Finding privacy is impossible, because they live in a compound filled with children and Avengers and one particularly nosy AI with exquisite timing for the exact wrong moment to interrupt. If it's not the kids, it's HYDRA. If it's not HYDRA, it's FRIDAY. If it's not FRIDAY, it's every goddamn Avenger, one after the other, deciding that now is the perfect time to start repairing their relationships and rebuilding team morale.

Tony'd just like to get laid in peace, please. Maybe he should just hang a fucking tie on the doorknob.
I have decided not to hold onto this fic until it's finished, primarily because I have 3300 words ready now and y'all have really just... blown me away with how well-received Swear Jar was.

Seriously, thank you all. I was a wreck over the progression, even though I've been planning it since "Done". That you all seem to have enjoyed it so much really just...

Just thank you. Love and hearts to all of you.

Also, I started college this week and until I know what my class schedule vs. workload vs. homework vs. project deadlines are like, I'd rather have a chapterized fic in an episodic series that I can update more frequently, instead of one very very long fic I post weeks or months down the road. We'll see how this works, and how my course load settles out.

In the meantime, please enjoy, and please leave comments. While I never withhold updates due to a lack of comments, this first chapter should prove that, if nothing else, they really do motivate the fuck out of me to keep writing.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Tony wakes up warm and content, well-rested and relaxed, and it takes him a long, long moment to remember why. He might not have remembered at all, had half his warmth not suddenly vanish with the dip of the mattress and the chill of the room suddenly shivering along his bare back.

He cracks an eye as someone pads quietly away and looks over his shoulder to see Clint silhouetted against the nightlight-lit bathroom for a moment before the door closes and a bar of light blooms under the bottom of the door. He blinks, because his mind is still caught in sleep, his memory sluggish in returning the events of the previous night.

“Oh,” he says softly.

The warmth against his front stirs, soft and smooth, and Laura lifts her head from under his chin, squinting up at him in clear non-comprehension. And then her face just… glows with contentment, lighting up soft and happy. She makes a contented noise and burrows back down into her pillow, curling into his chest and sliding an arm around his ribs to spread her fingers against his shoulder blades. “G’morning,” she mumbles into his throat.

He has to swallow down the lump in his throat, because it's been forever since anyone's been that happy to see his face first thing on waking. “Hi,” he whispers back. His breath catches again, he shivers again, this time because she shifts her head to kiss under his jaw, soft and sweet, and his arms tighten involuntarily around her. “Laura…”

“Can I do this?” she murmurs, and his eyes slip closed as her hand ghosts up his spine to thread in his hair. “I'll stop if you're not comfortable.”

He squeezes his eyes closed, because as feather-light as she's being, it's waking a whole ball of things he's been suppressing and crushing down for over a year. “No,” he manages to get out. “No, this is...good.”

He fees her lips curve into a smile as she kisses his throat. “Okay,” she breathes. “Say no whenever you want.”

The toilet flushes and water runs, and he tenses, casts a nervous glance over his shoulder at the still-closed door. And then shudders when Laura noses down his collarbone and licks the hollow of his throat.

“Relax,” she says softly, amused. “He'll be out in a minute.”

With a mind of their own, his hands start wandering over her bare shoulders and neck. “He's not going to mind?”

“He might grump that we started without him,” she says, shifting her legs to twine with his, and his breath stutters as her thigh gently nudges his apart, coming to rest just below the bottom hem of his boxers. “But no. He's not going to mind.”

That's… a revelation. Tentatively, he tugs at the thick elastic keeping her hair back and pulls her ponytail loose, letting the silky strands fall over and through his fingers. She purrs and tilts her head back into his hand, eyes closed and smiling. “I always thought…” He trails off, licks his lips, frowns in concentration, because it’s decidedly difficult to form thoughts with Laura shifting her hips against him like she is. “I always thought he had a thing for girls.”
Laura laughs, soft and light. “Oh, Tony,” she says fondly, petting through his hair. “Clint has a thing for people. I don’t think gender really comes into it. But he, and I, are very picky about who we invite into our lives. Even pickier about who shares our bed.” She gently pulls his head down and lays a kiss on him, a serious sort of kiss, that steals his breath and his ability to think. Before he can convince himself it’s a terrible idea, or out of bounds, he pulls her tight and opens his mouth and kisses back until they’re both breathless and dazed.

A hand touches his arm, warm and broad and callused, and the bed dips behind him as Clint slides back under the covers. And his first instinct is to jerk away from Laura, guilt striking like lightning through him. The hand instantly disappears from his arm, and Clint shifts his weight away from Tony’s back. “Sorry,” he says softly. “Shouldn’t have assumed. Carry on, you two. I’m more than happy to watch. Unless you’d rather be alone, in which case, I’m more than happy to use my imagination in the shower.”

“Idiots,” Laura mutters,

Tony shakes his head slightly, can’t help but smile, because he can all but picture the waggling eyebrows over his shoulder. “I wasn’t expecting it,” he says, turns halfway onto his back to face Clint properly. Part of him is still waiting for the other shoe to drop, for one or the other to turn mean and vicious and spiteful, or for it all to be a long-played joke with a punchline as hard as a sledgehammer, but he finds the lump is back in his throat again, the hitch back in his breath, practically nose-to-nose with Clint, who’s on his side with his head propped on his arm, watching Tony steadily.

“I don’t know how this works,” he says, unexpectedly and truthfully, blinks at little at his own honest confession. “I don’t know what you expect from me here.”

Clint’s eyes shift over his shoulder, and Laura presses into his side, letting her chin fall to his chest. Clint looks back and shrugs. “It’s really more about what you’re expecting, Tony. You set the limits here.”

It’s not like he’s inexperienced with threesomes, but this is a whole new level of complicated he’s never thought he’d be approaching, let alone stepping onto. “I don’t even know what my options are.”

Clint’s eyes go to Laura again, and his expression doesn’t change, though an eyebrow goes up. “If you want,” Laura says softly, “this can be a one-time thing. Or it can be an occasional thing. Or you can just sleep here, without anything else.”

Tony swallows hard, starts to feel the familiar sensation of the world yawning away from him. “Okay,” he says.

“Or,” Clint says, cutting him off. He brushes his hand up Tony’s arm and drags his fingertips along Tony’s collarbone. “You can have everything you don’t think we’re actually offering you here.”

“Which is?” They’re the hardest words he’s ever forced out of his mouth, because he’s desperate to know, and he never wants to know. Because it can’t be what he wants. It’s never what he wants.

“You stay here,” Laura says, moving to her elbows to lean in and nibble at his earlobe. “And you let us take care of you. For as long as you want us to. So you just tell us what you want, Tony, and you can have it.”

He needs to go before he’s in any deeper. But even as he has that thought, he knows it’s already way too late for that. He’d walk barefoot into hell for either of them, would die for their children. His
kids. Their kids. He closes his eyes, squeezes them shut, grits his teeth. It’s on the tip of his tongue to accept everything, tell them yes to everything, but the words stick and refuse to come out.

Because it can’t be that easy, to just say yes. It’s never this easy.

“I don’t think he believes us, Clint,” Laura says, low and subdued.

“He will,” Clint replies, quiet and confident. “We’ll show him.”

“Yes,” Tony says, so quietly he hopes they didn’t actually hear him. Because if there was ever going to come a point when the curtain’s yanked back and the joke is over, it’s now. It’s him admitting he’s ass over ankles for them, it’s him begging to be allowed to stay. But, in for a penny, in for a pound. Better if it happens now, while there’s still parts of him to salvage. “I want everything.”

They both go still and quiet. “Oh, Tony,” Laura says, and her voice shakes with nuances he’s too emotionally stunted to identify. He cautiously opens his eyes, but there are no smirks or disappointed expressions waiting for him. Just two people looking at him like he just gave them the best Christmas gift they could have gotten.

“It’s okay if it’s just Laura you want, you know,” Clint says. “It’s not all or nothing here. A vee is just as good as a triangle, as long as everyone’s happy.”

It’s with some relief that Tony realizes he’s not the only one on uncertain ground here. He has no idea how to handle people reassuring him he’s wanted, but he’s very, very good at reassuring other people he wants them. “I said yes to all, dumbass. That means yes to all.”

Clint’s answering grin is relieved, delighted and pleased, and he closes the two inches between them to kiss Tony senseless, while Laura sighs contentedly and goes back to kissing Tony’s neck.

It is, he thinks hazily, really unfair that they’re both phenomenal kissers, because every time Laura’s tongue traces over his skin, or Clint’s teeth sink into his lip, he loses entire clusters of brain cells to spontaneous combustion. It does eventually sink in that they’re working in tandem to drive him out of his fucking mind, though, when Clint breaks away and gently rolls him back on his side. Before he can do more than blink in protest, Laura is there with soft noises, licking into Tony’s mouth, absorbing the involuntary gasp he makes as Clint starts licking down his spine.

He growls a little in frustration when, instead of letting his questing hand find her breast, Laura links her fingers through his and holds tight. “Let us take care of you right now,” she murmurs, and plays dirty by biting his bottom lip immediately after she says it.

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“Just worry about feeling good,” Clint says into his shoulder blades, his breath hot across Tony’s skin.

“Definitely feeling good,” he agrees muzzily. Part of him still wants to flail and regain control of the situation, but the larger part, the one that’s learned how to trust again, is happy to lie back and let them have their way. Because their way seems to end with an orgasm, and he’s painfully, painfully aware of just how long it’s been.

“Oh god,” he groans when Laura finally abandons his mouth and, still holding tight to his hand, begins working her way down his front the same slow, exploratory, lazy way Clint’s working down his back. His breath is already starting to keen on the exhale, limbs just beginning to tremble, and he’s not sure whether to curve inward or outward when one Barton licks across his stomach and the other tongues the small of his back. “Jesus Christ,” he rasps, blowing a long, shaky breath. “You’re trying to kill me.”
Laura’s hands tug at the bottom of his boxers, and Clint’s hands settle on his hips to push at the elastic band, and all of Tony’s surviving neurons are cheering a united chorus of yesyesyes when the howl of a terrified child freezes them all dead in their tracks.

They stay statue-still for another moment, and Nathan cries out again, sobbing in the way Tony knows means he’s had a night terror and needs a reassuring hug to get back to sleep.

Laura collapses into Tony with a dire muttering, and Clint’s forehead touches Tony’s back just under his shoulders. “Welcome to the Barton family,” he says wryly. “One of the features you might not have been aware of is how often the kids end up cockblocking you when you least expect it.”

Tony presses the forearm of his free hand across his eyes and takes a few deep, shuddering breaths to get himself collected again. “I’ll go take care of him,” he says, even though the last thing he wants to do is leave the bed.

But Laura’s already getting up, and he lifts his arm in time to get a beautiful view of her, flushed skin and glittering eyes and heaving breasts and mussed hair, as she pulls away from him. “It’s my night,” she says with a smile, leans back onto the bed long enough to press a kiss against Tony’s mouth again, and one to Clint’s, and then she’s across the room to get her robe. “Don’t wait for me,” she says with affection, belting her robe and finger-combing through her hair as Nathan howls again, piteously. “This could take awhile.”

The door shuts behind her, and then it’s just the two of them. “Jesus Christ,” Tony breathes, dragging in a lungful of needed air, then jumps at the touch of Clint’s teeth nipping his hip. He glares down and Clint smirks up.

“Need a few minutes, babe?”

Tony flings his arm back over his eyes and goes boneless against the pillows. “I’d appreciate it.”

“Kay.” The mattress shifts as Clint crawls back up and flops down on his stomach onto his pillows. He rests his cheek against his crossed wrists, face turned towards Tony and when Tony looks over at him, his eyes are hooded and speculative. “And now that Laura’s gone, is your answer gonna be the same?” he murmurs.

Tony lets his arm slide over his head, tucks it under, and pillows his cheek on his shoulder. “Jesus, Barton. When did you get as insecure as I am?”

Clint shrugs, turns his head so his chin is on his wrists and he’s staring at the headboard. “Flirting’s one thing, Tony, and I know what the tabloids say about all your sexual escapades, but I’ve only ever seen you with a string of really, really hot women. So I’m just making sure everyone’s on the same page while Laura Evil Mastermind Barton is out of the room, because you’re just like me when it comes to her. There’s nothing you wouldn’t do to see her happy.”

