CASE 914
by DannieU

Summary

Almost a year after the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., Bucky finally stops running and lets himself be caught. Safe, for the first time in the better part of a century, surrounded by allies and with his best friend at his back once more, things are finally looking up, except something's missing, something's pulling and tearing at him, and he can't for the life of him figure out what it is, what secret is hiding in his wrecked memories. It doesn't help that the Tower stinks of alpha bitch, that its AI is leaving him incomprehensible clues and that its mysterious owner is nowhere to be found.

Notes

So, this is my first fic in a while, and my first ever in this fandom. I'm feeling kind of rusty, and my characterisations and voices might be a bit off to begin with, but I'm looking forward to getting back in the swing of things, and hopefully the quality will rise as we go along.
The story will probably be between eight and twelve chapters long, or thereabouts. There is currently no set schedule for posting. I'll be fairly busy for the next month and a half or so - there will be updates, but they won't be regular. From the beginning of September or so, I should have a bit more time on my hands, and I'll see about finding a regular day or two a week.

This is, I realise, a pretty dark and triggery story to be introducing myself with, but there will be light-hearted moments, and not everything I write is this brutal, so hopefully I won't have scared too many people off. Hopefully some of you will enjoy.

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

94 days after

Tony shut the door behind him, taking off the sunglasses and dropping them in his pocket. He let out an unconscious sigh of relief, face relaxing even as the too-cheerful greetings he’d been flinging around himself moments ago still echoed in his ears. He took in the room with a quick glance, eyes finally falling on the still form in the chair looking out the window. Her face turned towards him and her lips tucked into a smile as her sharp, dark eyes focused on him. A good day, then. Tony returned her smile almost despite himself and crossed the room to drop into the chair across from her.

"It's good to see you, Anthony," she said, the barest hint of reproach covering the crisp tones of her voice.

Tony grimaced. "Sorry, Aunt Pegs," he said. "I've been a bit busy." He should've made time for her, though, despite everything or maybe because of everything. He just-- Well, he could admit it to himself, couldn't he? He hadn't wanted to come here, needing her, and find her needing him instead, grasping and incoherent and calling him by his father's name.

She snorted indelicately. "I hear running around in a metal suit will do that to you," she said. Another smile stole over her face, making him remember the deep red lipstick and soft-sharp beauty of his childhood. "Come here, sweet boy," she said then. "My eyes aren't as good as they used to be."

Tony rolled his eyes good-naturedly. He doubted anyone but she had even thought of calling him that for the past few decades at least. "Hardly a boy anymore," he told her, even as he got up and scooted his chair closer until it was side by side with hers. His stomach twisted and he had to take a sharp breath to keep it under control. It wasn't so much her eyesight he was scared of: not much to see yet. Her nose, however, had always been sharper than most, and she'd trained it until nothing could get past her. If anyone were going to pick up the synthetic twang of his scent, let alone the new sweetness underneath, it would be her.

She cuffed him gently over the head. "I'm your godmother, darling. You're always going to be my boy." She leaned in, offered her cheek. He kissed the thin, wrinkled skin before rubbing his own against it in the more instinctive greeting he'd needed more than he'd realized. Her trembling hand came up to run through his hair. And then, just as he'd feared, her nose twitched once, then again, her sense of smell nowhere near as faded as he might've wished. "Anthony, what--"

"I'm leaving," he said, too fast, too frantic. He shouldn't have come here, wasn't ready for this, wasn't ready for the bursts of shame that made him want to growl and posture like a desperate bottom-pile beta. He pushed down the urge, made himself breathe deeply through the sharp surges of humiliation and panic that burnt through him. "Not now, I mean. Not leaving you, just. I'll be out of the country for a while. Soon. I just wanted to let you know. Spain. Should be lovely this time of year. Well, any time of the year, really, and--"

Peggy reached out, gripped his hand with her own wrinkly one. Her thin skin seemed to crinkle under his touch. "Darling," she said again, simply. Her tone was the exact same one that had always made him snap his mouth shut with nary a thought. Today was no exception. "The vineyard is lovely any time of the year." She gave him a soft, concerned smile. "I'm glad you're taking some time off. You work too hard." She breathed in, raspy, and her nose wrinkled again as her hand slackened ever so slightly in his grasp. "Your mother would've wanted you to go there." Her voice was starting to take on the slurred quality that marked another inevitable descent into incoherency. She blinked at him, dark eyes losing their sharpness. "Howard?" she asked.

"Of course, Howard," she said. "Only." She grimaced, gesturing weakly towards the bed. "Would you mind?"

Tony nodded, wrapped an arm around her and helped her up, guiding her shuffling feet gently across the room before he helped her under the sheets. She was disconcertingly light, her body too-thin under her hands. It was wrong, seeing her like this, small and old and sick, with not a slash of lipstick in sight, so different from the kind, larger-than-life presence she'd provided throughout his childhood. He leaned in and pressed another kiss to her cheek, tucked the blanket around her and began to back away.

Just as he turned to leave, her hand shot out and gripped his wrist with surprising strength. "Howard," she said when he turned back to look at her. Her eyes were shut, but her face was set in determined lines. "You should be kinder to the boy."

Tony winced, tried to break her grip gently, but she held on so stubbornly he was afraid of hurting her. He tried to ignore her words, ignore the accidental poke that still smarted even though the wound was old, long-since scabbed over. Everything just felt sharper lately, went deeper. Howard, especially. "Peggy." He heard the plea in his own voice and couldn't even bring himself to be ashamed about it. He just needed to get out of here, right now.

A frown formed between her eyebrows. Her lips firmed. Then, "Anthony," she said. "You're not Howard. Anthony. Not Howard, sweet boy." She released her grip, gave his hand a quick pat before dropping her own back onto the sheets. "Better." Her breathing began to even, and Tony stood there, rooted to the spot, watching her fall asleep. He was breathless, uncertain. Admonishment or reassurance or babbling? With Peggy, it was impossible to tell these days.

He might not have moved at all if his stomach hadn't given just the tiniest flutter. Hunger, or something else. He set his face, picked his shades back out of the pocket and placed them back on his face before turning and leaving the room. Hunger, definitely.

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01.03.15

The elevator door slid shut behind them without a sound, and Bucky immediately felt uneasy, skin crawling with it. His hand found his empty sleeve, worrying it between his fingers for a moment before he sucked in a breath, made himself stop. He wasn't scared of enclosed spaces; he'd asked Steve. At least he hadn't been, once upon a time. Now, it made his muscles clench and jitter, made his phantom left fist bunch up and his right one reach for weapons he wasn't carrying.

A hand landed on his shoulder. He jumped, sucking in too sharp a breath. "It's all right, Buck." Steve's voice. "It's okay. Nothing's going to happen."

"Stark's kind of an asshole," Romanoff added. Bucky might have imagined the sliver of fondness in her voice. "But he's not dangerous."

Wilson cocked a skeptical eyebrow.

"He retired the suit," Romanoff added.

Bucky dropped the sleeve, not reassured, not really, but their chatter was calming, reminded him of some past that existed only in shadows and starts and barely audible voice somewhere in some
corner of his mind he couldn't properly access yet.

"He can help with your arm," Steve said, for the hundredth time. "And the-- We'll be safe here, for a while anyway."

Bucky turned his head slightly, stared at the display that showed numbers all but flashing by, faster and faster for a moment before they slowed again, eventually coming to a complete stop. The doors began to open, as silently as they'd shut. A wall of scent smacked Bucky square in the face, and he was in the farthest corner of the elevator before he'd even begun to process it all. He was breathing too hard and his arm came up to wrap around himself instinctively even as he bit back a growl. "I'm James Buchanan Barnes," he heard himself mutter, faint and hoarse. "My friends call me Bucky. I fought in Europe with Captain America..." The words continued, falling from his mouth with no input from his brain. The mantra felt like solid ground beneath his feet, and the moment he was done, he started over again, kept the litany of words going, kept himself together until he could think again. Then, when he finally felt steady enough, "You didn't tell me there'd be an alpha here."

Steve frowned. "I didn't think that kind of thing mattered to you."

Bucky flashed him a look. Fucking beta, never going to get it. As damned evolved as they claimed to be, fact of the matter was they just didn't get it, and would just waltz in, put their sticky fingers everywhere, and they had no idea what they were dealing with. Not for the first time, he remembered a pint-sized Steve berating him for being perfectly fine beating up the betas the idiot routinely picked fights with but retreating, growling, when he came too close to another alpha dog. No fucking clue. He forced himself to drop that train of thought, took another, careful, breath. A wealth of new details struck him. Bitch. Male, yes, but bitch, which already made him relax a fraction. A bitch could be a big enough threat alone, but not in the same way a dog would be. And the scent was old. Deeply embedded, yes, but months old. Not abandoned, still claimed territory, but safer, for the time being. Slowly, he began to relax, let his hand drop back to his side, straightened up from the crouch he hadn't been aware he was in. "Of course it fuckin' matters," he muttered, even as he slowly followed the others out of the elevator.

"Good evening," someone said, and Bucky jumped again, sniffed in deeply. The scent hadn't changed a bit, and he couldn't hear movement beyond that of the others coupled with faraway traffic, the low hum of air-conditioning and appliances. Nothing to indicate another person near enough to make out so clearly.


"Indeed, Captain Rogers," the voice said, and this time Bucky could make out the faint electronic notes. He felt himself relax minutely. "Welcome back to the tower - you as well, Agent Romanoff. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Sergeants Barnes and Wilson. Suites four and five have been aired and ready, and two guest rooms on community floor two have been made up."

Romanoff's eyes glittered curiously. "You sound distracted, JARVIS."

"My apologies, Agent Romanoff. My processing capabilities are being stretched a bit thin at the moment."

One red eyebrow went up.

"Where's Stark?" Steve asked.

"I'm afraid Sir is currently indisposed. Do feel free to make yourselves home, though."
Less interested now, Bucky went back to trying to make sense of the whole place, of the scent pattern heavy on his palate. Either the bitch was smelly enough to completely dominate anyone else's scent, or... "You didn't tell me Stark's a bitch."

"Oh, he is," Steve said, scent flaring for a moment with the defiant anger of a beta who didn't understand why the big, dumb alphas wouldn't just get with the program already. "Only in the one way, though."

Bucky blinked. He might not remember much, but that was a lot meaner than the Steve Rogers he'd built up in his mind.

"Stark's a dog," Romanoff informed, even as she sniffed delicately at the room. She remained expressionless, but Bucky caught just the faintest whiff of surprise, difficult to discern under the spicy-sweet lungful of alpha bitch. "And that is in more ways than one."

"Listen," Wilson said. "I may never have met the guy, but the day Stark lets himself turn bitch is the day little pigs figure out how to put on my wings and start flying circles around us. You're probably smelling a 'lady friend.'" His eyes were enough to make the finger quotes obvious. At least he didn't use his actual fingers. Bucky was pretty sure that trick had already been old back in the forties. Or had they? He didn't know. Chronology was kind of a hit and miss thing for him recently.

Bucky didn't tell him that a dog didn't sleep with a bitch unless he actually wanted pups, which, from what he'd heard, wasn't all that likely. Things might've changed more than he realized. Or maybe it was just that none of them knew Stark as well as they claimed. He shrugged it off. Stark's business was his own, and as much as Bucky would've liked a new arm, a safe, warm place to sleep and some decent food to eat would more than do for now.

"And Banner?" Romanoff asked.

"Gone as well," JARVIS said simply.

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5-7 days after

"Total lockdown, JARVIS," Tony snapped. Something inside him slowly began to calm as the glass walls lost their transparency. For the first time in what felt like days, his pulse slowed to something resembling a normal rate. His hands gradually began to regain some of their former steadiness. For long moments, he just stood there, awash in the feeling that for the first time in what felt like forever, he was marginally safe.

It was only when dull pain began to spread that he realized he was holding his fingers pressed, hard, against the wound on his neck. The scabs were still rough and raised against his skin, maybe a day or two away from peeling off. Sharp little jolts of something not at all painful, too far from painful, shot through him the longer he kept touching the spot. He dropped his hand immediately, feeling as if he'd been burnt. And suddenly, he could feel it all, the aches and bruises, the places where he'd scrubbed his own skin raw, every part of him that was still on the verge of collapsing from exhaustion despite the nearly full day he'd already slept. His stomach dropped to his feet all over again, and he had to grit his teeth, squeeze his eyes shut for long moments just to regain some kind of balance.

"Sir, it's ten thirty-four on May third, twenty-fourteen. You are in Stark Tower, New York City. It is sixty-eight degrees and balmy, with a thunderstorm approaching." JARVIS's voice was steady and familiar, grounding enough for Tony to take a breath and feel the slight tingles of black retreating
from the edges of his vision. Slowly, the sounds of the shop blurred into focus. The beeps and
whirs of the bots, JARVIS, the hum of the machinery. Bit by bit, his breathing steadied out until he
could begin to peel open his eyes and pull the neck of his sweater up high enough to hide the wound.

"Thanks, Jay," Tony managed, voice rough. Disuse, overuse, he didn't even know. The past few
days were a complete blur. He shoved the thought away, didn't allow himself to linger. It was too
much, too sharp still. Lingering wouldn't do him any good. He took a deep breath. "Call up the specs
for Mark Forty-Two."

If JARVIS was surprised that Tony was calling the armor specs back up, it didn't show in his voice,
"Certainly, Sir." Immediately, the blueprints sprang up in front of him, the holographics as clear as
ever. And honestly, Tony wasn't sure why he hadn't done this sooner, why he'd kept keeping himself
away from this, from Iron Man, from the better half of anything he'd ever been. He should've done
this months ago, when Pepper moved out of the Tower for good, was still surprised that he'd kept
from doing it sooner yet, but he'd tried so hard, had wanted so badly, and then he hadn't wanted to
admit that-- He shoved that thought away, keeping himself as firmly on the small green area of
thoughts he could handle right now. Still, he should've done this months ago. Things would've been
so different if he had. He swallowed, turned to the armor, called up the points of vulnerability he
remembered remarking upon, everything that could be improved. "Create a new folder for Mark
Forty-Three," he instructed. "Save on my private server."

"Yes, sir," JARVIS said. He fell silent afterwards, but it felt more like a pause, a damned loaded one,
and shit, he really shouldn't have given the AI this much personality. He definitely shouldn't have
given him hormone scanners and the programming necessary to process the readings. "Sir," JARVIS
began again.

"I know, Jay," Tony said, wincing at his own words. "Place an anonymous order on pheromone
masking shampoo, body wash, the works. Some of the synthetic dog stuff as well. Highest quality."
It was the closest he could get to acknowledging what had happened, and that was probably how it
was going to stay for a while.

"Done, Sir," JARVIS said. "If I may remind you--"

"You may not," Tony cut in, turning his attention back to the schematics, zooming into the first
problem spot and beginning to work through the issues with deft fingers. Every moment of work
settled him a bit more, and maybe he should've just made JARVIS fabricate a copy of Mark 42 just
to tide him over until 43 was done. He needed it done now, needed to sink into the armor and know
that he was fucking safe, that no one could touch him, could overpower him so easily, that nothing
like what had happened could ever possibly happen again. Not that it mattered. The worst had
already passed, and other parts of it would happen again whether he wanted them to or not and God,
he just needed the armor to encase him, convince him for a moment that nothing was wrong and that
he was safe again.

"Sir," JARVIS said again, quite a bit more asserting this time. "It's important that you--"

"Mute," Tony snapped. "And put on some music, baby, would you?"

He had to endure a couple of hours of Katy Perry in retaliation, but overall that was the least of his
problems.

He was injecting the homing beacons into his left calf when the door slid open. Tony froze
immediately, injector half into his own leg, sniffing the air frantically. He felt himself start to relax a
moment later, and not a moment too soon; the finished Mark 43 gauntlets were already flying towards him. The scent that hit him calmed him immediately, centered him enough to will the armor back to where it had been as he let the soft, earthy scent of omega wrap around him. No threat there after all. "Brucie Bear," he greeted as he finished injecting the chip. "What are you doing here?"

Bruce rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "JARVIS told me you'd exceeded the forty-eight hour limit." Then he stopped short, blinking, clearly taking in the air in the 'shop, running it all through his nose, all omega careful and observant. "Tony, what--"

Tony stopped short for a moment, flexed his hand to make sure the chips already embedded in his arm weren't going to be in the way. They were good. Another couple of hours and he wouldn't even notice them anymore. And shit, would everyone just stop asking? Was that really so much to wish for? "I'm fine," he said, and he wished he didn't sound as tired as he did, but he was exhausted, damned near to dropping with it, and he should sleep, would, if he didn't think everything would just catch up with him then, if he didn't need so badly to finish the armor before he could even contemplate resting.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" Bruce asked. "We would've supported you if we'd know this was what you wanted. I would've, at least. Did you even fill out the forms?"

"Bruce." Tony sighed. "Not now."

Bruce sucked in another mouthful of air, seemed to read everything from it. His eyes widened. "Shit, Tony, did you register that? Who even--" He caught himself, and then his all-too-expressive face twisted into an expression of horror. Green began to take over the browns of his eyes. "Tony... You didn't mean for this to happen, did you?"

"Bruce," Tony said again, sharpening his voice, imbuing it with as much alpha as he could. At least he still had that much left to him.

Bruce was too used to him, though, or too practiced at ignoring his own instincts, to back down. At least the green retreated the barest fraction from his eyes. "Tony, you have to report this. What they did, whoever they were--"

"Happened," Tony all but growled. "It fucking happened. Now let it the fuck go. Splashes of fear and humiliation washed over him, left him cold and damned near shaking apart all over again, and fuck it, he couldn't deal with this, not right now, fuck all, and Bruce could give him this much at least, couldn't he? "Let it go, please."

"Okay," Bruce said, head tilting to the side just barely, enough submission in the motion to put Tony slightly more at ease. "Okay. Whatever you need." He paused a moment, then flashed Tony a sharp scowl. His eyes were back to green, but his expression was no-nonsense, all lab partner and barely a shadow of the hulk in sight. "Did you even wash those? That's completely unsanitary." With that, he plucked the injector out of Tony's hand and went to disinfect it before returning to help inject the final few chips.

Tony spent that night slumped inside the armor, sleeping fitfully.

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01.04.15

Bucky shot up sharply, chest pumping air in and out faster than his body could use it. For a moment, icy white panic was all he could feel, all that existed, his whole damn world. His hand was up,
grasping at empty air, grasping for... He had no idea what. Something inside him was clenched tight, something empty and yearning, something that-- Something was missing. He didn't know what, didn't know how he knew, but. He just did.

He didn't remember the dream, not really. Barely even remembered impressions or emotions. It had been bad, though. Something horrible, something he couldn't control. Vaguely, he remembered screams, cries, whimpers, determination and something else, something he had no word for, no reference. The glimpses vanished as quickly as they'd come, impossible to hold onto, and maybe that was a relief.

Carefully, he lay back down, ignoring the sweat-soaked sheets and the unfamiliar-familiar hot restlessness that still held his body in its grip. The mattress was too soft, strange against his back. The unfamiliar smells of the Tower curled around him, held him in their grip, made it damn near impossible to find his way back into restfulness. After a few moments, he gave up the attempt, pushed off the covers and swung his feet onto the floor. He picked the shirt Steve had lent him up off the nearby chair and pulled it on with some difficulty. Then, cautiously, he made his way out of the room and into the big, open space of the common area beyond.

He took in the space with both nose and ears and eyes. It was nearly silent, save for the kind of background noise he was already growing used to and the soft clink of a spoon hitting the sides of the mug as it was stirred. The scents hadn't changed much, aside from the rich sweetness of hot chocolate and the scent of non-challenging beta. He was vaguely aware of Wilson as his eyes swept the room, but so long as the other man kept the submissive pose and his scent betrayed no threat, Bucky could dismiss him to take in everything else. All the unfamiliar tech that he knew he should recognize. The lowered portion of the room with its couches and armchairs. The kitchen with its counters, large dining table, and humming icebox. The wet bar stretching out from the far corner and emitting the faint, old scents of alcohol. The floor-to-ceiling windows that showed the glittering view of the city and the snowflakes floating gently through the air. Nothing out of the ordinary, no immediate danger lurking around the corners. He felt his shoulders slump minutely as he slowly made his way to the kitchen, slinging himself into one of the bar chairs before putting his elbow on the table and staring across at his silent companion.

Wilson didn't show his unease, never mind that he reeked of it. He stayed silent for long moments, bearing Bucky's gaze before he straightened. "Jet lag," he explained. Then he gestured towards his mug of hot chocolate. "You want some?"

Bucky gave a small shrug, suddenly uncertain. He didn't remember what hot chocolate tasted like, wasn't sure whether he liked it or not, whether he was supposed to. The wariness in Wilson's scent put him on edge, reminded him too much of all the things he knew but didn't remember, didn't want to. Maybe this whole thing had been a bad idea, had just been something, some glitch in the programming he knew had held him in a deadlock for decades, just. He didn't know what to do with any of it.

Wilson seemed to take his silence as a 'yes' and got up. He pulled a mug from one of the cupboards and poured it full of chocolate from a pan still kept warm on the stove. Then he pulled some kind of can from the icebox, pulled off the top, and pushed something. It made some kind of sharp, windy sound, but just as Bucky tensed up, the scent of cream hit his nose, and he relaxed ever so slightly again. A moment later, the mug was placed unceremoniously in front of him.

Bucky stared at it, uncertain. Some part of him told him he should speak, should say 'thank you' or just acknowledge this whole thing somehow, but it felt so damned difficult, opening his mouth, creating some kind of connection. He felt so cut off from everything, so isolated from the whole damn world. He didn't know how to even begin to figure out how to work around that. Slowly, he
picked up the mug and took a tentative sip. Sweet warmth filled him up, made his tongue tingle and something inside him relax even as a spot of something cool collected on the tip of his nose. He put the mug back down, marginally more at ease, wiped the whipped cream off his face before taking another sip. Couldn't seem to help himself.

"So," Wilson said, tone confident, scent full of barely suppressed fear, and Bucky knew he was alpha, that betas had a certain reaction to him, but this was excessive, this was beyond what even his instincts told him should be right. He swallowed. He might not remember, but he did know, and having everyone constantly remind him, for all that they didn't use words, didn't help one bit. "I told you why I'm up. You gonna return the favor?"

Bucky shrugged again, unsure. He took another sip of the chocolate, let its heat swell through him, curl up inside him. He was clutching the cup, he realized, white-knuckled. He relaxed his grip before he could break the ceramics. "Dream," he said, then, simply.

It seemed like the right answer, made Wilson relax minutely, fall back into his customary confidence somehow. "It must be hard on you, all this," he said. "I mean, shit. POW for seventy fucking years, that's fucked up, man. No one's ever had to deal with that kind of shit before. You're holding up well, considering. A few nightmares are pretty much expected."

"Not sure it was a nightmare," Bucky said. He took another swallow, and suddenly he wished it was something stronger. Well, nothing was stopping him, was it? He got up, walked to the wet bar and let his nose guide him to a bottle of something that smelled somewhat familiar. He picked it up, twisted off the lid and returned to his mug to top it off.

"Give me a hit too, would you?" Wilson requested, and Bucky poured a healthy squirt into his mug as well before putting the lid back on and returning the bottle to where he'd found it. "Not a bad dream?" Wilson prodded when Bucky had returned to his chair and what felt like long moments of each of them sipping their drink had passed.

"Like I said," Bucky said. "Not sure."

"Well, if it's--" Wilson made a vaguely obscene gesture. "No wonder. You're safe for the first time in a lifetime. No one's going to blame you for, you know."

Bucky frowned, uncertain.

Wilson shrugged. "Just saying." He took a quick pull of his drink, wound up coughing for a moment, blinking as he regained his cool, and the picture was so reminiscent of some half-remembered image of Steve far too many decades too old that Bucky couldn't help but feel himself relax another fraction.

"I don't remember it," he heard himself saying. "I don't remember anything, lately. Everything's a blur, and that's when I'm lucky. All just, glimpses of being a kid. Steve's always fuckin' there. Were we ever apart for five damn seconds? And then it's just a blur, just a fucking flicker of red whenever I look at my hands and this sense that something's missing, there's something I need and it's just... out of my reach."

"Were you bonded?" Wilson asked.

Bucky shook his head, took another swallow. Even though his mug was damn near half alcohol, he barely even felt the touch of extra warmth to his stomach. "Shit, no," he said. Then he grimaced. "I don't remember."
Wilson shrugged, "It's just that ASS is so damn close to PTSD it's hard to distinguish, and I'd kind of prefer to know if you're dealing with both or just the one here."

Bucky flashed him a sullen glare, and scented another burst of wariness. "I got no idea what you're even talkin'bout."

Wilson's voice grew oddly soothing as he began to explain the differences and similarities of post-traumatic stress disorder and alpha separation syndrome, and within a few minutes, Bucky was blocking him out. Another few moments later, he fell asleep on the counter.

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179 days after

"So," Bruce said, glancing out the windows of the car for another long moment before he looked back at Tony. "I had no idea you had property in Spain."

Tony pulled the suitcase he'd brought ever so slightly closer to his side. "Of course I do," he said. "Maternal heritage. Howard might've been first generation rich. Mare, not so much."

Bruce frowned. "I thought your mom was Italian."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Popular misconception, though I couldn't tell you why. Carbonell isn't an Italian name at all, who the fuck's been filling your head with that kind of shit anyway? Howard was half-Italian, and half-German. Mare was a quarter English, had to get the Collins name somewhere. The rest all came from here."

"So you're saying you're actually mostly Spanish?" Bruce said, and fuck if Tony even knew why any of this even mattered. They were both American, weren't they? "My great grandma was Castillian."

"Fuck no," Tony said, and the knee-jerk reaction was still there, learnt from his mother too early to shake. "Catalan." He turned his head to look out the window himself, taking in the acres upon acres of wine fields, bare this time of year. He hadn't been here for any length of time since he'd been a kid, barely six and clinging to his mother's skirt as she'd made her one and only attempt at leaving Howard. They'd spent two months here before Howard had shown, red-eyed and pathetic, neck bared as he begged for forgiveness. He'd never quite figured out why they went back; maybe his mother had just been too alpha to look at Howard Stark in such a submissive pose and resist. Sometimes he wished they'd just stayed. He'd just started the local school, had learnt just enough Catalan to get by. He'd liked it here. It was calm. No one had told him his grape picking bot was a piece of shit. Abruptly, he pulled his gaze away from those windows. Last thing he needed right now.

"And this is your maternal home," Bruce said. "Makes sense." Only Bruce's soothing omega scent and his own inconvenient bulk stopped him from getting up and picking a fight at that point. And shit, just the thought of fighting made him feel too damned exhausted for words. His back gave a sympathetic twinge, and Tony flinched. Fuck, but he wished... He wasn't even sure what he wished anymore.

"Yeah," he agreed, clinging onto the edges of the conversation by the skin of his teeth. "This is where my mom grew up." He didn't have a den prepared, and his Malibu house had been blown to bits, even if he still owned the property. This, somehow, had become the one place on Earth where he thought he'd feel safe enough for this whole damned thing.
Bruce remained silent for long moments. Then he inclined his head just a fraction, a soft smile on his face. "I'm honored you chose to bring me here."

"Yeah, well," Tony said. "Figured I'd want an omega around when things got messy."

"You do know I'm not trained for this kind of thing, right?"

Tony swallowed sharply, felt his hand move to his midsection without any input from his brain. The barest flutter greeted him. "You know you just need to be there, right?"

A moment later, the car pulled to a stop and Tony got out, Bruce on his heels, making for the house and the hopefully remade master suite. Last thing he needed right now was a bed his parents had got down and dirty on. Thankfully, someone had anticipated his needs. The bed was still so new it smelled more like the dealership than anything else, and the sheets were crisp and bleached. He opened up his suitcase, pulled out Anna Jarvis's quilt and Jarvis's old knitted blanket and the ancient stuffed cat he'd slept with before Howard had informed him he was too old for that kind of thing. Slowly, meticulously, he began to construct his den.
So, I seem to be writing faster than I'd anticipated, and while I can't promise when the next chapter will be here, have this one for now. Thanks everyone for all the kudos, subscriptions and especially the comments. Those things make my day. Any questions, mistakes or things that look off, please let me know. Enjoy.

01.19.15

"No new memories," he told Steve the moment he walked into the kitchen and found the other man there. "Pretty sure it's going to be a bad day."

"Why?" Steve asked, and it felt almost as though he were taking the words as some kind of affront. Bucky didn't get why. He'd had more bad days than good, more days that made him lose his sense of self and end up in a corner screaming somewhere than days when he felt like he might stand some chance of figuring it all out.

"I don't remember my serial number," Bucky said, though that was the least of it, didn't really explain anything. It was just the words his mind threw out most readily.

Steve rattled off a series of numbers almost mindlessly, and Bucky was pretty sure he should be remembering them all, should be carving them into his own fucking skin just so he wouldn't forget again. That wasn't what this was all about, though, not really. He'd woken up with his hand grasping for nothing all over again, that empty, yearning space gaping wide open and painfully deep inside him. It fucking ached. It kept going like this, some fucking thing, the universe or something, reminding him, over and over, that he was missing something he didn't even have a name for. Himself, maybe. "It'll all come back to you soon enough," Steve added, voice soft and careful.

