpha- this is all I’ve got as far as methods to meet people and Bucky’s fine.” He’s smart, smarter than he lets on anyway, observant, and he happens to have similar ideals as Tony and that’s impossible to come by here. Especially given the tax bracket people who come here typically belong to. He has no idea what it is with rich people and traditional ideals but fuck he wishes they would just die. Especially since anyone with a half a brain can see that omegas aren’t the stereotypes leveled at them.

Natasha wrinkles her nose at him again. “I just don’t get why you would even want a relationship. Aren’t you bored of that by now?” she asks like he’s ever been in a relationship to be bored of it.

He shakes his head. “No. I haven’t been in relationships to be bored of them. Sure I’m bored of the initial courtship practice but I haven’t actually gone anywhere past that. That’s kind of exciting. Do you not get that?” he asks because she looks right confused.

“No. Seems like a waste of time,” she says.

Tony frowns, “don’t you want someone to spend your life with?” he asks, unsure where she’s even coming from.

Natasha rolls her eyes at that though. “Sure but I don’t see why I need romance for that. I have friends, and I like being single. I don’t understand why you feel the need to put in all this effort to find someone when most of these people don’t give a shit about you or omegas more widely speaking. For what? Someone to spend time with? You already have that,” she points out.

It’s not the same, not to him, but its pretty obvious she doesn’t make much of a distinction. Not that he wants to get rid of his friends- well, friend- when he leaves. If he does. But that’s what’ll happen if he does. Can’t keep contact with people in the house and that’s a real bitch. And not something he really considered until now and he doesn’t want to lose Natasha. They’ve been friends for almost as long as they’ve been here and that’s… not a comfortable thought, never speaking to her again.

“What?” she asks, seemingly picking up on his discomfort.

He sighs, “I don’t… want to never speak to you again, when I leave.” Because he knows it’ll be a long time before Natasha choses someone, if she even bothers. Maybe she’ll jump straight to dying in the forest like she wants.

Natasha squints at him. “Tony you literally met the guy why is leaving even on your
mind? What is this, a fucking Disney movie?” she snaps.

“Why are you so pissed off?” he snaps back. Where the hell is this anger even coming from?

“Because I’m tired of watching this over and over again, people thinking throwing their whole lives as they know it away after quasi dating someone for a half a fucking second is a good plan. Why are you all so willing to throw out everything you know for a romance? And the reasons I hear— they’re so stupid. Companionship, love, someone to spend your life with— the hell do you think you have here? Does no one know what a fucking friend is these days?” she asks, rolling her eyes.

“That’s not the same,” Tony says, but he doesn’t have a very good explanation of why. But it is different, a romantic connection and a platonic one.

“Fine, maybe its not. But why is one so easy to throw out for the other when romantic partners are fleeting and usually your friends have been around a hell of a lot longer than whoever the hell showed a half an interest in you? You barely even know Bucky and you’ve already considered throwing everything you know out for him. Why?” she asks, baffled.

And he doesn’t really have an answer for that in part because she’s right but the other stuff, he doesn’t get her distaste for romance in particular. Yeah okay, he gets plenty of things from having friends but romance isn’t one of them. And he doesn’t want romance from Nat anyway, it’d be like dating his sister and that’s… gross.

“I don’t understand it either,” someone new says and he and Nat jump, turning to face the door. Nebula stands there, leaning against the doorframe looking pissed off as usual. “Don’t look at me like that, you two were the ones yelling at each other loud enough for the whole house to hear,” she points out.

Tony sighs, turning to Natasha, who shrugs. “I don’t get it, Tony. You’re in real life, not a movie. And in real life alphas kill omegas for sport more often then they don’t, not marry them and deliver them from a life of abuse. You’re more likely to be a statistic then Cinderella so I don’t get why you or anyone else is so willing to throw themselves into this shit when everything you claim you want already exists in your life.”

“Also, alphas smell,” Nebula says. “They need to learn how to use deodorant. And that covering their smell in cologne doesn’t count as a shower,” she adds.

Tony laughs a little, “yeah, they do kind of smell. The ones that show up here aren’t so bad but in the wild?” Tony wrinkles his nose.

Nat snorts, “I’m expected to smell like daisies grow out my pussy but some gross ass alpha gets to walk in here with cheese dick or snatch gunk and that’s fine because they’re alphas I guess,” she mumbles. He’s glad he’s not alone when he gags a little. Nebula looks a little green at that too but Nat shrugs unapologetically. “They might usually be fine here, but we’ve all met the exception and it doesn’t smell pretty.”

Tony nods, “they always have the highest expectations too,” he says. Which means either him or Nat are trying to get the hell away from them and shove incense up their nose all night, usually.

*

Bucky tries his best to ignore the way Steve’s prattling on about how great it is that he sent Tony a gift and its so annoying Bucky shared a moment with Sam. Sam! He’s pretty sure Sam couldn’t believe that happened either because holy shit, since when do they betray their values like that? They
think the other is the worst and Steve’s being so annoying that for a moment they forgot how much they hate each other to express a moment of shared exasperation.

And then Steve decided to go off on *that*, claiming they have something in common or some other absurd thing. Absolutely not, he and Sam have *nothing* in common. “-Just saying that if you two put effort into it you’d like each other!” Steve says excitedly.

“I’d rather die,” Sam says and Bucky would call him dramatic except he’s not, that’s just how it is.

“Don’t look at me like I don’t feel the same way,” Bucky tells him, walking over to his mail box. He’s kind of hoping for... fuck, he doesn’t even *know* how this courtship shit works but he’s hoping for something anyway. Of course when he opens the damn thing he finds like five envelopes that are more than likely bills so he rolls his eyes and pulls them out. He’s carding through them when a smaller envelope in between two bills catches his attention. Catches Sam’s too and that’s how Bucky knows its relevant.

“What’s that?” Steve asks, noticing the attention on the envelope.

“Bucky’s rejection letter!” Sam says happily, laughing when Bucky glares at him.

Steve gives him a *look*. “Sam, can you be polite for ten seconds?” he asks.

“No,” Sam tells him and shit, at least he’s honest Bucky guesses.

He considers waiting until they’re gone to deal with this but he’s kind of antsy so Sam’s insults, which are probably true, be damned he opens the envelope.

*Well congrats- you not knowing what you’re doing is already better than literally every other person who’s tried to catch my attention*

-T

Bucky grins and reads it over just to be sure it says what he thinks it does.

Sam snatches the letter out of his hand and reads it over, rolling his eyes and throwing it back at Bucky. “Someone got some real shitty suitors,” he mumbles, walking away looking unimpressed. Bucky probably shouldn’t feel an unholy amount of glee at pissing Sam off but he kind of does. Serves Sam right for being a prick.

“Wait, what’s that mean?” Steve asks, frowning at Sam’s back as he walks off.

“Means he accepted, dipshit,” Bucky tells him and Steve lets out an annoying squeal and hugs him.

Maybe he should have made Morita his best friend. Or Falsworth. Or both, they can all bond about being named James but not going by that name. Better than Steve’s overenthusiastic ass.

*In any given circumstance Tony doesn’t really *do* nervous, he’s sort of grown to know what to expect in any given circumstance but the kind where he actually ends up on a date. He’s never really gotten here on account of literally everyone who’s ever sought after his affections hasn’t done much to show they have an interest in *him*, just an interest. So he doesn’t much like the fluttery feeling in his stomach mostly due to not being familiar with it and also because its kind of making him nauseous. He considers ditching because Nat made a point earlier- statistically he’s more likely to die than anything else and sure maybe Bucky doesn’t seem the type to him at least, and he’s got a good nose*
Bucky’s appearance keeps him where he is though, partially because Bucky looks almost more nervous than he does. “Oh Christ, thank god you’re here,” Bucky says as he walks up. “I wasn’t so sure you would be.”

Tony laughs, shaking his head. “Why not?” he asks. “I did accept your offer,” he points out.

“Yeah, I don’t do so well with unknowns,” Bucky says. “Gives me anxiety. You uh, look nice though,” he says, clearly unsure how to act.

Tony snorts, “yeah, I didn’t unearth my entire closet just to look ‘okay’ so yeah, I look good.” Nat had tried to kick him out of the bathroom a half a dozen times not that it worked and it turns out he got rid of the jeans he wanted to wear but whatever. He made it work.

“He doesn’t actually look that bad, just a little confused on how to dress up. Tony’s one hundred percent seen worse and he’s not sure the worst he’s come across can be outdone. “If it makes you feel any better I once got hit on by a guy with a raccoon tail attached to the back of his pants and let me tell you that was an experience. And not the worst one I’ve had so you’re fine.”

Bucky frowns, “honestly if I managed to out do the worst experience you’ve ever had it’d probably result in a jail sentence,” he says.

“Worst experience I had was some random woman licking me on the subway and I don’t think licking people is illegal, but it is weird as fuck so jail time isn’t totally on the table yet.” He’d been sixteen and it had been within the first dozen or so times he learned to sneak out without getting busted for it and he’d stayed in for a solid two months after that, not looking to be licked again.

“Oh, ew. Actually I’ve had that happen too but I uh… usually the weird shit that happens to me doesn’t happen to anyone else so this is a first,” Bucky says.

“Heard that story before,” Tony says, shaking his head. Bucky looks kind of traumatized by that and sure, he could be lying but that’s a fair amount of coincidence and a president to put into a lie so Tony figures if weird shit happens to him he’ll witness it at some point. And that he’s going to look that up later because if nothing else he’ll catch Bucky in a lie or he’ll get a good laugh. Win win.

* 

“No seriously,” Tony says, “I figured if I was only going to be valued for my looks I might as well make a career out of it. Uh, needless to say asking what my career options are when the only skill of value people will see in me is ‘pretty’ didn’t go well. Did get a laugh from everyone else though.”

They’re sitting at a small table out of the way from people in a coffee shop and yeah, stupid date idea or so Sam has reliably informed him but Tony doesn’t seem put off by it so Sam can eat shit. “Once when I was in the tenth grade I told a teacher I felt like shit during gym and he didn’t believe me and made me run laps. Didn’t like much when I threw up on him after three laps,” he says and winces because wow, greatest story Bucky. Could have told the one where he, Morita, Steve, and Falsworth let nine goats loose in the school and labeled them one through ten, purposefully skipping over eight so
faculty thought there was an extra lose goat in the school but nope. Went with the story where he threw up. Super appealing, he’s sure.

The good news is that Tony doesn’t look put out even if he does wrinkle his nose. “Be lucky you don’t have to deal with heat flus. The only thing worse than throwing up is throwing up with an extra high fever and a desire to cuddle. But apparently flu heat periods are worse, so women win the shitty experience competition,” he says, looking quite like he feels bad for them.

Shit, so does Bucky. That’s not a combination he would have put together and it sounds horrible. “I don’t think I could handle heats,” he says honestly. The sweat alone, he smells like assweaty.

Tony laughs, “well no, with a fever that high you’d die,” he points out and Bucky shakes his head, letting out a soft snort.

“Not like- if I were an omega obviously. I’ve had nasty fevers, fuck that, but fuck that happening once a month. I’d shoot myself.”

“I’ve thought about it,” Tony says far too casually. “But mostly we figured out natural ways to cool the fever. Ginger works wonders, mix it with hot water and honey and it taste less like spicy ass. There’s about a half a dozen other things that work like natural suppressants but everyone’s different.”

Huh, Bucky wouldn’t have even thought of any of that. “So I guess you guys don’t get suppressants then,” he says, which sounds fucking terrible to him but whatever.

Tony shakes his head. “People can’t read study after study after study that proves suppressants don’t really fuck with omega’s reproductive capacities so no. They can come with nasty side effects, but so do heats so whatever. Also apparently people don’t read that heats can fuck with reproductive capacity,” he says, rolling his eyes.

Bucky frowns, “how’s that work?” As far as he knows the entire purpose of heats is heightened reproductive capacity but what the fuck does he know really? Its not like he got great lessons on omega biology at any point so he figures Tony knows more than he does. He lives it and clearly he’s read on the subject so.

“If you bake a testicle it tends to stop working,” Tony says and Bucky winces, shifting uncomfortably. Tony laughs, shaking his head. “Can mess up ovaries too, but testicles fair worse. Sensitive organs.”

“Being an omega sounds like it sucks,” he mumbles.

Tony shrugs, “comes with benefits. People do give me an ungodly amount of jewelry and its not usually cheap either. A lot of omegas in my particular house tend to sell it all, which generally makes them a pretty penny and they use that to leave and do whatever. ‘Course that requires you to have rich suitors, which only happens in certain areas so omegas in poor areas are fucked but hey. At least that’s not me,” he says.

Yeah, seems a lot like being an omega requires one hell of a luck of the draw not to end up fucked somehow. “You don’t wear jewelry so I don’t see why you’d get jewelry as a gift,” he says instead of acknowledging what sounds like a pretty depressing reality.

“I don’t, how perceptive of you to notice. You’re probably one of seven people ever and I happen to be a hot commodity,” Tony says, lips tilting up a little.

“Sound exhausting,” Bucky says honestly. He’d know, he guesses, given that its not as if he gets a
small amount of people trailing after him. There used to be more when he was younger, before he became more jaded and isolated. Before he lost his arm.

“It is, but eventually someone who doesn’t suck comes along. You’re note was adorable,” Tony tells him, offering him a small smile and that’s sweet.

“I still don’t really know what I’m doing,” Bucky says honestly. “But whatever this is, I like it. I like you.”

Tony’s smile gets wider, “good to know, because most people think I’m insufferable and arrogant.”

Bucky frowns, “why, because you’re aware that you’re attractive? I assume you own mirrors, that’s not a hard assessment to make. Don’t really see how else you could be arrogant.”

“I’m smart and I know it, and I think I should have rights. Also, the looks thing but you’re right, I do own mirrors and the sheer amount of people who follow me around like lost puppies would have given me a clue even if I didn’t have access to reflective surfaces,” Tony says.

No shit. “Not gunna lie, the fact that you apparently have to send out rejection letters by the boatload is kind of flattering to me so like. That’s a stupid thing to bitch about,” he says.

Tony laughs, “you only think that because I accepted your offer,” he says but that’s not true. Okay, it kind of us.

“I’ll give you that,” Bucky tells him, smiling a little.

* 

He’s not entirely sure he’s met anyone who’s so… okay with him being this confident. Tony actually does put on the air of an insufferable jerk that’s a little too high on himself but that’s mostly because omegas with any kind of confidence are ditched immediately. But Bucky, he didn’t flinch away from any of it and when Tony clearly knew more then him about something he asked questions, relying on Tony’s knowledge. That’s literally never happened before and honestly Tony wasn’t much sure what to do with that for a moment.

Its nice, and kind of relieving, that Bucky goes along with his antics enough that most of the time Tony forgets to be insufferable. Its easy when Bucky doesn’t seem to care that he’s aware of his looks, or his intelligence, or his freely talking about omega rights or his suitors. In a way he’s mostly just talking about his life, but alphas don’t really react to that well regardless of how he phrases it. But he’s learned being overly blunt and up front about it makes them run faster so that’s how he tests them now. Bucky obviously passes with flying colors and it turns out he’s funny to boot. Damaged, sure, Tony can see the way he wears his trauma whatever that looks like for him, but there’s something underneath that draws him in.

They walk, hands linked and Bucky didn’t much care that it was Tony that initiated that. If anything he looked relieved about it, which Tony takes as a good sign. “That’s such a dick move,” he says, laughing.

“The principal was horrible. Catholic school, I’m sure you can imagine. The guy once sided with a priest who told Steve he was going to hell at thirteen because he’s bisexual. Anyway, he earned those goats. After looking for it for like a day and a half they seemed to realize there was no goat number eight,” Bucky says.

Tony snorts and starts laughing. “Yeah, the Catholics kind of go hard on sexual repression and all that. My family’s Italian,” he says in place of an explanation. He always hated church and he’s been
reliably informed that they aren’t all like his church had been but fuck if going to Catholic church didn’t make him hate religion enough to become an atheist. Also, he finds the idea of god laughable and he’s unable to reconcile it with science so he’s done away with the concept entirely. Not to mention he has no use for a higher power that thinks he’s lesser for no reason.

“Yeah, pretty sure Catholic school made me hate Catholics rather than devote myself to god but whatever. I did get out of a math test by pretending to be possessed once so that’s a bonus I guess,” he says and Tony starts laughing, doubling over with it.

“You what?” he wheezes out.

Bucky sighs, “okay, I hate math. I’m good at it, but I hate it. I’d rather sit on a cactus than work with numbers but sixteen year old me was a dumb bitch and instead of just skipping class like normal people I figured pretending to be possessed would get me out of it. Which it did but I didn’t really want to explain my faked possession to my parents so that wasn’t a very sustainable lie,” he says.

No fucking shit, pretending to be possessed. “What’d you do, go full Exorcist?” he asks, earning a funny look from Bucky. “Just because it’s not on the approved list doesn’t mean we don’t know how to get our hands on contraband movies. I have no clue why A Bug’s Life was banned but whatever,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“Probably the part where all the ants join up to fuck up the grasshoppers,” Bucky points out. “Might give you ideas.”

Tony considers it for a moment. “Huh. Well that’s fucking stupid,” he mumbles. “Did you guys have nuns? Because a nun whipping a rosary at you is a pretty hilarious image,” Tony says.

“No nuns, no rosaries, and the entire class called my bullshit but the teacher was freaked out enough to make me the nurse’s problem. Eventually they learned that me and my friends pretty much all faked sick in classes we didn’t like so we could fuck around with each other in the nurse’s office. In hindsight we were shit at pretending to be sick and also covering our tracks but it was fun while it lasted,” he says.

“Once I got busted sneaking out again and to get out of being transferred to a shittier house I claimed I found what was thought to be an extinct turtle because I couldn’t think something better up and I’d seen a turtle earlier. Obviously that’s the most ridiculous lie known to man but I wasn’t about to back down so I lead my makeshift cop to the damn turtle fully prepared to end up in Assfuck Missouri or something but it turns out the turtle actually was thought to be extinct so I got let off my crimes of trying to have a life,” he says.

Bucky frowns at him, clearly surprised. “You actually found an extinct turtle?” he asks, incredulous.

“No, if it was extinct I wouldn’t have found it. But yeah, I happened to find one of like five left in the world. Some rich asshole had a couple left and didn’t tell anyone about them and somehow a couple of them got loose and I got lucky.” Natasha says he’s got a horseshoe shoved up his ass and frankly he wonders sometimes because moments like this, nice walks with an alpha that doesn’t happen to normal people. Tony’s just lucky, really lucky. Always has been.

“I think I might have met my match as far as someone who experiences weird shit. I honestly didn’t think I could be outdone but finding some random rich person’s extinct turtle collection is probably weirder than anything I’ve got,” he says as the walk up to the house. Tony doesn’t really want to go back but he also doesn’t have much of a choice. Home sweet prison, he probably should have got out when he was legally allowed to but then who’d be around to keep Nat company? Also it actually isa right pain in the ass to ditch without an alpha and living with omegas has a lot of benefits. He
might not want to be there forever, but it is genuinely better than his other options.

“Yeah, pigeon in the middle of a job interview on the subway is pretty weird,” Tony says, turning back to Bucky. Bucky and pigeons seem to have a lot of stories together but pigeons are the seagulls of the city so that’s not terribly surprising. Though it is a little weird that two pigeons were facing a third pigeon, apparently in a job interview according to Bucky’s interpretation.

“Pigeons aren’t extinct. There was this one time though; this guy I used to work with pissed me off something fierce so for a couple weeks I fed pigeons by the train he took. Those little bastards are easy as hell to train. Anyway, after two weeks of being fed every day around the time he gets on the train I had a small army of pigeons prepared to do my bidding. As soon as he got on the train on Friday I threw a whole container of fries into the car he got in and watched Alfred Hitchcock’s The Birds become a reality. Needless to say I didn’t develop a better working relationship with Rumlow after that,” Bucky says.

Tony shakes his head because that’s ridiculous, conditioning pigeons to attack a coworker that must have really sucked given that Bucky seems to have a pretty laid back nature. “That must have been a fun HR complaint,” he says, giving the house behind him a distasteful glance. He can milk a few more minutes out of this, he’s sure. Just a couple more before he gets stuck back in there.

“Nah. Rumlow didn’t have much of a leg to stand on given how shit he was to literally everyone. He dealt with the pigeon attack quietly and told everyone he got into a bar fight and won,” Bucky says. He probably shouldn’t laugh at that but he does. “Who would even believe that shit?”

“No one, but only like five people knew about the pigeons and we all made an obscene amount of bird jokes with him around. But uh- guess you’re back to… prison,” Bucky says, choosing not to sugar coat it Tony guesses. As far as prisons go he could do worse so he doesn’t really bother to complain.

“Pretty sure if a bunch of pigeons got lose in there we’d immediately try and catch them all like it’s some live action game of Pokémon,” Tony says. “Which inexplicably also isn’t on the approved watch list.” He doesn’t get that but whatever. Frankly he’s disappointed that so much of the stuff he’s not supposed to get into is so boring. Except all the horror, Tony can do with that shit being banned for life from everywhere. The whole genre should be thrown out not that Natasha agrees. But she’s probably not right in the head and Tony, he’s got taste and also enough brain cells to know that scary movies are not what he wants to get into. He knew that before ending up here but when things are forbidden they become more tempting.

Bucky frowns, “omegas are weird. No offense,” he says.

Tony shrugs, “none taken. After being cooped up for awhile we do get kind of weird and find entertainment in odd things. I don’t know why we pay alpha film makers millions of dollars to make yet another shitty World War Two movie when no one on this planet is more creative than a bored fifteen year old omega about to make up an elaborate game with nothing but a push pin, a clay cat, and too much determination but whatever.”

“What was the game?” Bucky asks, amused.

“Uh. It involved gladiator-like battles that got too elaborate to actually pull off so we ended up making up something new,” he says. “Total disappointment.” Poor Bucky looks confused but Tony doesn’t want to get into the long history of the Clay Cat God and the sacrifices they were initially designed to make to it because it goes from kind of normal to a little bit fucked up fast.
Bucky looks over to the house and back at Tony and he doesn’t much want to leave either. Tony leans into Bucky a little, looking back up at him. Bucky’s looking at him too but the poor thing looks panicked so Tony smiles, shaking his head and reaching up himself to pull Bucky into a kiss. Thankfully that seems to cure Bucky’s indecision pretty much instantly as he drops Tony's hand, settling his hands on Tony’s waist instead. Tony wraps his arms around Bucky’s neck and stands on his toes to press himself in closer.

The kiss is soft, exploratory and sweet as Bucky’s hands tighten around Tony’s hips and oh, okay, Tony could do with more of that. He lets out a small noise of appreciation as Bucky deepens the kiss, running a hand up Tony’s back, carefully feeling his body in a way that’s tentative, almost hesitant. Like a silent ask of permission. Tony grins into the kiss, twisting one of his hands through Bucky’s hair and tilting his head the way he wants it.

Must be a thing for Bucky because he moans into it, grip on Tony’s hip tightening for a moment as he slides his hand back down Tony’s back. He leans further into Tony, kiss taking on a bit of a desperate edge to it and Tony’s breath hitches.

“The height difference between the two of you is fucking comical!” a voice yells from the house. Tony jumps a little, shaken out of his moment and he glares back to the house.

“Eat shit, Natasha!” he yells back.

“You’re going to have to stick him on a step stool to fuck him!” Natasha yells back, cackling wildly.

“I hope you get stuck on dish duty for a month!” he yells to her.

She gasps, “take that back!”

Bucky sighs. “Well that ruined the moment,” he says but he looks and sounds amused so that’s good at least.

“I don’t need a step stool to be fuckable,” he says and Bucky throws back his head and laughs.

“Yeah, you’re pretty fuckable as is,” he says, grinning softly.

Tony’s pretty sure he blushes, which is embarrassing because he’s an adult, damnit, there’s no need to blush. “Well um. Thanks,” he says because he’s terrible and embarrassing today, apparently.
Chapter 5

Once again I’m releasing a monster ass chapter but! Relationship building!

Nebula looks annoyed, “where did you get that?” she asks, giving Tony’s laptop a pointed look.

“Sold some jewelry for money, bought a couple computers because nothing on the market did what I wanted it to do, then tore them apart and built this guy,” he says. Not as good as what he could do on his own, but it works well enough so he’s not about to bitch.

“I thought we weren’t allowed to have computers,” Nebula mumbles.

“We aren’t,” Tony says though that sure shit didn’t stop him.

Natasha frowns at Nebula, “who invited the child?” she asks, getting a dirty look from Nebula.

Tony sighs. “Someone had to do mentor duty and I figured I’d save you from being seen with her at various times for a week. You’re welcome,” he tells her. Also, he happens to have the best tips on how to piss people off without overstepping bounds and Nebula clearly needs the lessons with how often she gets into shit.

“Fine. Lets look up your creepy boyfriend to make sure he’s not a serial killer with company then,” she mumbles, inexplicably annoyed with this.

Whatever, he’s got no time for Nat’s moods and he’s already been digging around. “Not a serial killer, though he does have a weird sense of humor,” Tony says but he kind of already knew that. Its more been hinted at then stated but Tony already got that impression.

“Define ‘weird,’” Nat says and Tony sighs.

“I don’t know, he posted this weird meme that’s like… two ghost figures in a dark hallway with glowing red eyes that reads ‘me and the boys at two a.m looking for beans’ so that’s weird. Also he has a thing for these bird memes and my favorite is this fat bird with the caption ‘I took a calculated risk but man am I bad at math’ mostly because Bucky isn’t bad at math. Had a career as a military sniper for a bit, can’t be shit at math for that.” Granted Tony’s met a lot of people who own guns and they claim a lot of it is instinctual and maybe they’re right, but whenever Tony has used a gun its all math, wind calculations, angles, and knowing the weapon of choice. But then he’s smarter than anyone he’s ever met with a gun too so maybe they’re right about instinct.

“What’d he do after?” Nat asks and Tony shrugs.

“Not sure but it must have netted him a pretty penny considering where he lives. Not that he uses that money to keep up with the lifestyle of everyone around him, which is interesting.” Most people feel something of a compulsion to keep up with the people around them but not Bucky, he guesses. Or he does but doesn’t show it, which defeats the purpose so Tony dismisses that idea fast.

“That doesn’t concern you?” Nat asks and not especially, no.
“I assume he did something with the military that’s not on immediate record. But he seems to have left that a few years ago.” He’s not really happier for it but Tony figures the military isn’t the greatest of places to foster good mental health anyway so whatever is going on now is probably the result of being in the military. Or some other life circumstances Bucky probably feels no need to share on various social media platforms.

Natasha makes a small noise of discontent. “Well why don’t you dig deeper, its not as if you can’t do that,” she points out because yeah, he could if he wanted to. When he was thirteen he hacked the Pentagon for funsies and got stuck on house arrest and like five government watch lists so Bucky’s records probably wouldn’t give him too much trouble.

“The goal was to find out if he’s a serial killer, not to find out how much toilet paper he uses when he shits,” Tony points out. “Also it’d be kind of creepy to dig into every record of his existence just because I can. He doesn’t get the same benefit with me.”

Not that it would matter- he’d be looking up Tony Carbonell, not Tony Stark and anything noteworthy of his existence is under his previous last name. Including a couple published scientific papers that are probably attributed to some alpha related to Howard by now and that’s a real piss off but whatever.

“Why are you acting like this is a situation based on equality when this entire set up benefits him far more than it’ll ever benefit you? Find his shit,” Nat tells him.

“I think he’s okay,” Nebula says unexpectedly, earning a betrayed look from Natasha.

“Who’s side are you on?” she asks and Nebula’s eyebrows draw in a little.

“There are sides here? And why aren’t you on Tony’s?”

“I am, that’s why I think he should get rid of Buckwheat,” Natasha says.

“He could do worse,” Nebula points out. “So I don’t know why you hate him so much. Wonder if he sent you anything new,” she adds more out of curiosity than anything but Tony had forgotten about that part of the courting process, the one where he gets gifts after dates and Nebula is right. He should be due for another gift.

He grins, pulling himself off his bed and headed towards the door with Nat and Nebula on his heels. Tony kind of wonders what Bucky will have managed to dredge up this time because he knows it won’t be some stupid piece of jewelry that he hates and will never wear. Or some random piece of expensive clothing that’s supposed to impress him. Might if he hadn’t grown up rich but he did so most of the time he thinks the clothes are tacky and a half a season behind in fashion.

“If its chocolate I call it,” Natasha tells him and he gives her a look over his shoulder.

“First off you don’t even like Bucky so you don’t get shit. Second of all, if its chocolate I will literally fight everyone in this house for it and I will win.” He loves chocolate not that anyone buys that for them on a regular basis. Every stupid bullshit romcom he’s everwatched involves chocolate and flowers somewhere but can alphas manage to get some chocolate? Fucking no, of course not. Instead they get diamonds and other ugly gemstones. Tony’s partial to rubies but has anyone ever gotten him any? No.

Nat sighs, “I don’t even doubt that and you probably fight like a brain damaged goat,” she mumbles.

Yeah, Tony’s not going to dispute that because the goat would probably have a better chance than him normally. He’s not much for fighting even if he’d probably manage to squeak out a win if for no
other reason than being as smart as he is. For the moment though he ignores that in favor of mail, assuming he has any. He opens the door that corresponds with his and Nat’s room and sure enough there’s a wrapped gift in there so he pulls it out.

“Don’t think its chocolate,” Nebula says, looking disappointed and yeah, Tony knows it isn’t.

He pulls the paper off the package and snorts at what he finds.

*Think its still on the banned list if it comes as a gift?*

-B

Natasha gives the DVD a confused look. “He knows you hate horror movies, right?” she asks.

“Yeah, its an inside joke,” he says, “but if you want a copy of The Exorcist feel free to keep that the fuck away from me,” he tells her.