Tony sighs, but it’s fond and drags himself around until he’s on his side. He’s hesitant at first, mostly because Clint’s side-eyeing him with his resting death stare, but he reaches out and smooths his palm up Clint’s back from the small to the nape. Clint shivers and heaves a sigh like a dog finding a comfortable spot, then goes loose and pliant, his eyes slipping closed.

“We’re on the same page,” Tony says softly, drifting over the planes of Clint’s back, and is rewarded with a dreamy smile. “You’re tense, sweetheart,” he adds a moment later with a frown, gently probing the knots his fingers find, and his frown deepens at the flicker of wincing on Clint’s face.

“Carry my stress in my shoulders,” he rumbles, and his eyes open a crack. “Always have. Between
your self-destructive ass and Laura’s constant fretting, I’m lucky I can move at all half the time.”

“I can take care of myself,” Tony says, walking his fingers down either side of Clint’s spine, looking for more knots and finding them. “And it isn’t just your shoulders. Jesus. How do get out of bed in the morning?”

“It’s amazing how motivating a pair of fighting pre-teens can be,” he says, then oofs when Tony abruptly slides a leg over his back and settles over his hips. “Can’t say I mind the way this is going,” he says, a trifle breathless. “But I should be on my back to do it properly.”

“Dated a masseuse once,” Tony says with a smirk, and leans forward and left, ignoring Clint's protesting grunt to rummage in the drawer of Laura's nightstand for the small bottle of baby oil he knows she keeps there.

“Yeah? Sounds fun. Hey!” Clint squirms when he squeezes a generous dollop directly on his spine, shoulders flexing with the motion. “Fuck, that's cold,” he hisses.

“Fun? Eh, not really,” Tony says, and cracks his knuckles before swiping his palms through the oil and digging in. The air whuffs out of Clint's lungs in a long, tight exhale. “Ended up with mono and two counts of public indecency on my record. She used me to meet Howard, and then made herself available for my old man, despite Mom being very much visibly devoted to Howard. But I did learn a thing or two about giving a world-class, melt-your-bones-into-mush backrub.”

“This,” Clint wheezes painfully, “is not at all relaxing.”

“It's not supposed to be at this point. Now shut up and relax.”

“I really, really fucking hate you, Tony.”

"I know, Katniss. Now shut up and relax."

By the time he's worked out the trigger points, Clint's back is gleaming and pliant, and grunting whines have transmuted to soft, purring sighs. Tony rubs his hands together briskly, until the friction has heated his palms, and then presses them onto Clint’s back, pulling a throaty moan of pleasure out of him. He slides off, but keeps smoothing his hands over his skin, lightning his touch, slows it down to something more approaching a lover's caress. “How’s that?”

One eye cracks open. “You aren't allowed to leave us, ever,” he mumbles. “Jesus. I could fall in love with you for that alone. So will Laura, cos goddamn, Tony.”

Tony smiles back at him, but he can feel the edge of uncertainty and panic in it, and he avoids Clint's eyes as he earths a package of wipes from the same drawer to clean his hands. It’s always something, he thinks as he cleans the oil out from his nail beds, some thing, not him, that people fall in love with. Hell, if that’s what he’s got, that’s what he’s—

“Knock it the fuck off.”

Tony blinks around, and finds Clint glowering at him from his boneless sprawl. “I’m sorry?”

“That stupid thought in your head. Knock it off. I can smell the self-sabotage from here.” It’s a blink-and-you-miss-it, because Clint is lightning quick when he feels like moving. Tony blinks, finds that Clint is surging towards him and yanking him down, and kissing Tony like he’s trying to make Tony forget his own name. And he's handsy, somehow managing to one-handedly strip Tony's boxers off without ever breaking lip contact, or letting go of the back of Tony's head with his other hand.
"It's you, you fucking moron," he growls, and bites Tony's jaw, down his throat, over his chest and down, down, down. And all Tony can do is clutch his hands in Clint's hair and make desperate, gasping sounds, because he's suddenly holding onto a force of fucking nature, and he couldn't move if someone put a gun to his head and told him to. "You. Not your money. Not your tech. Not your backrubs. It's you. Do you understand yet?"

“No,” Tony says somewhere in the middle of all that, barely aware of speaking at all, every last quivering nerve narrowed down to the anticipation of where his mouth will go next.

“I swear to Christ, Tony,” Clint mumbles into his hip. “You’ll get it, if it’s the last fucking thing we do.” And his head shifts inward, and Tony sucks in a breath, and—

“Pardon the interruption, boss,” FRIDAY cuts in suddenly, “but there’s credible report of renewed HYDRA activity on the Eastern seaboard, and Captain Rogers has sounded a general assemble for all active Avengers present in the compound.”

Clint’s head thuds into his thigh. “Oh, come the fuck on.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Whew. Next section ready to go. Had an unexpected day off with the partner sick, so I managed to get it finished.

Angst, miscommunication, and Tony Has Issues. And smut. There's smut too. Because of course there is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s been strained between them lately, since the airport if she’s being honest, but Natasha knows Clint’s facial expressions better than almost anyone else. She knows when a scowl means he doesn’t think he accomplished a mission to the best of his ability, she knows when it means that someone stole his last slice of pizza, and she knows when it means that he’s suffering a nasty case of blue balls.

This is definitely the latter.

She eyes him across the gym, where he’s sinking punch after punch into a heavy bag rated for Steve’s strength, and arches an eyebrow when a particularly vicious blow shifts it slightly on its chains. Must be pretty serious, she thinks, snagging a package of handwraps off the shelf where they’re kept and pulls open the plastic cover.

She wanders towards Clint as she binds her hands up, stretching her neck and shoulders carefully. There’s a phantom ache there, and there always will be, but her doctors have told her as long as she’s careful, it shouldn’t get worse. She wants to laugh every time there’s a callout, because when do the Avengers ever play it safe?

When has she ever played it safe?

Clint’s so involved in taking out his frustrations on the bag, he doesn’t see her coming. She pokes him in the side, right where he’s most ticklish, and then has to drop below his sudden, wild swing as he turns cobra-quick towards her.

Something sharp stabs at her neck and she winces hard, then carefully straightens up again. He’s breathing hard, staring at her with guarded hostility and wariness, hands fisted at his sides. “Jesus, Nat,” he says finally, once his eyes have settled and his breathing has evened out. “Are you alright?”

She presses careful fingers into the muscles of her neck, kneading lightly to test for damage, but it’s old pain, not fresh. Her sigh of relief is very faint, but she’s pretty sure Clint’s seen it anyway. “I’m fine, Barton,” she says, and drops her hand back to her side. “You don’t seem to be, though.”

His scowl returns, and it’s so adorably frustrated she has to resist the urge to reach out and ruffle his hair. “I’m fine,” he growls and turns back to the bag. His fist makes a dull thud as it dents the heavy leather again.

Natasha arches an eyebrow and snorts delicately, then moves to brace the bag for him. It’s completely unnecessary, given that his normal human strength isn’t going to do more than budge it
slightly, but it puts her in a position that’s facing him, and them both in a scenario that’s as familiar as breathing. “Uh huh. You look fine. Relationship troubles getting you down?”

She’s taken aback by the sheer hostility and defensiveness in his eyes. “None of your fucking business. What’s it to you, anyway?”

She takes her hands off the bag long enough to raise them in the air, palms turned towards him to show she means no harm. “I thought we were still friends,” she says softly.

His eyes drop down to the bag again, but not before she sees the world of hurt in them. “I told you it depended on how hard you hit me, Nat.”

“I didn’t hit you that hard, Clint,” she replies.

He just snorts. “I ended up in the Raft, Nat. And yeah, I own it. It was my fuck-up. But some part of me still expected you to have my back, and you didn’t. That’s a pretty fucking hard hit, as far as I’m concerned.”

“That’s fair.” It’s not, not to her, because they were all grownups and they all made their own choices, but she’s at least self-aware enough to recognize that her interpretation isn’t the default for everyone. “What do you want to do about it?”

Both his eyebrows go up at the faint challenge in her voice and, despite himself, he starts to grin. Because that’s an old game too, one they’ve played often over the years. “Yeah,” he says easily, straightening up from his boxing stance and grabbing a bottle of water from the nearby bench. “Alright. We’ll do that.”

Natasha smiles and steps out from behind the bag. “Think we’ll be good after that?”

“That,” Clint says with the kind of shit-eating smile she never thought she’d see directed at her again, “depends entirely on how hard you hit me.”

oOoOoOo

Tony is, for perhaps the first time in his life, in a completely healthy, completely supportive relationship. Not that Pepper wasn’t supportive, because she was. It’s just that Pepper had her own life, large portions of which had no time, attention or interest to spare Tony. They may be compatible, but in the end, they just weren’t compatible enough to make a romance work. She never understood his need to be an Avenger, not really. Never knew why he craved the skies, the fight, the team. Most of the time, he's not all that goddamn sure he does either. He just knows it's one of the only things that have ever felt right from the beginning.

And she didn't want kids. He can't fault her for that, and doesn't. She's never wanted them, been uncomfortable around them for as long as he's known her. And when they were together, it was fine. Because he could ignore the nagging voice deep down that told him he wanted them. Someone else made that decision, someone else decided their life didn't have room for a child, and it was a relief to not have to battle the ghost of his father because it was Pepper's choice, and it was the right one for her.

It was a relief not to have to decide for himself.

Laura and Clint, on the other hand…

He tries to tell himself that he didn’t have much choice there either, because they already had kids when he wandered into their life, that if he wants what they’re offering, there’s no choice to be made
because the Bartons are a package deal.

But deep down, in the same place where the nagging voice that tells him he wants kids lives, he knows that there was a choice to be made, and he made it the second he let Lila Barton crawl into his heart and drag her brothers in behind her. He made it the second he let Laura Barton kindly manipulate him into coming back to the Avengers. And if he’s being a thousand percent honest? He made it the minute Clint looked at him on a wreckage-strewn street and asked him for a lift.

He sighs, folds his forearms along the rail of the crib, and sets his chin on his hands. It’s an incredibly awkward angle to lean, and his back is going to be killing him in fifteen minutes or so, but right now, it’s the only way Nathan’s going to continue drifting off to sleep.

“You are a pain in the ass, tiny Barton,” he says, so quietly he’s barely audible at all, and tilts his head until his cheek is resting on his wrist. “Teething, nightmares, now strep. You’re just a bundle of fun, huh, buddy?”

Nathan, feverish and dull-eyed, just blinks slowly at him, lids getting heavier.

“And you always gotta scream right after your mom … well, we won’t get into that, kiddo. You’re way too small for the always make your partner happy first spiel, but suffice to say, she’s the only one getting happy. I mean, she’s got to be feeling guilty by now, because me and your dad? We’re not so happy with the non-happy.”

Nathan blinks long and slow, makes a soft noise and burrows his face into the mattress of the crib, and Tony reaches down to brush his hair off his forehead. “Yeah, go back to sleep, little guy,” he says softly, traces a fingertip down the bridge of Nathan’s nose. “Cos you might be adorable, but your parents are really hot and I’d like to get back in bed with them. We good now?”

Nathan’s breath hitches and sighs, and a tiny snore breaks from his throat.

Tony breathes a sigh of relief as he eases out of the room, pausing just long enough to make sure Nathan isn’t going to wake up immediately, and then all but runs down the hall back to Clint and Laura’s… and his, he should really try to be better about remembering that it’s his room now too… and slides in behind Laura, dozing and tangled with Clint.

She rouses again with a soft moan when he nips a nipple and slides a hand over her thigh, then she shifts around, seeking out his mouth. As she rolls onto her back, her legs shift open and Tony groans, fractured and needy, because she’s still wet from their interrupted lovemaking session forty five minutes earlier. His fingers slide right into the heat and slick, and she keens quietly, arching against the mattress.

Within seconds, Clint’s fully conscious too, and his hand brushes against Tony’s under the pillow supporting Laura’s head. Tony’s breath catches when Clint’s fingers thread through his, and that goddamn lump is back in his throat again. But all Clint does is give him a knowing smile that transmutes to a smirk halfway through, and bend his head to Laura’s unattended breast to give it attention.

Clint's fingers slide in and around his, and Tony shudders to feel her squeeze around them. Her keening erupts into a full-throated cry, her hands tighten in the back of his hair, practically mashing him into her breast, and she thrashes and twists between them. He hooks his ankle around one leg, and Clint gets the other, and together they hold her down and open, fingers moving smoothly in rhythm, like they have been doing this for years. Tony has to abruptly break from her breast to kiss her into silence before her yowling wakes the kids again.
Hazy-eyed and still twitching, Laura sighs contentedly and collapses boneless into the pillows. “That was amazing,” she croaks, clears her throat, rubs her eyes. “God. I can't feel my toes.”