"And if it doesn't?" Bucky didn't ask. "It's something else," he said. "It's... I got this tether on me, and I don't even wanna lose it. I just-- Fuck, I don't even know what. I can't make any damn sense of anything here."

"It's the bitch scent," Steve told him. "It should've dissolved by now. Damned near enough to make even us betas go crazy. Sorry, Buck. Guess Stark's cleaners aren't all they're cranked up to be."

"I'm not a beta," Bucky felt oddly compelled to point out.

" Doesn't exactly make shit any better for you, jerk," Steve said, truthfully enough. Maybe things would be better, easier, if he didn't have to constantly deal with these whiffs of alpha bitch all around him. That wasn't the way the world was, though, and if there was anything his knockoff serum had taught him, it was that closing himself off to the scents around him would only result in disaster.

"Yeah, well," Bucky said. "I've lived with it so far. Don't really think any of it is going to change anytime soon."

"I still don't get it," Steve said. "Stark should know better than to let himself be directed by a bitch in heat."
"Shut up," Bucky said, allowing a bit of the Winter Soldier's cold to penetrate the conversation. "You still just don't get it, do you?"

Steve gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes. "I get that you're an idiotic alpha and that Stark's shit seems to be influencing you. We shouldn't have come here in the first place."

Bucky flinched. This was the first place in his admittedly short memory where he'd felt even halfway at home. He didn't want to have move, didn't want to have to even admit to contemplating it. Safety felt so rare these days, more like an ideal than something he might ever actually achieve. He didn't want to ruin it by leaving, never mind that he was pretty sure he'd follow Steve wherever he went anyway. "Don't, Steve," he heard himself say. "Please." Despite himself, he still turned his head to the side, bared his neck, and fuck, but that grated. He wondered if it always had, or if somewhere along the way, he'd lost his ability to let Steve stay in charge, dynamics be damned.

Steve sighed, but nodded. "We'll stay," he said. "For now, anyway. But we'll have to think about--"

The elevator doors slid open, cutting Steve off, and a new scent joined the cocktail of them that Bucky was only just starting to get used to. For some reason he couldn't have explained if he'd tried, he didn't even tense at it. It was spicy-sweet, quick and efficient, familiar even as it was wholly new. He lifted his face slowly to take in the newcomer. She was dressed smart and businesslike, strawberry blond hair pulled back in a neat bun. Her heels clicked along the floor as she made her way towards the elevator on the other side of the room, the one Bucky hadn't seen anyone use even once.

"Good morning, Miss Potts," Steve greeted, standing from the chair and inclining his head in a gesture that didn't have the barest inch of submission to it.

Potts returned the gesture. She smelled busy and distracted, glanced quickly at Bucky and gave him a small smile, seemingly almost despite herself, if her confused look a moment later was anything to go by. Quickly, she returned her gaze to Steve. "Captain Rogers," she acknowledged. "And your other Russian friend, I assume."

"I'm not actually Russian," Bucky interjected.

Steve shot him a startled glance, and Bucky supposed it was fair enough. He hadn't been speaking much to anyone to begin with in the weeks they'd been here. Maybe it was startling to hear him talk so easily to a stranger. It was just, she didn't feel like a stranger, didn't smell like it. She smelled safe, for all her briskness, a softened edge to her scent that he'd only ever sensed around Steve and his parents and sisters. Family. He couldn't explain it, didn't know where the impression came from, but he couldn't possibly have denied it either.

"Listen," Steve said then, seeming to dismiss Bucky's behavior. "I'm sorry. I know we shouldn't have just showed up out of the blue without asking Stark, but--"

"I trust you didn't miss that big 'A' on the side of the building, Rogers," Potts said. "Tony doesn't mind you here. I'd leave you be too, except I need to get down into the workshop to fetch a file. I'll be out of your hair in a moment."

"It's no trouble, Ma'am," Steve said, sounding bewildered for a moment. He watched Potts as she kept walking, only cleared his throat when she finally reached the far elevator. "Miss Potts?"

"Yes?" Potts said, turning slowly, and Bucky felt a tiny curl of gratitude that she hadn't left yet after all. Her presence put him at ease to a degree even Steve hadn't managed yet, no nonsense and family and home, and fuck, where did those things even come from?
Steve wrung his hands for half a second, the way Bucky half-remembered him doing every time he'd ever been faced with a beautiful woman from the moment he hit puberty. Then he caught himself, put his hands back at his sides. The scent of his determination filled the air. "Do you know when Stark will be back?"

She merely cocked a perfectly sculpted eyebrow in response.

"It's only, we've been called out three times already in the time we've been here. Sam's wings are a wreck, so he can't help out, and Bucky--" He paused, grimaced, and Bucky didn't miss the glance Steve couldn't help throwing at his empty left sleeve. "Barton's off who knows where, and Thor's in Asgard. It's been just Natasha and me, and without Stark and Banner we're seriously short a heavy hitter or two."

Potts's expression didn't change, but Bucky could smell the affront coming off her in waves. "Three whole calls?" she asked. "And do you know how many calls Bruce had to deal with on his own while you were off playing tag with Sergeant Amnesia? Tony retired the suit, and unlike the rest of you, he has an actual job beyond repairing your tech. You're living in his home, you're eating food he's paid for, and you have the gall to try to make more demands of him?"

Bucky didn't even need his nose to know that Steve was gearing up for a fight, never mind the fact that he was facing an unenhanced woman, never mind that for once Bucky wasn't sure he was in the right at all. "Stark made a commitment--"

"So did you," Potts interjected. "And just like you, he had to decide that there were other priorities. He's on medical leave, if you must know, and Bruce is with him. They'll be back when they're ready. Please give them the dignity of allowing them that." With that, she turned on her heel and walked the last few steps to the elevator, which opened for her without so much as a press of a button.

"Too far, Stevie," Bucky heard himself mutter, though he wasn't sure where that had come from in the first place. Yes, he'd been out of line, but on the other hand, they were both soldiers. The mission came first, and if Steve didn't have the personnel and gear needed, it was his prerogative be make sense of the situation. Still... "What's your problem with Stark anyway?"

Steve gritted his teeth for a moment before exhaling in a long blow. "He's mouthy," he said.

Bucky rolled his eyes. "So are you."

"He's entitled and obnoxious, he always does exactly what he wants, never mind everyone else. And he never. Fucking. Listens."

"Basically," Natasha said, and Bucky jumped half a foot in shock. He hadn't heard any of the doors open or shut, had no idea how she'd even got in. "Stark's too alpha for Steve's poor little beta ass to deal with."

"I don't have a problem working with alphas," Steve said sharply. "I worked well enough with Peggy, and that's without even mentioning Bucky. We--"

"Peggy might've been alpha," Natasha said. "But she was also a woman in the nineteen forties. Bucky is..." She glanced at him for a moment. "I'm not sure what his deal is beyond having grown up in the thirties, but it's pretty clear he's been coddling you, for way too long. An alpha under beta command is always going to chafe, and he's always going to defy orders. It's not because he's out to get you; it goes against his nature to let you lead. And sometimes him not following orders is a good thing. Who knows what goes on in that big brain of his most of the time, but sometimes he does see things we don't."
"It doesn't have to chafe," Steve said, looking downright affronted. "He just has to--"

"It does," Bucky said, and he wasn't sure why he was getting mixed up in this conversation at all, except that some part of him couldn't stand for Stark not being around to make his own case. And if that meant Bucky had to make it for him, well, apparently he was all right with that. "It does chafe. It's hard as hell sometimes, Steve. And I've had a hell of a lot more practice at it than he has. It doesn't matter what we know, what we've agreed to. There's always going to be that hindbrain screaming at you not to stand for a beta ordering you around."

Steve frowned, didn't speak for long moments. When he looked at Bucky again, his eyes were wounded, and shit, Bucky hated that, but he endured it, didn't back down. "I didn't know that's how you felt," he said at last.

Bucky shrugged. "I make myself get over it," he said. "I have some practice. It's not that easy for all of us. Just... cut him some slack. Guy's sick, after all, and he's not around to talk for himself."

Steve sighed, but inclined his head in concession. That was something, at least.

"Anyway," Natasha said. "I have a surprise for you. Reinforcements." She turned to call over her shoulder, "You can come out now."

The door to the stairwell opened, and a short, built, blond man stepped into the room, his scent hitting Bucky and putting him on the defensive immediately, at least until Steve broke into a wide grin. "Clint," he called. "Good to see you, buddy."

***

1 day before

The Soldier had grown almost gentle. His hold was still firm, hands still brisk and efficient, but something about his touch was softer, more careful, as if he'd realized how close Tony was to breaking and was scared to give him that final push. Tony's hands were unbound, but he couldn't even remember when that had happened. It didn't matter. He was weak as a fucking kitten, could barely lift his hands even without the restraints. He blinked once or twice, bit back a wince when the Soldier thrust in again, his body so sore every movement hurt. His eyesight was blurry with exhaustion, his legs trembling. At least he wasn't on his front anymore, but on his side, held back firmly against a broad chest.

The metal hand came up to shift his head to the side, baring his neck. Tony didn't have the energy to fight it, barely even managed a whimper. He'd given up on the mantra hours - days? - ago. He had barely any voice left, speaking hurt, and nothing seemed to be getting through. Whoever, whatever, the man behind him was, there wasn't anything left of Bucky Barnes in there. The Soldier's mouth descended on his neck, cutting off his train of sluggish thought. Small nips and almost tender suckling shot sparks of lax pleasure through his body, making something yawn open and aching and empty in the pit of his stomach, and as if from far away, Tony heard himself let out another whine.

For a moment the thrusts sped up. Then the Soldier stiffened against him, and Tony felt the slight jerks as he spilled himself. He'd given up on the mantra hours - days? - ago. He had barely any voice left, speaking hurt, and nothing seemed to be getting through. Whoever, whatever, the man behind him was, there wasn't anything left of Bucky Barnes in there. The Soldier's mouth descended on his neck, cutting off his train of sluggish thought. Small nips and almost tender suckling shot sparks of lax pleasure through his body, making something yawn open and aching and empty in the pit of his stomach, and as if from far away, Tony heard himself let out another whine.

For a moment the thrusts sped up. Then the Soldier stiffened against him, and Tony felt the slight jerks as he spilled himself. Long moments later, he pulled out. Tony couldn't bring himself to even react as he felt the plug being eased carefully inside him, holding in hormone-laden semen. Finally, the Soldier pulled away, and Tony felt his own body slump without the support, head lolling forwards as he began immediately to drop into a half-slumber. The aches and pains in his body kept him from true sleep where even fear and frustration would no longer have been able to. The bones in his hips hurt as if they were slowly being wrenched apart. His stomach hurt, as if someone had stuck in a hand and was forcefully, bit by bit, turning him inside out. His whole body roiled with nausea.
sat thick in his throat, had for days now, threatening the loss of whatever sustenance he'd managed to take, and which he knew he needed badly. Thinking was difficult; he was bounced back and forth between pain and exhaustion, and he hadn't had a proper sleep in something like a week. At least there was that, the oblivion true incoherence promised was just around the corner.

He couldn't lie still, despite his exhaustion, couldn't find any position that promised even a smidgen of relief from everything. He couldn't move very well either, and even after so long, he still hated - distantly, now, but still there - the feeling of the plug moving inside him, shoving up against his inner walls, hard and unyielding, whenever he moved. And worse, yet, was the feeling of the Soldier's come sloshing around inside him. He'd hated it since the first time, but now, as much as he was able to react to anything, it made him cold with fear. He could feel his body absorbing it, so very slowly but still so much faster than it had in the beginning. He could feel the additional hormones soaring through him, making his hands shake and tiny beads of sweat gather along his hairline, made his breath come short and too-fast. There was no getting comfortable when those sensations were his whole world.

What felt like minutes later, but might have been longer - his sense of time had been shot to hell ages ago - the Soldier returned. Tony glanced up at him through slitted eyes, but he couldn't seem to focus his sight right. He didn't see what the Soldier was holding out until it was right in his face, couldn't smell anything over the thick scent of sex that clung to every inch of the room. An actual, honest to God sippy cup finally came into focus in front of him, the plastic old and worn, with baby-sized bite marks on it. Tony didn't even care. Compared to the rest of what had been put in his body for the past however long, this was nothing. He tried to lift his hands, accept the cup, but he barely got them off the mattress before they flopped uselessly back down. He opened his mouth, let the Soldier feed him. The instincts telling him it was wrong were a bare echo somewhere in the back of his mind, drowned out by physical weakness and newer, budding instincts that urged him to let himself be taken care of. The Soldier had to slip the flesh hand behind Tony's head and tilt his face up, but then the first trickle of liquid made it into Tony's mouth. It was lukewarm, slightly salty, chicken broth, or soup with all the chewables filtered out somehow. Tony didn't care. It tasted like can, and it was probably the closest to food he'd be able to eat right now, and as much as it made the nausea a hundred times worse, he knew he needed it.

He drank small sips, pausing for long minutes in between each one to let his rebelling stomach settle, and for every single moment of it, he could feel the pool of come inside him grow fractionally smaller. He had no idea how long it took him to empty the cup, and then drink a few swallows of chilled water from one of those squirty top bottle things. Then he shut his mouth, couldn't imagine taking in another drop. If he tried, everything would probably come right back up. The Soldier kept the water bottle hovering in front of his face for long moments before accepting Tony's denial, putting it on the bedside table.

Then his hand was trailing down Tony's back, barely a whisper of a touch, and Tony wished he wouldn't be so gentle, that he would make it hurt, force some last bit of fight out of Tony. It would be easier like that, even though an actual physical struggle at this point would probably kill him. Strong fingers gripped the plug and pulled steadily, and Tony felt a full-bodied flinch go through him. The cheap lube had all but dried up, and the semen was fully absorbed. There was nothing left to ease the glide, and the friction was like open fire against his already chafed channel. Even so, he felt his ass clench as it searched for the fullness it had become way too damned used to. "Wait," he managed, voice cracking with wear. "Please," and God, even now, that chafed. Begging. He'd never done it before, not really, and even in this state, it went against everything he was. It was just... It was too much. He needed a break, needed rest, or he'd crack, and he doubted he'd ever find a way to put himself back together. "Needasleep. Please."

The Soldier looked at him for long moments, considering. Then, carefully, he rolled Tony onto his
back. His flesh hand reached up, gently closed Tony's eyes. Tony felt his own breathing begin to even out even as he heard the wet sound of lube on dick. He was half-asleep when the Soldier shoved inside and felt himself falling, falling, falling. Then it was black.

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01.31.15

"Hey, guys, I found something **good**." Barton's voice reached him before even his scent did, and a moment later both were followed by the sight of a pair of legs hanging out of a vent, followed swiftly by the whole body of a full-grown man. Bucky rolled his eyes. He liked Barton, he did. He was the kind of beta who deliberately put himself in the bottom of the pile, just so he'd have more freedom to cause trouble. He was fun, and fast-mouthed, and a crack shot, and a lot more relaxing to be around than anyone else in the Tower. Still, Bucky didn't get him, most of the time. Who the fuck climbed around inside the walls voluntarily anyway?

"What did you find?" Natasha sounded bored, but smelled curious. Bucky was slowly getting used to that, to the way she hardly ever looked like she smelled. Most people probably wouldn't ever realize to begin with, but Bucky was an alpha, more instinct-driven than any other dynamic and with the nose to show for it, and with the finely tuned senses of the knock-off serum besides. He probably had one of the ten or so best noses in the world.

"You have to come see," Barton said, striding across the floor towards the private elevator that went only to the penthouse. Bucky winced. It didn't take a genius to figure out the penthouse was off limits. It belonged to Stark, who was already doing them a huge favor just by putting them up. Invading his private territory while he wasn't there to protect it... It went against everything Bucky's ma had ever taught him, went against everything his instincts told him was right just to top it off. Bucky half wanted to object, even as inappropriate curiosity swarmed him, going so far as to connect to his hindbrain until satisfying that curiosity somehow became something close to a physical need. Then Steve gave a shrug, got to his feet and headed towards the elevator, giving Bucky just enough excuse to follow his curiosity, whatever his sense of propriety told him. Bucky followed along at Steve's heels, sensed Natasha and Sam moving to follow as well, and soon enough all five of them were in the elevator, heading upstairs.

Bucky would've expected the top floor to have been off limits, locked up somehow, had half expected JARVIS to be shouting at them and stopping the elevator, but nothing of the sort happened. The elevator ascended smoothly, and then the doors slid open, revealing a smooth, streamlined interior. There wasn't much personality about the whole place. Even the scent wasn't much thicker than it had been down in the common areas. Bucky still found it odd that he smelled so much bitch and could barely pick up a hint of dog. Then again, Steve had said that it'd been about a year since the team had last lived here. Who was to say what had happened in between then and now?

"Come on," Barton called, walking swiftly down a hallway, neatly avoiding the door that smelled most strongly of bitch, only to open the one next to it. The rest of them crowded in behind him. "Tada," Barton crowed, and Bucky was finally close enough to look past him. He felt his own eyes widen as he took in the space beyond. The walls were only half-painted, strong strokes here and there while buckets still sat on the plastic covering on the floor. Even so, the soft, muted pink told a story all of its own which in no way fit in with Steve's rants about 'genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist'. And as if that wasn't enough, there were boxes stacked in the corner of the room, some of furniture Bucky vaguely recognized as a changing table and a rocking chair, some with toys and clothes and diapers. A half-assembled crib sat in one corner, hand-crafted and lovingly carved. An odd teddy bear in something that resembled Steve's costume but didn't all at once was leant
against one of the legs.

Sam's eyes widened. "You should feel honored here, Barnes," he said. "That's a fucking Bucky Bear. Original one too, if I'm not wrong."

"What's going on here?" Steve asked, face scrunched up completely, as if all his preconceptions were falling apart. "What's Stark doing?"

Natasha, in the end, was the one who said aloud what they were all thinking. "This is a nursery." She paused for a moment. Then, "JARVIS, is Stark having a baby?"

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to answer," JARVIS said, speaking up for the first time during their expedition. He didn't sound regretful in the least.

Sam let out a long whistle. "Guess he could only keep cheating biology for that long. Explains the bitch scent, at least, if he's been hiding a mate here."

Barton only kept on grinning, even as they left the penthouse and returned to the common floor, gossip flourishing in a way Bucky didn't remember experiencing since Brooklyn when he was a pup.

When he returned that evening, he couldn't have said why, except the nursery was so obviously unfinished and that somehow felt so utterly wrong to him it made his skin itch. With just one hand, he had to struggle for long minutes to open the paint buckets, but he managed it at last, and managed to figure out what the different equipment was for, got the paint on the plate thing and the roller into it before he started to distribute it along the too-big white portions of the wall.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been working when the door slid open behind him. Steve, his nose told him, which at least meant he didn't have to turn away from his work. "What're you doin' here?" Steve asked, sounding more like Bucky's memories than was entirely fair. "Couldn't find you anywhere."

Bucky shrugged. "Drove me crazy, this place, just thinkin' 'bout it," he said. "Could you imagine, bringing home your mate and pup and having just this to show for it?" He wasn't sure why it was so personal, why the thought of this half-finished mess grated at his nerves so damned much. Why it was that he felt so utterly compelled to finish it himself if Stark wasn't going to. He just knew that the thought of leaving it unfinished made his skin itch. "I know you don't like Stark," he added quickly. "And I know you don't fuckin' get this whole thing, but this is just... This is almost at the level of bitch going it alone."

Steve winced. Even betas knew enough to know that bitches going it alone was the ultimate failing of some dog somewhere, knew enough to know that even if he didn't like Stark, they were living in his territory, were at least periphery members of his pack by virtue of that alone. Stark might've failed, but they owed him more than to let that stand. And Bucky could practically see the transformation of Steve's face as he took in the task and accepted the challenge. "It's a girl, obviously," he said. "Do you think she'd like butterflies?"

"I think we should let the base layer dry before you go crazy on it," Bucky said, drawing his roller carefully up and down, trying to make sure the paint was evenly distributed.

"Probably a good idea, that," Steve agreed, before grabbing a second roller and getting to work.

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"You patching me up is never not going to be wrong," Bruce said, taking the ice bag out of Tony's hand and pressing it to his forehead.

Tony shrugged, tried hard not to imagine how hard a blow it would take to get the Hulk so beat up the bruises would carry over onto Bruce Banner's body. "At least you don't need stitches," he said, and tried not to feel sick at the sight of the trail of blood down the side of Bruce's face. And fuck, why did he still get so easily nauseous? He had been back in the Tower for nearly a month. His weight was almost back to normal. *He* was back to normal, as much as he'd ever be. Why the fuck was his stomach still so messed up? "I should've been there with you," he said.

Bruce flashed him a glance. "I may not remember much of your whole verbal diarrhea autobiography monologue thingie, but I do know that you gave up the suit for a reason, and not just for Pepper. You're doing more than anyone could ask just by putting me up and running the ops."

"Doesn't feel that way," Tony said, pushing a curl of hair out of his eyes. He needed a haircut, but lately even the thought of leaving the Tower pretty much made him break into hives.

"It should," Bruce said. "You're less cautious than Cap, but that's what works for the Other Guy. You're doing great." He paused for a moment. "I just wish you'd tell me what happened last month. I wish you'd let me examine you."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I'm not the one who got hurt attempting to fight a hundred doombots without backup," he said, thinking guiltily about the three new suits sitting down in the 'shop. He could've been out there, covering the Hulk. *Should* have been out there. He still hadn't been able to bring himself to admitting to the new suits, even to Bruce, never mind that Bruce already knew. He hadn't been able to bring himself to use them, not really. All he did was... Fuck, he slept in them, did everything he damned well could in them. Maybe he was just scared of going out in the suit again, finding out it wasn't fast enough, strong enough, that even inside it he was still vulnerable. What the fuck did it say about him that he'd rather keep his delusions of safety than go out there and protect others?

Nothing he did said anything good about him. That was the sad, honest to God truth. He was still a selfish bastard, just as he'd always been. And what would happen if Rogers did manage to retrieve Barnes, what happened if he managed to return him to his own mind? Tony knew what would happen. The bond would still be there. It was physical, linked to bodies rather than minds. Which meant that Barnes would return to the land of the living to find himself bound to Tony Stark. And despite all the money and fame and glamour, Tony knew that wasn't a good deal, knew Barnes, as he had once been and might one day be, was more than Tony deserved. Fuck all, Tony knew Afghanistan didn't even compare, but trying to imagine what he'd have felt, coming out of that cave only to find he'd been bonded to someone... God. Nothing he'd wish on anyone, let alone a kid like the Bucky Barnes he'd watched on his father's news reels. They were both of them caught by this, through no fault of their own, and Tony was pretty sure Barnes had got the short end of the stick. "No," Bruce said. "You're not. You are, however, the reason I knew which bot the signal was coming from so I could smash it down quick. Without you, there'd have been another dozen blocks leveled." He winced under the icepack. "Now stop that shit. You know my healing factor's about on par with Cap's. Get me some Indian instead."

Tony felt a slight loosening of the knot that had existed in his stomach since before the Avengers had moved into the Tower, never mind that they'd wound up dispersing anyway. "Jay, you hear that?" he called. "Get us some Indian instead."

"And tomorrow, I'm taking you for a full physical," Bruce said. "Don't even argue. It'll keep me
calm for a while, and you've been responsible for more near green-outs this last month than I care to count."

Tony bit back a grimace, forced a smile. "Sure thing, Doc."

Bruce groaned, tipped his head back against the headrest of his chair. "You do realize you have more PhDs than I do, right?"

Tony grinned, more out of habit than anything else, "Whatever you say, Doc."
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

A couple of warnings to start with: This chapter contains a not-that-graphic birth scene, and Tony being a drama queen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

02.04.15

Bucky gritted his teeth, braced the slab of wood between his legs and tried unsuccessfully to balance the crosspiece securely enough across the stump of his metal arm to somehow get in the screws. Frustration settled thick in the pit of his stomach. He took a deep breath, forcibly kept himself from throwing the unassembled furniture right across the room. He blew the air back out, put the pieces carefully back on the floor and sat back on his haunches. The rest of the room, the stuff he could actually do with just the one hand, was coming along nicely. The walls were done, a soft baby pink, and Steve's added butterflies and flowers added a bit of color and motion. The furniture, well, the furniture-- Bucky froze, felt a wave of annoyance go through him at the scent of beta a-fucking-gain. "Fuck off, Steve," he called. "I'm not obsessed. I'm not using weird coping strategies to deal with my fuckin' PTSD. And stop talking psych with Wilson! I am just trying to do the right damn thing."

There was a short pause with no answer. Then, "Sure, Grandpa. You look like you could use a hand, though."

Bucky felt himself slump in relief. "Shut up, Barton. That joke got old the first day you got here." He was letting his guard down too much if he wasn't even differentiating between the different betas in the Tower anymore.

"The correct response would be 'that's what she said,'" Barton replied. "Welcome to the twenty-first century." He looked around the room, let out a low whistle. "Looks like you and Cap've been busy."

"When he isn't being an asshole about it," Bucky agreed.

Barton shrugged. "He's Cap," he said. "I'd have thought you of all people would've been used to it by now." He shuffled for a moment. "You really do look like you could use a hand," he said at last.

Bucky rolled his eyes, gesturing the other man closer. "If you could just hold the pieces steady so I can screw them together," he said. Barton complied wordlessly, and they fell into something almost like a companionable silence, and he hadn't realized how damn much he'd needed that. Steve wouldn't shut up about the time Bucky spent in the nursery lately, Sam kept trying to psychoanalyze him, and Natasha just made him constantly uncomfortable without seeming to ever mean to. All any of that did was make him want to get even further away from them. Human companionship with none of that... Bucky was more grateful than he knew how to say.

Slowly but steadily, they began to get the set of drawers assembled, the white-painted wood taking shape into something greater beneath their hands, and Bucky could feel himself begin to relax with every piece that slid into its preordained place. At long last, they finished, and Bucky busied himself setting out children's books and toys and tiny decorations while Barton sat back against the wall to watch. "This really does mean a lot to you, doesn't it?" he asked.
Bucky shrugged, not really quite up to attempting to explain the difference between alphas and betas to yet another unreceptive beta. He'd lived on Stark's territory for a month now. He owed the man, more than he was sure he'd ever know how to pay back. Helping him out in return, on something this vital... It wasn't a matter of obsession, it was a manner of honor and debt and something he didn't even know the name for. "You guys all lived here at one point, didn't you?" he asked. At Barton's nod, he continued, "What went wrong?"

Barton let out a gruff laugh. "What didn't? Stark's Stark and Cap's Cap. Bruce moved in first, actually, right after the battle of New York. He and Stark got on fine. Alphas and omegas have always had that kind of... No one's challenging anyone and everything works smoothly thing." He shrugged. "Then Nat and I moved in, and that was fine too. Stark was in and out, back and forth between here and Malibu, and a bit of a recluse when he was here for longer than a couple of days at first. I think he was just more comfortable down in his workshop. Cap moved in when he finished his whole big tour of twenty-first century America. Still worked fine, even if I kind of think that had more to do with Stark spending more time in California than anything--"

"Steve pushed him out of his own territory?" Bucky asked, frowning. Then he shook his head. "Think I'm going to need a drink for this. You want anything?"

"Sure," Barton said, getting to his feet. "Whatever you're having. Stark's got the best stuff."

They spent long moments finding glasses and ice before Bucky poured them a few fingers of vodka each. He didn't remember liking the stuff - frankly, he didn't remember knowing what the stuff was - but somewhere in the depths of his lost memory, he seemed to have acquired a taste for it.

"Yeah," Barton said, when they were both seated at the bar with glasses in hand. "If that's how you want to put it. I really just think Stark had so much on his plate that staying away from Cap was easier. He's-- He ran missions with us, he was in charge of our tech, he consulted for S.H.I.E.L.D., and on top of all that, he's head of R&D and main shareholder of Stark Industries. Don't ever tell him I said this, but I don't know how he found enough hours in the day even without trying to slot in Cap's shit."

Bucky grimaced and vowed to take Steve down a notch next time they sparred. He loved Stevie, of course he did, closest thing to a brother he ever had, but sometimes Steve was too damned much a combination of the older-than-time beta instincts and the turn of the century (the turn leading into the twentieth century, that is) alpha rehabilitation movement. "So you all moved out?" he asked.

Barton shrugged. "Well, first Stark got his Malibu house blown up and had to move back here, then Potts moved out, and then, just--" Another shrug. "Listen, we make a great war pack, even when all Cap wants is to get Stark in line. But we're not a family pack. We don't do well living together. You've got Stark, who's alpha as alpha gets, and you've got Steve who's trying to play commanding officer at home as well as on the field. Then you've got an omega who shies away from conflict rather than try to mediate, and a bunch of other betas, and a demigod who thinks we're all crazy. We're a bitch and a couple of pups short of peaceful cohabitation. Fuck, finding a bitch is probably the smartest thing Stark ever did, no matter how pissed off Cap is. Being mated will calm him down in the field, and the two of them working together should be able to wrestle some control away from Steve on the home front. When they get back, we might actually just figure out a way to work."

