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**Category:** F/M, Gen, M/M  
**Fandom:** Marvel Cinematic Universe, Iron Man (Movies), The Avengers (Marvel Movies), Captain America (Movies)  
**Relationship:** Pepper Potts/Tony Stark, Clint Barton/Phil Coulson/Natasha Romanov, Eventual 0T6, eventual Tony Stark/Steve Rogers  
**Character:** Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, Thor (Marvel), Bruce Banner, Phil Coulson, Natasha Romanov, Pepper Potts, Clint Barton, James "Rhodey" Rhodes, James "Bucky" Barnes  
**Additional Tags:** Age Regression/De-Aging, Age Play, Non-Sexual Age Play, The de-aging is non-con, The age-play is entirely consensual, Eventual 0T6 - Freeform, Everyone Is Poly Because Avengers, Iron Man 3 AU, Tony-centric, little Tony, Post-Avengers (2012), Post-Captain America: The Winter Soldier, Shifting perspective, Food Issues, Anxiety Attacks, Doting Steve, Protective Everyone, Protective Jarvis (Iron Man movies), Slow Build, Infantilism, Kink Negotiation, Tony Stark Has A Heart, Hand wavy science, Team as Family, Howard Stark's A+ Parenting, internalized ableism, Diapers, Some spoilers for Marvel: Agents of SHIELD and Captain America: Civil War  
**Series:** Part 1 of *(That Would Be) Enough*  
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**Summary**

One phone call from Pepper Potts to Phil Coulson, and one seemingly misguided act of magical penance on Loki’s part alters the course of events in Iron Man 3. Already in the midst of a breakdown after the Battle of New York, Tony is de-aged, and the Avengers are faced with a choice: assemble themselves into a makeshift family, or risk losing Iron Man (and Tony).

**Notes**

Holy crow, this is terrifying. I've been active in fandom for almost fifteen years, but in a strictly kudos/reblogging/admiring from afar capacity, because anxiety. But I've been so inspired by my recent nose-dive into Avengers/MCU fandom that I worked up the courage to write and post a thing. It's unbeta'd, and a first attempt. There are probably a lot of problems, and while I welcome both anyone who wishes to beta this monster (it's currently
at 70,000+ words) and constructive criticism, please, please be gentle. (And Americans, please know that I'm Canadian so sometimes my spelling is going to be a bit different from yours.)

I'm doing some hand-wavy stuff with the timelines here, but essentially, the story is set post-Avengers and post-Captain America: Winter Soldier. It will borrow plot elements from Iron Man 3, but it is decidedly an AU right from the start (we begin with Pepper and Tony in New York, not Malibu, for instance.). I'll also borrow elements from the Hawkeye, Black Widow (mainly backstory), and make mention of Ms. Marvel and Moon Girl comics; no major spoilers about those, I don't think, but if you're worried and want more information, just let me know.

This story will feature a non-consensual de-aging, followed by a later (entirely consensual) ageplay dynamic between Tony and the Avengers. While there is an (extremely!) slow build toward an OT6 relationship happening, both the ageplay and the de-aging are and will remain entirely non-sexual.
(That Would Be) Enough

Chapter One: Help

Phil’s phone rings on a Wednesday. It’s been a day of nearly endless calls, so this would hardly be remarkable, except for the fact that isn’t his general-purpose Shield phone (an iPhone, a fact which Tony has complained endlessly about since they’ve known one another). It’s his second phone, his Avengers-specific StarkPhone. It has also been conspicuously silent ever since his return from the not-quite-dead.

He lunges across his desk for it with such speed that the still-healing wounds on his chest protest loudly. When he looks down at the screen, breath coming out in painful wheezes, and sees an unfamiliar number (rather than Clint’s, or even Tony’s), the disappointment is almost as acutely painful as his aggravated injuries. Phil debates not answering, taking a moment to gather himself and then returning the call later after some quick tracing work on the number and location. But maybe there’s something to that whole near-death-experiences making a person more optimistic thing, because he can’t stop himself from bringing the phone to his ear with a hopeful sort of grimace.

“Coulson.”

“Oh Phil, thank God.” The voice on the other end, though not one he expected, is instantly recognizable, except for the fact that Pepper Potts is endlessly steady and practically fearless, and right now she sounds neither.

“Pepper? What’s wrong?” He hears her take a few steadying breaths, hears the sniffling sound that suggests she’s been crying, and Phil is moving rapidly from concerned to alarmed. Pain in his chest nearly forgotten, he’s on his feet. “Pepper, I need you to talk to me. Are you hurt? Are you or Tony in imminent danger of any kind? Do I need to alert SHIELD?”

“No,” she stutters, “no SHIELD. He’d never forgive me.” As a CEO and, really, just as a person, Pepper is precise. Pepper is exact. And if she’s answering only the last of his questions, then the answers to the first two are not good. For a long moment, Phil considers calling in SHIELD reinforcements anyway. He’s hardly at his physical best, and with Pepper sounding so shaken and Tony likely still recovering from what happened in New York, they’re hardly going to make the most effective show of physical strength, even with Tony’s armour. As a mental compromise, he quickly locks up his office and begins moving in the direction of the parkade, hand hovering over the panic button in his pocket that Fury had insisted he carry during his recuperation.

“Pepper, listen to me. I’m going to help you, we’re going to get this sorted out, but I need to come into this as prepared as I can, alright? Are you or Tony in physical danger?”

“No. It’s not…not his body I’m worried about.” Her voice, he notes, is steadier now, and he decides to wait out that ominous pronouncement, confident that Pepper will offer more information when she’s able. “It’s, he hasn’t been okay since New York. Flying into that portal…it’s barely sleeps, almost never eats, and he’s building suit after suit. He accidentally called one into bed with us last night, I woke up with it looming over me like—like some ridiculously terrifying metal ghost. It wasn’t supposed to be like this, Phil! I thought the whole point of the Avengers was that
none of them were going to be on their own! Where the hell are they? Why am I fighting to keep all the broken pieces of him together by myself?”

She’s nearly screaming by the end of her explanation, but Phil’s senses feel dulled by the shock of how unendingly stupid they’ve all been. Stark had returned from Afghanistan and demanded Burger King, had flown through a portal and asked for shwarma, and in both cases, he’d gone immediately back to work right after. There’d been signs of Tony’s lingering trauma the first time, the disastrous press conference being only the most obvious one. And there had, Phil was sure, been signs this time too. True, he’d only seen Tony twice since returning from the ‘dead’; the first time, during a meeting with the full Avengers team, where Phil had still been a bit too star-struck by Captain America, and focused on attempting to convince Clint to even meet his eyes, to pay Tony much mind. The second, a meeting between Phil, Fury and Tony, had quickly degenerated into Tony and Nick’s usual bickering (this time over the status of Tony’s contract). Relegated to his usual role of referee, it had been all too easy not to see past Stark’s usual collection of barriers and assume he was back to his normal, egotistical self.

But he hadn’t been; Phil could see it even now as his mind raced back over the details of the scene. Already the signs of a lack of sleep and nutrition were present on Tony, his clothes hanging a bit looser, bruises forming under his eyes. And though he’d responded to Nick’s resistance toward officially naming him an Avenger rather than a consultant with his trademark snark, the way he’d left the room not with a saunter, but a defeated slouch to his shoulders, should have immediately reminded Coulson, yet again, that they weren’t dealing with the old Tony Stark. There might not even be any of that man left.

“Christ, Pepper, I’m sorry. I’ll be there in half an hour. You’re at the tower, right? The repairs are done?”

“Y-yeah, they’re done, but I’m not sure Tony will…things are still a bit off between you two, aren’t they?” For the hundredth time, Phil cursed himself for letting Fury talk him into the ridiculous death charade in the first place. Correctly interpreting his silence, Pepper continued. “Not only that, you’re still healing yourself. This isn’t supposed to be all on you either, Phil. Call his team back. The plan was for them to move in here eventually anyway, Tony’s already been preparing for it in between the million other things he does instead of sleeping. Get them back early.”

There’s a million reasons her plan won’t work. The bonds between the team are still fragile, for Tony perhaps especially. His lingering distrust and resentment toward Natasha, the fallout from his vicious fight with Steve on the helicarrier, his general unease with Clint who had fought against them for half the time Tony had known him, one wrong move on any of their parts and the whole damn thing would shatter. Yes, the plan was to eventually get them all living in the same space, and lord knew Tony had space to spare, but that was supposed to take months, maybe even years. But if Pepper’s account is to be trusted (and it always is), Tony doesn’t have years. He might not even have months.

“I’ll put out the call to Assemble and then I’ll be at the tower. Even if Tony doesn’t want to see me, I think the company might do you some good.” Hell, his company is the very least he should be offering this woman, and the stuttered thanks she replies sends another wave of self-loathing over Phil. He’s failed Pepper, and Tony, more than he would have thought possible. But even if he has to go out and individually drag every last Avenger back here, he’s going to make this right.

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By the time Phil arrives at Stark Tower, Pepper has coerced Tony into taking a heavy-duty
sleeping pill. Phil looks in on him briefly, frowning as he takes in the tension Tony’s body carries even in sleep. Tony has assured Pepper that he’s set up restrictions that will ensure he doesn’t call for one of the suits while in the midst of a nightmare, which is an admittedly small comfort, but Phil is taking whatever victories he can right now.

With Tony out of commission for at least a few hours, Pepper allows her body to betray her own exhaustion. She carries it differently than Tony, but for someone whose composure is legendary, it’s definitely noticeable; her hands shake slightly as she reaches for a carton of Chinese takeout, and her hair, typically perfect even when casually styled, has a slightly greasy sheen to it, suggesting she hasn’t had a full shower in at least a couple of days.

“I’m so sorry Pepper,” Phil repeats again, unable to help himself. How did they let it get this bad?

“Me too,” she sighs, stealing a spring roll from his plate with a shadow of her usual smile. “I know Tony can be—difficult, and I know things with the team are still at early stages. But I just can’t—I can run his company. I know how to do that, I’ve been doing it for years and I am damn good at it.” It’s a relief to hear the confident pride in Pepper’s voice; it means it isn’t too late, that she isn’t broken. “I can support him in nearly every possible way. I can soothe ruffled feathers at functions, I can convince journalists not to run the worst and most damaging stories when he blows off a little too much steam and does something he instantly regrets. I can…I can keep trying to learn how to wait at home when he’s off fighting God knows what. But I don’t know how to help him through this, Phil. He flew into actual outer space, expecting never to come back, and he very nearly didn’t. I’m not prepared to help him learn to deal with that, not in the ways he needs.” Phil hands her a beer, which she takes with a grateful nod as he considers his response.

“The Avengers, it wouldn’t work if they weren’t all broken in their own ways. No one who is perfectly sane or totally whole could do the things they have to do, see the things they’ve seen and will see, and keep showing up for the next call. But I think sometimes that means we lose sight of the distinction between what it has to have horrors in one’s past and what it is to be living a waking nightmare. And I think sometimes we—SHIELD, the public, the other Avengers—we’re even less inclined to remember that distinction when it comes to Tony. It’s partly because he’s gotten damned good at hiding the things he doesn’t want other people to see, but it’s not just that. We all need and want so much from him that to admit that he might not be okay is to admit that by continuing to take from him in that state, we might be actively contributing to the problem.”

The more Phil speaks, the more he knows what he’s saying to be true. They’ve needed Tony to be okay—they’ve needed his resources, financial, intellectual and otherwise, they’ve needed his near-constant energy and drive. They’ve actively drawn on his desperate desire for atonement and validation, using it to push him to create, to think, to work harder and faster and longer. Pepper is so ridiculously competent and effective at caring for Tony that it’s been easy for them all to keep pushing Tony and to trust that he won’t crack, that he’ll eat and sleep and relax just enough. But the effects of that short-sighted and dangerous plan are staring Phil in the face now. They’re in the lines that stress and grief have left behind on Pepper’s face and in her eyes, and they’re all over the broken man upstairs, so desperate for comfort that he calls deadly weapons to himself in his sleep.

“Alright,” Pepper’s voice brings him from his reflections and back to the present. “So what are we going to do about it now?”

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There’s a reason Pepper reached out to Phil first, and it’s that they are so similar in a number of respects. They’re both endlessly practical and organized people, the types who need plans and back-up plans with specific steps and tasks and deliverables. Some might call it a troubling internalization of corporate and governmental ways of being. Phil just calls it awesome, because in
With the team in its infancy, none of them would be likely to accept the true reason they’re being asked to return so soon after New York. Tony would almost certainly read it as an insulting kind of pity and withdraw entirely, and the rest of the Avengers (if they had enough loyalty to Tony to return just for the sake of his well-being at all which, Phil privately admits, is a question in and of itself) would likely be awkward and wholly transparent about being there primarily out of professional obligation.

This means that they can’t be entirely honest with the team about why they’re being called back. Uncomfortable with outright lying to the group, most of whom are still struggling to forgive him after his last rather large falsehood, Phil suggests a compromise. They’ll tell the Avengers that SHIELD is concerned about their cohesiveness as a unit and is requiring them to begin cohabitation sooner rather than later as part of a larger team-building strategy. It’s such a realistic plan that Phil begins to wonder why the organization hadn’t actually suggested it already.

“But if none of them have any idea what’s going on, and if Tony continues being his entirely charming self which is currently amplified by a combination of sleep deprivation and anxiety attacks, isn’t it possible that they’ll end up making things worse without knowing it?” Pepper had pointed out, all while tapping out notes on a StarkTab in her lap.

“I’ll talk to Cap,” Coulson says after a moment of consideration. “He’s the team leader, and he plays a big part in setting the tone for how the rest of them interact with Stark. And he’s a good man. Out of all of them, he’ll be the most likely to genuinely want to help Tony right from the get-go.”

“And Tony probably needs it from him the most anyway,” Pepper agrees. “I know Tony gave just as good as he got when they fought, but he still idolized the man growing up, even if Howard’s obsession also makes him a bit resentful. If things between he and Steve don’t keep improving then Tony’s never going to feel like he actually belongs on the team—and hey, is that sorted by the way? I couldn’t even get him to tell me how the meeting with Fury went, but judging from the fact that he didn’t come out of the shop for two solid days afterward, I’m betting not well.” Still deeply ashamed of his own role in that meeting Phil nods, promising,

“I’ll talk to Nick and have the contract drawn up within the next week. I’ll send it right to you so you can run it past his lawyers.” Pepper want to ask what happened, he can feel it, but she restrains her curiosity, and he’s unendingly grateful not to have to confess, even if that means she’s probably already inferred enough.

“Hey, what about Colonel Rhodes?” It’s a shot in the dark, and Phil already knows that if they go ahead with including him, getting the man temporary leave right as the media campaign surrounding the Iron Patriot is ramping up will involve calling in every favour he has banked and then some.

“It’s a good thought,” Pepper muses. “And Rhodey is…amazing with him. But, for right now at least, he isn’t an Avenger. And if he’s here right at the beginning of all this then chances are high that Tony will take the path of least resistance so to speak and rely on Rhody for everything rather than letting any of the rest of the team is. And Rhody just isn’t able to be around enough for that to work as a long term plan.”

They continue to work for several hours with brisk efficiency. At one point, Pepper groans, leaning forward to put her face in her hands.

“Pepper what—”
“JARVIS.” Understanding comes to Phil before he has to ask her for an explanation. Tony’s AI monitors all of the comings and goings in the tower unless specifically instructed by Tony not to do so. There’s no way they’re going to be able to sneak this plan past Tony without him finding out. Particularly because a Tony who is sleep deprived and anxious is a Tony who tends to obsessively review security footage from around his home.

But then again, Phil’s noted that Pepper tends to avoid interacting with JARVIS whenever possible. He’s not sure if there’s a story there, if somehow the two had gotten off on the wrong foot during the early moments of her professional and then personal relationship with Tony, or if Pepper has simply never been interested in pursuing a relationship with her boyfriend’s electronic butler. In either case, though, he’s betting Pepper is severely underestimating the extent to which JARVIS seems to feel things, especially when it concerns Tony and his welfare.

“JARVIS, can we reach an agreement on this matter?” To his credit, the AI doesn’t pretend to be ignorant of what Phil means, even though he’s probably aware that it’ll make Pepper uncomfortable.

“My programming does not permit me to generate false information or otherwise deceive Sir. Moreover, such a violation would likely lead Sir to conceal vital data from me, which would greatly interfere with my primary functions.” For a man like Phil, who spends most of his time surrounded by politicians and spies and bureaucrats, what JARVIS doesn’t say is far more significant than what he does. He hasn’t refused to assist them, or indicated any kind of disapproval concerning their plans. Indeed, he sounds almost reluctant to be reminding them of the limits Tony has placed on his behaviour.

“But you could choose not to offer Tony any information about this unless strictly asked, correct? And you could steer him in other directions, offer him other information first if he wants to review the footage from tonight?” There’s a long, nerve-wracking pause, but since the AI hasn’t rejected the proposal outright, Phil decides to keep trying to make their case. “JARVIS, Tony is suffering. The portal, on top of everything else that’s happened to him in the last couple of years, it’s been too much. He needs more help than Pepper or myself can give him on our own, but he’s never going to accept it if we tell him that outright.”

“Sir is…regrettably stubborn when it comes to matters of his own self-preservation,” JARVIS agrees. The frustration seeping into his tone obviously resonates in its familiarity with Pepper, because she smiles for the first time since the conversation has started.

“So you’ll help us, JARVIS?” she asks, peering up at the ceiling.

“Yes, Ms. Potts. I will do everything I can within acceptable parameters to assist sir in his recovery.” Feeling that this conclusively settles the last major matter of concern for now, Phil manages to convince Pepper to get some much-needed rest herself. He goes as far as tucking her in under a pile of blankets on the couch, and he’s rooting around the coffee table, trying to locate his car keys amidst debris from take-out cartons, papers and numerous bits of Stark tech, when Pepper speaks again, though her voice is rather adorably muffled.

“Don’t go back to SHIELD. Stay here. Tony’s designed a floor for you too, and we might as well start getting him acquainted with the notion of company, and trusting you again, sooner rather than later.” Seconds after making this pronouncement, she’s asleep, snoring quietly into a pillow. Fighting back the warm feeling in his chest that has nothing to do with his lingering injuries, Phil heads to the elevator and asks Jarvis to take him to ‘his’ floor. He’s tired enough that much of Tony and Pepper’s impressive attention to detail in the decorating is probably lost on him, but as he kicks off his shoes and changes into a set of pyjamas he finds in the dresser, his eyes fall upon something
on the nightstand.

It’s a set of Captain America collector’s cards, identical to the ones he’d owned as a child, and (unlike his old collection) not covered in blood. They’re pristine, individually placed in heavy plastic card protectors. Cards in this condition would have cost a fortune. Even Rogers himself had been somewhat embarrassed by (or maybe for) Phil and his lingering obsession with Captain America, but Tony, even while furious and hurt by Phil’s deception, still hadn’t hesitated to replace the objects that had meant so much to him, that had given him hope in some of the darkest moments in his life. Swallowing past a lump in his throat, Phil places a reverent hand on the cards for a long moment and makes a quiet promise to never again forget what Pepper had told him tonight: Tony Stark indeed has a heart.
Assemble

Chapter Summary

In which Tony finds out he has a new house guest, Phil and Steve bond, and Tony's health continues to decline. (a.k.a. When JARVIS is worried, everyone should be worried.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony’s rather transparently confused by Phil’s presence in the tower the next morning, and he doesn’t hide it well. As he stumbles into penthouse kitchen, where Pepper has invited Phil to join her for breakfast, he stops in his tracks midway to the coffee pot, hand still outstretched toward it.

“Agent?” Pepper, curled up in the breakfast nook with a smoothie and a StarkTab, laughs and stands to kiss him on the forehead. The other man’s posture is already tight, Phil notices, and while much of that can be rationalized by the presence of an unexpected person in his home, he’s hardly any more relaxed with his girlfriend. Tony’s body twists subtly away from Pepper’s touch, and though at one point his left hand rises and nearly bridges the distance between them, he drops it suddenly back to his side.

“His name is Phil, Tony. You can hardly keep calling him Agent all the time if he lives here. Go sit down, I’ll get your coffee.” The promise of caffeine distracts the sleep-addled engineer for several more seconds, and for a moment Phil actually starts to believe that might be the end of the discussion. But when Pepper’s comment finally registers several long seconds later, Tony chokes on his first sip of dark roast.