Clint smirks, snags Tony's head and yanks him forward, over Laura's chest, where he can take his leisurely time sucking on Tony's bottom lip and tongue. Tony moans softly into his open mouth, and Clint growls back. With Laura's soft, eager encouragement beneath them, Tony gets onto his knees, preparing to straddle Laura to get to the other side.

He gets his leg partway over, and starts swearing when the Assemble call starts blaring in the room. And with Laura in pure disbelief beneath him, and Clint's face pissed enough to rival the Hulk’s, Tony makes a snap decision and snarls, “Turn that fucking thing off, FRIDAY!” before finishing his motion and grabbing at Clint’s shoulders.

Clint grins and rolls with him, flipping Tony to the bottom, but Tony doesn’t care because finally, finally there’s nothing but miles of skin for his hands to wander over, rake down, grab, and Laura’s moving up behind him, teeth finding his neck, and —

“Sorry, boss,” FRIDAY says, and Tony’s not sure who actually screams in absolute frustration first, him or Clint, or if it’s at the same time.

“Go the fuck away!” Clint snarls into Tony’s mouth.

“It’s important, boss,” she tries again.

“I don’t fucking care!” Tony snarls into Clint’s mouth.

“But boss…”

“Shut the fuck up, FRIDAY!” Laura hisses savagely, and Clint and Tony freeze. Slowly, in unison, they turn their heads towards Laura.

“Yeah yeah,” she mutters. “Swear jar.” She blows out a breath and runs both hands through her mussed hair, opens her mouth to speak and Tony will never know what she intended to say, because from just outside the door floats Steve’s voice.

“— isn’t picking up, and FRIDAY says someone shut the alarm to the Barton apartments.”

It’s instant cold water, even before the knock comes at the door, because the thought of Captain America walking in on him in this situation is the world’s most effective boner-killer. Clint looks at Tony, then Laura, then back to Tony, then swears softly and most definitely heartfelt, and fishes his sleeping pants out from under the bed where they got kicked earlier.

“Clint? Laura? You in there?”

“Yeah yeah,” he calls grouchily. “I'm coming. Or,” he says under his breath, “more to the point I’m not, thanks to you assholes for the third fucking time in a week.” After stealing a quick kiss from Tony and Laura he pads out of the room, still tying the drawstring of his pants.

From across the room and around the corner, Tony fists his hands in the sheets. Until Laura lifts his arm and drags him back down to the pillows, curling into his side.

“It is ass o’clock in the fucking morning,” he hears Clint snap as the door opens. “The fuck are you doing here banging on my door? Trying to wake the kids? Christ’s sake, Rogers, Wilson. We just got Nathan to sleep again.”
“The call went out ten minutes ago,” Steve replies. “Neither you nor Tony responded. We had to check up on you, find out if you were injured or missing.”

“Yeah, better someone who can look after himself than whatever the fuck it is you’re calling us out for. And… speaking of which, when the *fuck do you sleep*? This is three times this week. The world does not need saving that often! I’m taking a night off.”

“We need you out with us,” Sam replies, almost too low for Tony to hear. “Got a call from a SHIELD cell, headed up by a guy claiming to be Coulson.”

Laura, so soft and pliant and delightfully post-orgasmic in his arms, goes tight and tense in an instant.

“Yeah, I know. I had the same reaction. But then he showed up with his team, and—”

Steve keeps talking, but it’s drowned out by the sudden cacophony in his head as Tony takes in the shocked, wide-eyed expression on Laura. She pulls in one shaky breath and then another, and presses a shaking hand to her mouth. “Phil?”

And when her voice breaks on the name, confirming his sudden, gut wrenching suspicion that Coulson had been a little bit more than just Clint's handler, his heart shatters with it. Because he’s always known that there was someone before him, someone important enough to close them both down, choke them up, dam the words in the back of their throats. They hadn’t offered, and he hadn’t pushed. Because it had clearly been an unresolved issue and if there’s one thing Tony knows how to avoid the fuck out of, it’s resolving issues.

Maybe he should have pushed.

Laura scrambles out of bed, grabs for her robe, and he lets her go, mute and still. He begs silently for her to look back, but she doesn’t, and his whole world goes with her when she rushes out of the room, demanding answers in a voice that manages to be assertive and reeling all at the same time.

He sighs, scrubs his hands through his hair and stares at the blankets between his knees for a minute, then gets out of bed and starts getting dressed. Nothing fancy. Jeans. T-shirt. His sneakers, one of which he has to dig out from under Clint’s boxers. He looks around, pulls his mask together, bits and pieces dragging from all the disparate corners of his psyche he banished them, feels it slide down and lock into place, just like his Iron Man helmet.

“Was fun while it lasted,” he says, turns one corner of his mouth up in a bitter smile and moves towards the balcony, tapping on the face of his watch to call his armor to him, then to block his personal locators out of the system, using his creator-level overrides to ban FRIDAY from tattling on him because he needs to be alone for a little while.

Because the universe hates him. This is a well-known fact. But Tony’s always just a little surprised at the depths to which it is willing to go to prove it.

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Chapter End Notes

Hopefully, I’ll be able to get the next section finished off so I don’t leave y’all hanging here like this for long.

Cheers!
Clint isn’t a stranger to anger. Generally speaking, there aren’t a lot of filters he employs on a regular basis. Verbal, emotional, mental. He kind of eschews them all in his personal and daily life, and since his shift from active-duty government assassin to active-duty Avenger, he’s used them less and less in his professional life as well. He isn’t Natasha, who filters everything through blocks and sieves so fine it’s purer than distilled water by the time it’s done. He lets himself be angry, irritated, happy, sad, whatever the situation calls for. Over the last year? There’s been a lot of anger. At Tony. At the world. At Ross. At Rogers. At himself. At the fact that he can’t manage one uninterrupted night of what, at this point, is going to have to be the hottest sex he’s ever had.

He’s through most of it now, but he’s let himself feel it all. The bitterness and the vein-throbbing fury and the irritation and the helpless rage and the murderous intentions.

So he’s no stranger to anger.

But the anger that’s in him now is foreign to him. It’s the kind of rage that steals his breath, that steals his thoughts, that focuses him down to one single fact, one thought, one notion. Phil is alive. And not only is Phil alive, he’s been alive for five years. Five years Philip J. Coulson has been alive, and he never had the common fucking courtesy to tell them.

This is crystalline anger, the kind that comes with lattices and structures, hard as diamond, clear as air. This is the kind of anger that he knows would allow him to loose an arrow without a green light, and never have the kill so much as smudge his conscience afterwards.

It’s dangerous anger, the kind he knows teeters him a little further towards the abyss over which he usually balances. He sucks in a sharp breath and begins to haul himself back. He’s not a bottler. It’s an alien concept to him. But this shit, this he needs to bottle up right fucking now, because this is the kind of anger that he’s pretty sure would intimidate the Hulk into going away.

“Somehow, Rogers,” he hears himself saying, “I really don’t think you’re having the same reaction I am.” He sounds normal to himself, but Steve is white and, under the deep, rich hues of his skin tones, Sam’s gone ashen grey.

“I’ll just… we’ll just…” Steve makes a jerky gesture indicating he’s going to close the door and leave.

“That would probably be best,” Clint replies pleasantly, and starts to shut the door.

Steve’s hand stops it, and he already looks like he’s regretting the decision, but swallows hard and gamely soldiers on. “Do you know where Tony is?” he asks. “FRIDAY says he’s not in his room or office or his workshop or any of the training rooms. I know he started staying with you guys a couple of months ago, so I’m just wondering if you might know where I could find him.”

Laura rushes into the room before Clint can do more than open his mouth to answer, strident and wild-eyed, robe half-belted and hair flying everywhere. “Did he say Phil’s alive?” she demands, striding towards them with such purpose Clint fully believes she will knock every single one of them down and step on their faces if they don’t move out of her way.

But he catches her around the waist, and yanks her into his chest, wraps his arms around her and holds her tight to him. “He did,” he says evenly. “He also wants to know if we know where Tony is, because he’s not in his room.” It’s easier to think while he’s holding Laura’s anger in check, and his
voice is pointed enough to break through to her, because she swings her head around and blinks at him.

“Does he have any reason to think we wouldn’t know where he is?” Her voice is high and sharp with disbelief, and her focus jerks to Steve. “What do you want him for, Rogers? What are you going to do to him now?”

It’s rare that he sees Steve off-guard and floundering for stable ground like this, and it’s amusing the hell out of a tiny, deeply buried, vicious part of him that’s still bitter over the airport. “Hard to do something to a guy who isn’t speaking to you,” Steve says.

“You’d manage,” Laura spits venomously, and Clint has to haul her back into him again as the shock registers across Steve and Sam’s faces.

“Easy there, sweetheart,” he murmurs into her ear. “You’re off the rails now. Take a breath.”

Laura closes her eyes, inhales deeply for the space of three breaths and sighs each exhale out. “My apologies, gentlemen,” she says in a much calmer tone when she opens her eyes again. “I wasn’t expecting to hear news of Phil’s … survival.”

“Uh huh,” Sam says, eyeing Laura like he would a wild animal. “It’s okay, Laura. It’s stressful for everyone who knew him. Nat said you guys were… close.”

Something about his tone tips Clint off, and as Sam’s eyes dart around the suite, he realizes Sam’s looking for Tony. He arches an eyebrow at him, but Sam shoots a quick look at Steve and shakes his head minutely.

“We were,” Clint says. “Tell you what. You go deal with Coulson’s resurrection, and we’ll find Tony. I think that’s probably safer for all involved parties. Wouldn’t you agree, honey?”

Laura’s eyes snap to him, hard as marble, then it smooths away again. “Probably for the best,” she says. “I think catching up with Phil right now is a bad idea anyway. Amber just went on her annual leave. I think she’s in Maui now.”

Clint’s mouth twitches as Sam looks confused and Steve looks lost. “Amber’s the facility dentist,” he says, loosens his grip on Laura now that he’s sure she’s not going to plow through anyone standing between her and her intended kill. “And Phil is going to need her services after Laura gets through with him.”

Steve opens his mouth to say something again, but Clint closes the door in their faces before he can. He blows out a heavy breath and sags back against it, feeling a thousand years old. “Shit,” he says quietly.

“That is a succinct summation, dear,” Laura agrees, looking just as old and tired as he feels. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Yeah? Get in line.” Clint swipes a hand down his face. “We never told Tony about him,” he says slowly. “Just that there was someone.”

Laura’s eyebrows go up. “Where are you going with this?” She’s wary, shoulders set and hands fisted at her sides. “You’re not suggesting…”

“No. Hell no. Even if we were unattached, which we are not…” He squints at her. “Why, do you want to..?”
Tension visibly drains out if her shoulders as he watches, and there's no hesitation on her answer. “No. That time is long past. And ... now is so much better.”

“Good.” He closes his eyes and his head thumps on against the door. He's sliding down the door before he knows he's sagging, but when his ass bounces on the floor, all he does is set his elbows on his knees and slide his hands through his hair and over the back of his neck. “Still... Five fucking years, Laura. How do you even do that to people you claim to love?”

“I don't know,” Laura says softly, and the tiny hint of brokenness in her tone makes him want to get up and find Coulson and punch him in the fucking face himself. “Five months, maybe. Five years? I kind of have to question if it was love at all.”

He doesn't know how Phil might have justified it to himself, doesn't know how it could possibly be justified, doesn't know if they're going to get any sort of justification now. The only thing he knows, in fact is, “Tony would never do that to us.”

“No. No, he wouldn't. He'd tell us he was alive because he's considerate and even though he'd assume we wouldn't want him, he'd let us know anyway. He's the most thoughtful man I've ever known.” Laura clears her throat, wipes her eyes. “And I kind of need him right now,” she says, and her voice cracks. “So I'm going to go get him.”

“It'd be nice. He says he has no fucking clue about how to deal with emotions, but he always manages to get it right.” He closes his eyes again, sighs deeply. “He always has.”

He sits against the door as Laura’s soft footsteps pad away, just trying to process this whole thing. It fights sinking in, because it doesn’t make sense to him. It refuses to parse. It won’t engage. It’s completely incompatible with every other thought in his head, and so it just swirls around and around with nowhere else to go, until it’s the only thing he can think about.