Bucky gave a small shrug. He got the dynamics Barton was describing, in a much more instinctive way than he'd ever got the social norms back in the thirties and forties. And shit, even with his limited exposure to social and political culture he couldn't help but think that plenty of betas would still object to the thoughts Barton had just put forwards. But the thing was, the thing they'd kept denying throughout the whole of his former life, dynamics and pack bonds and instincts were part of
them, no matter how much the betas claimed alphas and omegas had been left behind by evolution. And as much as he loved Steve, he knew leaving him in charge of everything all the time wasn't doing anyone any good. The day when Stark returned with his mate couldn't come too soon. Bucky wouldn't even challenge, would step back into as close to a beta role as he could manage. Bending his neck would hurt like hell, but he'd been doing it his whole damn life. Maybe it would finally do him some good.

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250 days after

Tony gritted his teeth, tried his very fucking best to keep his quiet throughout the lashes of pain flashing through his whole fucking body. Nothing had ever hurt like this, not getting his sternum ripped out and the arc reactor inserted, not having it taken out again, not having his whole body forced into a change he would've never asked for. This was more, was beyond any of that, was more than he knew how to fucking deal with. All he could do was try not to scream, and even that was starting to feel like more than he was capable of.

"Tony." Gentle hands touched his hair, and the soothing, earthy scent of omega mixed in with the stench of sweat and blood and fear that hung so thick in the room Tony could barely breathe. "Tony, take a breath." Slowly, Bruce's voice filtered through to his brain, made his pulse slow and his lungs calm. "Stay with me," Bruce continued, and Tony was so grateful he was here, so damn grateful. Anyone else, and he'd have struck out, would've made everything worse, but instead he was slowly, bit by tiny bit, edging back to something resembling calmness. "I know this hurts," Bruce continued. "I can feel you. I-- Tony, take a breath, Goddamnit."

Tony tried to will his clenching, rebellious muscles into submission, forced in a breath through a throat so tight it hurt. He felt disconnected for a moment, felt like he was watching from the outside, watching as his body gave another clench, closing off his intestine and opening up the uterine channel. He heard the muffled scream he couldn't hold in despite his best efforts.

"Please let me get someone else," Bruce begged. "Someone who knows what the fuck they're doing. There are professional omega midwives on standby. Tony, please, don't leave this all hanging on me."

"Trust you," Tony managed in between panting breaths. Now that the passage had opened, it was both better and worse. The pain changed in character, becoming something he could relieve, even as it became deeper, far more frightening, more real than it ever had before. "Bruce," he gasped out. "Bruce. Brucie, don't leave. I need. I need--" Another burst of pain went through his whole body, made him seize up and bite back another scream. "Drugs, please."

"Too far gone, Tones," Bruce said, and Tony was pretty sure he wasn't imagining the tears on the other man's face. "Can't give you any more."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, arched up in search of some kind of relief, anything. The scar on his neck ached like it never had since the day it had first been made, an open wound. Something inside him stretched taut, grasping, searching, and Tony bit back a sob at the knowledge that the questing was never going to be met from the other end. He bit down on a whimper, moaned in pain at the sensation of every muscle in his stomach squeezing sharply downwards. "Brucie?"

"I'm here, Tones." A hand closed around his, squeezed tight. "I'm right here." A pause, then, "I need you to breathe with me, Tony. Breathe."

Tony let a sob through, then focused on Bruce's breathing, tried to copy the patterns, tried to get
himself under control, tried to swim through the pain, emerge on the other side. It took more strength than he'd ever thought he had in him. "Bruce," he managed, voice cracking. "Brucie, it hurts. I can't do this. I can't..." He heard himself trail off as another wave of agony went through him, knocking him damn near out cold for a moment.

Cool, damp fingers brushed his sweat-soaked hair out of his face. "Of course you can." The words were soft, whispered straight into his ears. "You were the youngest CEO of a fortune five hundred company in American history. You made a career out of making the impossible possible. You came out of a cave full of terrorists a superhero, built a damned miniaturized arc reactor out of spare parts. You flew a nuke into space, stopped the Battle of New York. Only person in the world capable of keeping Steve Rogers in check. You can do this."

"Don't keep him in check," Tony said. "Mostly, I just avoid his spangly beta ass." A sharp spark of humiliation shot through him. "Fuck, what's the Cap going to say now? Got myself turned bitch, got myself fucking knotted up. How the fuck am I--" Another labor cramp went through him, shook him hair to toenail.

"Not your fault," Bruce told him, fingers stroking through his hair all over again, and it felt more soothing than the ice chips melting in his mouth. "If Rogers doesn't get that, I'm going to go green on his ass, you hear me?" He took Tony's hand in his own, squeezed down securely. "He looks at you or the pup wrong, that's going to happen anyway." A short pause, then, "Tony, you gave me a home. You gave me as much of a pack as you had to offer. You're a better man than you will ever believe. Just you fucking well get through this."

Tony forced a smile that probably looked more like a snarl, all teeth and drawn back lips, buck Tony couldn't possibly be expected to make his face behave right now, when everything else was reacting so far beyond his control. "Board always wanted an heir, you know," he heard himself say. "Hope they're fucking happy now, at least."

"Who gives a fuck about the board right now?" Bruce asked. "This isn't about them. This is about you and getting you through this all right, you hear me?" Tony felt him moving lower, not that Bruce was being subtle about it. His hand tracked from Tony's hand to his side and down his thigh, and from anyone other than an omega Tony had accepted as his own, a dear friend, it would've been enough of a threat to drive Tony out of his mind a dozen times over. As it was, he kept breathing, kept reminding himself that this was Bruce, that Bruce wouldn't ever hurt him in a million years. "And you will be. You'll be just fine. Bonding alone took ten fucking years off your age, and I still don't have a valid scientific explanation for that, by the way. You're in peak physical shape. If you can't do this, no one can. And I feel obliged to inform you that bitches do this every day."

"Fuck you, Doc." Tony forced the word through gritted teeth as the next contraction ripped through him. His body bucked and writhed through another cramp, and he didn't know whether to be relieved or frightened that they were so close together now. "Fuck," he groaned. "Fuckfuckfuck. Jesus, Brucie, make it stop."

"Would if I could." Gentle hands guided his legs upwards, pushed his calves into the stirrups he'd denied hours ago, and the new position was such a fucking relief Tony nearly sobbed out loud. Not that it made anything better. The pain was still there, only now it was marginally manageable, didn't get him turned around and panicked the way it had before. Slowly, a bit more with every contraction, his body began to take over, somehow already knowing what it was supposed to do, and Tony let out a sob of relief. "There you go," Bruce said softly, running a gently hand down the outside of Tony's thigh.

"Fuck you," Tony groaned. "Damn it all to hell, just fucking kill me now."
"No can do, Tones," Bruce said, hands keeping up the steady, soft support. "No need to anyhow. You're doing good, so damn good, just keep going. Push on my say so. One, two, three--"

This time, Tony couldn't keep the scream back. He arched and pushed and screamed for all he was worth, and some still unfamiliar part of him felt like it was expanding impossibly, and fuck but it hurt. "Christ," he sobbed. "Bruce, please."

"Doing so good," Bruce said, voice so soft Tony could barely hear him. "Breathe with me, Tones. And another--"

Despite himself, Tony felt his breathing latch onto Bruce's, copying the slow, deep, steady sucks of air, the even slower moments of letting it whistle back out. He hurt so bad he couldn't remember feeling anywhere damned near all right, wasn't sure he ever would again, but Bruce was the one point of familiarity, the one thing keeping him grounded in all this, so Tony kept following his directives, kept doing as he said.

"So good, Tones," Bruce said again. "I can see her now. She's dark-haired, like that's any surprise. Damned big head on her, must have your brain. C'mon Tones, you got this. 'Nother couple of pushes and this'll all be over. You'll have your baby girl here with you. Just give it to me, Tones."

Tony let out a strangled sob, and it was too much, too damn much. Couldn't do this, couldn't possibly get through this. It hurt, hurt so badly he was floating on it. His whole world was pain and he was swimming in it, weightless and dizzy and blinking every few seconds, even if every blink hurt like hell. "Can't," he managed. "Can't. Tell Pepper--"

"Tell her your-fucking-self," Bruce said, and it was fucking choked out, in a voice Tony hadn't thought he'd ever hear outside the times when Bruce was so damn close to an episode the only safe thing to do was get out of there. "You can do this, Tones. Just... fucking keep going."

Finally, Tony gave in and sobbed full out. Everything was getting to him, the pain and the panic and the damn memory of who he had once been, all of it coalescing into one tightly wound beam of... God, fuck, he didn't know what, just knew he couldn't fucking stand it. "Brucie," he gasped. "Brucie."

"I've got you, Tones," Bruce's voice replied, soft and gentle and angry all at once, so familiar and so fucking safe that it made every single available muscle in Tony's body shut down. "I've got you. Not going to let you go."

"If I--"

"Shut up," Bruce said. "Stop being a fucking drama queen." For a moment, he relented, sighing. "You know I would, but it's not going to come to that. Physically, you're barely thirty-five years old. You're strong as fuck, and your kid's even stronger. You don't get through this shit, no one could."

Tony gritted his teeth, kept all the self-deprecating comments inside, bit back all the bits about how everything would be better if he just threw in the towel now. The team would be, if nothing else. Cap could finally have all the damn control he'd ever dreamt of. Wasn't what Bruce wanted to hear right now, though. "If--" Tony winced at a sharp movement inside him, gritted his teeth against the impossible pain of it. "If I don't-- Don't let him blame himself, not in a million years."

"Tony." Bruce's voice had softened. "It's a girl. We've known this for months."

"I know," Tony managed. "Don't let him." Another contraction hit, and Tony gritted his teeth against it, gritted his teeth against the black soaring up to meet his vision. Fuck, fuck, fuckfuckfuck it hurt
Bucky grimaced for a moment, annoyed by his lack of a left hand all over again. Still, bedding was one thing he should be able to accomplish one-handed, even if he had needed Barton's help in assembling the furniture. Finally, he got the damn knot right, managed to copy the movements on the other few pieces of string, and the covers were soft and malleable as silk beneath his hands, yet more comfortable, less slippery. This, this was what Bucky would've given to a pup of his own if he'd ever had the chance. He hoped to hell Stark appreciated the work he'd put in here, and he wasn't sure why that even fuckin' mattered. He was ready to step back, had prepared himself for it. He wouldn't ever be a beta, but he knew how to act like it, knew how to act in front of an alpha couple if need be. He just hoped they'd figure out some way to settle the damn Tower. They needed a family pack, all of them, and Barton was right, they needed Stark to accomplish that.

"That is good work, Sergeant Barnes." Bucky jumped for a moment before the familiar patterns of JARVIS's voice soothed him all over again, even with the damn lack of a scent.

"Thank you?" Bucky said, and if it was more of a question than anything, well, he still wasn't used to a talking fuckin' house.

"You're very welcome, Sergeant Barnes." There was a pause, and Bucky wasn't sure he could've made himself fill in the silence if he'd wanted to. "The work you've done for Sir is admirable." Another pause, "You really are Sergeant Barnes again?"

"Yeah," Bucky said. "I really am Sergeant Barnes again." He swallowed, wasn't certain why vocalizing it felt like such a big deal. Honestly, he wasn't certain he'd ever quite vocalized it like this before.

"Follow the lights, please, Sergeant Barnes," the strange, mechanical voice instructed.

Bucky frowned. For a moment, he considered not even acknowledging the line of lights sparking into life along the floor. Then again, he hadn't got to the twenty-first fuckin' century by being careful. And all right, spending close to seventy years as a brainwashed assassin maybe wasn't a good calling card, but he had never got anywhere by ignoring his curiosity. His curiosity, he was pretty sure, was what had led him back to Steve, when there were no more HYDRA strongholds weak enough for one man to take down on his own. His curiosity was why he was here, recovered, and not floundering in some out of the way base, alone and afraid and waiting for the next mission. "Lead the way, Jay," he said.

Slowly, he followed the panels in the floor as they lit up, followed them all the way to another, previously unseen elevator bay. Every display around the elevator was lit up, blinking in a pattern so fast it made him dizzy, caught him in a sense of vertigo for just a moment.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant Barnes," JARVIS said. "I hope this isn't uncomfortable for you." Something almost like smugness clung to his words, and for the first time since entering the Tower, Bucky found he didn't quite trust the AI who ran it. Fuck if that was going to throw him off course, though. If anything, it only made him the more determined.

His curiosity seemed to come right into play almost despite himself. And he knew the old saying, curiosity killed the alpha, but what the fuck was he supposed to do? This was as clear a challenge as he'd ever received, and Bucky hadn't ever backed down from a challenge when he wasn't faced with
another alpha dog in a rut. Whatever Stark, or his AI, was up to, that didn't seem to be the angle they were playing right not. Ahead of him, the elevator bank kept blinking. Bucky took a step forwards, and another, and another, and then he was inside, and the doors were closing behind him. He swallowed against an entirely expected bout of claustrophobia, and then the doors were pulling back open. In front of him, glass doors were swinging open.

Bucky blinked, stunned. The scent that struck him was sharper than ever, a mix of strong, spicy alpha dog and sweet, tantalizing bitch, the two somehow not contradicting each other in the slightest even as the contrast remained jarring in and of itself. Somehow, though, the scents weren't the be-all-end-all down here, even a newcomer could understand as much. The predominant emotion was eagerness and determination and curiosity, the scents somehow edged with fire and metal. Around him, incredible sights, beyond anything his sci-fi zines could've prepared him for, took up every last bit of space. Impossible pictures hovered in nothingness. One-armed robots wheeled back and forth, following no pattern that Bucky could predict. Impossible innovations littered the workbenches. Ahead of him, what looked like sheer steel cabinets were kept shut. Before he could get entirely lost, yellow arrows lit on the floor in front of him, leading the way.

Slowly, cautiously, even though he already knew he was both feet in without a backup plan, he followed the arrows around two separate work benches, in between a pair of machines he didn't have the words for and something that looked like a construction beam but wasn't. Between one moment and the next, the arrows stopped blinking. There was a pedestal in front of him, sheer metal and glass, backlit by lights Bucky didn't know the words for. They sure hadn't existed in his day. None of that truly caught his attention, though. How could it possibly do that, considering what hid behind it?

Bucky had never seen anything like it. Yes, the arm HYDRA had given him had worked fine. According to his limited memories, it had got the job done, even the jobs he'd have rather never touched if he could've helped it. This, though, this was a work of art. It was a replica, but it wasn't. However fragmented his memories were, Bucky knew his prosthetics, and this was as far from standard as it got. It looked nearly the same as the old prosthesis, but he could make out the subtle differences, the places where this one was stronger, more flexible. "Stark make this for me?" he asked, and fuck all, he still couldn't make sense of any of this, couldn't even control the awe in his voice.

"Yes, Sergeant," JARVIS answered "Might I suggest calling Captain Rogers? Installing the arm is a two-person job."

"Call away," Bucky said, fighting down something that was too damn close to bliss to properly shut down. How had Stark known? How the fuck had he got any of this even close to ready from the other side of the world? Right now, Bucky didn't even care. He just wanted the damn thing on him and ready for use already, everything else be damned.

***

35 days after

"I make promises all the damn time, Brucie," Tony said, pushing the goggles back into a more secure position all the time. "Doesn't mean I plan of keeping them. Board's got used to it by now. You should too."

"Tony," Bruce said. "Fuck all this shit. I don't care about the board, you know I don't. Thing is, you don't smell right."

"Ah-fucking-ha," Tony countered, rolling his eyes. Mark 45 was slowly taking shape before his
eyes, and he couldn't pull his gaze away. This was beyond anything he'd ever even imagined. This one took his chips and his armor and the tricks he'd gleaned from the Soldier's arm and meshed everything into one, a significant improvement on what he'd had before.

"Even considering everything I know," Bruce pressed. "You don't smell right. The Big Guy agrees. You stink of mated alpha bitch, but this is more than that." To his credit, he managed to calm down a moment later. "Come on, Tony, please. I just need to take a blood sample, that's all. Everything will be okay."

Thing is, Tony couldn't explain it away anymore, not to himself and certainly not to Bruce Banner. Being jumpy and jittery was explained away easily after... after. The shift in his scent however, that was sharp enough that he was scenting it himself, the sweetness growing deeper, darker. He shook the thought away, so far from ready to deal with it. He had promised Bruce, though. That meant he couldn't keep putting it off forever. Slowly, he began to open his mouth, "I..."

The Avengers alarm blared, calling them out of whatever had just been going on. Tony winced, then put on his best game face. "Tony Stark acknowledging," he said, sharp and clear.

"Ready to suit up?" Maria Hill asked.

Tony winced, shook his head. "I'm running comms and ops," he said. "Hulk's here. What do you need?"

"Don't think this means you're off the hook," Bruce said through gritted teeth even as he carefully pulled off his sweater, shirt and pants, revealing the shorts Tony was still working on making stretchy enough to withstand the transformation - and hey, if they ended up grabbing him the international market for lycra, he wasn't going to complain. At least he wasn't trying to make money off the prosthetics line yet. Needed an alpha tester for that. He pulled his mind away before the train of thought could quite reach its destination.

"Hulk's exactly what we need," Hill replied, and Tony found himself longing momentarily for Coulson and the way he'd kept believing they'd all find some way to work together. He shut that down as well. Tony had got Bruce and possibly Thor in the damn divorce and he wasn't about to return to an abusive relationship, and okay, maybe that was stretching the metaphor just a bit, but fuck, he was grateful there was no Cap on this op.

"What're we dealing with here?" he asked Hill, and then he was being briefed about some science department going Doc Ock on their asses, and fucking thank God colleges hadn't been like this when he'd attended. He'd been way too fucking young and impressionable for that kind of shit, and without any kind of inspiration his mind jumped right back to Barnes. "Jay, bring up the specs for the arm, please. Move the op to the right-hand screens. And give me some background noise."

Hulk dealt with the threat in forty-three minutes. It was another forty-three hours before Tony was ready to leave the specs alone.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and thanks again for all the kudos and subscriptions and, especially, the comments, which still put big smiles on my face and make my whole day.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

02.17.15

Steve punched out, fist going straight for the supposedly weak point where Bucky's arm met his shoulder. Bucky raised his arm, took the hit even as he shot out his foot, taking out the back of Steve's heel. Steve recovered, caught his balance in a way that would probably never stop surprising Bucky. Then he had no more moments left to think. Steve's right hook was coming straight towards him, and even without the shield to back up that punch, it would fucking hurt. Bucky managed to duck around it, come up with an uppercut that somehow caught the edge of Steve's jaw, and he didn't remember, but he knew that Steve had a purer strain of the serum than he did, knew Steve was stronger and faster the same way he knew he was better trained, whether or not he actually remembered the training. Steve's fist shot out again, and Bucky caught it between his forearms, gave it enough of a twist to slow him down. Bucky let go a moment later, gave another drop kick and walked away from Steve's collapsing form.

"What the hell are you doing?" Steve asked, utilizing that same combative tone of voice he'd used on bullies once upon a time, before, by all reports, he'd become one.

"I'm supposed to pick out your soft spots, ain't I?" Bucky asked, throwing a look over his shoulder just to make sure he wasn't about to receive a punch of angry Steve Rogers in the back. Steve had never fought anything but dirty. Bucky had a vague memory of there being no choice, of Steve being too small to fight fair. Problem was Steve still had that same attitude never mind the fact that he could knock any street thug three ways to hell without a second thought these days.

"Not like that," Steve hissed. "You're not supposed to--"

Bucky took the few steps he needed to get to Steve's side, and he wasn't at all sure where this sudden courage was coming from, where he'd found this determination. "If I can take you," he hissed, watching out the corner of his eye as the rest of the team cleared out, "I will, and it'll mean someone else can too. Stop trying so hard to be in charge of the team you lose the battle. I'm on your side. You know I always will be. Just... stop being so fucking flashy. You ain't got nothin' to prove."

Steve snorted. "Easy for you to say," he muttered, voice low as if he didn't realize everyone else had already left. "You didn't grow up a beta smaller than most omegas. You didn't--"

"You didn't have to go through a dozen psych evaluations just to be cleared for duty," Bucky countered. "The forties were a shitty time, Stevie, just fuckin' please let's leave it behind now."

Steve opened his mouth to reply, but before he could get that far, the doors reopened and Barton was all but skipping as he came inside. "You have got to see this," he called. "Both of you, come the fuck on now. You weren't immunized to gossip, were you?"

"It's not gossip anymore," Sam called as they walked out of the elevator and into the common floor lounge. "Stark's on TV."

Something somewhere in the center of Bucky's chest lurched, pulled taut, and he had no idea why, or what that even meant. He wasn't going to waste time on things that didn't add up right now. Too much of his time back to himself had been taken up with that already. Instead, he joined Sam and
Natasha on the couches and turned his focus onto the screen.

Stark was... He looked a bit like Bucky's blurry memories of Howard, but at the same time, the differences were clear. The younger Stark had softer features, a kinder face, less polished. Even through the screen, even so obviously putting on a performance, he seemed more real and more soft and more vulnerable than Howard had been on his best - or worst - day, and yet a dozen times stronger. There was... more depth to him, somehow, to the slant of his features alone. Bucky didn't know how to describe it any better than that. In some ways, the similarities between father and son only made the differences more glaring.

Stark called the roomful of journalists to order with what seemed like no effort at all, eyes sparkling with what Bucky could've sworn was genuine joy. "Evening everyone," he called. "Bona nit and all that." He paused a moment, leaning against the speaker's podium with an easy, casual grace. "Some of you may have noticed I haven't starred in a scandal lately. Sorry about that, by the way, I know I'm making your jobs harder, but needs must, and hey, I've been told everyone has to grow up at some point. That's not what I wanted to talk to you about tonight, though. Figured I might as well initiate sharing time before everyone comes snooping, so I wanted to let you guys know that I have met the love of my life. She was born just over six weeks ago, strong and healthy and absolutely gorgeous." He kept speaking even as the journalists around him erupted into loud questions, simply spoke over them as though he didn't even notice the disruption. "Her name is Maria Rebecca Stark, but she can also be referred to as the Iron Lady or the Empress of Stark International, sorry Pep. I'm going to keep her to myself for a while yet, but you'll all be able to bask in her presence soon enough."

"He's ridiculous," Steve muttered. "Absolutely ridi-- I mean, who the hell even says stuff like that?"

"He has a right to be proud of his daughter," Bucky heard himself say.

"How's that even going to work anyway? Stark with a pup?"

"Get the fuck over it." Bucky was practically snarling, and he had no idea why, no clue how to stop it. Why the hell was he so damn pissed anyway? Steve was being an idiot, sure, but Bucky had dealt with that since he was a toddler. Shouldn't be getting to him so much now.

"Not like we hadn't figured that out already," Barton added in. "Fuck, Cap, you helped paint the damn nursery."

Natasha shushed them, watching the TV intently as Stark said something about taking no questions, no comments and his partner being fond of privacy, and then the screen cut to a couple of different journalists discussing the situation between themselves, talking about politics and economy and social elites and who the fuck even knew what. Bucky still felt like he was struggling for breath on the end of a too tight leash.

***

8 days before

Tony hated being kidnapped, fucking loathed it. And in his own damn car no less, new driver was obviously crap to have let this happen; he should've never let Pepper have Happy. He could feel his brain scrambling for some kind of solution, some way out of this, and fuck, he should be better than this. He’d made his way out of a terrorist cave in the mountains of Afghanistan with nothing but his brain and a pile of scraps. What did it say about him that all you had to do was hijack his car, take out the uplink to JARVIS and flash a fancy gun, and Tony was out of options? Fucking hell, how hadn't he been kidnapped a hundred times in the past couple of years if it was this easy?
He watched out the blackened windows as well as he could, trying to at least track the journey if that was the only option left to him. They were moving north through Manhattan, away from the city center and towards the areas that still bore heavy traces of the Battle of New York almost two years ago. It didn't help him any right now, but you could never discount the value of good data. The more of it he had, the better. Maybe he'd even find some way to use it.

His heart was pounding, had been since he'd heard the click of the car doors locking on either side of him, realized that all he could see in the driver's seat was the back of a sweatshirt with the hood up. Cold sweat made his spine feel clammy even as his lips stayed pulled back from his teeth in something like a fucking continuous snarl. The air in the car was thick with the heavy, oppressive musk of dog, his own scent mixing with his kidnapper's to create a cocktail that would put the fear in any self-respecting alpha. He could feel his hackles rising all the more with every few moments that passed in the car, could feel the bone-deep, instinctive panic take its grip on him. What the fuck was this even? Any villain worth a damn would know better than to send an alpha dog to kidnap an alpha dog; best recipe for utter disaster in the whole world, and this was coming from someone whose father had worked on the Manhattan Project.

It felt like half an eternity before they finally pulled into the derelict parking space that was apparently paired with a condemned apartment building. Tony wasn't sure whether he should be relieved that they'd stopped moving or not. The car was traceable, should be anyway, and he still had his cell phone, even if his kidnapper had turned on the car's jammer and prevented him from sending out a distress signal. A moment later, the driver stepped out, came around to Tony's door and literally tore it off and fucking hell, why did the guy have to be enhanced? Just Tony's fucking luck to be kidnapped by metahumans, again. A moment later, something almost like a hand, but harder, far less forgiving, gripped his upper arm and pulled him out of the car. Tony was about to fight back when he saw the glint of a knife in his kidnapper's free hand, and fuck all, maybe he should've taken Natasha up on her offers of hand-to-hand training. He would've, if he hadn't thought she just wanted an excuse to beat up on him. Honestly. The hand gripping his arm transferred to the back of his neck, keeping him pinned the way he knew some very militant alpha mothers were known to. He was dragged back around the car, and then he couldn't do a thing as the cell phone was pulled out of his pocket and his assailant pressed all the right buttons in the car to delete the records of their trip and send the car on an hours-long joy trip all over the nearest five states on autopilot. Jesus, he needed to keep a better lid on his tech.

The real panic didn't start until he was shoved through the unbolted door and into some random fourth floor apartment. The dog scent was thicker here, as though his kidnapper had been spending a significant amount of time hanging around here. A shudder of unease went through Tony's body. What if there wasn't some organization behind all this? What if-- He shoved the thought away before it could make his knees turn all the way to rubber. He wasn't a good prospect. Even another dog gone feral would go for an easier target, and even if they did buy into the whole dog+dog=better thing, Tony wouldn't be anyone's best choice. He was old, he had a host of medical issues, he liked to fill his body up with alcohol and nicotine on a regular basis, was constantly under threat. He was in a position where too many damn people was out for his blood, but at least he shouldn't be attractive to other alphas, right? Right?

Except a moment later, the kidnapper was baring his teeth, his whole body moving into a fighting stance that was as old as the human race, all dominance and the unique alpha brand of posturing that would never not be threatening. Tony felt himself responding automatically, all instinct in face of the threat. Fear called sweat out on his skin, pooling above his eyebrows, in the hollows of his collar bones. The other alpha was so clearly a soldier, special forces of some kind, every movement measured and efficient and fucking well radiating a strength Tony would be hard pressed to match even in the armor. Fucking metahumans indeed. He pulled his lips back again, let out a snarl. Never let it be said Tony Stark went down easy.
The soldier pounced a moment later, and it was all over so embarrassingly soon that Tony kind of wished he could just delete it from world history already. Tony went into the dirty boxing moves he’d learnt in dumb bar brawls in his twenties, hands held up in front of his body to protect himself. The soldier slapped them away, so fucking efficient and negligent it didn't even hurt, didn't make him break a sweat, and Tony was growling and putting up another defense, but no matter how hard he envisioned fighting, no matter how much upper body strength working with metal and fighting in the armor had given him, there wasn't really much of a fight at all. Even though he knew he'd never stop, part of him knew it was already over, acknowledged the fact that he was face to face with someone infinitely stronger than himself. Some part of him already begged to bend and break and grovel and fucking bare his neck, give over control and let himself be dominated, and fucking hell, even if Howard had never given him anything else, endowing him with his beta genes wasn't so much to ask for, was it? Couldn't he have done that one thing for him? Man was supposed to be his father, after all.

The soldier quietly dismantled his next set of defenses, and the next, and then he gripped the collar of Tony's dress shirt, quick and efficient, and pulled. The buttons tore, and the fabric followed, and then Tony was bare-chested. A moment later, the soldier had manhandled him onto the bed, and it didn't seem to matter that Tony was scratching and biting and growling. He didn't hit his target once, couldn't do anything to break the simple grip that immobilized him before the soldier turned him around and tied his hands behind his back with a quick knot. And that was that, that was it. He'd lost, definitely, however much everything inside him rebelled at the knowledge. He'd lost, and he was going to have to take the consequences, whatever the hell they were. Fuck all, he almost wished this was something as simple as a fucking assassination. Too many damn frills for that, though, Tony could acknowledge that even if the thought left him with a block of ice in his stomach.

A moment later, his suspicions were confirmed. The soldier gripped his trousers, didn't even try for the fly, just ripped them open, and fuck all, Tony shouldn't have gone commando, no matter how damned comfortable it was. Boxers might not have offered much in the way of protection, but this whole fucking situation might've been less humiliating if he'd been wearing them. And fuck, he shouldn't be thinking about humiliation right now, because clearly that part of the party was only just getting started. Tony knew it was nothing more than a physiological response, part of why alpha dogs were warned away from alpha dogs from the time they knew how to speak. Losing the fight, being outmatched, made him respond in a way nothing else ever had, not the betas and omegas he'd slept with, not even the crazy - if always protected - stunts he'd pulled with fellow alphas in his twenties. He was hard, and gasping, and growling and snarling, precome already leaking in a physiological response he had no defense against.