“Living—when the hell did this happen? I’m not even done with the floor, and we’re still finishing the repairs to the tower, and what’s the rush?” Exhausted and comparatively slow though Tony’s mental processes may be right now, they’re going to have to offer a credible explanation for this quickly or he’s going to put enough of the pieces together to start getting suspicious. Pepper is already fidgeting nervously (it never ceases to amaze Phil that she can twist the truth so effortlessly for Tony, while finding it nearly impossible to lie to the man), so he speaks quickly before she can stutter out something that’ll instantly put Tony more on edge.

“Listen, I’m sorry about that, Tony, it’s my fault. I was enumerating the many aspects of living at SHIELD barracks that aren’t particularly charming, and Pepper offered to let me move in here. I know it’s earlier than you planned, and maybe you didn’t even intend for me to be here full time, but it would really help me out to stick around even for a while.” It’s a well known truth in Phil's professional life that lies are best hidden in amongst truths, and that's no less true here in Tony’s penthouse suite. Tony is still shooting Pepper wary looks, almost certainly aware there has to be more to the story given that Phil has moved in the day after she woke up to an Iron Man suit above her, but for now, he’s apparently keeping those thoughts to himself. Phil decides to distract him further with perhaps the only thing that makes Tony Stark more uncomfortable with part-truths: gratitude. “I uh, I got the cards. They’re…thanks, man.”

Tony’s startled gaze meets his for a fraction of a second. Phil is painfully reminded of the skittish, frightened expressions that used to come over both Clint and Natasha’s faces anytime they were
confronted with a word or act of kindness, and the resemblance is so unexpected and sudden that his chest aches in response. Before he can stop himself, he looks away, and when he manages the courage to look up again, Tony has made a hasty exit from the kitchen.

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His first call when he reaches the office is Steve, who picks up on the last ring sounding slightly out of breath.

“Everything alright, Captain Rogers?” It would be just their bloody luck if Steve has somehow stumbled into another intergalactic crisis now when he’s so badly needed for a far more home-grown problem.

“Yes, sir—Agent—Phil. I’m still trying to figure out how to make these phones work without breaking them or pressing the wrong part of the screen. I think I might have bought a new record while I was trying to answer your call If I did, please inform SHIELD they can bill me directly for the cost, I know the phone is linked to a company credit account.” For a long moment, Phil considers altering his and Pepper’s plans entirely. It’s been easy to forget that while Steve has had leadership of this team placed upon him, he’s a young man who has suddenly been thrust decades ahead of his own time and is very much concerned with just trying to keep his head above water. But Pepper was right, they need Steve involved for this to have any damn chance of working.

“I can see about finding you a different phone. Maybe one that still has buttons so you aren’t fighting with the touch screen?” The offer is met with a self-depreciating laugh.

“I appreciate it, but my briefing package talked a lot about how important phones and the Internet are to everyday life. I think I might as well try to get this figured out sooner rather than later.” Phil hums in agreement. “Now I’m betting you aren’t just calling to test my phone-answering skills, Phil. What can I do for you? Am I needed back at SHIELD? I was told I would have a few months off to acclimate barring any imminent threats to the country.”

“I know, Captain Rogers, and I apologize for intruding on that. The truth is you are needed here; it’s not an official SHIELD mission, but it does have to do with the future of the Avengers Initiative, so I would appreciate your coming back as soon as you’re able.” Ever the soldier, Steve takes little convincing, and he even sounds somewhat relieved as he and Phil agree to meet for a late dinner that evening. Perhaps the work of getting used to the new century has been intensive enough that the type of work required of the Avengers seems easier by comparison? Now there’s a scary thought.

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They meet at a small hole in the wall diner. Phil hasn’t been here in ages, but chose it to try to put Steve at ease, and he tries his best not to preen when the man looks around and gives Phil an appreciative smile. It’s damn nice to feel like he’s gotten something right for the first time in ages.

Even with the urgency of Tony’s situation, Phil is genuinely interested in how Steve has been, so he asks a lot of questions about his adjustment and his efforts to help the rebuilding projects in the city. They’re still a bit awkward around one another, whether because of Phil’s initial display of fannish enthusiasm or simply because Steve is, at heart, a somewhat shy kid from Brooklyn, but things get slowly better as the meal progresses. Or at least they do until Steve begins to launch into a story about Bucky only to stop midway through, confused about what tense to use when speaking about his recently re-discovered and brainwashed best friend. Phil lets himself wonder for a moment if Clint and Natasha have had similar problems when they speak about him, or if they simply don’t talk about him at all. He’s not sure if the thought of living a life between-tenses or as an unspoken void is worse. What he does know is that Steve looks suddenly far older and wearier
than he had just moments before, and while they don’t know one another well enough for Phil to feel confident in his ability offer any comfort, he has to try.

“He remembered you well enough to save your life, Steve. And if your friendship was strong enough to break through decades of conditioning after just a couple of interactions, I wouldn’t bet against him coming back to you.” Steve clenches and releases his hand, nails biting into his palms hard enough that it would certainly draw blood from anyone without the serum running through their veins.

“I want to keep lookin’ for him. Will SHIELD… I know I’m probably not real popular over there, but will you help me? It’s not a condition of whatever it is you’re asking me to do to help Mr. Stark, I just need to know if I’m on my own with this.” When Phil used to dream as a kid about Captain America asking for his help, it had always been a moment of triumph. Swelling music would play, and men and women would gaze on adoringly at them as they charged away to whatever world-saving adventure was before them. The reality is a tired, half-broken young man out of time and space, sitting across from Phil and asking for a lifeline. It’s heartbreaking and humbling and nothing at all like he imagined, somehow both better and worse because it’s actual, gritty reality, not a schoolboy fantasy.

“I’m your handler, Steve. I won’t make promises about the form or extent of SHIELD’s support; I’m sure after what you’ve been through recently they wouldn’t mean a whole hell of a lot anyway. But you’re not on your own.” Steve nods tightly, but doesn’t seem able or willing to speak more about the subject, so Phil switches gears. “I’m sure you’re wondering why I asked you here tonight. First, I should clarify that much of what I’m about to tell you I’m saying in confidence, and I chose to meet with you after business hours partly because it’s particularly important that this information doesn’t make its way to SHIELD.”

“I thought this had to do with my team, though, Agent Coulson,” Steve frowns. “Shouldn’t we both be keeping SHIELD updated on any developments relevant to the Avengers? Or is that initiative no longer under their control while they rebuild?”

“No, strictly speaking the Avengers is still under SHIELD’s jurisdiction. But you’re not needed here on something like an official mission or anything that would require organizational support. In fact, though it would be well-intentioned, I think trying to get SHIELD involved in this would only manage to make things a bit worse for everyone involved.” Even a few months ago, Phil knows that Steve would have been a lot more hesitant to distance himself from a para-military organization, but now, in the wake of all that’s happened, he simply motions for Phil to go on. “I received a call last night from Virginia Potts, the CEO of Stark Industries and Tony Stark’s partner. She informed me that Tony was in substantial distress, and had been so since the events of the Battle of New York.”

“What kind of distress?”

“He’s been increasingly unwilling or unable to eat or sleep more than is necessary to keep himself conscious, and he’s, well, struggling to deal with the aftermath of what he saw and did that day.” The struggle that plays out on Steve’s expression is fascinating to watch; he’s a genuinely compassionate guy, and it’s plain that it upsets him to hear that one of his teammates is suffering, but it’s equally clear that he is having a hard time reconciling what he knows of Tony Stark with the kind of vulnerability that Phil is describing.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Phil. I really am, but I’m… well, to be frank, I’m not exactly sure what it is I can do if what you’re saying is true. Mr. Stark and I did not exactly start things off on a great note, and while I think we managed to work together successfully when we had to, I still doubt I’m
the fella he’ll want to turn to right now. He seems to have a huge assortment of friends and other folks around, wouldn’t they be better suited to helping him than I would?” There’s an edge of bitterness to Steve’s last sentence, and Phil realizes with a sad sort of shock that the man hasn’t just misread Tony, he’s actively jealous of who he believes Tony to be.

“Tony has a lot of acquaintances, and employees, and fans, and they all care to some level about him. Or more precisely, they care for the image that he projects, and who they think he is because of it. But part of the reason Pepper is struggling is that Tony, in reality, away from all the media and all of that, he’s a pretty lonely guy. I think he has been for a long time.” Phil considers offering some of his own speculations on Tony’s relationship with Howard, and the genesis behind his AI, but not only does that feel like an even further violation of the man’s privacy, he’s not entirely certain that Steve would take well to learning that a man he considered a friend was not, in all likelihood, the best father. “And this isn’t about Tony, or at least it’s not just about him. I suggest you think about this as a kind of precedent for how the team is going to handle matters like this. If you leave Tony alone to lick his wounds, he may heal eventually. But if the Avengers are going to be something more than just a logo on a sheet of paper, then you need to establish early that supporting each other through the hard times like this is something you all just do. The group needs morale and camaraderie just like any other unit of troops, and you aren’t going to achieve that by avoiding one another except when you have to jump into battle.”

It’s a bit like his experience with Tony this morning; the slightly cheesy and manipulative nature of what Phil is saying and how he’s saying it seems to be rescued by the fact that he still means it. He’s not foolish enough to think that he’s suddenly cured Steve of his own self-doubt, or of whatever lingering ill-feelings he has about Tony (or is projecting on him). But when the other man nods after several thoughtful moments of silence, his expression is all Captain America, and Phil is still just enough of a fan to believe that if there’s any force on Earth equal to Tony’s self-loathing and destructive tendencies, it’s the man sitting across from him.

In full-on Man With a Plan mode now, Steve insists that he be the one to call in the rest of the team, and to offer any required explanations. He accepts Phil’s rationale for keeping the exact reason for their presence from Tony, but he doesn't take well to the notion that they pitch this to the rest of the team as a general team-building exercise.

“It seems to me we can’t just trick people into accidentally becoming a team, Agent Coulson. If this is supposed to be a precedent like you said, then they need to be actively aware of what’s expected of them as members, and any support they offer one another needs to be sincere. It has to be a choice they make, and keep making.” What Steve doesn’t add, but Phil hears anyway, is that Steve has spent more than enough of his time under the control of the military and the government without being given much of any real information or control over what was happening to him, not until he simply took it for himself. And he obviously isn’t willing to revisit those mistakes on the Avengers, not even if it might have made his own life easier in the short term.

“That’s, of course, your call Captain. This is your team and your rules. As your handler I’m just here for advice…and to enjoy the side benefits of Tony’s 800 television channels.”

“Eight…hundred channels?” When Phil can’t help but laugh at the combination of wonder and disgust in Steve’s tone, he realizes with a start that it’s the first time he’s done so since before being resuscitated in a makeshift medical bay on the helicarrier.

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Over the next couple of weeks, Steve works tirelessly at collecting the Avengers from the various corners of the world into which they’ve scattered, updating Phil frequently. Meanwhile, in between plugging away at the piles of work that have built up in his absence, Phil and Pepper spend their
time at the tower attempting (largely in vain) to establish a routine that will ensure Tony receives both some human interaction and fulfillment of his body’s basic needs daily.

Already he’s constantly reminding himself that he and Pepper will soon have backup, because it’s a damn-near Sisyphean task to achieve even one of those aims on any given day. Tony’s sleep patterns are as irregular and disturbed as they’ve ever been, and Pepper’s move into one of the guest rooms after the upset with the suit only seems to have solidified this. He stays down in the workshop for days at a time, and on the rare occasions they are able to cajole the man into his own bed, he’s typically woken (often with screams audible enough that Pepper can hear them from down the hall) and returned to work in less than four hours. He looks longingly at the food they’re occasionally able to convince him to try, but seems to struggle to keep it down, pushing most plates away with a discouraged sigh after only a few bites. A last-ditch attempt at lunch, his favourite cheesy pasta (delivered from a restaurant Phil is pretty sure doesn’t make home deliveries except, apparently, for Tony Stark) leads to a violent round of retching that has Coulson’s guts aching in sympathy just listening.

But the more painfully apparent it becomes that Tony is heading fast toward a breakdown, the more he withdraws; when Pepper uses her clearance codes to force her way into the workshop shortly after Tony’s puking spell, the couple goes several rounds in a brutal screaming match that leaves Pepper hoarse and red-eyed even hours later. Shortly after Phil tucks her up in the guest room with ice cream, a Gillian Flynn novel and strict instructions to let Stark Industries handle itself for a couple of hours, JARVIS alerts him that Tony seems tired enough to now be experiencing mild hallucinations. When Phil enters the workshop, Tony, fast-talking, charming as all hell Tony, is stumbling dangerously over his words as he speaks to Dummy, who is across the room from where Tony seems to think he is, and smoking slightly while You and Butterfingers work to put him out. Drawing himself up to his full height and injecting every bit of Agent Coulson he can manage into his tone, Phil snaps,

“Stark. For Christ’s sake, put the welder down. Right now.” Tony jumps (perhaps surprising a sleep-deprived and starving man with a power tool in his hand was not Phil’s best plan).

“Agent? W-what are you…why…when did you…” Dread growing in the pit of his stomach—does Tony not remember that Phil lives here now?—Coulson addresses himself to JARVIS instead.

“JARVIS, can you cut the power to the welder? To all the tools down here?” The AI doesn’t respond, but seconds later the welder’s flame goes out, and Phil damn near throws it in his haste to get it as far away from Tony as he can. “Tony, you need to stop. You’ve been a danger to yourself down here for quite a while, but now you’re hurting your bots. And we all know damn well that you love them.” This seems to get through to Tony, his glassy gaze sharpening slightly as he finds Dummy and lets out a pained moan.

“S’ry, Dummy, m’sorry buddy.” Fire extinguished, Dummy zooms over to his creator, beeping and chirping steadily. Whether they’re intended as reassurance or not Phil doesn’t know, but the bot’s vocalizations certainly seem to have that effect on Tony, who reaches a hand out to brush lightly against Dummy’s claw. It’s achingly tender, and the most connected Coulson has seen Tony with anyone or anything since his arrival. Immediately, he abandons his plan of coercing Tony upstairs to his own bed, casting a glance at the worn couch in the corner of the room. Before he even has time to decide how to make the suggestion, Dummy takes matters into his own, well, claw, attaching himself to Tony’s shirt and pulling him. “What’re you…don’t want smoothy, Dummy, m’tired and I’ll prob’ly drink the motor oil and whatever else you…” Despite his mumbled protests, Tony follows his bot, and even manages a weak laugh when they arrive at the couch and Dummy ineffectually tries to use his mechanical arm to push Tony down on top of it. “Yeah yeah alright.”
Steve arrives at the tower later that evening. Tony is, according to JARVIS, miraculously still asleep, so Phil and Pepper lead him inside and to the communal floor. Phil’s startled to see that the entirety of Steve’s possessions fit in a SHIELD backpack, but of course most of what Steve had once owned was now scattered across museums and personal collections of memorabilia. He keeps peering around at the opulence of the tower in plain discomfort; while Tony’s tastes don’t tend to run to the gaudy, except when he’s deliberately trying to be obnoxious, there’s also no mistaking this as a space which is anything but saturated with wealth.

“The rest of the team will be arriving tomorrow, but I thought maybe it might help if I came ahead of them. I owe Mr. Stark an apology for what happened at our first meeting, and I’m guessing he’ll respond even less well to that in front of an audience.” Pepper chuckles tiredly at this as she curls up on the couch next to Phil and leans her head on his shoulder. He doesn’t think he’ll ever be used to her easy physical intimacy, not after decades of being surrounded by spies and government officials and whose bodies are used primarily for either violence or persuasion.

“Tony would say he’s allergic to both emotions and apologies and to skip them entirely.” Steve looks wholly bewildered.

“But the things I said…I mean, Loki’s device was there, influencing us. I didn’t even really mean all of them. I think the suit is wonderful and Mr. Stark seems like a very brave and capable man, I just…he got under my skin, and I-I lost control.” He’s plainly expecting censure from the two of them, but they both only laugh a bit harder.

“I call that the Tony effect,” Pepper grins. “He can make even the most patient person in the world lose it given enough time. Rhodey actually has an equation for calculating roughly how long that’ll take for any given person. It’s shockingly accurate. I use it in board meetings and press conferences sometimes as a risk-management tool.”

“That doesn’t mean I should have. We’re supposed to be a team and I’m supposed to be the leader.” For a man far more used to dealing with multiple layers of deception and manipulation, Steve’s utter sincerity is sometimes almost too much to take, but Phil manages what he hopes is a comforting smile.

“We know that, Steve, and no one is saying that it’s okay for you to shout abuse at Tony whenever you like; he might act like that type of stuff doesn’t effect him at all, but it does, especially when it’s coming from you. All Pepper means is that Tony, well, if given a choice he’d just pretend it never happened and act like it’s fine. That doesn't make it the healthy approach, but even without an audience, getting Tony to sit still and listen long enough for you to apologize to him might take some doing.” Steve begins to pace the length of the floor, but before they can continue plotting out his approach, all three occupants of the room are suddenly unconscious.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who read, commented, and left kudos of last chapter! Posting was a tremendously scary thing and I'm so grateful for the kindness and support.

As is probably apparent by the abrupt ending, things are picking up next chapter due to the magical interference of our pal Loki! And it'll also be our first shift away from Phil’s perspective (though I did unexpectedly love writing his POV, and I come back
to it a lot throughout the story.)

Apologies for what might seem like an unnecessarily-extended prologue to the main events, but it felt important to establish, even in a super Tony-centric story like this one, that they are none of them whole or undamaged going into all of this. Phil is still struggling with the fallout from his not-death, and Steve with the events of the Winter Soldier narrative, and both will very much shape their actions in this story.
MIB29 (or: Magic is Bullshit Protocol)

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark is suddenly four years old. No one handles it particularly well. Except Dummy. Because, well, Dummy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony wakes with a start, head spinning, a disembodied but panicked-sounding voice repeats his name at increasing volume and frequency.

“Sir, per the terms of protocol TDBAI42, I’ll be forced to alert the authorities if you aren’t able to acknowledge me within the next thirty seconds.” Tony wants to reply, even if he has no idea who the voice or the authorities are, but the entirety of his attention is devoted to trying to breathe. Tony’s never had problems in this area before; his mother has actually voiced the suspicion that he has a larger lung capacity than most people, allowing him to talk endlessly, seemingly without ever needing air. But what feels like half his chest is currently being taken up by a large hunk of metal. Though he can’t be sure exactly how far, he can feel that it’s in there deep, can feel it pressing down against his lungs, resisting his every attempt to suck in enough air. What breath he can manage leaves his body in short, painful wheezes. Every bit of caution he has ever learned about messing with unknown tech is utterly useless in the face of the fact that Tony can’t breathe, and he wants this thing out of him right now.

His hands are bathed in a soft blue light as he lifts them to his chest. They’re also sweaty with exertion and fear, and they slip across the device as he tries to figure out how to remove it. The voice has been speaking to him the entire time, but he’s unable to keep tuning it out when it sounds again, sharp and almost fearful.

“Master Stark, removing that item from you chest may cause you grievous bodily injury.” Tony recognizes with a start who the voice sounds like, and it’s almost embarrassing just how relieved he feels. He might be a big boy, four years old now, but Jarvis always makes him feel at home.

“Jarvis! Where are you? Why are you hiding? Where are we, anyway? This looks like Dad’s shop, but I’ve snuck into all of them by now, and none of them look like this.” Now that he knows he has a familiar adult to turn to, the questions are coming to him even faster than usual, but a speck of bright blue light in the corner of his peripheral vision reminds him quickly what the primary issue is. “Jarvis what’s wrong with me? Why cant I take it out?” What’s wrong with me is an embarrassingly familiar question; he asks Jarvis this all the time, usually after Dad has gotten angry again for reasons Tony doesn’t totally understand. Jarvis usually tells him that there’s nothing wrong with him, that he’s a wonderful boy, but there’s no way he can deny it this time. Tony’s chest looks like a cross between a nightlight and a generator. Something is very, very wrong.