“Clint?” Laura’s voice is sharp, edge of panic, and he opens his eyes to see her come around the corner, halting at the end of the hallway with wild eyes and a pale, frightened face. “Clint, Tony’s gone.”

oOoOoOo

Tony goes where he always goes when he has issues he needs to work out: his workshop. But not the shiny engineering lab with all the bells and the whistles on the same floor as Bruce’s biochem lab and Helen’s medical bay. He’s down in the bowels of the facility in the mech manufactory, where the meat and grist of his suits get put together.

Everyone thinks the magic happens in his engineering labs, but this place is the real miracle foundry.

It’s also a place where he can destroy almost anything he fucking wants to destroy, and the automated servos and VI-controlled machinery will fix it up good as new in no time. And it’s the place next to no one knows exists, so no one’s going to find him until he’s damn well ready to be found. Not without FRIDAY’s directions, and he took care of that with his ban on her divulging his location to anyone.

He's always believed in grand gestures, ostentatious gifts, grandiose gestures of self-expression. Iron Man itself is the ultimate manifestation of his personal motto: go big or go home.

That applies here too, when he has some rage and grief to work out.

So he starts with repulsors and works his way up from there.
Cooper’s not sure what all the noise is about, but he shuffles out of bed, rubbing his eyes when Dad wakes him up and asks him to keep an eye on his brother and sister. He’s still half-asleep as he zombie-walks down the hall, yawning and stretching and taking the baby monitor Mom hands him.

He throws himself in Papa Tony’s favorite chair, hauls the afghan off the back and over him, and burrows into it as he watches his parents run around the house like they’ve lost something important. It takes him a moment and a couple of long blinks to realize the important thing they’ve lost is Papa Tony.

He knows better than to say anything, because Mom’s got the Look on her face, and Dad’s frowning in the way he always does when he’s super worried and doesn’t want anyone to know — which is dumb because he always uses the same expression, so everyone always knows — and that means they’re thinking about what they’re going to do.

“C’mon, FRIDAY,” Dad says as he laces up his boots. “This is for his health and safety. Just tell us where he went.”

“I’m sorry, Clint,” FRIDAY says, and Cooper smiles as he pillows his head on the arm of the chair and closes his eyes. He likes FRIDAY’s voice, because it’s soft and nice and always friendly when he’s looking for help with his homework. “I’m not allowed to tell you.”

“Goddammit, Tony,” Dad mutters, and Cooper opens his eyes, glances to Mom rummaging through the drawer muttering about her keys. But she seems to have forgotten he’s there, since she doesn’t remind Dad about the swear jar.

“I can’t find my fucking keys,” Mom says, shutting the drawer hard enough to rattle the cups on the shelf.

Cooper bolts upright at that, because Mom never swears, and it starts to occur to him that something’s really wrong. “Dad?”

It comes out as a whisper, but his father’s really good at catching stuff that most people wouldn’t, and turns to him almost right away. “What’s up, bud?”

He swallows and his hand goes tight on the baby monitor. “Is Papa Tony hurt or something? Cos you guys are acting like something’s really wrong. And it’s scaring me.”

Mom stops what she’s doing and looks at Dad, and Dad looks back at her, and then they both turn to Cooper, and that scares him more than anything else, because he can’t remember ever seeing either of them so worried. “No, he’s not hurt,” Mom says, and comes towards him to crouch at the chair’s arm. She takes his hand. “We just don’t know where he is. And he left when..”

Mom breaks off, then looks up at Dad, and Dad sighs and rubs his eyes. “Coop, do you remember Phil?” he asks.

“Uh huh. You told me he died on the Helicarrier right before the aliens invaded New York.”

“Well, as it turns out, he didn’t.”

Cooper frowns, eyes his parents a little nervously. “He’s not a zombie, is he?”

Mom’s eyes do that thing where he knows she’s mad, but she’s not mad enough to ground him for anything. “I told Tony to stop letting you watch those horror movies,” she mutters. “No, Cooper,
he’s not a zombie. He just didn’t… Or he did, but…”

“We don’t understand how, bud,” Dad cuts in, and puts a hand on Mom’s shoulder, and she grabs onto it. “He’s just not dead.”

“Oh.” He looks down at the monitor in his hands, can faintly hear Nathan breathing through it. “If he comes back, does that mean Papa Tony’s going to leave?”

Neither of his parents reply right away, and that alarms him, but when he looks up, neither of them look… he’s not sure what they’re supposed to look like when they’re breaking up with people, but he is sure they’re not that.

“Honey, no,” Mom says. “We told you we were keeping Tony. We meant that. As long as he wants to be with us, we’re keeping him. We…” Her voice squeaks, and she clears her throat. “We love him.”

“Okay. Good.” He slumps as he sighs in relief. “Papa Tony’s not always good with people loving him,” he says after a moment of thought. “He hasn’t told me he loves me yet, but he says it to Nathan all the time. Lila sometimes too.”

His parents exchange looks again. That’s getting annoying, because it makes him feel like they’re having a conversation he doesn’t understand. “Does that bother you?” Dad asks. “That he hasn’t said it yet?”

Cooper shrugs. “No. I know he loves me. He likes it when I help in the workshop, and he gave me my own tool set. He helped me with my rover, and he never got mad when I screwed up. He just talked me through fixing it. I’m his kid, he said, his science kid. It’s like you say, Dad. You just gotta know how to see what you’re looking at.”

He yelps in the next second, cos Dad scoops him up and, even though he’s nearly as tall as Dad is now, hugs him like he used to do when he was little. “I’m so fucking proud of you, Cooper,” he says, and kisses Cooper’s forehead.

“I know Dad,” he says and hugs his father back. “Can you go find Papa now? He should be here with the family.”

“We will,” Mom says, and when Dad lets him go, she hauls Cooper in for another tight hug and a kiss. “You’ll be okay keeping an eye on Lila and Nathan?”

He rolls his eyes and hops back up on the chair, under the afghan. “Of course Mom. I’m twelve. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“Alright. We’ll be back soon. Love you, Cooper.”

“Love you.” He watches them leave, lying down in the chair again. He stares at the ceiling, where blue lights lazily swirl, faint and faded from Papa’s holo-projector on the table beside him. He knows they’re not going to find Papa, because he’s really good at hiding.

He sits up. “FRIDAY?”

“Yes, little boss?”

“Can you tell me where Papa is?”

FRIDAY’s voice is gentle. “I’m not allowed, little boss.”
Cooper frowns, thinks. “Can you tell me where he’s not?”

“I haven’t been told not to.”

“Is he in his workshop?”

“No, little boss. He’s not.”

“Is he in the other workshop that no one knows about?”

“I can’t tell you, little boss.”

And Cooper grins, because he knows how to find Papa Tony now. “FRIDAY, can you call Aunt Natasha for me and ask if she can watch Nathan?”

There’s a moment of delay, and Cooper bounces his knee impatiently. Finally, FRIDAY says, “Natasha says she’d be delighted to babysit Nathan, little boss. She’ll be here in five minutes.”

“Awesome.” Cooper carefully sets the monitor beside the holo-projector on the table next to the chair, slides off the seat, and goes to wake up Lila. Mom and Dad are not allowed to screw this up, because Papa Tony is one of the best things to happen to this family. But Cooper knows that he and Lila can fix it.

He knocks on Lila’s door, hears her snoring, so even though he’s not supposed to, he opens the door and goes in. He calls her name, then goes to her bed and shakes her shoulder until she wakes up.

“G’way, Coop,” she grumbles. “M’sleeping.”

“Get up, Loola,” he says, and she swipes at him for using the hated nickname. He shakes her shoulder again until she opens her eyes to glare. “Mom and Dad lost Papa. We have to get him back. So get up. We have a mission.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It doesn’t matter how many targets he destroys, because he’s locked into the endless loop now, and there’s no breaking out of it. The fact that he had something so profound for a moment of his life, to have it taken from him just as quickly…

He’d call it cruelty, but he has to face facts. It wasn’t their intention to invite him to build a life between them, with them and then knock it all away to clear room for the return of their supposedly-dead lover. They hadn’t meant for it to happen. It hadn’t been intentional. But that’s the story of his life too. Unintentional things that break him apart until he’s no longer sure it’s worth putting himself back together again.

And it certainly doesn’t hurt any less.

It’s going to take a while for the bots to clean up the mess he made. U and Cooper’s proto-bot 1DR are already working overtime on the impromptu testing range he slapped together, sweeping broken things up and dumping them in the trash where they belong. Dummy, on the other hand, keeps bringing him nuts and bolts, beeping and whistling emphatically at him.

It isn’t until Dummy brings him an empty mason jar and starts dropping the nuts and bolts into it that Tony realizes what he’s doing.

Dummy has started his own swear jar.

And Tony laughs until he wants to cry, at which point he gulps air until he feels like he’s drowning in it, which kills the tears. And then he laughs again, soft and bitter and utterly hopeless. “Thanks, Dummy,” he croaks, swipes at his face with the back of his wrist. “But I don’t think the bank is going to take this as currency.”

Dummy whistles again, and Tony swears he sounds offended. Then, the bot wheels around and goes back to the testing range, leaving Tony holding the bots’ swear jar. He turns it between his hands, listening to the rattle and scrape of metal on glass, then gently lays it on a low bench where they can reach it and stands up. “FRIDAY, what’s it looking like upstairs?”

“Quiet for now,” FRIDAY replies. “But Clint and Laura are looking for you, boss, and they seem upset.”

His stomach starts gnawing at him again, and he swallows hard against the burn of acid bile at the back of his throat. “I imagine the shock of having a lover come back to life is very upsetting,” he says, tries for a neutral tone, fails miserably. It comes out shocky and shaken instead.

“Boss,” FRIDAY says gently. “I don’t think—”

“Quiet.” It’s out before he decides to say it, and FRIDAY falls obediently silent. He closes his eyes, swipes a hand down his face. He really doesn’t need to hear about how Clint and Laura are handling things, because he’s pretty sure what the result of that is going to be for him. And it’s selfish and it’s petty, but he needs far more time than he’s had to gird himself for the breakup thundering towards him.

Privately, though, he’s pretty sure that he could have eternity, and he’s still not going to be ready for
Laura’s full of nervous energy, and she can’t help but pace as she waits for Rhodes to answer his door. Clint is leaning against the support post of the verandah, arms folded pensively across his chest. “Why would he run off?” she mutters, hands raking through her hair.

“Why does Tony do anything?” Clint replies, low and quiet. “A lifetime of rejection and people telling him he’s not good enough, I imagine.”

Laura blows a noisy sigh and drags her hands through her hair again. “Have you ever wanted to have pointed words with everyone who drilled that into his head?”

“Yup. Never have though.” Clint raises his head a fraction, and his eyes gleam with a hard sort of anger that momentarily steals Laura’s breath. “Maybe we should get around to that.”

She chews on her lip, eyes him consideringly. “It’d probably start a whole new civil war in the Avengers.”

Clint shrugs, straightens, turns to face her fully. “Yeah, well. I’d be on the right side of the line this time.”

There have been a lot of ups and downs in their marriage. Times when she wondered why they were still together. Times when she was concerned over their ability to stay together. Times when she didn’t know the man she chose to walk beside. Times when she was afraid she didn’t know him because he didn’t know himself.

This is not one of those times.

This is one of the times when she is dead certain why she married him. Because this is the man who puts himself in any compromising position necessary to protect and defend his family. This is the man whose shoulders are broad enough to carry their world on his back.

He stares at her, and she must be looking at him strangely -- she can feel the frail, tremulous smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, and her eyes are liquid and hot. He arches an eyebrow with a bemused smile. “What?”

She smiles softly, shakes her head. “Nothing. I love you. That’s all.”

His eyebrows crawl upwards even further. “I love you too,” he replies. “Weirdo.”

Laura opens her mouth to reply, but Rhodes chooses that moment to open the door they’ve been knocking on for the last few minutes. He peers out at both of them, and arches an eyebrow. “Man, if everyone keeps ignoring the Assemble call, sooner or later there’s gonna be no one answering.”

“I’m taking a night off,” Clint replies. “Have you seen Tony?”

Rhodes’s eyebrow goes up further, and the other one joins it. “Not since earlier today,” he says, slow and cautious. “He did some tune-up work on the War Machine armor. Why? You lose him?”