Once he was stripped bare, everything happened really fucking fast. He was rolled onto his front, his bound hands pulling painfully on his shoulders. Vaguely, as if from far away, he heard the sound of a zipper being undone, then some barely identifiable sounds as a bottle was opened and fluid was squished onto fingers. Moments later, sounds ceased to matter. The fingers had definitely been slicked, even if it was with sub par lube, and the first two were inside Tony's body in one go, and they felt good, impossibly good, so much better than they should. Tony let out a growl, body writhing against the sheer strength of the man holding him in place. Even as the growl left his mouth, though, Tony could hear the undercurrents of a whimper in his voice, and utter fear twisted through him, vicious as some living creature, intent on flaying him to bits. It was all right, he reassured himself. He could take a load or two, had in the past when artificial hormones had proved too strong and rubbers had failed. A load or two wouldn't change the world, and even as the utter violation of it made him want to sob like a fucking baby, he knew it was all right, he was going to be all right. Someone was going to come get him, and he'd be so fucking embarrassed he'd lock himself in the 'shop for a couple of weeks, but they'd come. He'd be all right.

He let those words keep holding him up even as a slicked dick pressed against his entrance. A cool,
almost metallic - judging by feel, anyway - hand smoothed up and down his spine, made him jump and shudder despite himself, negating the new growl he let out, despite his best intentions. And then his kidnapper was pushing inside him. Tony winced as a bolt of pain washed through him. He'd barely been stretched anywhere near enough and this asshole, whoever the fuck he was, wasn't exactly small in the downstairs apartment, to put it delicately. Strong hands held him tight, balancing him through it despite himself, and fuck all, he'd never known what the damn betas meant when they'd said alphas were prisoners to their own biology, but now he did, couldn't have missed it if he'd wanted to. Nothing had ever felt so damned good, not even that one memorable mix of coke and alcohol and threesome, not Pepper in the days they'd been at their very fucking best. It hurt, but it still felt good. He was scared out of his fucking mind, yet felt safe. He wanted to fight and melt all at once, and the stretch, the utter polarity of all those emotions, made him just want to curl up in a corner somewhere and escape, so fucking good and terrible he wanted to flinch away before he was overcome. No one had ever told him it could feel like this, had ever taught him how to fucking deal with it all.

His kidnapper bottomed out, and then one hand trailed up his body, raked through his hair, hard nails scratching against his skull, and fuck that felt good. He'd never admit it, would fool the goddamn lie detector, but it felt so good he blacked out for a second, and when was the last time anyone had touched him for anything more than a handshake or a cheap fuck anyway? The fingers caught in his hair, pulled his head to the side, and Tony felt the growl start back up again when he was forced into that submissive a stance. Didn't sit right on him, man or instincts. He reared up, muscles bunching in a last show of utterly infutile strength. And fuck, what did this dog see in him anyway? He was old, wasn't exactly healthy, was more likely to get a pup killed than take proper care of it. Sure, he had territory, territories of his own, had enough means to support anyone and anything, had political clout and a brain that, not to brag, didn't have a lot of peers in the world. But none of that was enough to make up for the obvious shortcomings. Maybe it was just a one-off. Tony didn't know. This... soldier, whoever he was, seemed desperate more than anything, powered on instincts. Feral. Closest Tony had got to feral had been after Afghanistan, and even then he'd managed to suppress the need to fuck, bond, create a pack, had satisfied his need to protect himself by locking himself up in his 'shop and developing the Mark II and III. And IV. Still, that was a gentle, peaceful kind of feral. This, whatever was going through the soldier's head, was not peaceful, and Tony didn't have the first clue how to deal with it, wouldn't have known what to do with it in the best of situations, let alone with a superhuman pushing him into the mattress.

The soldier started up a pace, strong and steady and Jesus, Tony wished it would've been fucking brutal, wished it would've hurt, would've done anything other than make him moan and buck and snarl as his fucking alpha libido betrayed him. He hated this feeling, the sense that nothing he did would make a difference, the not being strong enough, fast enough, smart enough to avoid this. Hated how much he fucking loved it. Fuck all, he'd always known alpha biology was fickle like this. He'd just never thought it would apply to him. This kind of shit happened to the neighbor's kid, and then there was a big televised courthouse drama where the betas tried to deal with the whole damn thing, and beta professors shaking their heads at outdated biology and omegas making their jittery points and fuck, this shit was not supposed to happen to him.

The pace held firm, so damn good it made him squirm on his kidnapper's dick, made him moan and whimper as he tried to get closer, his fucked-up body searching for a knot already, even if he was nowhere near ready to take it, and that he knew from experience. Fucking nineties, fucking stupid searching the boundaries. Maybe if he'd never taken a knot before he'd be panicked enough to react like those damn mothers rescuing their babies from under trucks on live television. Taking an average fist wasn't much harder than taking an average knot, and fuck, this guy was bigger than he had any experience with, in both respects.

There were no synthetic hormones, thank fuck, and as such neither of them was reacting to false
stimuli, which was a relief, at least. Even so, the slide and friction and fuck, even the sensation of being tied down, out of control, was enough to get to him in a big way, and throughout it all, the thrusts remained steady, until the soldier froze above him, shooting inside him unceremoniously. He stayed lodged inside Tony for long moments, no knot, at least, with no bitch hormones to activate it. Tony felt the slosh of come inside him even as he felt the soldier's dick softening, and fuck, he wanted a shower, wanted to clean himself out, stop this in its tracks, get back to being Tony fucking Stark-- The soldier didn't give him a chance. He retreated at long last, but then his fingers were there, pushing his come back inside when it began to leak, pinching Tony's stretched hole closed to keep it in, and all Tony could do was writhe and whimper, wanting to be anywhere but here and knowing that trying to get away right now would be futile.

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02.19.15

Bucky knew he should've started reading up on modern culture and politics before now. It was just that information gathering seemed so damn difficult these days, the access hampered by his awkwardness when it came to information technology. And he'd had so much to deal with already, trying to jam anything else into his already overloaded brain had simply felt like too damn much. Still, something was pushing at him now, created some need for a new context for everything, for why Barton had spoken the way Bucky's instincts had told him the world should be rather than the world he'd been taught in school, the knowledge that an alpha had been at the helm of one of the world's biggest companies, everything he'd learned. And maybe, if he was honest, a lot of it had to do with this strange fascination with Stark that he couldn't explain even to himself. He wanted to prepare before the new alpha pair returned home, wanted to make sure he knew how the world worked before he made a fool of himself.

He had spent hours tapping with a single finger at the laptop Sam had lent him before pushing it away in frustration. Only a blurted, "How the fuck is this supposed to be simpler than going to the damn library?" had saved him, as it had somehow prompted JARVIS to offer assistance, and then it turned out that the face of the common lounge coffee table doubled as a monitor of some kind and that JARVIS could pull basically every bit of information the world had ever produced onto it with just a few words of instruction. Even now, hours later, his head was still spinning, full of the sixties and seventies, the alpha rights movements, the omega marches, the new laws that had taken the place of old ones repealed. Something inside him almost panicked at all the new information, uncertain what to do with it all. Sure, it was nice to know that he could enter the army with only a cursory psych evaluation these days, that he could theoretically run a company or even run for president, but it was so different, so unlike anything he'd ever known, the world so changed it made his breath come short, and how was he supposed to act in this new context? How was he supposed to react around Steve and other betas, if he wasn't supposed to keep himself in check anymore, wasn't supposed to stay careful and embarrassed by his own animalistic nature?

A clearing of a throat made him jump, and fuck, was he not even noticing other people entering the room he was in anymore? "What's eating you?" Sam asked, plopping down next to him.

Bucky shrugged, uncertain how to put any of it into words. "You know," he said slowly. "When I was born, the ninth American president in a row was a beta." He forced out a strange, barking laugh. "I don't remember, not really. That's what this site says, though." He gestured towards the windows JARVIS was keeping open on the tabletop. "I know I had to go through a ridiculous amount of psych evals to be cleared for active duty. I was raised to think I was a... relic, I guess, of some bad strain of evolution. Too volatile and reactive and emotion-driven to be trusted. The time I came from... I was expected to bend my neck and let the sensible betas do the politicking and thinking. And now..."
Sam nodded slowly, handsome face tucked into lines of sympathy. At least he didn't stink like near-panic whenever he was around Bucky anymore. "And what do you think now?" he asked, and that was his therapist voice, Jesus, and that really should be more annoying than it was, but by now Bucky was so used to falling asleep to it on otherwise sleepless nights that it was almost soothing, an insufficient but present balm against the constant, gaping wound of whatever it was that was missing.

Bucky gave a small shrug, his mind struggling between what he'd read today, his vague memories from before and the general sense that he just didn't have enough information, on anything. "I get why a beta president is a good idea," he said. "So long as it's not one who's got a thing for posturing. Less reactive, that much is true. Know that much from experience. But..." He shrugged. "I'm glad, I guess," he said. "That we're allowed to run some things now. That bitches are more than just breeding stock to keep alpha-kind alive like some kind of zoo curiosity. That we ain't supposed to be ashamed and think of ourselves as fuckin' animals anymore." He paused a moment, bit down on his lip in contemplation. "It's scary, though. Maybe the generation before mine was right. Alphas are known to go feral, and that shit ain't pretty. Maybe we should be managed."

"Most alphas never go feral in a full lifetime," Sam countered. "It takes severe trauma to trigger that reflex, and most are subdued before any real damage is done." A small grin tucked at his lips. "And you are being managed. The sheer amount of paperwork it takes for an alpha to legally change sex or bond is staggeringly, for your own protection." He was silent for a moment, then, "What brought this on?"

Bucky glanced down at the articles on the tabletop again. "Steve grew up in the same time I did," he said at last. "I was trying to figure out if he is being a product of his time or whatever, or if he genuinely has any ground to stand on."

"Stark?" Sam questioned.

Bucky nodded slowly, hesitantly, and felt kind of traitorous even having this conversation. He might not remember much, but he knew that as soon as his mother had come to trust Steve - and fuck, how old had they even been then? Seven? Eight? - she'd encouraged Bucky to protect him and otherwise keep his head down, follow Steve's lead, because Steve was beta-steady and trusting him was a better move than trusting his own instincts. "I just don't know how to make sense of what's right. My hindbrain's tellin' me one thing and Steve is tellin' me 'nother and society can't seem to make its damn mind up. You know Steve staying beta after the serum was touted as some kind of proof of your superiority?"

"Didn't know that, no," Sam said. He sighed, turned on the couch to face Bucky fully. "I get how this is confusing for you," he said after a brief pause. "Just remember that whatever time you're a product of, Steve's that too, and Stark was raised in a world where being an alpha was all right, where that kind of authority was something to be utilized, not hidden away. Steve and Stark's problems may not be so much about who's right and who's wrong and just about history and opinions and military and civilians and fuck all. I'm not exactly an expert on alpha or omega movements, just know that Cap's a bit more militant about the whole thing than people generally are these days." He gave a single-shouldered shrug. "Maybe he's the one you really should be talking to."

Bucky returned the shrug. He vaguely remembered a time when he talked to Steve about everything, except maybe he hadn't. He didn't remember ever really talking about this, attempting to explain the whole alpha thing to Steve. He vaguely remembered growing up in a time and age where the alphas telling betas they were wrong about alphas was taboo. So maybe he'd spoken to Steve about anything but this, and he didn't really feel like doing it now. But what the fuck was he supposed to do? An alpha couple with a new, presumably alpha, cub were moving into the Tower, probably
within the next few days, weeks at the latest, and Steve could make a lot of trouble for them. Hell, he'd pretty much run Stark out of his own territory before. And it might not be Bucky's business, not at all, but he couldn't help but chafe at it, both in the defensive alpha way and in the way of a friend who didn't want his friend to act like an asshole. Shit, he wished he could just figure this out sooner rather than later.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and thanks so much for the kudos, bookmarks and subscriptions, and especially the comments, which always make my day. Thanks for sticking with me.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Very brief bit of male lactation, hopefully not too disturbing. Sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

5 days before

Tony flexed his fingers, again and again, trying to work some life back into them despite the tight knot of his own dress shirt wound around his wrists. Slowly, his hands began to come back to life with the sharp sense of pricking needles that always accompanied sleeping limbs waking up. He writhed a moment, got his bound hands worked underneath the swell of his naked buttocks and, bit by bit, down his thighs, streaked with the dried flakes of come that had escaped despite the Soldier's best efforts. The muscles in his thighs and belly protested, fucked out and full of aches, and fuck, he could already sense the beginnings of the transformation taking form inside him. Too damn fast, way faster than anything he'd ever heard of. It hurt, like shrapnel piercing through his bones and organs, stabbing him and tearing him apart, threatening to remake him, and fuck, Jesus and Maria, he needed to get the hell out of here, needed to wash himself out, whatever good that would do, and find a clinic that could do the genetic therapy he needed to counteract whatever changes had already occurred. Fuck, he needed Bruce, and however little he wanted to explain what had gone on here, he wanted to let it keep going even less.

This was the first time since he got here that he'd been left alone for more than a few minutes. They weren't always fucking, no, but the Soldier tended to stick around long enough to make sure most of his semen stayed inside Tony's body, ready to pump him back to full the moment he'd absorbed the last load. He'd be an idiot if he didn't at least attempt to get away, and fuck knew what kind of timeframe he was working with. Wincing at the pull on his arms, he tugged his wrists down lower, bit his lip hard to control the pain when he bent one knee close to the breaking point and managed to stick his foot between his arms. Before the agony of it could get the best of him, he followed with the other one, and quickly pulled his bound wrists up the front of his body, damned near sobbing with relief.

From then, it was a matter of engineering, really, even if he was using his teeth rather than a computer or a welding iron. Slowly, meticulously, he began to work the knot on his dress shirt loose, tried to create enough room to pull his hands through the loops and get free. It took forever, Jesus fuck, but finally he could slowly begin to wriggle one hand through the bindings, fucking WWII special forces, no one should ever be able to make this good a knot out of a piece of clothing. At fucking last, his hand came free, aching from the strain, and the other one followed quickly. Tony sucked in a deep breath, tried to quell the sudden terror. Being caught like this would be fucking awful. He steeled himself, pushed back the darkened edges of a panic attack with a ferocity he'd never known he had. Then he began rifling around. His own clothes were a lost cause, but a cursory search left him with a pair of worn-out jeans and a thrift-store worthy hoodie. He pulled the items on quickly, haphazardly, and made his way to the door, put his hand on the handle, pulled down-- And fucking hell, how unlucky could one man possibly be? Just as he was about to stumble out the door, a broad, looming form all but materialized in front of him, damn near bleeding out the fucking shadows, and Tony felt himself shrink back, instincts forcing him to appear as small and non-threatening as he possibly could. He'd crossed the dominant alpha, and that kind of thing wasn't to be
Rather than cuffing or biting him, though, the Soldier simply gripped him by the neck, hand firm but not damaging, fingers digging into the spots at the base of either sides of his neck where the bonding glands would've presented if he'd been a bitch. Displaced pleasure shot through his whole body, made his knees damn near collapse beneath him. A strong hand settled on the small of his back, guided him back to the bed. The Soldier remained wordless, and Tony felt his own mind gearing up, bringing him back to the only form of assault that had been available to him before all this. "Your name is James Buchanan Barnes," he managed even as he was thrown back on the bed. "Your friends call you Bucky. You fought in Europe with Captain America. You earned a medal of valor, and your name's on the honorary list in every S.H.I.E.L.D. building on the planet. Steve Rogers is still looking for you. You have a friend and a home to return to. You don't have to do this, Goddamnit." Metal fingers pulled first the sweatshirt, then the jeans from his body, wrapped what felt like an electrical cord around his wrists and pulled it tight, pushed him down onto the mattress. "James, please, fucking please, don't do this." He bit his lip sharply, internally reprimanding himself for his own slip. "Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. Your friends call you Bucky. You fought in Europe with Captain America--" The slick sounds of lube on dick made its way to his ears, and Tony winced despite himself, tried to curl up. Strong hands prevented him. "James, Jamie, Jim-Jim, Jesus, please--" A wet dick pushed into his still loose hole. "Jesus Christ, you're supposed to be all sugar and spice and all things American forties nice. They even modeled a toy after you. Fuck, James, I get that they got your age wrong, but fucking hell--" A thrust directly to his prostate shut him up for a moment, forced him to focus on nothing but keeping himself grounded against the damnable, impossible pleasure. He sucked in a sharp breath. "You're James Buchanan Barnes. Your friends call you Bucky..." This time he managed to stick to the script, delivering all the points he'd lined up... what was it, yesterday? The day before? Either way, he was following them now, wasn't letting up on his mantra, was doing every damn thing he could to call out Barnes from behind this damn emotionless, unresponsive predator he was faced with.

The Soldier - Tony couldn't bring himself to call him by name within the confines of his own mind - simply ignored him, began thrusting in a steady, sharp rhythm, easily enough to drive him halfway insane. Tony kept the mantra going, even as he fought to keep from arching up and moaning at the fucking impossible amount of stimuli. They'd never covered this when they'd taught him alpha dog on alpha dog was Bad News, had never told him how damn good it would feel, how much he'd want it to keep going even as it made him nauseous, made him shake with fear. It was like a fucking drug, and Tony was a damn authority on those, or had been before Afghanistan. He was shaking apart with every stroke against his prostate, with every motion of the Soldier's smooth body pressing against him, was on the verge of coming at the sensation of maddening friction against his inner walls, and fuck, it shouldn't feel this damn good, this was a flaw in evolution, and Goddamn the betas for being right, and fuck he wished he'd been one of them, then this wouldn't be happening, at least. No one was crazy enough to try to do this to a male beta. Jesus, who'd even try? And fuck, why couldn't he have been born beta? Life would've been so fucking much easier, so--

The Soldier stiffened above Tony, emptied himself in sharp burst, and then, before Tony even managed to peel his eyes open, even managed either pride or frustration at the fact that he'd been left unsatisfied, he heard another set of sickeningly slick sounds. Before he could properly react either way, a plug was carefully pushed inside him, keeping the sloshing coming in place, far more effective than fingers would ever be, and that thought was enough to scare the shit out of him, make him writhe and whine and try to push the foreign object out of his body. All he managed to do was push the toy in deeper where it pressed against his prostate in a truly detestable way. Tony snapped his teeth at nothing, growling, and he could feel the tears in his own eyes as he slowly stilled. At least he knew, now, why the Soldier had gone missing for hours, not that that made anything any better. Tony hadn't managed to make anything of the time allotted to him anyway.
For all that he'd managed to have the discussion with Sam over the course of several sleepless nights - he had a feeling Sam was forcing himself to stay awake just to catch him out on his crazy and force him to talk about it - Bucky never quite built up the courage to talk to Steve about the whole alpha issue, and then suddenly JARVIS was telling them a helicopter was touching down on the roof, Sir and Doctor Banner ready to emerge, and Bucky didn't even have words for what he was feeling, antsy and jittery, like he had something damn near impossible to prove, some unknown standards to live up to, and it made sense, it did, Bucky had never lived in close quarters with an alpha bitch - his mother and sister had all been betas - had never had to try to work with or around an alpha couple to create a family pack. He had no idea how any of this was going to work, and that scared the shit out of him.

And then the door to the common room opened, and two dark-haired men walked inside, both of them short, one more compactly built than the other, with a damn goatee decorating his chin and lip, all too recognizable after the press conference. Stark was a presence to behold, lithe and strong and charismatic, all slender strength and vulnerable-despite-himself charm, all dark eyes and long lashes. His scent was... Bucky couldn't make sense of it. There was a sweet edge of bitch, but also the smoky, spicy, threatening sting of dog, and beneath it all there was something that stung his nose, almost synthetic, like the hormone body washes HYDRA had sometimes made him wear for certain ops. Even as all that caught his nose, though, what caught his eye was the soft, tiny bundle strapped to Stark's chest in some sort of fabric harness. He caught sight of a head of fly-away dark hair, pale olive skin peaking through at the cheeks and temples, an impossibly small thumb stuck into a rosebud mouth and Jesus, he had never seen a more perfect human being than that child. The sensation was immediate, far more visceral than even his reaction to Pepper Potts. This pup was family of the most important kind, and Bucky would die to keep her and the bitch who carried her alive, come whatever the fuck may. It was as simple as that, as simple as anything would ever get in his life, and he latched onto that with every last bit of him he had left, no questions asked.

Stark's eyes swept a quick survey of the lounge, taking in everyone he'd been housing and dismissing them just as quickly, though Bucky imagined his eyes might've rested on him for just a moment longer than everyone else. Stark hunched just a bit, curling around his precious cargo. Then he dismissed them all in one fell swoop, made his way to the lift and stepped inside, disappearing into the penthouse, and Bucky's nose twitched in the wake of his scent. Dog, definitely, but the scent of bitch clung to him even though his only companion was an omega. Bucky sniffed again, felt his eyes widen as he finally began to detect the sharp, synthetic twang to the dog scent. The bitch scent underneath, however, was a perfect match for the one the overlaid the whole of the Tower. Bucky breathed in again, called on his half-forgotten training to dismiss anything that wasn't real. The dog scent retreated to a faint, irritating buzz, leaving just the sweet-spicy notes of alpha bitch behind, and fuck, it only took a whiff of the purity of it, and Bucky felt a stirring he didn't remember ever experiencing outside his dreams, though he must have, at some point. The arousal was of a gentle sort, leaving his trousers too tight but without any real kind of urgency, but also without any real sense of any competitors. And what the fuck was that? Stark was an alpha not-bitch-bitch, attractive to Bucky's hindbrain which meant not bonded, and Bucky was reacting in ways he didn't have the first way to deal with. Fuck, none of the thirties sci-fi zines had prepared him for the future being this fucking difficult.
"Tony," Bruce was saying, and for the first time in fuck knew how long, Tony was actually hearing him. Vaguely, maybe, but his voice was still there, no longer dismissed the way any non-threat had been since the birth. Slowly, Tony uncurled from the center of his den, blinked bleary eyes up at his friend even as he clutched the tiny, naked bundle of pup closer to himself, uncertain of the situation now that his instincts were finally giving way to the more human side of him. "Tony," Bruce said again. "You told me you wanted to take the lactation suppressants as soon as possible, and I'd really like that to be now, because you're starting to trigger my hormones."

Tony gave another bleary blink, his mind taking long, slow moments to catch up with the situation. Alpha bitches with young pups could trigger any omega of the pack, regardless of gender, into lactating. Leftover hormone from a primitive past where the bitch was expected to go right back to hunting and leading as soon as the manic den phase was over and leave the omegas to care for the pups, more wolf than human. Even so, he looked down himself, took in his swollen chest with a self-conscious wince, and yeah, he was definitely not keeping this shit up any longer than he had to. He shifted the pup into the crook of one arm and held the other one out for the syringe. In the mere moments it took Bruce to stick the needle into a vein and press down, Tony tried to and gave up on remembering the past few weeks. Denning was a haze, just like everything he'd ever read about it had indicated. The instinct to isolate himself from everyone except the least threatening, most trusted pack members - usually omega - and give himself over to the care of the pup until the most vulnerable stage was over, well, all that was apparently true, true enough that he couldn't recall any solitary detail, just a mess of warmth and protectiveness and the perceived safety of the den. Tony gritted his teeth, shook his head, tried not to feel it too keenly as the drug made its way through his veins. He did not like the missing chunk of memories, did not like the idea of how out of control he must've been, more, even, than when he'd been in the depth of his stint with going feral. It was over, at least, and thank fuck for that.

"Soooo," Bruce said slowly, drawing out the word hesitantly, and shit, but Tony sometimes wished he'd take to confrontations a bit better, for his own sake if nothing else. Hadn't he been practically training the guy for that kind of thing since the first time he poked him with something pointy anyway? Even so, he made himself stay silent and wait, eyebrow cocked in expectation. "Are we ever going to talk about that?" Bruce stared pointedly at the scar on the base of Tony's neck, raising his own eyebrow in response.

Tony grimaced, shrugged, all too aware of the fact that he wasn't wearing anything but the same ratty wife beater he'd probably been wearing for days - possibly weeks - now, which didn't exactly do much to hide the mark. The cursory glance he cast at himself also revealed the slightly crusted front of it, smelling of sour, dried milk and fuck, Tony needed a shower and a change of clothes worse right now than he had even after emerging from that Thor-forsaken cave in Afghanistan. "I'm going to have to raise you Norse-pagan, you know," he told the pup absentmindedly. "Only religion I've seen any proof for, plus praying will be so much simpler for you if you can just go have a chat with your Uncle Thor." He blinked. "JARVIS, remind me to research Norse Mythology and Norse Paganism."

"Certainly, Sir," JARVIS replied from the rudimentary speakers Tony had managed to install in the room before shit had gotten too crazy.

"Tony." Bruce snapped his fingers in Tony's face for a moment, catching his attention. "You're still kind of out of it, aren't you? You're coming out of it faster than normal anyway. Must be a damn strong pup." He paused for a moment to let Tony preen with a parental pride that he couldn't dismiss no matter how silly it was. The pup's strength didn't have anything to do with him. That enhancement all came from... He cut himself off with a brisk shake of his head. "Do you think you'd let me examine her?" Bruce went on. "Will just take a couple minutes, and it'll make me feel better to know for sure she's all right. You too, sometime soon."
Tony nodded slowly, frowned, tried to gather his wits about himself and sharpen all his suddenly too-soft edges. "Sure, if that's what's best," he said, words still half-slurred. He dropped into something almost as mindless as the haze of the past few weeks, watching anxiously as his daughter was examined. He didn't have quite the same patience with being poked and prodded himself, though, and once he came down from the high of Maria being declared 'healthier than any infant I've ever seen, let alone a premature one', the world began to sharpen a fraction around him, along with his awareness of the fact that he had absolutely no awareness of what had gone on with the world for the past however long. "JARV, what's going on back at the Tower?" he asked, just for some place to start.

"Currently, Agents Romanoff and Barton, Captain Rogers and Sergeants Wilson and Barnes are in what appears to be semi-permanent residence," JARVIS answered, and Tony felt himself grin. Fuck, but he'd missed that prim-and-proper voice. Well, he must've, was sure he did. He just didn't remember, like with everything else in the past few weeks. "The nursery has been completed, mainly thanks to Sergeant Barnes and Agent Barton."

Tony felt some part of him he hadn't even realized was tense begin to slowly calm down. And then there was that prick of dopey happiness at the knowledge that his mate had-- Again, he pushed the thought roughly aside. "And how's the arm working out? You give it to him yet? Wait, we're sure he's really Barnes at this point?"

Bruce looked away from whatever squishy-doctor thing it was he was doing, stared at Tony with narrowed eyes. "Barnes?" he asked. "The Winter Soldier? That's who you refused to ever name?"

Trying to ignore his own sudden sense of trepidation, Tony kept his attention firmly on JARVIS. "The arm appears in perfect working order, though I have collected a few notes on areas that could be improved," JARVIS replied. "I guided him to it when he started working on the nursery. And yes, Sir, he no longer appears either brainwashed or feral. In fact, he is growing more assertive by the day, has attempted to educate himself on modern society and is regularly standing up to Captain Rogers." Was that? Tony thought it was, and he couldn't quite help another burst of warmth at the sound of something damn close to approval in his AI's voice.

"Tony..." Bruce's voice was dangerously low, and dangerously compassionate. "You need to--"

Tony gritted his teeth. "That's right," he said. "I need to take care of this before some stupid beta gets their nose in. JARV, can you contact Cho? Tell her I need to register turning bitch, about nine months ago. Get her to sign the documents. Find some registered shrink who can be paid off to sign off on a backdated document and validate the mind bit of 'of sound body and mind' too, please. And hack into the registration databases, put me down as having applied for turning bitch about... Government stuff takes time, let's say I applied twenty months ago, and was approved four months later. Should make for enough time that no one will suspect anyone enhanced was involved. Make sure the shrink also signs off on the mental fitness forms to add in there. The bond..." He frowned. It wasn't actually that uncommon anymore for an alpha pair to hold off on bonding, waiting the better part of a decade and a few pups, beta sentiments bleeding into alpha culture and all that shit. The mark was nothing a bit of concealer couldn't hide, which meant this, at least, was something he could put off dealing with. "Never mind. That's it."

"I will get right on it, Sir," JARVIS replied, and this time there might be just a hint of disapproval in his voice and shit, Tony really shouldn't have tried quite this hard to make JARVIS exactly like the Jarvis he'd grown up with. Might be less overbearing, then.

"Tony." And this time Bruce's voice had deepened, taking on notes of the Hulk that Tony definitely did not appreciate around his baby. He pushed Bruce's hands away, got up from his chair and picked
Maria off from the den to cradle protectively in his arms before he turned to stare Bruce down. Other Guy or not, Bruce was still an omega. Tony should still have some kind of sway over him, especially now. Omegas had always been notoriously loyal to the alpha bitch of their pack, especially with a pup involved. Bruce sighed, but the green did recede from his eyes, if just a bit. "Tony, you can't just let him get away with this." He shook his head, pushed his glasses higher up his nose. "And this isn't just 'letting him get away with it', you're actively helping the bastard cover up a crime, and you're breaking the law yourself to do it. Think this through. He isn't safe, clearly. He needs to be somewhere they know how to handle him so something like this doesn't happen again."