“Sir, I am not Mister Jarvis in the form you knew him. I am an Artificial Intelligence system you created. And sir, I must strongly request that you allow me to call for assistance from members of your team. They will be able to explain matters much more to your satisfaction, and assist you with your struggle to breathe.”
So much of that non-explanation made no sense that Tony doesn’t even know where to begin. Since the second kidnapping, Dad has been preparing him for numerous scenarios in which he’s abducted, either for ransom or for information about Stark Industries, but why would his captors put him in a workshop of all places? Is he supposed to build something? And why on Earth would they make an electronic version of Jarvis, and then try to claim that Tony himself made it? Tony is supposed to be able to outthink any potential abductors, Dad’s always said his brain is his best weapon in situations like this, but no matter how he re-arranges the pieces his mind, they simply aren’t coming together.

Maybe he hasn’t been abducted at all, then? Maybe some kind of an accident happened to him in Dad’s shop (Mom was always yelling at Dad for letting him in there, saying he was too young and some of the tools could hurt him—maybe one had?), and he’d had to put this thing in Tony’s chest to help him? But then why would he still be down in the workshop and not in a hospital or something? Was he so broken that he had to be hidden away down here, away from people, even his parents? Would they do experiments on him, using a fake-Jarvis to try to keep him calm and cooperative? Surely Dad wouldn’t leave him here forever, would he? But then, the voice said something about a team, didn’t he? Maybe there are at least other people like him trapped down here?

Breathing is becoming even more of a problem, because in addition to the heavy weight in Tony’s chest, his nose is getting plugged as he struggles to fight off tears. Dad hates it when he cries, has since he sat Tony down on his third birthday and explained how Stark men were made of iron and it was past time that he started growing up. But does that rule count if Dad really has abandoned him here with a hole in his chest? Does he even consider him a Stark anymore? Whether the rule still stands or not, Tony’s breaths are coming out in gasping sobs, and little spots are starting to swim in front of his eyes. Not-Jarvis sounds downright alarmed now.

“Sir, my apologies, but your respiration and blood oxygen are both officially outside of acceptable parameters. Your team seems to still be recovering from whatever incident caused your…altered state, but Agent Coulson is mobile and is making his way to the workshop. I’ve activated emergency protocol MIB29.” Team, Tony realizes, must be comforting word they’ve told not-Jarvis to use instead of ‘doctor’ or ‘policeman’, because grown-ups don’t have words like Agent in front of their names unless they’re scary.

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Tony’s first, stupid, thought when the man bursts into the room is that his eyes are kind of nice. They’re a blue that reminds him of really deep water, the kind where your feet can’t even touch the bottom. Of course, Tony’s a big boy and he knows this doesn’t mean he can trust the man. Dad’s told him all about how if he was taken away, they might use nice men or pretty ladies (Tony can’t really imagine why the latter—girls are terrifying) to try to get him on their side. Unfortunately, knowing that the man, nice-eyed or not, is probably going to hurt him doesn’t make him any more able to breathe long enough to find somewhere to hide or a weapon to use, the way he’s been taught.

“Tony?” Like not-Jarvis, the man almost sounds scared, and he seems to pay no regard to his fancy suit, which he catches on the arm what Tony thinks might be a robot as he runs over to the couch Tony’s laying on. “What the hell happened to him JARVIS?”

“Unclear, Agent Coulson. Whatever temporarily disabled you, Captain Rogers and Ms. Potts seems to have affected my systems as well. By the time I came back online, Master Stark was already in his current condition.” Tony hates it, has always hated it, when adults talk over and about him instead of to him, but he can’t manage to do much more than gasp in reply. This manages to get the Agent-man’s attention anyway, and a moment later those kind-looking (tricky, Tony reminds himself, tricky) blue eyes are meeting his own.
“Tony, Tony, shh, it’s okay buddy, you’re alright.” The man stares at him for another long moment before kneeling in front of him. His gaze feels oddly like being measured, but not exactly in the same way as the people who had done all those intelligence and aptitude tests on Tony. It’s more like the way Dad looks when he’s really, really focused—seeing all sides of the problem, he calls it. It somehow feels both flattering and disconcerting to have that kind of attention directed entirely on him. “Okay, Tony, I need you to do something really important for me. I need you to make your breathing match mine. Can I take your hand and put it on my chest so you can feel it?” For a second, Tony almost forgets that he’s about to run out of oxygen in the face of this unprecedented question. People touch him all the time, and except for Jarvis, they tend to be people he doesn’t know and would never actually choose. But it’s so common, a hand on his shoulder at one of his parents’ fancy parties, a ruffle to his hair by strangers in the street (or a shove, if they don’t like his Dad), that Tony wouldn’t know how to respond even if he could get enough air to talk. Slowly, the man takes Tony’s hot and sweaty hand and places it on his own chest. “In, nope, through your nose…can’t you breathe through your nose? You need to blow it?” Tony nods miserably, and a second later, the thing he thought was a robot rolls over, a box of Kleenex in its claw. Once it has handed the tissues over, it pivots toward Tony, claw outstretched. If he didn’t know better, he’d be sure the robot is trying to hold his hand.

Agent-man interrupts this fascinating development by holding a tissue in front of Tony’s nose. “Blow, Tony. No, it’s fine, you don’t need to hold it, you just need to take a big breath and then blow through your nose for me.” Only babies need help blowing their noses, but Tony doesn’t want to anger the Agent, at least not until he manages to get control of his breathing. He does as he’s told. “Good boy, Tony, you’re doing really well. Now try to match me again, alright? In through your nose for three, and then out through your mouth for three. In, two three, out two three. In, two three. Out, two three.” Though the metal thing in his chest still aches, Tony’s starting to successfully slow his breaths, and the dizziness is starting to fade. But then the door to the shop slides open again, revealing a pretty girl with long red hair and a tall, familiar looking man holding a round shield—

“TONY?” the woman shouts, at the same time as Tony whispers in disbelief, “C-captain America?”

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Pepper, Phil is realizing, is rapidly reaching her breaking point. Not with Tony, but with the combination of everyday issues involved in being a CEO combined with the extraordinary, ridiculous and entirely unpredictable stressors of being involved with an Avenger.

“Pepper. Listen to me.” Her eyes dart between Phil and Tony until the former stands and tilts her chin upward. “I think you’re done right now. That doesn’t mean you don’t love him. It means that you’re under an impossible amount of stress just as the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, let alone all the other stuff that comes with being a member of this team. But if he needed our help before… right now he needs everything we’ve got, and I don’t think you have that in you to give at the moment.” She flushes, but doesn’t dispute what he’s saying. She does seems to want to say something to Tony, even opens her mouth a couple of times, but she can’t seem to manage it. Finally Pepper turns and departs the workshop at a near-run.

Adult Tony would be (will be, Phil reminds himself) devastated by this turn of events, but kid Tony? He has eyes only for Steve, who looks absolutely bewildered by this turn of events.

“Are you him?” Tony asks, eyes still wide with poorly contained excitement.

“Yeah, kiddo, I am,” Steve agrees, managing to shake off enough of his shock and confusion that
he can offer Tony at least a weak mirror of his most child-friendly smile. Tony beams back in response, nearly launching himself off the couch in his haste to see his hero more closely. Steve chuckles and holds his arms out in invitation, but as quickly as Tony’s childish enthusiasm appeared, it seems to vanish. He turns unsteadily on his feet and half-sits, half-collapses back onto the couch, breath picking up speed again.

“Hey, now, none of that. Remember, we’ve gotta keep breathing together? Nice and slow and steady,” Phil reminds him. Tony stares up at Steve, who must realize how huge he appears to someone so small, because a moment later, he’s kneeling next to Phil so that he and Tony are almost at eye-level. Tony jerks backward.

“My name is Steve, what’s your name?” Big brown eyes look up at Coulson as if to confirm he’s allowed to reply, and Phil gives what he hopes is an encouraging nod.

“T-Tony, sir.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Tony. And you don’t have to call me Sir.”

“Dad said you’re worth 100 of me on my best day. Gotta be polite.” Steve looks stricken at this pronunciation, and the way Tony delivers it so matter-of-factly. But before Steve can try to correct Howard’s assessment, Tony keeps talking, addressing himself to Phil. “Mr.—Agent. Did I…did I get hurt in a ‘speriment? Do I have to live here now because of whatever happened to my chest? Or just because Dad is mad at me? Are you here to take me away?” Tony gestures at the arc reactor, but it’s Phil who feels like his heart is stuttering.

“Oh Tony, no, nothing like that. You were hurt, but it wasn’t your fault at all, and no one is mad at you.”

“Then what happened to me? Why am I here? Where’s the real Mr. Jarvis? And my parents?” The way Phil answers these questions is going to shape his relationship with this younger variation of Tony (and probably the elder version as well, if he remembers this later). It only takes a few seconds of dedicated consideration to decide that trying to hide anything major from the bright and terrified child in front of him is only going to create more issues. But that doesn’t mean he can’t stall a bit, and try to get as many nutrients as he can into Tony while he’s in this state.

“Tony, you strike me as a pretty good negotiator, so I’m going to propose a deal, okay? I can promise I’m going to answer any questions you have honestly, or at least give you an extremely good reason why I can’t. But I need two things from you in return. First, Captain America over there is probably pretty hungry from his trip, and you could probably use something in your belly too. So I’d like us to have some breakfast first. And then I’ll answer your questions if you’ll answer mine just as honestly. Does that seem fair?”

Tony considers the offer with a seriousness that would be almost comical if the situation were different. His brows furrow, and he reaches out, almost absently, to stroke Dummy’s claw. The bot chirps happily and wheels even closer, nearly knocking Phil out of the way in his haste to support his creator. Phil can’t help but laugh, even as he’s forced to slide over to ensure that his feet aren’t run over by Dummy’s wheels, and something in Tony’s expression changes at the sound. For a just a moment, it’s painfully apparent how much he wants to trust Phil, how much it means to Tony to see Phil being kind to Dummy, even if he can’t consciously remember either of them.

“Okay.”

Once they arrive on the penthouse Steve volunteers to cook, leaving Phil to follow a few steps behind Tony as the boy darts about the floor. Ever the tactile learner, Tony touches everything he
can get his hands on. He picks up one his larger self’s band t-shirts, and Phil doesn’t know enough to know if the group was around when Tony was this young, but the aesthetic is at least familiar enough, because he gives it a small smile before placing it carefully back on the floor. He reaches out and presses his finger against a piece of art on the wall; in all likelihood, it’s something both famous and expensive, and Phil amuses himself with the thought of how Pepper’s face would look if she could see a four-year-old child literally poking at something that probably costs more than a small car. Predictably, though, Tony is most fascinated by every hint he gets about the ample technology that surrounds him.

“So that holograph thing that was open downstairs, is that just in the workshop?” It’s not entirely clear who Tony is asking, and Phil is grateful when JARVIS is the one to reply, because trying to decide on the fly what information to give Tony and what to withhold is a bit dizzying.

“That technology is available in every room in the Tower, Sir. You need only ask for me to bring up a projection. Is there something you would like to see?” Giving Tony carte blanche to access whatever information he chooses seems to Phil like an extremely risky move, but perhaps this is another occasion where he has something to learn from the AI, because while Tony seems comforted by the offer of transparency, he shakes his head, probably too overwhelmed to even know what to ask for. It breaks the ice between Tony and JARVIS, though, and after that JARVIS pipes up more and more frequently, essentially giving Tony guided tour of his own home. It’s admittedly a selective one—at one point, JARVIS hurriedly guides Tony away from a compartment in his own nightstand, and Phil makes a mental note to temporarily relocate its contents to his own floor. (He also insistently tells himself that he will not get any voyeuristic pleasure out of imagining the older-Tony using whatever he might find there. Because Coulson is a damn professional, not a teenager with a crush on the smartest guy he’s ever met.) Tony occasionally replies to JARVIS with further questions and commentary, and while it’s hardly the rapid fire chatter Phil knows the two of them to be capable of, the increasingly easy back and forth is still familiar enough that it’s really starting to hit Phil now. This is Tony Stark. Younger, impossibly vulnerable and absent many or most of his defense mechanisms, but this is indisputably the boy who will grow into the damaged, generous and complicated man they all know and care for.

Eventually, he herds Tony into the kitchen for pancakes and bacon. Tony is quiet, and though his eyes linger frequently on Steve, he offers polite but short and quiet responses to anything they say directly to him. Steve, too, is quiet, alternating between using his food to avoid everyone’s eyes and staring at Tony with an unreadable expression when the boy isn’t looking. Tony only manages to clear just over half his plate, but when he begins to shift restlessly next to him, Phil knows he can’t put matters off any longer.

“Thank you for eating your breakfast, Tony. We’ll let Steve finish his, but I can start trying to answer your questions now, alright?” Tony’s eyebrows raise and his mouth opens slightly, perhaps registering surprise that Phil is keeping his word?

“Yes Mr. Agent.” Fighting back a chuckle at Tony’s unconscious echo of his older-self’s insistence on calling him by his job title, he offers,

“You can call me Phil, you know.” Tony nods but doesn’t say anything in response, and Phil decides not to push it for now. Though really, if he ends up with two versions of Tony Stark who both refuse to call him by his first name, he might start to take offense. “Tony, right now we’re in Stark Tower. This is where you live and work; well, by you, I mean your older self. Something seems to have happened last night or early this morning, we suspect some kind of magic, and it’s turned you into a younger version of yourself.”
“I’m four and a quarter now,” Tony supplies, negating the first question Phil had planned on asking. “How old is…he? The other me?”

“Well he claims every year that he’s 29, but he’s in his early forties.” Tony processes this rather remarkable bit of news with a thoughtful but oddly calm expression. And really, given some of the scenarios Tony himself had proposed downstairs, Phil supposes the reality of the situation is actually far less frightening by comparison. “We don’t know why this happened yet, but we’re not going to stop working on figuring it out. Can you tell me the last thing you remember?”

“I…everything’s fuzzy. I think Mom and Dad were fighting about—something.” There’s a story in Tony’s hesitation, and every bit of Phil’s training urges him to press him, but the boy is not a target or even a reluctant witness. “I was in my room, supposed to be asleep.” Tony looks suddenly nervous at the admission. “Don’t tell?”

“I won’t, Tony,” Phil assures him solemnly. He’s avoiding providing the intel that probably feels most important to a four-year-old version of his friend, he knows he is. Clever and precocious though Tony might be, he is not yet enough of a scientist to be more preoccupied with the ‘hows’ of his condition than the immediate, material implications, but Phil can’t bring himself to offer it all up on a platter. He waits for Tony to set the terms of the conversation, to decide what it is he thinks he’s ready to know.

“But I guess that was a long time ago for them,” Tony reasons. He’s speaking more quickly and quietly, an echo of the way his older self does when he’s talking not to converse, but to think out loud. “They’re coming, though?” he asks Phil, eyes suddenly sharp and wary again. “Are they part of the team that Not-Jarvis was talking about?”

“I am JARVIS, young Sir,” the AI interrupts, sounding offended. “I do not have an analog form as your previous caretaker did, but you yourself programmed me to share as many of his other characteristics as possible, and I can assure you that my affections for you are just as sincere as his.” Far from comforting Tony, this assurance causes a mournful look to cross Tony’s face.

“Previous caretaker. So he’s dead then, my Jarvis.” When neither the AI nor Phil contradict him, Tony sighs. “And so are my parents, aren’t they?”

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Agent Coulson seems to have far more skill at handling the child version of Tony than Steve, so he’s tried to remain quiet through the course of their conversation. But Tony’s face now, so shocked and uncomprehending in the face of all of these sudden losses, it’s intimately familiar to Steve. It’s not a 70 year gap that Tony is dealing with, true, but like Steve, he’s woken suddenly to find that everyone he knew and cared about is gone. He’s been thrown headfirst into a world that makes no sense to him, with no one familiar to guide him or comfort him. Seeing Steve’s own pain and confusion mirrored in someone so young is more than he can take. Without asking or putting much thought into whether it’s a good idea (he’s noticed that Phil has seemed to actively avoid touching Tony, and he’s thus far followed the agent’s lead), he reaches across the table and lifts the boy into his arms.

Much like his adult self, this version of Tony is slight, but the weight of him somehow feels immense. Before this moment, a part of Steve had felt oddly disconnected from all of this, sure it would somehow be a prank of Tony’s, relying on just another piece of modern technology that Steve is unfamiliar with. But this child is entirely real, his little breaths hot and quick against Steve’s neck, his small frame shaking ever-so-slightly, and Steve has just reached out and touched him, so now he needs to make sure their second first-meeting is not nearly so disastrous as their first. Tony stares at him. He stares back, unwavering.
“They are,” Steve confirms, “but you’re not alone, Tony. You and I and Phil, we’re all part of—well, we have a whole team of people around us, called the Avengers. They’re actually on their way to come see you right now.” He anticipates a positive reaction to this, but if anything Tony looks a bit more forlorn.

“No one would ever want me on their team.” Steve wonders if they’ll ever make it through a conversation where little Tony doesn’t make him feel the same way it used to feel to get punched in the gut in dark alleys during his pre-serum days.

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s my Dad everyone wants. Wanted.” His voice cracks on the last word. Tony is clearly trying to adjust to having to speak about his father in the past tense, but he has none of his older self’s skill at hiding how much effort it’s costing him.

“Your Dad was…” Steve hesitates, now, with what to call the man who had so clearly contributed toTony’s low self-worth. Before he would have called him a friend without hesitation, but he senses that if he does so now, it’ll push he and Tony even further apart. “I cared about your Dad and I think he cared about me. But Tony, you’re the one who has fought beside me. You’re the one I’ve trusted with my life. You’re the one who’s a hero and an Avenger.” Tony takes this in for a long moment, still holding himself rigid and tense against Steve’s chest. Then he asks,

“Not…I mean, other-Jarvis said that there’s video games in the living room. Can I try them?” It’s entirely a non-sequitur, and were the boy currently an adult, Steve probably would have been inclined to read it as a show of disinterest or boredom. After all, since when does Tony Stark not want all possible data, even the information he isn’t supposed to have? Beside them, Phil is visibly surprised (a feat in and of itself), and it looks as if he’s going to try to keep Tony talking. But Steve has a notebook in his pocket. It’s a list full of reminders that he’s playing catch-up about everything from global warfare to Grumpy Cat memes, and it’s filling up so distressingly fast that he already knows he’ll probably never feel like he’s just here now, rather than constantly split in two. He knows, in short, what it is to need the constant flow of information to just stop, even though (and in large part because) there’s so much more to know. And he certainly never thought it was a feeling he would ever share with someone like Tony, whose utter connectedness with the world was equal-parts awe inspiring and gutting for Steve to witness, but he’ll be damned if anyone is going to force anything else on this child until he’s ready.

“Sure we can buddy. But you’re probably still going to end up teaching me. I’m just like you, I haven’t been living in this time very long, and I’m not nearly as smart as you are.” Tony shoots him a look of frank disbelief at the notion that he could ever best Captain America at anything, and Steve’s grip on him tightens just a little bit more.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again so much to all of you for your kindness and support. I’m already happily overwhelmed at the response to this.
Twenty-ish Questions

Chapter Summary

Phil and Steve separately deal with the fallout from Tony's de-aging (and they're each pretty sure they're getting the hardest questions). The team arrives at the tower, and Tony might never come out from under the bed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“So the thing in my chest, is it part of what happened to make me little?” The question startles Steve, not only because he’s still trying to figure out how to throw banana peels at his Mario Kart opponents rather than somehow setting them in his own path and entirely negating their supposed benefit, but because the pseudo-casual voice Tony says it in is not one any child should be so skilled at using. When the actual content of the question sinks in, Steve decides to abandon Princess Peach to her fate against what looks to be giant digital crabs. He feels wholly unprepared to have to be the one to deliver any of this news, but just as he’d been unwilling to force information on the boy seated next to him, he’s equally unwilling to keep something this crucial from him.

“No, Tony. That’s…well, that’s partly how you became a superhero.” Tony’s eyes are still on the screen, but they’re wide with anticipation and what might even be a little bit of pride. “You were taken by some bad people, they wanted to use your brilliant mind to try to harm lots of other folks. When you stood up to them, they…hurt you. But a man,” Steve wishes he knew the guy’s name, but it had been redacted in all the records, he thinks by Tony himself, “he built a device to help with the damage to your heart. When you escaped, you made a better version, and that’s what helps power the special armour you use to fight with.” Big man in a suit, Steve remembers taunting Tony, and though the entire exchange has haunted him for weeks, he’s never felt more sick with himself than right now as he tries to convey to this child the depth of his bravery and ingenuity.