There’s nothing in his demeanor, nothing in the faintly pleasant expression on his face, but Laura is suddenly reminded of that talk Rhodes’d had with them when Tony first moved into their home, and a chill shivers down her spine.
“He lost himself,” she says softly, rubs her temple briefly. “It was a misunderstanding, but he left before we could talk about it. He left before we even knew he was leaving.”

“Sounds like Tony.” Rhodes’s tone shifts to somewhere in the range of caution, and his shoulders tense, eyes shutter closed. “What triggered it?”

“Cap-us interruptus,” Clint says, flat and blunt. “Third time this week. Only this time they were knocking on the door to tell us that Phil Coulson was alive and well.”

Rhodes’ expression doesn’t shift much, just enough to hint at confusion. “And?”

Laura’s hands fist at her sides, fingernails digging into her palms. “He was our lover before Tony,” she says, tamps down on the screaming rage that wants to rise at the hurt and betrayal churning in her chest. “We didn’t take the news particularly well. He didn’t take our reaction particularly well. He was gone when I got back to the bedroom.”

The confusion clears away. “Ahh,” Rhodes says, enlightened. “Yeah,” he says, slumps against the doorframe, runs a hand over the cropped military haircut he still wears. “Yeah, that sounds like Tony too.” He glances up, first at Laura and then at Clint. “I warned you this would happen,” he says, edged with just enough anger that the chill returns to Laura’s spine. “And I warned you what would happen when it did.”

“If we could save the threats for after we find Tony,” Clint says, hard and impatient, “that’d be great. We just want to find him.”

“And what happens when you find him?”

“We’ll probably fight,” Laura cuts in bluntly, because both Clint and Rhodes are starting to go alpha male and she has time for none of it, “and after that, we’ll probably fuck. And it’ll be noisy and messy with repeat performances if I have anything to say about it. Then lunch. Then Clint and Tony are going to take Cooper into SI like they promised last week, and I have a spa date with Natasha. Scott and Hope are taking Lila and Nathan for the afternoon. When we all get back, we’ll have supper, and then the three of us will fuck a lot more before we fall asleep. Would you like tomorrow’s schedule too, Rhodey, or will that suffice?”

Rhodes’ expression is comical as his head snaps to Laura, and in the corner of her eye, she can see Clint grinning wickedly. Laura waits with her arms crossed across her chest, drumming the fingers of her right hand against her left elbow, and doesn’t flinch away from Rhodey’s incredulous stare. “Well? Would you like to know what I plan to do to and with my partners tomorrow? Or would you prefer a more graphic description of my plans for today?”

Rhodey heaves a sigh and mops a hand down his face. “No,” he says, staving her off with her other hand, palm flat towards her. “Dammit, he says, staving her off with her other hand, palm flat towards her. “I really don’t need to know the details. What I’ve already heard is going to haunt me for the rest of my life.” He closes his eyes, shakes his head, and sighs again. “If I had to guess, Tony is probably in the foundry.”

Clint’s forehead furrows. “We already checked his lab,” he says. “He’s not there.”

Rhodes shakes his head again. “No, not the engineering workshop. The mech foundry. It’s where he goes when he wants to really be alone.”

Laura blinks, glances at Clint, but he looks just as blank as she feels. “I’ve never heard of the foundry,” she says.

Rhodes sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb. “Dammit,
Stank,” he mutters. “Okay. I don’t know where it is, exactly. I’ve never been there, Tony left it off
the blueprints and FRIDAY’s forbidden from divulging its location. It’s in the basement, that’s all I
know.”

“It’s a starting place,” Laura says, though the troubled look on her husband’s face prevents her from
feeling too much relief. “How big is the basement again?”

Rhodes opens his mouth to reply, but Clint beats him to it. “Five levels, ten sublevels,” he says
quietly, and Laura’s heart sinks right through her stomach. “I thought I’d been over every inch of this
place. I’ve never seen a mech foundry.”

Rhodes shrugs. “Wish I could be more help,” he says. “Tony likes his hiding places. I don’t think I
know even half of them.”

Laura sighs and rubs her palm across her forehead. “If you see him before we do,” she says, “will
you tell him we’re looking for him?”

“Fuck that,” Clint says with a frustrated growl. “He won’t talk to us if you do that. Sit on his ass and
call us yourself.”

Rhodes, for some reason, looks more amused than anything else. Indulgent and entertained. “Sure
thing, Bartons,” he says. “And hey, before you take off? Do me a favor. I told Tones I got his back
where you two are concerned, but if you’re getting up to any freaky shit, hang a tie on the door, huh?
There are things I don’t need to ever try to unsee.”

“No promises,” Laura says, as Clint slides an arm around her shoulders, and maybe enjoys a little too
much the deeply disturbed look Rhodes gets when she adds, “Just remember to knock, even if
someone is screaming.”

Tony has just about worked his way through the self-pity and the inevitable mourning of his
inevitably shitty personal life, and has moved on to dictating to a still-silent FRIDAY his list of
chores to complete before he moves out of the Barton residence and back to Stark Tower in New
York City.

He feels bad about muting FRIDAY, and there’s a little voice in the back of his head that’s trying to
tell him that he’s overreacting, another being all manner of snarky about him hiding in the basement,
and a third that’s telling him that he needs to face the situation head on. The first voice sounds like
Pepper, the second like Howard and the third like Steve.

He ignores them all.

He leans back against the wall, letting his head thunk softly against the metal and sighs. “I’ll have to
figure out a way to remote-maintain Rhodey’s exo-legs,” he mutters, rubs his eyes, drops his hands
limply back into his lap. “And I’ll… no. I’ll have to schedule trips back here. I can’t expect him to
come to the Tower every time War Machine gets banged up. FRIDAY, display my schedule for the
next couple of months. I need to slot in some time for that.”

The monitor on the wall flickers and flips to Tony’s month-by-month, and Tony would swear it does
so with extreme disapproval. He closes his eyes tiredly, rubs them again. He’s imagining things and
projecting, and he knows that. FRIDAY doesn’t have the same kind of emotional complexity
JARVIS did. JARVIS would not have been above spite. FRIDAY doesn’t know what spite is.

“Shit,” he says, thick and lost, and swallows hard. He drags himself to his feet and leans heavily on
the ledge beneath the monitor, squinting up at the colorful blocks and dark, serif words and wills them to make sense. “Okay. Let’s figure this out. Can I move my meetings on…”

FRIDAY still hasn’t said anything, which is beginning to worry him a bit. JARVIS she might not be, but she’s a chatty little VI in her own right. If she’s not talking something’s awry. Her circuitry, maybe? It takes him an embarrassingly long moment to remember he’s given her orders not to speak.

He sighs, shoves his hands through his hair a few times, and says, “You can answer me, FRI.”

“No, boss,” FRIDAY says, and her tone is clipped enough to make Tony wince a little. Emotionally complex or not, he’s managed to upset her. Story of his life. “Miss Potts has flagged your schedule as needing approval for any external alterations, because, as her note reads, ‘it took six organizational experts to straighten it out in the first place, Tony’.”

He was hoping to avoid talking to Pepper about it, because she’d ask all the prying personal questions and offer perfectly reasonable advice about staying and talking and being a semi-functional adult instead of retreating to New York or Malibu and avoiding the unpleasant things. He sighs, because deep down, she’d be right and he’d do what she’d tell him to do.

He turns and leans against the ledge, surveys the damage he did and the half-complete repairs the bots are undergoing. “FRIDAY, am I being ridiculous?”

“I dunno, boss,” she replies. “I don’t have any frame of reference for ‘ridiculous’.”

He looks sharp and surprised at the monitor behind him, where a digital display of her neural pathways is projected, but it just hovers innocently above the glass. “FRIDAY, when was the last time I ran a diagnostic on your program?”

“Eight months, thirteen days and eight hours ago, boss.”

He frowns. “When are routine diagnostics scheduled?”

“Every three months.”

“Who’s been performing them?”

“The Vision, boss. He emails you his reports.”

He blinks, then blinks again, and inadvertently glances up at the ceiling towards Vision’s suite of rooms, wondering for the thousandth time how much of JARVIS is left, and how trustworthy the android he helped create is. Thor’s hammer be damned. “Should I be worried I have an AI maintaining a VI?” he mutters, half to himself, unwelcome visions of Ultron dancing in his head.

“Don’t worry about me, boss,” FRIDAY says. “If you need something to worry about, your children are crawling through the vents and will be in the foundry in approximately fifteen seconds.”

When he can breathe again, and his heart has decided not to stop beating, which is shortly after quite a lot of yelping and scrambling and Lila tumbling out of the overhead vent like a miniature Hawkeye straight into Tony’s frantic arms, Tony reminds himself to kill Clint as his earliest opportunity on principle alone.

Cooper’s descent is handled with much less flailing and much more decorum, but Tony has an arm outstretched anyway, half-wheezing from the octopus death grip Lila has around his neck and his eyes locked onto Cooper’s thin, lanky form. He doesn’t relax at all until Cooper dangles by his fingers from the vent and drops, landing in a crouch that, if Tony didn’t know better, might have
been copied straight from Iron Man.

Cooper straightens, then throws himself directly at Tony, necessitating he hastily raise the same arm he’d just dropped to catch him. Cooper hits him like a twelve-year-old linebacker, Lila shifts her weight at the same time, and Tony crashes down, twisting desperately to fall with the kids above him.

He ends up in the bottom, with Cooper sprawled across his chest and Lila clinging to the side of his head. He lays there for a moment, trying to catches his breath, patting Cooper's back gently with one hand and clutching Lila's shoulder with the other.

“Not that I mind spending time with you,” he says, and impresses himself with how strained he doesn't sound, “but do your parents know where you are?”

“You're a parent,” Cooper says, flashing him a defiant glare before burying his face in Tony's chest again. “You know where we are.”

Tony's mouth opens and closes as the world tips sideways and upside down. “But I'm not…” He snaps his mouth closed again because he doesn't think he can speak without his voice cracking.

“Yes you are,” Lila says, fierce as her brother, and shoves away from Tony so she too can glare at him. “Daddy said we were keeping you. You said we could keep you.”

God, these kids are going to kill him. Because he can’t help it, he reaches out to smooth Lila's hair back from her face. “Sometimes things just don’t work out, little Barton,” he says quietly. “You can't keep someone if things aren't working. It's not good for anyone.”

Cooper sighs and gets off Tony, sits back with his legs folded under him. He stares at Tony for a long moment. “Is it cos you don't get to have sex?”

It takes a lot for Tony’s brain to blue-screen, but Cooper’s question, frank and blunt and completely out of the blue, manages to do it in less than three seconds. It takes that long the words to sink in, because Tony doesn’t want to grasp them. And when he does, it triggers a coughing and choking fit so hard his vision goes grey and spotty. “What,” he croaks, squinting at Cooper through watery eyes, “the hell, kid? You really wanna have this conversation? Aren’t kids supposed to find it icky when their parents kiss and hold hands and stuff? Won’t you be traumatized for life?”

Cooper tilts his chin up, jaw set stubbornly. “Maybe. But you and Mom and Dad are being dumb. You love them, they love you. But you’re running away and they’re scared you’re going to leave.”

Lila turns big, liquid eyes to him, but her mouth is hard and firm. “No one is allowed to run away,” she says sternly. “We have to try and talk first. That's the rule.”

Tony’s breath hitches and his eyes water. “I thought,” he says, and sounds more fragile than he thought he would, voice shaky and thin, “they’d be catching up with Coulson. That there wouldn’t be room for --” His teeth clench on the words and no matter how hard he tries, he can’t bring himself to say them.

“I don’t like Phil,” Lila declares angrily, clings ferociously to Tony’s side. “He left and it made Mommy and Daddy really sad. They’re a lot happier with you. He better not come back. And you better come back, Papa.”

Tony swallows hard and closes his arms around Lila, buries his face in her hair, breathes in the scent of kid’s shampoo and presses a kiss to the crown of her head. He’s so fucked, because he knows there’s nothing he wouldn’t do for Lila, especially when she calls him Papa in that sweet tone.
“Okay,” he says quietly. Squeezes his eyes shut and steels himself as best he can. “Okay. Let’s go back and we’ll call your mom and dad, and we’ll talk. Just like the rules say.”

Lila erupts into smiles and tight hugs, and Cooper looks pleased and satisfied with himself. In short order, Tony’s ordering FRIDAY to close down the foundry back to standby, and he’s walking out the door with Lila on his hip and Cooper’s hand in his.