Nat pulls the DVD from his hand and reads the note, considering it for a moment. “We should test that,” she says, grinning.

*This is a shit idea and Tony hates this stupid movie and no one else seems freaked out and he’s mad about that too. “You’re an atheist, why are you even freaked out by Christian demons?”

“Because they’re fucking scary, Nat. What kind of question is that?” he asks, offended.

“But you don’t believe in them,” she says. “So why would they scare you?”

He rolls his eyes, “the actors aren’t really the characters, why would you care about their journey? Just because its fake doesn’t mean it doesn’t get an emotional react- oh what the fuck,’ he says, jumping as some creepy shit happens on screen. Fuck this movie, fuck this genre, and fuck everyone who has anything to do with it.

“Its not even scary. What idiot decided this was one of the scariest movies every made?” Harley asks, frowning at Nebula, who shrugs. Neither of them look bothered at all and Tony resents that actual children are handling this better than him. How’s that fair? He’s an adult damnit, they should be more scared than him.

“Do you two have functioning senses?” he asks.

“Yeah, which is why they don’t think it’s scary. Its kind of boring,” Peter says and oh come on, he’d probably be the only one on his side and he’s not? Tony decides that he doesn’t like anyone here because they all suck.

“You’re a wimp,” Nat tells him and he flips her off. He pulls the hood to his sweater over his head and draws the strings tight around his face. He full well knows he looks ridiculous but he doesn’t care.

“What are you all watching?” someone asks and shit, busted.

“Scatter!” Harley yells and they all take off running.

*“Yeah, so now he’s on dish duty for two months because no one was willing to rat me or themselves*
out. Probably because they all know if they fuck me over I’ll fuck them over right back. I have a reputation,” Tony says.

Bucky looks amused as he shakes his head. “You let a twelve year old take the blame for you?” he asks and that’s rude.

“He’s sixteen, he can deal with being framed on his own,” Tony says. “Also he was the idiot who stood up in the middle of a crowded room and yelled ‘scatter’ like that doesn’t draw all the attention to himself. I can’t fix stupid,” Tony points out, examining his nails.

Thankfully Bucky laughs at the joke rather than thinking he’s an asshole. “So I guess it’s still banned even if it’s gifted,” Bucky says.

Well, not that anyone knows it was a gift. Knowing that means ratting himself out and he figures he’d rather help Natasha find the damn movie to add to their collection of banned items. “Probably, but no one has any idea it was gifted. We are all banned from TV time though so that… fucking sucks.” That’s pretty much everyone’s preferred activity in down time and now they all have to read, except none of the fucking books are good they’re all eighty years old and conveniently always depict omegas in care taker roles. Tony knows most of them have some kind of contraband books and entertainment lying around but that comes with a risk of being caught and being caught generally doesn’t result in pleasant things. Most of the time they take enough risk with phones to access the internet, which is all they’re useful for given that none of them have actual working phone numbers. Also they’re all about to be watched like hawks so you know. Doing risky things at the moment is kind of a stupid idea.

“Sorry,” Bucky murmurs like he’s the one that should feel bad.

Tony shrugs, “whatever, technically I have a laptop so I could watch movies whenever. Not that I do- I’m not looking to get caught with a computer and watching something that’s not on the approved watch list even though there’s no fucking reason for it to be there. What is wrong with V for Vendetta?” The graphic novel is banned too and Tony doesn’t get it.

“Probably the fact that it’s a story about sticking it to an authoritarian government that functions shockingly like the house you live in. I can’t believe 1984 level control and surveillance is more preferable to omegas than living outside of that,” Bucky says, shaking his head.

Yeah, Tony gets it probably because he lives there but also because he’s not stupid enough to think living outside the house gets him less surveillance and control. It just looks different. “Most of the no watch list is shit anyway, and I get just as much control outside of here than inside. Shit, being in public requires dress codes if I don’t want to end up assaulted. Or smelling like a beta. Seriously, people are so transparently bigoted when they don’t think you belong to a certain group. But you know, at least I can wear whatever I want in the house if I’m not stuck at a party which, yay for me, dating you exempts me from.” Natasha is mad because she’s still forced to go and she can’t dress like a hobgoblin swamp thing or a particularly slutty person. Tony doesn’t get why the dress code is what she doesn’t like about those events when they have to deal with the most boring people alive but sure.

Bucky still looks uncomfortable and maybe he should be because Tony’s under no real illusions that his situation actually improves regardless of where he is. But that doesn’t change that he has a preference for which shit hovel he wants to live in, even if he’s not looking to live there forever. Smelling like alpha will help prevent people from being creepy anyway. “You shouldn’t need to look or smell a certain way to get respect,” Bucky murmurs and that’s sweet, really.

“No, I shouldn’t. But that’s not the world I live in.” That’s just the world he wished he did. He’s
long ago accepted that people will make his life harder for no reason, and he also accepted that he’ll always be the exception to the rule.

“Sounds exhausting to have to put up with that all the time,” Bucky says and Tony shrugs.

“It is, but to a larger extent I’m used to living like this. Most of the time it’s the overt stuff that pisses me off because everything else happens so often that it’s tiring to care about every time some random alpha decides they know what’s best for me after talking to me for five seconds and ignoring every single thing I said in that five seconds. And there’s benefits, occasionally. People consistently underestimate me and that’s amusing to toy with.” Alphas get confused when he knows more about things then them, and then suddenly he’s flipped the script and they’re on the defensive while they grapple for control over a situation. Doesn’t typically happen either because Tony plays his cards right. He doesn’t do that unless he knows there’s no way he’ll be caught off guard and its fun to do.

Bucky snorts, “I can’t imagine someone being stupid enough to underestimate you. You need like five seconds of speech patterns to determine that you’re clearly intelligent and a minute to know you hide it well. And anyone with basic observation skills can see that you’re mind is always on the run-do people seriously not see this?” he asks, frowning.

Tony reaches out, threading his fingers through Bucky’s. “Yeah, consistently.”

“Well I see you,” Bucky murmurs, squeezing his hand.

He smiles a little, “I know you do. Doubt anyone else would have taken me to a museum for a date,” he points out. “Kind of wish that technology through the ages exhibit was still here but you don’t always get what you want.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow, “you like tech? You’re pretty behind now unless your few hours of stolen freedom leaves you enough time to catch up,” he says.

Yeah, Tony doesn’t need to play catch up but Bucky doesn’t know that. “Actually I’m a genius- I’m unusual in that I’ve already done post secondary. I have a Masters in bioengineering,” he says. And a Bachelors in engineering and theoretical math but that was mostly so he could do more advanced courses. Bucky looks surprised and he should be given how young Tony had been. “I skipped a lot of grades, never really needed formal education and before I got stuffed into a home I did a lot of inventing. Everything I made was more advanced then anything on the market and I do keep up. Sort of. Kind of a pain in the ass but I manage okay.”

He’s expecting the skeptical look Bucky gives him but it irritates him nonetheless. “How come I haven’t heard of you before?” he asks and Tony gives him a look.

“Really? That’s a question you just asked? And you have, but I changed my last name and I’m not looking to disclose what it was. Oh don’t look at me like that; I bought your president story. Just acknowledge the fact that we both have pasts that are colorful and probably not that great,” he says.

At least he gets a guilty look out of Bucky. “Good point. For the record I used to be a spy of sorts. CIA. Fucking hated it, then moved to a government agency that I’m literally not allowed to tell you the name of. Hated that more. I retired early,” he says.

“You saw something you shouldn’t have and they paid you off,” Tony corrects and Bucky frowns. “Explains why you live in an expensive neighborhood when you clearly don’t come from money. Don’t look so offended- I come from money, I know the difference between someone who’s born with it and someone who isn’t. Also you don’t bother to even attempt to keep up,” Tony points out. “Which is part of your charm, don’t worry. Its nice that someone thought to show me them before
their wallet.”

“Guess I know where all those stereotypes about omegas being gold diggers came from. Except it seems like you guys get money thrown at you more than you take it,” Bucky says.

Tony half smiles, “no, we take plenty. Sometimes we swindle people out of it too. But those stereotypes like to conveniently ignore that omegas have poor access to damn near everything without a whole lot of cash or an alpha and if you don’t want an alpha you need to screw a few over to make money. We’d probably do that a lot less if we had literally any other way to make decent money but we don’t so. Also no offense but alphas are idiots, they’ll throw a necklace at anything they think looks pretty.”

Bucky shakes his head and, to Tony’s surprise, doesn’t make a nasty comment about omegas using alphas like it’s not still totally up to an alpha whether or not they want to send something to begin with. Doesn’t really matter how much an omega might flirt or attempt to get something out of a relationship, it’s still an alpha’s choice to go get something. And alphas have taken so much from them already; maybe they shouldn’t be surprised when omegas find a way to take something back. But tell an alpha that and they get bitchy, acting like omegas owe them something for them making choices of their own free will all because they gave an omega something shiny. Not Bucky though, apparently.

“You’re right by the way, about me knowing things I shouldn’t. Kind of makes my life hell,” Bucky says then frowns a little, looking away.

Clearly he’s been dying to get that off his chest given the sharp subject change. “Fun fact, studies show people find omegas more trustworthy. Doesn’t live up to reality though, we suck as much as everyone else in regards to secret keeping. But we’re not gossips, contrary to popular and contradictory belief. We just aren’t any better than anyone else at keeping secrets,” he says. Bucky looks confused and Tony sighs. “When I don’t know how to handle something I naturally fall back on science. That’s comfortable, testable. People and their experiences, not so much,” he admits.

Bucky’s lips tilt up a little, “wish I had something like that. I’ve never been that great at science,” he says.

“You probably aren’t bad at it though. Don’t give me that look, you aren’t the only one who can tell who’s smart and who isn’t. You didn’t do post secondary though, you don’t use jargon.”

“Neither do you,” Bucky points out.

“Not the right crowd for that,” Tony says, “but I know plenty. The way you explain concepts though, it shows a clear intelligence but not one filtered through academia.”

“Never got the chance to go and I wouldn’t even know what to study if I did,” Bucky says, shaking his head.

“Well, you obviously have an interest in Greek mythology,” Tony points out. He knew plenty about it, more than Tony and he’s read about the Greeks in several different books. He’s kind of impressed that he learned a few new things when he’s done a lot of reading already. Not, he supposes, that he would have on his own but Natasha likes mythology and she’s got a few books in their Forbidden Things collection.

Bucky laughs a little, “hobbies don’t count,” he says but Tony doesn’t accept that.

He steps in front of Bucky, dropping his hand and settling his hands on Bucky’s waist. “Do so.
Besides, there’s no use in studying anything if you don’t like it enough to be a hobby,” Tony points out. It’s why he chose bioengineering specifically when he’d made that choice. He wishes he could go back to it but as it was he only *just* finished the degree before he was stuffed into his new home and only because his profs were nice enough to fast track his already fast tracked program. It’d be the only time in Tony’s school career that he’d felt any kind of pressure to perform because he’d had *somuch* work to do in a short period of time. He managed, if only just barely.

“Guess you have a point there,” Bucky murmurs, wrapping his arms around Tony too.

* Bucky’s not quite sure what he did but he seems to have broken the ice in some type of way because it turns out Tony is super affectionate. Or maybe he’s just touchy, Bucky’s not sure how to interpret his sudden attachment to him and he’s not going to read some weird shit into it until he gets Tony’s body language better. Because there’s a difference between the way he holds himself now and the way he did when they met. He’s distinctly less guarded, for one, but there’s something else to it too that Bucky can’t quite put his finger on.

Regardless, he decides he likes the way Tony clings to his arm as he points out things that he knows about various things around the museum. Frankly if Bucky doubted his education before he doesn’t by the time they leave- there’s no way Tony could have amassed all that knowledge without either a background in academia or a whole hell of a lot of reading and a natural understanding of overly academic texts. Except it’s kind of hard to automatically understand academic language with no knowledge of how it works, Bucky would know. Though given that his career- one that clearly started *stupidly* young if he’s not lying and Bucky thinks his story would be a ridiculous lie if it were one- he figures Tony both has an academic background and reads a lot.

“So I guess history isn’t censored for you,” he says and Tony snorts.

“No, plenty of it is. But the books in the library aren’t always moderated correctly and I get bored fast. Read through the whole thing pretty quick before I found other ways to occupy my time,” he says.

“Like learning how to sneak out, I assume?” he asks.

Tony nods. “Tight security- I had to figure out how to cheat a bunch of different systems and not end up on camera doing it. Took months of planning and now my system is good enough that even the dumbest of fourteen year olds can get in and out undetected most of the time. Might be one of my more impressive achievements,” he says, grinning.

“Yeah, because you got stuck somewhere that doesn’t actually let you do anything. I’m pretty sure I’d go nuts,” he says, shaking his head. He really doesn’t get it but he doesn’t really have to deal with bias against omegas in his life like Tony does either and clearly that’s the defining feature in understanding Tony’s predicament or not. Bucky suspects Sam would have a lot more understanding than he does. He lived the same bullshit.

“Yeah, but you don’t seem to do well with limits and authority,” Tony points out.

Bucky raises an eyebrow, “and you *do*?” Because everything he knows about Tony tells him he does not like rules, limits, and censorship. First thing he seems to do when faced with all of those things is find a way to thwart them.

Tony laughs, “no, I don’t. But I have a vested interest in staying where I am until I’m good and ready to leave. You’ve got nothing but rules. Makes a big difference in perception.”
No shit. Bucky’s never really been good at just following orders because he did a whole lot more listening to Steve than any of his superiors. They seemed to figure that out fast though and he and Steve had talent, a lot of it. So they figured giving Steve the information that would lead him to doing what they wanted and dragging Bucky’s ass along with him was a good plan. Might have been, if they didn’t figure it out. Its not like either one of them are stupid and they’re both trained to investigate. Someone had to know it was only a matter of time before they realized they were being fed partial information.

“Guess so. What would make leaving worth it to you anyway?” he asks. “I imagine that bar is pretty high.” He suspects Tony has reasons for why he’s done things this way aside from general not wanting to deal with alpha bullshit. Tony seems to be good at thinking things through well and thoroughly so Bucky doubts this is an exception.

Tony sighs. “Much as I resent it having an alpha around makes my life a whole lot easier if I leave. Takes a lot of problems out of the equation and in something of a twisted set of events it gives me more freedom to do what I want if I’m not constantly defending why I need a house or why I’m looking for a job instead of a spouse and a bunch of other complicated mess. Settle that and I can just do what I want to.”

“Stability, then,” Bucky says and Tony nods.

He sighs, “I can’t believe the bar is seriously that low. I probably shouldn’t tell you this on account of I actually like you but you can do so much better than me. You really should have higher standards,” he tells Tony.

“Oh honey, it’s cute that you think that’s the standard. The standard actually looks more like ‘showers, not likely to assault you.’ And maybe gets something, literally anything, that isn’t another fucking piece of jewelry you’ll never wear. So by my standards you’re a fucking unicorn because I assumed no one like you existed.”

Bucky doesn’t really want to say it but he swallows his pride anyway. “Tony. I’m not a unicorn. I eat Hot Pockets at two a.m straight from the package and sometimes I don’t even care that they’re still half frozen. I can assure you, I am not a catch let alone a fucking unicorn.” Jesus Christ Tony has some low ass standards to think he’s any kind of anything special. Especially considering Tony is all kinds of special, he should end up with someone who compliments that. Not that Bucky isn’t selfish enough to ignore that to be with him anyway because he is, he so is. Still, though.

Tony sighs, looking a little pained. “Share one of those Hot Pockets with the younger ones and hand over a meme and they will literally marry you. We’ve had this discussion,” he says.

Hot Pockets and a meme? And Bucky thought Tony’s standards were low. Turns out compared to his peers he’s high maintenance. “Holy shit, what the fuck?” he asks.

“We’ve all decided the worst thing about that standard is that not a single alpha we’ve ever met meets that low, low standard. Which is why you’re a unicorn,” Tony says.

Yeah, he guesses when the bar is so low its underground he looks good in comparison. “Shit, if the standard is that low why the hell are alphas spending all this money on jewelry omegas don’t give a shit about?” Bucky asks. It’s a waste of money for one, but on a practical courting level it doesn’t even get them anywhere.

Tony snorts, “because alpha’s courting gifts are about them boosting their own egos and bragging about their money, not the omegas they’re courting. It’s why your gifts are refreshing, and funny. And they show that you actually pay attention to what we talk about,” he says like that’s something
Bucky lets out a long breath of air. “Oh I am really tempted to take that ego boost but honestly I’m not doing anything special Tony, I’m just sending random shit I thought you’d like or something I thought was funny. And obviously I pay attention to what we talk about, that shouldn’t even be something you think is a good thing that’s normal shit.” Who tries to court someone they don’t even listen to? Okay, scratch that, probably a whole hell of a lot of people he guesses.

Given the look on Tony’s face he’s right. “Buck, I’m used to people flat out telling me how many kids they want before they ask for my name. Actually giving a shit about what I’m telling you is basically the Holy Grail as far as experiences I’ve wanted out of relationships and never gotten until you. It sure shit isn’t ideal, but it does mean that I like you and not just because you’re not a jackass. Believe it or not I’m actually pretty high maintenance and so far you meet all the extra standards I have that I never really apply to the people I talk to on account of I know they’d fail them immediately.”

Given that he keeps getting gifts from alphas in pissing competitions with themselves Bucky’s sure whatever Tony’s standards are they’d fail. They fail Bucky’s standards and he just wants someone he likes. “I seriously meet your standards after the two a.m Hot Pockets?” he asks and Tony laughs, wrapping his arms around Bucky’s neck and leaning in to kiss him.

“Yes, even after the damn Hot Pockets,” he murmurs.

“Baby, you need higher standards than whatever you’ve got because that is so not a good meal choice for a grown ass adult,” he says.
Chapter 6

Tony sits in the kitchen, not paying much attention to his surroundings because he’s thinking about Bucky. Despite his protests he’s sweet, and he listens, and it helps that he’s a good kisser. Big plus when Tony has had some terrible kissing experiences but that’s what happens when you jam a bunch of teens in a house. Doesn’t much matter if they’d prefer alphas or betas; all they’ve got is each other so they make the most of it. Or in Tony’s case get stuck with the worst. But Bucky at least knows what he’s doing and it’s nice, his tentative approach to anything even vaguely sexual.

Not that Tony wouldn’t appreciate him picking up the pace because he would but its sweet that he lets Tony lead their interactions anyway. Tony gets the feeling that Bucky’s the nervous type too, which is odd considering how attractive he is and he knows Bucky is aware of his looks. Usually the pretty ones are arrogant but Tony managed to luck out. Popular theme with Bucky.

“Hey, earth to Tony!” someone says and he snaps out of his reverie to find Harley looking down at him annoyed and holding the butter knife Tony used to put cream cheese on his bagel. “Really? Why do you people make so many damn dishes?” he asks.

Tony snorts and starts laughing. “You do too, when you aren’t on dish duty anyway.”

Harley gives him an annoyed look because he knows Tony’s right. “Stop using so many dishes. Once my time is up use as many as you want,” he says, trudging over to the sink to clean whatever is over there.

He shakes his head and gets up, “you’re just upset because you got yourself busted,” Tony says. Harley rolls his eyes at him, “obviously that’s why I’m mad! Your stupid boyfriend isn’t even worth it,” he mumbles.

Not to Harley, no. Tony thinks he is though, so far at least. “Next time don’t yell scatter like a moron and wonder why only you got busted. Just flee like the rest of us did,” he points out. Though he’s surprised only Harley managed to get busted but maybe they all took off too fast to notice who was there specifically and they’ve all enacted a code of silence so finding out isn’t really possible. Theoretically they could all be punished but the last time that happened Tony started mutiny by accident when he protested it so he’s pretty sure no one is about to test that twice.

“I was trying to help and you all fucked me and not even in a fun way!” Harley says, pouting.

Tony wrinkles his nose, “yeah, well I in particular have no taste for teenagers so,” he shrugs.

“I’m not even that young,” Harley mumbles.

“You’re sixteen, in what world does that count as old to you?”

“I’m not old, but I’m not that young,” he says.

Honestly most of the time Tony doesn’t really notice that he’s talking to teens- they’re all well spoken, they’re trained to be so noticing the age difference doesn’t happen so much. Then shit like this happens and he’s reminded he’s boarding with kids and he’s an adult. “Yeah, okay, uh-”

“Yeah, you’re going to talk to adults, I know. Natasha is sulking in your room,” Harley mumbles, annoyed. He spares the sink another irritated look and Tony shakes his head. Sometimes flying under the radar is useful and this is one of those times, Harley will learn.
Bucky considers his now clean closet and yeah if he turns around the rest of his room is still a mess but this is something at least. Its hard, usually, to find a moment of ‘give a fuck’ to clean the space around him. Normally he does enough to avoid bugs and that’s it but he had some energy and he figured he might as well put it to use. He knows it won’t last, the good days never do and he knows it’s Tony fueling them and he knows that’s not going to last either and he has no idea what’ll happen when that happens. Because its not an ‘if’ so much as a ‘when.’ And how will Tony react when it does? Because Bucky knows he’s a lot to handle and it’s not fair to expect Tony to deal with his bullshit.

This whole fucking thing was selfish anyway, he never should have involved Tony in his life. Tony’s great, total fucking mystery of a person, but great- he doesn’t need Bucky’s problems and there’s a lot of them. Most of which he technically can’t talk about and that’s even worse. Maybe he’d do something about the gnawing anxiety, or the sleeplessness, or the depression but the fuck is the point when for the most part he can’t talk about what’s causing his problems anyway? So instead he does pretty much nothing but lay around for most of the day, an odd job here and there, hang around Steve’s long enough for food, or scrounge around in his freezer for a frozen meal that’s probably terrible for him.

And that’s what he decided to start a relationship with. Fuck he’s an idiot for that and obviously Tony is some kind of invested even if he doesn’t know why given that Tony can one hundred percent do better than him so its not like he can back out. But honesty might be the best policy here. It seems fair to warn Tony that he comes with a basket case of problems so he can like… prepare himself, Bucky guesses. Or ditch. Whatever, point is that this was a bad executive decision from day one and Tony spends his time in omega prison. That should have been deterrent enough for him and anyone else who gives a shit about human rights abuses. Like shit, he already hated those places and sure maybe Tony’s great but Bucky doesn’t really like them anymore. Especially with the free way Tony talks about the casual abuse that happens there. Like he’s used to it.

Yeah, and that’s not a great way to start a relationship either. Sure, go pick yourself up someone who’s spent the last six plus years figuring out ways to have basic freedoms because that’s absolutely the state of mind you want a partner to have when dating them. Bucky might think that more if it didn’t ignore Tony as a person. As a person Tony is bold, fierce, doesn’t seem to like rules too much and he seems to have a tendency to get into trouble. Its not something he minds either, and Bucky figures the risks of all his attempts to drown out the rules he follows come with varying level of risk.

He did once mention potentially being moved, which seemed to be the only consequence that concerned him. Frankly after Tony’s brief mention of other places Bucky can see why he’d be concerned about that kind of thing. Other than that Tony’s pretty fearless and unafraid to do what he wants when he wants. That’s like ninety percent of why Bucky’s attracted to him to begin with, his brash personality. Though it does help that he’s so pretty. Ridiculously pretty actually, drop dead gorgeous and Bucky’s got no fucking clue what he’s doing with him. Sure Bucky’s pretty enough but he sure shit doesn’t put any effort into it, he just happens to be blessed with good facial structure. That’s about where the benefits of dating him stop.

He sighs, turning back to his messy room that he should probably clean at some point. Yeah, he might want to warn Tony about what he’s getting into.

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Tony dislikes waiting for things on account of he’s terribly impatient and Natasha isn’t making things better. “Jesus Christ, he’s not that great,” she mumbles at him as he shakes her awake from her nap.
“If you stay up with me we can watch High School Musical,” he says and Natasha throws her sleep mask across the room, sitting up fast.

“Put up or shut up, Stark. You know how much I love that movie.” Yeah, unfortunately he does and that’s not even banned so ugh.

“Just so you know if you were a High School Musical character you’d be an extra and you would share no scenes with Sharpay,” he tells her.

He lets out a lout yell as Natasha shoves him to the ground and that is rude. Its not his fault its true. “Well you’d be Troy,” Nat tells him and he gasps from his place on the ground.

“You take that back I don’t sing, play basketball, or look anything like Zac Efron!” And thank god for that. Tony thinks he’s much better looking, thanks, and also wouldn’t be caught dead acting in a movie that bad. He doesn’t understand why Nat loves those damn movies so much but she does and she insists on forcing him into watching them. Or in this case he’s bribing her with things she likes to distract himself.

Nat nods, “yeah, you’re right. You’re too low rent to be Zac Efron,” she says and he picks himself up and walks out without another word. “Aw come on, don’t be like that!” Nat calls after him. “Can we still watch High School Musical?”

He turns and gives the door an offended look, “no! I’m going to go harass Harley in the kitchen,” he says, walking away.

When he gets to the kitchen Harley looks so offended to find him there that Tony laughs. “You get out of here, you did this to me!” he says, hands on his hips.

Tony rolls his eyes, “you did this to yourself by yelling and then not ratting me out,” he says. “You’re welcome,” Harley says. “Next time I’m selling you out,” he mumbles.

Yeah, he’s not going to do that. There’s a code of honor that people aren’t so eager to break probably because it results in you being hated permanently. Teenagers are petty and they don’t much like being caught out for their misdeeds let alone ratted out. “Uh huh, sure, have fun being hated,” he tells Harley, walking over to the cupboards to hover. He doesn’t actually have any plans to use any dishes but its fun to fuck with the kid.

“Hey! Stop harassing Harley and make good on your promise to watch High School Musical with me,” Natasha says from the doorway, leaning against it pretending to be casual even though she’s freakishly excited. Tony really hates her shit taste in movies and clearly Harley is thinking something along the same lines because he wrinkles his nose.

“How come you made friends with the defective one?” he asks and Tony sighs.

“Well its not like I had a choice, she’s the only one my age. You guys are all great but sometimes I want the company of someone whose voice isn’t cracking,” he says. “Even if she’s got the worst taste known to man.”

Natasha rolls her eyes, “do not. And lets not act like your taste is better. You like eighties everything, even the shitty action movies so you can’t judge me for my supposedly bad taste. That isn’t bad,” she says in her own defense.

Its not a great defense given that eighties movies are good; she just hates fun and also cinematic poetry.
“You guys both have crap taste in movies now get out and don’t use any dishes because I don’t want to clean them,” Harley says, shooing Tony out the door.

“High School Musical?” Nat asks hopefully and he sighs.

“Fine,” he mumbles, already annoyed with it.

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By the time Bucky shows up Tony had been looking for saving for the last several hours. He didn’t even know there were more High School Musical movies but apparently there’s three and a movie about Sharpay. So when Bucky finally shows up he runs up to Bucky throws himself at him. Bucky catches him, obviously, and smiles a little. “Well you seem happy to see me,” he says.

“I’ve spent the last several hours being subjected to torture, so yeah, I’m pretty happy to see you.” For a moment Bucky looks horrified and Tony sighs, “not literally. Nat made me watch a bunch of movies I’d rather gouge my eyes out than watch again.”

Bucky shakes his head, “you’re ridiculously dramatic,” he says and that’s just rude.

“Am not, you’d be annoyed if you had to watch High School Musical too okay. I’m just saying, that’s the worst.” Nat has the worst taste in pretty much everything, including clothing if she’s left to her own devices. If she’s not she dresses like a normal human being but left by herself she wears the tackiest shit known to man and Tony has been known to like tacky things. For a moment Bucky looks sheepish and Tony gives him a look. “You like the movies, don’t you?” he asks.

“No,” Bucky lies, looking away.

Tony sighs, “why do I have the worst taste in friends and apparently boyfriends?” he asks more to himself than Bucky.

“For the record I think you have great taste,” Bucky says, then pauses. “Actually I don’t, you could do a lot better. I’m a hot mess.”

So he thinks but Tony’s not exactly lacking in the mess department so he smiles. “So am I so I guess we’re even.” Bucky doesn’t look like he agrees but he doesn’t need to, Tony knows how to make his own choices and he’s quite fond of Bucky.

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They’re curled up on the ground of a greenhouse that Tony assumes belongs to someone Bucky knows looking at the flowers. “I’m not really kidding about being a hot mess. Most of the time I forget to take care of myself. Its like my life is a Tamagotchi only the dumb little creature I’m keeping alive is me and I’m piss poor at it,” Bucky says.

Okay, Tony probably shouldn’t laugh because that’s kind of sad but the way he phrased that was hilarious. “Sorry, sorry,” Tony says as he gathers control over himself. “Question though, do you expect me to take care of you?” he asks.

Bucky wrinkles his nose, “obviously not,” he says in a distasteful tone.

“Then I don’t really care,” Tony tells him. “People aren’t perfect and I don’t expect you to be either. Also its pretty obvious looking at you that you’ve been through some shit. You literally have a metal arm so your warning is late. Good craftsmanship on the arm though. Functions almost as well as your biological one.” Not common for prosthetics even now, Tony looked it up and he happens to
know there aren’t a lot of people with the knowhow to do something like that. And one is in prison for terrorism so that narrows the list.

For a moment Bucky says nothing. “That’s it?” he asks and Tony shrugs.

“Don’t know what you expected, Buck. What, do you think I’d dump you because you have depression or something?” Kind of a stupid reason to break it off with someone when things are going well. Maybe if that was something combined with a bunch of other things but so far he and Bucky have proven themselves pretty damn compatible so as it stands that’s a stupid reason to ditch Bucky. And for what? Its hardly like he’s got better prospects anyway. What’s he supposed to do, dump Bucky then date someone who’s got his entire life planned before they even meet? Yeah, no.

Bucky shrugs, “I don’t know, I thought maybe you’d have like… reservations or something.”