“Is he safe?” Nick Fury is not a man for imprecise questions. His name is openly a verb at SHIELD; to be Furyd, any new recruit can tell you, is to face an unexpected and unnerving series of inquiries that end up leaving the addressee stunned and dismayed at how they gave up so much, often more than they even thought they knew. So the things he isn’t asking now (Are you bringing him in? Should he be seen by SHIELD medical staff? Are you going to file a report?), they’re all the confirmation Phil needs.

In the wake of Hydra’s infiltration, the organization is still weak. Still rebuilding. Still a little bit wary and uncertain that all of the traitors have been removed. Fury, already paranoid and secretive on his best day, now trusts no one around him with the knowledge that Iron Man is currently more vulnerable than anyone could possibly imagine. The Avengers are on their own with this.

“Err, so I don’t have a heart?” Steve knows that Tony means the question on a strictly biological level, he knows that, but God Almighty it’s such an uncomfortable echo of the worst critiques that have been leveled against Tony that before he knows it, he’s holding the child again, ignoring
Tony’s squawk of annoyance when this causes his character to veer off the road.

“You have a heart Tony. You have one of the best and biggest hearts I know. It just needs a little bit of extra help staying safe, that’s all.”

“You give lots of hugs,” Tony declares by way of response. Steve laughs, but then realizes that perhaps this is younger Tony’s way of trying to indicate that he’s uncomfortable with the contact.

“Is that okay? You never have to let anyone, including me, touch you in any way that you don’t like, Tony. Do you want me to put you down?” Tony’s face betrays a struggle to figure out what the ‘right’ answer is, but given that his hold on Steve tightens a bit as he considers, Steve feels relatively confident that the boy doesn’t need to be set on his feet immediately. Steve tells himself the relief he feels has everything to do with giving Tony the affection he clearly wants and needs. It’s not at all related to how damn right it feels to have the weight of him back in Steve’s arms.

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“Fury said you wanted to see me. If this is about whatever team-building crap Steve is on about, shouldn’t I be meeting with him?” It’s the first time Phil has seen or heard from Clint since the revelation of his not-quite death. He looks better than he had then, but the shadows under his eyes and the tightness of his shoulders are evidence enough that he is still struggling both with the lingering effects of Loki’s control and with his own wounded feelings toward Phil himself. When Phil explains, the archer seems almost relieved to be presented with a different issue altogether.

Tony is their priority right now, and Clint has always been skilled at ensuring the mission comes first.

Part of Phil wishes, selfishly, that he wasn’t. He wants Clint to rail at him, using a creative string of multi-lingual curses. He’d even settle for a solid punch to the jaw. But he should probably leave the wishing to the actual four-year-old for now.

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Tony is silent for a while after that. Steve slowly paces the room, rubbing gentle circles on his back. The boy’s head starts to droop against his shoulder, and just as he begins to hope that the combination of gentle, repetitive touches and continual, slow motion might be enough to put him to sleep, Tony jerks in his grip.

“How did they…my parents, I mean. How did they die?” This time, Steve answers with a question of his own.

“Does it matter?” The phrasing is insensitive, and he winces almost as soon as the words leave his mouth. “I’m sorry, Tony. I don’t…it matters very much that they’re gone. But will knowing how…do you honestly think that’ll help you?” Steve remembers, has never stopped remembering since the day it happened, Bucky’s scream as he’d fallen. The horrible ‘gift’ of his enhanced hearing meant Steve had heard every second of the way his brave, fearless friend, his first and best protector, had yelled from the moment he lost his grip on the train to the second when his body had connected with the ground. It might be the worst kind of cowardice, but even knowing now that Bucky had survived, Steve would give anything to have someone take that knowledge, that sound, from him. Sometimes abstraction is its own kind of gift, and Tony, in Steve’s opinion, has more than enough material and visceral horrors in front of him without adding more.

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“Does he have toys or clothes or anything?” Natasha, as always, has been nearly impossible for even Phil to read. She’d offered, first, to avoid returning to the tower, arguing that Tony’s lingering mistrust of her might be more acute, if unconscious, when he’s in this form. But she hadn’t protested at all when Phil had insisted that she be there with the rest of them, and the tiny upward
curve to her lip (a micro expression that he knows he's only seeing because she's allowing it) suggests that she’s pleased, and probably a bit relieved, to be included. He offer to shop is rather unprecedented, but Phil’s surprise at that is quickly overtaken by an annoyance that this had never occurred to him.

“I…no, he doesn’t have anything. Jesus I didn’t even think of that. The clothes he was wearing when it happened seemed to have shrunk with him, but that’s all he’s got.”

“You’re slipping, bossman. The grave obviously didn’t suit you.” She hesitates by the door for a moment, and then adds, “So don’t leave us again.” Natasha being Natasha, she follows this rather touching command up by informing Phil that she has somehow during the course of the meeting successfully picked his pocket, and that he can expect the charges for her shopping trip be put on his SHIELD-issue black Amex. He wonders idly if the organization will be bankrupt by the end of the day, and then realizes he doesn’t much care.

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“What about the arc reactor? I assume whatever magic caused the spell made it smaller so it stayed proportional to his body? Or—well, I suppose the shrapnel isn’t technically there yet, depending on whether the spell is manipulating time itself or only Tony’s physiology.”

Bruce had been Phil’s last meeting of the day. It had been the longest of all of them, and it had run the gamut. Initially enthusiastic about helping out (which makes sense given that he’s probably the closest to Tony out of all of them), the scientist had balked when he’d realized that this plan would place a child in close potential proximity to the Hulk. And to be fair, it’s not that Phil’s entirely comfortable with this either, but the Hulk likes Tony, has always liked Tony, and he’s not about to deny the boy the comfort of a man who understands how his mind works as well as Bruce does. Add to that the fact that Bruce is the closest they’ll be able to get to a doctor they can trust, and there’s no real way they can do this without Banner. To make doubly sure the man’s anxieties and predilection to run don’t get the best of him, Phil had offered to drive them both to the tower. It’s during the drive that Bruce’s mind seems to have switched gears to the science of it. For a moment Phil’s lost to his own speculations about multiple timelines and parallel universes, but this only serves to make his head ache, so he focuses back on the practicalities, which is what he’s always been best at anyways.

“He does have it, I’m not sure how or why or any of that, but he does. It seems to have gotten smaller with him, but he was struggling to breathe earlier, so we might want to check on that. He was having a panic attack at the time so it might be mostly down to that, but Tony…adult Tony, he doesn’t talk much about the impact the reactor has on his health. It’s possible it makes breathing a bit of a challenge.” Bruce’s skin takes on a distinctly greenish tinge, and for a long, alarming moment Phil’s brain goes into disaster mode, considering the many problematic outcomes of a Hulk-out taking place in a moving vehicle. But after several long, deep inhalations, Bruce takes out
Traffic is more snarled and unwieldy than usual, and by the time Phil and Bruce arrive at the tower and make their way to the penthouse, they find virtually every surface of living room covered in bag after bag of everything a child could conceivably need or want. There’s piles of clothes, small jeans and at least a dozen t-shirts (including several that look to have superhero prints, Phil notes with a smile), soft-looking pyjamas, brightly coloured socks, underwear, and several pairs of shoes. At least one bag is full of books, a Harry Potter box set, some science fiction titles Phil isn’t familiar with, several comics, and a few magazines on various topics. And then there’s the toys. They’re everywhere, plush stuffed animals in varying shapes and sizes, multiple sets of Legos, several dolls, and a potato head that appears to come with the option to dress him as each of the Avengers. There are several board games that Phil recognizes, many that he doesn’t, and several sets of cards and activity books and colouring implements. Natasha is in the process of trying to impose some kind of order on all of it when they walk in, and Phil raises an eyebrow at her. The usually unflappable super spy actually flushes a bit.

“I didn’t mean to get carried away. I just… I didn’t know what he liked.” Phil is pretty certain there’s more to it than that, a lot that Natasha is trying to communicate to Tony through these offerings, but he doesn’t speculate aloud about any of that for now.

“Where exactly is Tony?” Because while purchases made for the child are scattered across the room, and Clint and Bruce are both exploring the bounty (Clint occasionally letting out loud exclamations of excitement when he comes across something he either had or wished he had growing up), Tony himself is nowhere to be found.

“He took off when we got here, I think he was pretty overwhelmed by all the people and stuff,” Clint explains as he beams down at what looks to be a Jurassic Park lego set. “Steve’s with him now, trying to get him out from under the bed.”

As promised, Phil finds Steve in Tony’s room, lying on the floor at the foot of the bed and peering under it. When Phil joins him, ignoring the protest from his sore chest the best he can, he sees a huddled form pressed up against the wall.

“Hey buddy, what are you doing under here?” he asks gently, feeling a stab of pleasure when Tony looks over and seems relieved to see him. Tony doesn’t offer any explanations, though, so after a moment Steve takes pity on them all and replies.

“Tony’s a little nervous about having a house full off superheroes. Especially when he found out Natasha was the one to do all the shopping.” Phil must look confused at the latter, because Steve expands in a quieter tone. “He’s never had a dame that isn’t related buy his underpants before.” Laughing would be a mistake, but Phil comes a bit close anyway. There’s no good that can come from comparing this version of Tony to his older self, yet at moments like this it’s hard not to feel stunned and a bit amused by this shy and awkward boy when he thinks about Tony’s older self’s reputation for shamelessness that borders on exhibitionism.

“I think I live here now,” Tony declares miserably. This time Phil does laugh a bit.

“That might get a bit boring, don’t you think? All the cool stuff is out here, and so are all your friends.” As Phil had hoped, it’s that last word that last gets Tony’s attention, though he quickly decides,

“They’re not my friends, they’re his.” Steve frowns, and Phil can practically feel the other man’s
temptation to lift the bed right out of the way to get to Tony faster. But even though Steve’s spontaneous decision to hold Tony earlier had proved successful, they need Tony to want to come out, and to trust that they’ll respect his boundaries. Phil has no real way of stopping Steve if he decides to just go for Tony, but he puts a hand on the super-soldier’s arm anyway, and even if it’s just performative, Steve yields to the gesture all the same.

“Tony, I would love to be your friend,” he says softly instead. “We all would.”

“Why?” As usual, Steve elects to go for the almost painfully candid answer.

“Because I’m lonely, Tony. We all are, in our own ways. Being a superhero is swell, but it’s also hard sometimes. People are scared, or they want us to be heroes all the time and they forget that we’re humans too, humans who don’t know how to work the Nintendo, for example.” Tony grins weakly at that. “But you’ve always accepted me, accepted all of us for who and what we are, no matter how old you are. And we feel the same about you.” It’s only a few seconds before Tony is crawling down the length of the floor under the bed and right into Steve’s lap. His small arms can’t come close to wrapping all the way around the super soldier’s broad chest and back, but that doesn’t appear to matter, because Steve lets out a noise that sounds like something perilously close to a sob and returns the embrace.

It should probably be more surprising that these two have bonded so quickly and so intensely, but then it never really was a matter of genuine dislike that separated them, more like a perfect storm of Tony’s father issues and their connections with Captain America, Loki’s magic, and Steve’s sudden and traumatic re-entrance into the world. With all that, as well as Tony’s multiple layers of defenses stripped away, they’re just a boy who desperately wants to believe in his hero, and a tired, isolated young man who wants to believe in anything, especially his own ability to be worthy of someone like Tony.

Phil could, maybe even should, leave the two of them alone now. Certainly there’s no doubt that Steve can handle things from here. But the thought (and the jealousy and loneliness it evokes) makes him feel immediately queasy. Cautiously, he reaches out to stroke Tony’s hair.

“This okay?” Phil can’t help but look for confirmation that the touch is wanted, cautiously neutral expression slipping away when the boy unburrows from Steve just enough to lean pointedly into Phil’s hand. “Maybe getting to know the team all at once is a bit much. What do you think about spending the next few days getting to know people just one-on-one? Like today has been mainly you and Steve, and tomorrow you can hang out with me, or maybe Bruce? We’ll have our meals together as a team when we can, but we can take the rest of it a little slower.”

“Whatever you want.”

“What’s actually most important right now is what you want, Tony. Could you think about it for a minute and try to tell us what that is?” The slight shades of Agent Coulson that Phil injects into his tone earn him a frown from Steve, but he ignores that as best he can.

“Maybe slow.” Tony says it slowly and cautiously, as if sure he’s being tricked and will shortly face some kind of retribution for arriving at the wrong answer.

“Of course kiddo. Thank you for telling us what you need. Now how about you and Steve relax in here for a few more minutes, and I’ll call you guys when it’s time for dinner?”

“Not hungry,” Tony replies immediately. Phil’s been having this fight with the elder version for close to a week, but Steve isn’t nearly as familiar with Tony’s complicated relationship to food.
“You haven’t eaten since breakfast, Tony. We’re absolutely having dinner.” The little boy plainly isn’t pleased, and Phil doesn’t doubt that once Tony gets confident enough, they’ll be in for some pretty epic tantrums. But for now, the honeymoon period of having Captain America be the one to enforce even the rules Tony hates the most is, apparently, not quite over, because the boy nods, smiling faintly.

Confident that the two will be fine until the team dinner, Phil leaves the room after one more ruffle of Tony’s hair. Since he left the living room, Natasha has successfully roped everyone into helping her sort through her purchases, and Phil is not entirely successful at hiding his snicker as he watches three of the most dangerous people in the world busily organizing what could easily be the entirety of the children’s section of a department store.

“I told you, we shouldn’t sort the Lego by franchise, we should sort them by number of pieces.” It’s so damn nice to see Clint focused on and enthusiastic about something so trivial that Phil lets out a full-bellied laugh, which catches in his throat when Clint’s eyes dart up to meet his. He expects almost any conceivable reaction, from the punch he’d oddly longed for earlier to cool silence, but as per usual, Clint manages to surprise him. He tosses a large package of AA batteries toward Phil, with only slightly more force than is necessary. “You’re on assembly duty, Coulson. Put batteries in anything that needs them and make sure that it works.” They work in relatively comfortable silence, stopping only to bicker about the relative merits of several take-out options. When the food arrives, Steve leads Tony into the living room.

The boy is still clearly nervous—he refuses to relinquish his grip on Steve’s hand, and his brown eyes are wide and far too wary as they dart around the room. The silent consensus seems to be to allow him his space, though none of the team is able to help sneaking interested looks at Tony whenever his attention is elsewhere. He has also only managed a few small bites of his pizza, a fact that quickly registers with Steve as well.

“Tony, you gotta have more to eat than that. We made a deal, remember?” At Steve’s gentle rebuke, all eyes in the room are on Tony, and he flinches under the weight of their combined stares.

“Does your chest hurt, Tony?” Bruce’s question seems to come out of left-field, and Phil’s first instinct is to glare at the scientist for letting his curiosity about the reactor get in the way of ensuring Tony’s basic needs are met. But when Tony looks up at Bruce, it’s with a distinct look of relief that the little boy nods.

“Feels all…full and funny.” It may not be just Tony’s lungs, Phil realizes as he begins to catch up with what Bruce has obviously concluded. True, Tony’s poor eating habits have always seemed to have an emotional element to them as well as a consistency with the man’s generalized patterns of self-neglect. And it’s definitely Tony’s lungs that would experience the most direct pressure from the reactor, but the device has reorganized his entire chest cavity. Everything probably feels a little bit off.

“Do you think you could give something lighter than pizza a shot? Maybe some soup?” Tony appears to give this sincere thought, and then he nods, eyes falling back on Steve.

“‘m sorry. Didn’t mean to go back on our deal, Mr—Steve.”

“I know, and you didn’t. I don’t ever want you skipping meals just because you think they’re not important, but you can always tell me if you don’t feel good, honey. Bruce is gonna make you some soup and that should go down a bit easier.”

“While we wait, do you want to pick out one of your new toys to play with?” Natasha offers.
“No boring clothes stuff, I promise,” Clint adds with a conspiratorial grin. After Steve gives him an encouraging pat, Tony follows the pair back out into the living room.

“Can the reactor really cause him that many problems?” Phil asks as soon as he’s sure Tony is out of earshot. Bruce sighs as he gives the pot in front of him a couple aggressive stirs.

“Honestly, if I had to bet I’d say it’s just as much psychological as physical, maybe more; he woke up and on top of the whole world around him being different, his body has had this radical thing happen to it. We can keep an eye on him for the next couple of days and see if he starts to have an easier time as he gets more accustomed to the reactor.”

“Wait, wait, what?” Steve interjects, looking both horrified and furious. “The thing in Tony’s chest, the thing keeping his heart safe, has it been hurting him this entire time? Even as an adult?”

“It would make some sense. It’s invasive, and I’ve always assumed it places some significant stress on his lungs. But it’s possible that it’s enough of a rearrangement of his organs that it has some secondary impact on other systems as well. It’s also possible that the de-aging of his body and the corresponding shrink of the RT unit were imperfect.” Steve’s brow furrows, but Bruce quickly picks up on his confusion and rephrases. “It might be proportionally bigger now, taking up more space than it does when Tony is an adult. Since his older self has never been particularly forthcoming on how it impacts him, there’s too many variables for me to be sure right now.” Presumably thinking to comfort Steve, Bruce adds, “Hey, at least it isn’t killing him anymore.” It’s only years of training in diplomacy and negotiation that stops Phil from groaning and banging his head on the kitchen table.

“Excuse me?” Steve croaks.

“Let’s stay focused on the present right now,” Phil quickly interjects before Bruce can dig them all in deeper. “Banner, we’ve decided to have Tony spend some time with team members individually during the days rather than converging on him all at once. Why don’t you take tomorrow so that you can monitor him directly?”

“Oh, you want to leave him…alone, with me? Not sure that’s a great idea.”

“Bruce, I honestly doubt you’ll have any problems, but if you’re that nervous about it, we could always try introducing him to the Other Guy tonight, while we’re all here.” Steve’s shoulders rise, but it’s the only outward show of tension the man allows himself, and when he speaks, it’s in his Captain America voice.

“It’s the best plan, Bruce. Tony is doing better in one-on-one situations right now, and you are not going to be the only member of the team that doesn’t get the chance to spend that kind of time with him. It isn’t right.” Bruce’s only response is the softening of his stirs in the pot of soup, but he doesn’t really need to tell either of them what it means to him to be trusted, particularly with something as fragile as a four year old version of their teammate.

When they bring the soup out to the living room, Tony is sitting on the floor putting together what looks to be a race track for small RV cars. Clint and Natasha are seated behind him, smiling fondly but allowing the boy the space he probably craved when he chose an independent activity rather than a group game.

“Dinner’s ready,” Steve tells him. Tony whines, sounding closer to his current age than he has all day, and points down at the half-completed track.

“Can I finish?”
“Not right now, buddy. Right now you really need to get some food in your belly.” It registers to Phil and, if he's not mistaken, to several of the others, how natural the conversation sounds, how easily it feels like all of this could become their new normal—Tony building and playing under their watchful eyes, Steve and the others taking turns gently wrangling him into eating and sleeping. Phil misses adult Tony, it isn’t that he (or any of them) would wilfully trade away him away for what they have now. But seeing Tony like this, all of them having the opportunity to care for him this way, it’s its own kind of intoxicating.

“If you want, I bet we could turn Clint into your own little assistant, just like your helper bots downstairs,” Natasha offers. “You could eat and tell him where you want the pieces to go.” Tony seems on the fence about this proposition, but Clint’s joyful squeal and the eager way that he scrambles over to the toy seems to decide things for Tony.

Perched in Steve’s lap, Tony alternates spoonfuls of soup with directing Clint’s construction of his racetrack. At first Tony is uncharacteristically hesitant, probably afraid to boss around a grown-up (and superhero), but after Natasha shouts out a few snarky suggestions and playful insults to Clint’s assembly strategy, the boy becomes a bit more assertive with his directives. By the time Steve manages to convince Tony to finish off the remainder of his dinner, the track is complete, running almost the entire length of the room. Both Tony and Clint look eagerly for where the package of race cars ended up, but Phil intercedes.

“Tony, before you and Clint get to your racing, there’s someone else we wanted you to meet.” The boy turns to him warily, tension seeping back into his frame. “It isn’t anything bad, Tony. Lots of superheroes have different sides to them, right? Like Steve is Steve and he’s also Captain America. Bruce is the same, but his superhero side works a bit differently, and we just wanted you to meet him since you and Bruce are going to spend time together tomorrow.” Natasha goes ominously still and Clint rises to his feet, but both remain silent after a pointed look from Steve.