There’s still going to be a messy end to things, and he knows that. It’s always been the writing on the wall, because he’s been replaceable in every relationship he’s ever had, and though he tries to convince himself different, he can’t quite bring himself to believe the Bartons are any different. But he owes it to himself, to the kids, to them, to at least try, he supposes. It’s just going to be more painful to do it this way, but at least he’s used to the sensation of coming apart at the seams.

He tilts his head at Cooper, grins a bit. “Still want to have that traumatizing conversation about having sex there, kiddo?”

Cooper wrinkles his nose in disgust. “No, cos gross. But you’re all being dumb, and if someone had to talk about it…” He trails off and shrugs, and Tony can actually feel the grey creeping into his hair at the realization that Cooper has maybe a bit too much of Clint in him.

Lila lifts her head off his shoulder. “Papa, what’s having sex? Is it like having ice cream?”

When Tony’s coughing fit stops, he glares at Cooper balefully. “This is your fault,” he says, accusatory. “I should make you explain.”

Cooper grins wickedly. “You’re the parent, Pop.”

“Suppose I am.” Soft, wondrous, amazing, that fact. He’s a parent. He looks at Lila, and Lila looks patiently back at him. “You know, sweetheart, your dad’s really good at explaining things like that,” he says sweetly. “Why don’t you ask him tomorrow? I’m sure he’ll be happy to tell you all about it.”

Chapter End Notes

It isn’t just that I’ve been busy, folks. I’ve had a series of minor personal emergencies that culminated in the Spouse ending up in hospital for 10 days after collapsing and I had to take two weeks off school to become Solo Parent to a passel.

It’s fine now, I’m back in class this week, Spouse is home and recuperating, but I’ve not had my head in the game for quite awhile now. I will finish this story and am already planning the next one, so please just continue to be patient, and feel free to touch base with me on Tumblr in order to get updates on when the next bit of fic is coming out.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

This ran a little long. Chopping into two.

Natasha sits in the living room, flipping through the virtual pages of old SHIELD files on her Starkpad, dredged from the depths of the internet onto which she dumped it. She isn’t sure what she’s looking for, but like the old adage says, she’ll know what it is when she sees it.

Seeing Coulson alive and well had been a punch to the gut for her, a nasty shock to the system that’s made her do nothing for the last few hours but re-evaluate the deep, implicit trust she’d placed in him over the years of her work with SHIELD. In some ways, she’s harder hit by the duplicity in his survival than she was by the revelation that half of SHIELD had been HYDRA all along.

Cooper’s request for her to come babysit had been just the breath of fresh air she needed to get out of her rooms, away from bad memories and dark thoughts. With a breather from it, sitting with Nathan and rocking him back to sleep, she’s been able to distance herself from the worst of it.

Now, she’s just looking for answers. How and why, what decisions had been made. How deep it had gone. Not just for herself, but for Clint and Laura. Because as betrayed as she feels, it’s got to be a thousand times worse for them. Sooner or later, they might want answers too, and she’d like to have whatever ones she can find for them.

She sighs and tosses the pad aside, scrubbing her face and feeling a thousand years old. Even in their ostensibly “free” form, terabytes of data from the SHIELD servers remain heavily redacted and encrypted, and she keeps running into the most vaguely worded reports from around the time of the Chitauri invasion.

Dead end after dead end.

Then again, finding a report somewhere written by a SHIELD pencil-pusher about the whole thing probably wouldn’t improve the situation at all. If any of them want answers, they’re going to have to talk to Coulson. Maybe it’s for the best, she thinks as she stretches out the kinks in her back, careful as always with her neck. At least if Clint and Laura want to know the whys and hows, they can finally shut the door on something that’s done nothing but cause them pain for the last five years.

As difficult as it is for her to conceptualize it, Tony’s far better for them than Phil ever was anyway. She can’t remember the last time she ever saw the two of them as content as they are now.

If only they could get laid.

She smirks to herself, then gets up to answer the knock on the door, peering through the peephole to see Rhodes and Banner on the other side. Just like always, a fist briefly squeezes around her heart, but just like always, she shakes it off. Because it’s his fucking loss, not hers. “If you’re collecting for Assholes Anonymous,” she says as she opens the door, leaning against the jamb, “I gave at the office.”

Banner has the grace to look abashed and uncomfortable, but Rhodes just arches his eyebrows.
“What’d I do to you today, Natasha?” he asks, mild as a summer breeze. She notes he doesn’t ask what Banner did.

She stares at him with her best deadly-Russian-assassin impression, but the tiny smile she allows to peek through is genuine. “Nothing, Rhodey,” she says. “I just assume that, since you survived thirty years of being Stark’s BFF more or less unscathed, you’re an asshole in general.”

The side of Rhodes’ mouth curves up. “I’ll allow it.” His eyes skate past her into the empty den. “Nobody’s back yet?”

“Not yet.” She eyes them both, and figures she really needs to make a decision here, because she can’t leave them standing on the doorstep, and it would be terribly rude to close the door in their faces. “You can come in if you like, but Nathan just went to back to back to sleep. He’s under the weather again.”

Rhodes grimaces in sympathy. “Poor guy. Still teething?”

Natasha shakes her head, resumes her spot on the couch and tucks her feet under her again. “Strep this time.”

Banner clears his throat, soft and wary. “Do you want me to take a look at him?”

Natasha purses her lips, and Banner flinches hard and fast, which makes her blink. “Maybe if he wakes up again, big guy,” she says, still blinking. “But it’s really Laura’s call to make. I’m just here while everyone else is out.”

Banner nods and falls silent, sitting on the edge of the armchair and looking for all the world like he desperately wants to bolt. Natasha eyes him critically, and he gives her a nervous smile in reply. “How’s… how’s your neck doing?”

It’s really sad, Natasha thinks to herself with a wistful regret, how far they’ve all come and how far they’ve all fallen. “It’s been better,” she says, surprising herself a little with the honesty. “It’ll never been a hundred percent again, but as long as I’m careful, I can still do my job.”

His eyes meet hers, flicker away, meet hers again. “If there’s anything I can do…”

“I’ll come to you. I promise.” Impulsively, she reaches out and lays a hand on top of his, which is resting on his knee. Banner jumps, starts to jerk away, then cautiously slides his hand back under hers, turning it over and squeezing gently.

“Man,” Rhodes says, amused and aggrieved, “it’s like watching a pair of horny teenagers at a high school prom. It’s like 90210, only with superpowers, around here lately.”

Natasha shoots Rhodes a filthy look, which she’s disgruntled to discover is completely ineffective on him. “Shouldn’t you be out looking for our wayward billionaire?” she says pointedly.

Rhodes shrugs and stretches back against his chair, folds his arms under his head. “I don’t see why. Tony’s a big kid, he’s entitled to his privacy, and I’m not his boyfriend. That dude is already out looking, and so’s the package-deal girlfriend, so as far as I’m concerned, it’s being handled by the professionals.”

Natasha tries the deadly-Russian-assassin look again, thinks she sees an edge of discomfort in Rhodes’ eyes, decides to count it as a win. “Then why are you here?”

Rhodes’ smile fades slow and steady. “For Tony,” he says. “In case he needs someone to either back
him up in a fist-fight, or drop his ass like a sack of potatoes and sit on him so he doesn’t run again. I won’t know which until he and the Bartons get back.”

As reasons to involve oneself in business that isn’t theirs, Rhodes actually has a good one. Natasha finds herself nodding slowly, impressed with his reasoning. She glances at Banner. “What about you?”

He shrugs, looks uncomfortable. “I… don’t know. I owe Tony, though. I left him holding the bag back when…” Banner’s eyes shutter closed, shadow over, and Natasha figures he’s thinking about the mess with Ultron and Johannesburg specifically.

“Think we’ve all done that at some point or another,” Rhodes chips in, then glances over his shoulder as there’s a knock on the door. “Grand Central get installed here without me noticing? No, I’ll get it, Natasha. Don’t get up. Gotta stretch my legs anyway.”

In due course, Scott Lang and Hope van Dyne have joined Banner and Rhodes in the living room, squishing Natasha down further on the couch, and explaining how they heard through the Avengers’ rumor mill and came to see what they could do to help.

“I thought we could take Cooper and Lila for a few nights,” Scott says. “Maggie and Pax are in Europe for the next week on vacation, so we have Cassie.”

“She’s been asking to have Cooper and Lila over,” Hope adds, and glances at Scott, before going back to Natasha. “We figured now might be a good time to extend the invitation. Give everybody some breathing room.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Natasha says, head tilted in thought. “If I take Nathan for a couple of days, it would give them time to…”

“Get laid?” Banner smiles wryly, glances at all the eyes suddenly on him. “What? I just said what we’re all thinking. Hasn’t exactly been hard to suss out, with all the frustrated scowling Barton and Tony have been doing, and with how guilty Laura’s looking.”

“I’m pretty sure I walked in on them about to do it in the lab,” Scott offers, grimaces and scratches the back of his neck. “Never look at that bench again the same way,” he mutters.

“I ran into them in the hot tub after training a few days back,” Hope says. “I felt terrible about interrupting them, but I needed the heat after I pulled a muscle in my back and heat packs weren’t helping.”

“Charity auction Saturday night,” Rhodes says cheerfully. “Cockblocked them the whole time. I didn’t know the Bartons had come to surprise Tony, and I kinda co-opted him for the entire party.”

“Add in the kids and Assemble calls,” Natasha says thoughtfully, “and what does that leave them for time for themselves?”

Not for the first time has Natasha been in a room where she’s confident everyone is completely in tune with a plan being formulated, but it might be the first time that plan involves sex without either blackmail or assassination following it. She finds she much prefers this sort of conspiracy to the other.

oOoOoOo

Tony’s stomach is churning by the time he gets back to door of his ho-- the Bartons’ home, and he eyes the doorknob like it’s a live snake ready to bite. He doesn’t know what he’s going to find
inside, but his mind is helpfully conjuring images of Coulson and Clint and Laura in all manner of situations, from having all his meager possessions boxed and waiting for him to pick up, to full X-rated fucking on the couch.

Cooper, on the other hand, has no such compunctions about the doorknob and hipchecks the door open like he usually does, barrelling on through with, “I’ll call Mom and Dad, Pop. You go sit in your chair,” flung back over his shoulder. “Aunt Nat! Guess what? We found Papa Tony!”

Lila scrambles out of his arms, and he sets her on her feet. She stares up at him with stubborn determination. “No running,” she says firmly, and reaches out to take his hand. “C’mon. We’ll go sit down until Mom and Daddy get back.”

Tony sighs with a wry smile, but lets Lila tug him along into the living room. He hesitates when he sees the sea of faces looking expectantly at him, because out of all the things he’s envisioned on the march to the gallows between the foundry and the front door, but it wasn’t to see Scott, Hope, Bruce, Rhodey and Natasha lounging in the den like it’s an intervention. Lila tugs again and he shuffles to the armchair Bruce clears out of to let him sit. “What’s going on?” he asks as Lila clambers up into his lap. “If there’s a camera crew for A&E here, I’m going to be very upset.”

“No cameras, Tones,” Rhodey says with a big smile. “Just friends hanging out. Hey there, short stack. We on for checkers this weekend?”

“Yup,” Lila chirps from his lap. “And you better bring your game face this time, Uncle Jim. I won’t go so easy on you this time.”

Tony’s eyebrows crawl into his hairline. “Uncle Jim? When did that happen?”

Rhodey shrugs with that same easy smile still on his face. “About the same time you became Papa Tony, I imagine. Perils of being your brother, brother.”

That damned lump is back, even if he’s not terribly surprised. Rhodey, despite their ups and downs, has always been forthcoming and honest with him. He clears his throat. “And the rest of you are here for what, schadenfreude and popcorn?”

“I’m babysitting,” Natasha says, waggles the baby monitor at him. “At least until you and Clint and Laura all get home. Then I’m kidnapping Nathan. Aunt Nat needs to spoil the hell out of him, and this is the best opportunity I’m going to get.”

“We came to see if Lila and Cooper wanted to come stay with us and Cassie for a few days,” Hope says.

“Thought we’d go camping,” Scott adds. “Fresh air, room to run, no parents to interrupt?” He has the balls to wink at Tony when Tony blinks at him, but Tony is avenged by Hope when she elbows Scott sharply in the ribs. “Ow,” Scott complains, glaring at Hope as he rubs the sore spot. “That was how you phrased it!”