Tony had to fight to keep from rolling his eyes. He knew exactly what his mother would've said in response to those words. 'Beta indoctrination on omegas will be the end of whatever's left of pack-based society, Meu Cor.' There were times to listen to omegas, times when their tendency to be less fiery and less temperamental in their involvement was an enormous help, but also times when you had to dismiss them and listen to your gut instead. And Tony, well, Tony had made a life out of listening to his gut. "Barnes didn't choose to go feral," he said. "And I know what the laws are, but the laws are fucking wrong. Punishing someone who had no control over their own actions is never going to correct the damage that happened. The people responsible are HYDRA, for probably keeping him on the verge of feral for years, it's the handlers who disappeared and left him without direction, it's even, fuck, Rogers and his musketeers for trying to run him down. He was pushed, until the hindbrain took over. It's instinct, it's biology, but there's no crime if there's no intent, okay, and I'm not going to let my baby-daddy hang over something he couldn't have controlled if he'd tried. I know you don't get it. I know you have no clue what going feral feels like. Take it from someone who's been damn close, there isn't a bit of intent involved." He sucked in a sharp breath. "Besides, even if he was unbalanced and likely to go feral again - which JARVIS would've noticed and told me - he can't do this kind of damage to anyone else." Tony lifted one hand from where he was holding Maria and stabbed at the scar on his throat, swallowing down the visceral response to the touch. "He's locked and caught, just as much as I am."

"Tony," Bruce said anyway. "What he did to you was wrong, and I get that your--"

Tony shook his head violently. "No," he spat. "No, you don't get it. You--"

"Tony," and this time Bruce was shouting, and Bruce never raised his voice, Tony couldn't help but flinch at the sound, more aware of the Other Guy lurking beneath the surface now, with Maria in his arms, than he'd ever been before. And as if on cue, Maria began to wail. Tony cradled her closer, kissed the top of her head, reveling in the feeling of her whisper-soft downy hair against his lips. Bruce, sensing an opening, continued. "Tony, this is your hindbrain talking. But that shit's not true. Just because you lost a fight, that doesn't mean this is right, doesn't mean you deserved this. What happened to you was wrong, and--"

And Tony felt his own temper flare again, and he couldn't find it in himself to back down, not even at the sight of the Hulk green expanding from Bruce's eyes to his cheeks. "Of course it was fucking wrong," he shouted. "So's what they did to him. So's the fact that a traumatized kid has to be stuck with me and princess here. There's nothing right about it, but it's alpha biology, all right? And that shit's brutal, no matter how much the betas try to regulate it. Here's the thing, though, we're the stronger for it. Our heads were built to deal with this shit, because when you strip everything away and leave just the instincts, this is what we're naturally going to do, and we have to be able to survive that. There are alpha-dominated societies out there still, in Africa and the Pacific, where the pup-to-grown rituals of passage still include forcing teenagers to go feral, and either they win the fight and bond, or they lose and are either rejected or turned bitch, or turn themselves dog, which-fucking-ever, and yeah, that sucks, I wouldn't wish that on any kid, but do you think those people stay traumatized for the rest of their lives? We deal. We're built to deal. So stop fucking trying to stop me from dealing. Locking him up isn't going to change anything, and so far, non-feral, all he seems to
have done is finish the nursery and stand up to Cap, which is stuff I would've wanted a mate to do. He's no more of a threat than the rest of us are, and I-- I need to do this." He let out a sharp breath, felt his own temper begin to settle into something more manageable. "I need to do this," he repeated. "I need to deal, I need to get over this, and locking up some poor kid who was pushed until he went feral isn't going to accomplish anything."

Strangely enough, Bruce seemed to react to Tony's temper by finding his own calm. The green receded, and his hand was gentle when he reached out and put it on Tony's shoulder. "Okay," he said slowly. "Okay. I don't agree, but if this is what you need to do, I'll support you. But. If he ever looks at you or Maria wrong for even a second, I promise you the other guy is going to come out and smash him to bits."

Tony nodded, relieved, breathed slightly more easily. Maria gurgled, gummed against his wife-beater, and Tony could feel his chest swell in response, wincing at the feeling. Yeah, that was definitely not something he wanted to continue feeling. Hopefully the suppressants would kick in soon. Still, until they did... It wasn't like they had a bottle ready. "Thanks," he said, clasping Bruce's arm briefly. "I appreciate it." Because no matter how big a game he talked, returning to the Tower wasn't going to be easy. Facing Barnes wasn't going to be easy. And yes, those were things he needed to do in order to deal, but knowing that a giant green rage monster had his back, well, that might make it the tiniest bit easier. He dismissed those thoughts in favor of attending to his daughter, pushing his undershirt up and out of the way, letting her latch on, and fuck but that felt weird. Not bad weird, not entirely, but still really fucking weird, that sensation of something flowing out of him and into her mouth, the suction and the... He grimaced again, better not think of it. He waited until he seemed to be running dry, shifted her to the other side. "We do have formula somewhere, right? Because I'm not doing this shit again."

"I should hope not," Bruce agreed and reached up to rub uncomfortably at his own chest. "Let her finish up, and then go take a shower. You reek. And maybe have a shave too. You kind of look like a caveman."

Tony flashed him a quick grin before looking back down at Maria.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks once more to everyone who's left kudos or subscribed or bookmarked, and especially those of you who took the time to review. It means more than you know.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Found a bit of time to get the next chapter cracked out. I was a bit stuck and had to write through it, so this chapter might be a bit clumsy and clunky, but hopefully you'll bear with me until I get into the flow again and the quality goes up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

03.06-10. 15

The thing was, Bucky had always known just how fucking compelling unbonded bitches with pups were, whether they meant to be or not. They were the failing of some dog out there, obviously, but once their pheromones let that dog go and started searching for the next best thing, all bets were off. Scents went into overdrive, and while honor was enough to make any dog do whatever was needed to take care of an unbonded bitch with a pup, the scent was enough to drive anyone crazy. Bucky had been around unbonded bitch mothers before, and sure, it had affected him, but it was nothing like this. Tony Stark's scent drove him damn near crazy, kept him constantly half hard, made his chest go tight, made his temper short with the need to fight whoever had been idiot enough not to claim a mate like that and instead leave them alone and unsupported. More than any of that, though, was the old, gentle response to a bitch going it alone, the old instinct that made any unbonded dog try their very fucking best to make sure the bitch was in good health and not suffering.

Tony Stark, Bucky was realizing after just a few days of - somewhat - sharing a living space, was very bad at taking care of himself. Oh, he was taking care of the pup just fine, feeding her and changing her and carrying her around in that chest sling more often than not, but it didn't take Bucky long to realize that no matter how many times he encountered Stark in the common kitchen with a bottle held to the pup's mouth, he'd never actually seen Stark eat anything himself. He was also fairly certain that the pup had a healthier sleep schedule than Stark did, had seen Stark inhaling huge mugs of coffee at three in the morning while the pup was asleep in her sling. The fact that he never caught more than a glimpse, the fact that Stark seemed proficient at leaving a room the moment Bucky entered it... It bothered him, but he got it. They were both unbonded alphas, and that was never going to be an easy relationship. Still, once his instincts ferreted onto the fact that Stark wasn't taking care of himself, he was damn near physically incapable of letting it go.

And that was how he found himself in the kitchen, dismissing the phantom sounds of his sisters laughing at him as he took a long look at the produce in the fridge and settled on a good old Cottage Pie, the way his ma had shown him before his sisters were old enough to learn. He chopped the vegetables with the quick efficiency his new prosthetic afforded him, mashed the potatoes, cooked the minced beef and mixed everything together. If wasn't until he was close to done that he realized he'd been humming one of the old folk songs under his breath, and how the fuck was he suddenly remembering this damn much? He dismissed the confusion, wouldn't get him anywhere. Finished up the dish, plated it and found himself glancing up at the ceiling uncertainly. "JARVIS?" he asked. "Where's Mr. Stark?"

"Sir is in his workshop, Sergeant Barnes," JARVIS answered a bare moment later. "He's locked it down, but given your intentions I feel compelled to tell you that the override code is Three-Two-Five-Five-Seven-Zero-Three-Eight."
Bucky frowned for a moment, the numbers strangely familiar. Then he let that impression go, picked up the plate and made his way towards the elevator that would take him first to the penthouse and then to the alternate one he'd only ever used to find his arm, the one that would take him straight to the workshop level. He was there faster than his mind could properly catch up, and then he was enveloped in that soothing, titillating scent of bitch, and fuckin' hell, but his pants were getting too tight already, but that wasn't what this was supposed to be all about. With some effort, he focused back on the plate he was holding, forced himself to focus on the aromas of the dish. "You need to eat," he told the impossible bitch currently bent over a work bench with one hand manipulating a series of holograms in front of him and fuck, if the workshop had seemed damn near magical without Stark in it, it was nothing to what it was now, with its heart and soul reintroduced.

Stark looked up, and for a moment he was all wide, dark eyes and frightened motions as he pushed himself back against one of his odd little robot arms, one hand coming up to cradle the pup, and Bucky knew other people might be offended - Steve would've probably gone off the deep end - but Bucky got it, kind of, he thought. Stark couldn't have been born bitch, that happened so rarely in men as to be dismissible, but that meant he'd been born dog and someone had turned him, and Bucky shuddered to even imagine what that might've been like. Like he kept insisting to Steve, there was a reason unbonded alphas didn't always cohabitate well. Bucky heard it all too clearly when Stark finally pulled in a calming breath and constructed his face into something resembling a smile. "Guess I am kinda hungry," and that was a lot more easy than Bucky had expected. Still, his ma hadn't raised him to look a gift horse in the mouth, so he walked forward and placed the plate carefully on the work bench in front of Stark.

Stark waited a moment, and then he picked up the fork and damn near attacked the plate, eating way too fast and letting out sounds that were damn near indecent while he was at it, and Bucky could barely swallow around the odd sensation of pride and accomplishment that rose up inside him, warmed him up and made his trousers grow too tight all over again, and fuck, hadn't he been better at controlling his own responses once upon a time?

"What's this?" Stark asked. "Where did you order it from?" The plate in front of him was empty, damn near licked clean, and another overwhelming sensation of accomplishment washed over Bucky, made him feel warm all over.

"Made it," Bucky said, shrugging. "The ingredients were all in the fridge."

Stark's eyes went round as saucers, and fuck, Bucky had never seen eyes like that, not even on the Italian kids he'd grown up with in Brooklyn. Stark's eyes were impossibly wide and impossibly dark and impossibly unbelievable, as if he couldn't even begin to process the idea of someone cooking a meal for him, and somehow that disbelief was both heartbreaking and encouraging. Bucky wanted to keep doing this, wanted to keep providing the way any good dog should, and he felt impossibly sad and angry that whoever had knotted Stark up wasn't here to do this themselves. "This is--" Stark averted his eyes for a moment, looked away to focus on that utterly beautiful pup in his arms. "Thank you. That was great." His eyes never left the top of his daughter's head, and fuck, but Bucky hated that dog who'd left them more than he thought he'd ever hated anyone, on such an instinctive level anyway. The pup was perfect and beautiful, healthy and clearly intelligent already, tiny fists reaching for the holograms the moment Stark called them back on. And Stark himself... He was sweet, if sharp-edged, and he was clever in a way Bucky would never be, he was strong but not overwhelming, was so damn gorgeous it made Bucky's breath catch, and that was without mentioning territory and resources, and fuck, whoever had left those two behind had been a damn idiot.

"There's more in the kitchen," Bucky heard himself say. "You want any?"
Stark's whole face seemed to light up in a smile even as he kept a very obvious workbench between himself and Bucky, clearly trying to protect himself and avoid a fight all at once, and Bucky wished to hell that he wouldn't. Bucky wasn't about to start a fight. Even with his whole fucked up bundle of instincts telling him to take this family for his own, even with his pants constantly too tight in Stark's presence, head awash in hormones, he wouldn't, not ever. He was more than his own damn biology, whichever century he was in. "Please," Stark said, pulling him right out of his own contemplations.

And then what the fuck choice was there? An abandoned, underfed bitch had accepted his offer of food, and Bucky's instincts could never possibly ignore that, especially when he took a moment to remember the sight of that tiny, dark head of the pup cuddled against Stark's chest. Bucky pushed all of that away as best he could, scooped up another portion of the leftovers of his dish. He was going to have to cook again if he wanted anything himself, but when irritation threatened to resurface, he remembered the too prominent collarbones and ribs that Stark's undershirt had done nothing to hide. It would take a far colder asshole than him to begrudge Stark a meal, even if it meant he had to cook all over again. He sprinkled on a tad more pepper, remembering Stark's skin color, and perhaps he shouldn't judge so easily, but he kind of wanted to please more than he wanted to be polite or politically correct or whatever it was called these days, and Tony was as clearly Mediterranean as Steve was Irish, and as far as Bucky's memories supported him, that meant a bit extra bite to food.

Whatever it was, when Stark got another mouthful of the pie, he outright moaned, deep and pleased and fucking filthy. "So fucking good, Barnes," he managed in between mouthfuls. "You don't even-- You know when the last time was that anyone cooked for me without me paying them? Yeah, I kind of don't know either. Been that long, and Jesus Christ this is good."

Without even a bit of permission, all of Bucky's instincts reared up, because fucking hell, this wasn't how it should be. Stark was strong and clever and so handsome it damn near hurt, all sculpted face and round, dark eyes, and the knowledge that someone had looked at this man and the gorgeous pup he carried like a badge of honor and an invaluable treasure all at once, that was enough to make any dog confused, because no dog should ever leave a bitch behind, and whichever dog had left Stark behind had very clearly been out of their mind, and shit, he needed to make his own head stop running in circles, felt like he kept coming back on a trail he'd only just left. "I can make you more," Bucky promised. "If you want."

Stark let out another moan, finished up the plate. "Fuuuuuck yes," he groaned. "Fucking hell, how are you this good a cook, and how the hell have I not hired you already?"

Bucky fought back a flush, not that he was certain Stark would've caught on anyway. "My repertoire's kind of limited," admitted. "Pretty much just know the dishes my ma taught me. And I don't even know what you like."

"Good old home country food, then," Stark said, scraping his fork against the plate to collect what little food was left there. He stuck the fork in his mouth, pulled it back out with a half-moan that was damn near enough to drive Bucky insane. "I don't even have to be Irish to like this," Stark said, long moments later. "And I like Indian and Thai and Mexican and stuff. I'm Catalan, though. I really like ollada."

Bucky made a mental note to look up whatever that was. Shouldn't be too difficult anyway. So long as his goal remained making sure Stark didn't work himself into an early grave and leave his daughter an orphan, JARVIS would probably be on his side. He'd barely made his way out of the workshop before he tilted his head towards the ceiling, though, unaccountably uncertain. "JARVIS, what is ollada?"

"Just a moment, Sergeant, and I'll find you the most popular recipes online," JARVIS said, and
Bucky let out a sharp breath of relief. He might not know what the hell he was doing, but the AI was not ever going to let Stark down, and that was better than anything Bucky could've ever imagined. As the only alpha dog in the Tower, Stark, in some roundabout way, was his responsibility, and he'd be dammed if he let himself fail.

***

7 days before

Tony had only managed to catch glimpses of his kidnapper out the corner of his eye. Even during the fight, he hadn't managed to catch sight of a full face under the hooded sweater, which just reiterated how embarrassingly final that fight had been. Still, those glimpses had been disturbingly familiar, and now that he was resting, still panting, on the ratty mattress he was caught on, trying to catch his breath, his equilibrium, he finally got a full look at the man who was threatening to turn his whole world upside down. Tony's breath caught in his throat, because fuck, Bucky fucking Barnes had died almost seventy years ago, but the resemblance, even with the smudged makeup and long, matted hair, was damn near impossibly to wrap his mind around. Maybe Barnes conceived a kid during the war which could've made it possible for him to have a grandkid or great grandkid who really resembled him to a fucking frightening degree, but no. Tony had seen Bucky Barnes's face too many times on too many old as fuck newsreels, and had experienced too damn much weird, impossible shit in his life to dismiss this out of hand.

Barnes's clone, or whoever the hell else this was, held out a plate of plain buttered bread and a bottle of water. A moment later, it seemed to occur to him that Tony's wrists were tied and his hands out of commission. He placed his treasures on the bedding and reached behind Tony to free him for the first time in more hours than Tony could possibly count. Tony had to take a few, long moments to get over the pins and needles, flexing and relaxing his hands until they were back in working order. Tony raised the bread to his mouth and took a bite, chewing slowly as he took in the form of the man before him. He was beefier than he'd been in any of Howard's newsreels, any of Aunt Peggy's stories, might actually be able to take out Captain America if need be. His face held the vacant, implacable notes of alpha dog gone feral, and fuck if that didn't make Tony's stomach ice over even as something alien inside him clenched in odd anticipation. Well, this was the first time in hours he'd been free of both come and dick, of course he was going to react. He swallowed his bite, took another one and made sure to be just as infuriatingly slow again this time around. His mind was working, more slowly than usual maybe, but he was exhausted, damn it, damn near fucking fucked out even after just a handful of rounds, and he glanced at the ratty window curtains, noted that there was light again, where his last close look had only revealed darkness, or as much darkness as New York was ever capable of.

He glanced at his captor again as he took another bite of food into his mouth. Fuck, he should've made the damn time actually read all the classified files Natasha and Rogers had uploaded, should've actually taken in the contents rather than just playing internet watch dog, shielding whatever files looked like they might need to be on SI servers, editing and redacting others on a flying-by-his-ass basis as he skimmed them. Mostly, though, even skimming had been beyond him what with the sheer amount of data. His main objective had been to secure any files that were too sensitive to see the light of day, but fuck, he wished he'd had time to do more than that. Maybe a more thorough look at those damn, dodgy files would've told him how the fuck Bucky Barnes was alive and well - prosthetic arm discounted because it was quite possibly an improvement on the original flesh and blood model - and how in the world Tony had been supposed to figure out a way to defend himself against two-hundred-twenty-plus pounds of enhanced strength and fucking metal arm.

In the end, the conclusion was still the same. There was no way he was good enough to fight his way out of this situation, especially with all his suits exploded. He was fucking helpless against the
Soldier - and fuck, Tony wasn't ever going to think of him by either his given or ridiculous chosen name. What were you supposed to do in this kind of fucking messed up situation? Despite himself, Tony remembered sex ed and the tiny class of alphas he'd been in, all his classmates older than himself. They'd all been warned about this, about the dangers of an alpha dog going feral, forgetting themselves, forgetting-- Tony felt his own eyes widen. That was it, it damn well had to be. The Soldier was in this state because he was forgetting himself, was forgetting who he was, what was important. Tony didn't even have to think in order to start up the mantra, just had to make himself remember all the bittersweet notes of his childhood. "Your name is James Buchanan Barnes," he heard himself say, as if from way too damn far away, and this was wrong, all wrong, all so damn fucked up. He wasn't going to kid himself and pretend he knew James Barnes, but he had grown up on stories of the Howling Commandos, told to the scent of Peggy's perfume and the sound of Dum-Dum's booming laughter. Good days with his father had been marked with black and white old propaganda films and accompanying anecdotes. So while Tony didn't know Barnes, he knew this wasn't who he was, or should be. He remembered the newsreels, the image of a smiling, yet intense young man, strong and handsome, about Tony's own size, alpha but in control of it, kind and sharp and funny and oddly understated next to Rogers. There was nothing of that man in the Soldier he was faced with now. He couldn't help but think that even without the whole gone-feral thing, something was really fucking wrong. The new height and bulk, the hair and arm and smudged makeup all told a story very different from the ones Tony had grown up hearing. Then again, it had been sixty-nine fucking years. And--

The Soldier broke him out of his train of thought by pushing the last bites of bread and the water bottle closer to him, clearly impatient, and Tony could smell his arousal already, sharp and musky, still so feral it was painfully obvious. Tony hurriedly stuffed the last of the food in his mouth, chewed and swallowed, no longer willing to drag it out and find out what the consequences of that might be. He downed the water in one go, and then he grimaced but did not struggle as his hands were tied back up and he was guided down onto his front. Instead, he began talking again, "Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. Your friends call you Bucky. You fought in..." And on and on and on, laying out the most basic facts of Barnes's life. The Soldier showed no reaction, not one bit, but still Tony kept speaking, pushing out words in between gasps and pants that he couldn't quite suppress. For now, this was the one avenue of escape he had. He was damn well going to do his best to utilize it.

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03.16.15

Bucky carefully finished plating up a portion of some kind of food that had a name he couldn't pronounce, but which the Internet assured him was traditional Catalan, and which hadn't been too hard to cook. He hoped it'd turned out all right, but he honestly had no way to tell, no reference for this kind of thing. At least it didn't taste like it was going to give anyone food poisoning. The door opened behind him as he pulled a bottle of water out of the fridge. "You make enough for everyone?" Steve asked, and the tone of his voice alone was already enough to rub Bucky all the wrong ways.

Bucky waved a dismissive hand, trying not to be bothered by the fact that he hadn't noticed Steve entering. "Help yourself," he said. "You ain't gonna like it, though." He shut the fridge, picked up plate and cutlery and walked towards the elevator that would take him through the penthouse to the workshop, pretending not to hear Steve's grumbles because fuck, he was not up for a fight right now. It would get too damn ugly, especially with the voice in the back of his head whispering that if Steve were a proper beta, was aware of whose territory he was living in and whose pack he was part of, however peripherally, he'd be Goddamn trying to take care of Stark too.
He punched in his code and waited for the doors to slide open. They'd barely separated an inch before he was very much aware of the fact that something was off. Stark's bitch scent was deeper, headier than it usually was, so fucking compelling Bucky's breath came short for a moment before he got it under control. Uncertain of the situation, he stepped into the workshop, staying near the doors as his eyes searched out Stark. Eventually, he picked up a pair of feet sticking out from under one of the cars. Off to the side, the pup was sleeping in a basket-like thing, one tiny fist curled up against a round cheek, and Bucky had to stop himself from walking over and picking her up. This was becoming a thing, this need to be around the pup, hold her close, take care of her like he tried to take care of Stark, and fuck, he needed to figure out some way to get his head on straight. Maybe Steve was right. Maybe he was obsessed. He shook his head slowly, tried to clear it, but the pheromones down here were so thick, even thicker than usual, and his head felt like it had been wrapped in cotton wool. He cleared his throat, uncertain.

Stark wheeled himself out from under the car, becoming slowly visible, muscled legs first, all too visible through the too-tight jeans, then the torso, clothes still tight enough that Bucky could make out the subtlest of roundings on an otherwise flat, strong stomach, the bitch bulge, visible sign of where Stark's still very male body had had to make room for a uterus. His face finally followed the rest of him, and his hair was sticking up in all directions, grease streaks decorating skin that somehow stayed tanned no matter how much he seemed to avoid direct sunlight. He looked terrible. Well, correction, he looked like he felt terrible. His skin was flushed and his undershirt was drenched in sweat. The effect of that was as far from terrible as it got, and Bucky winced, realized he was so hard it damn near hurt. Even the extra tissue at the base of his dick was already beginning to swell. And fuck, he'd been around bitches before, but rarely around unbonded bitches with pups, and still more rarely ones he wasn't related to but still felt a sense of pack connection to, and fuck, he should've thought this through sooner, because in packs, however loose and disorganized, if there were only two alphas, the attraction was always going to be damn near painful, especially with one bitch and one dog.

Stark sucked in a breath, and for a moment his eyes widened. The size of them should've been comical, but it wasn't, not at all. Those big, round, dark eyes were suddenly just about the most attractive thing Bucky had ever seen, even more so when they began to glaze over, pupils expanding. A moment later, they narrowed, breaking the spell, and Bucky felt himself breathe in. The heady, spicy sweetness damn near made him lose his mind. It wasn't a true heat. No ovulation, or fuck knew if he'd have even been able to control himself. Miniature heat, he thought it was called. Common in bitches during and immediately after pregnancy, a biological trick designed to keep their bonded interested or, if there was no mate, to attract someone able and willing to provide for them and their pup. It would be uncomfortable for Stark, but not unbearable, and fuck, Bucky's textbook driven thoughts were derailing again as his nose picked up on the subtle, overwhelming notes of slick and fuck, fuck, this was not good.

Stark picked that moment to narrow his eyes further, lips pulling back in a snarl. The bitter stench of panic came off him, mixing with the pheromones he was giving off to create a sour note that put Bucky more firmly back on his feet. "Out," Stark hissed. "Out. Out, get the hell outta here. Right the fuck now, or I swear to God--"

Bucky nodded, instinctively more concerned with Stark's safety and comfort than his own problem. He put the plate and bottle down on the nearest workbench, turned tail and fled. He didn't stop moving until he was in the gym, needed some way to work this off without resorting to putting his hand on his dick at the thought of someone who very clearly wasn't willing. He didn't stop to put on wraps, just made for the heavy bag, got into the same fighting stance he was pretty sure he'd learned as a teenager, and began to punch. He kept to some routine he'd learned so long ago it was more muscle memory than anything. He suspected some YMCA in Brooklyn. Either way, it didn't matter, what did was the heavy impacts against his knuckles, keeping moving, keeping on his toes, bouncing
just that tiny bit as he kept up his defenses, kept up his combinations. Jab-jab-hook-jab-cross-jab-jab-hook-jab-uppercut-repeat.

He scented beta before he heard Steve's footsteps, didn't stop in his routine, though. He kept punching, kept up the combinations he'd known even before basic army training, used the soothing motions to keep himself as calm as he could be, tried not to think about how tight his pants still were. "What?" he asked at last, when Steve was only a few steps away.

"You've got to teach me that sometime," Steve said. "I know the basic punches," he added. "You taught me those. Nothing like that, though."

Bucky gave a quick shrug before going back to the bag. "I will," he promised. "Gotta be some other time, though. Not really up for anythin' right now."

"What's going on?" Steve asked, even as he stepped up to hold the bag still for Bucky, and fucking hell, that made it almost as painful as punching a fucking wall, Steve damn near unmovable behind the bag. Fucking satisfying was what it was.

"Stark's having a mini heat," Bucky answered. He continued before Steve could say something idiotic, "Shut up, that shit was heady enough you'da been effected as well."

Steve looked unconvinced, shook his head. "You needa get over this damn obsession of yours," he said, and some of his Brooklyn was coming out. That part, at least, was satisfying, made Steve feel more familiar for all that Bucky's instincts still told him he was the wrong size. "Don't remember you bein' affected by other dogs' ruts anyway."

"It ain't no fuckin' obsession." Bucky sucked in a breath, then continued his attack on the heavy bag. And fuck, what the hell had Stark done to the thing to make it durable enough to hold up under this? And how did Steve not realize this was an upgrade that had happened long before Bucky had moved into the Tower, clearly with someone else in mind. "Stop being so damn thirties beta. Stop tryin' to pretend you know and start fuckin' tryin' to understand. This mess of a Tower is a pack, or should be, and we should all'a'us be tryin' to take care of the bitch. Me especially, sure, but I seem to be the only one aside from Banner who got the memo. You needa lay off here, Stevie. Fella got turned against his will. Last thing he needs is his own pack makin' his life hell."

"I guess I just don't understand why all this shit is so damn important to you," Steve said. Then he frowned, stopped his argument and looked at Bucky with narrowed eyes. "Wait, what bitch? Stark never took her here."

And Bucky realized suddenly that aside from Bruce, he might very well be the only one who'd figured it out. Well, him and Natasha, because he was pretty sure nothing in the world got past her. "Steve," he said slowly. "There ain't no 'her'. The bitch is Stark. He was turned, and whoever that dog was, he then up and vanished. Stark's alone with his kid. He's unmated, and he's a bitch. So just, please. Lay off. This's gotta be difficult enough for him without you playin' antagonist."

For once in his life, Steve didn't seem to have any sort of comeback ready, and Bucky was damn relieved, because he wasn't sure he'd have liked his own reaction if Steve had said something wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who subscribed, bookmarked and left kudos, and
especially to those who reviewed. It means the world.
Chapter 7

45 days after

They were running some kind of experiment, and for the life of him Tony couldn't remember what the hell it was. Some kind of soft science thing that didn't really interest him at all, and he wouldn't have let anyone else talk him into this. But Bruce. Bruce was a treasure, the only omega Tony had managed to convince to trust him for more than a few hours, and so Bruce could talk him into stuff he probably wouldn't let anyone else get away with. Probably wouldn't have let Bruce get away with it either if any of the others were currently in residence. As much as alphas might indulge omegas in private, he knew his own instincts too well to think he'd let Bruce have the same kind of power over him in front of the rest of the team. Betas were too big assholes for that, would read it all wrong and take it to mean they got to walk all over him too, and Tony was so done with that. Was so fucking done with Captain America, and what the fuck had Aunt Peggs ever seen in that beta dick anyway?

Bruce shifted out the current sample from the mass spectrometer, and then he suddenly had a syringe and had moved before Tony had a moment to even think. Next thing he knew, the needle was in the crook of his elbow, pulling out blood, and then Bruce had thrown that into some machine or other as well while Tony stared at him with his best betrayed look. Bruce ignored him completely, utterly focused on the machines Tony had been idiot enough to build for him.

"Well, then." Tony rolled his eyes. "You finding anything interesting? Want to tell me all about my bitch hormones?"