“Phil and I are going to be there the entire time. Nothing bad is going to happen to you Tony, I promise,” Steve rushes to assure him. True to form, Tony looks slightly confused about why he’s supposed to be scared in the first place.

Chapter End Notes

Ack, I'm still kind of unhappy with this chapter, but the one thing that writing a dissertation is teaching me is that there's a thin line between revising and obsessing, and I think I already crossed that line a bit trying to get this right. I promise Tony does actually bond with more than just Steve in this fic; he and Tony were just absolutely insistent that they needed a bit more time together first, and ever-practical Phil-muse was all 'Doesn't everyone want to hear about my long day explaining all this to the Avengers and Fury hello' and everyone was really chatty I'm way too indulgent. I promise you'll hear and see more from the rest of the team soon.

Please keep the comments and kudos coming; I absolutely love hearing what folks are enjoying so far. While the bulk of this story is written, or at least roughly drafted, I'm also willing to consider suggestions if there are things you want to see. (And I'm already planning a series of one-shots in this verse, so even if it doesn't make it into this story, there’s a decent chance I can accommodate requests in that series.)
Chapter Summary

Tony meets the Hulk. Steve wagers a valiant war against his helicopter-parent impulses. JARVIS and the bots remain the unsung heroes of the tower.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Not sure I’m wild about him being downstairs with the Hulk,” Clint opines once the little group departs.

“Which him?” Natasha is the worst sometimes. “Oh, stow the glare. I’m just saying, if you and Phil are going to be living together for the foreseeable future, it might be a good idea to slip in at some point that you’re still in love with him.”

“One more word about Coulson and I swear I’m going to dress the Black Widow figure you got Tony in a tutu and a “Future Mrs. Superman” shirt.” Natasha raises her hands in mock surrender, though the effect is somewhat ruined by the small knife he can see holstered to her left wrist.

“Seriously though, I don’t have a problem with them introducing Tony to the Hulk, but I guess I wish we hadn’t found out at the same time as the four-year-old did.” Clint nods his agreement, hands idly finding the ear of one of the new teddy bears and stroking lightly. “Do you…it’s not that Steve and Phil don’t trust us with him, is it?” It’s been ages since Clint has heard Natasha sound anywhere close to this vulnerable, and it’s only his awareness that drawing attention to it will shut her down immediately that stops him from reacting.

“Nah. Hell, Nat, you’re the only one who even thought about making sure there was things in the tower for him to wear and entertain himself with. Steve’s just in team leader mode, not to mention completely gone on the kid, and Phil…well, other than JARVIS, he’s the member of the team who’s known Tony longest.” JARVIS doesn’t voice any response to being included as an Avenger (because of course he is), but Clint realizes after several moments that the temperature in the room is being raised several degrees to the balmy climate that he prefers (which most people he’s met tend to unfavourably compare to a sauna). He shoots a fond grin in the direction of the ceiling.

“Did you ever want kids? Did you and Laura ever talk about it?” The mention of his ex-wife doesn’t cut the way it used to, and definitely doesn’t press on the same acutely raw places that discussing Coulson does. But it still takes Clint the span of several stuttering heartbeats to summon a response.

“Yeah we talked about it a lot, especially at the beginning. But she was very clear on the fact that she wouldn’t bring a child into the life I was leading then. I can’t say I blame her.”

“I can,” Nat says fiercely. Her deep and unhesitating loyalty isn’t new, but they’ve fallen away from each other a bit in recent months. Clint’s body responds embarrassingly fast to the sudden broaching of the distance between them, muscles he hadn’t even been aware were tense suddenly releasing. “You’d be great, Clint.”
This is a dangerous conversation to have when Tony is the implicit object; they’re none of them his parents, not really, and given that they have no idea what caused all this to happen in the first place, they also have to be prepared for it to end just as suddenly. But he also can’t not say it.

“So would you.” He pauses, then adds with an overdone leer, “Plus you’d be a total MILF.” Nat groans and slaps him lightly on the side of his head, but then she curls up so that she’s pressed tightly against his side. It’s the first time Clint has been touched by anyone in a positive way since before the Battle of New York, and he inhales the fresh sent of her almond body wash with more relief than he’d thought possible.

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His older self, Tony learns, has apparently built a room in the tower specifically made for containing the Hulk. Well, Mr. Bruce says contain—to Tony, it looks more like a kind of playroom, complete with a TV (surrounded by some kind of shatter-proof bubble), large-print books, several pieces of extremely sturdy furniture that also looks to be bolted to the floor, and pillows. Lots and lots of pillows, in every conceivable shape and size. It’s a cozy-looking space, and Tony is pretty certain the adults around him need to just chill already.

Steve and Agent have gone over the rules so many times that even though he’s talking to Captain America, Tony nearly rolls his eyes. Several times. It’s not like the rules are hard to remember or something. They basically boil down to trying to not make the Hulk mad, and running as fast as he can out of the room if that does happen. And there’s an oddly specific one about poking Hulk with sharp or electrified things, which seems kinda weird. It’s not as if it’s likely that any of that stuff will be in the room in the first place. But both Steve and Agent are weirdly intense about that rule, so he doesn’t push it.

When they finally (after the sixth—sixth!—run-through of the rules) let him go into the playroom, the Hulk is already inside. They hadn’t lied about how big he is; even sitting on the reinforced couch, he towers over Tony, and their size difference is only made more apparent when Hulk stands and lumbers over to him. Hulk peers curiously down at Tony, and Tony stares back up at him.

“Tiny,” Hulk grunts. Tony has been teased about his size more than enough in his life already, and a grumpy retort leaves his mouth before he can really consider whether it’s the best plan.

“Ever thought that maybe you aren’t a fair unit of measure, size-wise?” The room is sound-proofed, but Tony swears he can almost hear the groan Steve is surely making as he watches the video feed on the other side of the wall. Hulk doesn’t seem mad, he’s just cocking his head sort of like a curious puppy, but Tony decides a change of subject might still be best. He certainly doesn’t want to get pulled out of here just when the cool stuff is starting to happen. “I’m Tony. It’s nice to meet you.” The others had warned Tony, repeatedly, that the Hulk may not recognize him, but at this introduction, the Hulk cocks an eyebrow, looking both bored and bemused.

“Hulk not stupid. Recognize Tiny Tin Man. Hulk’s.”

“Uh—sure, yeah. We’re teammates, right? That’s what Mr. Bruce and everyone says.” At the mention of Bruce, Hulk makes a sound that is unmistakably a raspberry.

“Puny Bruce. Boring.” Tony doesn’t really know the man very well, but much as Agent’s eyes had immediately put him at ease even before he knew it was actually safe, so too had Bruce’s soft, even voice made even scary questions about the thing in his chest less scary. He doesn’t like the thought of anyone being mean to Bruce, even if Hulk is sort of part of him.

“I think he’s nice.” Hulk blows another raspberry. “Maybe he just doesn’t know what you like or
how to make you happy?”

“Banner not ask. Banner never ask. Just want Hulk to go away.”

“Well I’m asking. What do you like?” Hulk surveys the room and then shrugs, big shoulders slumping. Well that’s not good. Tony sure does not want to go down as the guy who replaced the Hulk’s anger with boredom and sadness. They’ll kick him off the team for sure, and he won’t even blame them.

“We could try to find something to smash?” he offers. Smash was, technically, one of the banned words according to the rules, but it’s one of the only concrete things Tony knows about Hulk (and come on, how cool would it be to break stuff with a huge green superhero?) Hulk cocks his head again, seeming more confused than impressed by the offer.

“Tin Man too tiny for smashing.” Poking Hulk to get him to let up on the whole Tiny thing is starting to seem more appealing by the minute.

“Well if we can’t break stuff we could try making it? There’s enough pillows in here to build a cool tower or something. And then we could still smash it after without hurting anything.”

Hulk accepts the compromise, and they spend the better part of the next half an hour perfecting their tower. It falls a couple of times halfway through (once when Hulk accidentally knocks it over, and another when an oddly shaped pillow causes the entire thing to unbalance). The second time Hulk roars his discontent, but there’s something entirely un-frightening about Hulk’s anger, maybe because it’s right there in your face. His Dad’s worst rages tends to sit sort of under the surface, sometimes for days, and those are always the worst because you never know when his big smiles and seemingly happy voice will suddenly become something else entirely. Tony shivers, and Hulk, feeling it where Tony is pressed against his leg, stops so quickly mid-roar that it would be almost funny if Tony weren’t caught up in his own fear and sadness and guilt.

“Scared?”

“Not of you.” Hulk seems entirely too interested in Tony’s feelings given that Bruce had several times made a point of basically calling him stupid, so Tony rushes to change the subject. “But you shouldn’t get so upset when stuff breaks or falls. That’s what making stuff is. You’re never going to do the really cool things if you don’t mess them up and have to put ‘em back together better a lot first. That’s what Mr. Jarvis says”

“Building…like smashing?

“Yeah, that’s...yeah. Building is like smashing,” Tony agrees.

After this, Hulk takes almost as much delight in their failures as he does their eventual success, a tower that reaches nearly to the ceiling of the playroom. He even lifts Tony up over his head to place the final pillow on the top, and then they both take a running leap at the structure, knocking into it and sending pillows flying everywhere. Several of them split open, leaving both Hulk and Tony covered in feathers, and Hulk spends several hilarious minutes chasing one that’s being blown around the room by the air conditioning.

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When the Hulk and Tony have destroyed the majority of the pillows in the room, Steve and Phil manage to convince them both to call it a night (though Hulk growls several warnings at them both to be careful with Tony before he permits them to take the child out of the room). In all, though Steve was certain his heart was going to stop at several points, the meeting as a success, and Tony
wastes no time in declaring Hulk ‘awesome’ when they join the others upstairs.

He insists he wants to play with his new racetrack, but it’s evident from even a cursory glance at the kid that he’s flagging and quickly. His eyelids are drooping over his glassy eyes, and he yawns constantly, though he makes a valiant effort to muffle the sound in his arms. He isn’t fooling anyone. Natasha winks at Steve as she seizes Tony’s package of race cars and hides them under her thigh.

“It’s time to get you ready for bed, sweetheart,” he announces, trying to maintain a semi-stern expression as Tony wrinkles his nose and shakes his head.

“Tony.” Nat’s tone is calm but firm, and Tony seems to realize pretty quickly that there’s no messing with that voice, because he looks up instantly. “Steve’s right, it’s late and you’re sleepy. I promise I won’t let anyone use the cars without you, and we’ll leave the track right where it is. But for now, you need to go to bed. I put a pair of your new pyjamas and your toothbrush in your bathroom. I bet if you get all washed up without one argument, you can probably talk Cap into reading you a bedtime story.”

Steve is quickly realizing that he’s underestimated Natasha’s skills in this arena, because that? That was a masterpiece. The subtle invocation of Captain America, her careful combination of authority and gentleness, Steve could have stood there and argued with a big or little version of Tony for twenty minutes and not achieved anywhere near as positive an effect. When she combines all of this with a smirk and a wink in Steve’s direction, he’s not sure what he wants more—to kiss her again, or to worship at her feet and beg her to teach him all of her ways.

Apparently, he sits there looking stunned and silly for longer than he realizes, because soon Tony has crept back into the living room, clad in blue pyjamas printed with cartoon representations of all the Avengers.

“Nice PJs buddy. Specially that guy right there, right over your arm. What a handsome devil.” Clint is grinning and pointing to the drawing of himself that covers much of Tony’s left bicep. Tony smiles shyly at the compliment, but then turns back to Steve.

“Is… I mean, if you’re busy, you don’t have to…”

“Hey, of course I want to read to you. Did you know I’ve never read Harry Potter? It’s real popular, apparently, and look, he has kinda messy hair just like you. Want to start there?” The child beams in response, taking the first book from the boxed set and setting off for the bedroom at a run.

“Can we come listen, Cap?” Clint is still bearing the silly smile he’d directed at Tony, and Steve guesses that if he says no, the archer will play the entire thing for laughs and they’ll never discuss it again. But it feels like there’s something more to the question, a bridge there that would be nearly impossible to mend if broken. And even if a deeply selfish part of Steve wants to have Tony entirely to himself, wants his easy smiles and his warm snuggles and the way that the boy looks at him with utter trust and certainty, he wants, too, what seems to lie behind Clint’s question: the promise of some kind of family.

“Yeah you can come.” On impulse, he adds, “But half of you are still in work clothes, so get changed. If Tony’s gotta be in his pyjamas for a bedtime story, so does everyone else.” It’s the right thing to say, judging by the way that Clint, Bruce and Nat race off to their floors. Phil shoots him an approving smile before getting up and departing for his own level of the tower at a (slightly) more sedate pace.
Tony’s ridiculously huge bed makes it easy for five adults and a child to comfortably arrange themselves. Steve has never read aloud to a child except at a couple of school fundraisers he’s done recently, and at first he’s stiff and anxious. But the others, most of whom are familiar with the story already, start helping out, and they pass the book back and forth so that they can each perform particular characters, complete with voices and sometimes ridiculous and spirited gestures. It takes ages to get through even a couple of chapters, but Steve wouldn’t trade Tony’s rapt attention and periodic giggles, nor the easy camaraderie of the team, for anything. Even if Tony does fall asleep during Steve’s best impression of Petunia Dursley.

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Tony gets to sleep no problem, confidently rebuffing the team’s repeated offers to have someone stay with him. Steve drifts off to sleep in his own bed a short time later, optimistic about the amount of rest Tony will be able to catch up on in this state. So it is an entirely unpleasant surprise to arrive on the penthouse floor after his run to find Tony’s bed empty and cold. Before he can fight down the bubble of fear rising like acid in his throat, JARVIS volunteers,

“Mr. Stark is currently in the tower, and all of his vitals are within normal parameters.”

“Well that’s…something, at least. Thank you JARVIS. Where is he?”

“Sir has…requested privacy concerning the events of last night. But as he does not currently possess knowledge of the protocols and override codes that would render such requests commands, I find myself with unexpected…leeway concerning their execution. I cannot lose his trust, but with Sir—well, not quite himself, I am unclear as to the best way to proceed.” Steve known from previous interactions with JARVIS that he had personality, but Steve never could have imagined that an AI could sound as pained as JARVIS does now.

“Are you asking my advice, JARVIS?”

“I…suppose I am, yes Captain Rogers.”

“We all trust your judgement here. You have known him longer and better than anyone. If you’re tempted to give us a bit more information about Tony than you normally would be allowed or even want to, I think there’s probably a real good reason. And I think you also know that none of us would use it to hurt him.”

“I appreciate that, Captain.” The AI pauses again, then makes his report, tone at least closer to his usual strident, formal manner. “Sir slept for a total of three hours and seventeen minutes. He woke upon experiencing a nightmare, and exhibited many of the same issues with his breathing as he presented with yesterday. Under the medical protocols of the house I nearly alerted you and Agent Coulson, but Sir begged me not to, and I was able to employ Agent Coulson’s breathing techniques to provide at least some assistance. He refused to reveal the content of the dream, but he was insistent that he would not return to sleep. He then made his way to the workshop, where myself, Dummy, You and Butterfingers have kept watch on him.” Without Steve having to ask, JARVIS brings up live footage from downstairs. Tony is seated on the floor; the angle is tight enough that the boy’s bloodshot and shadowed eyes are easy to spot, as is the slight tremor in his hand as he tosses a ball for the bots. Each time he does, two of them take off with exaggerated excitement, whirring and beeping noisily and even intentionally bumping into one another. The ‘fight’ over the ball always brings a small smile to Tony’s lips, and as two bots entertain the child, there’s always a third (currently Steve thinks it’s the one called You) that remains steadfast next to Tony. He doesn’t speak, but occasionally he leans against the bot, and he allows it to tuck one of the workshop’s threadbare blankets tighter around his shoulder without complaint.

It’s touching, of course, and Steve is grateful for every bit of help the team can get right now. But
it’s equally frustrating that the bots and JARVIS had been the only ones even aware Tony was in distress. Of course his nightmares hadn’t stopped because he couldn’t remember New York. Steve had just personally told a four year old boy that his parents and his beloved caretaker were dead and that he was thirty-some years in the future, how could he possibly have believed Tony was fine with that once the excitement of meeting the team wore off?

“Thank you for telling me, JARVIS. I think you’re right and we don’t want him to start trying to hide things from you, so could you please tell him that I’m awake and that I’ll probably be up to start breakfast soon?”

When he makes his way back to the penthouse (having gone to his own floor to allow Tony time to ‘sneak’ back to his room), he finds a predictably exhausted and crabby little boy, who spends the morning alternating between clinging desperately to Steve and making a show of pushing him away. Tony doesn’t volunteer information about his night, and Steve doesn’t push for it, even if it stings a bit to have evidence that however much Tony idolizes Captain America, he doesn’t totally trust Steve yet. The others slowly trickle in, but none of them fare any better. No one can convince him to eat anything, either, though finally at JARVIS’s recommendation they make a smoothie that Tony seems at least somewhat less inclined to refuse.

The absolute last thing Steve wants with Tony in this kind of shape is to follow through with their plan to leave the child with Bruce. As, Clint, Natasha and Phil begin readying themselves to head to SHIELD for the day, he corners the latter.

“Do you think…he obviously had a hard night, maybe I should stay here with Tony and Bruce?”

To Steve’s great offense, Phil appears rather amused at this extremely reasonable proposition.

“Steve, stop being such a stereotypical new parent. Tony is going to be fine with Bruce, you know that.” He crosses his arms and begins to prepare his list of objections, but Phil, annoyingly, stops all of them in their tracks. “The last thing you want to do is make Bruce, or any of them, feel like you don’t think they’re capable of caring for Tony as well as you do. You would never have done it if our original plan was still in place and they were here to help him when he was adult, so you can’t do it now.” Phil gracefully accepts Steve’s defeated groan as acknowledgement of the truth of his statement, and claps a hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t you come into the office with us? Jane is going to try to make contact with Thor and see if he’ll be able to come back sooner rather than later.”

Having something specific and helpful to do is probably going to make the day go faster than if he just sits around agonizing about Tony, so Steve agrees. Far too soon they’re all on their way, Bruce cheerfully wishing them a ‘good day at the office dears’ while Tony waves from beside him and promises Clint he won’t touch the cars until they can race them together that evening. Steve wonders if it would be too pathetic to set a countdown on his phone to tell him how long it’ll be until they get to go home.

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As he watches Captain America and most of his other new friends depart, Tony secretly admits to himself that maybe he’s a bit nervous. Not about being with Bruce, or Hulk, they’re both pretty awesome, but because maybe the others won’t come back. He’d grumped at absolutely everybody when they’d tried to talk Tony into having some French toast, what if they decided everything Dad had said was right, and they went off to form a new Avengers group without the stupid little kid version of their former teammate? Would they be allowed to kick him out of a tower that’s technically his, but not yet?

A warm hand falls on his shoulder, and Bruce’s low voice makes the ache in his chest ease just
slightly. “Want to come down to the lab and do some science-ing with me?” Though he’s pretty certain the kind of stuff Bruce will let him do is going to be limited to the kiddy experiments like baking soda volcanos, it’s better than being by himself (everything is better than that). Eager to keep what might be his only remaining friend, Tony even vows to ooh and aah at whatever silly little tests Bruce lets him do.

As it turns out, there’s no need for Tony to feign any kind of reaction, because Bruce is so cool. In the lab, he speaks to Tony like another grown-up, and he doesn’t hesitate at all about letting Tony help him with his current project, which involves running a panel of tests on the poison that had been on a tipped arrow that hit Natasha a few weeks prior. He insists on all kinds of safety measures of course, and he never lets Tony handle any of the slides or test tubes containing samples of the actual poison directly, but he lets Tony contribute plenty in both actions and ideas. He takes the latter especially seriously, responding to Tony’s questions and comments with thoughtful and detailed conversation. The thought that he’s actually doing something to directly help the Avengers makes Tony’s stomach-ache fade away almost entirely, and when he’s sure Bruce’s back is turned, he does a little jig that nearly sends him flying off his lab chair.