Hope ignores Scott and smiles sweet as sugar at Tony. “What Scott’s saying is that we’d love to take the kids out camping with Cassie for a few days.”

Few things can drag Lila Barton away from Tony, and Tony knows this. Tony also knows that one of those very few things is an opportunity to spend time with Cassie Lang. Lila perks up like a mongoose popping out of its den. “I’m going to go pack my bag!” she says and scrambles off Tony’s lap. Then she stops, turns to him and looks up at him. “Is it okay if I pack a bag, Papa? It’s okay if I go?”
Tony bites his lip, because this is his first official decision as a parent, and it’s probably going to be his last, meaning it’s also his only. “You’ll have to double check with your mom and dad,” he says softly, “but I don’t mind.”

Lila’s grin lights up her face. “Yay! Thanks Papa!” And she scurries out of the room with a skip in her step. “Cooper! We’re gonna go camping with Scott and Hope and Cassie! C’mon! Pack your bag!”

“That was well-handled,” Natasha says, approval clear in her tone. “You make a good parent.”

Tony snorts, shifts uncomfortably under her piercing stare. “Your standards are low, Romanoff.”

Glances at Bruce then. “Why are you here? Trouble sleeping?”

Bruce has the good grace to wince and look abashed. “I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t really know what I’m doing here. I just couldn’t… not be here.”

Weirdly, that makes more sense to Tony than almost anything else he could have said, and Tony nods thoughtfully. “Okay then. So let me get this straight. You all showed up here to provide moral support, light-hearted mockery, and child distraction services for the next few days?” He shakes his head with a small, hopeless smirk. “It’s not going to take that long or be that disruptive for me to move out.”

In reply, Natasha takes a quarter out of her pocket and slaps it onto the coffee table, while holding Tony’s gaze with her own. “You are a fucking idiot if you think those two are going to replace you with Phil Coulson.”

“It’s not a pay-to-swear service,” Tony mumbles, and has to drop his eyes away from her.

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Natasha, to Tony’s eternal surprise, starts clearing people out of the room soon afterward. Scott and Hope herd Cooper and Lila and their bags towards their suite of rooms, and Bruce carries the overstuffed diaper bag for Natasha, who spirits Nathan away with the kind of self-satisfied smile that makes Tony think she’s actually stealing him for herself.

And then it’s just him and Rhodey, staring at each other over the coffee table.

“You look tired,” Rhodey says, shifts on the chair to stretch his legs with a faint grimace. “How’re you doing, Tones?”

Tony smirks, left side of his mouth tipping up. “I have no fucking idea,” he replies, hoarse and raw. “I don’t know what’s going to happen when they come through that door, but my track record doesn’t lead me to believe it’ll be positive.”

Rhodey shakes his head. “You are the dumbest genius in the world, you know that? You don’t know what’s going to happen when Clint and Laura come through the door? Then you haven’t been paying attention. You know what?” he adds, shaking his cuff back on his arm and pressing two fingers to his temple, closing his eyes. “I’m going to predict that they’re going to be happy to see you, I’m going to get kicked out, and then you’ll have an argument and you’ll fight, and then after the argument you’ll make up and there’s gonna be a lot of things that I don’t even want to think about happening.”

Tony stares at him. “Quite an imagination you have there, Rhodes,” he says. “Are you reading Carol’s romance novels again?”
“No need to imagine anything. Laura told me that’s what was going to happen.” He glances towards
the door at the sudden noise of footsteps and voices just beyond it. “Sure you’ll see for yourself here
in a moment though. Sounds like they just got home.”

Tony didn’t think his shoulders could get any tighter, but they manage it at that news, and his hands
white-knuckle on the arms of his chair. “Awesome,” he choking out. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Rhodes gets to his feet and moves towards the door, claps Tony on the shoulders as he passes him.
“Have faith, Tones,” he says with a chuckle. “Despite your deeply-held beliefs and all evidence to
the contrary, the universe isn’t really out to get you.”

"I'll believe that when I see it," he mutters back, then steels himself as the door opens and Rhodey
exits with a loud reminder of how big his shoulder-mounted machine gun is, if Tony needs it.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

There's a hefty amount of explicit sex in this. You may wish to avert your eyes.

The door shuts with a resounding clang that sounds like a guillotine falling, and Tony swallows hard. The last thing in the world he wants to do is stand up and face the music, but he steels himself and forces his body to stand and turn towards the Bartons.

Clint and Laura are standing just inside the door, Clint with his arm around Laura’s shoulders, Laura clutching the lapel of Clint’s jacket with a bloodless fist, and both of them are staring at Tony with stricken, pale, relieved expressions.

He shifts uncomfortably and drops his gaze for a second before forcing it back up. “Hi,” he says lamely.

Laura whimpers, abrupt and sharp, and breaks free of Clint to rush across the floor to Tony. Tony flinches and braces for anything from a shrieking tirade to a physical blow, but all she does is throw her arms around him, cling tightly and sob into his chest. In utter bafflement, Tony hugs her back, and looks wild-eyed at Clint. “What do I do?”

Clint just shakes his head, throat working. “You could try not being the Great Disappearing Assholini. The hell were you thinking, Tony?”

There’s less heat in the statement than Tony thinks he rightly deserves. He winces anyway, because it’s a well-placed shot from the man who never misses. “That it had been fun, but it was clearly over.”

Clint’s stricken expression abruptly shifts into a scowl. “And you just made this decision without asking us. Or informing us. Or anything at all involving us.”

Arms full of a still-crying and clinging Laura, Tony reels for something that makes sense to reply with. “I heard… I thought…” He snaps his mouth shut and clears his throat, shakes his head. “I didn’t think…”

“No,” Clint snaps, takes a step forward before stopping again. “You didn’t think. You’ve never thought. We can tell you and tell you, but you never fucking believe us. I’m starting to wonder, Tony, how much of it is your fucked up dating history, and how much is your own lack of self worth.”

What the hell is he supposed to say to that? He flounders for a reply, but again comes up short. “I…”

“I told you,” Laura says, sniffling and pulling away from him to wipe her eyes. “I told you we were picky about who we let into our lives. It isn’t just anyone who catches our fancy, Tony. It’s not any random person. We’re careful about that. You’re here because you and we choose it, not because you’re disposable.” She shakes her head, clears her throat. “I need a minute,” she says. “I’m going to go splash some water on my face. Just… give me a minute.”

“Of course,” Tony says, and the world yawns under him, reducing him to about two inches in
height. He scrubs at his face as she strides away, and a flicker of hope he has no business feeling sparks when she looks back at him, as if reassuring herself he’s still there.

Clint sighs heavily, wipes a hand down his face. “I should let the kids know you’re okay,” he says. “We woke Cooper to keep an eye on Nathan and Lila when we left. He’s probably gone back to sleep. I’ll be back, Tony. Don’t move. We’re not done, okay? We need to talk about this.”

Tony flinches and he grits his teeth. “About the kids, Clint,” he says, “they’re not here. Natasha took Nathan for a few days, and Scott and Hope came for Lila and Cooper to take them camping with Cassie. I, uh…” He squeezes his eyes shut. “I told them it was okay with me, but they’d have to check with you. They cleared out about twenty minutes before you guys got home.”

Dead silence reigns for a full minute, and Tony cautiously opens his eyes to see Clint staring at him with a completely inscrutable expression. “I, uh…”

Clint holds up a hand, and Tony abruptly closes his mouth. “Wait a second. Are you trying to tell me that there are no children in the house at the moment, and there won’t be until at least Sunday, and possibly longer?” Tony nods, and Clint starts laughing. “Well then, that changes everything,” he says, and crouches to untie his boots.

“It does?” Tony’s mouth runs dry as Clint straightens up from his crouch, shrugs off his jacket and hauls his shirt over his head as his jacket hits the floor. He backs up as Clint stalks towards him, nearly trips over the coffee table in his retreat, and only manages to catch himself at the last second. Which puts him in an ideal position for Clint to reach out, hook his fingers through Tony’s belt loop, and yank him forward, against firm planes and soft skin his hands can’t help but skate across. “Uh huh. We can fight later. Carpe canem, right? I am seizing the fucking canine, Tony, before Lila decides she forgot something or Captain Cockblocker knocks on the door to give me blue balls for the fourth time in a week.” The fingers threading through his hair and around the back of his skull still, soften, go hesitant. “Unless you don’t want to. I mean, if you think we’re just interested in you for the sex, we don’t have to do a goddamn thing. We love you. I love you. You’re not a convenient quickie to me.”

To his eternal horror, Tony finds himself choking on the giant ball of tears that just formed in his throat, but he spreads his hands across Clint’s shoulders, splays his fingers over Clint’s spine and neck, swallows hard at the pulse of sharp arousal that slams through him at the promising gleam in those eyes. “Shut up, Barton,” he says, smiling and husky, “and kiss me already. I love you too mmmph.”

Clint yanks his head down, shutting him up with a heated, hard kiss that sears Tony all the way down to his toes, leaves him aching and hard, and draws a muffled, strangled moan from his throat. His fingers flex on Clint’s shoulders as the doubt rears up again, just for a second, and he debates pushing him away, pulling away, finish breaking up and getting on with the remnants of his sorry life.

But something changes then, some indefinable shift in Clint's posture, in the suddenly trembling pressure of fingertips across his face. Their kiss slows, softens, deepens into something languid and intimate, and Tony gulps, because there's no faking that kind of emotion. The last doubt, the last shred of resistance, fades away, and he sighs, soft and satisfied, and slides his arms slow and warm around Clint's back, pulls him tight.

Light footsteps behind him announce Laura’s return, a second before hands slide under the hem of his shirt and up across the curves of his spine and shoulders, and he has to break away from Clint, gasping, to let her push his shirt over his head. She presses a kiss between his shoulderblades,
smooths her palms down his arms, over his back and rests them on his hips. “I thought you’d be fighting,” she says, and tucks her thumbs into the band of his jeans, reaching around until she can lazily pop the button and drag the zipper down.

“No kids in the house,” Clint says muzzily, tilts his head to the side so Tony can kiss under his jaw and across his neck, which he is happy to oblige Clint by doing. “Carpe canem.”

Laura’s smile curves against his back, and her hands hook under his jeans and his boxers both, pulling them both down over his hips. “Diem, Clint,” she says, circles Tony’s erection with a light stroke, and Tony jerks helplessly, moaning and stuttering into Clint’s collarbone.

“I said what I meant,” Clint says shakily, still clutching the back of Tony’s head with one hand, and Tony doesn’t have much presence of mind left after Clint’s free hand wraps around Laura’s hand and his cock, firm and confident, and Tony’s knees buckle for a split second and a loud, guttural moan tears free of his throat. “Jesus,” Clint says, breathless and shaky. “Find a couch or something before you fall over and take us with you.”

Laura pulls away briefly, and Tony hears the whisper of cloth hitting the floor before she’s back, bare, warm breasts pressing against his back, hands tugging gently at his hips to guide him out of the jeans still puddled around his ankles. He manages to step out of them without tripping, and makes it to the couch before collapsing on top of it, pulling Clint and Laura down with him.

There’s a bad moment where he thinks he’s fallen on top of Laura, but then she wriggles out from under his arm and bends to kiss him, hard and fast. He reaches for her, but she scoots back out of his reach, draping herself across the armrest at the other end of the couch. “No,” she says with a wicked smile, and pops the snap on her jeans. “I’m just gonna watch for a bit.”

Tony opens his mouth to protest, but his attention is abruptly co-opted by the sound of Clint’s zipper coming down, and he doesn’t have the coherent thought to form words anymore. He reaches out to push the denim off Clint’s hips, listening to Clint’s breath go loud and ragged as he lifts his cock, hard and quivering and smooth, out of the confines of his boxers. “Jesus, Barton,” he says and his throat is raspy and ruined. “You sound like you’re about ready to come already.”

“Tony,” and Clint’s just as throaty and ruined as he looks down at Tony with heavy, gleaming eyes, “I’ve been trying to fuck you for a week, and I think today I might actually manage it, so of course--”

“You talk too much,” Tony murmurs, and leans forward, closes his lips around the head of Clint’s cock, and sucks him into his throat.

“I’m fucking about ready to fucking come-- ohjesusfuckingchrist.” Both of Clint’s hands fist tight in his hair and Tony groans in the back of his throat at the helpless, breathless noises over his head.