"Not that much of a surprise, Tones," Bruce said. Even his voice was distracted as he looked into first a microscope and then stared intently at a screen and fuck, but Tony wanted to just get back to his 'shop and his suits and his own hard science. He would've too, except for the disquieting feeling he couldn't dismiss at the idea of Bruce having a sample of his blood. Suddenly, Bruce stiffened, and then he was glancing between Tony and his screen, his eyes wide and suddenly glazing over with a sheen of green. "Tony, I need to do a test."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "What kind of test? Because I have to tell you, I usually make people pay me for anything to do with alien probing,"

Bruce sighed. "That wasn't even a good joke," he said. "JARVIS," he said. "Do you have ultrasound capabilities in this lab?"

"Yes, Doctor Banner," JARVIS replied, the damn traitor, and before Tony had a chance to say anything, he was being scanned, grimacing under the assault.

"Okay, this is just fucking rude," Tony said. "How about giving a guy a warning?"

"Would just make you back out of it," Bruce said. "Again." He turned his face to another screen, and then his eyes were widening. "JARVIS, are we sure?"

"Yes, Doctor Banner," JARVIS said, and to his credit he did sound regretful. "I believe so."

Tony pulled a face at the nearest camera, then turned to Bruce, cocking an eyebrow even as he swallowed down his suddenly vibrating nerves. "What's the verdict, Doc?"
Bruce wasn't meeting his gaze, kept staring at the screen, his shoulders hunching ever so slightly, and fucking hell, every moment Bruce hesitated only made Tony tense up more until fear had him in as rigid a hold as it'd had in that ratty fourth floor apartment. "He didn't give me something incurable, did he?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. "I'd make a fucking terrible Van Gogh."

Bruce cleared his throat. "Well, technically..." He cut himself off. "On the upside, you're physically about twelve years younger than you were two months ago. How fucking young was this dog anyway? That kind of change is unprecedented."

Tony made himself shrug, made himself look exactly as unconcerned as he in no way felt. "Older than me, technically," he said. "But the asshole's enhanced."

Bruce gave a slow nod even as Tony caught the whiff of his sudden curiosity. "That might explain it," he said. "I've never heard of anyone losing twelve years before. Five, maybe. Five's the upper limit of anything that's been observed."

Tony rolled his eyes. So, a few of his crow's feet had smoothed out and his grey hairs were growing in brown. He was going to have a harder time making the board listen to him if they all thought he'd had plastic surgery and started dying his hair, but fuck, he'd take that. Small price to pay for faster response times and the fact that his breath was coming easier. On the great scale of things, considering everything else about him that had changed, it was pretty inconsequential. Maybe his liver was a bit cleaner too. Tony didn't need Bruce to explain the mechanics of it anyway. He knew already. He was a fucking alpha, it was his job to know these things. Bonding to a younger, healthier alpha tended to make the older partner younger and healthier as well, the cells receiving a temporary boost of regeneration.

It was all down to the near-sentient nature of the life-long bond trying its hardest to make sure the two alphas had as many years together as possible. It was also why eight-year-old alpha bitches were practically for sale to old, decrepit dogs in the less conscientious countries in the third world, it was why no alpha with a terminal illness in civilized society was allowed to bond, was why medieval European royalty had made it a habit to bond with partners decades younger than they were, was why the bonding itself was surrounded by so many damn regulations. One alpha could use another to buy him- or herself years of healthy life, but if they still managed to die, they'd go on to provide the other alpha with the truly horrible backlash of losing a bonded mate, and no one ever came back from that quite right. Usually, the younger, healthier bond-mate lost more years than the old, unhealthy one gained. So, regulations. Tony could definitely agree to them on this point, which meant that the lost years sent a shiver of disgust down his spine. How old was Barnes anyway, physically speaking? Thirty, tops, maybe early thirties, but that was stretching it beyond what Tony was comfortable thinking of, indicated more days and weeks awake than he wanted the Winter Soldier to have had, than he wanted Barnes to ever have to recall.

Bruce made an odd little twitch, eyes still very much on the readings, and there was a distinct sheen of green to his eyes by now. "Tones," he said slowly. "Fuck it, I really don't want to have to tell you this," and Tony winced because Bruce cursed so damn rarely that when he did the cause couldn't be much less than the world ending, and Tony's world had already ended once in just a few weeks. He wasn't sure he could deal with it happening all over again. Bruce finally looked away from the monitor, met Tony's gaze with a hesitant look. He looked sad and angry and regretful all at once and fuck, Tony wasn't sure he was going to be quite equipped to take this whole damn thing in. "Tony, you..." He paused, swallowed. "There's going to be a pup."

Tony winced, hunched in on himself, and fuck, it wasn't like the thought hadn't crossed his mind, but he'd dismissed it out of hand. He was forty-four, just about into his least fertile-while-still-somewhat-fertile years in the worst of cases. But apparently he was thirty-two, physically, and that made a hell
of a difference, put him almost two decades rather than maybe a handful of years ahead of his potential menopause. Thirty-three was how old his mother had been when she'd had him, damnit, and why the fuck did fate suddenly have a sense of humor? Somehow, Tony managed to dredge up another eye roll. "Of course there's going to be a pup," he said. "My luck doesn't ever fuck me over just once or twice, it's all on board with the 'bad stuff comes in threes' thing." Even as his voice staid steady, though, he could feel the turmoil tearing through him, the fear and panic and stomach-twisting-something he didn't know the name for, but which made him want to break down and cry because fuck, he'd never wanted kids in the first place and he'd never fucking wanted them like this. He had too damn much of Howard in him to ever make a good parent, was too volatile and distracted, too stuck on alcohol and super-heroing, too messed up to know his way about interpersonal relationships. How the hell was he supposed to ever be someone's dad?

"I'm sorry," Bruce said. "You do know there's no way to--"

Tony sucked in a deep breath, then spoke before Bruce got a chance to finish up, "There's a reason it's illegal for alpha bitches to have abortions. Bodies are hard-wired against it and all that. I don't exactly relish the idea of becoming a barely-functioning vegetable because my body decided to shut half its functions down to keep the pup alive." Tony swallowed painfully. "I'm not an idiot, Bruce. I know how alpha biology works. I know there's no going back."

"I'm so fucking sorry, Tones," Bruce said, and the sound of him swearing was never going to not be jarring.

"Me too," Tony said. He let out a sharp breath. "Me too." He forced something that might've been either a fake smile or a very real snarl. "At least they're going to have Pepper and Rhodey for godparents, and you for an uncle. You'll all make sure I don't figure out how to fuck up too badly."

Bruce flashed him the barest of smiles, and then his arms were wrapping around Tony, pulling him close until Tony was surrounded by safe omega scent and strong, wiry arms and the sensation of being held close by someone who gave a fuck about him for the first time in who the fuck knew how long. Tony couldn't have kept himself from melting even if he'd wanted to.

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03.30.15

Movie night had started within a week or two of Bucky moving into the Tower with Steve, Sam and Natasha. It wasn't really a set and scheduled thing as much as something that just seemed to happen every time they were all in on the common floor in the evening, ostensibly to catch Bucky - and Steve, who hadn't seen most of it either - up on modern culture. They took turns picking. Steve picked from his ever expanding List. Bucky usually left JARVIS to make the choice for him, trusting the AI to have a far better clue than he did. Sam picked comedies, interspersed with dramas and political thrillers featuring soldiers returning from war or somehow depicting or relating to the alpha rights movement, though that last had only cropped up after Bucky had spewed his own confusion all over the poor bastard. Clint usually went for action, as fast and flashy as possible, and had a fondness for anything - usually science fiction or fantasy - with archers in it. Banner had a thing for documentaries on all sorts of strange, obscure stuff, and more often than not they were actually strangely fascinating. Stark hadn't been to movie night often enough to have picked anything yet. Natasha, though, Natasha's nights were the ones they all dreaded. She liked foreign art house stuff with subtitles and imagery no one else understood, dark and cryptic. So tonight there was the usual air of dread as Natasha demonstrably asked JARVIS whose turn it was and let through a smirk when it was confirmed that she was up. She had JARVIS queue up a title no one seemed to recognize, and sat back in her armchair, content in the same way a cat with a mouse between its paws might be.
To everyone's surprise, the movie wasn't actually subtitled. It was British, and yeah, okay, it was immediately obvious that it was about as dark as she always went, but at least it was dark in a way that he got. And then, another few scenes in, he realized he got it too damn well. "What the hell is this?" And that was Clint, throwing a handful of popcorn at the screen.

"Dystopia depicting a theoretical modern-day alpha-run society," Banner said from his own chair, and his voice was tight with something Bucky couldn't quite identify.

Clint let out a loud groan. "I prefer my dystopias with hot archer versions of Jennifer Lawrence," he informed.

Off to the side, Bucky just barely noticed Stark grumble something under his breath, but it was too faint to pick out any of the words. And Stark looked sort of odd, naked without the pup somehow bundled up against him. Bucky figured Maria was probably asleep in the nursery with JARVIS keeping an eye on her, and he was still unaccountably proud of that nursery, but he would kind of have preferred if she were here. He couldn't quite explain the whole thing, just knew he felt easier when he could keep her within his line of vision. Well, at least Stark wasn't in any kind of heat, miniature or otherwise, which made him marginally less distracting and allowed Bucky to return his attention to the movie, not that it was exactly a masterpiece.

And slowly, the whole movie grew more and more uncomfortable, and, fuck all, the Brits really weren't as concerned about making stuff that couldn't possibly warrant less than an R rating as what Bucky was used to. And all Bucky could really do was sit there and stare, trying not to feel sick with fear and sympathy as everything began to come together in a terrible string of events. It was as the smaller dog, barely out of his teens, screamed and writhed as the change took him that Stark barked out a, "JARVIS, pause that shit." He was panting, and when Bucky looked at him, his eyes were wide, too-visible in the darkened room, his shoulders hunched, hands shaking, and fuck it, Natasha must be a fucking sadist to show this kind of shit to someone who'd been through what Stark had been through. The scent of distress coming off him was so thick Bucky was startled he hadn't noticed it before.

"The rule of movie night is that you watch the movie or you leave. You don't stop the movie for anything less an Avengers call." Natasha's voice was flat. She wasn't even posturing, wasn't challenging in any obvious way, but there was still a danger in her tone that Bucky couldn't place.

"Yeah, well," Stark said. "I didn't sign up for those rules, and they shouldn't apply to piece of shit movies anyway. This is-- this is nothing more than poorly-veiled anti-alpha propaganda, designed to underline the point that a beta-run society is necessary to save the poor, dumb alphas from themselves. It's prejudicial and demeaning and a complete misrepresentation of alpha nature, of going feral, of mating, of abso-fucking-lutely everything. So yeah, no, I'm not going to encourage anyone to sit through some piece of shit movie that'll just make Rogers thump his chest and keep thinking he's always right."

"This doesn't really have anything to do with Cap, though, does it?" And Natasha's voice was getting sharper now, and damn she was frightening. Not even in a good way right now. "Are you going to pretend that most ancient societies didn't accept and encourage an alpha who'd killed another alpha to take care of and eventually bond with any alpha children there might be?"

"If they were feral," Stark shouted. "If they were feral and accidentally killed another alpha, they were responsible for any pups left behind, but if there was an alpha among them then yes, they had first right to challenge. But it doesn't work like shit does in that shit movie. That asshole wasn't feral when he killed the parents, which means that even in an alpha-run society, he should've been locked the fuck away. And first right to challenge doesn't mean the other alpha is just going to roll over and
show his neck, it means a fucking fight which the challenger could very easily lose. It's a misrepresentation, and you know it.” His voice was shaking now, and he'd got out of his seat, hands fisted at his sides. Anger had mixed in with the distress from before, and Bucky was half certain he was going to try to attack Natasha. Honestly, the rage rolling off him in waves was so damn pure Bucky wasn't sure what the outcome of that fight would be.

"And if they're feral, everything's all right?" Natasha asked. "Is that what you're saying? Or are you saying that the kind of thing we just saw never happens in real life? Are you going to deny that rather than have him committed, you decided to house the man who killed your parents, your alpha mother included, who kidnapped you, raped you, bonded with you and knotted you up? Are you going to tell me that's fictional too?"

Stark froze, and sheer panic came over him, and he was on the edge of hyperventilating within ten seconds flat. The distress and panic was such a sharp, thick sense that Bucky wasn't even processing Natasha's words. It was all he could do to stop himself from getting out of the couch and either find some way to comfort Stark, or some way to deck Natasha in the fucking face.

"Come on, Nat," Clint said, and there was a forced humor to his voice, as if he wasn't at all aware of the sky-rocketing tension in the room. "Stark's a dog, and if he'd actually been bonded rather than just slapped with a paternity suit, we'd have met the bitch by now."

Natasha, apparently, wasn't done. She walked right up to Stark as if unaware of just how out of it he was. Then she pulled a handkerchief or something - and why the fuck was she even carrying that? - out of her pocket, wet it with a nearby bottle of water. She pulled down the collar of Stark's t-shirts and rubbed at the junction where his neck met his shoulder. Stark was rigid, but seemed utterly incapable of fighting her. "Lights, JARVIS," she said. "Override--" And she held up her phone, pressed a button, and Banner's voice came out of it, "Giant green rage monster for the win. Doctor Bruce Banner. Tony, honestly, couldn't you have come up--" She pressed another button and the recording ended.

"Override accepted," JARVIS said, even as he sounded hesitant. "Sir, I believe this is a security loophole we must look--"

"Mute." Stark's word was strangled, practically gasped out. His whole body was trembling. And then the lights came up, revealing the mark right where his bonding gland would present with heat or arousal. The scar was still red, and there was a tear at one side, as if he'd been fucking brutalized in the process. The sight made Bucky's stomach turn, threatening to expel everything he'd eaten in the past week.

"Stark," and that was Steve. "What the hell? Did you even register--"

Stark's mouth moved a few times as if he was trying to say something else, but all that came out was a stuttered breath with just a hint of a tone to it, as if everything else had been caught and cut off somewhere in his throat. Bucky's stomach turned again. And then Stark turned around and walked out on unsteady legs, arms wrapped around himself and shoulders nearly up to his ears. Bucky resisted the urge to follow him, some strange instinct telling him that right now that would be exactly the worst thing he could do.

Banner got up then, and he was shaking too, skin a faint green color, and there was more aggression to his scent than Bucky thought he'd ever experienced on an omega. "In front of the whole team, Natasha?" he asked, words barely more than a hiss. "In front of Barnes? I thought you were better than that."

"He needs to deal with this," Natasha defended, and her voice was less confrontational now, almost
imploring. "He needs not to be alone, needs to--"

"He is dealing," Banner fairly shouted. "In his own way, at his own pace. And he is not alone, he hasn't been. And he is trying to get through this with the least amount of collateral damage. That's something to fucking admire - fuck knows I couldn't do what he's doing - not something to attack him about. We may not get it, but we need to accept that he knows himself, and his own dynamic, better than we do." He shook his head. "I don't know how you plan to make this right, but you better start thinking up ways right this instant." And then he was storming out as well, presumably chasing Stark, which had to be a good thing. If anyone could help him right now, it would be someone safe and grounding, omega.

Bucky's head was starting to reel, the nausea turning his throat tight as his eyes kept flashing to the sight of that crooked scar, and there were images as well, faint and ghostly like the memory of a memory, of a strong, lean body laid out beneath him, writhing and trembling and snarling, of the sweetest scent he'd ever smelled, enveloping, wrecking him, of tight, slick heat and the impossible closeness of his knot expanding inside someone else's body, the taste of blood as he bit down, down, down. He turned around and fled as well, didn't even attempt to follow Stark but made his way to the gym instead, tried to force those images, phantom memories, sick fantasies, whatever they were, back down where they'd come from.

When Steve showed up, Bucky had wrecked a Cap-proofed heavy bag, and wrecked the knuckles of his flesh hand to match. The fact that his metal arm was still holding up was pretty much only a feat of modern engineering and Stark's genius. He was panting, sweaty, his clothes drenched, and the nausea was still rolling through him. He waited while Steve put up the reserve bag and made him put on wraps, though what good they'd do at this point, Bucky wasn't sure. He'd be all healed up tomorrow anyway. Which was more than could be said for Stark, and fuck, that was all it took to set him off again, and he was punching and punching, no finesse or combinations left, just the utter need to take out his horror and helplessness somewhere.

It might well have been hours later that he was finally too worn out to keep lifting his flesh arm. His whole body ached, and he was limp and weak with exhaustion. He dropped down on his back, threw a hand over his eyes, tried and failed to make sense of everything, tried and succeeded in keeping in the tears that were suddenly threatening to overwhelm him. "Natasha said she got suspicious," Steve said. "Stark's behavior was off, so she hacked Bruce's laptop, found all these notes, everything." He was silent for long moments, moving only to drop down next to Bucky, resting back on his elbows. "Did you do it?"

Bucky bit back some strangled sound he didn't know the name for. "I don't know," he managed at last. "I don't remember. The first long while after I got out from under Hydra is a blur. The first month or two is nothin' more than a hole. I can't remember a damn thing." It would make sense, though, would make a terrible sort of sense that made Bucky feel sick all over again.

"What they said about... alphas, and, and dead parents..." Steve trailed off, and Bucky thought this was the first time Steve had ever sounded uncertain about anything pertaining to alphas. It wasn't nearly as satisfying as it should've been.

"It's part o' the instinct," Bucky said. "A feral dog might kill other fully grown alphas if they get in his way, but he ain't gonna kill a pup. This meant a lot of orphaned pups back in the day, and with alphas always a minority..." He shrugged. "From what I read, it's a survival of the species kinda thing. You feel guilt and responsibility once you come back down after going feral. You're compelled to take care of alpha pups left behind, and once they reach a certain age, the sense of unblooded pack that comes from the protective instincts means the attraction is unbearable, which is loads more of a reason than laws or honor or any of that shit why the older alpha has first right of
challenge." He was silent for a long while. "At least that's what I read," he reiterated. He swallowed. "I did kill Howard," he said. "Or the Winter Soldier did. More importantly to this theory, I killed Maria Carbonell. Which I guess just means this all makes a painful amount of sense." Exhausted and fought out as he was, the emotions, the reactions, seemed further away, the panic and guilt and devastation distant enough for him to reason through it all. "And it does make sense," he added. "He's bonded, which means I shouldn't find his scent attractive unless I'm the one he's bonded to. I feel so attuned to him it's ridiculous. I ain't ever reacted to anyone that way before. And I've." He swallowed heavily. "Maria. I've loved that pup since the first moment I saw her." He sucked in a sharp breath, squeezed his eyes shut. "Fuck, Stevie. What've I done?"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for the kudos, subscriptions and bookmarks, and for the comments which still put a smile on my face every time.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I know a lot of you were upset by the Natasha scene in the last chapter. I promise it'll be followed up on at a later date, another chapter and all that. For now, I hope you enjoy the story as is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

29 days later

"If we change the alloy to a ratio of 4:1:1, we should be able to shave off a millimeter, bring the weight down a bit and take care of that damn weak spot by the upper left corner," Tony said.
"Render and pressure test, JAY." He was safely ensconced in his suit, sheltered in the depths of his workshop, watching the bots as they whirred around him, manipulating the holograms with deft fingers. This was as fine as he'd ever been. Really, it wasn't such a big change, was it?

"In progress, Sir," JARVIS responded. There was a short pause and then, "Sir, I feel compelled to remind you that by completing this design you'll be rendering the Starkpad that entered the market two months ago an antique."

"If it works, it'll have better processors, stronger code and compatibility, it'll weigh less, be more durable and more cost-effective," he said. "Just because Apple can't spew out new stuff this fast doesn't mean we can't."

"It will render the sale potential of the worldwide stock of the current model nil and make it a loss leader," JARVIS continued. "The number of recently acquired .5 models will also make this new design less sellable. I recommend sitting on this design for six months to a year before putting it into production."

Tony groaned. "You're talking sensible. Why are you talking sensible? I don't like it when you do that. Why did I make that a thing you can do?"

"I believe I would be rather useless if I were unable to, Sir," JARVIS replied.

Tony grimaced. "Yeah, you'd be kind of like Dummy then, wouldn't you?" DUM-E whirred at them, setting one camera-eye on Tony, its whole posture ridiculously puppyish. Tony sighed. "Sorry, Dummy. You'd be less useful. Still be a good robot, though." For long moments there was silence as Tony looked longingly at the new design. "Render and test anyway, JARV. We need to know that it works before sitting on it. Pull up the new Starkphone instead, would you?"

JARVIS paused for a moment. Then, "We are already two models ahead of the best Starkphone currently on the market. I believe it would be unwise not to wait and see in what direction technologies and trends will go before trying to stretch it any further."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut. God fucking damn it all. "Any requests from R&D at all?" he asked.

"Only for you to stop coming up with technology the company won't be able to implement for years, Sir," and shit, maybe coding in snark and sarcasm had been a mistake too, if in a slightly different
Okay," Tony said with another groan. "Okay," And shit, him being this far ahead of SI's developing projects happened just about never, since he always had about a dozen other things he needed to get done. Then again, he had locked himself inside the workshop and stuck himself in an engineering binge for the past three weeks without any Avengers related projects to work on. It had been a good distraction, but not really quite time-consuming enough, as he'd learned when he'd been unofficial head of R&D while writing and researching the dissertation for his three first doctorates, simultaneously. Damn, but he was good at not having a life whatsoever. As much as he wanted to, though, he couldn't keep just distracting himself. "Pull up all the S.H.I.E.L.D. files featuring any variation of Bucky Barnes, James Buchanan Barnes and Sergeant Barnes."

"Certainly, Sir," JARVIS said, and pulled any number of vague, nonsensical files and reports out of thin air. Far too much had been edited out for it to be quite trustworthy. Still, slimmer pickings than he'd hoped.

"We got nothing here past World War Two?" Tony asked after a few moments of skimming through the contents.

"Only footage from the recent battles in Washington DC, Sir," JARVIS responded.

Tony frowned. The Soldier had been involved in that? Tony had thought that had been all HYDRA. "Sure," he said. "Pull that up, get as much footage and information as you can, and play it."

It took JARVIS barely more than a few seconds to process and act on those commands, and then Tony was looking at several different angles of security camera footage detailing the highway Winter Soldier fight he'd only had time to contemplate in passing.

"So," Tony said, swallowing. "The Winter Soldier is..."

"Facial recognition software strongly suggests that the Winter Soldier and Sergeant Barnes are one and the same," JARVIS said.

Tony swallowed, unsettled, then forced himself to push past the discomfort. Wasn't even close to the most painful thing he'd ever had to do. "Pull up every file we can find on the Winter Soldier, then. And do we have any idea what he's up to these days?" he asked.

Files slowly began to crop up on the left hand monitor while the right one pulled up shaky, grainy video footage from somewhere Tony didn't even recognize. And there was the Soldier, semi-automatic in hand as he strode into an anonymous-looking building. "The Winter Soldier appears to be targeting HYDRA," JARVIS informed. "He's attacked and demolished several buildings and organizations in the past few weeks, and while I have no definitive proof as to the entity or organization behind his targets, HYDRA currently seems the likeliest." On the screen, the camera shifted, and there was the Soldier, walking up to a security guard and almost casually grabbing him in a chokehold, slitting his throat with a knife Tony couldn't figure out where he'd been keeping, and pushing the corpse down to the ground. That really shouldn't be hot, should it? Except it was, and Tony knew it was his hindbrain crowing at the strength and competence of his mate and the knowledge that Tony would be safer than he'd ever been with that backing him.

With some effort, Tony went back to the reports, felt horror and disgust rise gradually within him as he began to realize the scope of just what had been done to Barnes over the past sixty-nine years. Tony swallowed, suddenly so uncomfortable he didn't know what to do with it, and how the fuck was it possible for a person to go from half-attracted to frightened within moments anyway? "Shut it off, JARV," he heard himself say, voice choked. "Save the footage and information to my private
servers. Do whatever you can to delete anything else on the Winter Soldier." He wrapped his arms around himself, tried to quell the tremor in his limbs and the countless sense memories and the fucking nausea from this damn stomach cold he couldn't seem to shake. "Send the links to Rogers," he added. "The terrible threesome could probably use it, if Barnes is who they're going after. And knowing Rogers, I'm pretty sure that's what they're up to."

"Of course, Sir," JARVIS said, and that was that. Tony didn't have to deal with this, at least not right now. He glanced at the looming, flawed designs from R&D for a moment, considered more ways to strengthen the suit without losing the power to weight ratio.

"Keep an eye on him," Tony said at last. "Please." Tony wasn't sure where the compulsion was coming from, if it was sheer bitch instinct to want to always know what the dog was doing, if it was leftover fear from the whole incident or something else entirely.

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03.31.15

Bucky had just decided, at last, to give up on sleep altogether after tossing and turning for hours when there was a knock on the door. Slowly, his whole body still sore from his fight with the heavy bag, he pulled himself out of bed and padded across the floor, aware of the fact that he was kind of moving in the fashion of men his actual age. Slowly, he opened the door and peered outside. Sam was standing there, pretty much shuffling his feet. "Hey, man," he said. "I made hot chocolate, but I made way too much. You want a mug? I promise there's no one else in the kitchen, nothing to freak out about. Just, please?"

Despite himself, Bucky hears his own voice taking Sam up on the offer, and he shouldn't, he really shouldn't. Stark - Tony - could come down at any minute, and Bucky didn't want to inconvenience him, didn't want to make him feel scared in his own home. But. Bucky was going crazy on his own alone in his room. The promise of human contact, the chance that he might get to think of something other than whatever horrible stuff he might've done, called to him like a siren, even if this was very obviously a setup. He followed Sam into the kitchen, allowed a heavily spiked and utterly ineffective mug of hot chocolate to be pressed into his hands. He took a halfhearted sip, couldn't even manage a smile of thanks for the other man.

Sam was looking at him, gaze steady, seeming to take in his every movement, his every expression, and Bucky didn't like the idea that someone was drawing a picture of him that he wasn't allowed to see.

"What?" he snapped, flashing Sam a sharp stare, shifting so the outline of the knife at his hip would be visible. And yeah, sure, he'd stopped carrying weapons everywhere when he'd first moved into the Tower, but then Tony and Maria had moved in and making sure he could protect them at a second's notice had become vital. Which, yeah, should really have told him something sometime ago.

It was another long moment before Sam said anything. Then, "Are you all right? I mean, tonight has to have been pretty damn intense for you."

Bucky shrugged, wrapping his hands more tightly around the mug. "Am I really who you should be asking that question?" he asked.

Sam looked back at him silently for long moments, then shrugged. "Far as I can tell, Stark's had nearly a year to get over this. You've had, what, nine hours at the very most. I know who I'd sign on for the emergency here."
"Still," Bucky managed, taking a quick sip of his hot chocolate. "I'm not the one who got hurt. I'm not the one who..." He swallowed, suddenly spitless. "I wasn't raped. I wasn't turned. I didn't have to carry a pup whether I wanted to or not."

Sam was silent for long moments, dark eyes simply watching him. Then, "You're still shaking like a fucking leaf, though."

Bucky took another sip of the hot chocolate, then pushed the mug away, turning halfway around so he wasn't forced to look Sam in the face whenever he looked up. "I don't know why I did what I did," he said at last. "I know it sounds stupid, but... I don't want to just apologize. I want to be able to explain it, not excuse it, but explain, and I don't have the first idea how."

"Didn't Natasha do a pretty good job for you there?" Sam asked. He put his own mug down. "I realize she was inappropriate and way out of line, and none of us would've stood for it if we hadn't felt that she only had Stark's best interests in mind. But didn't her points hold up? The Winter Soldier did kill Ma--"

Bucky shook his head, putting as much authority into that single movement as he could. "Right to first challenge is a pack thing," he said. "Sure, I know about it. Even my hindbrain's telling me it's a thing, but the thing is that it's linked to pack bonds. The Right is there not so much because one alpha killed an alpha parent as because the pup is pack, and should stay pack. I never even met Tony before this. He wasn't pack."

Sam gave him a slow shrug. "Maybe not," he said. "But maybe yes. Stark doesn't look like a Carbonell. He looks like a Stark. He looks like his dad, anyone would testify to that. And here's the thing, you weren't only ever the Winter Soldier. You were something more than a killer, before. So maybe it's nothing to do with Tony's mother. Maybe it's all about Howard, all about you being lost in the brave new world and seeing a poster advertising the new edition of the Starkpad or what the hell ever. Maybe you recognized something about Tony up there on the poster. I mean, Howard was periphery, but he was still a member of the Howling Commandos, right?" Sam didn't stop to wait for an answer. "So maybe you saw Tony and recognized him as someone who should be pack, and that set you off. Or maybe it was all about money and genius and territory and giving your pups the best chance in life. Who the fuck knows? How is that the most important thing, though?"

Bucky forced a small shrug. "Maybe not," he said. "But maybe yes. Stark doesn't look like a Carbonell. He looks like a Stark. He looks like his dad, anyone would testify to that. And here's the thing, you weren't only ever the Winter Soldier. You were something more than a killer, before. So maybe it's nothing to do with Tony's mother. Maybe it's all about Howard, all about you being lost in the brave new world and seeing a poster advertising the new edition of the Starkpad or what the hell ever. Maybe you recognized something about Tony up there on the poster. I mean, Howard was periphery, but he was still a member of the Howling Commandos, right?" Sam didn't stop to wait for an answer. "So maybe you saw Tony and recognized him as someone who should be pack, and that set you off. Or maybe it was all about money and genius and territory and giving your pups the best chance in life. Who the fuck knows? How is that the most important thing, though?"