After they leave the poison with some tests that will take several hours to yield results, Bruce takes them back to Tony’s own workshop. Now that he isn’t afraid he’s doomed to live here or be experimented on, the place just gets less and less frightening. And even though they had sat up all night with him, Tony’s bots seem wildly excited to have him back. They’re not the best secret keepers though; Dummy’s enthusiastic presentation of the ball they’d played with last night causes Bruce to give him a knowing and sad kind of look, and Tony pretends to be ignorant of what the bot is asking for. At least until Bruce turns away—then he hurriedly whispers,

“I’ll come back tonight. Secret, ‘member? I was ‘posed to be in bed.” Tony could swear that despite having used his best quiet voice Bruce overhears, because the man’s lips twitch. When he asks JARVIS what big Tony has been working on, though, Bruce sounds just like he normally does.

Almost instantly, the room is filled with over 50 holographic projections of different projects Tony has on the go. Sadly, Bruce flatly rejects all of the options having to do with big-Tony’s armour, and he gets a weird look on his face when he learns that there are apparently 48 versions of it. They still manage to spend an enjoyable couple of hours working on a communication unit that is designed to withstand high speeds and altitudes better than SHIELD’s models, which grown-up Tony’s notes insist are ‘shit’. Bruce even allows Tony to read the swear word out loud and giggle multiple times without getting mad, instantly upping his cool-factor by another ten points.

When Bruce insists on stopping for lunch after this, Tony lets out a frustrated whine. Who actually eats three meals a day the way these people all seem to? Dummy races over to the workshop’s blender, and Tony briefly thinks he’ll be able to get away with having another smoothie for a meal, but JARVIS, the traitor, tells Bruce something about Dummy mixing food with motor oil that puts an immediate end to that option.

Tony’s stomach ache has abated somewhat in all the excitement and science-ing, but as Bruce lists off their options for lunch, it starts to return full force.

“I think I’m more tired than hungry. Maybe I should go nap?” In his limited experience, the grown ups here seem equally as excited about getting him to sleep as they are to eat, so Tony thinks this is a pretty solid distraction. Bruce doesn’t appear fooled at all.

“After lunch you’re definitely going down for a nap kiddo, but right now we need to get some food into you.” Bruce levels him with the same thoughtful look that Tony just saw on his face down in
the lab, and it’s then he knows he’s in real trouble. “Tony, can you talk to me a bit about why eating is so hard for you right now? Does your stomach still hurt like it did yesterday, or is it that you’re a bit anxious about being in a new place and with new people? Sometimes that makes it hard for me to eat.” Tony can’t ever imagine Hulk having trouble eating, personally, but he keeps that thought to himself.

“Um, dunno.” Bruce arches a brow and does that annoying big-person thing where he just waits out Tony’s silence. And really, Tony should have known better than to think that playing dumb would work after the way they had just spent the last few hours. “I guess it hurts all the time just a little bit, but then if I’m…..thinkin’ bout stuff, sometimes it feels lots worse.” On top of causing all these stupid problems with food, Tony’s nerves are making his speech come out more kiddish than usual, and he frowns in annoyance at himself.

“Alright. I’m going to put some chicken nuggets and fries in the oven for us, and then while it cooks we’re going to try something.” That sounds a bit ominous to Tony, but it turns out that Bruce wants to try something called meditation. When he explains it to Tony at first, it sounds boring, and pretty impossible. He’s never been able to control all the thoughts that are constantly floating around his head, and Bruce says the whole point of meditation is to try to help your mind calm down. But as Bruce never insulted him with ‘safe’ (boring) science projects, Tony decides to humour the man, coming to a cross-legged sit on the floor next to him. He listens as Bruce’s low, even voice describes imagining the movement of his breath as the expansion and contraction of certain colours. They breathe in red from the ground, let it travel up their bodies and out the top of their heads, back to the ground. Then it’s orange, and yellow, and green. Then the next colours, blue and violet, come down to them from the sky, before they end off imagining themselves surrounded by a white light. Bruce also tries to introduce something he calls affirmations, which seem to be sort of like when grow ups have asked Tony to say something he likes about himself. He does not like affirmations. But imagining the colours, linking them to his breathing, it eases the knot in his tummy a lot, and his whole chest feels less squished than it has since he woke up with the weird metal thing in it.

He manages to clear more than half the plate of food Bruce offers to him, and he tries not to be too obviously proud when the man compliments him about it, because it’s hardly like eating is a real accomplishment. After lunch, Tony is sure that Bruce will insist on that nap, but he readily agrees to watch a movie instead. Smug with his successful evasion of sleep, Tony allows Bruce, who has been pretty hands-off compared to Steve (and he isn’t disappointed by that, he isn’t a baby, he isn’t) to settle him in his lap. He doesn’t register the very slight rocking motion Bruce has been making until his eyes start to droop. Incensed at this trick, Tony struggles against the temptation to close his eyes all the way, then decides as he starts to drift off that he’ll just have to address Bruce’s epic betrayal when he wakes.

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Steve barely restrains himself from running through the door at 4:30 when they finally reach the tower after what felt like the world’s longest drive. Tony’s floor is quiet, and his mind immediately offers a hundred scenarios where Tony has been crushed by the Hulk or abducted or is hiding under the bed again, utterly traumatized by their absence. When he finds Bruce and Tony curled up together on the couch, fast asleep, he’s forced to admit to a smug voice in his head that perhaps he might have been slightly overreacting.

When the others start to trickle in, Bruce wakes. He doesn’t move, just casts a fond look down at Tony before glancing over at the others.

“Any nightmares?” Phil asks quietly. Bruce shakes his head.
“Not that I know of. We did some meditation before lunch to try to make eating a bit easier, and that might have helped him sleep too.” Bruce spends half his time in such deep shame about the Other Guy and his actions that to see him flushed with success at having positively impacted Tony makes every bit of Steve’s reluctance to leave the two alone together seem even pettier.

“That’s fantastic, Bruce. Maybe we can all join you tomorrow morning when you practice? I know a bit about yoga but I’ve never bothered much with the meditation end of things.” Impressing Natasha is no easy feat, and Bruce’s grin is even wider when he nods his assent. They discuss the rest of Bruce and Tony’s day in a hushed whisper, those absent from the house all getting a kick out of the Science Bro’s adventures, especially kid-Tony’s encounters with his adult self’s less than glowing reviews of SHIELD tech (which, by the end of the day, the smaller Tony wholeheartedly agreed with). Just as they’re debating when to wake Tony, the boy stirs in Bruce’s lap, bringing his fists up to rub at his eyes in a gesture so unbearably cute that Steve is crossing the room and scooping him into his arms in seconds.

“Hey sweetheart.” Tony, still grumbly and half asleep, mutters something that sounds like ‘not fair.’ “What’s not fair?” Bruce chuckles.

“I think Tony is referring to the fact that he perhaps didn’t intend to take a nap when we sat down this afternoon. But obviously he needed the rest, didn’t you buddy?” Tony humphs against Steve’s chest and otherwise seems to decide the discussion is beneath him.

“Dude, naps are awesome. I definitely had one at my desk today…after I was done all my very important paperwork of course,” Clint amends hastily as Phil levels a glare at him. Their banter, however, is abruptly cut off as every screen in the penthouse flashes and comes loudly to life, JARVIS insisting that he can’t halt or otherwise control the transmission. Instantly, Natasha, Clint, Phil and Bruce are on their feet and forming a protective barrier around Steve, who has Tony gripped tightly in one arm and the shield in his other.

“Some people call me a terrorist. I consider myself a teacher…”

Chapter End Notes

Oh right, that pesky Iron Man 3 plot! Even if I am playing fast and loose with some aspects of it (like the fact that the first Mandarin video aired before the suit-hovering-over-Pepper incident, not after as it’s depicted here), it’s still starting to rear its head a little bit. I promise the de-aging and then age play remain the central focus of the story, but sadly for Tony (and everyone), the world isn't going to stop long enough to let them just settle into that without complication.

Thank you all so much for your continued support of this story. I had no idea how much fun it would be to share this, or how much your comments and kudos would keep me excited about even the pickier, less fun parts of revision.
Superheroing and Other Data-Gathering Expeditions

Chapter Summary

Clint prevents an epic Steve/Tony blow-up in the immediate wake of the Mandarin's first 'lesson'. Tony, puzzled by the Avengers, starts charting their behaviour.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The video is less than two minutes, and it’s hardly the worst kind of violence any of them have seen. Hell, some of them have inflicted worse than what that video shows, willingly or not. And yet, when it finally stops after what feels like ages, picking up the regular feed from networks that are at a loss to explain what has just happened, the silence in the living room is ear-splittingly loud.

Phil moves first. Without a word to anyone, he slips on the suit jacket he had just taken off and draped over a chair and exits the penthouse, already on his phone with SHIELD. Natasha takes a long look at Steve, and a much shorter one at Tony, who looks less scared or upset than he does mystified by the intensity of their responses. Apparently she can’t bring herself to answer the questions she can certainly see in his gaze, because after another beat, she turns and makes her way to the elevator, presumably to join Coulson.

Clint would normally follow them. However pissed he is with Coulson, however unsure of Natasha, they’re his and he has never once allowed either of them to walk into a situation full of so many unknowns without his support, not unless they wanted it that way. His fingers are itching for an arrow, and he can feel the anchor point under his chin waiting impatiently for the press of his bow.

And then he makes the mistake of looking at Steve.

Steve, whose hold on Tony looks just shy of too-tight as he stares, unblinking, at the television. Bruce, standing to their right, opens his mouth to speak, but his skin is already taking on a distinctly green tinge. He mutters a quiet apology and hastily makes for the elevator at a near-run.

“Is he—Hulk? I can go help,” Tony offers, twisting impatiently in Steve’s grip. Cap actually growls and tightens his hold.

“NO, Tony.” Tony is clearly intending to put up a fight, and if he does there’s a decent chance that Steve is on edge enough that all of this could go to hell extremely quickly. So Clint blurts the first thing that comes to his mind.

“You haven’t taken a bath since you got here, buddy. And science-ing is pretty smelly work. We’re going to do that now, alright?” It’s hard to say who looks more nonplussed by the suggestion, Steve or Tony, but he’s shut both of them up at least temporarily, so Clint is putting this one in the win column dammit.

“You will have to make use of the bathtubs on yours or Captain Rogers’ floors, Agent Barton. Sir’s floor has had only a shower since 2008.” Christ, even JARVIS sounds tense, and why is he going into so much damn detail about the floor plans—right. 2008. Popular word around SHIELD had it
that Stark had been waterboarded in Afghanistan, and this seems all but confirmed by the fact that
Tony had apparently returned home and ripped the bathtub out of his house. The AI is offering a
reminder and a warning, but Clint just has to hope that no subconscious memories of those events
are going to come through for the kid, because there’s no damn way he’ll be able to convince
Steve to put Tony down for a shower by himself right now. And Clint so does not need to get into a
fight with a super-soldier today.

“Alright, thanks JARVIS!” he says, voice hollow and falsely cheerful even to his own ears. “You
heard the man, kid. Now my floor happens to have an awesome bathtub, so why don’t you and Cap
head down there and I’ll try to find the bath toys I know Tasha bought you and meet you there in a
sec, alright? Steve, you want me to grab swim trunks from your level?” Steve’s wide blue eyes
snap to his, but the man seems to be looking right through him. Come on soldier, work with me
here man. “Steve,” he repeats, just slightly louder. “Trunks?” The other man’s eyes finally come to
focus on Clint, and he gives a jerky nod.

“Uh—yeah. Sure. They’re in the bottom drawer of my dresser.”

“Cool. I’ll meet you two down there then. Don’t use all the best bubble baths without me!”

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Trying to force his stubborn fingers to loosen their death-grip on Tony, Steve carries him to Clint’s
floor. Even through the haze that’s fogging his brain and making it difficult to think about anything
at all beyond a nearly primal desire to destroy everyone and everything that even thinks about
breathing too close to this child, he’s aware enough to notice how different this floor is from his
own. The best way he can think to describe it is drama—Clint and Tony share an appreciation for
the showy and performative, and it comes through in the design. While the floorpan is almost
identical to Steve’s, the lines and colours and fabrics of the space are far bolder and brighter,
refusing to yield or fade quietly into the background. And there’s definitely a lot more exposed
entrances to the vent-work.

Tony is mercifully quiet as they move through the space and get set up in the bathroom, while
Steve keeps working to get a handle on the rage and anxiety that are almost suffocating him. He’d
been stupid not to realize that everything wouldn’t stop just because all of this had happened with
Tony. And it’s not like he’s never witnessed people he cares about under threat—he’d been in a
war, for goodness sake, this shouldn’t be so impossible to handle. Even Tony himself is plainly
confused about the extent of Steve’s overreaction.

Clint joins them shortly thereafter, already wearing a pair of bright purple trunks and holding a
mesh bag full of toys. It’s obvious pretty quickly that the toys are there to attempt to distract Tony
and put him back at ease, but it’s equally clear that Tony isn’t going to make that easy on them. As
soon as they are all settled in the water, Tony directs a series of rapid-fire questions at Clint that
he’d obviously been straining to hold back while alone with Steve.

“Who was that man on the TV?”

“I actually don’t know.”

“Are the Avengers going to fight him?”

“I have no idea buddy.”

“How did he take control of all the television signals?”

“I’m not a techy guy, Tony, I really couldn’t tell you.”
“Stop LYING!” Tony has been so soft-spoken and hesitant to this point that Steve is completely stunned by the outburst, and it’s solely Clint’s quick reflexes that prevent their charge from jumping out of the tub. Tony fights the steady grip, kicking and clawing and even trying to bite down on Clint’s arm. “I can HELP! I know I’m not him, but you have to let me—you have to—I helped Bruce today, he said I was in-inval”—

“Invaluable?” Steve offers gently. Tony nods, his struggles slowly starting to give way to the fat tears sitting right at the edge of his lower eyelids.

“I can do it. I can change the armour so it’ll fit me, and JARVIS can help me fly and I can help you get the bad guy who hurt all those people. I can do it.” The mere idea of Tony anywhere near a fight when he’s in this state makes that visceral, almost animalistic part of Steve’s brain rage again, and he grips the edge of the Jacuzzi. Clint, who has borne all of this, including Tony’s (admittedly small and ineffective) assault with complete calm, loosens his arms and spins the child so that they’re facing one another.

“Yeah you could. Whether you’re 2 or 92, you could do damn near anything you put your mind to.” The unambiguous statement of faith in his abilities seems to bring Tony up short; even his sobs come to a stuttering halt. “No one in this tower has lied to you once since you got here Tony. I’m telling you that I don’t know what just happened because I really don’t have a damn clue. The first step in superheroing usually isn’t jumping right into a battle, it’s gathering intel. It’s figuring out who this guy is and what the hell he wants and how he plans to get it. If we go in without knowing that kind of stuff, we are just as likely to make things worse. You with me so far kid?”

“Yessir.” Clint laughs and runs a hand through the boy’s wet hair.

“Sir? Buddy, you just tried to gnaw my arm off at the elbow, I think we’re on a first-name basis.” Tony flushes at the reminder.

“...’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. You’re upset just like the rest of us, and I was touching you when you didn’t want me to, which I normally wouldn’t. But I didn’t want you running off and hurting yourself, you understand me?” Tony nods. “Good. Now back to our little chat. One of the other things you gotta learn about this whole superhero biz is that you still gotta live your life. It’s not all fighting bad guys all the time, or even most of the time. It’s all the regular stuff too. It’s eating your breakfast and playing games and taking baths and pranking Steve—” Clint smirks at the halfhearted glare Steve gives in response to this last item, “—it’s all the stuff that makes life fun, because otherwise, there really isn’t a point to any of it, y’know.” After giving Tony a long, thoughtful moment to take this in, Clint grins and tosses the mesh bag of toys at him. “Now, littlest Avenger. Your current mission, should you choose to accept it, is to search and recover the coolest toy in that bag. Do you accept, or should I call for backup?”

There is absolutely nothing for Tony to do in the face of Clint’s enthusiasm but accept, but whether because of lingering unease from the events of the night or something else entirely, he still seems at a loss about how to proceed. One by one, he takes things out of the bag—toy boats and animals that can spray water, a plastic fishing rod accompanied by what Steve assumes are magnetized plastic fishes, a package of crayons designed to be used on the bathroom walls—and one by one, he puts them back. Clint shamelessly uses his genuine enjoyment of play to try to get Tony excited, challenging him to a contest over who can use the boats to spray Steve with the most water. This backfires, however, for Tony is horrified at the prospect of attacking Captain America, even with tiny, harmless bursts of bath water. Even Clint is starting to look a little defeated, so Steve casts his eyes desperately back at the bag, feeling his stomach do a hopeful kind of flip when his gaze falls
again upon the bath crayons.

“You know, I used to do a lot of drawing. What do you say we try out those crayons together?”

Tony blinks.

“You draw? I don’t…I mean, I’m probably not very good.”

“I’m sure you’ll be better than you think. And besides, it’s not always about being the best at something. Sometimes it’s nice just to have fun.” Tony looks even more perplexed by this, but he doesn’t put up any protest when Steve digs out the crayons and hands a few to him. Clint and Steve both take a crayon for themselves, and Steve begins sketching out a cityscape of Brooklyn, at least how he remembers it. He loses himself in it a bit, remembering the store fronts and the smells and the people, but he’s brought quickly out of his reverie when Clint kicks him under the water. He’s gesturing to the wall, where Tony is making what looks like a detailed sketch of a piece of the Iron Man armour.

“Tony, where did you…” Steve trails off, vowing to have to talk to Bruce and JARVIS about the documents Tony is given access to in the workshop. He knows enough about grown-up Tony’s memory to know that even a quick glance at something is enough to cause problems. “Hey, buddy, that puppy Clint drew looks pretty cold. He could probably use some fur, don’t you think?” Tony is deep in thought, and he doesn’t even seem to hear Steve’s suggestion.

“There’s probably a way to make this part more efficient,” he mumbles to himself. Clint and Steve exchange glances again, and then the archer takes action, seizing the red crayon from Tony’s hand. “Hey!”

“I’m sorry, dude, but look at this dog. You can’t just leave him naked here like this. Now I’m thinking purple fur, what do you think?”

“Dogs don’t have purple hair,” Tony snaps, though it’s unclear if it’s out of annoyance at having his work interrupted or because the lack of realism in Clint’s proposal actually bothers him.

“Mmm, I think this one does. She fell in a pile of jello and now she’s stuck that way, see?” Tony giggles at this despite himself, and when Clint hands him the violet crayon, he begins adding fur to the stick-figure dog without further protests. He’s still hesitant, particularly when he looks over and sees Steve’s work (which he deems to be much more skilled than his own), but Clint continues to use every bit of his charisma to his advantage, weaving the drawings together through a convoluted but amusing narrative where the be-Jelloed dog escapes into the streets of Brooklyn and manages to get up to all kinds of mischief.

Steve watches them both with a pleasant, if bittersweet, ache as he contemplates Clint. He’s probably the Avenger that Steve knows the least about; he knows Clint was married, and that he and his wife divorced several years ago. Steve is aware that Clint, Natasha and Phil have worked closely together a lot (and he’s pretty sure there’s more to that dynamic, actually, but despite Tasha’s numerous attempts to pry into Steve’s personal life, he’s never felt brave enough to do the same). Clint’s file hints strongly at an unhappy and unstable childhood, and his medical file is lengthy enough that it has its own index.

Even in the wake of Loki’s control, when Clint had been at his most vulnerable, he had always given off an impression of absolute competence. Yet he’s also always struck Steve as a somewhat distant and removed kind of guy, so the ease with which he’s managed to salvage the evening—preventing what could easily have been a blow up between Steve and Tony, and then himself and the child, drawing Tony instead into his imagined world, getting the boy to participate and relax—it’s not something Steve ever would have guessed him capable of.
The events of the evening still hover between them all. There’s no getting back the illusion that the world is safe. But at least for tonight, they get to pretend a little bit longer, and Steve will always be grateful to Clint for that. And for the picture he helps Steve take of the completed mural on the bathroom wall.

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Several weeks pass, and they are somehow both the best and the worst of Tony’s life. He’s constantly with at least one member of the team (usually more than that, once he gets more comfortable with them all), and though he keeps waiting for them to grow tired and bored of dealing with him, they somehow don’t.

They’re the most bewildering group of people Tony has ever met, and as time goes on, he gets only more confused by their actions. So he does what he thinks his Dad would do, what a scientist would do: he decides to make a record of all of their behaviour, hoping to start recognizing patterns. Even if he’s entirely discarded the theory that they’re kidnappers, there has to be a reason a group of grown-up superheros is so invested in Tony’s well-being, and he has to know what it is. He has to know what they need from him, so that he can be prepared for when all of this is going to be taken away.