“God, you two are so beautiful,” Laura says, soft and wondrous, an edgy hitch in her that pulls Tony’s attention briefly away from the heavy weight on his tongue and the flex of solid leg muscles under his hands. He glances at her and the sight nearly undoes him, because Laura’s naked, watching them both with hungry eyes and a hand circling light and steady over her clit. “I’ll never get tired of watching this.”

Clint pulls away from his hands, snapping Tony’s attention back to him as he finishes shucking off his jeans and boxers, cheeks flushed and hair disarrayed. Tony couldn’t find a coherent phrase to speak even if his mouth worked and his throat hadn’t gone parched-earth dry, watching him walk back. He thinks he might have whimpered, needy and high, but Clint makes some sort of hand signal to Laura, and the next thing Tony knows, he’s sprawled back against the couch, a hand on Clint’s head and one on Laura’s, and rocking and thrusting erratically upwards as they work in tandem to
lick and suck him from tip to root like they’re sharing an ice cream cone.

A teasing, slick fingertip circles the pucker of his ass, and his back bows as he comes almost completely off the couch, and the eager, noisy whine that comes out of his throat is borderline inhuman. “I think he likes it,” he hears one of them say, but the voice is too rough to tell if it’s Clint or Laura, and he babbles something back that he thinks is yesyesyesIlikeitdon’tstop, but might not actually be that coherent.

Fingers slide into him, gliding slowly to work him open, and he keens, legs trembling and eyes and teeth clenched shut. A hot, wet mouth engulfs his cock, bobbing in time to the rhythm of the fingers fucking in and out of his ass. He almost misses the shift of weight away from him, but with supreme effort he opens his eyes to see Laura about to pull away again, with lust-blown eyes and heaving breasts.

“Come...back,” he pants, swipes out and snags her by the waist. She yips and wiggles, but Tony pries his other hand free of the death grip it has on Clint's hair and drags her over his chest, grabbing her ass and hauling her moaning and squealing towards his face.

He falls on Laura’s pussy like a starving man, staving off the orgasm he can already feel building in his balls by focusing all the scattered attention he can muster on bringing Laura to a shrieking, grinding, gushing orgasm with his tongue and mouth before Clint can manage the same to him. Her fingernails dig into his scalp, and tension vibrates through her legs, and Tony redoubles his efforts, sucking and licking and growling into her dripping cunt.

He’s on the edge of coming when Clint pulls away from him, and he all but screams in frustration, muffled by Laura’s thighs, Laura’s sobbing moans. Clint’s only gone for a second, long enough to slick himself with more lube. As Laura shrieks and thrashes and shoves at Tony until she’s falling back onto the other cushion, twitching and gasping, Clint pushes into Tony, falling to his elbows and hauling Tony with badly shaking hands into a tongue-twisting kiss that tastes like all three of them.

“Oh fuck,” Clint chokes out, and his forehead touches Tony’s chest, and his hips jerk, pounding with ragged, rough strokes. He works a hand between them, wraps it around Tony’s cock and Tony’s washed away in the white noise of animal sounds and sheer sensation.

“I love you,” he rasps, flinging his hands out to the side, questing blindly for something to hold onto. Laura’s fingers tangle with his, thread through and lock tight. Clint groans and swears and jerks violently tense for a long, string-out moment before sagging with a moan of relief. Before Tony can do much more than register that Clint’s come and he hasn’t, Laura’s in his lap, guiding his cock into her still-quivering cunt with faint, shocky gasps and a hitching “I love you too.”

He grabs her hips hard enough to leave bruises he’s going to apologize profusely for when passion cools and rationality returns, hanging on for dear life as she rides his cock hard and fast, kissing him savagely until her breath is hissing through her teeth and her pussy’s clenching and squeezing his orgasm from him, with a hoarse cry and straining muscles.

They stagger together into the bathroom off the master bedroom, take turns in the shower, and tumble damp and clean into a pile of tangled limbs and blissful, satisfied smiles. It’s quite some time later when Tony stirs from his doze to find Laura kissing her way down his chest and Clint nuzzling into his neck.

“You two are going to be the death of me,” he groans faintly, curls an arm around Clint and strokes other hand through Laura’s hair. “I’m not all that young anymore. I don’t think you’re going to wake it up right now.”
“The tabloids lied about that? Say it ain’t so.” Clint smiles against his throat and slings an arm across Tony’s chest. “You owe me an argument.”

“Oh, is it that time already?” Laura murmurs from somewhere around Tony’s hip, and moves back up to curl into Tony’s free side.

Tony tries to tense, but is too bonelessly satiated to do more than twitch. “This is not usually how my arguments start,” he says lazily, works an arm around Laura and shuts his eyes to enjoy the warmth of being sandwiched between them. “There’s usually a lot more clothes and shouting involved.”

“We like to plan ahead,” Clint says. “We’re perfectly positioned for make-up sex by starting the argument naked in bed.” He shifts around until he can prop his chin on his hands. “Why’d you run?”

There are a hundred ways he could answer that, from the flippant to the brutally honest. And he knows that he could answer any of those hundred ways without the conversation ending, so he decides to go for the efficient route and reaches for brutal honesty. “I thought that you would decide to get back together with Coulson, and I wanted to go with a bit of dignity.”


“That’s two,” Laura says mildly, rising to an elbow and looking down at Tony with the kind of practiced glare that simultaneously turns him on and intimidates the shit out of him. “You don’t have the luxury of running away like that anymore, Tony,” she says with a stern and gimlet eye. “You’ve made it somewhere none of us have ever been. You’re not a third, you’re a partner, full stop. We’ve never had this before, Clint and I, and I don’t think you have either, so mistakes are going to be made. But you have to stay and face the mistakes. We all do.”

“No one gets to run away,” Clint says quietly. “That’s a rule for every Barton after that shitshow at the airport.”

“That’s three,” Laura says, and Clint sighs in exasperation.

Tony frowns. “But, Coulson--”

“Maybe Phil might have made it here,” Laura says, gentle but still firm. “But he didn’t, and then he disappeared. The second he did that, he lost his place in our lives, and even if we’d decided to take him back? He’d never make it here, because we couldn’t trust him to not do it again. And we can trust you not to do that, now that you know.”

Tony knows he needs to be grateful that they’re so forgiving, but he also knows that they’re not going to be after he confesses his next sin. “I knew Coulson was alive,” he says quietly, feels Clint go still and Laura gasp softly. “He came to try and recruit me while you all were still in Wakanda, wanted my help with the Maximus situation. I turned him down and didn’t see him again. I…” He knows he’s going to sound like Rogers, and he hates himself for it, but he can’t help himself. “I didn’t know he was your third. Not until last night.”

He waits, holding his breath, for their reaction. Their rejection. The yelling and the betrayed looks, and the guilt nearly chokes him alive. For a moment, there’s only silence, and then Laura blows out a shaky breath and Clint grunts, and both of them go back to snuggling into Tony. Which confuses the shit out of him. “You’re not… angry.”

Laura arches an eyebrow. “Why would we be? Maybe a heads up would have been nice, but you didn’t know we’d need one.”
“Vision’s the mind-reader,” Clint mumbles, then shifts to nip at the skin over Tony’s ribs. “Unless you’ve got some weird psychic ability you haven’t told us about.”

He hisses in a breath, and lets it out shaky and slow. “No,” he says, bites his lip to muffle the groan when Laura curls her hand around his testicles and gently starts massaging. Not-as-young-as-he-used-to-be or not, his cock twitches with sluggish interest. “I’m not psychic.”

“Then let it go,” Laura says, and stretches to kiss him, languid and deep. “You couldn’t possibly have known, because we didn’t tell you.”

“I should have put it together,” he mumbles into Laura’s mouth. “It was right there in front of me.”

Clint sighs. “Knock it the fuck off, Tony, and I’m not paying into the pot for that one, Laura. We didn’t tell you. You could have had all the suspicions in the world, but we didn’t tell you. We probably should have, so all of this could have been over and done with instead of twisting you up like a fucking Christmas ribbon.”

“If there’s any blame to be had,” Laura says, and shudders with a gasp. Tony glances down to see Clint’s fingers sliding his fingers up her inner thigh. “If there’s any blame to be had, we share it too. It’s not all on you.”

“But I mmmph.” If Clint is going to shut him up all the time with those impatient, heated kisses, Tony thinks, grabbing at the back of Clint’s head with a thready moan, he needs to be mouthier than he usually is.

Clint breaks off, flushed and panting faintly. “I’d really like to be done with the fighting now,” he says plaintively, and nudges into Tony’s hip with his half-hard cock, “and move onto the fucking. That’s always my favorite part.”

“You’re insatiable,” Tony grumbles, but lets Clint roll him on top and bends to suck Clint’s earlobe into his mouth. He shudders at the touch of Laura’s hands skating up his spine and back down over the curve of his ass, and he arches like a cat to follow her palm.

A knock at the door freezes them all, snaps their heads around to the open bedroom door. They wait, still and silent for a moment, Tony pressing into Clint and Laura on her knees beside them, and just as Tony’s about to shrug and go back to the very important business of making out with one of his partners, the knock echoes again.

“Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me,” Clint says.

Tony gives him a wry, sideways smirk. “At least we got to get off once before the world reminded us it hates us,” he says.

Laura blows out an annoyed breath and slides off the bed backwards, snatching her robe off the hook on her side of the bed and slinging it on. “You boys go back to what you’re doing,” she says, tying the sash with sharp, abbreviated gestures that make Tony feel very sorry for whoever’s on the other side of the door. “And since neither of you are particularly shy, make some noise. Whoever’s knocking at--” She glances at the clock. “--half past three in the morning deserves to be traumatized with the sounds of really messy sex.”

He watches Laura stalk out of the bedroom, admires the sway of her ass in the robe, and then looks back down at Clint, who’s smirking beneath him.

“You heard the evil mastermind, Stark,” he says, and rolls his hips to grind his erection into Tony’s now fully-interested cock. “C’mere and fuck me.”
“Work, work, work,” he grumbles, and reaches into the nightstand drawer for the bottle of lubricant.

Laura fumes as she crosses the living room, hands fisted on the tails of her sash. Not for the first time in the last few months, she debates the merits of moving the whole Barton family back to the farm for awhile, just to get away from the constant interruptions that come from living in a compound with a dozen Avengers and their families. If nothing else, when she sends the kids on their sleepovers, she’d be guaranteed no interruptions during the really important times in her relationship.

She pauses, tilting her head and smiling when Clint groans in the stuttered, noisy way he always does when he’s the one getting fucked, and she bites her lip at the sharp arousal throbbing through her at the sound. She reorients on the door when the knock echoes again. The annoyance returns with a vengeance, brings impatience and aggravation with it, because she doesn’t want to be answering the door. She wants to be back in the bedroom, watching her partners making love to each other.

She yanks open the door to catch Steve Rogers in the act of raising his hand to knock again, and arches an eyebrow sharply at him when he just stares at her in shock. “Can I help you?” she asks, as politely as she ever is.

His eyes rake over her, discomfort clear in his flustered expression, and clears his throat. “I heard about the--” he begins, but Clint chooses that moment to moan Tony’s name, and Tony rasps words of love in return, and Steve’s mouth abruptly snaps shut.

She’s probably enjoying the way his face goes shocked and flushed a little too much, but he’s delaying her return to the bedroom, so she doesn’t bother chiding herself too much. She just waits, eyebrow still raised. “You were saying?” she says, sweet and soft.

Steve coughs and shakes his head sharply, backs away with both hands raised. “It can wait,” he says. “Just, ah, tell Tony and Clint that--” His mouth snaps shut as another series of moans floats out of the bedroom. “Meeting tomorrow,” he says, in a rush, then turns and high-tails it back down the hall.

Laura shuts the door with a satisfied smile and flicks the lock with a determined twist of her wrist. “FRIDAY,” she says, unbelting her robe again as she moves back towards the bedroom, “no more disturbances or interruptions. For at least forty eight hours.”

“You got it, missus boss,” FRIDAY replies. “Forty eight hour lockdown of communications is now engaged. Enjoy your weekend.”

“I fully intend to,” she murmurs, and tosses the robe aside. She’ll pick it up later. Much, much later.

End Notes

I am on Tumblr @allthemarvelousrage. Ask box is open for anons and open users. And I don’t block IMs.

Please, if you do rec me or link my works over there, feel free to tag me also. :)
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