Bucky forced a small shrug. He wasn't at all sure why the hell it was so important, he just knew there were some things he had to be able to answer, even if only to himself. Maybe it was the threat of it all starting over the moment Tony entered a true heat. It had been difficult enough to control himself through a miniature one. What was going to happen if Tony had a full heat and Bucky lost control? How was he going to explain that, on top of everything else? And it was more than that, even. It was about Maria, it was about the fact that if he ever had a relationship with her, if she ever asked why he'd chosen to create her, he wanted to be able to say something other than 'your pa went feral'. "It hurts to look at him," he said at last. "Has ever since the first moment after he came back here."

"Hurts how?" Sam asked.

"Hurts like..." Bucky swallowed. "It's painful to look at him. He's so fuckin' beautiful, and he just. He calls to me like nothin' ever did. And I know, knew from the get-go, that I wasn't allowed to reach out, wasn't allowed to touch. I didn't figure it would this much of a problem."

"What do you want, then?" Sam asked.

Bucky rubbed his metal hand roughly over his face. "I don't know. I don't fuckin' know. I don't know how I'm supposed to know. How am I-- I thought HYDRA packed a hell of a punch, and then I'm back to normal only to find out I raped someone enough times to turn him bitch and knot him up,
and suddenly I've got a perfect pup and a mate who always, always keeps a workbench between us, or more, if he can find it, and." He stopped, swallowed. "How the hell am I supposed to make this up to him? I'm already so damn fucked up it ain't even funny, so how am I supposed to take care of a mate and a pup on top of all that?"

Sam gave a small shrug. "Hey, dude," he said when Bucky flashed him a glare. "It's not like I got all the answers. Better listener than talker anyway. Just, Stark..." He stopped a moment, adam's apple bobbing beneath the dark skin of his throat. "Maybe worry less about taking care of him and more about reaching him. He can take care of himself. He's been through enough, I think. Don't initiate anything you can't follow up. And if you do initiate something, make sure you're never going to let go." He paused a moment, then, "For what it's worth, I don't think he blames you. And if it matters at all, I don't either. I've been in the military. I've seen dogs go feral before. And I like to think I know you by now. Enough to know there's no way you would've done any of this if you'd been in your right mind."

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71 days after

"Pepper," Tony said, and he was feeling so fucking uncertain now. His fingers were drumming out an unsteady beat against the center of his chest, exactly where the arc reactor had once been. "Would you please say something?"

Pepper just stared back at him, eyes wide in a face that looked even paler than normal. One slender hand covered her mouth, fingers trembling. The other one was wrapped around her own middle, and fuck, Tony had never seen her like this before. That realization was like someone pulling the rug out from under him, making the world go sideways as panic lurked around the edges of his mind, threatening to bear down. "Oh God, Tony," she managed, voice cracking, and then there were tears in her eyes. Another burst of panic tore at the last remnants of composure Tony was still clinging to.

"No," he heard himself say. "No. Pep, Pepper, don't cry, don't--" And his own voice was cracking now, his throat tight and his eyes beginning to sting. "I could never fucking handle it when you cry and you're, fuck, you're going to make me-- I'm trying to keep it together here, Pep, please. Don't--" And why the hell was he saying all this aloud? It sounded bad enough in the privacy of his own mind. Out here where everyone could hear it? He could feel himself start to shake as cold crept down his spine, as the phantom sensation of too-strong hands pressed him down, pulled his head to the side and bared his throat, took him at his most vulnerable and made him even more so. His stomach turned, and he got up abruptly, began to walk towards the bar, changed his mind at the last second. Couldn't drink, shouldn't drink, alpha bitch wiring made him damn near allergic to the stuff out of consideration for the pup he was going to be feeling all too clearly far too soon and fuck. He came to a slow stop somewhere in the middle of the room, confused about where to go, what it was he'd meant to do.

A pair of strong, wiry arms wrapped around him all of a sudden, and the scent of pack and family and safe wrapped around him, comforting even with notes of rage and sadness coloring it. Tony leaned into it, pressing his face into Rhodey's shoulder as he shook apart. There were barely any tears, and his sobs were soundless - he hadn't been very old when he'd learned that trick - but he was still trembling so hard he couldn't have possibly held himself together. Rhodey did it for him, held him close and steady, face pressed into Tony's hair. And then Pepper was there as well, pressing against him from behind, arms wrapping around his waist and her lips pressed to his nape.

Tony wasn't sure how long they just stood there, all three of them wrapped around each other. The hair on the back of Tony's head was damp from Pepper's tears, but her hands where steady where
they held him. Rhodey was gripping him just a bit too tightly, exactly right, scent still laced through with aggression and vengeance, but the love and protectiveness hovering there as well were so much stronger Tony could easily dismiss the sharper parts of his scent, at least for right now. He felt closer to all right than he had since this whole thing began, felt like if he could just keep them with him, keep them on his side, he might have a chance of getting through this, maybe it wouldn't all be so impossible after all. Slowly, he felt himself begin to calm, felt the shaking subside into faint tremors, felt his breath come in more evenly. He was still lax against them, relying on their strength to keep him upright, but the breakdown was over at the very fucking least and Jesus, he never wanted to do that shit again.

"Give me a name," Rhodey said, without backing away so much as an inch. "Give me a name, Tones, and I swear to God--"

Tony shook his head, kept his face hidden in the crook of Rhodey's neck. He wasn't sure he could talk without his voice cracking again, wasn't sure he'd even make a whole lot of sense if he tried to, but he trusted Rhodey to back off when Tony so clearly wanted him to.

A few minutes later, "Tony," Pepper said, voice soft. "You don't have to do this alone. You can--We can tell the press we're back together, hide your pregnancy and tell everyone we adopted. I can even put on one of those costume maternity suits if you want me to, pretend I'm the one who's pregnant. We can pass the baby off as both of ours. No one will ever have to know, about anything, and you'll never. You'll never have to deal with that sick freak again."

For a moment, Tony wanted to just nod and go along with it, wanted so badly for someone else to take the reins, to make this not have happened, to help him pretend it hadn't. But he couldn't. Couldn't do that to Pepper, who'd had valid reasons for leaving him. Couldn't do that to himself, attempt to spend the rest of his life in a fake relationship, couldn't bring himself to attempt a real one when he knew the Soldier would always have a hold on him, that he would always be his number one. He couldn't do it to Barnes, who was already going to have to deal with more shit than he'd ever deserved. The very least Tony owed him was a chance to keep the door open for him to one day openly be a father to his own pup, if he ever decided he wanted that, and passing the pup off as someone else's wrecked that in one fell swoop. "Love you, Pep," he managed, breath hitching but voice keeping almost steady, even if it were a bit too breathy. "Can't do it."

"God, Tony," she said, and there was another sob audible in her voice. He could feel fresh tears in his hair. "I can't believe this happened to you. I can't-- You've been through so much already. This isn't fair. This is-- Why does it always have to be you? Why do you always have to get hurt?"

Tony clamped down on whatever sound it was that was trying to rip its way out of his throat, squeezed his eyes shut. It was long moments before he could say anything at all, let alone anything coherent. "Life sucks sometimes," he finally managed, and well, that was at least partly coherent so there was that. "I guess you just." He ground his teeth hard because fuck, did he not want to break down all over again. "Jesus, I wish I could drink a glass of scotch right now."

"You know," Rhodey said, and his voice was mild and gentle enough that the evident humor in there didn't immediately set Tony off. "I always figured you'd end up with a handful of kids, all of them accidental. This isn't exactly how I thought it'd go."

Tony felt Pepper tense behind him, and it was a moment before he was able to work through his own mess of emotions enough to dredge up a response. When he was, he laughed. He dug his face more firmly into Rhodey's shoulder and laughed and laughed and laughed until he was crying again, clutching at them both, his whole body aching with the laughter and the sobs and all the damn directions he'd been pulled at since dinner had ended and he'd sat the two of them down to tell them
what was going on, and he was exhausted and broken and such a fucking mess, but they were still holding onto him, refusing to let him go. "I want you to be the godparents," he managed what might very well have been hours later, after his knees had long-since given in and they were a damn puppy pile on the floor, all three of them entwined in ways he wouldn't have ever dared be with anyone he hadn't known as long or as closely as these two. He was bracketed in by their love and the sense of pack and their beta steadiness, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this safe outside the armor.

"Of course," Pepper whispered, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

"Only if you name him James," Rhodey said, and Tony fought down the urge to stiffen or flinch at the words. Fuck, the last thing anyone needed was a pup named James Junior running around.

"Not going to happen," he said, and once again he was surprised by how steady he managed to keep his own voice. "It's going to be a girl," he added, though that wasn't something he knew for sure yet, rather just something his hindbrain kept insisting. "You can help me beat up her dates behind her back in fifteen years if that helps."

"Deal," Rhodey said, arms tightening around Tony's waist for a moment, and the realization was simple and yet so incredible it blew Tony's mind. They didn't despise him for this, didn't respect him less, didn't think less of him. They were going to be there for him and the pup, were really going to be there to help him not fuck this up the way all three of them knew he could so easily do, too much of Howard and not enough of Maria in him. Somehow, against all odds, things were going to be all right. Not today, not tomorrow or probably anytime this year, but eventually, eventually things would be okay.

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04.06.15

Bucky was sparring with Steve when Thor arrived, which was probably the only reason he let himself be coaxed up onto the landing pad. Once he was within smelling distance of the newcomer, he stopped short, senses so confused they were reeling. Thor's gait and authority reflected a more powerful alpha dog than Bucky had ever met. His puppyish demeanor was very much young beta, and his scent was everything and nothing, all the dynamics wrapped up together to become something that was none of them, all of it lazed in ozone, utterly alien. Bucky had stepped away from Steve and placed himself firmly in front of Stark and the pup held in a sling against his chest before he'd even had a conscious thought about it, hand inching towards the knife he kept concealed at his hip. Tony gave an audible huff behind him, then stepped around him, smelling like acrid fear and sharp annoyance. "Hey, big guy," he called. "How was Asgard?"

Bucky gritted his teeth and made himself stay exactly where he was. Whatever Bucky's instincts were saying, Stark clearly didn't think this fella was dangerous, and whatever had happened between them in the past, or maybe because of it, combined with their week-long mutual avoidance of one another, Bucky was fairly certain he had no right to keep protecting Stark from something he clearly didn't want protection from.

Thor walked forwards, all swishing cape and wide grin, and scooped Tony up in a hug, which thankfully didn't seem tight enough to put Maria in danger of being crushed. It did still make Bucky bristle. "Asgard is well," Thor said. "As am I. I am happy to be back amongst you, my friends." He looked up, quickly surveyed the group. "I see you've had more shield brothers join our merry band. I look forward to fighting by their sides."

"It's good to see you too, Thor," Steve was saying, and how was he not even reacting to the fact that
Thor's speech patterns would've been long outdated when their grandparents were children? Thor grasped his arm in what looked like some kind of overly formal warriors' handshake, and fuck, Bucky had stepped right out of the sci-fi zines and straight into the Goddamn Hobbit.

Thor, other than the handshake, didn't seem to pay Steve much attention, kept his eyes on Stark for most of the duration, and if Bucky'd had fur, it'd be standing right on end about now. "That is a beautiful child, Anthony," he said. "May I enquire as to the health of her lady mother?"

Tony gave a small cough, followed quickly by a shrug. "Well, not like anyone here doesn't already know," he said with a roll of his eyes. "Technically, I guess I'm her mother. And I'll thank you to never call me a lady again."

Thor frowned, blinked for a moment. Then his gaze cleared up. "You must be a great sorcerer, to have accomplished such a feat. Not unlike my brother. Loki can change sex at will, and has borne several healthy offspring."

Banner gave a discreet cough that sounded more than anything like a choked back laugh. At Bucky's confused look, he sidled slightly closer. "Look up Norse Mythology someday," he muttered, lips barely moving. "Also, Thor has a girlfriend. You can stop growling." Bucky blinked, realizing suddenly that this was probably the first time Banner had spoken to him, at least to say anything nice. That was... Omegas were almost always unquestioningly loyal towards the alpha bitch of their pack, and Banner seemed more dedicated than most. Maybe, maybe, that meant something.

Tony pulled a face. "Fuck no, no I always look like this." He paused a moment, glanced down briefly at his chest and grimaced. "Well, mostly." And despite himself, Bucky couldn't help but imagine what Tony would've looked like in the days just after the birth, before he'd taken whatever he must've taken to staunch the flow of milk. He wasn't a large man, not an ounce of excess fat on his body, and male bitches never grew that large anyway, but there was still something viscerally appealing about the thought of Tony Stark with his chest swollen with milk, something that called to Bucky's instincts despite the fact that he would've sworn, not that long ago, that he wouldn't find a man with anything even resembling breasts to be attractive. Fuck, his head was messing with him today. What-- He blinked, and then he realized. There was nothing left of the taint of artificial hormones to Tony's smell. Maybe the fact that the whole team already knew had made the whole difference. Bucky didn't know. What he did know was that the lack of that constant, buzzing annoyance was hitting him much harder than it should've. "--VIS, compile another document on human pack dynamics for Thor, would you?" So, apparently Tony had still been talking. Well, shit.

"Certainly, Sir," JARVIS was saying. "I'll put it through to the monitor in his apartment, shall I?"

"Thanks, buddy," Tony replied.

Thor seemed to take this in stride, like a man who was used to being met with a lot of things he didn't understand, but too confident to think less of himself for it. Bucky wished he had a tenth of that confidence. "Thank you, Anthony," Thor said. "I shall make sure to study it in depth." He tilted his head slightly to the side. "Afterwards, may I inquire who the father is? I should like to share with him a celebratory toast. This seems an extraordinarily strong child, and he should be commemorated for his prowess."

The awkwardness that followed was only broken by Clint's gagging noises for what felt like half an eternity. Then Tony shocked the living hell out of Bucky, and probably everyone else present, by pointing over his shoulder at Bucky. "Thor, meet James Barnes. Barnes, Thor. That's my baby daddy."

Bucky couldn't quite bite down the sudden surge of pride that went through him, and then, a moment later, Tony was gone, probably back to his workshop, and Bucky had a heavy arm
wrapped around his shoulders, the biceps probably even thicker than Steve's, the smell of ozone heavy in his nose while an alien prince was prattling in his ear and Bucky was just too damn confused to keep up with any of it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks and, especially reviews. I cannot remember the last time I had this amount of reviews and it's making me so fucking giddy it's ridiculous. The Natasha concerns and the aftermath of that scene will be looked at again later.

Due to a recent comment, I feel obliged to inform everyone that I can take criticism. I appreciate it, actually, so long as there's anything marginally constructive about it. If there's nothing helpful to be found, I'll be a bitch in return, and if you make a second attempt of the same kind, again with nothing constructive there, I'll delete your comment out of hand. I'm sorry, but repeated insults teach me nothing.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I haven't said this before, and given the general warning and what's already gone down, I kind of think this goes without saying, but since apparently some people have been a bit disturbed, **trigger warning**. Proceed at your own discretion and know that if the subject matter is touchy for you, you probably shouldn't be reading this in the first place.

On a happier, if also annoying, note, I have seen the name of Thor's hammer spelled in so many different ways it's making me dizzy. Now, I am lucky enough to be Scandinavian. I grew up with Norse mythology, and while I don't know Old Norse, or Icelandic (which is the closest modern language to old Norse), although I can read both in a pinch (including the runic alphabet. I'm not bragging, I'm just that huge a nerd)... Er, that sentence got off track. Sorry about that. What I'm trying to say is that every Norse word (excluding Thor and Loki, since Tor and Loke might be disturbing to some people) I am going to use, I'm going to spell the way I was first introduced to it, which is Danish. Not completely accurate, but far more accurate than the butchered trying-to-be-English versions I've seen out there. This goes for everywhere, in all my stories, although for now the only sign of it is that Thor's hammer's name is Mjölner.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*The day*

Tony wasn't sure when he'd fallen asleep, but waking up was as abrupt as the metal hand that pulled the plug out of his ass, and with the rounds of fucking as close together as they were by now, it was a wonder he'd managed to sleep at all. For the first time, the removal of the plug didn't chafe or hurt at all, and Tony heard himself let out of bleary moan, his ass clenching down on nothing, abruptly, disconcerting empty. He didn't get so much as a moment to adjust, didn't - thank fuck - get a chance to voice the pathetic, beret groan building in his throat, because a moment later the Soldier was fucking into him all over again, and it felt good, so damn good, wetter than it had yet, and Tony went from asleep to painfully hard within seconds, dizzy with it. He was hot, he realized, too damn hot, sweat pooling everywhere, and he was panting, his heart trying to force its staccato way out past the scars where the arc reactor once sat. The Soldier released a muffled moan, the first sound Tony remembered hearing out of him in all their days together, and then he upped the pace, going deeper, harder, damn near frantic, and Tony was helpless to do anything but arch back into it.

He breathed in, and his own smell struck him like a sucker punch. It had darkened, sweetened, grown damn near unrecognizable. With surprise like a slap in the face, he realized the fucking was only getting wetter, and fuck, was that-- He swallowed, pleasure and horror living alongside one another, momentarily incapable of fighting each other. Ecstasy roared through him even as he became dimly aware of the fact that this wasn't lube, this was his own slick, the slick that he shouldn't be producing in the first place, and it was oiling the way for the Soldier, and every single slide of his dick through it felt like utter paradise. And fuck, fuck, it wasn't supposed to happen so fast. Yes, it had been intense, the rounds of fucking far closer together than anything any sane doctor would've recommended even for couples who'd picked one of them to turn and decided to go about it the natural way. Yes, he'd felt the changes that had already taken place. But he still should've had more time, his body should've had stronger defenses, and fuck. Fuckfuckfuck what was happening?
He came, bending and arching and yowling, and the Soldier thrust once, twice more and followed him, pulling out abruptly and pinching Tony's entrance shut. Tony's body seemed to swallow it up like a damn sponge, and then the pleasure fled his body for long moments, giving way to the agony tearing through him.

Back at MIT there'd been an illicit VHS tape making the rounds among the betas. Tony'd heard enough whispers about it that his utterly hormonal, too curious for his own good self had found it impossible to ignore. So he'd snuck into one of the viewings, when everyone else had been too high or drunk to notice or care. The video had been grainy and the stripes of overuse had been visible on almost every frame, but the subject matter had still been clearly visible. There were two bitches, a male and a female, and the woman was riding the man's face, arching and moaning. Bits of his come was still dripping out of her, and Tony had known enough, even then, to know that a male bitch's come was as potent to other bitches as a dog's come to another dog, nearly as potent as the hormonal glands at the very back of the insides of a bitch's cheeks. The woman screamed when the turning started - or ended, depending on your viewpoint. It had sounded more like ecstasy than agony, though, as the sheath that sat where the clit would be on a beta or omega split apart and her chick dick sprouted, long and slender where it was visible for just a moment before she thrust into her partner's mouth. He writhed beneath her, tugging at the bonds that tied him to the bed's headboard, and then she shuddered and came before moving down his body in quick, sinuous movements, thrusting inside and knotting even as she bit down on his bonding gland, sealing the change for good and tying the two of them together. Tony hadn't had any doubts that it was consensual, that the couple had planned this, had wanted this, and had just decided to make an extra few bucks by sharing it with the world. Still, the sight of it had shaken him to the core, had made him take pains to avoid any other alpha, even bitches, for days afterwards.

It wasn't pleasure that made him scream as his own bitch glands sprouted to life inside his cheeks, as his hips cracked and shifted again, moving slightly further apart. Fire tore through his abdomen for a moment before falling back, and there was a horrible, sickening wrench as his intestine shifted, his anal passage closing and something else opening up. And then the roaring fire was back, burning through his whole body, leaving him panting and moaning and damn near sobbing for an endless moment as his body ached for something he didn't have a name for. And then the Soldier, still inexplicably hard, thrust into him again, and Tony let out a sob. He wasn't certain whether it was relief or pleasure or utter terror, but it still wrenched through him like a whiplash. And he was hard again, how the hell was that even possible, he was forty-three fucking years old - or was it forty-four now, he wasn't sure, how long had he been here? - he was usually lucky to get it up twice in a night, let alone this close together, and fuck.

It was even more overwhelming now. He could feel the deepest thrusts striking at some point just below his fucking cervix - his cervix, how was that even a thing? - that made him see double and whine with it, and they were both wet and sticky, from his sweat and the other fluids his body had suddenly decided to expel. The ratty sheet beneath him was wet with his come, and the Soldier kept thrusting into him relentlessly, and then he was sitting back on his haunches, pulling Tony against his chest, and Tony's bonding glands were as swollen as everything else about him, throbbing and aching. The Soldier bit down even as he thrust up hard, and Tony was screaming. Agony and ecstasy mingled until he couldn't tell them apart, turning into a cocktail he couldn't resist, burning through him like liquid fire. And then the Soldier was swelling within him, his knot bulging up like it only could when responding to a bitch in heat, and Tony's body opened for him without his volition. The Soldier's teeth dug in further, pulling even as Tony involuntarily wrenched his head to the side. The tear pulled another scream out of his throat as he felt his muscles relaxing, expanding, then clamping down hard on the bulge of inflamed tissue. He was still arching, back bowed so hard he thought it might break, when a metal finger reached down, tracing first his expanded, straining rim. Then he pressed against his perineum, even as the Soldier somehow managed to inch his knot in that bit...
deeper, and then his prostate was being assaulted from the inside and the outside all at once, and Tony gasped, and choked, and came again, letting out another sob.

His vision was blurred and his throat was tight, and he could feel the Soldier spilling inside him again and again and a-fucking-gain. Dogs had a lot of come. He knew this in theory, but even the best kind of artificial hormones only went so far, and he'd never experienced it like this, from either end. Spurt after spurt filled him up, and every time he shifted involuntarily around the knot, an even harder spurt would answer him. He looked down with blurry eyes, and his stomach was beginning to expand, looking obscene against the rest of him, and he groaned, wasn't sure he could handle anything else. The Soldier, at long damn last, slumped against him, pulling them down onto the mattress until they were spooned together. He licked languidly at the wound on Tony's neck, sealing his own saliva inside, sealing the bond, sealing them both in the sex they were currently in, forcing them to stay compatible, and another sob wrenched out of Tony's mouth because that was it, that seal was it. He was never getting out of this, never going to get to put this behind him, and worse yet, Barnes might one day wake up to find himself a prisoner of this as well.

The Soldier's hand moved up from between Tony's legs to rub gently at his distended stomach, and then he was nuzzling against his nape, stroking his soft, over-sensitized dick in slow, languid strokes. Tony's breath came in gasps, and a wave of heat welled through him, calling another coat of sweat to his skin. He clenched down involuntarily, felt another sloppy load of semen join what was already sealed inside him. The Soldier stroked his flank, calming him with soft shushing noises, and how the hell was he so communicative all of a sudden?

It was more habit, by now, than anything else when Tony started up the mantra, voice slow and strained and hoarse almost beyond even his own recognition. "Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. Your friends call you Bucky. You fought..." His mind shut off completely at some point or other, even as his mouth kept going. Still, when the Soldier's knot went down, he gave Tony about two minutes - or maybe it was Tony who initiated it this time - before he pushed inside again, one smooth move through Tony's slick that got him in to the hilt and got Tony moaning like a cheap fucking gutter whore.

Tony came again, dry this time, but somehow that only seemed to make it the more intense, his body shuddering, his dick jumping and softening for a moment before pumping right back to hard without ever expelling a drop of liquid. When the Soldier knotted him again, that finger returned to his perineum, pressing down, and Tony shuddered through another sensational overload, nothing left to give as he was knotted and held there, leaking just tiny amounts of semen, eased on its way by his own slick, and the room was a blur around him, and he was drenched in sweat, shaking with it, and if the Soldier stopped he was pretty sure he might just fucking die from it. The heat was a tangible presence by now, real and towering above him, and the easiest damn thing to do was to give into it, give into oblivion and let it have him, let it carry him through, let him survive this with his sanity intact, and so that's what he did. He shut his eyes, gave himself over, and the last thing he remembered was a sobbing whine as the knot went down again.

***

04.07.15

Bucky woke up slowly, for the first time since he could remember. HYDRA, or maybe years in the army, had taught him to go from asleep to battle ready between one breath and the next. Today, though, he was coming to blearily, slightly dizzy even though he was lying down, slightly more at peace with himself and the whole world than he remembered ever being. He gave a slow blink, tried to figure out where he was without moving, too comfortable to move, and damn, this was nice. Couch in the common floor lounge, he concluded a moment later, letting his eyes droop back shut as
a yawn made his jaw crack. Bit by bit, disjointed pieces of last night came back. There was... Thor?
And some drink that tasted like spiced honey and burnt going down, and loud exclamations, and
tales of Asgardian grandeur. And quite possibly a couple of arm wrestling matches. He wasn't hung
over, in spite of all that. If anything, he was still drunk, and how the fuck was that even a thing? He
hadn't been able to get drunk in more than seventy years, even when he'd wanted to, even in those
first awful days after Steve brought him and the others back from the HYDRA base. Well, whatever
Thor had given him, it had been nice. And as much as he had a feeling he should be disconcerted
about his current lack of control, it was pretty damn nice, nice enough to keep lying here in
yesterday's clothes and just enjoy the soft buzz of it.

Some time later, he came back to the sense that someone was watching him. "Well," someone was
saying, and a beat later he recognized Tony's voice. "Good to know that Thor's mom's homebrew
works on super soldiers as well. Rogers would never let us test it on him." Bucky blinked blearily,
looked up to find Tony watching him from far closer than he'd ever otherwise let Bucky get to him.
Shock, more than anything, made Bucky sit up straight, and then Tony was jumping back, stumbling
and just barely catching himself with a loud, "Shit! Ow!"

Bucky was up before he had time to think, reaching for Tony, wanting to steady him, make sure he
was all right. Tony retreated as though shot out of a cannon, putting the coffee table between them.
The faintest tinge of acrid fear colored the air between them for just a moment before Tony got it
back under control. Bucky swallowed, hands flexing once before he dropped them to his sides. "Are
you." He coughed, grimaced slightly, still a bit more lightheaded than he'd have liked, but thankfully
without any of the headaches he'd got from drinking before HYDRA gave him his first few shots of
the serum. "Are you okay?"

Tony held up his hands, one clutching a tiny espresso cup and the other a larger mug that smelled
like plain black coffee probably about the consistency of sludge. Both were empty. "Fine, fine," he
said. "Just stubbed my toe. Told Thor not to just leave Mjølner lying about where anyone can step on
it. Not like the rest of us mere mortals can move it around when it gets in the way, is it?" He let his
hands drop with a shrug, and then moved back towards the kitchen, not ever quite turning his back
completely, and always keeping at least one piece of furniture between them, and Bucky hated that,
hated the distance and the fear, the fact that someone he felt so safe with obviously felt none of the
same around him. He came back into view a moment later, hands empty and fiddling with his
sleeves. His hair stood on end, and stubble shadowed the spaces around his beard he normally kept
bare. He was barefooted, wearing just a pair of sweatpants and a wife beater, and a stab of want shot
through Bucky's gut before he had a chance to suppress it. "He got you good, didn't he?" Tony
shitfaced and you don't even get hung over the next day. Best kind of magic there is. Well, only
good kind of magic there is. Only kind I'd allow in my tower, anyway. Which, you know... er." He
coughed, shifted on his feet, and for a moment he looked impossible young, in all the ways he
wasn't. Bucky knew, intellectually, that there was very little Tony Stark hadn't seen or done or
experienced, that even his looks were deceiving when it came to age - though that was probably
down to Bucky himself. None of that negated the sudden stab of protectiveness he couldn't help but
feel, though. He wondered whether those feelings would've come of their own, or if it was the bond.
Not that it mattered, at this point. The bond was the bond, it was there to stay and he could only deal
with the feelings he felt, not with other, hypothetical, ones. "I talk a lot," Tony said at last. "Just so
you know."

Bucky knew. With a sudden, startling connection he realized that his first thoughts when he began to
come back to himself, those grounding, saving words had existed in his head in Tony's voice. 'Your
name is James Buchanan Barnes. Your friends call you Bucky. You fought in Europe with Captain
America. Steve Rogers is looking for you. He loves you and wants to bring you home. You can be
free. You can be safe. Your name is James Buchanan Barnes...' Tony, in some roundabout way, far
more than Steve, had been the one to bring him home, and fuck but Bucky had made him pay for it. Guilt shot through him, pulling him right out of the pleasant buzz of morning-after-intoxication. And suddenly, it didn't matter that he had no explanations to offer, no answers, might never have. He just needed to at least do this one tiny bit to ease things between them, whatever good it might do. "I'm sorry," he said, voice still raspy with sleep, and maybe other things too.

Tony shrugged, adam's apple bobbing on a swallow. "You were feral. Nothing you could've done about it." The smile twisting his face was very obviously fake. "And I don't blame you." He gestured himself. "Who wouldn't have--" He cut himself off, grimacing, pulled his hands up to wrap his arms around himself. He pulled in a shuddering breath. "One day I'm going to be able to joke about this shit, you know. I can joke about everything. It's one of Rogers's top five least favorite things about me." A pause, then, "Seriously, I don't. Blame you. You'd had your head screwed with for sixty-nine years, went feral on top of it. You had absolutely no control, and that's just. Things turn out like this sometimes."