Bruce readily supplies him with a notebook from the lab without forcing him to provide any information about his project in return. It’s a really fancy notebook, too, the kind with thick, creamy paper, and a mix of lined, unlined and graphing paper sheets bound together with a chocolate brown cloth cover. For just a moment, the kiddish part of Tony is tempted to use the unopened package of non-bath crayons sitting in his bedroom to make a drawing, one full of colour and complete with a silly story, like the one he, Steve and Clint had made in the tub. But Starks don’t do those kinds of things, not when they can be useful.

So he starts to chart things out. Bruce is sitting across from him in the lab and is very much on Tony’s mind, so he starts the list there. The scientist is definitely the strictest of the group (wait, is strict with a ‘k?’ Tony considers looking it up, but decides it’s not necessary since no one will be reading his report but himself.) Bruce had been the one who sat Tony down after their first few days together and talked to him about house rules, like no leaving his bedroom and going to the lab in the middle of the night without telling anyone, and no fibbing about having eaten his lunch (you hide a sandwich in a kitchen drawer one time!). He was even stricter about lab safety, and more rigid still about anything to do with the Hulk. It doesn’t have anything to do with his investigation of the team’s behaviour toward Tony, but he can’t help but make a note that Bruce doesn’t seem to get the Hulk or vice versa. Because it’s true and it’s annoying to Tony, who is a big fan of both of them. But Bruce is also the one who keeps helping Tony with his meditation so that his chest hurts less, and who noticed that Tony likes parmesan cheese more than cheddar, and who seems to understand that Tony is comforted by routines, like the way they always eat breakfast, the hardest meal of the day for him to convince his body to accept, together as a team. Tony adds, and then crosses out, and then adds again “nice voice”.

He decides to do Clint next, maybe because he’s the opposite of Bruce in so many ways. Clint is the one Tony knows to go to if he wants to get around the rules, like if he wants an extra snack or half an hour more playtime before sleep, or, on one highly memorable occasion, if he wishes to find out whether or not his adult self’s giant bed is as bouncy as it looks. (It had been. And it had been awesome, even if they’d gotten in a little bit of trouble from Bruce and Steve.) It wasn’t that he could get away with anything with Clint—like all of them, the man is very interested in making sure Tony eats and sleeps. But he also seems to believe it’s like a basic human rights violation to not play and have fun, as often and in as many ways as possible. The night they’d finally gotten to use Tony’s racecars on the track they’d built together, it had spawned a team-wide tournament that had lasted well into the night, and probably would have gone longer if Tony hadn’t fallen asleep.
face-first on the living room carpet. Clint is free with smiles and jokes and laughter, and none of it is ever fake the way that so many adults tend to be. (Either that or he’s just better at acting than anyone Tony had ever met. But that last thought makes Tony a bit too sad, so he comforts himself by drawing a mini-sketch of their purple stick-puppy from that first bath next to Clint’s name.)

Natasha is entirely different again. It’s not that she’s fake like the people at his parent’s parties, but more like she is careful. About everything. All the time. It takes a lot to earn a smile or a laugh from Natasha, and she’s quieter than the others, less inclined to immediately fill a silence or to be the first to contribute a thought or idea to a group conversation. But when she does, everyone stops what they’re doing and listens, every time. Most often, though, at least with Tony, Natasha seems to communicate through objects. She gets up in the middle of the night with him when he can’t sleep and makes him rich, sweet hot chocolate that warms all his insides up, even the bit of his chest that always feels cold and weird because of the metal thing. She’d bought all that stuff for him the first day, and always seems happy to see him using any of it. Especially Sanders. Sanders is Tony’s stuffed sloth. Tony been in the tower nearly two weeks, and had actively avoided the multiple stuffies Natasha had bought; Dad has strict rules about all toys that aren’t helping him learn or make something, but he especially hates stuffed animals, and always had. Tony had been happy enough to sneak glances at the toys where they’d been lined up on a little bench in the corner of his bedroom, but one night when she was tucking him in, Natasha had brought the sloth over and slid it into bed next to him without a word. He’s slept with Sanders (named by Clint, who had been absolutely insistant that all stuffed animals needed names) every night since, and already dreaded the day he’d have to let him go.

Agent Phil? Well, there’s a Before Agent and an After Agent. The Before Agent (the one Tony had known before the video that had upset everyone so much), he’d been warm and gentle, even when he tried (and failed) to hide it behind a kind of blank expression. He’d taught Tony how to breathe that first day, and he’d been patient with Dummy, and even when he’d played at being stern (especially with Clint), those bright blue eyes never looked anything but kind. It wasn’t that Agent was mean now or anything, but After the video he’d been different. He was rarely home, for one thing, and when he was he always seemed sad, especially with Tony. Even when he happens to be at the tower, After Agent usually chooses not to join them for bedtime stories and games, and he seems to make every effort to ensure he’s not alone with Tony ever. He considers writing ‘mad at me’ by the man’s name, but it feels too sad, and too much like accepting it, to put it on paper. Like he’d be giving up on ever having Before Agent back again.

And then there was Steve. He’d saved Steve for last because out of all of them, he confused Tony most. Unlike Phil, Steve is around the tower, and with Tony himself, as often as he can manage. He holds Tony, hums to him, talks to him about anything and everything from how he learned to ride a motorcycle (and when he’ll let Tony go on it with him) to what he thinks will happen next in Harry Potter, and he does all of it with the air of someone who has nowhere else he’d rather be in the whole world. It’s the type of focused presence that neither of Tony’s parents have ever really had with them, even in his best memories of them all together as a family. Steve’s huge and brave and smart and funny and he’s Captain America and he has every reason on Earth to be annoyed and frustrated by having to deal with Tony, and instead the man is just always there. Plus he seems to believe so completely in the power of hugs to solve any problem that even though Tony is pretty sure there’s no reliable evidence to back him up on this, Tony has started to believe it too.

The problem with all of this when it comes to Tony’s report, though, is that it’s somehow impossible to try to capture Steve’s…Steve-ness on paper. He stares down at the blank page for what feels like forever. And then, without really thinking about it, he reaches out and scrawls the word ‘sweetheart’, the first nickname Steve had ever called him. Before he knows it, he’s half filled the page with all of the affectionate ways Steve has referred to him over the past few weeks, and though seeing the list of endearments laid out like this makes Tony blush all over again,
they’re the closest he can get to capturing who and what Steve Rogers has been to and for Tony.

Evidence assembled, Tony confidently writes “Conclusions” on a new page. But try as he might over the next hour and a half, despite going back and poring over his observations, he still has no idea what any of it adds up to. He’s still trying to make sense of it all when Bruce finishes up the work he’s doing and insists they both stop for lunch.

Tony comforts himself with the idea that he’s not giving up, but just continuing to gather data. He lets Bruce and Steve help him through a breathing exercise, and he manages to finish a bowl of butternut squash soup and a slice of warm, crusty bread that Steve had spent the morning baking. Then the three of them spend a highly enjoyable afternoon watching an animated movie about emotions in a young girl’s brain. Tony honestly can’t decide if he enjoys the story or Bruce’s commentary about the scientific accuracies and inaccuracies of the film more, but he definitely likes that no one makes fun him when he cries at the sad part. In fact, his sniffs leas Steve to apply his fix-all solution of hugs, and Tony snuggles back against the man shamelessly. Steve is always several degrees warmer than everyone else, and cuddling with him is sort of like having a heated blanket around all the time.

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Late that night (or maybe early the next morning, he didn’t check), Tony gets an unexpected opportunity to gather further data when he stumbles out of his bedroom and into the penthouse kitchen after a nightmare. He’s supposed to wake someone up if he’s up, it’s one of the rules. But when the dreams are about his Dad, he tends to get stubborn about that; it’s too hard to try to explain how it is he can feel so many things about one person—how he can be sad to think of his Dad being gone and somehow relieved at the same time, for example. What kind of a jerk could even think about being relieved by their parent being dead?

Tony is trying to decide the best way to persuade JARVIS to take him to the workshop without tattling to the others (JARVIS is a pretty good ally, but much like the caretaker who was his namesake, the AI is also kind of a stickler) when his mind registers that the light in the kitchen is already on. He whirls around to find Agent seated at the table. He’s still in his suit, though it looks a bit wrinkled, and the blue eyes that had first drawn Tony to him look tired and sad.

“Sorry,” Tony mutters, “I-I wasn’t… I just wanted some water.” Agent nods, standing up and filling Tony’s cup, the one Clint had brought home one day last week. It has a chalkboard kind of material on the outside so that you can write on it, and the evidence of their last Xs and Os game is still faintly visible. “Thank you, Ag-Phil—I—”

“You don’t have to call me Phil if you aren’t comfortable with that, no matter what Steve says, Tony.” The man sounds even sadder now, even further from Before, and the words burst out of Tony before he can stop himself.

“I’m sorry. For whatever I did, I mean. I know it’s gotta suck to have to deal with me. I’ll…if there’s anything I can do, to be better, I mean, I’ll do it.” Agent makes an unidentifiable noise from above him, and then he’s kneeling in front of Tony, much as he had done that very first day, when he’d been the first one to find Tony alone and scared in the workshop.

“Is that what you think? That I don’t like you?” His usually neutral face is all pinched and lined right now, but Tony still doesn’t know how to read it. He can’t tell if he’s angered the Agent more, or just surprised him or what. Thankfully, it doesn’t seem like he’s going to be required to answer. “Tony, I like you very much. You’re an awesome kid.” The last word comes out in a strange voice, like it’s somehow both a good and a terrible thing to be a kid, and that’s when it hits Tony.

“You miss him. The other me, I mean.” Phil sighs.
“Yeah, sure I do. He’s a good man. It’s not just that, though, Tony—I miss him, but I like having you here too, I really do.”

“But you’re never here anymore, and when you are, you don’t want to spend time with us. With me. Not since the video.” Tony prays that this comes out sounding like an observation and not an accusation, but he’s not totally certain that he manages it.

“God, I forget how perceptive you are.” Agent sighs again, and comes to rest with his bum on the floor. Tony mimics him, resting his back against the cabinet and pulling his legs up to his chest. He wishes he’d thought to bring Sanders with him, because if Agent is about to tell Tony in great detail why he hates him or something, it’d be nice to have a friend. “Tony, I like the Avengers. They’re my friends and my teammates and I care a great deal for all of them. That includes you, whatever you might think of me. But I’m sort of on the outside, too, and that happens for a reason. I sometimes have to make decisions that are about more than the team, the big-picture kind of stuff.”

“Big-picture?” Tony asks, embarrassed at his own need for clarification. But this conversation feels too important for him to risk misunderstanding any part of it.

“Well, for example sometimes what’s good for other people isn’t always great for the team, and those decisions are very hard for me to make. But sometimes I have to make them anyway, because somebody has to. That’s the only superpower I’ve got.”

Understanding seems to hit Tony all at once. And the thing is, he thinks he should be surprised, or mad, or hurt, but all he feels is a grim kind of acceptance. Because some part of him has known for weeks that this was coming. If anything, the knot of anxiety that has sat in the pit of his stomach since the moment Tony arrived here actually loosens a bit at the moment when he understands what Agent is really saying.

“Do you have to make it now? The decision?” Agent smiles, a twisted kind of expression that isn’t really a smile at all, and he reaches out to touch Tony’s cheek gently.

“Not yet. I’m still trying…I still want there to be another way, I really do. But if I’m right, and I usually am about this kind of stuff…it’ll be soon. You and I will talk again then, alright?” The two of them stay seated on the floor while Tony finishes his water, and then by silent agreement, they depart one another’s company without another word.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Phil. Remember in the coming chapters that I actually really love Phil, and he will not be descending into random or OOC villainy. I promise.

Thank you all so much, as always, for the support and encouragement in all forms. I take so much delight in these characters and this story for its own sake, but that’s always magnified 1000 times when I get to see other folks enjoying it with me.
Chapter Summary

The Mandarin's second lesson leads Phil and Tony to make a difficult choice. Everyone deals with the fallout.

Chapter Notes

1) Please note that there's a major spoiler for the plot of Harry Potter and Prisoner of Azkaban in this chapter. If you haven't read/seen that already, you'll want to skip from when Tony says "Can you tell me how the book ends?" to the end of that section.

2) There's also some pretty serious angst here. Nothing (at least that I know of-please tell me if I'm wrong!) should be triggering in ways that I haven't already tagged for, and things are going to start getting better for Tony and co. very soon, but still, take care of yourselves and don't read this bit if you're in need of more comfort and less hurt kind of material.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After their nighttime chat in the kitchen, Phil keeps as close an eye as he can manage on Tony. The boy had taken their conversation with all the maturity and acceptance of someone who had already been forced to grow up too fast, but a part of Phil had still expected that at some point, Tony would panic or get angry, and for both of their sakes, Phil wants to be the one to deal with that if it happens.

But the thing is that it doesn’t. There are small, shifts, yes, but they’re so easy to read as positive things that everyone else seems to miss them. Because Tony’s version of accepting what’s coming is not to pull away or strike out, but to give himself permission to bask unrepentantly in the affection and support the team gives him. He says yes to anything and everything they offer—he cuddles with Steve without shyness or restraint and begs for more chapters of the stories they read together; he plays hours of games with Clint; he practices yoga and meditation and works in the lab with Bruce. Hell, he even lets Natasha give him a bath, and he composes a formal presentation for her, aided by Bruce and the bots, about the results of their tests on the tipped arrow that had hit her nearly two months ago. Poison was never a topic that Phil thought could possible be considered cute, but he defies anyone who has heard four-year-old Tony talk about it in a deep, official tone that’s a clear attempt to mimic Bruce’s speech to feel anything but completely besotted.

In short, the boy flourishes under the constant care and attention he’s finally letting himself take—he laughs and sleeps and even eats more than Phil has ever seen (though food remains a challenge for him most days). And it’s not just Tony, either. The entire team is easy and loose in a way that Phil has rarely witnessed. Bruce’s face loses that constantly-haunted look it has, for hours and sometimes days at a time. Clint spends almost no time in the vents (except for the day he decides it’s a great idea to give Tony a tour), and Natasha stops tensing every time anyone enters a room she’s in. And there is absolutely no comparing the Steve Rogers from before all of this to the man
who spends as many of his waking hours as he can with Tony Stark. He is golden and beautiful and so utterly content that Phil falls a little more in love with the guy every day, even as he remembers constantly that soon Steve will probably never want to look at him again.

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The night of the first Mandarin tape, he’d gone in to SHIELD and asked Jane to make contact with Thor. They’d already done that, of course, had brought her back to New York for that express purpose almost immediately after this had all happened with Tony. But Phil knows Thor, at least well enough to be quite certain that he never would have left his beloved Jane again so soon without some way of finding out if she were in immediate danger.

“He has another way of contacting you, or you him.” Phil doesn’t frame it as a question, doesn’t make it easy for her to deny it, and to her credit, Jane doesn’t bother trying.

“There have to be lines, Phil. The last time SHIELD had access to Asgardian secrets, they hardly did a stand up job. I’m trying through every other channel I have to contact him, because the one that’s available to me is for me personally. You of all people understand the need to keep those parts of our lives separate, don’t you?”

“You misunderstand me, Dr. Foster. I don’t care what it is that allows the two of you to contact one another. Well, I do, and I can make an educated guess that it involves the reparation of the Bifrost, probably using the Tesseract technology, but I’m not asking for SHIELD purposes. I don’t need to know the how of it right now. I just need you to use it. You saw what happened tonight?”

“With The Mandarin? Of course I did, SHIELD called all available personnel in as soon as it aired. But I’m not clear on why that makes talking to Thor about the situation with Tony any more of a priority. Unless you know something I don’t about what or who it is The Mandarin wants.”

“No, I don’t have any new information. But that’s the problem. This might involve Tony, it might not, but at some point down the line, something will. And without knowing how this happened, or when and if it’s going to stop, we are all just groping around in the dark to try to keep him and everyone else safe.” Phil lets all of the desperation he’s been feeling for the last few hours seep into his tone, and Jane takes a long look at him.

“We don’t even know that this is magic.” It’s a weak objection, and from the way her shoulders slump as she says it, Jane already knows that.

“Of course it’s magic. It might not be Asgardian, sure, but even if it isn’t, Thor is in a better position than anyone else to help us get some answers.” She shifts uneasily, and suspicion starts to creep up on Phil. “You’ve already spoken to him, haven’t you?” She nods. “Jane, you have to tell me what he said. Please.” The fight seems to exit the scientist in one long sigh, and she starts talking.

“It was Loki. We’re not entirely sure how, but our best guess is that it was some kind of time-delayed spell that he cast when he was still here. There is absolutely no getting out of an Asgardian cell, Thor has checked. Believe me.”

“And what does the spell do, exactly?”

“Loki is being…well, Loki. The most Thor has been able to get out of him so far is that he says it’s an act of penance. In his own way, Loki actually kind of liked Tony, and he says the spell is to try to give Tony something he needs. He says it’ll wear off on its own when he gets it, but that it could take a while.” Maybe it’s a bit petulant of him, but given that Loki had cost Phil both his life (temporarily) and his relationship (probably forever), Phil has a difficult time imagining that any of
this is as altruistic as it sounds.

“If all of this was supposed to be kind, why the hell would he have left the arc reactor in his chest?” It’s not a question he expects an answer to, so he’s surprised when Jane’s face brightens.

“Oh, Thor actually asked him about that. He said, well, I don’t really understand it and Thor couldn’t or wouldn’t explain, but he says the spell recognized the arc reactor as a part of Tony’s soul.”

“His…” Trying to think about Tony’s soul and why on Earth even Loki’s magic would be twisted enough to think the device keeping shrapnel away from his heart is part of it is way too much for Phil right now, and he shakes his head. “Not even going to touch that one. Listen, even if I bought that Loki was attempting in some odd way to be kind, this situation is no longer tenable. I need…I need you to ask Thor how to end the spell early. Worst case scenario, we’ll need him to grant Loki temporary release or something so that he can come here and do it. And I need you to keep this between us.” Jane frowns, and after a moment she reaches for his hand.

“Phil, the last time you made a decision like this for them, we both know what it cost you. You’ll regret it forever if you do it this way.” A bitter smile, not unlike the one he would make several weeks later seated on the penthouse kitchen floor, twists Phil’s lips.

“I already regret it, Dr. Foster. Make the call.”

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Though she won’t officially admit to it, Phil suspects that Jane takes her sweet time in following out his instructions, probably hoping that he’ll change his mind if she gives him long enough. It’s a sound strategy, one that Phil is far too aware might work, so he avoids the tower and Tony himself as much as humanly possible over the next several weeks.

It isn’t easy. For the first two weeks or so Tony and the team greet him eagerly when he gets back to the tower, and they never fail to invite him to partake in whatever fun they’re having, even if it would mean they had to re-start a movie that was 3/4 finished or re-make the teams for the game they’re playing. He feels the tug of temptation, the desire to let himself sink into this makeshift family they’ve assembled and cling to it for dear life.

Eventually, after weeks of frustration, they stop asking. It takes the longest with Natasha and Clint; both of them make numerous attempts to corner Phil on his own, at the tower and at SHIELD, and get him to talk. The way Clint’s face falls the last time he tries, disappointment mingling with rage and disbelief, nearly brings Phil to his knees.

And the longer things go on, the more the illusion of calm settles back over the tower, the more Phil starts to wonder if he’s being too hasty. Maybe Jane is right. Maybe he could talk to them, try to find a way to make this work so that Tony can be with them this way as long as he needs or wants.

Then the second ‘lesson’ comes.

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Phil is, unfortunately, not present at the Tower when Pepper phones with the news that Harold ‘Happy’ Hogan was caught in the blast outside the Chinese Theatre. When he arrives that night to find the tension in the penthouse so thick that it’s almost a physical presence on its own, a part of him hopes that, having seen the second video, the rest of the team is starting to come to the same conclusions Phil has. Of course, his life is not that easy.
Steve corners him in the kitchen almost immediately. His entire body is taught, ready to spring into lethal action at the slightest provocation. It reminds Phil painfully of the first time he’d sat with Natasha in the immediate aftermath of a mission gone wrong.