“You say that like the bar for alphas isn’t ‘Hot Pockets and memes’ and they’re still failing. So far you’ve gone out of your way to show that you listen to what I’m saying, your gifts are funny or at least well enough thought out that I know you didn’t just buy some random shit, and it helps that you’re cute. And you shower, god help me if I run into another person with a scent so nasty I nearly throw up on the spot. Doesn’t happen often but when it does,” he shudders. They all have stories of bad encounter with the Smelly And Entitled but Bucky isn’t either of those things so great.

“I don’t know if that’s a compliment or if you’ve been so traumatized that you actually think the bare minimum is acceptable,” Bucky says, frowning.

Bare minimum Tony’s ass. “Oh, minimum is showering and not immediately deciding you can run my life. Or giving me literally anything that’s not jewelry. You’re attentive, you care about my feelings and omegas more widely, and you obviously have money but you don’t think that’s a substitute for actually caring about me as a person. And you show emotion. Holy Christ that shouldn’t even be a standard but I am tired of alphas that only express emotion when they’re pissed. I get that you guys don’t get much room culturally to do that but its unattractive to know the only time you care is when you’re pissed. And it’s kind of frightening.” Yeah, people who only decide to show emotion when they’re screaming at you aren’t exactly ideal life partners. Or ideal anything, Tony wouldn’t even keep people like that as friends.

“Sometimes I wonder how omegas seem to end up in shit relationships more and I realize now its because you run into such shit people you apparently end up with slightly less shit people. Everything you listed is a given in any relationship I’ve ever been in, not some kind of bonus. No wonder omegas hate us,” he mumbles.

They don’t, not really. Just the way things are run in a way that benefits them to such an extent that omegas are routinely fucked right over. “Yeah, alphas are better in theory than in practice. I mean you’re pretty and smell nice when you decide soap isn’t something only omegas use but shit, at what cost?”

“Statistically, your life,” Bucky points out.

“Depressing,” Tony mumbles.

“Couple days ago a pigeon landed beside me while after I got coffee and it had a package of extacy strapped to its back. Whoever trained that pigeon did a piss poor job,” Bucky says and Tony starts laughing.

“Messenger pigeons for drugs?” he asks and Bucky shrugs.
“I stopped questioning these things because they happen to me a lot. Once I was walking down the street at like four in the morning and out of nowhere a dildo fell from the sky and suction cupped to the ground it landed on about two feet in front of me. I almost got smoked in the head with a dildo falling from the sky,” he says, shaking his head.

Tony starts laughing again because that’s ridiculous. “Lucky you, weirdest thing I’ve gotten in the last couple years was that one alpha who decided a Louis Vuitton condom was a good courting gift and the time Peter made toast and it looked like Jesus got burnt on to it.” Watching him regretfully put peanut butter on it and eat it guiltily is probably his favorite story about Peter. He looked soupset but wasn’t willing to waste the toast. Probably because Harley was hovering nearby ready to steal it.

“Oh, Jesus toast. I’ve had that except I stuck it in the toaster oven and when I went to get it out it burnt me so Steve told me it was Judas toast.” Tony snorts and starts laughing.

“Judas toast, I’ll have to remember that. The children will love it.” Except maybe Nebula but she kind of hates everything to varying degrees so that’s to be expected. And maybe Harley too but he’s mad about being on dish duty for a whole house of people and also hates fun.

Bucky snickers for a moment before he frowns, “wait, did you say ‘Louis Vuitton condom’? Because I have questions and concerns.”

Tony nods, “not the weirdest thing I’ve gotten, and definitely not the weirdest thing anyone has gotten, but not exactly a great gift nonetheless.”

“Who the fuck thought that was a good idea? Also what the hell tops that in weirdness?”

“Tropical birds- toucan to be exact, a clump of what we could only assume was wet hair, a jar of sperm, a stuffed taxidermy cat, a glass eye, and a first edition of The Canterbury Tales. The last one wouldn’t be so weird if it didn’t go to a blind person,” he says. “There’s definitely more but those are the ones I remember off the top of my head.”

Bucky squints, “wet hair?”

Tony shrugs, “look, some rich people are weird okay. Wait, there was that time someone sent me a jewel encrusted beetle. I hate bugs so I threw that shit out on sight.” Natasha thought it was funny when he screamed and honestly he resents that because that stupid bug freaked him out. He’s pretty sure someone fished it out of the garbage but if they want it then fine, Tony has no objections so long as he doesn’t have to look at it. He can’t believe that was someone’s idea of a decent gift.

Bucky leans down and kisses the top of his head. “I am genuinely sorry that you have to deal with that bullshit,” he says. Yeah, Tony too but the good news is that Bucky’s gifts, even when he doesn’t want them, aren’t fucking weird bugs with gems on them so. He twists a little to look at Bucky, considering him for a moment before he leans in and kisses him softly. Bucky grins as he pulls back a little, “I’ll never get tired of kissing you,” he murmurs and Tony grins back.

“Good,” he says, leaning back in to kiss Bucky again. The kiss is slow, sweet, hesitant- so Tony presses into it more, silently letting Bucky know there’s no need to the hesitation not that it works. Even as Bucky lifts a hand to Tony’s hip, gently resting it there as he deepens the kiss he’s still hesitant. Tony pulls back a little, earning an upset noise from Bucky as he tries to chase after him. Tony allows him a brief kiss before he pulls away again, “you always this prudish?” he asks and Bucky looks at him like he’s nuts.

“I’m not prudish,” he says and Tony snorts.
“Bucky, I don’t know if you know this but I have a whole body and you can touch it,” he points out. “So maybe do so,” he adds, leaning back in to kiss Bucky.

“You sure?” Bucky murmurs as if Tony hasn’t thought of this before.

“Hell yes, I’m sure,” Tony tells him, “think about it all the time,” he adds.

Thankfully that seems to break Bucky’s worries because he slides his hand down Tony’s hip and over his ass, hand hooking around his thigh as he pulls it over his waist. Tony helps him out a little, shifting positions so he’s properly straddling Bucky. He makes a pleased noise, hand sliding back up his body to rest on his waist. “You think about this all the time, hmm?” Bucky asks, pressing a quick kiss to Tony’s lips.

Tony shrugs, “sure I do,” he murmurs, hand trailing down Bucky’s chest. He’s damn good looking, Tony’s pretty sure everyone with functioning eyes is interested in Bucky minus Natasha but Tony thinks she might have a preference for women. Or no one, he’s not sure which. Point is Bucky is hot and yeah, obviously he thinks about it frequently. “What about you?” he asks, looking up from Bucky’s body.

Bucky laughs, curling a hand behind Tony’s head and pulling him back into a kiss. This time it’s rougher, a little more desperate as Bucky’s hand moves from his hair to his jaw, cupping it surprisingly gently given the heat of the kiss. “Tony, I don’t know how much time you spend with mirrors but yeah, obviously I fuckin think about you all the time,” he murmurs and huh.

“Brooklyn accent?” Tony asks, nipping at Bucky’s bottom lip. “That’s new,” he murmurs.

“S’not,” Bucky tells him, “just doesn’t usually slip out unless I’m distracted.” His eyes flick down to Tony’s lips and he grins, leaning down to kiss Bucky again as Bucky draws him in again.

His hand moves slowly back down Tony’s body, fingers trailing lightly until his hand settles on his waist. Tony runs his fingers through Bucky’s hair, earning a soft noise of happiness from him as he curls his fingers, gripping his hair as he tilts Bucky’s head to the side. He kisses his way down Bucky’s neck; smiling when Bucky shifts a bit underneath him, hand on his waist tightening as his breathing picks up speed. Tony nips at a sensitive spot on Bucky’s neck and he lets out a soft moan, hand moving off Tony’s hip and over his ass.

“Come on guys, right in front of my flowers?” a new voice says and both Tony and Bucky jump. Tony turns to find a somewhat annoyed looking Asian guy standing there giving Bucky a look.

“Morita, get out of here!” Bucky says, clearly familiar with the guy.

“Morita, find a better time to wax poetic about your dumb flowers!” Bucky looks between the two in disbelief. "Morita, a watering schedule, Bucky. You know this," Morita tells him.

“They have a watering schedule, Bucky. You know this,” Morita tells him.

Bucky rolls his eyes, “they can suffer for a night, they aren’t going to die,” he mumbles. He waits a beat and sighs, “you’re not going anywhere are you?” he asks.

Morita snickers, “and miss an opportunity to embarrass the hell out of you? Absolutely not. He ever
tell you about the icy hot incident?” he asks.

Tony grins, “no, he hasn’t.”

“Do not tell that story!” Bucky tells Morita.

“You gotta tell it now,” Tony says.

“Sorry Bucky, I have to please the crowd,” he says, shrugging like he’s got no choice but to embarrass Bucky.

Bucky sighs, looking a bit like his soul has left his body in despair.
Chapter 7

Morita looks horrified and in his slight defense Bucky doesn’t know what that is either. “Barnes, you should be thrown in the ocean,” Morita says and yeah alright, he’s earned that.

“I think you need gloves because that is unidentifiable,” Bucky tells him and Morita makes a disgusted face, tossing what looks to be a slimy hairball at Bucky. “Don’t be disgusting!” he says, dodging the hairball as it splats on the ground.

“You don’t be disgusting, I wouldn’t be in this mess if it wasn’t for you,” Morita points out and yeah maybe but that’s not the point.

“You offered to help clean,” Bucky reminds him.

Morita wrinkles his nose. “I assumed you lived like a normal human, not like a fucking heathen,” he says. “I knew you had depression issues but I didn’t think it’d lead to questionable shit down your kitchen sink. Why is there hair in your kitchen sink?”

Bucky looks at the sink for a moment, then at Morita. Yeah, there’s no way he’s admitting that he sometimes washes his hair in the sink because he’s too lazy to get in the shower because that’ll result in more shaming. “No idea,” he lies and Morita rolls his eyes.

“You your stupid ass washes your hair in the sink, don’t you?” he asks. Bucky doesn’t say anything but his face must do enough talking for him because Morita lets out a long sigh. “You need a therapist,” Morita mumbles.

He does not. Well, okay, he does but also he resents that- so he’s got some problems, he’ll be fine. Okay, he hasn’t been fine in years but he feels the best he has in a long time and that should count for something. It’s not likely to last but it’s still something good. “I’m fine,” he says and it’s kind of true even if it’s not permanently true.

Morita rolls his eyes, “no you aren’t, you haven’t been for years. You know none of us are stupid, right? We can all see the difference between you in your early twenties and now. Hasn’t Steve said anything?” he asks, frowning.

Sure he has but Bucky listens to him about as much as he does to Morita. “Sure, but what exactly does anyone expect me to do? Almost all the shit that’s caused me all these problems is stuff I’m legally not allowed to talk about. Can’t get therapy if you can’t actually talk about the problem,” he points out. Which is why he’s done nothing until now anyway. He’s not a moron, he knows that more and more he’s having a hard time with life and he doesn’t want to live this way. He likes the freedom that comes with happiness not that he’d felt that in a long, long time.

“Yeah, alright. I’ll give you that. Seriously though, has Steve not said anything? Because you two are usually attached at the hip until recently.”
Bucky knows what he’s actually asking because neither of them are particularly stupid, at least not at the moment. Give them some drinks and wait a couple hours and sure, dumber than a sack of hammers with no heads. “Yeah, he’s said plenty but its not like my answer for him was different. And at the moment Steve is… exhausting.” He’s always been a little exhausting and maybe its because Bucky has hit something of a low point or maybe its something else but at the moment Steve gets on his nerves more often than he doesn’t. He’s fairly certain it’s his ever tenuous mental state and it’ll pass like it always does.

For a few moments Morita remains quiet before he talks again. Bucky can see the hesitation there, the uncertainty, and that’s odd. Morita isn’t much of a hesitant kind of person. “Yeah, I uh… get what you mean. No offense, but it gets tiring to spend so much time with a guy who’s moral code only ever seems to be there when it’s convenient for him. Not that I don’t like Steve, but sometimes his attitude is a lot.”

That’s something Morita has been waiting some time to say, Bucky can tell. He can also tell that he thinks Bucky will react negatively to his statement and yeah, it’s his first instinct to defend Steve but he’s not wrong. Steve does have a bad habit of taking the moral high ground at least until its convenient not to and then he acts like it was still the moral high ground anyway. It’s a habit he’s long had and its mostly only now that Bucky’s got annoyed with it. Probably over that whole ‘get yourself an omega’ thing like that’ll solve Bucky’s problems. And yeah, Tony does make him happy, but Bucky’s not a fool or naïve- Tony makes him happy because they’re in the beginning stage of a relationship. Everyone is happy at this stage.

“Yeah, gets annoying after awhile,” Bucky murmurs, surprising Morita.

“Guessing that’s why he’s not attached to you at the moment?” he asks and Bucky shrugs.

“Could be that, or it could be the fact that Sam and I hate each other with a burning passion. Either way.” The Sam thing probably doesn’t contribute a lot- he and Sam both know Steve comes with them both and they’re both willing to deal with it, but still. Maybe on Steve’s end that’s not why he’s pushing as much as he usually does when Bucky pulls away some.

“Yeah, pretty sure he’d get rid of Sam before you so. In all seriousness though, having some time away isn’t a bad thing. That hair ball over there though? That’s heinous and if you want to impress Tony start using the damn shower like a normal person,” Morita tells him.

Bucky lets out a long sigh because he forgot about that. “Why the hell did you invite him over to not your house again?” he asks.

Morita snorts, “buddy, as one of your best friends and a casual observer in your life I damn well knew you weren’t going to do it and also I’m trying to get you laid here. Show some gratitude,” he says, waving a hand around at Bucky. “Especially when I ended up touching that all in an effort to get you some.” He gestures to the wet hair and Bucky wrinkles his nose, remembering Tony’s tales of wet hair presents at least until Morita’s words sink in.

Wait, what?

*

Tony’s going to have to thank that friend of Bucky’s because Bucky sure shit wouldn’t have asked him to pay a visit to his house. It’s kind of cute, if frustrating, how shy Bucky is when he probably shouldn’t be. Its not as if he’s lacking in looks or personality and in Tony’s experience the combination is rare. Most of the time its one or the other and sure, looks are nice but trying to have a conversation with someone who’s got the personality of a card board cutout of a gerbil is impossible.
“Your nervousness is adorable, but I don’t bite,” Tony tells him. “And your house is nice. I was kind of sold on the ‘no teenagers’ element to begin with though. I love them all but if I hear one more fourteen year old cry about someone stealing their last energy drink I think I might throw myself off the roof.” He doesn’t even know why they’d need energy drinks; they’re all full of energy all the time. Also, they’re one hundred percent not allowed to drink those and Tony’s pretty willing to risk his minor freedoms for a computer he hides under his floor boards but an energy drink? How about no.

Bucky lets out a small laugh, “I’m pretty sure I’d cry about that too and I’m a grown ass man. So in the defense of the teenagers,” he says. Tony shakes his head and gives Bucky a small push.

“Don’t be a jackass. And if you tell me you’d have an actual argument over who’s better, One Direction or the Backstreet Boys I will reconsider you as a dating option.” The answer is none, boy bands are shit full stop but Bucky decides to test Tony’s patience anyway.

“Backstreet Boys, but only because I’m nostalgic otherwise One Direction wins,” he says and Tony can tell he means that. He considers Bucky for a moment, trying to determine how much he meant that but it becomes obvious fast that that’s an informed opinion.

“Next time I date someone I’m leading with ‘do you have garbage taste in music?’ because it might save me trouble,” he mumbles.

The look on Bucky’s face would be funnier if Tony wasn’t actually upset that he’s dating someone who thinks boy bands are acceptable music. “I’m sure my music taste isn’t that bad and the standards are Hot Pockets and memes, I’m definitely doing better than that,” Bucky says in his own defense.

“I think maybe you were right about me having too low of standards,” he says. Boy bands, Tony can’t believe this is real. How is it that Bucky managed to keep such a large personality flaw from him?

“I know I told you you should have higher standards but now I’m being selfish and asking to you lower your standards again,” Bucky says, looking quite like a kicked puppy.

Tony laughs, stepping forward and circling an arm around Bucky’s neck. “Yeah, alright. Your music taste might be trash but I do like you,” he murmurs. Bucky looks relieved and Tony laughs again, leaning forward and kissing him softly.

Bucky circles his arms around him right away like Tony might take off due to his bad music taste and Tony might be more tempted if Bucky were anyone else. But he’s not, he’s soft and sweet and considerate and yeah he might have the worst music taste known to man but everyone has flaws.

“You’re not gunna run off on me, are you?” Bucky asks, pulling away a little. He looks amused at least, more so when Tony snorts.

“Yeah, we’re going to have to throw out you’re entire music collection but enjoying music that burns my ears is probably one of the least shitty flaws I’ve come across so I’ll stick around,” he murmurs.

Bucky grins, “good,” he says and he leans back down to kiss Tony with a little more urgency this time, hands on his waist gripping him a little tighter. Tony grins because two can play at that game so he leans in, standing on his toes to press into Bucky’s kiss some more. Bucky makes a pleased noise and starts walking backwards, pulling Tony along with him until he hits the edge of the couch. He sits, pulling Tony down with him as he does. Tony allows himself to fall into Bucky’s lap, arranging himself so he’s straddling Bucky.
He presses Bucky into the back of the couch as Bucky runs his hands up and down Tony’s sides before curling them under his ass and squeezing a little. Tony lets out a soft noise and pleasure and tangles a hand into Bucky’s hair, tilting his head the way he wants it. Bucky’s soft sigh turns to a moan when Tony pulls on his hair. “Hmm, didn’t take you for the type,” Tony murmurs.

“Yeah, it’s a thing—” his words cut out as Tony pulls on his hair again and presses his face into Bucky’s neck. The action elicits another moan out of Bucky as he shifts under Tony, arching into him. Tony smiles as he kisses his way down Bucky’s neck because he’s heard plenty about how alphas react to omegas but he’s never actually tested anything out. Never really wanted to before now and he hasn’t much had the opportunity to either but Bucky’s making him regret that choice a little. He likes the way Bucky reacts, soft gasps into Tony’s ear as his hands cling to the back of his shirt all over a little scenting. “Tony,” Bucky murmurs as Tony’s teeth graze his neck, fingers gripping tighter to his shirt as Tony kisses the spot he’s been teasing softly.

“You always this easy?” Tony asks, nosing at Bucky’s neck.

He shivers a little under Tony. “Don’t be rude. S’been awhile,” Bucky tells him, “and you smell fuckin’ great,” he adds.

Tony pulls away a little, detangling Bucky’s hair from his hand and running it down Bucky’s chest. Bucky looks disappointed at the loss and that makes Tony smile, “it’s been awhile, hmm?” he asks and Bucky lets out a soft huff.

“Let’s not dwell on it,” he mumbles.

Tony grins and leans back in, pressing Bucky back into the couch, “how about we change that, hmm?” he asks.

Bucky’s eyes go wide and it’s kind of funny that he’s surprised at all considering. But Tony doesn’t have time to unpack Bucky’s inability to read very obvious body language when he’s got better goals in mind. “Seriously?” Bucky asks like this is some kind of shock.

He leans in and kisses Bucky soft and slow, teasing Bucky until he’s whimpering softly into Tony’s mouth. His hands have found their way under his shirt and Tony pulls away just long enough to pull it over his head and toss it aside before he leans back into Bucky. “This a yes?” he murmurs into the kiss.

“Fuck yes,” Bucky tells him, wrapping an arm around his waist and he shifts, pulling Tony down onto the couch and kissing him again. Tony grins, wrapping his arms around Bucky’s shoulders and dragging him further into it. Bucky places one hand above his head, balancing himself there as he runs his other hand down Tony’s body. His hand settles at Tony’s waist band, fingers teasing at edge as Tony’s breath picks up. “What’s got you in such a rush, hmm?” he asks, leaning down and giving Tony a soft, sweet kiss that he pulls away from way too soon.

Tony huffs, impatient. “Been awhile for me too so get to it,” he tells Bucky, curling a leg around him to prod him closer. Bucky frowns, clearly confused and Tony squints. “What?” he asks because this isn’t really a confusing activity.

“What do you mean its been while?” Bucky asks and it takes a second for Tony to catch his drift because he’s got other things on his mind and apparently Bucky is more easily distracted than he is.

“You think in a house of horny teenagers its never occurred to us to just fuck each other? Oh honey, it has.” Bucky looks kind of like he doesn’t know how to feel about that and Tony doesn’t really give a shit how he feels about that because he’s got better things for Bucky to feel if he’d pull his
head out of his ass.

“Is this where that weird notion of omegas experimenting with each other comes from?” he asks because that’s what he thinks is acceptable right now.

“Are you going fuck me some time this year or are you going to ask more dumb questions? And the answer is probably, not that we have a choice. That’s all that’s readily available and trust me being picky within that doesn’t really work in your favor but that doesn’t matter right now because I have better things to care about,” he says, pulling Bucky back into a kiss.

Thankfully Bucky lets him, happily diverting his attention back to causes Tony cares about. Tony moans softly as Bucky nips at his lower lip before turning his attention to Tony’s jawline and neck, trailing kisses down it as his fingers go back to toying with his belt line. He curls into Bucky a little, slipping one hand up his shirt and the other over Bucky’s ass. “Come on, Bucky, hurry it up,” he says, almost whines actually.

“I’m trying to savor things over here,” Bucky murmurs in his ear.

Tony huffs, “savor it next time and hurry it up now,” Tony tells him, lifting Bucky’s shirt. Bucky’s polite and cooperates with him, pulling it over his head and tossing it aside. He grins, hovering over Tony for a moment, before he stands up and, “no!” Tony says, sitting up.

Bucky, because he’s an asshole, laughs at him. “Christ you’re impatient when you’re horny. Give me a minute to grab lube and a damn condom. Safety first,” he says, padding off. Tony glares after him because it’s rude to not tell him that first. He does thankfully return quickly with supplies, laughing when Tony pulls him back onto the couch fast. “Fuck, gotta appreciate your enthusiasm,” he murmurs as he leans in and kisses Tony.

Hell yeah he should appreciate Tony’s enthusiasm, he’s privileged to get it. “Yeah well, helps that you’re hot,” Tony murmurs between kisses. Bucky pushes him back into the couch a little roughly and Tony moans, curling his legs behind Bucky’s ass to prod him forward some. Bucky runs a hand down Tony’s body, settling it at his waist as he kisses his way down Tony’s neck, fingers tightening around his hipbone.

“Not sure I can do better than quick and dirty at the moment,” Bucky murmurs in his ear.

“Not really picky on how I get fucked at the moment,” Tony tells him, arching into him when Bucky hits a sensitive spot on his neck.


“Stop that and get to it,” he tells Bucky, “or do you need directions?”

Bucky rolls his eyes at him fondly, “pushy little bastard,” he mumbles and Tony resents that alright, he’s just determined to get what he wants and he’s more than happy to give Bucky a nudge in the right direction. Bucky’s fingers do trail back to his pants though and he swears if these things aren’t off him in five seconds or less he might have to actually write out instructions for Bucky.

Thankfully Bucky seems to pick up on the message because he undoes Tony’s pants and looks up at him for a moment, grinning when Tony must give him one hell of an impatient look. “You’re cute when you’re frustrated,” Bucky tells him and Tony gives him a dirty look.

“If these pants aren’t on your floor in the next minute I’m about to get real fuckin’ adorable,” Tony tells him. Bucky shakes his head and kisses him softly.
“Yeah, yeah, give me a minute,” Bucky murmurs.

“I’ve given you many minutes, at this point I think you’re wasting them,” Tony tells him, propping himself up on an elbow.

“I think I might be the only one attempting to at least try and savor this a little,” Bucky says and yeah, he is.

“Told you that you can savor things later, there will be another day but today hurry it up!”

Bucky considers him for only a half a second more before he shrugs and kisses Tony hard while he wiggles Tony’s pants down. He lifts his hips a little to help Bucky out and as soon as the pants are gone he lays himself back down, dragging Bucky with him. Bucky goes happily, one hand proping himself up while the other gropes around for something or another, Tony isn’t really concerned about it on account of Bucky’s still wearing clothing for some reason and he wants those pants off.

He reaches for Bucky’s waist, curling his hands around Bucky’s hips and pulling him into a little better reach. He makes an annoyed noise when Bucky pulls back some and Bucky laughs, “relax gorgeous, someone needs to handle the lube and you’ve obviously got other missions on your mind,” he points out.

Yeah, alright, acceptable. He gives Bucky a little room to work and its been while since he’s done this so when he feels Bucky’s fingers against his hole he lets out a soft gasp. Bucky’s eyes flick up to him, concerned but he doesn’t need to be. “Come on,” Tony tells him, encouraging him. “Wanna fee you,” he tells Bucky. And a whole lot more.

It does what it needs to though because Bucky presses inside and Tony moans a little with it. “You okay?” Bucky murmurs as he slowly starts to move.

Tony nods, “mmhm, fine,” he says. “Go faster. Want more now,” he tells Bucky. The look on Bucky’s face when he says that is so worth it too because he can see the want there, the way Bucky holds himself back from doing exactly what Tony wants strictly for Tony’s comfort. Bucky bites his lip as he takes a breath but he does move faster. “Come on, add another finger,” Tony tells him after a few moments, “s’not enough,” he says, petting a hand up Bucky’s arm and back down again, slightly desperate for more contact.

Maybe Bucky senses that because he leans back in, pressing Tony back into the couch as he kisses him, adding another finger like Tony requested as he does. They both moan as Tony presses down onto Bucky’s hand, encouraging him without words. “Jesus fuck that is hot,” Bucky tells him, picking up his pace. Tony throws his head back, gasping a little as Bucky kisses his way down his throat, nipping at it as he goes. Tony curls a hand around Bucky’s arm and back down again, slightly desperate for more contact.

“Fuck, you think you’ll be okay?” Bucky asks, voice sounding a little ragged.

Tony nods perhaps a little too vigorously, “yeah I’ll be fine, come on,” Tony tells him.

Bucky lets out a breath of relief in his neck, “thank fuck because I don’t think I can hold out much fuckin longer with you like this,” he murmurs, “so fuckin’ hot for me, s’hard to hold back.”

“Don’t need to,” Tony tells him, “don’t want you to.” Bucky nods, peeling himself away for a moment while he strips himself of those pesky pants Tony had wanted to rid him of not all that long ago before he starts looking around. He finds what he’s looking for fast, scrambling for a moment while he battles it out with the condom wrapper. It takes a moment but he succeeds with it, putting it
on before he leans back over Tony.

“You sure about this?” he murmurs and Tony’s offended, truly.

“Fucking obviously Bucky get your damn ass moving,” Tony tells him.

Bucky nods, “okay,” he murmurs, kissing Tony before he presses in slowly. Tony’s hands curl over Bucky’s shoulders, grip tight as Bucky moans. “Shit,” he murmurs under his breath, head dropping to Tony’s shoulder as he slides in.

Tony’s lets out a few soft huffs of breath, “come on baby, move,” he tells Bucky. Bucky lets out a soft moan as he shifts his hips a little and Tony sighs, prodding Bucky. “You can do better than that,” Tony tells him. Bucky nods, shifting his position so he’s half propped up, face still half buried in Tony’s shoulder, and he starts to move. Tony moans, hand moving from Bucky’s arm into his hair, curling into the soft strands. “That’s it,” he tells Bucky, “fuck yeah, that’s what I want.”

“Feel so fuckin’ good,” Bucky tells him. “holy shit,” he murmurs as he picks up the pace. Tony encourages it, legs wrapped around Bucky as he digs his heels into Bucky’s ass, pushing him in faster, further. Bucky presses his face back into Tony’s neck, scenting it lightly and Tony’s back arches in pleasure. That’s different, in a good way, a great way even so Tony pushes Bucky’s face into his neck a little more.

Bucky lets out a shaky laugh that’s half a moan as he mouths at Tony’s jawline. “You like that, hmm?” Bucky asks and Tony nods.

He pulls on Bucky’s hair a little, “do that again,” he says, “wanna be marked.” Bucky inhales sharply, nosing at Tony’s jaw as the pace of his hips picks up.

“What was that?” he murmurs as Tony arches into him again. His angle is good and fuck Tony forgot how good this could be.

“Wanna-” he starts, words failing when he moans when Bucky hits the right spot. “Wanna be marked,” he tells Bucky, “be yours.”

Bucky shivers, nosing his way down Tony’s neck and scenting him again. Tony’s fingers curl tighter in Bucky’s hair, pulling it tight and Bucky moans. “Shit Tony yes, keep doing that,” he tells him, letting out another moan when Tony pulls at his hair again. He shifts Bucky’s head, tilting it to where he wants it to be and shudders when Bucky’s teeth graze his collarbone.

“Buck,” Tony whines, “fuck, I-” his words trail off as Bucky shifts his angle, hitting just the right spot for Tony to lose his ability to talk to the waves of pleasure.

“Yeah?” Bucky asks, voice ragged in Tony’s ear.

“Don’t think- oh- I- ‘m gunna last much longer,” he tells Bucky, tugging at his hair again almost involuntarily.

He can hear Bucky’s breaths coming faster too as Bucky’s free hand runs up Tony’s side than down. “Fuck me either, not with you like this. Smell fuckin amazing, feel so good,” Bucky tells him, Brooklyn accent stronger than Tony’s ever heard it before.

Tony doesn’t respond, doesn’t have the energy to especially when Bucky’s hand closes around his dick and starts stroking. “Come on baby, wanna see you come for me,” Bucky murmurs in his ear and that has no right to be that attractive.
“Bucky,” Tony moans, tugging on his hair.

“Come on, Tony,” Bucky murmurs, “be good for me.”

He’s not entirely sure he tries to hold back at all or maybe he does, he’s not sure but he doesn’t succeed anyway. “Bucky, I-” he doesn’t bother finishing his sentence as he moans, pulling Bucky’s hair hard as he does so. He doesn’t expect Bucky to bury his face in his neck, loud moan muffled by Tony’s skin but he does.