Something inside Bucky clenched, because it shouldn't all be dismissed like this. Despite going feral and HYDRA and everything else that had happened, he'd still hurt Tony, in so many different ways. He wasn't sure he would ever forgive himself, and receiving not a bit of blame in return almost made it worse. "I still. Tony, fuck. Not even just that. It's... I been messing with your life pretty much since the start, ain't I? I-- I may not remember, but we both know who--" He had to stop, suck in a sharp breath. "I killed your parents, and then I. Like Natasha said. I kidnapped you, raped you, turned you, knotted you up and bonded with you against your will. It's. I've ruined your life probably more times than HYDRA's ruined mine. How many of the worst things that have happened to you were down to me?"

"I don't remember you kidnapping me in Afghanistan," Tony muttered, but that was redirection, and Tony was so damn good at that, and Bucky was tempted to answer, tempted to let the conversation be steered away from this painful, messy wound that lay between them, but that wouldn't help anything. So he simply shot Tony an unimpressed look, let him know he wasn't going to follow him down that road. Tony's mask dropped for a moment, turning into a look Bucky didn't even recognize but which still made every single protective instinct he'd ever possessed rear up for action. Then the mask was back, slightly different. Tony's body language was different too, more open but also more resigned. Slowly, he made his way closer, dropping down in one of the armchairs across from Bucky. He still kept the sturdy coffee table between them even though they both knew that if Bucky had been going to attack, that wouldn't have stopped him. He reached out, snatched the clay bottle off the table, swiped off the cork and took a long sip. "Not having this conversation without a bit of alcohol in me," he said, and took another long mouthful.

Bucky simply waited, not pressing, until at long last, Tony leaned back in the chair a bit, flashing him a hard look. "First of all," he said. "My parents weren't your fault. There was... Back in my weapons manufacturing days, there were a few popular sayings I was pretty fond of spewing all over the place. One was 'I make at least as much love as I make war', which." He coughed. "Neither here nor there." He frowned. "Down, soldier boy."

Bucky blinked, realized he'd somehow started growling without even noticing, and promptly made himself stop even if the thought of Tony with someone else, anyone else, was unfairly difficult to face. "Sorry."

Tony rolled his eyes although Bucky could still smell the unease on him. "Anyway, more importantly, I was very fond of the various gunslingers' associations' whole 'guns don't kill people; people kill people' shtick. Still am, to be honest. The weapon, however precise or intelligent or deadly, isn't responsible for where it's pointed at. And I've read your files. I know how deep they had their hooks in you. You were a weapon, nothing more. HYDRA killed my parents, HYDRA pulled
the trigger. You weren't any more responsible than any other bullet." As if sensing his skepticism, Tony sighed and took another drag of the bottle. "Take this from someone with way more red on his ledger than you, and out of ignorance rather than helplessness. I don't hold you responsible for my parents. And again, having read the files... What HYDRA did to you would've twisted even a beta or an omega. In an alpha dog, combined with keeping you constantly on the verge of feral for that damn long... Anyone would've snapped. You could've hurt me so much worse than you did. You could've brutalized me utterly. You could've kept me tied up in that shitty apartment for years. You didn't. You were as close to gentle as anyone in that situation could've been, and you let me go the moment you began to come down. That says more about you than everything else that happened."

His hand was shaking on the bottle as he took another swallow. "Don't get me wrong. Try to fuck me over now that you've got your head on, and I'll mess you up. But that, all of that? It's in the past, it's behind us, and you. Were. Not. Responsible." He grimaced. "Fuck, I'm going to break out in hives here. I don't do conversations like this. Why are you making me do this?"

At any other time, that might've made him smile, and he half suspected that was Tony's whole goal with the little song and dance, but this, all of it, was just too damn serious. "Still," he said, keeping his voice calm. He was grateful to Tony for giving him an out, he was, but he couldn't just let it go so easy. It wasn't as simple as that, as being absolved because of his state of mind. His state of mind didn't change whether horrible things had happened or not.

"Still nothing," Tony said, and this time his voice was a snap. Maybe the whining hadn't been so much an attempt at humor as a genuine warning. Fuck, Bucky didn't even know. Tony didn't like to make things easy, did he? "I don't hold you responsible. You don't owe me anything. You don't... I'm not going to pretend there's no fallout, but you're as free as you can be, given everything, okay? I can take care of myself. I can take care of Maria. I can give you a place to be safe, because you need that, you deserve that. I don't need anything in return. Sure as hell don't need your guilt. I need you to put this behind you and start fucking moving forward. That's it. That's all. So just. Stop, with the guilt. It's not making anything better. It doesn't change anything, and even if it did, you haven't done anything to warrant it."

Bucky blinked, trying to take in all that and not entirely sure he was succeeding. In the end, he latched onto the only two important things in the spew of words. "If you ever do need or want me for anything, though, I'm here. I promise. And." He paused, bit his lip, suddenly uncertain, because he couldn't help but feel like he'd already overstepped a dozen times this morning and that he was about to do it again. He couldn't not, though. "Maria. It's not. She wouldn't be a burden, you know?" He drew in a shuddering breath. "I ain't even seen her up close, but she's gorgeous. And I--"

Tony looked at him for long moments, considering. A conflict of emotions Bucky couldn't even hope to follow played out behind his dark, expressive eyes. "Of course she's gorgeous," he said, halfheartedly cocky. "Have you seen the two of us?" It fell utterly flat, and Tony seemed to realize this before he was even done speaking. He sighed, reached up to run a hand through his hair, messing up the loose curls further. "She is," he said at last. "She's gorgeous and sweet and calm and so intelligent already. And I swear she damn near broke my finger the other day when she gripped it. Super soldier serum 1, Tony Stark 0. Anyway, she. I can handle her. You don't have to. You." He stopped, swallowed, practically inhaled another mouthful of mead. "You don't have to be more involved than you want to be."

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Bucky bit down on his lips again, tasting blood, and fuck all, he could practically taste the conflicting emotions in the air. The bond seemed to kick in to amplify it, strained from how estranged they were, how little they had nurtured it, but still strong enough to give him a glimpse at the faintest shadows of what Tony was feeling. Protectiveness, possessiveness, unwillingness to share his daughter mingled with the foreign hope that maybe he wouldn't have to go it alone, be the be-all-end-all for a tiny human he still didn't feel entirely equipped to care for. Bucky's breath hitched as the bond shut down
again, leaving him cold and empty where Tony's emotions should always be a presence in the periphery of his mind. He doubted Tony felt it as keenly. The bond always latched more strongly to the dog, because the provider and protector - never mind that in reality he was neither - should be tune with what he provided for and protected. Still, he'd had that glimpse, and despite the hesitation and fear he'd felt, he'd also felt more, and that was the key here. Tony's hope gave him some kind of hope of his own in turn. For what, ultimately, he wasn't certain, but for now, for now it was for the daughter he still hadn't so much as held, and fuck, his arms ached at that thought. "And if I want to be involved?"

Tony looked at him for long, silent moments, seeming to consider it. He took one last drink before putting the bottle down on the table and shoving in the cork. "I've got some less than child friendly work I've got to get done down in the lab," he said. "You watch her. Bruce and JARVIS are around if you need help." With that, he got up and walked towards the elevator, and Bucky sensed prodding at it any further would be too much right now. It was all still so fragile right now, and if Bucky was anything other than confident, Tony was likely to recant in half a breath. Still, there was one thing he seemed utterly incapable, still, of leaving alone. "There's a sandwich in the fridge," he called out. "If you gonna work, please at least eat."

"Yes, Mommy," Tony replied, but he did pick up his sandwich before walking into the elevator.

Bucky had maybe ten minutes to contemplate that whole exchange, everything that had - and hadn't - been said, everything Tony had given him to think about. And Maria, Maria. He would finally get to hold Maria, touch her, smell her from up close. Get to-- change her diaper, as it turned out, when JARVIS called him upstairs ten minutes later. Even that, what with the sudden adrenalin rush, wasn't so bad, and after he made JARVIS run a few instructional videos, he even managed to clean her up and get her in a fresh one, and then he was holding her close, marveling at her tiny button nose and dark, wispy hair, the faint cleft in her chin and her chubby cheeks and impossibly dark eyes. And he was gone, was a complete goner. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her, nothing, so long as he got to keep her close like this, nestled against his chest while she babbled at him and reached for his nose and hair and shiny metal arm. For the first time since he could remember, he felt utterly at peace.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone for reading, bookmarking, leaving kudos, subscribing and especially for commenting. I treasure every comment, especially the ones that make me think. I have to add, at this junction, though, that while I have nothing against criticism - appreciate the potential learning experience, actually - crit with no constructive elements is less than helpful and will be replied to accordingly. You don’t like the story, tell me why in a thoughtful, intelligent way, and I'll do my best to respond in a thoughtful, intelligent manner, whether or not I believe we will ever see eye to eye. If all you do is basically say I suck without telling me why you think that way, I reserve the right to be rude in return.

Er, yeah, sorry if that got a bit longwinded. I guess you can only get so many comments before the negative ones begin to crop up? Either way, I appreciate all the feedback. You lot have left so many smiles on my face, and I look forward to checking my inbox every morning. Thank you so much.
The thing was, Tony discovered when Barnes showed up with a plate of steaming hot food, Barnes was pretty much the perfect alpha dog. He was capable of being quiet, polite and kind, and Thor knew those weren't qualities Tony had ever possessed even when he'd been a dog himself. Too much a mix of alpha dog domineering and beta male posturing even on his best of days, even after Afghanistan and his attempts at being better. It all came back to that in some way or other, didn't it? His beta father and alpha mother staging a constant battle somewhere deep inside him, and fuck, at least Maria wouldn't ever have to deal with that. However she'd come to be, she was the alpha pup of alpha parents, and Tony would do anything in his power to make sure she never had to do the splits and divided loyalties he'd had to. If only he could figure out how to let Barnes in on the whole thing, how to create a situation that wouldn't hurt any of the three of them. No. He shut the thought away. He had time yet, still had space to figure this out. He wasn't about to pollute that for anything.

Tony kept a workbench between them, shoulders hunching up whenever Barnes got too close, and fuck, he shouldn't be reacting like this, should be better than this. While no non-consensual turning was ever all right, even his own, he was supposed to be dealing with it better than this. Even that thought wasn't enough to stop the not-at-all-instinctive, deeply emotional panic that began to tear at him whenever Barnes came too close without a barrier between them. The closeness was enough to make Tony want to whine and growl all at once, and fuck, what was wrong with him? He was a bitch now, and yeah, okay, his hindbrain had definitely got the idea, crowed and danced happy dances when Barnes gave him a first, then a second portion of fucking old-fashioned shepherd's pie, the second one spiced far more closely to Tony's tastes. He was a bitch and he should love the idea of a dog bringing him food, providing, protecting, even if he had financed it himself. And he did, especially from Barnes who was his fucking mate, however much shit that had cost them both. But part of him stayed frightened, insisted on trembling whenever Barnes got close, on twisting his stomach and chest into knots, on holding Maria closer than would've probably been wise if she hadn't been fucking supercharged and capable of crushing his fingers if he let her.

He heard himself, as if from far away, babbling about ollada and what other kinds of food he liked, falling back on the typical bitch response when all else failed. And he knew, on some deep, base level, that this was the alpha equivalent of flirting, of fucking courting, and they should simultaneously be way past this stage and nowhere near it, and Tony didn't know what the fuck to do with it. All he knew how to do was eat his food, because his dog, his mate, had given it to him and because he was hungry, dammit, couldn't quite recall the last time he'd eaten - he was so behind on work after all those damn weeks in Catalunya, and who could expect him to keep up with time of day and meal hours when he already had so many other numbers running through his head anyway? Barnes looked ridiculously pleased when Tony accepted his offering, and Tony felt warmth and
terror curdle alongside one another inside him. His instincts told him he'd acted exactly right. His more human weaknesses told him he'd brought himself that much closer to yet another disaster.

He ate the second serving, damn near licked the plate - it was good, fuck all, especially with the added pepper and garlic and extra lick of salt. And the smile forming on his face against his own will was once again all bitch, all flirty, all desperately attempting to reel the dog back in. And fuck, he didn't know how to deal with these instincts, this side of the coin. He's been a dog his whole life, self-sufficient and independent, and how was this his life now? Again, pleasure curled alongside fear in his gut, and he didn't know what the fuck to do about it, only knew he was simultaneously pleased and disappointed when Barnes left the 'shop for the last time that night, the unspoken promise to return tomorrow hanging between them, an unspoken threat and temptation. Tony banged his head against his workbench, carefully shielding Maria's precious, not-that-fragile skull from impact. "Fuck," he groaned. "Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck." "Would you like me to contact Doctor Banner, Sir?" JARVIS asked.

Tony sucked in a deep breath. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, sure."

Bruce was there what seemed like mere seconds later, undoing the straps of the baby harness and cradling Maria's tiny form against himself. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"He's bringing me food," Tony said, and he didn't even try to rein in the whine in his voice.

"Course he is," Bruce said. "His head thinks you're an unbonded bitch. His hindbrain knows exactly what's what. Be glad he isn't bringing you decapitated doom bots or any shit like that. Some dogs would."

"It was good food," Tony said.

Bruce sighed and reached out with the hand that wasn't holding Maria to clasp his shoulder. "By modern conventions, that makes you lucky," he said. He took a moment, then deflated. "Listen, I know this is fucking difficult. And I'm not ever going to deny that there's a very big, very green part of me that would like to see him six feet under or at least castrated and in prison, but I know that's not what you want." He paused again, shifted Maria in his arms and took a moment to coo at her when she looked up at him with eyes that were shockingly aware, and Tony suddenly had the thought that maybe they shouldn't be having this conversation in front of her. He reached out, took her from Bruce and carried her across the lab to her tiny basket where he put her down and covered her with the soft blue blanket Jarvis had once given him. He kissed her forehead and made it back to Bruce ten seconds later.

"This would all be a hell of a lot easier if the kid wasn't such a fucking sweetheart," Tony said. "He was all self-conscious and nice and so fucking eager to please I'll probably be eating home cooked meals three times a day for the foreseeable future."

"Not a bad thing, by the way," Bruce said with a roll of his eyes. "I've been trying to make that happen for closing on three years. More seriously, though." He sighed. "Tony, the first thing you need to do is stop thinking of him as a kid. He was born in nineteen seventeen, he's about the same age you are now, physically, and he's seen and done shit as bad as any of the rest of us, even before HYDRA got their hands on him. He's no more a kid than you or I. Even as Bucky Barnes, he was a sniper and a spy. Are you going to call Clint a kid next? Cap?"

Tony sighed. "No," he said. "It's just... Fuck. I don't even..."

"You're creating distance from the situation by casting him in a role he doesn't fit," Bruce said. "And
you're keeping him stuck there by not letting him see the whole picture. Do you want to spend the next eighteen years raising that pup alone? Because Tones, you don't have to." Bruce paused, swallowed. "You were right about him. He's a good man. He'd make a good father. He'd help you out when you need it. But you need to let him."

Tony groaned. "Last thing he needs right now," he said. "He's already falling over his own ass trying to take care of me. What would happen if we put Maria in that equation?"

"He may actually be more balanced than he is now if he had enough information," Bruce said. Then, "What are you going to do if you go into heat tomorrow--"

"I won't," Tony said. "Too soon after the birth, even with the lactation suppressants. I've got a while yet."

"That's not my point, and you know it," Bruce said. "What happens if you go into heat tomorrow? I can tell you already that toys and hormones aren't going to cut it and that suppressants are out. What will you do? Hire a pro and let Barnes go nuts without realizing why he's reacting as strongly as he is? Go nuts yourself if you don't get enough hormones into your system?"

Tony let out a long groan, because he knew what Bruce was getting at. He knew what the healthiest way of dealing was here. He knew what any sane bitch with a mate would do. "I'm not bringing him into it," he said.

"So what are you going to do?" Bruce asked. "This pack, if you can call it that, is already too messed up. Bring the alphas out of balance on top of all that..."

"What balance?" Tony asked, and he was shouting, he realized, didn't know how the fuck to stop it though. "We were never in balance."

"You are, though, however messed up it is, you're in balance right now," Bruce insisted. "Introducing another alpha, however temporarily, into that system, that's a recipe for disaster. Hulk level disaster."

Tony groaned, ran a hand over his face, and fuck, could they all just quit expecting him to have the answer about now? He didn't, he never had, never would, and he didn't know how the fuck to live up to their expectations. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Ideally?" Bruce said. "Either you get rid of Barnes, report his ass and get him out of here. And like I said, I'm beginning to agree with you that that might not be the right choice. Second choice is to let him take his place. Utilize him. You tell him what happened, you let him help you raise Maria so you can get some fucking sleep. And if you go into heat tomorrow, you call him down, push him into whatever shape works for you, and you make him knot you and finish it for you."

"Contraceptives aren't likely to work on him," Tony said. Then he rolled his eyes. "Wait, we already had this conversation."

"You and I are both only children," Bruce said. "Tell me it's a walk in the park."

Tony huffed. "You want me to-- Again?" But even as he said it, he could feel his eyes sneaking towards the basket and its precious contents. It was true. Growing up, he'd wished time and time again for a brother or sister, but, well. He supposed his father hadn't had the drive, given his age, and his mother probably hadn't had the desire. Either way, it had ended with him alone, as most situations did. As much as the idea of being pregnant again bothered him, so did the thought of Maria as an only child. So did the idea of having more than one damn dog showering him with homemade food,
as delicious as it was. "Fuck," he said.

Bruce gave a small shrug.

"Fuck," Tony said again. Then he shook his head. "Still want contraceptives," he said, but even that was weak. "Not going through that shit again if I don't have to."

"I'll let you keep your excuses," Bruce said, "No worries," and Tony really should deck him a good one.

"And if he doesn't know, I want you to keep him as far away as humanly possible," Tony said because, fuck, whatever else this conversation had forced him to uncover, even if only to himself and Bruce, he still wasn't sure he could handle Barnes ever knowing. "And you don't tell him," he added. "You don't tell a soul."

The green retreated momentarily from where it had been spreading across Bruce's face. "I'd never," he promised. Then he reached out, wrapped his arms around Tony, and Tony, content in the knowledge that no one would ever see, allowed himself to collapse into it.

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04.13.15

Bucky shifted his grip on the pup, and fuck, the feeling of holding her was still fucking intoxicating. It was impossible to describe, he had no reference for it, no real words for it, even in the confines of his own mind. She was impossibly soft, impossibly fragile, and he still couldn't believe that something so unbelievably perfect came out of this whole mess, that him going feral, messing everything up, wrecking another person's life, still somehow resulted in this. He didn't want to say it was worth it, because the guilt still ate at him whenever he took a moment to think about what he'd done to Tony, but... in some ways, it was. He hated the way it had happened, but now that he'd held her, now that he knew her, he wasn't sure there was anything he wouldn't have done to ensure Maria's existence, even if that did make him more of a monster than he already knew he was. He wrenched his thoughts away from that path, knew nothing good lay down that way, concentrated on the television instead. The program playing was all bright colors and cheery voices, less funny than the cartoons he remembered from movie theatres in the thirties and forties, but interesting all the same, if only for all the unknown technology and psychology even he could recognize had gone into it.

JARVIS had reassured him it was educational, and while he wasn't sure Maria was the intended age group audience, she did seem interested enough, making grabby hands at the screen, giggling and squealing and babbling. She wasn't like any baby Bucky had ever known, and he'd been old enough when the original Rebecca had been born to have some clue. According to the how-to-parent articles he'd been binge reading for the past few days, her eyes shouldn't have been able to properly focus on anything as distant as the television yet, but she had no trouble doing that, just as she'd had no trouble damn near denting his metal finger when he'd let her get hold of it. And when he remembered Rebecca's response to the surrounding world at this age and compared it to Maria, his sister, as much as he loved her, didn't hold up a candle. Maria was aware and attentive and present in a way no baby in his experience had ever been before. Bucky had no idea how much she comprehended when the program began to teach the basic numbers, but she was still rapt as she watched, chewing her gums on a strand of his hair.

Thing was, while Bucky was impossibly proud of Maria, felt, half the time, like his entire life revolved around her existence, he also had a mess of other feelings about the whole situation. He was beyond grateful for the fact that Tony had chosen to trust him with her, that he'd gotten to watch
her for three afternoons now while Tony worked away in the lab. And he loved her to death. It was just, something in him balked at the knowledge that Maria was the perfect example of the theory that alphas chose the best possible partner in the whole damn world while feral, the best possible partner for the strongest possible offspring. And the thing was, Maria was exactly that. She had been born with the serum saturating her cells, impossibly healthy, impossibly strong, and already she showed signs of having Tony's intelligence on top of all that. She was... She probably had the potential of being even closer to the peak of human perfection than Steve himself, because while Steve had the physical and moral sides down, and was nowhere near stupid, he didn't have the extreme level of intelligence that ran in the Stark line. Bucky... wasn't sure what to do with that, with what Maria's existence said or proved or disproved. Wasn't sure what it said that there was a good chance that his feral self had chosen Tony for this exact potential. Which was stupid, even he could recognize that. That was how it worked, how going feral worked, how alpha instincts worked in general. The strength of the next generation was always paramount.

It was just... He'd liked to think it was something more, that something more than breeding potential had pulled him towards Tony, even in that state. He'd wanted... Fuck, this was cliché, was some silly beta's stupidly romantic interpretation of what the alpha dynamic meant, how it worked. It was just, he'd really fucking wanted there to have been some other reason, something deeper, more visceral, that had pulled him towards Tony, something that would explain the tug and hitch in his chest whenever he saw him, whenever he heard his voice, something to justify the way he loved Maria not just for herself, for who she was - though he loved her to death for all that already - but how he also loved her for who had borne her. None of it was anything he could truly make sense of, truly explain, even to himself. He just. He wished it had happened differently. He wanted this exact pup with these exact strengths - and fuck did she have strengths - he just wanted it all to have gone down differently.

He sucked in a deep breath, made himself calm down and focus back on the children's cartoon, reminded himself all over again that all he had to deal with was reality, and he had to accept that, deal with it and live in it. At least he'd gotten Maria, impossibly strong, impossibly smart, impossibly tiny and vulnerable and dependent and beautiful Maria, out of the deal. The cartoon shifted to something to do with colors and Bucky raised Maria's tiny index finger to help her point as each one came up. "Red," he said as she gurgled along. "Blue. Yellow." He wasn't sure how much she understood, but he was pretty damn sure it was more than she was supposed to, and even as it made him feel ashamed, he couldn't help the flush of pride at her intelligence, even as he knew he had nothing to do with that, aside from trapping and forcing the most intelligent fellow alpha he could find.

He wasn't too out of it to smell beta when it walked into the room and he glanced over his shoulder for a moment, registered Steve and tensed up in a way he never would've before. In his arms, Maria let out a growl, picking up on his emotions the way only an alpha pup more attuned than her age suggested could've possibly picked up on the reactions of a father she barely knew. "Hey, Steve," he greeted, uneasy all of a sudden. He hadn't spoken much with Steve in the past couple of weeks, had only really exchanged a few words since Natasha had dropped her bomb. He, himself, hadn't known how to be around Steve either. He was an alpha with an alpha mate and an alpha pup and the things he'd stood still and taken once upon a distant time... He couldn't do that anymore, not when he wasn't the only one, not when he knew the world had changed while he'd blinked in and out of sleep. He didn't want to lose Steve, God, the thought alone made his breath come short with panic, but he had other priorities now, and if Steve had asked him choose... Oh fucking God, he wished to hell Steve didn't make him choose.

"Buck..." Steve flopped down on the couch next to him, and he looked so confused and so young and Bucky had no idea what to do. Once upon a time, he was pretty sure that look would've made
him fold Steve into a hug and hold him there until he stopped looking like that, but these days they weren't quite like that, and even if they had been, Bucky's arms were occupied by a wriggling handful of pup who was pointing at the television and clapping her chubby hands. It was long moments before Steve said anything else. Then, "She's really yours?"

"She's really mine," Bucky said. "I may not remember much, but even if I didn't already know... I can't believe it took Natasha before I managed to smell it on her. Or make the connection, anyway. I think I'd probably kind of smelled it already."

Steve nodded, ignoring the less coherent part of his words. "Can I see her?" he said after a beat.

Bucky wet his lips, uncertain. A strange, bone-deep protectiveness welled up inside him, and he shouldn't want to protect her from Steve of all people. Steve, who was his oldest friend, who was his brother in all the ways that mattered. Slowly, he made himself relax, muscle by muscle. Then he handed over the sinuous bundle of infant. "Careful on her head," he cautioned.

"I have held a baby before," Steve said as he cradled her in his big hands and looked at her curiously. "God, she even looks like you."


Steve stiffened momentarily before calming back down. "She is darker skinned than you ever were," he said, and that seemed about as much of a concession as Bucky was likely to get out of him right this second. He bounced her a few times before carefully bundling her up against his chest. "I can't believe you've got a kid," he said at last. "I mean, I can't even... A year ago, I was hunting you all over the world, trying to bring you home only to find wrecked HYDRA base after wrecked HYDRA base, like you didn't realize I would want to help. And now you're here and you're you, and somehow you have a kid, and I don't even..."

"Not exactly something I suspected either," Bucky said with a small shrug. His arms felt empty, but then they'd felt that way whenever he wasn't holding his pup ever since he'd first touched her, before that even. "I just... I still don't remember all of it. I remember coming to and somehow knowing that HYDRA had done something unforgiveable, something I had to set right. You were a blur and Tony... I didn't remember a bit about going feral. I still only get... images, maybe. I'm not sure how much of it is even real. But I did know HYDRA was real and I needed to take them out, so whatever base I could find that I knew I could take down on my own, I did. And then, when only the strongholds were left, that's when I let you take me. I didn't even know why. Still not sure I do." He paused a moment. "Still don't got a clue what made me go off the deep end like that, but..." He swallowed. "I'm here now. She's here. I'm not going to make that harder than it has to be."

Steve gave a slow nod. "I'm not going to pretend I get it," he said. "But she's... I get why she means so much to you. She's so... soft."

Bucky bit back a laugh for a moment, and then he was biting his lip, uncertain. "I'm not going to pretend I get it," he said at last. "Not that Tony would stand for that anyway, child of the revolution and all that. I'm going to help him raise her to be proud of herself, to utilize what and who she is, turn it into a weapon for her if need be. I don't want her to ever be ashamed of who she is." He swallowed. "I'm not going to make that harder than it has to be."

Steve was still for a moment. Then he nodded, adam's apple bobbing on a swallow. "It's not the thirties anymore," he acknowledged, and, distantly, Bucky felt the victory of those words. "You're my brother and I love you, I'd love anything of yours, especially your kid. You don't raise her to be proud of herself, and I'd deck you in the eye."
Bucky flashed him a heavy half-smile. "You need to talk to Tony," he said. "If this whole Tower is going to work, you have to. This is his territory. You can't just keep trying to keep him out of the chain of command, especially if you're going to be part of Maria's life. I just... Please, Steve."

Steve was silent for long moments. Then, "I'll try, Buck. Just, give me a bit of time, please?" Several long beats, and then, "What the hell happened?" he asked. "If what Natasha said..."

"I don't remember," Bucky said. "But I'm damn sure Natasha told the truth, about what happened. What I..." He trailed off, swallowed painfully. "Did. I can't tell you what happened. I wish I could, but I don't remember. I don't. God help me, I wish I did. I wish I could explain it all, to myself, to Tony, to you, but I just... I doubt I could've found better genes for Maria, and maybe that's all it is, and maybe it's the territory, and maybe it was Howard, or Maria, the old Maria. I just. I don't know. I'm beginning to think I'm not ever gonna."

Steve gave a slow nod, then, unaccountably accepting. "It doesn't matter how it happened," he said. "She's your kid. She's my niece." He gave her his finger and winced when she pressed down hard. "And I love her, even if she is going to end up taking us both down sparring in about ten years."

"Strength and genius," Bucky said, grinning, even as so many different feelings he couldn't even keep count kept churning underneath his skin, making him feel unbalanced and off. He turned to Steve and opened his arms imploringly. "Back to Pa, baby girl," he said softly. And back she came with the support of Steve's hands, immediately molding herself against his chest as she returned her focus to the television.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone for kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions and especially the comments. They never fail to make my day.

End Notes

This story leans on the A/B/O trope, but like most of this type of fic, it doesn't follow all the general guidelines. Put very simply, this borrows a bit extra from real-life wolves, in that alphas mate with alphas, betas are constantly battling for status and omegas, while they have an important nurturing role in families/packs and the care of pups, quite often don't have partners or pups themselves.

The fic owes a heavy debt to Addiction by Jaune_Chat, who inspired the gender-transformation elements.

Maria Stark, when her ethnic/cultural background is mentioned at all, is often described as Italian, and while I do like that trope, a quick bit of research told me that Carbonell is such an uncommon surname in Italian as to be nearly non-existent, while the highest occurrence of the name is in Spain, specifically the region of Catalunya, so in this story I followed those statistics and made Maria Catalan.
If there are any questions, suggestions or corrections, please let me know. Thanks so much for reading.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!