“Holy fuck,” Bucky murmurs after they pant it out for a few moments.

Yeah, no shit.

*

Bucky looks nervous and honestly Tony doesn’t get that but Bucky’s established as weird and now Tony’s witnessed it too. He didn’t really want the experience of some homeless person wandering up and telling a whole life story Tony didn’t want to hear but apparently it happens to Bucky frequently.

“You’ve got something to say Buck, spit it out,” Tony tells him.

He looks away for a moment and seriously, he really needs to remember that it wasn’t that long ago that they were both naked- whatever it is he wants to say Tony’s sure its less potentially embarrassing than a naked body. Humans weren’t meant to be seen naked, they’re kind of gross looking fully uncovered. Best to leave a little something to the imagination on account of humans have inexplicably weird looking junk. Not that said weird looking junk is without its uses of course.

“I know its kind of… soon,” Bucky starts and then stops there, going back to avoiding looking at Tony.

Not that he doesn’t already know what he’s trying to say, he does. “Yes,” he tells Bucky, surprising himself and also Bucky.

“You didn’t know what I was going to say,” he points out.

“If you were going to ask me to move in, yes,” Tony tells him.

For a moment Bucky looks dumbfounded but then he grins, “yes!” he says excitedly, picking Tony up and spinning him around.

“Is that a hickey on your neck?” someone yells from the house.

Tony looks over and rolls his eyes, “shut up, Harley,” he yells back.

“Slut!” Harley yells back and Tony flips him off.

“That was rude,” Bucky mumbles but he doesn’t get it.

“That’s just how we are with each other. And I’ve called him worse.” There was that time he called Harley a shit covered hobgoblin ballsack for stealing his contraband pizza flavored gold fish so he’ll take Harley’s entirely uncreative ‘slut’ even if Bucky still looks confused about it.

*

Morita is giving his laptop suspicious looks so Bucky rolls his eyes, “the hell are you so confused about?” he asks, waving the bottle of beer in his hand around.
“Are you aware that ‘Tony Carbonelle’ doesn’t exist?” he asks and Bucky throws back his head and sighs.

“Can’t you just leave well enough alone?” he asks. He deliberately didn’t look into Tony for a reason though he could have.

“Its best friend duty to make sure you’re not dating a serial killer and besides what the hell- no one lives a paper trail free life,” Morita points out.

Yeah, Bucky knows. They were spies together not that Morita seems to remember that most days despite Bucky being better at the job than him. “He said he changed his last name a few years ago anyway, and apparently he has a Masters degree so that should make him a lot easier to find,” Bucky tells him. He gets a look and Bucky rolls his eyes, “lets not act like that’s the most unbelievable thing we’ve ever heard,” he points out. “I’ve had weirder shit happen this week. Found out my neighbor is a hoarder with fifty cats because the fifty cats were carted off.”

Morita frowns, “don’t you have like four miles between you and all your neighbors?” he asks.

“Yeah, but still. I jog sometimes,” he says and he resents that that gets him another squint.

“Fucking when?” Morita asks. Bucky flips him off because that’s rude as hell for no good reason. Thankfully Morita takes that as an opportunity to go back to sleuthing Tony anyway so he gets a reprieve of judgment.

It’d be nice if it lasted longer but Morita’s sharp laugh tells him both that he’s found something and that Bucky’s not going to like it. “Buddy I know you want to leave your spy days behind you but I do gotta love how hard life wants to pull you back into it,” he says, turning his computer around to show a news clipping that Bucky wouldn’t have paid much attention to if not for the fact that someone he recognizes is in the picture. There’s Tony, yeah, but its Howard Stark that catches his attention.

“No fucking way,” Bucky says more to himself than Morita.

“Its not a fluke. Carbonelle is Maria’s maiden name and there’s no way that’s a coincidence,” Morita says. “So uh, what are you going to do with that?” he asks.

Get new fucking friends who don’t dig up Tony’s past is what he’s going to do. Maybe he should have stuck it out with Steve’s irritating behavior as of late.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Well, I'm not totally sure what this chapter is but it DOES have some fun elements so I figure why the hell not post it now because I have the attention span of a brain damaged goat and I feel bad for waiting so long with the last chapter.

Sidenote: this is now entering its downswing as far as story goes! Well, kind of. I'm entering the set up of the downswing but its teetering on the edge!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natasha looks so unimpressed but honestly Tony has to leave here some time. “You’ve been on like five dates,” she points out.

“Well there was that time I decided to do drugs in like five seconds so I think this is a better decision than that,” he says.

Natasha squints, “your options are move in with some rando you just met because he was a good lay or do meth? Really? For a genius you’re a total idiot,” Nat mumbles.

Yeah, probably but he’s pretty known for making last minute decisions that may or may not work out. And he likes Bucky, obviously, or he wouldn’t have agreed to move in with the guy. Sure, maybe it’s a little soon but its better than his current prospects not that he doesn’t love Natasha and yeah, he’ll miss her but he’s tired of living here and he wants to do something else that doesn’t require months worth of paperwork just so he can go on his own. He damn well knows it’s more difficult to do that for financial and sheer paperwork reasons strictly to try and keep omegas in alphas homes but it’s still the faster route and he did happen to find an alpha that isn’t shit. Might as well take the easy road if he can help it.

“It’ll be fine, Nat. And this so isn’t because Bucky’s a good lay. I mean he was but that’s not a reason to move in with someone or I would have moved in with you,” he points out.

Natasha looks at him like he’s stupid and waves her arms around. “You live in here you dolt! How many brain cells did he fuck out of you?” she asks, flabbergasted. Tony rolls his eyes because that’s different.

“I moved in because I like you and also you’re the only one in here that’s my age. You know how painful it is to spend time with the teens. I love them all but shit they care about the dumbest of things and I feel old because I’m starting not to understand their memes.” This isn’t a position he ever wanted to be in and he’s young still, he should get the memes but the youth… they’re weird.

She presses her fingers to her temples. “I maintain that you’re missing brain cells, Tony. Did you even think this through?” she asks.

He shrugs, “nope. I’ll figure it out as I go.” Seems to work well for him and he’s had a list of things to do since he was fifteen, its not like he’s got nowhere to go when he gets out. He’s even got an order for the things he wants to do so as far as winging it goes he thinks he’s got a good setup so far. Its not even a full swing at winging it if he’s got plans so Natasha shouldn’t be worried.
His answer doesn’t seem to persuade her though because he rubs her temples with her fingers.
“Tony, this isn’t going to end well.”

“Or maybe it will, neither of us have any real idea of where this is going. For all I know staying here could end horribly too,” he says. “Don’t look at me like that either, we all have horror stories,” he points out. Even the young ones and they aren’t even typically involved in the courting process, not formally anyway.

“Yeah, and we all have worse stories from what happens outside this damn hovel,” Nat counters.

Well, yeah, of course they do. “Look, I’ve spent enough time avoiding the outside world out of fear. I’m tired of it, aren’t you?” he asks, confused. Of course this is something of a safe haven even with its caveats, but being here comes at a cost too and if he’s going to have limits imposed on him no matter where he is he might as well choose the prison that makes him happier. They both know it doesn’t matter what he does, he’ll always be suffering for being an omega in some manner. He might as well make peace with it and do whatever the hell he wants anyway.

Natasha deflates some, “yeah, obviously I’m tired of it but we don’t get a choice, do we?” she asks, anger leaking into her tone.

“No, we don’t and our options are shit. So what, we deal with daily discrimination and a lot of weird sexual comments at the least or we live in a house with extreme censorship, forced dating rituals, and leaving on our own is so strenuous that it’s almost not worth the time to do it. Assuming you live in a state where that’s even an option. We aren’t ever going to win so I might as well go with whatever option is least shitty in a given moment,” he says. “Right now that’s Bucky. Lets be real, even with all the bullshit attached to leaving with him it’s still the easier option and it’s the one that gives me more freedom.”

It wouldn’t, if Bucky was awful, but he’s not so Tony damn well knows he can change his circumstances as much as he wants without any interference. That’s not an option he’ll get here and that’s not an option he’ll get with most anyone else either. So in this particular moment it’s the best he’s going to get.

Natasha lets out a harsh sigh, “and if this all goes wrong?” she asks.

Tony shrugs, “I guess I call you when I need to bury the body. Like I’m losing that fight,” he says. Natasha rolls her eyes at him but they both know she’d help him if need be and he’d do the same.

“Don’t leave it long enough to bloat. I don’t do bloaters,” she says like she’s got experience in this.

Tony wrinkles his nose. “Obviously Nat, I’m looking to clean up evidence as it happens, not three days later after eating a bunch of Cheetos and figuring out why people like that one show with the children so much,” he says. She frowns and he sighs, “you know, that one with the kid that’s named after a number? The one kid looks like old people without dentures? The number kid has powers or something? There are demons?”

“He’s talking about Stranger Things and there are no demons you stupid bitch, they’re demodogs,” Nebula says from the doorway.

They both turn and look at her for a moment before Natasha smacks him, “that was an entirely unhelpful description of that show!”

Tony blinks a few times because what? “The number kid! The powers! The weird shit that came out of some kind of hellscape- it was all there so I don’t see what you’re bitching about. It was a
perfectly adequate description you’re just not as smart as Nebula,” he tells her.

*B*

Bucky considers his options because he doesn’t really know what to do here and honestly Howard Stark being Tony’s dad isn’t even the most horrifying thing he’s had to deal with today. That goes to all the paperwork he had to fill out before Tony could leave his current hellscape and he’s got opinions all that shit but also he doesn’t know what to do about the Howard Thing. “Do I like… tell him?” Bucky asks Morita, who looks just as lost.

“Fuck I don’t know, I mean it doesn’t really matter given that we’ve sufficiently proved that Howard hasn’t spoken to him in years. I always knew he was a prick but shit, finding out he had a kid by finding out he never talks to said kid really does add a layer of turd to that shit Sunday,” he says, shaking his head.

Yeah, yeah, they all hate Howard that’s well established years ago. “But like. Do I pretend I have no idea or?”

“Bucky, I don’t know on account of I’m a beta, no one expects me to be in any kind of relationship with omegas or literally anyone else because I guess we have no sexualities. Figure it out yourself, I have my own problems. Please stop looking at me like you’re a kicked puppy, you know no one can resist that,” he says, shoving his hand in Bucky’s face like that’ll help.

Bucky shoves his hand out of the way so Morita attempts to just look in another direction but that doesn’t really work out for him either. “Are you guys going to like… wrestle there all day or what?” Tony asks from the doorway and Bucky jumps, knocking both him and Morita off balance, resulting in them falling over.

“Man, go see a therapist for that shit,” Morita mumbles at him as he wiggles around beneath Bucky’s weight. He lies there for a few more seconds just to make Morita suffer a bit before he gets up. Tony looks amused with them both and Bucky grins at him for apparently too long because Morita smacks him. “Jesus Christ, get your shit together. He’s just a guy,” he points out.

Bucky gives him a shove, “don’t be rude,” he tells him.

“I think it’s cute that he’s so enamored,” Tony says, “means I can probably get away with a lot.” Bucky frowns, “what does that even mean?” he asks.

“Trade secrets,” Tony tells him, walking off with that. Bucky’s kind of reminded of that ‘all right, keep your secrets’ meme because he finally gets what the damn thing is talking about.

He decides to leave that be for now in favor of giving Morita a look. It doesn’t do him any good because all Morita does is shrug. “Like I said before, you’re on your own here. I don’t know how to deal with this stuff, I’ve only ever dated people who don’t purposefully distance themselves from shitty parents and also all my dating partners haven’t been sequestered to a house with weird and strict rules. I read those papers, what the hell?” he asks.

“Yeah, I know and that’s probably not the worst thing those houses do but also can you at least pull some damn friend advice from your ass, how am I supposed to react to all this?” he asks.

“Ignore it forever like you do all the rest of your problems?” Morita suggests and that’s… an option. “Don’t do that, I was joking. You already need therapy don’t make it worse,” Morita adds when he seems to have second thoughts about his advice.
“How am I supposed to go to therapy when all the shit that made me need therapy is classified? Do you have an answer to that one? Because I feel like I should at least get one solution for my many problems out of you today,” Bucky tells him, hands on his hips.

Morita frowns, “oh shit, good point. I didn’t think of that so I guess its back to suffering on your own,” he says.

Bucky rolls his eyes, “you’re useless,” he mumbles.

* *

Yeah, Tony knows there’s about fifty different things that have thrown bUcky for a loop today including being threatened with death and worse from Natasha, who decided that she was going to see him off regardless of how little she endorsed this whole thing. Better her than Harley, who was realpissed that technically Bucky is the cause of his being on dish duty for another month and now Tony’s ditching Harley for him. Though Tony maintains that its not his fault, or Bucky’s, that Harley was stupid enough to single himself out when he yelled ‘scatter’ like they didn’t all know to do that already.

Then there was all the paperwork and yeah, Tony knows what it all says he broke into the offices years ago to read it all because someone had to figure out what his options were and its not like they get lessons on what rights they have. So yes, Tony knows that for all intents and purposes Bucky technically has custody of him like he’s a damn child and yeah that’s some really uncomfortable shit but Tony had the benefit of knowing all that pre looking things over. Bucky? Not so much and its pretty obvious that he wasn’t much comfortable with any of that but lucky Tony they both happen to know Spanish and the office temps don’t so they managed a private conversation in public. Tony figures the language thing is related to the probably ex spy thing because that makes sense but for all he knows Bucky speaks a whole bunch of languages for funsies.

But there’s something else that’s bothering him too, presumably whatever he was talking to that friend of his Morita about. He could ask about it, figure out what’s got Bucky’s feathers so ruffled but since he’s had to deal with death threats, paperwork straight out of a dystopian novel, and his regularly scheduled mental health shit Tony figures he’ll leave it be for now. “Hey,” he says, curling up beside Bucky. He still looks a little confused and Tony figures he’s got a right to feel that way.

“You’d think that process would take longer,” he says and Tony knows he’s referring to essentially permanently signing Tony out of omega prison into real world prison.

“Yeah, they don’t actually want us to stick around that long so no, it doesn’t usually take more than like an hour. Technically I could have met you this morning and fucked off tonight if I really wanted to,” he says and Bucky looks horrified. “Yeah, happens more than you think. The young ones are pretty easily manipulated.” From there Tony assumes they become some type of statistic and not the positive kind. He’s more than aware that signing into a power dynamic that doesn’t favor you within hours of meeting a person is probably a pretty fucking dumb thing to do. But they are raised from birth to think that’s the best way to do things and there’s always the ones who buy into it. Tony finds that in recent years that’s a whole lot less omegas but that directly correlates with a rise in omega rights groups in the news so.

“That… doesn’t it make you uncomfortable that I have so much power over you like, legally speaking?” Bucky asks.

He’s not entirely surprised that’s the issue Bucky chose to bring up first of all the things flying around in his mind at the moment. “Sure, but I’d be a hell of a lot more uncomfortable if you had any intention of actually using that leverage against me.” Which he wouldn’t- no one who’d think of
using that power would be so uncomfortable with having it in the first place. People who want to abuse power dynamics pretend they don’t exist in order to continue exploiting them and Tony knows that better than most. Bucky’s awareness coupled with his discomfort tells him more than he needs to know about Bucky’s potential to use that power against him.

“You can’t know for sure that I wouldn’t,” Bucky points out.

Tony shrugs, “can’t know for sure that you would either. I’m kind of tired of dividing my life into disaster situations that I’m trying to avoid so instead of wondering what the worst case scenario is I figured maybe I’ll give wondering what he best case scenario was a try. So far you seem pretty great,” he notes, leaning into Bucky.

Bucky wraps an arm around him and Tony weaves his fingers through Bucky’s. “You put a lot more trust in me than I would. I don’t think I could trust anyone with that much power over my life,” he murmurs.

“Yeah, because you’ve never been confronted with the knowledge that you’d have to. I don’t get the privilege of walking around with automatic rights and people to back them up for me. In my world rights are more like privileges and everyone in power works against me, not for me. You’re a lot more uncomfortable about this than I am because this has never been your reality and the idea that it could be puts you off. I made peace with it years ago and found ways to access the internet so I could look up laws. Pissed me off for a long time, still does, but this is what I have to work with at the moment so.” Sure, he’d like a lot more options and yeah, he’s pretty offended that legally speaking he’s more like Bucky’s child than his spouse but its not like he can change the laws at the moment. The revolution can come later when he has a driver’s license and a job.

“That’s all pretty horrifying, thank you for confirming,” Bucky mumbles.

Tony snorts, “I mean, it could be worse. This could all be taking place in Missouri, the worst state,” he says.

“Hell no, Alabama,” Bucky says.

“Missouri is literally a funny way of saying ‘misery’ it’s the worst state,” Tony says. “Case closed that’s how this works.”

“Alabama is… like that,” Bucky says, wrinkling his nose. “Its definitely worse than Missouri.”

“Is not. And Texas is definitely number two for worst state.” Its big, there are tumbleweeds, and its laws against omegas are horrendous. All shit qualities in a state.

Bucky snorts, “oh absolutely not. Alaska is the second worst state because its cold and dark and no one lives there.”

“I wouldn’t mind Alaska actually, they tend to mostly not bother their omega population probably because sticking five people in a house when they live on opposite ends of the state seems excessive and like a weird amount of work. Sure the cold would suck but rights are worth it. Canada agrees,” he says. Not that they don’t also have their problems but shit, better than Missouri.

Bucky sputters, clearly at a loss before he pulls his phone out of his pocket and calls someone. “Morita, what’s the worst state?” he asks.

On the other end of the line Morita snorts, “New York hands down. I like it here fine but people act like living here is some sort of reason for self congratulations and its insufferable,” he says.
“Yeah, but Missouri is number two on the worst states, right?” Tony asks.

“*Hell* no, that’s definitely California because stoners and suffers are the worst people in the world and that’s all California *is*,” Morita says.

“Florida!” Bucky says suddenly. “How could I have forgotten about Florida and all the weird tales of the Florida Man!”


Tony sighs, “yeah fine, I’ll give you that but only because every time I went to Florida as a kid someone inevitably asked me for meth.”

Bucky frowns at him and Morita’s confused silence tells him maybe that’s not normal even for Florida. “You’re experiences are not universal and also you would have been younger than fifteen so *why* did people think an actual child would know where the meth is?*

“Please Bucky, like you’ve got room to talk when you had a man rant at you for an hour about how much he loves guns and how slavery is still a thing in America except instead of talking about prison labor he thought Big Pharma was drugging the water and—”

Tony cuts him off, “turnin’ the fuckin’ frogs gay!” he says, causing Bucky and Morita to burst out laughing at least until something occurs to Bucky.

“Wait, The Exorcist was banned but *Alex Jones* was fine?” he asks, frowning.

“No, Alex Jones was banned too but the teens grew up with internet. They can, do and *will* find a way to access the memes. We all manage to get our hands on contraband goods one way or another.” Tony had a whole bunch of shit he scrapped together and hid under the floor boards so no one found it.

“Wait, why was The Exorcist banned?” Morita asks and Tony frowns.

“Wait, censorship in omega houses isn’t common knowledge to the public?” he asks.

Morita pauses for a moment. “Uh, *no*. Tell me more because *what*?”

Chapter End Notes

If I had to think up this Cursed Question I must ensure you all suffer: since I decided Alex Jones exists in this universe is he an alpha, a beta, or an omega?

Yeah, I’d like to light my brain on fire after thinking that up too so that’s why I decided everyone else needs to suffer with me.
I am both horrified and amused that you all decided Alex Jones was a beta who wanted to be an alpha lmfao. I didn't expect a real answer, but you all chose to deliver so now we all live with it lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky stares at the note because if he’s honest he didn’t really expect Tony to do a whole lot for the first couple weeks of being here. He thought he’d take time to settle in and adjust but no, Tony’s gone when he wakes up in the morning and according to the note he somehow managed to find a way into town. He supposes he shouldn’t be surprised on account of Tony’s resourceful as hell but it still throws him for a bit of a loop, especially when he doesn’t come back for hours.

He’s in the middle of trying to figure out how the fuck to play some video game Morita brought over when Tony flies back in in a flurry of movement and when did he get a key? Come to think of it that’s something Bucky should have considered when he moved in but he kind of asked on impulse and he’s starting to think he doesn’t really do his best work on impulse these days.

“Hot Pockets and a bottle of mustard and that’s it for food?” he asks, dropping a bunch of grocery bags on the counter, judgment on his face.

“Hey, I’m a meme away from meeting your standards,” he points out.

Morita frowns but Tony at least looks mildly amused. “The standard is memes, Hot Pockets, and a bottle of mustard?”

“Drop the mustard and yeah,” Tony tells him, taking the food out of the bags.

Bucky gasps, “a vegetable!” he says when he sees the broccoli.

The look on Tony’s face definitely doesn’t make him very proud and Morita snickers, grinning at his phone. “So glad I captured the moment where he realized this is the rest of his life and he regrets it,” he says, turning the phone to Bucky.

The instant regret is a lot more visible in the zoomed in picture of Tony’s face as he seems to realize Bucky wasn’t a good choice. “You’re surprised by a vegetable?” Tony asks, sounding equal parts horrified and baffled.

Bucky sighs. “Lets not talk about my diet right now. Or ever.”

* 

Tony has no idea why Bucky is surprised he can cook considering that was pretty much first in his lesson plans but he is. And truthfully once Tony started thinking of it as edible chemistry he didn’t hate it so much and now he’s actually pretty good at it. Helped, he thinks, that he had wanted to figure out how to make Italian food the way his grandparents used to make it. Turned out to be a hell of a struggle given that his grandparents were from Italy and food always tastes better when the people actually come from the place the food is made in. But he did a good job approximating flavor.
for awhile and now he can replicate it pretty much exactly.

Still, Bucky’s surprise at his skill is offensive. You don’t get stuck in a house to teach you homemaking skills without learning how to fucking cook. Its not his fault no one teaches alphas in the wild how to forage for something that isn’t the frozen food aisle, omegas are held to higher standards. Though Bucky seems to be surprised by a lot of his actions for whatever reason. Tony has always had a list of things to do once he left the damn house so he figured he’d set about doing them and he figured getting a key was probably important too since Bucky forgot.

The good news is that he managed to set up driving lessons not that he doesn’t already know how to drive but its best to at least practice considering it’s been forever since he last drove something. And that was illegally and without Howard knowing about it. His mom busted him but she wasn’t a bastard like Howard so she didn’t ream his ass so much as freak out over safety. Still, he knows how cars work and he’s driven before. Should be easy to relearn and then he can get a license because bussing? Absolutely awful. And someone had to get food since Bucky has no idea how to do it, or more likely forgot about it. He hadn’t really been fucking around when he’d mentioned his mental health issues but Tony hadn’t really realized the extent of it not that he minds.

People find themselves in shitty situations, it happens and yeah, maybe he’s kind of worried about the fact that Bucky had been pleased to find a vegetable in the groceries but that’s less because of the mental health thing and more because he fears for what Bucky’s normal diet is. The benefit, if one can call it that, is that Bucky doesn’t have much in the way of expectations for him so he pretty much does whatever until he’s finished with his list of things to do for the day and he comes home. Bucky’s always happy to have him back when he gets home so it works for him even if he worries about Bucky’s lack of activity. He figures that’s something Bucky needs to work through at his own pace though.

The other benefit, if one can call it that, is Morita because the guy is hilarious. And supportive, which Tony appreciates, but mostly he’s hilarious. “Look, I’m just saying I was positive Bucky had died or something until he resurfaced in the bar. Seriously, I ready to look up obituaries,” Morita tells him. Bucky’s off grabbing take out since he’s the only one with a license though Tony has no idea why anyone would choose not to have a license the way Morita does. Still, that left Bucky to get the food so he’s off doing that and frankly Tony’s happy that he’s out of the house at least. He doesn’t seem to leave much.

“Christ, with his mess of a name I guess he’d be easy to find,” Tony says. James Buchanan Barnes, what an awful name. Tony might not care that he shares a name with his father- Anthony is Howard’s middle name- but shit Tony is way better than James Buchanan. Shit, even Tony Stark is better than that garbage even if he vastly prefers Carbonell.

Morita snickers, “yeah, probably. Thanks, by the way,” he says on a more serious note and Tony frowns.

“For what?” he asks. He hasn’t really done anything worth a thanks lately except maybe figure out where Bucky’s keys disappeared off to. The guy rarely leaves the house and somehow manages to lose the keys. Not that Tony should complain, he used to lose things all the time before he got forced into a habit of remembering shit. Now he finds that convenient but he hadn’t much liked it at the time.

“Lets be real, Bucky’s a hot fucking mess. I love the guy, but he’s got issues and… it’s easy to expect a lot out of him, out of anyone. But you seem to work with him pretty well. Lot of other people might get pushy, expect him to change the way he lives because they moved in but you haven’t done that and he doesn’t need that. He needs time, even if it feels like its been forever. But
he’s out more now than I’ve ever seen him so obviously something has changed.”

Yeah, Tony’s presence. Bucky out and out admitted that to him on more than one occasion but he at least seems to know that the feeling probably isn’t a permanent one and he doesn’t seem to expect Tony to continue providing an impermanent feeling of happiness. Tony can tell that some of that is slipping, probably a side effect of Tony being around all the time rather than a night or two a week, and that’s fine. Worrisome to a point but fine. Bucky can’t help what his moods to and if he’s not being a prick about it Tony doesn’t care what they do.

“I know he needs time and space. And this… isn’t my house. I mean technically it is but also I’m the new element here so it doesn’t really make a lot of sense for me to be pushy.” Its weird, trying to settle into someone else’s space and outside the kitchen of all things, and he resents that, really, he hasn’t gone out of his way to take up more space. But he let Bucky cook exactly once and he’s banned from ever trying that shit again on account of Tony would rather eat out of the trash than try something else Bucky has cooked.

Morita shrugs, “still. You and Bucky are genuinely good together, its nice to see him with someone who seems to get what he needs. He’ll get better though, eventually. He wasn’t always like this either, believe it or not Tony was really outgoing and extroverted.”

Tony has a hard time imagining that, Bucky anything but the overly anxious mess that he is now but that’s who he loves and he’s fine with him that way. Its not like Bucky didn’t tell him what he was walking into. “Yeah, pretty sure whatever spy work he did really fucked him over but he obviously got a pretty penny out of it,” he says, gesturing around. Makes Tony wonder what exactly Bucky knows but he’d never ask something like that. Whatever it is the information he has must be important in some capacity.

Morita sighs, “shit consolation prize given what the poor bastard went through but I shit you not that’s all confidential so. Pretty much all I can say is that Bucky was good at what he did, too good because he found a bunch of shit he shouldn’t have and you lived the rest.”

Pretty vague in terms of a timeline of events but Tony figures if he really wanted he could find the information himself. Its not like he doesn’t know how even with working with the restrictions he’s had for the last several years.

He’s about to ask what involvement Morita had in all this mess when the door opens and Bucky walks in with the food. “I swear to god another squirrel runs out into the road I’m going to die,” he says.

“Just run the damn things over Bucky, a squirrel is not worth dying for,” Morita tells him, clearly familiar with this argument in a way Tony isn’t.

“There’s not enough meat on a squirrel for me to give a shit. Now if it’s a moose I’ll stop because fuck that,” he says, shaking his head.

“Don’t just going to run over the squirrel, they’re cute and its mean,” Bucky says.

“You don’t even drive, what are you on about?” Bucky asks, rolling his eyes. He goes to move past Tony but he catches Bucky’s arm and pulls him into the seat beside him, leaning into him as he sits. Bucky smiles, wrapping an arm around him as he settles in.

“Aren’t moose the size of deer? I mean I’m not looking to hit one because that’d cause a bunch of damage but I don’t see why moose was your go to.” They don’t even have moose around here, or none that Tony has ever heard of.
Morita, however, looks confused as hell. “The size of deer? Have you ever seen a moose? Those things are the size of cars, you hit one and it takes you out and keeps walking along. I’m not shitting out either, I saw it happen to this one Canadian guy up north, that thing was huge.”

Yeah, Tony’s pretty sure shock at watching someone hit an animal made the moose bigger than it actually was but okay.

Bucky hands Morita his burger, shaking his head. “Stick to stuffing your face instead of talking up moose size, they aren’t that big,” he says.

“Are so! Look them up, they’re way bigger than a damn deer.”

“Ten bucks says Morita won’t eat that burger with the paper still on it,” Tony says, changing the subject.

Morita raises an eyebrow, “oh you think I’m too proud to not eat this paper for a tenner? I assure you, I’m not.”

Tony pulls a ten out of his pocket and Morita takes a fucking bite, paper and all. Tony stares at him, horrified. He turns to Bucky. “Remember when I judged you for your food habits? I was wrong and I should have reserved my judgment for the real savage in this house,” he says, pointedly looking at Morita. He shrugs, utterly shameless and Tony can’t believe he actually just did that.

*  
This absolutely isn’t Hope’s first plan or even her tenth but of Hank wanted to be a prick about her trust fund fine, she can find a work around. Not that her current work around looks impressed about it but Hope’s not a moron. She’s not looking to take home a child and the ones that last in these houses past nineteen tend to be ‘difficult,’ which she damn well knows is code for ‘wants respect.’ The redhead looks suspicious though, world weary of too good to be true offers, and that’s why Hope chose her to begin with.

“I’m not stupid,” Natasha tells her.

Hope sighs, “I know that, that’s why I chose you to begin with. Clearly you have life experience and that’s what I’m looking for out of this.”

Natasha’s eyes narrow, “I thought you weren’t looking for anything out of this?” she asks.

Hope sighs, “I’m not, not really. What I need is a life partner that looks stable enough to get access to my trust, then we part ways amicably and you get a nice settlement for your time. Other than your continued presence in my life at a few events I don’t want anything else.” This is easier, she figures, than trying to actually find someone and she figures Natasha gets something out of it too. Freedom without having to go through all the extra steps to get there and without any of the usual expectations of an actual relationship. Truthfully Hope isn’t much interested anyway, she just needs access to the money Hank is hanging over her head so she can start her own business and rid herself of him.

“You’re giving me money to show up with you occasionally in public? Yeah, pretty sure you’re secretly a serial killer,” Natasha tells her.

Well, she supposes she can’t blame Natasha for being suspicious. “Will you give me an opportunity to show you that I’m serious? Because there’s a reason I chose you over the young ones,” she says, hoping that it’ll make her seem less suspicious. It doesn’t, not from the look on her face, but she tips her head up after a moment.
“Give me real proof and fine, alright.” Hope doesn’t need Natasha to outright say it for her to know there’s no trust there- Natasha is clearly certain this is a fake offer, or one made to trap her in a space she doesn’t want to be in. But Hope is out of options and she’s willing to give this one a little more effort before its back to the drawing board.

Chapter End Notes

For those who don't know, moose are genuinely huge as fuck. I've not seen many, I'm too far south in Canada to see many, but I've been to other areas of Canada with more moose and those bitches are way bigger than you think they are.
Chapter 10

Yeah, alright, Tony is aware that his resume sounds made up and not by someone very smart either. Who the hell has a Masters degree before they’re fifteen and no job experience? Its kind of bullshit that he’s dealing with these circumstances anyway but whatever. Its not like he isn’t aware that the circumstances he’s in are designed to disenfranchise him in comparison to other workers. By his age betas and alphas will have already had at least two part time jobs and he’s got dick all to make him look good and given his extra weird circumstances it sounds like he entirely fabricated his qualifications.

Which, he figures, is why he needs a cover letter that doesn’t suck. Too bad writing was never his strong suit, that would have been helpful in this whole process but what he does have is a knack for research so it doesn’t take him long to gather the knowledge he’ll need to make a cover letter sound good. He’s halfway through applying to a list of jobs when Bucky appears, long hair wild around his face looking vaguely confused. Not unusual for his morning, well technically afternoon, look. Tony finds it surprisingly endearing.

He sets his computer aside and reaches out for Bucky wordlessly and he walks over, seemingly knowing what Tony wants without him having to say it. He throws himself on the couch unceremoniously and Tony laughs as he arranges himself so his head is in Tony’s lap. “So what’s got you up early?” he murmurs. They’ve discovered they’re both night people though Bucky’s preference is more driven by an inability to sleep. Tony has that problem too, but not for the same reasons.

Tony runs his hands through Bucky’s hair, detangling it some. “I’m not up that early and I’m job hunting. Probably won’t hear anything back but you know. Might as well try,” he says. For all he knows he could have some success and he doesn’t really have anything to lose in the job department so.

Bucky smiles, catching his hand and kissing his wrist softly, “I’m sure you’ll find something. If nothing else you are persistent.” More persistent than Bucky for sure, but he clearly has his issues. Still, comparison is flawed given that Bucky has a bad case of lethargy.

“What are your plans for the day?” he asks. Bucky’s up earlier than usual so Tony assumes he’s got a reason to be out and about.

He sighs, “nothing all that interesting. I was just going to watch Stranger Things. Again,” he says like that’s not normal. Tony’s seen Star Wars too many times to count and he’d been meaning to watch Stranger Things anyway.

“Mind if I watch with you?” he asks and the bright grin on Bucky’s face betrays his answer before his words do.

* 

Natasha has read through the papers but she’s not an idiot, any moron with the ability to type could have come up with Hope’s situation and stuck it in a word document. Though she does have to admit that inventing an elaborate situation involving marriage doesn’t seem extreme. Especially since Natasha watched her scan the room, pinpoint her, and then walk straight over like she was on a mission. If she wanted to dupe someone she wouldn’t have chosen the oldest in the room. Generally speaking the older an omega in one of those houses is the more aware they are of stupid shit alphas do to manipulate them. That doesn’t always ring true, but it does most of the time.
So in theory Hope would have went for one of the younger ones, around eighteen or seventeen if she felt like grooming them for awhile, not her. And she sure shit wouldn’t have stuck with her after Natasha called her a serial killer and made it clear that there’s no trust between them whatsoever. But that doesn’t mean something else isn’t going on and Natasha isn’t sure she wants to deal with the possibility that she’s wrong about this. Being right about Hope nets her a pretty penny after a year or so, but being wrong traps her in a situation that sure shit doesn’t favor her.

Getting out of those fucking contracts takes work and even if an omega shows up in a police station with the shit kicked out of them its not taken as proof of violence. And that’s on the end of less shitty things that can happen, they’ve all heard horror stories and Natasha isn’t looking to become a statistic. Even so, this is an elaborate ruse given that it’d be a hell of a lot easier to pick a target that’d be more likely to buy this story at face value.

“Alphas don’t usually find themselves in these situations,” she says eventually and she knows Hope isn’t faking her annoyance.

“Yes, well. I pissed my father off a lot as a kid,” she says and Natasha squints.

“You must have done a lot more than that for him to hold your trust over your head. Never did get the marriage stipulation though- how the hell does being married make any kind of difference?” she asks. And the tax benefits that come with it too, and all the other benefits. Marriage gets treated like some sort of holy grail and she doesn’t get it because it makes no difference in a person’s life, especially if they were already in a relationship. But its seen as some kind of ‘next’ step, or a final step, and for omegas in particular they’re expected to fall in line.

Hope looks almost more irritated with that than the mention of her father. “He chose marriage because I’ve never wanted to get married. Frankly if it weren’t for this mess of a situation I’d find the entire institution useless not to mention its stuck on some type of pedestal for no real reason at all,” she says, shaking her head.

Natasha frowns a little because she’s never met anyone else who thought that before. Even Tony, who came the closest, is a secret romantic and she’s sure he’d throw some ridiculously dramatic party mostly for his own benefit though she’s seen Bucky with him. Guy is clearly smitten however much she doesn’t want to admit that, he’d definitely go along with Tony’s plans whatever they end up being. Still though, even the omegas who aren’t necessarily interested in marriage don’t tend to see it as actively useless, especially given all the benefits that are attached to it for no reason aside from people deciding marriage is more important than any other relationship.

“I think marriage is a useless institution that pretty much punishes anyone who doesn’t want to be married,” she says and Hope’s eyes light up.

“Right? Why the hell do married people get tax benefits? And when I was looking into wills it turns out even if you like common law with someone all your assets go to your next of kin if you don’t have a will stating that it should go to them. How exactly is a signed certificate more official than living with someone for years? I could marry you in two minutes and that has less meaning than someone who’s lived with someone for several years but we’d get benefits they don’t,” she says, shaking her head. “Ridiculous,” she adds, rolling her eyes.

Natasha frowns a little, “why were you looking into wills? What were you going to do, off your father?” she asks more as a morbid joke than anything but its pretty obvious Hope considered it.

“Well… it’s an option,” she says slowly; regret showing on her features but Natasha starts laughing.

“Oh my god that’s hilarious. So, if you killed him would you get all his shit?” she asks, curious.
Hope sighs, “no, he’s got a will sending all his assets to anyone but me. Well, I’d get the house but I
never liked it there anyway so I’d sell it immediately and he damn well knows that.”

“It’d still be a pretty penny,” Natasha points out. “Two birds with one stone- no more shitty father
and money. Problems solved,” she says, waving a hand around.

Hope shakes her head, amused. “I thought you were worried about me being a serial killer?” she
asks, eyebrow raised.

Natasha shrugs, “if I’m not on your list of targets I’m cool with it,” she says even though that’s not
technically true. She’d mind, but only kind of. “Am I seriously your beset option though?” she asks.
There has to be something better than her lingering around.

From the look on Hope’s face she’s got a backup plan but she doesn’t like it. “Well, there’s Scott and
don’t get me wrong I like Scott but he’s a dumbass and he’s got a kid. This would just make things
confusing for Cassie and I don’t know Luis was so fine with this whole thing when I brought it up
but… well, Luis is Luis,” she says, shaking her head.

“And Luis is?” Natasha asks, just to get her story straight. Scott’s clearly a friend, Cassie is obviously
his kid, but she’s not sure what Luis has to do with it.

“His boyfriend- it’s a long story that involves divorce and prison time. I don’t even know how Luis
landed himself in prison because he’s quite smart. Scott? I know how he got caught but Luis? No
crue and I’m pretty sure he got thrown in there for piracy of all things.”

Natasha frowns because who the hell goes to jail for piracy?

* * *

Tony has decided Stranger Things isn’t all that great much to Bucky’s deep offense to that opinion
when his phone rings. Which reminds Tony that he should probably get one of those and he honestly
can’t believe that slipped his mind of all things. He adds it to his list of things to do mentally as Bucky
answers the phone. Bucky’s still giving him offended looks when whoever is on the other end of the
line distracts him enough that he finally stops looking like Tony slapped a puppy with a wet sock.

“Oh, no that’s fine Tony’s cooking,” he says and yeah, alright he never wanted to be a house omega
but holy shit Bucky shouldn’t be allowed in the kitchen. Tony is more than happy to take up cooking
duty if it means he doesn’t ever have to eat Bucky’s awful attempts at cooking ever again.

Bucky pauses, listening to the person on the other end of the line with what looks like barely there
attention. Poor thing looks like he did whenever he was forced to talk to his father whenever he
called his mom. “Yeah, uh huh. He’s great. Better cook than you actually,” he says and given
Bucky’s standards for cooking Tony doesn’t take that as high praise. Before Tony showed up it
looked like he subsisted entirely on Hot Pockets and he knows the kids would love that shit but a
grown ass adult? How is Bucky’s body not begging for a vegetable? Tony isn’t even that old and if
he doesn’t eat well for awhile he starts craving veggies and Bucky is older than him.

Tony considers Bucky for a moment before turning back to the food. He figures if Bucky needs to
be saved he can ask Tony and he’ll do his best. “What? No, he moved in,” Bucky says, confused.
“Like a week and a half ago didn’t I tell you that?” he asks. Tony frowns and turns around, confused
about who Bucky is talking to. Except Bucky looks like he’s trying to do mental math and he’s not
very successful at it. “No, I told you. I think,” he says, frowning.

Obviously whoever is on the other end disagrees. “No, that’s fine I-” Bucky starts but he’s obviously
cut off. Bucky sighs and pulls the phone away from his ear, giving it a forlorn look. “Well, Steve’s coming over which means he’s probably bringing Sam and I hate Sam and Steve’s being annoying so this is going to suck,” he says, still staring at his phone.

*It’s easy to expect a lot out of him, out of anyone- lot of other people might get pushy, expect him to change the way he lives because they moved in but you haven’t done that and he doesn’t need that.* Morita’s words come back to him and Tony wonders if he was talking about Steve directly even if he hadn’t mentioned names. Tony thought it was just a general statement but maybe it wasn’t. Given the look on Bucky’s face even if Morita wasn’t talking about Steve he should have been.

He walks over and runs his hands down Bucky’s arms. “You know this is your house and you can just kick people out, right?”

Bucky sighs, “you don’t know Steve.”

* Rhodes absolutely hates hiring new people and usually Pepper handles most of that but this happens to be an area he has more expertise in. Pepper’s an amazing business person and she’s damn good with numbers but when it comes to engineering she only knows so much. More than most, certainly, but not near as much as Rhodey. So he’s stuck reading resumes and cover letters from hundreds of people and he really wishes there was something more efficient than this but whatever. Its long, tedious work but there’s the occasional silver lining in terribly written resumes or, in this case, some idiot who didn’t consider his age made his resume impossible.

He reads it over, snickering to himself because who the hell does this moron think he’s fooling? Masters by fifteen, no work experience, and apparently an internship at NASA except he would have been thirteen. Rhodey hates reading resumes but shit like this gives him life. He’s tempted to call Pepper in just so she can laugh about it too when he notices the cover letter and figures he might as well get an extra giggle in before he bothers Pepper. She probably has paperwork to do and he knows how much she hates being bothered when she’s eyeballs deep in her work. So he figures he’ll read the letter and then bother her with his hilarious find.

It starts out generic, like all cover letters do, but three sentences in Rhodey damn well knows that this guy knows what he’s talking about. Partially because the knowledge he demonstrates in the letter isn’t exactly common knowledge, but also because he happens to have solved Rhodey’s arc reactor problem. In a cover letter.

He reaches over and grabs his phone, still staring at the letter in surprise. “Pep, you gotta come see this. I’m looking at the most ridiculous resume I’ve ever seen but I think maybe its not a lie.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

With that last update this was 44,000 words exactly and I'm mad I didn't notice until I updated it now.

Anyway, this isn't my best work but I wanted to update this guy so here it is!

Bucky looks anxious, upset, and Tony doesn’t much care for that. “Bucky,” he says softly, “if you’re this anxious about it just don’t answer the door. Probably wouldn’t be the first time you’ve ghosted someone. You seem the type, no offense.”

Bucky snorts, half turning to face him. “So do you, no offense,” he says, smiling at him.

Tony grins, “oh I’ve done worse than ghost people so if you need advice,” Tony says, smiling at Bucky before he returns to the food.

“What kind of shenanigans could you have possibly pulled in a house designed to force you to date?” Bucky asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Bucky, I think we have well established that I don’t play by the rules unless I think they suit me in the moment and trust me. Trapped omegas get really good at pawning off the absolute worst onto the absolute worst. They deserve each other anyway.” There was a time, a very brief time, when Tony had a weird admirer and he’s got taste alright, he couldn’t have Justin Hammer following him around like a lost puppy the guy was the worst. So he set him up with a very annoying alpha that also had a weird obsession with him and Tony hopes that’s not the sticking point in their relationship but hey, if Hammer and Vanko never cross his path again he’ll be happy about it.

“Something tells me your resourcefulness would shock me,” Bucky tells him, a hint of admiration in his tone and the way he’s looking at him. Its nice, Tony thinks, to be recognized for his talents rather than his looks. Not that he’s fooling himself, clearly Bucky is interested in his looks too and why wouldn’t he be, Tony knows he’s good looking. But it is nice to know he has value beyond that to Bucky because he wouldn’t to a lot of alphas.

“My resourcefulness tends to come as a surprise to a lot of people. Taste test?” he asks, holding out a spoon. Bucky happily takes it just as the door to his house bursts open and Tony has already decided he hates this Steve asshole. When he turns around his opinion is more validated than not given that Tony knows his type. They’re a dime a dozen, the pretty blondes with more muscles than brains and they always think they’re exceptional in some way when they aren’t. Tony looks him up and down, sure that his feelings are pretty clear on his face because try as he might he’s never been good at hiding his dislike.

“Uh, hey Steve,” Bucky says, interrupting Tony and Steve glaring each other down.

“What’s with the tension in here? You could cut that with a- oh my god you’re a real person?” a new person asks and oh hey, an omega! Tony doesn’t seem them around much, except later at night when they’ve managed to sneak out of their houses and they’re always incognito.
“As far as I know,” Tony tells the other guy, presumably Sam if Tony’s memory serves. And if Tony’s memory serves Bucky isn’t fond.

Sam looks like he feels bad for Tony and he has no clue why, he’s the one who got stuck with the shitty alpha but whatever. “You can do so much better, man. You should leave him,” Sam tells him.

Steve at least looks offended on Bucky’s behalf as he turns to Sam. “Don’t be rude,” Steve tells him.

“Can I really do better? You know what I’m working with better than these two and just because you decided to settle doesn’t mean the rest of us need to,” Tony says, giving Steve an irritated look.

Bucky snickers, “ha, yeah, you did settle,” he says to Sam and he clearly didn’t consider that Sam settled with his friend because when Steve gives him an offended look Bucky looks away. “Oops.”

“You seriously think this is settling over that?” Sam asks, gesturing to Bucky. “Man what did they do to you?”

“Gave me enough opportunity to recognize someone with more muscle than brain. Bucky at least has a personality, something tells me Steve’s defining trait is that he thinks he’s nice.” From the way Sam winces he knows that’s not entirely false.

“That’s not true!” Steve says.

Sam pats his shoulder, “I love you, but that’s a little bit true. Its not totally true but it is a little bit,” Sam tells him. “And if you’re so good at reading people how’d you end up with Bucky, worst human on the planet?”

Tony frowns, “I can list at least three people who are worse.”

Bucky gives him an upset look, “only three?”

Sam starts laughing way harder than that deserves. “I thought you were a lost cause but I think you’re alright,” Sam tells him. Given the betrayed look Steve gives him Tony assumes that’s not a mutual feeling.

“Well just so you know I don’t approve,” Steve tells Bucky, who snorts.

“The fuck does that matter?” he asks.

Steve seems to take it as a personal affront and Tony can add hypocrite to his list of flaws given that he clearly doesn’t care that Bucky doesn’t like Sam. “What do you mean ‘what’s that matter’? I’m your best friend,” Steve says a little rudely.

“If that mattered you’d throw Sam in the trash where he belongs,” Bucky says.

“Eat shit, Barnes,” Sam tells him.

“Anything to avoid putting up with you,” Bucky mumbles.

* 

Bucky supposes it’s only fair that he happensto end up with someone who hates Steve given the whole Sam situation but holy hellhe’s never seen Steve take such an immediate dislike to someone. Tony, Bucky doesn’t really think that’s much of a surprise- maybe that he dislikes Steve specifically, but he gets the idea that Tony runs on a constant state of judgmental. In his defense its more of a survival skill than anything given his circumstances but Steve? Usually he at least waits a week to
hate someone but Tony? That took two seconds and they were snide to each other all night. At a
certain point he and Sam- he and Sam- shared a look of confusion over it.

With Steve gone Tony doesn’t look more impressed wither and Bucky doesn’t get it. “Shit, I didn’t
think you’d hate each other. What was with that?” he asks.

Tony’s still clearly pissed off but he at least takes a moment to respond. “Well, he didn’t exactly
make the greatest first impression,” Tony points out, not turning around.

“Well, you did pretty much hate him on sight,” Bucky says, confused.

“Less on sight and more your reaction to his presence, but he sucks more in person so I feel
vindicated,” Tony says.

His reaction? He sighs, “I… sometimes Steve is a lot, but he’s not a bad person,” he says eventually.
He’s not entirely sure why there’s a sudden rift in his relationship with Steve, why there’s been one
for some time now, but it feels like he’s at some sort of breaking point and its obvious Steve isn’t in
the same place. He’d obviously been confused and a little hurt when Bucky brought up Morita so
many times. It’d made it more clear to Bucky that he’s spent a lot more time with Morita than Steve in
the last couple months and he’s pretty sure he hasn’t talked to Morita in almost a year.

Tony turns and raises an eyebrow, “that’s the standard for you? ‘Not a bad person’? Come on, Buck,
you damn well know that’s not really a shining beacon of goodness so much as not being an asshole.
You’re the one constantly telling me I should have higher standards, maybe you should take your
own advice. Sam’s a delight though,” Tony says and Bucky has never felt this betrayed in his
life.

“Sam is not a delight, he’s the fucking worst!” He can’t believe Tony hates Steve but likes Sam of all
people. Bucky has chosen wrong and now he’s stuck with his mistake.

* 

Yeah, Tony thinks he needs friends because Bucky’s suck. Well okay, Morita is actually pretty nice
but Steve is awful and for a guy that’s supposed to be so important to Bucky Tony doesn’t know a
lot about him. A handful of stories at best, but all of Bucky’s mentions of the guy were vague. Not
the kind of thing he’d expect out of a good friend but Bucky’s got a weird definition of friend. He’s
content to further pick apart all his interactions with Steve, none of them positive, when Bucky’s
phone rings.

“Why the hell is Rhodes International calling me?” he asks more to himself than Tony but he
snatches the phone anyway.

“That me,” he says, holding the phone up to his ear. “Hello?” he asks more than states.

“Who the hell sends a resume that looks like a blatant lie? I mean I’d think it was, if you didn’t solve
the reactor problem,” presumably James Rhodes says.

Tony grins, “well, it was a simple equation so I figured I’d give you a tip,” Tony tells him as he
walks out of the living room leaving Bucky looking confused.

“Simple my ass. Brilliant for sure, but not simple. Who the hell are you because there’s nothing
anywhere about you and I’d think that someone who’s as smart as you would leave a mark
somewhere,” Rhodes says.

Amazing, Tony thinks, that he didn’t put two and two together. “Well, that’s what happens when
you’re an omega,” he says bluntly.
There’s a few seconds of silence before Rhodes lets out a soft, “oh.”

“You’d think I’d be less surprised by how little alphas seem to consider that possibility in regards to literally anything but despite being shockingly common it still manages to shock me every time,” Tony says. “And my last name used to be ‘Stark.’ You’ve at least heard of my father.”


Tony frowns, “how would cooking lessons make a person less intelligent?” he asks.

Rhodes sighs. “I’m digging myself a hole here. Point is you’re clearly brilliant and- why the hell wouldn’t you get a job at Stark Industries?” he asks, derailing himself.

“Would you want to work with my father?” he asks.

“Yeah alright, you make a valid point there. No offense but that guy is a fucking prick.”

Yeah, no offense taken. “I’d say I grew up with the man but he did ship me off to boarding school and then an omega house so really we were mostly roommates for a couple of bad years. Did happen to inherit the intelligence, though, so that’s nice I guess.”

“Yeah, I’ve met the guy enough times to know he’s just peachy. Once told me my company would fail because it wouldn’t be able to keep up with his,” Rhodes says, distaste obvious in his tone.

Tony rolls his eyes- sounds like something Howard would say. “Given that your company is now more successful than his I’d say that prediction was based off little more than ego. Your pharmaceutical interests are a little… off brand, but I can’t really say it’s a bad thing that you do a lot of work in pursuing making medication affordable to people who need it. The tech side is what holds my interests though.”

Rhodes lets out a small noise of sadness, maybe, or something else. It’s difficult to tell over the phone. “My momma dealt with a lot of complications that were easily solved assuming she could have afforded her insulin. That’s more of a personal thing than anything I’m actually good at. I mean I know plenty, but pharmacology isn’t exactly my area of expertise,” he says.

So Tony knows. “Green energy is, so much so that you appear to be at least ten years ahead of the rest of the market and that’s a conservative estimate.”

“You did your research,” Rhodes says.

“Green energy is my passion project, or it would be if I actually got the opportunity to do anything with it.” He’s done his research on that too, plenty of it, which is what led him to Rhodes International to begin with. It happens to be a bonus that Rhodes doesn’t seem like a total asshole.

“You available to do something with it tomorrow?” Rhodes asks and okay.

“Yeah, as far as job interviews go I don’t think I did that well,” he points out, suspicious.

“Maybe not, but as far as friend interviews go that went fine. What I have in mind is going to be a lot of working directly with me and I don’t want to deal with some insufferable asshole who’s smart but has less personality than cardboard,” Rhodes says.

Tony throws his head back and laughs. “Oh, I get that. What time am I supposed to be there?”
It really does shock Morita how fucking dense Bucky is. On a scale of one to nearly brain dead he should be flat lining with how damn dumb he is sometimes. But here he is, looking surprised when he shouldn’t be. “I think I’ve got depression,” he says, staring off at nothing in particular.

Morita rolls his eyes, “no shit. Got any new news?” he asks, eyebrow raised.

“I think Tony’s done more in the last week and a half than I have in the last three years,” Bucky says.

“Yeah, in your slight defense he seems like a restless one. Probably the type that always needs to keep busy. You should probably get a hobby though, something that isn’t sleeping,” he adds because he doesn’t count that as a hobby except when he does it.

Bucky sighs, “but sleeping is a good hobby,” he says.

“So’s knitting or like… I don’t know, coin collecting. You’ve got plenty of money, use it to find something you don’t hate doing on a regular basis,” Morita tells him.

“That’s work I don’t have the energy for,” Bucky says, shaking his head. Shit, so Morita knows. He hasn’t even had enough energy to talk to him in almost a year until a couple months ago when he crawled his ass out of the woodwork like nothing happened. He’d be more pissed off about it if Bucky didn’t look like hell when he finally showed back up. Morita figured he didn’t need judgment and he’d been right, in his defense.

“Fine then, take up reading. Minimal effort, plenty of things to read. Not a bad low energy hobby,” he says.

Bucky shakes his head and laughs. “Always something with you, hmm?”

Morita shrugs, “well, I get bored fast and depression never took so I guess I got the better end of the deal with a sense of humor and a job I like.” Never really saw himself as a bar owning type but its not so bad. A shock to his system when he first went about it, sure, but he’s used to a lot more adrenaline at work. Once he got used to it it wasn’t so bad and there’s still the occasional bar fight to get the blood pumping.

“Must be fuckin’ nice,” Bucky mumbles. “Also, I hate reading so got any other ideas?”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I'm sure at this point you've noticed that sometimes two words like to stick together in my fics and I'm sure you've also noticed its always an italicized word stuck to the next word. I have no clue why this happens, but know that its not on purpose on my behalf it just sort of... does that unless I comb through and separate them all.

Natasha and Hope walk down the street and Natasha has to admit this is either a very convincing ruse or Hope isn’t lying about her proposition. “Well that was awful,” Natasha says eventually but Hope doesn’t look like that entire dinner date was a hot disaster.

“Actually that went quite well. I didn’t think you’d be intimidated easily but it pays to see how someone reacts in person,” Hope says. “Hank hates you.”

She rolls her eyes, “I don’t care what your father thinks of me,” she says. She’d told Hank that in so many words as well not that he’d been pleased about it either. Natasha is certain Hank thought he was about to deal with some poor, timid omega that Hope scooped out of a home for her purposes but she hadn’t chosen someone meek. Natasha is familiar with people like Hank, was even before she got stuck in that house, and she’s made it her mission to never be intimidated by someone like that ever again. Besides, she’s dealt with far scarier than Hank Pym.

“Which is exactly why I thought you’d be a good fit. Helps that you don’t have a heinous personality too,” Hope says, smiling a little.

Yeah, she’s a delight, she knows. “I assume if I have to stick around for a year at least you’d want someone who’s decent company. And I’m excellent,” Natasha says, smiling.

“I assume I’ve won a little trust, then?” Hope asks. She tilts her head to the side like she already knows the answer and Natasha supposes she does given that she’s not exactly shy about how she feels. Perhaps a sign that she’s gotten a little too comfortable with sharing how she feels but Tony is a hot mess on the best of days, its not like she could outdo him as far as being neurotic goes.

“You can’t be worse than your father,” Natasha says in place of giving Hope credit where its due, she does seem to be genuine and Natasha has always been talented at reading people except maybe Tony. She only seems to understand what’s going on with him half the time and she used to not understand the appeal of mystery with a person but Tony’s always doing something strange and contradictory and she finds it surprisingly endearing. Not that it matters now that he’s gone and he’s missed. Even Nebula is sad and Natasha isn’t sure she feels much more than anger most of the time.

Hope snorts, “wow, you’re really not one for compliments. But hey, at least I’m not as bad as Hank,” she says, shaking her head and laughing.

“Compliments aren’t my thing, no. I tend to be too blunt for my own good.” At least when she’s not playing a role, and she’s good at playing a role. She’s almost better at that than at playing herself most days. Its easier, more comfortable to be someone else for a day than it is to risk someone getting to know her and then deciding maybe she isn’t worth it after all. That was the beauty of Tony- he already knew everything and he’s loyal to a fault. Even if he hated her he’d probably keep her
around because he wouldn’t want to hurt her feelings. Poor bastard is a bleeding heart once he decides to care about people. Natasha on the other hand, she doesn’t trust easy and she certainly doesn’t go from no trust to all the trust the way Tony does. All or nothing is the best and worst part of Tony’s personality.

“Yeah, when you told Hank you’d sooner shoot yourself than be a home maker I got that impression,” Hope says. “The look on his face was pretty funny though.”

Natasha has always enjoyed when people make that sour squinting face like they’ve just eaten something disgusting and this is no exception. That and she genuinely hates all things to do with homemaking. Tony at least had the benefit to taking to cooking once he stopped blowing things up but she never found much joy in that. She did, however, find a little joy in getting around all those pesky rules and security systems. She’s always loved sneaking around and the higher the stakes the better. Keeping what little precious freedoms she has is something she considers high stakes enough to make things interesting.

“Natasha!” someone calls and she frowns, scanning the street immediately because there shouldn’t be anyone around here who recognizes her.

Rhodey looks a mix of amused and horrified. “You’re joking,” he says, shaking his head in disbelief.

Tony snorts and laughs, “you think I’d joke about my trauma?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Something tells me that’s a strong possibility,” Rhodey says and he’s not wrong, Tony does kind of have a thing for jokes. Pisses serious people off because they assume he can’t take things seriously but that’s not true, it’s just that he prefers not to.

“You’d be right, but I’m dead serious about that the presents were the worst,” Tony tells him.

“Pepper never mentioned any of that, not that it matters all that much,” Rhodey says but he’s frowning a little.

“Its not always such a huge part of people’s lives. Plus whether or not that kind of thing matters is pretty related to your zip code.” Its not like he’s ignorant to poorer areas not that he’s ever been in one for a long enough time for it to matter. He’s lucky enough to have come from wealth rather than happening to be the child of the help that share, if only barely, the same zip code.

“Pretty sure Pepper grew up rich but she doesn’t talk to her parents so I don’t really know. I figure they didn’t have a good relationship,” Rhodey says.

Ugh, yeah, Tony can relate. So can most other omegas. “Well clearly you’re close with your family, given your side projects,” Tony says. “That must be nice at least.” He’s always liked the idea of family but never really had the privilege of having one, not really. Though he supposes he can’t complain, he had everything else he could ever ask for until that pesky omega thing pretty much stripped all that away.

Rhodey sighs, “well, not really. Momma died three years ago and my father was an army man, died when I was a kid so now all I’ve got left is an eccentric uncle who thinks he’s a musician but,” Rhodey shakes his head. “Not to much.”

“Well that’s a sad, depressing sad tragic backstory but you have to wait at least three work days to unlock mine. There are no eccentric musical uncles though, except for my equal parts love and fear of Scar from The Lion King.” One of Tony’s favorites as a kid not that he was allowed to watch
many cartoons. Howard thought they were immature and now that Tony’s not a child he’s pretty sure Howard just hates fun and also his kid that Tony’s sure he only had to inherit the company not that it worked out for him.

“It’s not so bad all things considered. Pepper’s always been very supportive and we work well together. It’s not the worst consolation prize I could have been handed,” he says.

Not the best, either, but Tony hasn’t met Pepper so he has no idea what she’s like. “You do own one of the most successful tech companies in the world and honestly I am offended on your behalf that people even put Hammer Industries in the running.” He’s too familiar with that family for his own liking and they’re all morons who managed to trip into success off the backs of people in R&D that are smarter than them. And even then it’s still not enough to combat their terrible business sense and general stupidity.

Rhodey snickers, “something tells me you have a history with them?” he asks more than states, raising an eyebrow.

Tony presses his heels to his eyes. “Oh you have no idea. Do yourself a favor and never spend any time with any of them ever unless you want your brain cells to die and you also find watching someone else’s last brain cell hanging itself in loneliness amusing to watch.” It comes with the risk of your own brain cells looking to off themselves so Tony doesn’t think the risk is worth watching.

“Damn man, what the hell did they do to you?” Rhodey asks, laughing.

“Subjected me to their shitty son who’s been obsessed with me for years but thankfully I got rid of him a year or so back.” And hopefully he never runs into him ever again or Tony might have to ask what kind of skills Bucky has so he can like… get rid of Hammer.

“Justin?” Rhodey asks and Tony cringes. “Yeah, he still has a thing for you but we don’t tend to cross paths often due to the fact that I have taste and also don’t trust anyone who lacks that much self awareness.”

Tony lets out a long sigh, eyes wide. “You have no idea.”

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Honestly he’s so offended that Rhodey thinks the way he takes his coffee is wrong. “Oh excuse you Mr. Fifty Sugars- black is the only way to drink coffee,” Tony tells him.

“If you hate yourself, maybe. Face it man, you need therapy to deal with your issues of which you must have plenty. Black coffee, what is wrong with you?” Rhodey shakes his head and gives Tony’s cup a distasteful look that Tony doesn’t think it’s earned. Sugar in coffee- that’s the real crime here and Rhodey is guilty.

“Where the hell have you been?” a new voice asks and judging from the immediately guilty look on Rhodey’s face Tony assumes this isn’t going to be good.

“Pep, I can explain,” he says fast as a tall, terrifying looking redhead enters the scene and oh, Tony knows how to deal with those!

“Hey, Tony Carbonell,” he says, extending his hand and his blasé attitude seems to throw off both Rhodey and Pepper.

“Are you the reason Rhodey didn’t make it to that meeting?” she asks, letting his hand hang there for a moment.
Tony drops it, nonplussed. “No, he looked at the time and said ‘oh, I have a meeting in five minutes. I can miss that’ all on his own,” Tony tells her. Rhodey looks betrayed and he shouldn’t, Tony’s not about to get on his wife’s bad side because Rhodey thought hanging out with his inventions and Tony was more fun than a meeting. Pepper loves Rhodey, he can make it up to her but Tony can’t redo a first impression and he’s not looking to work his way into someone’s good books if he can throw Rhodey under the bus to do it right away.

Pepper turns back to Rhodey, arms crossed and Rhodey looks away, sheepish. “WE were making good progress,” he says in his defense.

“You better have because I don’t appreciate fielding stupid questions from people who don’t think I know what I’m talking about when I know more than them about the subject at hand,” she snaps.

“Ugh, I hate when that happens. Especially when they act like it’s a debate- like buddy its really not, I know more than you and you’re wrong. Or on this case you knew more then them but they chose to ask questions anyway because it wasn’t Rhodey saying all the same shit you were,” Tony says, rolling his eyes.

It’s the right thing to say because Pepper softens immediately. “Oh exactly, and then they’ll listen to his slightly reworded response that’s the exact same as mine was but they act like he’s enlightened! You don’t work my job as long as I have and not know more than most about any given project. Just because I don’t build Rhodey’s tech doesn’t mean I don’t know how it works. And Mark can barely use a cell phone so that man has got no right to act like he knows more than me or even a stuffed rat about your projects,” Pepper says, directing that last bit at Rhodey more than Tony.

“You think I like the guy? I don’t, he’s inherited and I really wish I could disinherit him,” Rhodey mumbles.

“Well next time you get to deal with him. Nice to meet you,” Pepper adds to Tony, smiling a little. Rhodey looks impressed so Tony takes this to be a good thing.

“Nice to meet you too, Rhodey doesn’t shut up about you. In a good way. Says you’re insanely smart and invaluable,” he says, grinning.

Pepper shakes her head, flattered despite her best efforts not to be. “Oh don’t suck up on his behalf, he knows what he’s done,” she says, raising an eyebrow at the still guilty looking Rhodey.

“I got a little overexcited,” he admits.

Pepper considers this for a moment before she smiles, “well, don’t let your playdates overrun your responsibilities. You know how much I hate having to deal with the Board,” she says, turning and walking away with that.

Tony raises an eyebrow at Rhodey and he laughs. “That went better than expected. Probably because you didn’t immediately assume she’s a beta.”

“You already implied she’s not and also I have a working nose. Who the hell makes that mistake?” He pauses for a second because no actually, he knows the answer to that. “Alphas,” he and Rhodey say in sync.

“I mean, not all of them but a weird amount of them. She likes you though and given the amount of time you’re going to be spending with her that’s probably for the best.” Yeah, Tony figures that’s for the best too. Even if he didn’t work with Pepper often it doesn’t seem like a great idea to get on his boss’s wife’s bad side.
He’s on his way out pretty satisfied that he’s had a good day when he happens to look over. “Natasha!” he calls, waving. It’s almost funny, watching her scan the street suspiciously before she locates him and her body language changes completely. Its kind of funny to watch her sometimes given how suspicious of everything she is because then there’s moments like this where she realizes someone she trusts is around and she goes back to looking normal. She smiles at him as he makes his way across the street and as soon as he’s on the other side she throws herself at him in an uncharacteristic show of love. “Oh, wow, okay. Missed you too,” he says, hugging her back.

After a few moments she steps back, scanning him over like she’s expecting to find some kind of sign he’s not okay but she appears to deem him healthy. “You’re looking… normal,” she says and he rolls his eyes.

“Oh obviously, Nat. I have a job,” he says, gesturing to the building he just left. She looks up and raises an eyebrow.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you managed to land on your feet so fast. You’re kind of like a cat that way,” she says.

“This is?” asks someone new and Tony turns to face…

He frowns, “Hope Pym?” he asks, confused.

“van Dyne,” she corrects in a tight tone, giving him an annoyed smile.

Natasha senses the tension immediately and gives Hope a suspicious look and oh wait, what? “Hold up a minute, are you on a date?” he asks because he sort of assumed she snuck out but that makes no sense because its not dark out and they’re all smart enough to wait until the have the benefit of natural cover under a dark sky.

“No, we’re discussing a mutually beneficial relationship possibility,” Natasha says and Tony squints.

“That’s a date, Nat.” She obviously doesn’t think so given the look on her face and Tony doesn’t get that but alright.

“No, it really is a mutually beneficial relationship agreement,” Hope tells him, smile still tight.

Natasha looks between the two of them, squinting. “You know each other,” she states, not asks, because she can see that they know each other.

“We went to boarding school together,” Tony explains. “Didn’t get along.” He can’t help but be a little self satisfied when Natasha shifts closer to him than Hope, looking her over like she might find the reason for their childhood feud somewhere on her person.

“That was ages ago, Tony,” Hope says, clearly annoyed.

“You still don’t seem to like him,” Natasha points out.

“My father, actually. Incidentally we feel the same way about him but she never asked about that before she took her father’s word for it that I was bound to be awful given who I was related to,” he says, irritated.

That seems to confuse Natasha for a moment, “you don’t like your father,” she says to Hope but it must be some kind of discrepancy otherwise Nat wouldn’t have brought it up.

“I’d assume so, given that she took her mother’s maiden name,” Tony says. “What, you realize Hank
was a piece of shit sometime between then and now?” he asks.

Hope glares at him, “how the hell could you even know that? You were a kid, then you were in omega prison, you don’t know anything,” she snaps at him.

“I know plenty, I watched him hit your mom in our library when I was eight. Told me everything I needed to know,” he snaps. Like he’d make baseless opinions. Well, okay, as a child he did that plenty on account of it was a real betrayal if someone didn’t also like your favorite snacks.

That obviously throws Hope for a loop but she backs down fast. “You knew about that?” she asks, shocked.

Tony shrugs, “I was a kid, so its not like Pym felt the need to ruin my life about it lest I tell anyone. Then I turned out to be an omega so I didn’t have any power anyway. Took care of his problem though something tells me you became a problem for him at some point.”

Hope sighs, “well, my mother has been missing for the last five years and we all know about how he treated her. I suspect he had something to do with it, he swears innocence, I don’t believe him. Now he’s trying to hold my trust fund over my head like I don’t know how to make my own money. But it is easier to achieve my goals with that money so,” Hope gestures to Natasha.

“For the record I’m still not on board with this,” Natasha tells him. Tony snorts because yeah, no shit. She’s not easy to win over.

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By the time Tony makes it back home he finds all the lights off but that’s not really unusual. Bucky… wasn’t really lying about the depression thing though Tony admits he might have taken it a little less seriously than he should have. Not that it matters really because he loves Bucky nonetheless so as he lets himself in he resolves to figure out if Bucky left the bed at all or if he managed to settle on the couch. He drops most of his stuff at the door and notes that Bucky’s not in the living room so bedroom it is.

He makes his way upstairs, unsurprised to find Bucky curled up in bed watching videos on his phone. “Hey, baby,” he says as he walks in, shedding his suit jacket at the door and climbing into bed. Bucky drops his phone and smiles at him, curling his arms around him as he settles in beside Bucky.

“How was work?” he asks, kissing Tony softly.

“Fine, mostly uneventful. How was bed?” he asks. Bucky lets out a soft sigh and Tony can practically feel the energy leave his body. “I don’t mean anything by it, Buck. You brushed you teeth so you did something today,” he murmurs, kissing Bucky again.

Some of the tension leaves his frame and he presses his face into Tony’s chest. “That’s like. Not even a thing,” he mumbles, voice muffled by Tony’s body.

He runs his fingers through Bucky’s hair and mostly discovers a bunch of knots but that’s alright. “It is when you can barely find the energy to wake up. Give yourself some credit,” he murmurs, kissing Bucky again.

He runs his fingers through Bucky’s hair and mostly discovers a bunch of knots but that’s alright. “It is when you can barely find the energy to wake up. Give yourself some credit,” Tony tells him. “And let me brush your hair. Its too nice to look like rats live in there.”

“I think rats are cute,” Bucky murmurs.

“Rats are cute and I’ve always wanted a pet rat, but I would rather not find my pet in my boyfriend’s hair. I’m getting the brush,” Tony tells him. He goes to get out of bed but Bucky’s arms tighten
around him.

“No, stay here for a couple minutes,” Bucky says, “I missed you.”

Tony smiles, settling back in and doing his best to comb Bucky’s hair with his fingers instead. “Fine, but only because I choose to spoil you. Ran into an old friend today too,” he says.

Bucky lifts his head enough to frown at Tony, obviously confused and Tony laughs. “Dinner date I happened to crash. Turns out Natasha ran into an old rival of mine. She seems okay now- the rival, Natasha is always okay.” Not that Natasha seems to agree with him on the Hope front, probably won’t for actual years but its kind of funny to watch Hope bark up the wrong tree.

“Hmm. Well, you had a more interesting day than me. I accidentally watched a horror movie trailer and spent the rest of the day in bed watching cat videos and one video of a dog skateboarding.” Tony frowns because that’s… well, very Bucky.

“You used to be a spy but you can’t handle horror?”


Tony laughs, pressing a kiss to the top of Bucky’s head. “You’re adorable.” He’s running his fingers through Bucky’s hair when the doorbell rings and Bucky lets out a soft sigh.

“If it’s Steve tell him I’m dead,” Bucky mumbles into his chest.

Tony rolls his eyes, “I’ll get rid of him,” he mumbles, dragging his ass from bed to go answer the door. Bucky looks unimpressed with this and Tony smiles over his shoulder at him, giving himself another second before he goes to deal with whomever. Bucky smiles back at him, soft and sweet even with his hair mussed like that. He sighs, taking off with one last longing glance at Bucky and the bed.

He makes his way through the still dark house to the door, frowning when he sees who’s behind it. “Please tell me you’re Steveless,” he says to, of all people, Sam.

Sam sighs, “yeah, I don’t know what is up with your hate-hate relationship but I need omega friends and you’re stuck being the only one I know,” Sam tells him.

Tony laughs and opens the door wider. “Ten bucks says your presence motivates Bucky to get out of bed just to try and get me to kick you out because apparently I have more authority than him in his own house,” he says, raising an eyebrow.

Sam wrinkles his nose, “I sure as hell hope not, I don’t know how the hell you can stand him he’s awful,” Sam says, shaking his head.

“Is not and you’re stuck with his shittier, blonder best friend so I don’t see how you think you’ve got room to talk,” Tony tells him as Sam steps in.

“Who’s at the door?” Bucky calls.

“Sam!” Tony yells back.

He waits a moment and smiles when he hears Bucky coming down the stairs, appearing in the kitchen doorway within seconds. “No!” he says, glaring at Sam.
Sam looks him up and down. “You still think Steve’s the shitter deal?” he asks and yeah alright, Bucky doesn’t look so good at the moment but it’s not a good day for him either.

“One hundred percent,” Tony says and frankly he’s offended that Bucky looks surprised by that.
Chapter 13

Sam looks as self-satisfied as always but Tony likes him anyway, even if he’s sure at least part of his reason for striking up a friendship is because Bucky won’t like it much. He doesn’t really get their antagonistic relationship but he’s pretty sure it’s not genuine, their animosity, so he’s not too worried about it. Mostly it seems like they both get joy out of disliking each other without any real heat behind it. “You’re ambitious. More ambitious than I would have thought Bucky would go for,” Sam says but Tony shakes his head.

“He has a lot of uh… problems with the set up of omegas. No way he would have gone for someone less opinionated and ambitious than me on account of he’d have no real way to gauge how interested they actually were.” With him there’s no question because Tony’s not shy about what he likes and doesn’t like and he’s not at all afraid to say it out loud. Bucky’s way too shy and anxious not to look for someone to give him that guidance.

“Seems a bit hypocritical, given his current relationship,” Sam points out.

“Yeah.” Sam frowns, waits for more, and Tony rolls his eyes. “What? It is. But who hasn’t participated in a system they criticize in the most ethical way they can? Probably everyone in some way or another. Both of us included, unless you think there’s absolutely no problems with the way omegas are dealt with and have zero resentment towards the ruling class of alphas essentially treating us like an extended dating game for their own amusement even though you ended up with someone through that system.” He’s not ignorant to the hypocrisy in that, but he’s also not ignorant to the fact that he has little choice in the matter. Bucky has more than he does though he gets the distinct feeling that if he ran into anyone but Tony he never would have ended up in this position.

Sam sits back in his seat but he looks impressed, “you actually care about him,” he says and Tony resents the surprise there.

“Obviously I do, why the hell else would I move in with the guy?” he asks.

“Come on man, how many people do you know that just chose a person because they wanted out. You’re not stupid, don’t act it,” Sam says, shaking his head.

Tony rolls his eyes again, “they didn’t read the fine print. I suspect none of those people ended up in places better than that house. I mean, I hope they did, but I’m not stupid enough or naïve enough to think that’s a strong possibility.” If he could have just left with someone at eighteen and ditched them right away to start a new life he would have but that’s not how things work.

“So you wait for one to come along that doesn’t suck because leaving on your own is next to impossible. Though maybe not in your zip code,” Sam reasons.

He shrugs, “depends on how likable you are. Or in my case if you’re pretty enough to make up for having a personality.” Poor Nat, she got it almost worse than him because people mistake her stony silence and hard to read expressions as stupidity rather than a healthy dose of suspicion. He’s gotten good at reading her by now but ninety percent of the alphas that come around don’t put in the effort.

“Bet you have a pretty penny in jewelry,” Sam says and Tony throws up his hands.

“They do that with poor omegas too? Jesus Christ, do they ever get creative?” he asks, shaking his head. He’d love to go back in time and tell the asshole who came up with the idea that omegas liked diamonds in the thirties that he’s wrong and also to try coming up with something less heinous.
Omegas liking science sounds good, maybe then he could have gotten some decent equipment out of the deal but no, that particular jackhole decided diamonds were the things omegas liked.

“Nah, its just that rich alphas realize poor omegas are a lot more easily swayed then those that grew up with a certain lifestyle. And also maybe a little lacking in creativity, Steve was no damn better at it but he’s cute so I let it pass,” Sam says, shrugging a little.

He resists the urge to insult Steve because he kind of misses omega friends too and he’s only not had them for a couple weeks. “Bucky did alright but that’s probably because he pays attention.”

Sam snorts, “oh Steve too, probably too much but gift giving is really not his strong suit. For the first little bit I was mostly looking to get laid out of the deal because he’s at least hot but eventually he sprouted a personality.”

Tony laughs, “did he lose it again?” he asks, earning a dirty look from Sam. “Don’t act like you haven’t held in at least five insults about Bucky.”

“Yeah, but you two are different. You actually don’t like each other, I just think its fun to insult Bucky and he seems to think the same but I don’t actually hate the guy. He’s a dumbass and I don’t get your attraction to him but he’s not a bad person or whatever. And Steve I get, he’s jealous and seems to be under some delusion that you’ve somehow taken Bucky from him when I’ve never seen evidence they were close to begin with but you I don’t get.” Sam looks confused, like he’s genuinely put thought into why Tony thinks that and Tony will give Sam credit, he seems pretty smart so he doesn’t see why Sam has missed Steve heinous personality.

“I don’t like the way Bucky reacted to his coming over, and I especially don’t like that Bucky didn’t feel like he had a choice in the matter. I’ve spent way too much of my time with assholes like that to give this one the benefit of the doubt. But they were close, Bucky and Steve. Bucky’s mentioned it too, and so has a mutual friend. Don’t know what happened though.” He doesn’t really care much either because it means he doesn’t have to deal with Steve. Morita is a better friend anyway and he’s funny even if he’s weird about his plants.

Sam sighs, “Steve… feels weirdly threatened by Bucky not being as close to him anymore and he normally doesn’t act like that but-” Sam cuts himself short, looking away with his jaw clenched like the words aren’t quite coming to him. “I don’t understand why he acts the way he does about Bucky but he’s not normally that insufferable. Usually he’s smart, funny, bit of a dick sometimes but mostly in a lovable way, compassionate- generally a pretty nice guy. The Bucky thing is the exception to the rule.”

Yeah, well Tony’s dating the exception to the rule and he can’t say he’s willing to look past that no matter how much Sam or Bucky insist Steve doesn’t suck. “Has it occurred to him that maybe his shit attitude is why Bucky doesn’t want to spend time with him?” Novel thought, but Tony’s pretty sure that’s it.

Sam doesn’t look as convinced though. “No, you’re definitely part of why Bucky pulled away because he put up with Steve just fine before that even if he never really seemed to be engaged. I thought that was the depression, not anything to do with Steve but what you said suggests otherwise.”

Well, he’ll give Sam that, that’s an interesting tidbit of information. “He’s never said anything to me either way so,” he shrugs. He doesn’t mention that just because Bucky seemed to pull away more when Tony came around doesn’t mean he had anything to do with that because he suspects Sam already knows correlation doesn’t equal causation. He also suspects Sam has a reason for guessing Tony had something to do with Bucky’s sudden disinterest in Steve but he figures Sam will bring
that up in his own time.

“Mind asking him about it?” Sam asks, raising an eyebrow.

Tony raises an eyebrow back, “do I sense an ulterior motive?”

Sam laughs a little, shaking his head. “Nah, I just don’t like seeing Steve upset. That, and I’m currently studying psychology and if you know anything about the subject those two are fascinating to watch. Tony frowns because on a bad day watching Bucky mostly consists of him sleeping for most of the day but alright.

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Bucky looks adorably grumpy, “find other omega friends. Literally anyone else. Or get a pet or something. A fish would be more interesting than Sam,” Bucky says, looking up at him like an upset puppy.

Tony rolls his eyes at him, running his fingers through Bucky’s hair. “Fish are gross, Buck. Besides, Sam’s alright. He’s funny and he’s opinionated and when he’s talking about Steve he’s cute so I at least he’s nice to look at when I tune out until he mentions something relevant again.”

He’s not exactly surprised by Bucky’s nose wrinkle but he’s more surprised that he doesn’t say anything about his attraction to omegas. “Sam isn’t cute, Sam is awful and his nose is crooked,” he mumbles.

“He’s movie start hot, don’t lie just because you don’t like him you know I’m right,” Tony says, giving him a look.

Bucky wrinkles his nose more and it probably shouldn’t look that cute but Tony thinks he might be blinded by love or whatever. Natasha would probably vomit on the spot. “He’s really not, you need better taste,” Bucky says.

“That’s not very flattering considering I’m dating you,” he points out.

“Proof you have no standards,” Bucky says and its blasé but Tony doesn’t like it.

He leans down a little and presses a kiss to the top of Bucky’s head. “You are not proof I have no standards. That time I decided it was a good idea to date that model from Paris for a week is proof I had no standards,” he says, wrinkling his nose.

“What model from Paris?” Bucky asks, adorably offended at this piece of information.

“I’ll be honest, I don’t remember his name but he was really hot and I have impulse control issues so I decided that was a good plan for a hot minute until he turned out to be insane so.” Bucky considers this for a moment before he starts laughing and Tony gives him a push. “Don’t laugh at me, that ended in a really dramatic scene that involved lobsters and a parakeet. It was not my finest moment and probably just another Wednesday for him.”

“I don’t think that speaks highly to your standards that you insist you have but you can’t because you know, Sam,” he says, going back to wrinkling his nose.

Rude, but true at least that time he dated Hot Guy From Paris. “My standards have improved drastically since then but Sam did say something… weird,” he says, hedging his bets mostly because he’s curious too, now that he’s thought about it.
“Everything Sam says is weird because he’s probably an alien. He’s escaped Area 51, the government is looking for him,” Bucky mumbles and Tony laughs.

He runs his fingers through Bucky’s hair, “they are not and Sam’s fine. And if you cooperate with me I’ll give you a little ammunition against him,” Tony tells him. From the way Bucky half twists in his arms to give him a much more attentive look he figures Bucky has taken his bait. “He said Steve’s jealous of me, thinks I’ve taken you from him somehow because clearly the guy thinks you’re a possession or something.” Bucky gives him a look and Tony sighs. “Fine, sorry. Anyway Sam said he’s never actually seen any evidence that you two were close anyway, but I know that’s not really true unless you and Morita also buy into Steve’s apparent misperception of your relationship so what happened? Because everyone seems to think you’re great friends and the only time I saw you two interact you had that look on your face that you usually only get if it’s a particularly bad day. Doesn’t exactly speak to a good friendship.”

Doesn’t speak to friendship at all but Tony doesn’t say that because Bucky already looks unimpressed. He sighs, “I don’t know,” he mumbles eventually but they both know that’s not true.

“Come on Bucky, you’re not that stupid and I’m actually kind of worried about you. You didn’t see your face when Steve invited himself over, you looked like you got diagnosed with terminal cancer.” He kind of looks simultaneously like he’s under slept and overslept simultaneously all the time, but its worse when he feels worse and Tony doesn’t really understand why he feels the need to defend someone who seems to send him off the deep end. And he’ll admit that maybe half of that is fueled by his dislike of Steve, but the other half is genuine.

“That’s an exaggeration,” Bucky mumbles and Tony sighs.

“No it isn’t.” He must say it in a serious enough tone because Bucky frowns, looking over at him. “I’m sure there’s some reason you two don’t talk as much and maybe you genuinely don’t know why, but you were miserable with him around and you can’t blame it on me and him hating each other because he looked like that long before Steve got there. Might be worth some thought, why you feel that way.” He doesn’t really expect a response; Bucky doesn’t seem receptive to the idea that he’s not exactly as fond of Steve as he claims, so when Bucky lapses into silence Tony lets him. Instead of pestering him he pets Bucky’s hair because he likes that and Tony figures he needs the comfort and Tony can use the time to consider his design on that reactor anyway. Rhodey’s predicted models all failed and he’s pretty sure he knows what the problem is so.

He’s considering various internal components when Bucky lets out a small sigh and starts talking. “I don’t know if you’d even have a frame of reference for this considering your um… circumstances. But have you ever had a friend, one you went through a bunch of shit with, but at the end of it you changed and they didn’t?” he asks.

“No. Most of the friends I had dated someone then skipped town so.” A purposeful design, he’s sure, to ensure omega connections aren’t built long enough for them to gather in groups large enough to demand rights but that’s mostly just suspicion on his behalf. Natasha comes the closest but neither of them have changed all that much really.

“Not exactly, no. Most of the friends I had dated someone then skipped town so.” A purposeful design, he’s sure, to ensure omega connections aren’t built long enough for them to gather in groups large enough to demand rights but that’s mostly just suspicion on his behalf. Natasha comes the closest but neither of them have changed all that much really.

Bucky sighs. “Well, for a long time it seemed like Steve and I seemed to change, but in ways that remained compatible. Until about five years ago anyway- we were both tired of our lives but… bunch of classified shit, point is by the time I came out the other side it was like Steve was a different person except he’s not, I’m the one that’s changed but its just- I don’t get how he goes through all that he does and nothing ever changes with him. I used to think it was admirable, he’s resilient, but at this point its bordering on naïve or… I don’t know, sheer stubbornness preventing growth or something.” He waves a hand around, vaguely annoyed and more than a little baffled.
“Sam thinks I have something to do with you actively pulling away, which kind of proves Steve’s insane theory but I’m kind of curious whether or not I actually play a role so. Also you know that’s usually what happens to relationships when you hit puberty and one matures faster than the other, right?” Because that he knows something about, except his maturity was forced and also he didn’t really have friends so much as people he didn’t hate.

“You… feel like a way to move on from a life I never wanted. Sometimes Steve feels more like a reminder of a past I’m trying to avoid,” he murmurs.

That’s so… unexpectedly sweet. Tony wraps his arms around Bucky and hugs him tight, “I love you,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to the top of Bucky’s head.

Bucky leans into it, smiling. “I love you too,” he murmurs. He remains silent for a moment before he looks up at Tony, grinning. “so what was that thing you had on Sam?” he asks.

Tony rolls his eyes because that’s so predictable. “He doesn’t actually hate you, he just thinks its fun to trade insults with you,” Tony tells him.

The look on Bucky’s face is so worth telling him that too because Tony doesn’t think he’s ever seen that much glee on Bucky’s face, including when he agreed to move and that’s kind of rude, actually. “I genuinely hate Sam with every fiber of my being this is the greatest thing I’ve ever heard!”

Tony shakes his head, “it pains me to admit this, but you should probably talk to Steve and you know, have a real conversation with him. Preferably without me around.”

Bucky laughs, “oh my god, you look like you’re in pain.”

“I am, but I stand by that. Unless you decide to never speak to him again, which I also fully support,” Tony tells him.

Bucky makes a noise that Tony swears to god is a squeal. “I can’t believe Sam’s stupid enough to tell you he doesn’t actually hate me. Think you can get more details on that?” he asks.

“Bucky, he’s dating Steve so the poor thing is basically a charity case. I can’t be more mean to him than telling you he doesn’t hate you, it would be cruel and unusual.”
Rhodey can see how Tony maintained his grades through school given the sheer mental focus he has once he’s involved in something. He hasn’t eaten or drank anything all day and his stomach has started growling loud enough for Rhodey to hear it across the room but Tony doesn’t seem to notice, and he doesn’t notice when Rhodey leaves either. He’s not entirely surprised that Tony hasn’t moved by the time he gets back but he takes pity on the guy anyway.

“Tony,” he says, giving him a nudge and then another when Tony doesn’t notice that either. It takes a second but he shakes himself out of his reverie, frowning. “I appreciate your focus man, but remember to eat something,” he says, handing Tony a bag.

He takes it, grinning when he looks in it. “Bless you for not trying to feed me a vegetable,” he says, laughing. “And we have a problem, a considerably big problem.” Rhodey raises an eyebrow and Tony turns his screen towards him. “Design works great but the core? It’ll take time obviously, but it’ll poison the ground and that’s not exactly something you want in a green energy product.”

“Then use a different material, you’re smarter than that- that’s barely even a problem,” Rhodey says, frowning.

“Oh, it is when no material currently on earth will make a good substitute so. Short of a meteorite hitting the earth with a viable element attached to it we’re um. Fucked,” he says bluntly.

“That can’t be right, there has to be something. We already managed to fix a bunch of impossible problems this- there has to be something.” He’s done way too much work on this to drop it, especially considering he’s sure the elder Stark will throw a pissy fit about it despite his and Tony’s designs being vastly different than the originals anyway. But Howard Stark doesn’t really handle much if anything with grace so he doubts he’d handle a design that’s similar to his if still wildly different being distributed by someone who’s not him.

Tony lets out a soft sigh, “sorry platypus, looks like this is either dead in the water or we’re hoping for a miracle. Thanks for the food though,” he says, pulling the burger out of its bag.

He sighs, “well lets hope one of us pulls a miracle out of our- did you just call me platypus?” he asks.

“You’ve been called worse, I’m sure.” Yeah he has, sometimes by people he thought cared about him but this is probably the first time he’s been likened to a weird animal.

“Yeah, sure. Um small… hamster?” He cringes but not as bad as Tony, who kind of looks like his cat in college whenever the poor thing made the mistake of visiting the bathroom after he ate Taco Bell again.

“You not good with nicknames, never try that again,” Tony tells him and Rhodey laughs.

“You, never was my strong suit. Platypus, though?” He feels like he suits a lot of other animals that are not weird mammal duck poisonous things.

“You seem like a platypus, it suits you,” Tony tells him.

Rhodey frowns, unsure if that’s a compliment or not. “Drink something and figure out that core problem. I have faith in you little gecko,” he says, patting Tony’s head.

“That’s worse than hamster, no. And I can run more tests but I’ve done pretty much all I can do so
uh, we might want to figure out a new project and quickly honey bear.”

It really isn’t fair that Tony managed to come up with a not heinous option twice in a row and the best Rhodey can come up with on even shorter notice is ‘raptor’ and sure dinosaurs are cool but that doesn’t seem like a good option.

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She hasn’t even been jailbroken for a day and Natasha damn well knows that Hope hates her sense of fashion but she doesn’t really give a damn she likes her hideous sparkle pants and tacky Lorax shoes. “Can I make a request?” she asks, looking a bit like she’s in pain.

“No.”

“Can you please wear something simple to lunch tomorrow?” Hope asks anyway.

“If I don’t feel vexed. Bye,” Natasha says, picking up her giant ugly Hello Kitty bag and leaving before Hope can say something else. She’ll play along but only because she’s still on the offensive here, she needs to see how Hope reacts to people knowing about her. She also needs to figure out how genuine Hope’s reactions are, but so far she’s quite easy to read even when she’s actively trying to hide her feelings. She’d done her best to hide her discomfort with Tony but she hadn’t done a good job of it. And whatever her thoughts are, none of them especially positive, they aren’t accurate. But all she’d say was that, contrary to Tony’s perceptions of himself; he’s exactly like his father.

Natasha knows that’s not true so she’d dismissed it immediately. She met Howard once and Tony, when they first met, might have been cold and callus but it’d been to hide a soft emotional interior she suspects he was never really allowed to express. He’s since learned being emotionally constipated is for morons. Well, actually he learned that not being aware of other people’s emotions makes him a sucker but his own emotions remain elusive to him. Given that the inner working of his own mind seem to consistently confuse him his impulsive nature seems irresponsible to Natasha but she’s more a fan of calculated moves after considerable planning.

The most impulsive thing she’s ever done is shown up on some random person’s doorstep and only because she knows Tony is home otherwise she would have occupied her time stuffing her face with McDonalds or something else equally disgusting and normally restricted in her diet. She’s not entirely unsurprised to find that Tony answers the door too, and the disgusted look on his face when he looks over his outfit is entirely expected. “Natasha you look like a six year old mingled with some hookers and a bedazzler,” he says, nose wrinkled.

“I like my outfit,” she says in her defense right as Tony looks at her shoes.

“Why does it look like you skinned some kind of mustard yellow mythical creature only to attach strips of it to your feet?” he asks, giving her an even more pained look than Hope but she suspects that’s because he cares about fashion more.

“I think they’re cute.”

“I think someone should call PETA and you know how I feel about PETA.” The same way everyone should and he’s being dramatic.

“Tony, they’re cute and obviously they’re fake fur. Real fur is tacky.”

Tony gives her outfit a horrified look. “Natasha you have zero room to talk about tacky wearing any of that. Also wait, what, how are you here?” he asks, a little slow on the uptake as always. For a genius he’s an idiot.
She grins, “I have a week long jailbreak thanks to Hope and my end of the deal is that I have to show up to a few luncheons. Other than that I’ve been promised I can do whatever I want so I thought I’d visit.”

“If you ever show up to my house wearing shit like that ever again I will close the door in your face. Come in,” he says, stepping aside to reveal a way to smitten looking Bucky.

“You called it your house,” he says, obviously touched.

Well, at least her other motive for coming here has pretty much resolved itself immediately. Tony is smart but he’s never made good decisions regarding himself so she figured she’d do him a favor and make sure he didn’t end up with some kind of serial killing psychopath. But it doesn’t take someone with any kind of skill to see the absolute adoration on Bucky’s face. It’s more than a little obvious that he loves Tony with the way his eyes follow him, expression soft and happy. And Tony shares the feeling though Natasha is surprised to find he’s better at hiding it, much better at it. Practiced, almost, and she’s sure there’s a story there but she resolved to get it later because Tony has zero right to judge how she’s dressed when he’s dating someone who’s wearing a One Direction shirt probably unironically.

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Admittedly there isn’t a whole lot Sam misses about being stuck in a house where everything fun was banned but the friendships he had there tops the very short list of those things. And thankfully Tony is being more than cooperative because now he’s bringing friends of his own. Natasha might look like Lisa Frank threw up on a pile of sparkles but she’s hilarious so he’ll let it go.

“There is no way in hell that story is true,” Sam says, snickering.

Tony looks embarrassed and a little horrified as he takes a drink of his water so Sam thinks it might actually be a genuine story and not something Natasha pulled from her ass. “Can we please never tell Bucky that story?” he asks, not looking up from the table.

“You actually did that?” Sam asks. “How the hell did you not get busted?”

“I did, my mother paid off everyone who waned to give me the boot. Which was everyone so.”

Must be nice, Sam wouldn’t have gotten that much but Tony at least has the decency to look like he feels bad about that. “You don’t seem like the type to look good on a stripper pole.” Too skinny and probably not coordinated enough but apparently Tony has a wild side he’s never seen.

“Uh, I didn’t. I’m sure there are some fun pictures of me lingering on the internet somewhere though. Hopefully not but I’m not that optimistic.” He winces but Natasha laughs.

“Oh, its not worse than that time you almost sold Harley for a corn chip,” Natasha says.

“I’ll be honest, I’d sell someone for a corn chip back when I couldn’t eat them too,” Sam says.

“Harley would have sold someone for a corn chip too, which is probably why he forgave me even though that was heinous of me.”

“Well, I almost sold you right after for a an Ah Caramel so I figure he decided that just how things werenearound there but after a couple years he probably figured out you were being an absolute asshole,” Nat says. “And so you know I’d still sell your for an Ah Caramel.”

“Jokes on you Nat, I’d give you away for free,” Tony tells her, laughing when she smacks him.
“Think I could get some kind of package deal selling you two for a bag of barbeque chips?” He always keeps them around now and Steve doesn’t really get it but Sam never really felt the need to fill him in anyway. He’s just lucky that Steve doesn’t care for the flavor so he doesn’t steal them often, if ever.

“No, Tony’s too mouthy to get a bargain on,” Natasha says, laughing when Tony gives her a shove. “I can’t help having a personality, Nat!” Tony says in his defense.

“None of us can but that doesn’t stop alphas from acting like its an affront to them when we have thoughts,” Sam says. Especially, in his experience, the rich white ones. Not that he’s about to tell Tony and Natasha that, he’s got no idea where they sit on that problem and he’s not keen to see if they don’t agree given that they almost certainly weren’t treated the same way he was by the same demographic. To them entitlement is entitlement, but Sam gets an extra dose of racism he’d rather not deal with. Not that he gets a choice.

Thankfully he doesn’t much have to deal with that anymore, at least not in such an overt way. And Steve, he’s great contrary to what Tony seems to think of him. Sam had kind of given up any kind of hope on meeting someone that at least didn’t suck when Steve showed up flustered and looking for directions. The fact that he actually listened to what Sam said instead of either glossing over it or asking someone else for directions right after like Sam had no idea what he was talking about certainly gave him points in his favor.

It was his sheepishly crawling back two days later to ask him out in the most embarrassing mess of stuttering Sam has ever had the good fortune to witness that really sealed the deal. That, and the fact that Steve is genuinely great. He’s soft and compassionate and he’s always supportive of whatever it is Sam is doing and he’s had plans for years. Steve hasn’t even tried to hold him back and most of the time he doesn’t even offer any kind of constructive criticism of what Sam’s doing either. He listens and he’s always interested in what Sam’s telling him too. He kind of misses Steve but he knows that’s ridiculous because he saw him a couple hours ago and he’ll see him soon anyway.

“Once I got stuck talking to some random alpha and she got mad that I liked cats,” Natasha says.

“I had one get mad that I was smarter than him,” Tony adds.

“I regularly told people to fuck off, got me moved like four times but then Steve came around and he didn’t suck so you know, I took him home.” Even though technically speaking Steve took him home and thankfully not to Bucky. He’s pretty sure he’d throw himself off a cliff if he had to share a space with Bucky for an extended period of time so if Steve hadn’t thought to move out he would have had to reconsider quickly.

“I got moved once for propositioning a teacher,” Nat says.

“My mom probably paid hundreds of thousands to not have me transferred for a whole lot of stuff worse than that,” Tony says, wincing.

“Like that time you supplied us all with alcohol and slept with half the people in the house?” Nat asks and Tony lets out a long sigh, eyes looking a little more dead than before.

Sam grins, leaning forward. “You seem to have a colorful past, got any more fun stories?” he asks. Tony looks prepared to deny it but Natasha looks enthused enough that Sam knows he’s going to be entertained for hours.

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Tony crawls into bed and all but throws himself at Bucky, who lets out a noise of surprise but wraps his arms around him happily. “You’re right, Sam’s evil,” he mumbles. He had no intentions of visiting his crazy party days like ever but Natasha is an asshole and Sam is worse. He didn’t plan on spending three hours being roasted for his bad life choices and his mother’s rather gracious handling of his bad behavior but that’s what he’s dealt with.

“Told you,” Bucky tells him, leaning in to kiss him softly. Tony allows it on account of he doesn’t want to explain why Sam’s the worst and this is a better way to occupy his time anyway. “So how come Sam’s evil?” Bucky asks, pulling away way too soon for Tony’s liking.

He sighs, “I… may have something of a wild past and that’s by normal standards, not I didn’t like sewing lessons wild, like genuinely wild. Anyway Natasha spilling all my secrets to entertain herself is expected but Sam didn’t need to enjoy it so much,” he mumbles, pressing his face into Bucky’s shoulder.

“If it makes you feel any better Steve was like four feet tall until he hit an unexpected growth spurt at eighteen, but he has a temper so I pretty much got into fights every other day making sure he didn’t die until we were twenty. Got pretty good at it too,” Bucky says.

Well, he obviously made good on those skills later but Tony figures he’ll leave that alone. Instead he looks up, “that doesn’t make me feel better but thanks for trying,” he says.

Tony lays his head back down on Bucky’s shoulder and they stay like that for awhile, silent as Bucky runs his hand up and down Tony’s back. It’s nice, the silence and Bucky’s reassuring presence especially after his extended session of reliving every embarrassing thing he’s ever done. Which is everything he did between the ages of fifteen and seventeen so that was a lot of ground to cover.

“Do…” Bucky trails off for a moment after breaking the silence and then he sighs. “Do you actually think I’m the better option over Steve?” he asks and Tony lets out a loud snort.

“Yeah, obviously. What kind of question is that?” Obviously he thinks Bucky is the better option and he has no idea why the hell Bucky would even feel the need to ask that. Even if it was a competition Tony would still choose Bucky without hesitation.

“That was quick,” Bucky murmurs.

“That isn’t even something I need to think about. If it was pizza toppings I’d need time.” And if its olives or pineapple he’ll have to sever all ties with whoever thought those were acceptable pizza toppings. “So what brought this up anyway? You should know that in a competition of you and Steve you’d easily win. If it was between you and a very fuzzy kitten then I might have trouble.” He’d probably figure out a way to keep both but still.

Bucky remains silent for a few moments before he lets out another soft sigh. “I… don’t know, but I guess I thought I wasn’t really… lovable, not like this anyway.”

Tony props himself up so he can look at Bucky and yeah, his hair is a little wild, and he could probably use a shower but he’s also pretty much everything Tony thought he’d never find in a partner so he’s willing to overlook a few flaws. And as far as flaws go it could be a lot worse. “Good news is that I don’t really care what you think of yourself and even if I did I’m a big fan of doing whatever I want anyway so. I love you even on your bad days.”

Bucky pulls him in close, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. “God, I have no idea why because you look like you’ve been photoshopped in real life,” he murmurs into Tony’s hair.
“I do not, that’s ridiculous,” Tony tells him, laughing as Bucky all but drags him into his lap.

“Is so. Sometimes I look at you and I wonder if you’re actually real or not because I don’t actually think I’ve seen someone as pretty as you in real life.”
Tony shakes his head, “that’s not going to work, honeybear, but the attempt is noted,” he says.

On the other end of the line Rhodey lets out a long sigh, “I’ve put way too much effort into this to scrap it Tony, and you already solved half the problems I had making the damn thing smaller than Howard’s model.”

Tony lets out a loud snort, “I did more than figure out half your problems, I out and out solved them and that problem was impossible before I came along. Give me credit where it’s due,” Tony tells him.

Rhodey laughs, “yeah alright, you revived my already dead in the water project so give me a little magic and do it again, I have faith capybara.”

He wrinkles his nose, “did you just compare me to the world’s largest living rodent? Because you better not have just compared me to the world’s largest living rodent.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Rhodey says like Tony wasn’t just turned into a large rodent.

“Yes it was.”

“Well you compared me to a duck beaver thing, I think big rodent is earned and you’re like three feet tall, appreciate that I gave you a big rodent instead of like a gerbil or something.”

“Um excuse you, the platypus is nature’s best mistake because it turned out so cool. First of all, it looks like four different animals and Europeans literally thought someone made it up when they first heard of it. Also the males are venomous, and that’s just the cherry on top of that weird sundae,” Tony tells him in a cheery tone. From the doorway of the kitchen Bucky looks confused but Tony leaves him there with it because he doesn’t have time to explain.

“That is so not true, they can’t be venomous,” Rhodey says.

“Exactly why he platypus is the best animal, every new fact you learn about it makes it seem more made up.”

“How does this relate to me?” Rhodey asks, confused.

“I gave you a fun, regal animal that’s full of fun surprises, the least I can get is something that’s not a rodent. And that’s the second rodent you’ve chosen,” Tony reminds him. And hamster was number one. Tony’s offended, really.

“The platypus is nota regal animal and rodents are cute. I think I chose the superior animal and you’re just being difficult,” Rhodey tells him. “And uh. Pepper’s giving me confused looks so I’ll see you at work.”

Tony rolls his eyes fondly, “uh huh, see you there.” He ends he call and Bucky still looks confused.

“Did you call your boss ‘honeybear’? And how did platypi come up?”

“Platypodes, actually,” Tony says and Bucky’s eyebrows draw together in confusion. “See? Every new fact about the platypus is more interesting than the last. And friendship isn’t a bad thing, even if it comes with a pay cheque.”
“How come I don’t get cute nicknames? How’d your boss end up higher on that list than me?” Bucky asks.

It takes a second for Tony to clue in but when he does he laughs. “Aww, it’s cute that you’re jealous but you don’t need to be, when I think up a cute nickname for you you can have one too,” Tony tells him.

Bucky sulks for a moment before he lets out a soft sigh, “so what’s the problem he called about?”

Tony presses his fingers to his forehead. “The uh, the core of the project we’re working on is basically poison. I’d take awhile to seep into the ground, but it’s kind of killed the idea at the moment given the whole… green energy thing so.”

“Why don’t you just build something new?” he asks like it’s that simple.

Tony shakes his head, “you can’t just build an element, baby, but thanks for the encouragement,” Tony tells him.

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Pepper looks a little pained and Tony sighs, “I know she’s dressed like a Russian mob boss’s wife but I promise you she’s great. She’s dating Hope van Dyne,” Tony throws out in Natasha’s favor. Pepper frowns, still not totally convinced.

“Hope doesn’t date.”

“She dates Natasha,” Tony says. “Which is weird and a little jarring because we didn’t get along as kids.” Don’t really get along as adults either but Tony’s willing to give Hope the benefit of the doubt for Natasha’s sake.

“Right, Pym has that uh… thing with your father,” she says and Tony sighs.

“Not entirely unfounded, but absolutely hypocritical given Pym’s behavior but hey, we’re adults now so maybe we can grow out of that. Give Nat a chance, she might look like she’s got a Q-tip on her head right now but she’s actually pretty awesome.” Not that Natasha seems to care about the hideous fuzzy hat on her head or her even more hideous matching fuzzy coat but Natasha will be Natasha.

“She looks like an overenthusiastic child dressed its Barbie except she’s a person not a doll. She’s certainly stunning though, even if she’s got the world’s worst fashion sense,” Pepper says, giving him a small smile.

He considers her for a moment before he decides to take a stab in the dark. Natasha would know what’s going on for sure but Tony’s not nearly as good at reading people as she is. “You shouldn’t be jealous, Rhodey is very obviously in love with you. And even if he wasn’t I have no interest, I’m very happily in my own relationship so.” And he wouldn’t give Bucky up for almost anything, certainly not a relationship that so wouldn’t be viable with Rhodey. They get along great, almost better than anyone else Tony has ever met actually, but that’s a platonic connection only.

“You have pet names for him,” Pepper says, making a face.

“I have a thing for pet names, he’s not unusual in that regard. And his pet names suck, be glad he decided your actual name is what he went with. His first attempt was ‘small hamster’ and this morning it was ‘capybara’ and I don’t sense that he’ll get better at this.” He suspects Bucky would be worse if he had to choose pet names that weren’t already popular but he’s not about to give him the
option because Tony loves him and he doesn’t want to ruin it by letting Bucky make a Taylor Swift reference or something.

Pepper wrinkles her nose and he can see that she’s trying to keep from laughing but she only succeeds for a few moments. “‘Small hamster?’ Oh, that’s bad. I’m going to decide to be glad you get the brunt of that,” she says, laughing.

“Yeah, I regret starting this because I’m so much better at the nicknames than he is. So, Natasha?” he asks, raising an eyebrow. Pepper lets out another soft laugh and nods, walking towards Nat.

* 

Tony raises an eyebrow because he wasn’t really expecting this, “a date?” he asks more than states. “Bucky, you don’t need to be jealous of Rhodey of all people. Sure, he’s probably one of like… five people I’ve met that can keep up with me intellectually but you’re you and that doesn’t really make it a fair competition for Rhodey now does it?”

Bucky at least laughs a little but he shakes his head. “No, it’s not that. It’s a good day today and it’s been awhile since I’ve had one. I have a little extra energy so I figured I’d put it into doing something with you,” he says, wrapping his arms around Tony’s waist.

He presses himself into Bucky, wrapping his arms around him as well. “That’s so sweet. I also kind of made plans but you can totally come along. Be warned, Sam will be there, but you can get the satisfaction of tormenting him for a couple hours,” Tony says, grinning up at Bucky.

For a moment Bucky pretends to consider it even though Tony knows he’s going to say yes. “Fine, but only because it’s been awhile since I’ve seen Sam suffer and I feel like I should be rewarded for showering today,” he says.

Tony laughs, “oh, I can give you a few rewards but we can worry about those later,” he tells Bucky, winking as he drags him off.

“Well, I’m not opposed to that either,” Bucky tells him, allowing Tony to drag him off as he tangles his fingers through Tony’s.

Its so worth bringing Bucky along to see the look on Sam’s face about it too because he looks like someone just slapped him with a wet piece of rye bread. “Okay, I can make exceptions for Pepper’s husband but leave the trailer trash at home,” Sam says, waving a hand at Bucky.

Bucky rolls his eyes, “please, coming from something that looks like it crawled out of a swamp is a joke. I’d compare you to Shrek but that’s offensive to Shrek,” Bucky tells him as he sits down, pulling Tony down to sit beside him. He goes easily, curling into Bucky’s side as he settles in.

“Oh as if I’m the swamp creature? Have you looked in the mirror lately? You sleep with that?” Sam asks Tony in particular and that’s a bad idea.

“Hell yeah I sleep with that, he’s hot. Its not my fault you have cataracts or something,” Tony says, shrugging.

Rhodey lets out a loud snort, “cataracts! That’s great, this is why I like you.”

“Well, you’ve never been good with insults or nicknames so I suppose someone needs to pick up your slack,” Pepper says, patting Rhodey’s shoulder. “And Tony is far superior to you as far as skill goes in that department.”
“Yeah, he seems to be good at picking up all my slack, I’m being outshone,” Rhodey says.

Pepper gives his shoulder another pat, “you can’t be good at everything and I must admit Tony isthe better engineer.”

“And you’re better with numbers. We’re kind of a dream team, next thing you know Rhodey will be decoration,” Tony tells her.

Rhodey makes an offended noise, “oh that is so not true!” Pepper laughs though, giving Rhodey a sympathetic look because she totally knows Tony’s right.

“Is no one else offended that they’re in the presence of this?” Sam says, waving a hand at Bucky.

“He’s not that bad even if he resembles a demented raccoon,” Natasha says, arriving a little late.

Rhodey looks Bucky over and shrugs, “more like a shrew.”

Bucky squints, “have you ever seen a shrew before?”

“Maybe a panda,” Natasha says. “Tony’s never had good taste though.”

He makes an offended noise, “excuse you Bucky is the best taste I have ever had and I happen to think he’s great so you guys can suck it.”

The arm Bucky has wrapped around his waist tightens a little and he presses a kiss to the top of his head. “You’re particularly sweet today,” he murmurs into Tony’s hair.

“I’m sweet every day if I like you,” Tony tells him.

“That’s true, sometimes a little too true,” Natasha says and Tony stomps on her foot.

“You don’t get to do this to me twice,” he hisses at her. “Keep your mouth shut or I tell Hope all your secrets.”

Sam’s eyes light up, “oh, she has secrets too!”

*I kind of miss having friends,” Bucky says as they walk into the house.

“Well, there’s Morita,” Tony points out. There’s Steve too, and Sam decided to ask for a favor because he really does seem to care about Steve and also he blackmailed Tony with his own damn actions. Tony wouldn’t have thought his party days as a teenager would come back to haunt him but here he is.

“Yeah, he’s been surprisingly forgiving considering I think I maybe didn’t speak to him for a year before I started dating you,” Bucky says.

Yeah, Morita has all but confirmed that but he doesn’t seem to mind too much. Tony suspects their history is a good part of that but what that history is isn’t really something he knows a whole lot about. “I’m sure Steve would also be understanding, apparently he’s over attached,” Tony says, unable to hide his distaste but there, his favor to Sam has been fulfilled.

Bucky gives him a look, “you clearly don’t believe that.”

“I kind of do, considering your first response to his showing up is that he’s some kind of unstoppable
force so I’m sure he’d be plenty forgiving. But if you must I’m being blackmailed by Sam to talk you into talking to Steve but I hate that plan so I’m outing him even if you maybe probably should talk to him. Without me present, preferably.” He wouldn’t be upset if he never had to deal with Steve again but something tells him he will if for no other reason than he genuinely does like Sam. Even if Sam is an evil genius who must be stopped.

For a moment Bucky considers the situation before he sighs. “I kind of already know about that your last name was Stark before you changed it, Morita did some digging and I don’t really care and I’ve dealt with Howard I can see why you’d never speak to him again,” Bucky says. “So Sam doesn’t really have anything on you.”

Yeah, last thing Tony expected was that but he supposes he shouldn’t be surprised. If anything he should be surprised Morita did the digging. He’s sure Bucky has the skillset for it. “Um, not what Sam had on me, but that’s a sweet gesture. And apparently you’ve been friends with Steve forever. As much joy as it would bring me for you to never speak to him again because I’d never have to speak to him again it pays to appreciate friendships like that. I’ve never had the benefit of a lifelong friendship; the way an omega’s world is set up is designed to prevent that. So talk to Steve and if you decide he sucks after that, well, Sam might not want to see Steve sad but you can’t force what isn’t there.”

Bucky probably goes through like twelve emotions but he settles on resolved. “Yeah, alright. What’s Sam have on you though? Pretty sure you consider Howard a high priority on things you don’t want people to know.”

Tony shrugs, “its also the easiest bit of information on me to find so maybe not the first thing I’d want anyone to know about me, but its not really preventable. And you’ll never know what Sam has on me because I paid my dues,” Tony says primly, nose in the air.

“It can’t be worse than Howard,” Bucky says. “Guy’s a fucking prick. I didn’t even know he had a kid.”

Yeah, that probably shouldn’t hurt as much as it does but he shouldn’t be surprised. Howard barely knew he had a kid, why would he tell people he has one? “I didn’t choose Howard, I feel like he can’t be held against me. My own actions? Those can be held against me.”

Bucky walks over and wraps his arms around Tony’s waist. “Tones, you watched me eat a can of SpaghettiOs I basically gnawed open with my teeth at three a.m last week. I don’t think anything you’ve done can really hit that level of rock bottom.”

He laughs, pressing his face into Bucky’s chest. “Yeah, you have depression and a weird love of shitty foods. I was a rich asshole- kind of a big difference.”

“You were also a pissed off omega stuck in a really shitty system that’s absolutely determined to treat you like a second class citizen. I’d probably do some crazy shit too. I did crazy shit without that excuse. Don’t ask Morita about my teens, he will answer and I don’t really want to deal with that.”

“Ten bucks says Steve will keep your secrets,” Tony says, at least trying to pay his dues so Sam doesn’t try to come back to haunt him.

Bucky rolls his eyes, “only because he’d be keeping his own secrets. Can’t have Sam finding out about all those skeletons he keeps in his closet.”

“Any chance you’ll sell him out? I’d love a little something to torment Sam with,” Tony says, grinning.
“Not without selling myself out and I have a newfound sense of self-preservation,” Bucky murmurs. “And just so you know I don’t care about who you were when you were a stupid teen. I already know you’re not that person anymore and even if you were I’ve already trapped myself because I love you too much to let you go,” Bucky tells him.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

So, the next chapter is actually going to be deleted scenes from the fic so technically this is the last chapter. I think this is a bit abrupt, but that could just be my realization that I was at the end of the story so who knows.

Anyway, hopefully you enjoy and the deleted scenes will be some nice supplementary material :)

Tony is considering his options somewhat distracted by thoughts of Bucky when Rhodey rudely interrupts him. “You can twirl that pencil all day long but its not going to help you think any faster,” he points out.

“I’ll be honest, I was thinking about Bucky but its sweet of you to assume I was doing my job,” Tony tells him.

Rhodey throws back his head and laughs, “yeah, too much information. But the plus side of seeing you two together is that Pepper has stopped side eying me like I’d ever cheat on her. My momma didn’t raise a fool, I know a good thing when I see it and Pepper is too good for me to be honest. You don’t find a woman like that anywhere.”

No you don’t, Pepper has a frightening level of competency and Tony is impressed. “Yeah, Bucky had this weird thing about that too but… I don’t know how to explain it,” he says eventually, frowning.

“Its like we’ve known each other for years. I don’t think I’ve ever been this comfortable with someone so fast,” Rhodey says and Tony nods.

“Yeah, exactly. But like. Not romantically by any means.”

Rhodey wrinkles his nose, “yeah, don’t get me wrong but that’s a hard no from me. I mean you’re cute enough, but uh. Not my type, at least not for a relationship.”

He laughs, “yeah, no. We are pretty awesome together though. And usually I’m uh, not quite as trusting but something tells me you aren’t really the type to screw people over.”

“My extensive record in not doing that even when I could have proved that,” Rhodey points out. “Which I know you know about because I know you do your research.”

So he does, and yeah, Rhodey has a spotless record as far as not being a dick goes but still. Doesn’t mean Tony would be much comfortable with him but hey, might as well go with it. “Yeah, obviously. But um, back to the impossible problem that Bucky lovingly tried to solve by suggesting we build a new core.”

Rhodey laughs, “oh that’s cute but you can’t just make an element. And none of the other tests I’ve run have produced results.”

“You could always claim its fine and poison the earth anyway,” Tony suggests and thank god
Rhodey looks so horrified because if he didn’t Tony would be worried. “It was a joke, platypus, relax about it.”

“Thank god, I was wondering if I was going to have to find a new person to help me out with this. And new friends,” Rhodey mumbles.

“Might help to remind you that my name is technically on this too and this is the first thing I’m attached to leaving that damn house. It wouldn’t exactly do me any favors to knowingly put out a faulty product.”

Rhodey snorts, “that’s a nice way to say it’d destroy you and any chances you had at a career. I’d recover, it’d take awhile, but it’d happen. You don’t get that benefit.”

Tony smiles a little, “oh, I’m not easily dissuaded but yeah, I’d have to work twice as hard as you to do it.”

“Too bad neither of us are Howard, even his failures are seen as successes,” Rhodey says a little bitterly, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, must be nice to be able to fail upward,” Tony mumbles.

They remain silent for a few minutes before Rhodey laughs softly, “did Bucky really suggest just making a new element?” he asks, amused.

Tony sits straight up, “yes, and I have an idea that I might have to thank him for.”

Rhodey frowns, “Tones, you can’t just make an ele- where are you going?”

“To go get supplies, get your coat on we’re going out. And congrats on finally finding a nickname that doesn’t suck,” he adds, flying out the door at top speeds. Pepper makes a surprised noise as she jumps out of the way, Rhodey coming out shortly after him.

“I think he might have gone nuts and someone should make sure he doesn’t run into traffic or something,” Rhodey throws over his shoulder at her as he rushes to catch up with Tony.

* 

He’s put this off awhile because Steve is… difficult, not that Bucky thinks he means to be. Its just that dealing with someone with that amount of history comes with its own set of problems and Steve-Bucky isn’t sure how to deal with him at all if he’s honest. Steve clearly feels the same way because he keeps looking Bucky over like he’s waiting for some kind of shoe to drop but Bucky doesn’t even know where to start.

“Since when did you start talking to Morita again?” he asks suddenly, confused.

Bucky frowns because that’s a weird place to start. “Few months ago, why?” Of all the problems they’ve had in the last few years Bucky didn’t think this would start with Morita of all things.

“You haven’t talked to him in a year,” Steve says like that matters. Well okay, it does but it doesn’t seem to matter to Morita and that’s all that Bucky cares about.

“How is this relevant?” he asks, already tired of this.

Steve sighs, “you went to someone you haven’t talked to in a year before you came to me, why? And its not like it was Tony, he didn’t decide he hated me on the spot before I said anything until he met
me months after you two started dating and I barely even knew about that. What happened to the
time when we told each other everything?” Steve asks and Bucky clenches his jaw.

“Its fucking *gone*, Steve, we aren’t those people anymore so why the hell are you so determined to
act like we are? You want to know why I stopped talking to you? Its because you’re *next to
obsessed* with how we used to be when that’s not who I am anymore. Its exhausting spending time
with someone who acts like you’re the person you were ten fucking years ago when you haven’t
been that person in forever. I don’t see how you haven’t changed at all, that makes no *sense.*” After
all they’ve gone through, and then everything that happened after and Steve’s on about the good old
days? Bucky doesn’t get that, can’t even *fathom* why Steve would act that way.

He assumes, given the look on Steve’s face, that he’s got his reasons because he looks a mix of
pissed off and confused. “Of course I’ve changed Bucky, who goes through all that without
changing?”

He rubs his temples a little, “then why are you so determined to pretend like you haven’t? Like I
haven’t? You can’t possibly think that’s going to end well for either of us. Hasn’t done anything
good so far,” he points out. All its done is ruin their friendship and Bucky hasn’t had anything in his
life as long as Steve. Including his family, and Steve’s.

“I’m not pretending like nothing ever happened Bucky, I’m just trying to figure out how to feel the
way I used to because-” his words cut off unexpectedly and Steve’s jaw clenches.

Bucky frowns because that’s weird and he doesn’t really know what that means, which is a new
level of weird because he knows Steve better than he knows himself. He used to be able to read
every expression of Steve’s but he’s out of practice. “Because-?” he prompts.

Steve lets out a soft sigh, “because I haven’t felt like that person in, hell, I don’t know. Years. That
was the last time I felt happy and people say fake it till you make it,” he says somewhat pitifully.

For a moment Bucky doesn’t even know what to *do* with that because its so ridiculous. “You can’t
fake* being a person you’ll never be again to be happy Steve, you need to come to terms with who
you are and move on. Seriously?”

Steve gives him an irritated look, “what, did Tony tell you that?” he asks and Bucky rolls his eyes.

“Keep your digs about him to yourself, and no, he didn’t tell me that common sense did. you can’t
live in the past Steve, that’s not even who you are anymore. Its not who I am any more and I’m not
faking it to fit your fantasy. You have problems, we both do, so deal with them so you can
do*something about it.”

Bad advice coming from him and Steve damn well knows it. “Funny, coming from you,” he says
and yeah alright, he’s earned that.

“Yeah, and look how well that’s worked out for me. I did something new, something that wasn’t
normally in my routine and for the first time in a long time I feel normal sometimes. I feel like shit
most of the time, but not all the time the way I used to so that’s am improvement. And truth be told
having Tony around ended up being a pretty good way of putting things in perspective. Within
weeks* she managed to get his shit together and its not like he had a lot to start with. Pretty sure he’s
done more in the last few weeks than I have in the last few years.” It also turns out that Tony’s a bit
of a workaholic if given the chance not that Rhodey lets him stay at work too long. But Tony would
live there if Rhodey wasn’t shooing him out of the lab at the end of the night every night. And
Bucky? He can barely even remember what its like to have that level of passion for anything.
It wasn’t the intended result, sure, but Tony’s presence around him did show him that something needs to change. Maybe it’s tempting to live like this forever, but that’s not doing anything for him and he knows that. He’s known that for a long time and he didn’t really know how to change anything. But Tony seems to do just fine foraying into the unknown and having it work out for him so Bucky figures maybe he should do some of that too, at least enough that he’s not constantly bogged down with his feelings of failure and the litany of memories he’d rather forget. He’d take that over Steve’s method any day.

“If I remember correctly you didn’t want anything to do with that option until I talked you into it,” Steve reminds him, annoyed.

“I meant Morita, but yeah, Tony too. And I would have preferred to meet him under normal circumstances but something tells me there are no normal circumstances so I guess I get what I get.” Tony doesn’t seem to like average as a standard of being, he always manages to go above and beyond and Bucky’s not looking forward to when that results in something terrible but he figures it’s a matter of time. Tony does things too far in extremes for it to not blow up in his face eventually. Not that it matters much to Bucky, he’ll be there for him regardless.

“You realize he’s a total asshole, right?” Steve asks.

Bucky rolls his eyes, “you realize that’s one of the many things I like about him, right?” Personality flaws and all he loves Tony for who he is and frankly of all the flaws he could have they aren’t that bad.

* 

Tony comes through the door excited because things are going as planned at least until he spots Steve on the couch. Bucky’s sitting beside him though and he doesn’t look like he’s got a stick up his ass so Tony figures he’ll keep quite so long as Bucky’s not obviously uncomfortable.

“You’re late,” Bucky says as he walks in.

He sighs, “Rhodey lost track of time too but the good news is that my plans worked even though Rhodey managed to derail them like six times.” He’s smart, incredibly so, but not much of a visionary or at least not in the way Tony is. Pepper says he’s got a talent for thinking outside the box in a way most don’t and Rhodey seems to agree.

Bucky looks pleased too, “told you to just build a new element,” he says even though he’s got no idea what that entails.

But Tony will give him credit where its due, “I know, and you were right so thanks for that,” he murmurs, sitting in Bucky’s lap.

Steve wrinkles his nose a little but it at least looks like he’s trying to avoid doing that consciously. “Really Bucky?” he asks.

“You subject me to Sam you have no right to complain,” Bucky tells him.

“There is nothing wrong with Sam, why do you hate him so much?” Steve asks, baffled.

Bucky lets out an annoyed huff, “because Sam is awful, I don’t get how you don’t see that,” Bucky says, wrinkling his nose.

“He’s not awful Bucky, he’s totally fine and I don’t understand your rivalry,” Steve says. Bucky responds but Tony’s phone starts buzzing so he figures he’ll take the call and leave them to battle it
out, putting himself out of his misery.

“Hello?” he says as he leaves the room.

On the other end he hears a loud cackle and frowns. “So guess what happened last night?” Natasha says, excitement high in her voice.

“You got handed uppers and they haven’t worn off yet? What’s with the weird amount of joy?” he asks.

He can basically hear Natasha roll her eyes at him. “No. Harley, dumb bitch, got busted with a bunch of contraband shit so we all got raided and obviously everyone who hides their stuff under their bed got caught, which turned out to be almost everyone. Except for me because no one would think to look under the floor or in the walls, not that it looks like there’s a hole in it hiding anything behind it bust still. And Nebula was smart enough to choose good hiding places too, not that I’m surprised there. Point is we’re on lockdown,” Natasha says excitedly.

Tony’s eyebrows draw together in confusion because he doesn’t know how that could be a good thing. “Uh, okay? How… why are you so excited about this?” he asks.

“So here’s the thing- since you left and Hope happened to show up right after everyone here thinks you were the problem with me and they’ve decided I’m super trustworthy because obviously you were encouraging my bad behavior!” she says with way too much enthusiasm. “So they put me in charge of security and I’ve never seen such a mass exodus of omegas all in search of replacing the stuff that got forcibly removed from their rooms!”

Aided by Natasha, no doubt, given that apparently she’s trusted with security now. Tony rolls his eyes and shakes his head, “wow, I can’t believe I manage to be the problem even when I haven’t been around in like two months. How are dealing with an empty house though? People have to notice that, they’re stupid but they aren’t total idiots.”

“Old footage on loop showing everyone going into their rooms at the right times and coming out in the morning like they’re supposed to. Edited on the fly by Peter so the clothing matches. Other than that Nebula is helping me run interference with bed checks but so far we’ve been doing well here despite the risky business we’ve got going,” she says, clearly pleased with herself.

Tony shakes his head. “So how’s Hope anyway?”

“Great, I see her a couple times a week for a few hours to convince people we’re together and then I do whatever I want for a few hours before she drops me back off. Fantastic arrangement so I figure it won’t hurt to make it a full time thing. Hope seems more determined to stick it to Hank than me so as long as I keep it that way I should be fine,” she says like she hasn’t considered every single possibility.

“That’s nice- I made an element today,” Tony tells her like that’s no big deal when it is, in fact, a huge deal.

“Sounds stupid but congrats,” Natasha says in a woefully underwhelming response to life altering science.

“I need smarter friends who understand what this means. I need like seven more Rhodeys.” Not that he doesn’t love the one that he’s got but he needs more so he can have a whole bunch of them to talk to about his work.

Natasha lets out an annoyed sigh, “well I need more scheming friends who understand my genius
because you’re also a disappointment,” Natasha tells him.

He chooses to laugh at that because she’s at least partially right. “Sam’s a good start, guy is shockingly petty and loves a good plot to thwart the rules.”
Bucky turns the music back to his god awful Taylor Swift shit and Tony’s patience was tested an hour ago. Now he’s next to irate because pop lost its luster in the nineties if it lasted that long. He turns it back to his music and Bucky gives him a look before turning it back.

“I swear to god if I hear another Taylor Swift song I’m going to kill myself,” he says, mostly serious. He hears someone laugh to his left and finds two women snickering in the car beside Bucky’s. Bucky sighs and changes the song to the Backstreet Boys and Tony wants to light himself on fire because that is not something he should know two notes in.

He changes it back to his music and Bucky lets out another long suffering sigh. “I don’t like The Rolling Stones,” he says eventually and Tony can’t help the noise he makes.

The laughter from the car over filters back in and Tony can’t handle this anymore. “Marry someone else,” he tells Bucky, taking off his ring and tossing it at Bucky before he gets out of the car. Beside him the two women in the car are howling with laughter, heads thrown back and Tony’s glad his suffering is amusing to someone because it sure shit isn’t funny to him.

“Need a ride?” the woman in the driver’s seat asks.

“Please get in here because you’re probably the funniest person I’ve ever met in passing,” the woman in the passenger seat says.

“Yeah alright,” he says because why the fuck not.

Bucky looks horrified, “they could be serial killers!” he yells, obviously worried.

“Well then they’re going to have to murder my ghost because your shit taste in music has already killed me,” he tells Bucky, climbing into the car.

“Yeah, you’re awesome. My name’s Carol, this is Maria,” she says, gesturing to the woman in the driver’s seat.

*  

Sam doesn’t get it, he leaves his house and doesn’t run into another omega for almost two years and the poor bastard ends up with Bucky Barnes. And he likes it so that’s even worse. But for two years there was nothing and now he’s in a whole damn house of omegas because Tony finds them all the damn time. He found two because he got mad at Bucky’s shit taste in music and he can’t blame Tony for that.

“Where do you find them all?” he asks.

Carol nods, “right! Maria and I grew up together, caused quite a stir when we ran off together too,”
she says, grinning. Yeah, because omegas dating other omegas is off limits. Sure, everyone kind of
knows they dabble a little, side effect of no one else to experiment with but to actually end up with
one? That’s not supposed to be allowed not that Maria and Carol seem content to play by the rules.
Actually, no one Tony knows seems content to play by the rules and Sam senses a pattern. Even
Steve fits that type even though he and Tony hate each other. “But even we don’t seem to run into
many omegas.”

“Me either,” Natasha throws in.

They all look to Tony but she shrugs, “I don’t know, its not like I looked for any of you and I’ve
known Natasha for years.”

“Tell me your omega attracting ways, I never run into any either,” Pepper adds. “And god knows I
desperately need some omega friends, betas are alright but they still don’t get it.”

“Yeah, and I wouldn’t trust one to put up with my heat,” Sam says. “They’d probably freak out.”

“Better than acting like a horny toad,” Carol points out.

“Rhodey’s not that bad,” Pepper says wistfully. “He does sniff a lot though, but he at least tries to
hide it.”

“Bucky’s not subtle, stuck his face right in my neck and got smacked for it. Kinda felt bad but it took
me by surprise,” Tony says, frowning a little.

“Bucky deserves a slap for existing, you did nothing wrong,” Sam tells him.

“He does not, and he apologized even though I’m probably the one who should have apologized to
him first. Its not like smacking the guy was an acceptable reaction,” he says.

Yeah, Sam’s willing to let that go on account of its Bucky but Tony looks like he feels bad about it.
In his defense given what he’s used to its reasonable that he reacted that badly though.

“Can we get back to Tony explaining how the hell he finds us all?” Natasha asks. “Because it is flat
out weird, the lack of omegas I see in public. Its like we all disappear after we leave those houses.”

“Given the statistical probability of murder its quite possible a lot of us do,” Tony points out. “And I
don’t do anything special I’m just here.”

Sam flips him off because he wishes he were the omega magnet. Then he wouldn’t have to suffer
Bucky’s presence to hang out with Tony because he refuses to be around Steve for longer than five
damn minutes.

* 

Tony considers Bucky for a long moment and he’s thought about this, really thought about it so he
sighs and grabs a pillow before smacking Bucky with it. The poor bastard wakes with a start,
looking quite like a confused raccoon. “What?” he asks, sounding like he’s ended his question early
but too confused to consider why.

“Get up,” Tony tells him. Bucky stares at him for a long moment so Tony smacks him with the
pillow again. “Get up,” he tells Bucky.

“What-” Tony smacks him with the pillow again. “Stop that, I’m getting up,” Bucky mumbles,
stumbling out of bed looking confused and dazed. “Why are you beating me with a pillow?”
He sighs because this could go wildly wrong but it could also do a lot for Bucky so he’s decided to commit to it. “Open the curtains,” he tells Bucky, who at least does what he’s told even if he’s still confused. “And put clothes on, you’re driving me to work.”

That doesn’t seem to clear anything up with Bucky. “You have a license,” he says, eyebrows drawn together.

“And you spend all day in bed, now your forced not to because if I have to take a fucking bus home I will leave you for Sam and we’ll be happy together,” Tony tells him, arms crossed over his chest.

Bucky squints, “why the hell would you choose Sam and he’s already married, I don’t want to deal with Steve,” he says.

So Tony knows, Steve blames it on him no matter how much Sam points out Bucky’s problems with him predate Tony’s appearance in Bucky’s life. “So what if he’s married, people have affairs all the time Bucky. And Sam’s pretty awesome, don’t know why you don’t like him and he doesn’t keep up as well as Rhodey but he’ll do. Put pants on,” Tony tells him.

Thankfully Bucky chooses to cooperate and sighs, grabbing a pair of pants off the ground and Tony figures he’ll let that go for now. He can work on Bucky’s other depression habits later, for now he’ll work on forcing him out of bed every morning in the least invasive way he could think of.

* Sam looks unimpressed and Tony doesn’t want to deal with this either. “Figure it out,” Sam tells him and Tony flips him off. “Look, you think I want to deal with this? I don’t, but I’m tired of hearing about it so figure it out or I make this your problem too,” Sam says, hands on his hips.

Tony lets out an annoyed noise, “why the hell does this need to be my problem, I’ve got nothing to do with this. Contrary to Steve’s galaxy brain conspiracy rants,” he says, rolling his eyes.

The good news is that Sam looks as annoyed with his as he feels. “Oh believe me I know, and don’t think I haven’t pointed out that this distance with Bucky has existed long before you came around because I have. I damn well know the problem is Steve and I know he knows it too, but it’s easier to think someone else is the problem when you’re close to someone and you don’t want to believe you did something to your relationship with them.”

Yeah, so Tony knows but he’s tired of Steve’s bullshit. He whines and cries about taking responsibility all the time but does he do it himself? Not a fucking chance. Which Tony wouldn’t mind so much if he didn’t pretend to be a moral authority. Everyone is a hypocrite to some extent but Tony has more respect for people who are at least willing to admit that then people who act like they do no wrong. He’s got no clue how Sam, who is by all means a level headed guy who’s pretty cool, can deal with Steve’s shit. Tony assumes Steve is a wildly different person around Sam because he can’t see Sam putting up with that kind of thing otherwise.

“Why the hell is it my problem to solve Steve’s problem? Don’t you find it boring, not to mention fucking irritating, to be the one who always has to solve alpha’s emotional problems? Like grow up and do it yourself,” he mumbles.

“Like you totally haven’t involved yourself in Bucky’s emotional problems and you don’t at all try and get him out of bed and out of the house most days? Clearly you’re totally not invested in alpha’s emotional problems,” Sam says and its cute that he thinks he’s pulled one over on Tony about that.

“Bucky has depression and probably like five other mental health problems,” he says. PTSD and
anxiety are at the top of Tony’s suspected list anyway. Not that he’s an expert and he’s never really liked psychology too much anyway, they always seem overinvested in problematizing omegas if they don’t live inside their narrow box of acceptability. But sometimes psychology gets things right, and he suspects a few things apply to Bucky specifically. “Steve’s problem is self created, Bucky didn’t create any of his. That’s not even remotely the same.” And Bucky is aware of his problems too, and Tony has talked to him about therapy, knows Morita has too, and he’s told them both the same thing. It’s hard to get help for your problems when the thing that caused your problems is a matter of national security and is classified.

 Mostly Bucky hasn’t decided he doesn’t have problems at all like Steve has, he knows he does but he also isn’t in a place to get any kind of help either. So Tony doesn’t mind helping him because Bucky doesn’t have a lot of avenues to go down but Steve does. Namely the get the fuck over himself avenue.

Sam sighs, “can you please just do me a solid and figure out what the hell is going on so I don’t have to listen to it anymore? Because the conspiracies are getting pretty far fetched at this point, I honestly wouldn’t be surprised to find out if Steve is under the impression that you’re secretly a lizard person.”

“Well,” Tony mumbles, “in his defense I have been frequently described as cold blooded.”

* 

Bucky looks more at ease than he normally does so Tony resents Sam’s stupid ass request because he knows its going to ruin Bucky’s mood and his good days are starting to become more frequent. But he doesn’t want to listen to Sam whine any more than Sam wants to listen to Steve whine. “You look chipper,” Tony says, at least allowing Bucky to feel nice for a few more moments before he bursts his bubble.

“Yeah I uh, got a job. Kind of, its with Morita so its not like it’s that special or anything-” Tony cuts him off because he doesn’t have much use for Bucky’s self depreciation.

“That’s amazing, I’m so excited for you!” he says even though he wishes Bucky would have found a hobby over a job. He’s got money so its not like he needs the pressure of a job at the moment, but it’s a step forward nonetheless and Tony doesn’t want to insult that for him. And it’s with Morita so Tony knows he’ll be fine because Morita looks out for him.

Thankfully Bucky reacts to his enthusiasm well, smiling wide and it’s so nice to see, genuine happiness. It’s so rare for him outside of their relationship and Tony doesn’t want that for him. Everyone should have a wide array of things that make them happy, not just a single person. Part of that is because it’s always nice to have multiple things make people happy but another part of that is because one person can’t be a person’s whole source of happiness without repercussions. Tony doesn’t want to be that for Bucky, but he knows Bucky is trying to get himself out of that rut so he doesn’t mind dealing with it in the interim. Besides, Morita comes around plenty and Bucky seems to be at least making an effort these days. Which is more than he can say when he first moved in and Morita essentially harassed Bucky into a friendship out of worry.

“Thanks,” Bucky says softly, still smiling and Tony lets him have it for the moment, not wanting to disrupt his happiness right away.

He remains mostly quiet on the way back to the house, something he knows Bucky notices because that happiness wears off and Tony wished it hadn’t gone so fast but he’s not good at hiding his thoughts and even if he were Bucky is ridiculously perceptive. Sometimes Tony doesn’t like that about him, like now, but usually it works in his favor considering he’s not good at expressing his
emotions. Natasha has told him repeatedly that he has the emotional range of a teaspoon but he
doesn’t, he just doesn’t usually show more than that out of self preservation.

Not that it much matters with Bucky considering he picks up on all Tony’s expressions anyway.
“What’s wrong?” he asks finally and Tony sighs.

“‘Wrong’ isn’t the right word for it. More like irritated mostly. Guess Steve won’t give up on the idea
that I somehow sabotaged your relationship because clearly the ‘evil genius omega who ruins
everyone’s personal life’ isn’t an overplayed trope already. Sam asked me to figure out what the hell
is going on because he’s annoyed with Steve too.”

Tony doesn’t quite know what to make of the anger on Bucky’s face for a moment but eventually
Bucky rolls his eyes. “And what, he couldn’t talk to me himself?” he asks, meaning Steve, not Sam
Tony is sure.

“I probably have a weird vice grip like hold on your critical thinking skills because I must be psychic
as well as a horrible shrew who seeks to ruin his life specifically for absolutely zero personal gain
considering I had you in my life long before I met him. Because again, I must be an overplayed
thriller trope instead of an actual person,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, pretty fucking stupid for Steve to think I can’t make my own choices when I’m a fucking
grown man. And apparently can’t grow up enough to talk to me himself and you know what, when
we were kids it was an annoying personality flaw but now its just immature and exhausting,” Bucky
says, shaking his head. “And so is his habit of blaming everyone else for problems he created
himself, then acting like he’s somehow a beacon of morality when most of the time he’s kind of a
dick. Don’t get me wrong, I love Steve, but he’s kind of a dick. Even Morita says his moral code
only seems to apply when it’s convenient for him. And-” Bucky looses wind fast and lets out a harsh
sigh, glaring ahead.

Tony gives him a few moments. “Shit, tell me how you really feel,” he says, not expecting much
from it but Bucky gives him more anyway.

“Have you ever known someone a long time and you go through a bunch of shit and you both
change, not really for the better either, but they refuse to admit anything has changed? Steve’s like
that and I can’t pretend to be the guy he used to know because he doesn’t want to deal with his shit. I
can’t fucking deal with that okay, I’ve got my own problems and I actually want to solve them and
pretending like nothing every happened to me isn’t going to do that and I’m not Steve’s fucking
therapy nostalgia I’m a person. I don’t have time to deal with him refusing to deal with his shit,”
Bucky says, shaking his head harshly.

They sit there for a long moment and Tony shakes his head. “I haven’t had that happen, actually.
Sounds like a lot to handle.”

Bucky lets out a soft laugh, “you haven’t had that happen because you have zero patience for that
kind of shit,” he says.

Yeah, okay, so he’s not wrong there but still. “Mind if I pass that along to Sam? I figure his bullshit
psychobabble bullshit degree will have at least given him a way to phrase that less harshly,” he says
and Bucky starts laughing.

“Wow, didn’t think I’d ever hear you insult Sam. It’s a good look on you,” he says and he only
thinks that because he doesn’t like Sam.

“Excuse you, I insulted his degree, not him. big difference,” he says, nose in the air.
Sam looks hilariously unimpressed about this whole thing but Tony thinks its funny. Bucky is just as pissed about this development on account of Steve sticking Sam in the dog house for getting more annoyed with him than Bucky and telling him off has resulted in him being a permanent fixture in their house for the time being. Bucky has threatened to mail Sam to five different countries and Sam threatened to poison him twice. Tony has banned them from speaking to each other but the entire conversations they have in eyebrow has become entertainment for him and Nat and now, apparently, Hope.

“Oh wow you weren’t exaggerating,” she says and Bucky and Sam continue their insults through eyebrow.

“Yeah, its kind of funny unless they wake me up. Then I threaten to shave their eyebrows off,” Tony says. Which has happened twice this week and Sam about lost a brow this morning about it.

Hope snickers, “your friends are more interesting than mine,” she tells Natasha.

Nat rolls her eyes, “that’s because your friends are all hedge fund twats,” she says. They continue to bicker back and forth, a familiar argument between them and its nice to see that Natasha has some kind of trust there. Tony wasn’t sure she’d ever get that with someone and maybe she and Hope have an unconventional arrangement but its still nice to see them getting along.

He leaves them be when he spots Rhody and Pepper and Rhody in particular looks pleased to have found him. “What’s with the happy face, platypus?” he asks. Pepper and Bucky had both gotten kind of weird about their relationship, probably because they get along so easily and Tony has to admit he’s never immediately clicked with someone so fast. Both he and Rhody have admitted, although they’d never tell Bucky or Pepper, that if they had run into the other before their respective partners they probably would have gotten married. Tony has no idea if they’d even be compatible romantically but a friendship as good as he has with Rhody is probably better than a marriage anyway, not that that’s in his wedding vows.

Pepper spots Bucky across the way and detaches herself with a quick smile to Rhody because that’s the weird fallout of their close relationship, her and Bucky bonding about their mutual jealousy however unfounded. It’s not like he or Rhody would ever be asshole enough to cheat on either of them. And Tony is in no position to, he’s got three years before he’s technically in the clear from that fucking house. If he fucks it in the meantime he’s back to it not that he’d stick around. He’s kind of a moron for sticking around past when he needed to the first time anyway, not that he really knew what he was missing. Well, he did, but he hadn’t anticipated the horrifying reality that he got hit on a whole lot more as a child than he has as an adult. He still runs into jackasses but not at the same frequency and that’s fucked but at least he mostly gets to live his life in peace.

“I um. Gotta talk to you,” Rhody says and Tony frowns.

“What?” he asks because ‘we need to talk’ is literally never good.

Rhody rolls his eyes fondly though, “About?” he asks because ‘we need to talk’ is literally never good.

Rhody rolls his eyes at him fondly though, “stop that, its not bad. Come on,” he says, walking away from the party and Tony shrugs, following him out. Bucky might suck at this kind of thing, downside of having no ‘how to be a good host’ lessons that Tony got, but it’s a good exercise in leaving him to his own defenses. And he’s been better lately, a lot better even with Sam around shaking things up. “So,” Rhody says as they get to the kitchen. “Uh… shit, Pepper is better at this kind of thing,” he mumbles and yeah, Tony knows that without her he’d probably die. She’s freakishly organized and Rhody is by no means helpless, but she does compliment all his traits well enough that they run together like a well oiled machine. It’s probably for the best he met her before
Tony anyway because he’s a fucking mess ninety percent of the time.

“Something tells me Pepper left you alone for a reason,” he says and Rhodey sighs.

“Yeah, yeah. I want to give you my company,” he says and if Tony didn’t hear the thin squeak he let out he probably wouldn’t have believed he made that noise.

“What?” he asks because he’s got nothing better at the moment.

Rhodey sighs, “I’ve been thinking of retiring, at least from that aspect of my life, for some time now and you happened to come along at the perfect moment. You’re smarter than I am and I don’t say that lightly, and you’ve got amazing ideas. Pepper will still be on with you anyway and I know you two work well together. But I’d like to do something different with my life, the fact that you happen to be the only one I trust to have the company just happens to be convenient,” he says.

Tony frowns, “what about Pepper?” She seems like the more obvious choice to Tony but maybe Rhodey has a piece of information he doesn’t have.

“Oh Pepper was never going anywhere so that was half my problems solved. But she’s good at the business thing, not the inventing thing so I’d still need a you anyway,” he points out.

He waves a hand, “Pepper can keep the business aspect, I might be good with numbers but business bores me. I’ll take R&D though,” he says, grinning.

Rhodey snorts, “Pepper said you’d say that. Guess that clears up whether or not you’d kill each other,” he says and Tony laughs. “Stop that, I was worried I don’t know,” he says, waving a hand around like he and Pepper haven’t been friends for awhile now.

“Oh huh. We’ve bonded over babysitting you, we’re very close,” Tony says. He gets a ‘what the fuck’ look from Rhodey as he shakes his head.

“Uh huh. We’ve bonded over babysitting you, we’re very close,” Tony says. He gets a ‘what the fuck’ look from Rhodey as he shakes his head.

“Oh hell no, Pepper!” he yells, walking out of the kitchen and finding her pretty much immediately. Predictably Bucky is eyeing up the food Tony has sitting on the island and he rolls his eyes. Well, at least Bucky isn’t a mystery. “What the hell do you mean you have bonded with Tony over babysitting me? We’ve been babysitting him,” he says, hands on his hips and Pepper starts laughing.

“Oh my god, is that what he told you? He knows he’s the one being babysat,” Pepper says, taking Rhodey’s arm and he looks satisfied with that.

“That’s what I thought,” he says, nodding to himself as he leads Pepper away from Tony and Bucky. Pepper turns around and shakes her head, mouthing ‘no we haven’t’ and Tony laughs.

“Aw, we’re supposed to let him think he’s not helpless. Adorable,” Tony says.

Bucky wraps an arm around him and kisses the top of his head. “Its adorable that you think that Pepper isn’t babysitting both of you. Lets be real, without her you’d regularly forget to eat.”

Tony doesn’t like that he’s right but he gives him a dirty look for it anyway.

* * *

They lay in their bed and Tony is exhausted, which means Bucky probably is too. Poor Morita is probably dying on the couch downstairs because he drank too much and Tony figures one of them will deal with him in the morning if Morita himself doesn’t get to it first. “So,” Bucky murmurs, wrapping his arms around Tony, “do you want kids?”
Tony snorts, “you’d think we would have had this discussion before we got married,” he says.

“Yeah, but we suck at doing things right so we didn’t.” Bucky says, pressing a kiss to the top of Tony’s head. “Do you want them?”

He nods, “yeah, kind of do. Didn’t think you’d want any, though.” Not with Bucky’s issues, however much they’ve improved. Bad days are still frequent but clearly Bucky knows something he doesn’t.

“Not right now, but eventually. I kind of figured you wouldn’t, with the company and all that,” he murmurs.

“Well, you’d be the one staying home. I can’t exactly have the luxury of doing that.” People would immediately dismiss him, not that he won’t face a stupid amount of backlash for not staying home. Damned if he does damned if he doesn’t, but he’d like something, maybe, to pass on to a kid assuming that’s what his kid wanted. And Bucky would do just fine at home anyway; it’d give him something to do. Maybe a little too much to do but he’d figure it out.

“Kind of figured I would anyway, but I wasn’t sure you’d want more responsibility,” Bucky says.

“I’m good at multitasking,” he says, grinning when Bucky hugs him closer.

**End Notes**

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