“Steve, listen, I don’t know any more than you do right now—”

“Tony’s friend Happy was injured in the attack.” Phil inhales sharply, the only answer he can manage, but Steve isn’t done. “You can’t tell him. You weren’t there the night of the first one; he was all but ready to hop into the armour and head off to fight. He’s been making all kinds of sketches, trying to figure out how he can change it to accommodate for his size after seeing one goddamn schematic for a matter of seconds. And he’s asked JARVIS all about how to control wind and speed and direction when he flies, and he’s looked up footage of himself fighting on the stupid Internet, and I can’t—he’s just a kid, Phil. He’s a kid. And it’s only in the last week or so that he’s let himself just be one and stopped with trying to be a hero, and if you tell him, he is not going to let me keep him safe. Please.”

If there were ever a time to tell Steve, this is it. Phil could sit him down right now and try to appeal to the man as a strategist and a team leader and a serviceman and a patriot. In any other situation, even one of those factors would be enough to tip the scales, to give them back the almost eerily calm and pragmatic Captain America. But right now, Steve Rogers isn’t capable of that. Right now he is as far away from the Man with a Plan as he has ever been, because he is a panicked parent, ready to do anything, prepared to let it all burn, to keep his child safe and whole and happy. Nothing Phil can possibly say is going to change that, and he can’t bear to make any of this any harder on them all than it has to be.

“Alright, Steve. Alright. I won’t tell him.” Steve sort of deflates, knees trembling as he collapses onto one of the kitchen chairs. Phil reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder, and the shaky, grateful smile the other man looks up at him with is only slightly less painful than Loki’s blade had been.

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Phil spends the rest of the evening making and then discarding various plans to get Tony on his own within the next twelve hours, but they all end up being unnecessary. Because once again, he’s underestimated just how perceptive this kid is. Two hours to the dot after the rest of the team has put him to bed, Tony creeps into the kitchen. He’s clutching his sloth in one hand, and he looks completely unsurprised to find Phil sitting at the table.

“I’m ready now,” he says quietly, and only the way Tony’s hold on the stuffed animal tightens until his knuckles are white gives away how reluctant he is to be standing here.

“You don’t have to do this, Tony.” Phil has fought like hell for weeks to try to find another option, and has failed utterly, but he can’t not say it. Can’t pretend that if Tony really can’t bear it, that there isn’t a part of Phil just as willing as Steve is to sacrifice almost anything to let him stay. But Tony looks up at him then, and though his smile is watery and far more vulnerable in every way than it would be if he were an adult, it is still Tony fuckin’ Stark that is meeting Phil’s gaze, steady and brave and all too-willing, always, to give everything he’s got.

“I’m ready now,” he repeats. And then he slips his free hand into Phil’s larger one, and begins leading the two of them towards the elevator.

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As Phil had requested before leaving for the Tower that evening, Jane, Thor and Loki are all at SHIELD HQ when he and Tony arrive. It’s pure worry that Loki would take any aggression toward himself out on Tony that limits Phil to nothing but a venomous glare at the demigod, and then he
turns his attention to Jane and Thor. The latter is uncharacteristically quiet and solemn, so obviously Jane has filled him in not just on the plan to restore Tony to adulthood, but on Phil’s ethically ambiguous role in all of this as well.

“You are certain that you wish this, son of Coul,” he confirms. Phil nods, and then Thor looks down at Tony. “And you, my brave and wise friend Stark? What think you of this matter?” Tony swallows and is silent for so long that Phil thinks he might not answer. Then, quiet but steady and for the third time that night, Tony says,

“I’m ready.” Thor nods, and turns his attention to Loki, removing a mask that had been covering the lower part of his brother’s face. The trickster god locks eyes with Tony, and there’s a sudden softness to Loki, the barest glimpse of whatever it is in him that Thor still believes in. “Is it going to hurt?” Phil thinks Tony might be asking him, but it’s Loki who replies.

“No, child. You will not suffer. This spell was a gift I wished to bestow upon you, and while it is ending before its proper conclusion,” he shoots a petulant glare at both Thor and Phil, “the magic will bring you no harm.” Tony nods, steeling himself, but then before Loki can speak again, the boy turns and looks up at Phil.

“Can you tell me how the book ends? We’re on the third one, and we never got to finish. Does the bad man get Harry?” Phil’s eyes are burning like they’ve been rubbed with sandpaper, but he kneels down next to Tony one more time. He’s never been more thankful in his life to have two Harry Potter obsessed nieces, because if he couldn’t give Tony this at least, he doesn’t know what he’d do.

“It turns out Sirius is not a bad man after all. He’s Harry’s godfather, and he loves Harry very much.”

“So—he gets a family?” There’s a cautious kind of wonder in Tony’s voice, and Phil can’t stop himself. He reaches out and runs his hands through the boy’s soft curls, voice a rasping, destroyed whisper as he replies,

“Yeah, baby. He gets a family.” This news seems to steady Tony, and he sets Sanders down carefully in Phil’s lap before he turns to meet Loki and his future head-on.

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Phil expects pandemonium when he arrives back at the Tower after the longest night of his life. But it’s quiet, almost eerily so, to the point that he’s starting to wonder if they’ve all formed a search party and are pounding the pavement of New York City. Then he sees Clint.

The archer is sitting on the penthouse couch. The lights are all off, and he gives no outward sign that he’s heard Phil come in, but there’s absolutely no way he hasn’t, so Phil waits, frozen in place.

“Why.” After all they’ve been through, Phil had been sure he’d seen all possible variations on Clint’s anger. Most of them are explosive—loud, vicious, and often accompanied by some kind of property damage. But this? This quiet, somehow dispassionate rage? This is far worse.

“You know why.”

“No, Phil, I can’t say I fucking do. As you know though, I’m kind of an idiot.” Clint has always been deeply ashamed of what he perceives to be his own lack of intelligence. He’d offered to immediately stop seeing Phil when the man had found out about his struggles with reading, and he still grows deeply uncomfortable and embarrassed whenever he’s with the types of SHIELD execs who like to wave around the letters behind their names as if their educations make everyone else
somehow less. Accusing Phil of agreeing with Clint’s own awful and highly inaccurate views of himself is the worst thing the archer has ever said to him. He can’t even think for the cruelty of it, and he snaps back in a growl he barely recognizes as his own voice.

“Fuck you. You damn well know I’ve never once thought that of you.” Clint, still calm in that way that is so not Clint that Phil wants to scream, just gives him a sardonic smile that makes Phil want to punch the nearest hard surface. “You know he couldn’t stay that way. You know it wasn’t safe.”

“Why yes, Agent Coulson, I do know all of that.”

“I—wait, what?” Blood boiling at the sarcasm, the fact that Clint is actually agreeing with him takes Phil entirely by surprise when it actually sinks in.

“I said I do know that. I know a lot of things, and maybe we can chat about some of the other things I know a little later. But for now, I’d like to focus on what you know. Like how long have the two of you been planning this?”

“…a couple of weeks.” Clint nods, miming as if he’s peering down at a list on a clipboard the way Phil does when he takes post-mission reports.

“Hmm, yes. And tell me, Agent, was it always the plan that none of the rest of us would know, or get to say goodbye or anything? Or was that just a little twist you added in for colour? Sort of like that time Fury rubbed blood all over your Captain America cards and threw them in our faces, just to make sure we were agonized enough about your passing?”

“Fucking hell, Clint, come on. I—I wanted to tell you. I thought about it so many times. But you were all so happy. I couldn’t…I worried that you wouldn’t remember when it counted that Tony Stark is not a child.” Now that he’s getting his feet back under him after Clint’s knockout blow in the first round, Phil is starting to gain a bit more confidence, cadence becoming steadier, more Agent. “The spell was always going to be temporary, and he was always going to be mortified that any of this had happened at all. Now try to imagine what it would’ve been like for him to wake up and feel like everyone, but especially Captain America, his hero and the guy whose shadow he lived his entire childhood in, liked him better as a four-year-old.”

Clint gets up suddenly from the couch and begins pacing the length of the room. It’s a bit sick, but the visible sign of agitation is so much better than this ridiculous, unfeeling front Clint has been putting up that it feels like a victory to Phil.

“Do you honestly think I didn’t see that? I mean, I get it a little bit with Steve, especially tonight. He was…it wasn’t okay that he wanted to keep information like this from Tony, and if I’d been in Stark’s place and found out any of you had hid something that important from me I’d have put an arrow in you. But let’s leave Steve aside for a second. You really think if you had come to me, or Tasha, or Bruce, that we wouldn’t have agreed with you? That we didn’t already, to some degree? The thing is, Phil, you might not think I’m stupid, not the way that other people do. But you keep making these decisions, these huge fuckin’ life and death calls, for us instead of with us. And the only way I can see that making sense in your head is if you honestly believe we are incapable of seeing what you see, or that you think we won’t at least listen if you tell us we’re missing something. And I honestly don’t know which of those options I find more insulting.”

“I—”

“Nope. My turn to tell you what I know, remember? I know he couldn’t have stayed. I know he would never have chosen this, and I know that he’s gotta be about a hundred shades of pissed off
and embarrassed right now, and that’s not even counting how upset and self-blaming I can only assume he is about Happy. And us making any kind of choice for him would have been condescending and and gross, and at least some part of us would have been doing it to avoid actually having to help him deal with the problems he faces as an adult. But it didn’t have to be like this Phil. He didn’t have to be alone, and scared, and wake up from a second childhood that ended up just like his first—with him thinking that no one, including Captain Fuckin’ America, really likes or cares for him when he’s not being useful.”

Clint stops and looks at Phil, waiting for the next objection or clarification or argument. And Phil has nothing to offer back to him. This seems to satisfy whatever anger has yet to burn itself out of Clint, because he stops pacing, coming to a halt in front of Phil, posture and expression betraying nothing now but bone-deep exhaustion.

“You have some decisions to make, Coulson. You want to be our handler? Fine. We’ll work with you, because you are the best SHIELD has, and no matter how pissed I am, I’m not willing to put my life or the lives of my team in the hands of anyone else. But if that’s all you want, then you get the hell out of this tower, and you leave picking up the pieces of Tony Stark to us. If you stay here, then you fucking fix this. And you do it as our teammate and our family member and our equal. Until you make that choice, I don’t want to look at you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a Hulk to pacify, and a new case of punching bags to bring in for Steve, and some knives to dig out of the walls on Tasha’s floor.”

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Harold Hogan has always been a big man. Not just size-wise, but in presence; he’d seemed huge to Tony from the moment that he’d pulled Tony’s drunken ass out of the back of burning town car (not Tony’s fault, surprisingly enough). After ensuring the safety of both Tony and his chauffeur, Happy had laid into the latter, eviscerating the man over his shitty driving and asking repeatedly if he’d been trying to kill Tony. Hell, the guy had been hired by Obie, so for all he knew now..yeah, no, better not go too far down that road.

The point was, Happy had always been substantial and solid and there, and the thought of that not being the case, the idea that Tony had spent the last month getting coddled and played with and put down for naps of all things instead of hunting down the Mandarin was…well, he’d made several people’s worth of mistakes in his life, but this one might be the most unforgivable yet. And he’d had plenty of time to think stew on that during the flight from New York to Malibu (thank Christ Coulson had thought to bring the briefcase armour with them), but in retrospect that flight felt like a resort spa package in comparison to what it is to stand beside Happy’s hospital bed, watching his chest rise and fall accompanied by the rasp of the respirator. It might be keeping Happy alive, but that respirator is the most hateful sound Tony’s ever heard, because Happy Hogan’s lungs aren’t all weak and broken like Tony’s dammit and the very fact of that sound means Tony has failed, again, to protect someone he loves.

Coulson’s absurdly gentle pleas for Tony to take it easy, stay in contact and not do anything stupid are a distant memory in comparison to that sound. He’s still hearing it when he steps outside the hospital and is immediately swarmed by reporters. They want to know why Tony hasn’t done anything to stop the Mandarin, and god, they don’t realize how much more they should hate him, or how selfish he’s spent the last few weeks being. So he does the only thing he can think to do through the haze of guilt and rage and fear: he rattles off his home address and invites the Mandarin to play.

Chapter End Notes
Eek, don't hate me! Or Phil. Okay I can't actually tell you how to feel about Phil's actions, but I will say that I'm genuinely on team everyone in this chapter. I think Phil did the right thing but that he went about it in entirely the wrong way, and I think Steve's own trauma (particularly the combination of losing and then finding Bucky again) also led him to do some things in this chapter that were equally not okay. I've known from the very beginning that this was how the de-aging portion of the story would end, and my heart kind of breaks for all of them, but ultimately, like Clint says in the chapter, that situation allowed them all to hide from as many of Tony's problems as it let them help.

Anyway, that's my long, rambling apology/plea. I'm super anxious to hear all of your thoughts and feels! Thanks, as always, for reading, and for your comments and kudos.
Endings and Beginnings

Chapter Summary

Things are looking bleak for Tony and the Avengers. But the thing is that while we do make our own enemies, we can also make our own families. And the events of the last month are not that easy for any of them to brush aside.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: There's brief, hypothetical mention of sexual age-play in this chapter. It's not a direction this story will be going, but I wanted to flag it just in case.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What the FUCK!” Everyone thinks Steve Rogers doesn’t even know how to swear, and it’s true, he doesn’t do it often; his anger has always had more of a quiet burn to it. It’s Phil whose language tends to be rigidly controlled even under the most dire circumstances, so hearing the man cursing a blue streak when Steve is making his way into the penthouse is enough to stop him in his tracks. The spiteful part of him wants to dress his abraded knuckles as he’d come up here intending to do and then leave the man to his fate, but the terrifying prospect of what exactly it is that has Coulson so worked up is enough to force Steve into the living room.

It’s the first time he and Phil have actually been face-to-face since Tony left, but Steve’s attention is almost immediately drawn to the drama playing out on television. Tony’s invitation to the Mandarin, complete with his home address, is playing on an endless loop on one side of a split screen, the other featuring live aerial footage of the house in question. Most of the others are in the room too, but Steve barely registers them, focused as he is between the screen and Phil’s face.

“This has gone far enough,” Steve announces, glaring venomously at the other man and daring him to argue. For the first time in ages, he’s tempted to actually use the full extent of his strength, not to defend but to injure, to try to make Phil hurt for this. If he hadn’t let Tony age up, let him leave, none of this would be happening. Tony wouldn’t be punishing himself by turning his own survival into the most ridiculous game. Clint’s voice sounds from a vent above their heads, disrupting this extremely dangerous track Steve’s thoughts have started going down.

“Phil promised him space. And even if he hadn’t, and even if I didn’t agree with him, there’s a very good chance that we wouldn’t get there in time. Thor is off with Jane, SHIELD is short on Helicarriers, and commercial flights from New York to LA take at least six hours. Even if we can get access to one of Stark’s private jets, there isn’t time for us to be the ones to get his fool ass out of there. And chances are that if we did happen to make it in time, our just showing up would drive him to do something even more stupid.”

“Pepper?” Bruce suggests. That…that could work. Pepper has been in Malibu since almost immediately Tony had been de-aged, and there’s a decent enough chance that she’s been staying at the house that regardless of whether she can help Tony, she needs to be warned. When no one
protests, Bruce has JARVIS put the call through, and soon her harassed and frightened sounding voice is sounding through the living room.

“Yeah, I know. I’m on my way to the house right now, along with half of the city. What happened? I didn’t even know he was...back to himself, let alone coming out here. And why is he alone?” Something about this makes Phil let out a quiet laugh, and if Steve couldn’t tell instantly that there’s absolutely no humour in it, he might actually kill the man.

“It’s a long story, Pepper. We don’t have easy access to quick flight options at the moment, so we’re relying on you to get there and then get both of you the hell out and as far away as possible. We’ll take it from there if he’ll let us, I promise.”

“Phil, seriously, you have to give me something here. I need to know what I’m walking in to. What mess am I trying to clean up, by myself, this time?” Many members of the team bristle at this, presumably because Pepper has hardly been present through this whole thing either. She seems to realize the same too, because she gives an audible sigh. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t entirely fair. I just... the spell, and what happened to Happy, and now this, I don’t. It’s too much. I’m not like you all, I’m not built for this.” Pepper’s panic is all the push Steve needs to put his own to the side for the first time since he’d heard Phil yell.

“Ms. Potts, this is Captain Rogers. I’m very sorry we aren’t with you, ma’am. But you are not alone, not for long. You need to get him out of the house to safety, and if you’re feeling real forgiving, you can try to convince him to let us help him. But he’s going to get that regardless, and that’s a promise.” The team and Pepper all respond to the sudden reemergence of their Captain and leader, and even Phil is suddenly look at him with a shadow of the way he used to, like he’d follow Steve anywhere. While Pepper crawls through the mess that is LA traffic, they all keep talking, a mix of strategy and anecdotes from the past month; the latter occasionally provokes weak laughter from her.

Clint is midway through a highly biased account of his and Tony’s joint Hide and Seek victory when the action on the television shifts, catching Steve’s eye. The view changes to a full-screen shot of the Malibu house, which is undergoing a total, devastating assault. The noise of it is deafening enough that the reporter in the chopper clearly has no sense of her own volume as she speculates loudly and almost gleefully about the extent of the damage and the likelihood that anyone, even Iron Man, could have survived such damage.

“And Stark is such a showman, if he has survived, why haven’t we seen him flying away from the ruins by now? Let’s face it, Chad, the most likely scenario is that we have just witnessed the end of Tony Stark, live on network television.” The mention of the suit brings a flare of hope to Steve’s chest despite the reporter’s ridiculous and dramatic declaration.

“JARVIS?”

“Sir had placed all privacy and security settings on blackout mode and de-activated all existing medical protocols prior to the attack, Captain Rogers,” the AI says regretfully. Pepper has pulled over and is nearly hyperventilating on the side of the road, and Steve can’t even look at the rest of the team, and this can’t happen, it can’t because if Tony was in there it was because at least on some level he chose not to get out, and that can’t—

“Please, JARVIS.” No one in the room has ever heard Phil Coulson sound anything like this, and seeing him suddenly falling apart is at least as affecting as the images on screen. Natasha sucks in a breath, and Clint drops from the vent with none of his usual grace. Bruce trembles, and Steve wonders if they should be trying to convince him to go into the containment room downstairs, but he feels curiously disconnected from any real concern. What does it matter now, really, if the Hulk
tears apart the penthouse?

“Agent Coulson, just as your own...protocols dictated the decision you recently made regarding Sir, so too must mine always take priority, regardless of what I might wish.” Phil semi-collapses onto the couch behind him, and he looks up at Steve almost as if begging for the other man to yield to the dark, violent impulses he’d felt just minutes ago. Clint looks between them and seems to be preparing to try to stop Steve if necessary, but the thought that Steve can do anything that will make Coulson feel worse more than he already is seems laughable.

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Tony wakes and he’s falling and his first thought is that this is hell, to relive New York and falling over and over again for all eternity. He discards that theory when he makes a painful and extended crash landing, but a world where he’s in *Rosehill Tennessee* without even JARVIS as a friendly voice in his ear might in fact be worse than hell.

With nothing but his own thoughts to keep him company as he drags the suit behind him like a grotesque metal corpse, Tony would like to be able to say that he keeps his mind mainly on the problem in front of him. He’d been working through connections between potential Mandarin attack sites before Maya had shown up, that was presumably why JARVIS had carried out that flight plan he’d promised to put together and sent him here in the first place. If he can just get some warmer clothes, and access to the right components to fix the suit and get JARVIS back online, he could take advantage of his probably presumed-death and do some poking around in Rosehill—

Tony wants to be focusing mainly on these types of thoughts, and he isn’t. Because almost his entire being is occupied with his only slightly less recent fall, the trip that had taken him into the ocean with the remains of his Malibu home. At first, the panic at being submerged into water had completely overtaken him; he’d always promised himself after Afghanistan that the only type of death he would outright refuse to accept, regardless of the nobility of its purpose, would be drowning. The shocking cold of the water combined with his own terror had acted like a lead weight, and there had been several long moments where he’d tried to at least not die feeling like this. He’d tried to close his eyes the way he had in the wormhole, a parody of the kinds of peacefulness that people dying heroic deaths in books and movies all claimed to feel.

But Tony hadn’t felt peaceful. He’d felt longing. Not just for a better death, or even for Pepper (most of what he felt about her was a mournful sort of relief that she hadn’t been there, hadn’t been put in danger by him, again). He had spent what he thought were going to be his last minutes on Earth wishing for the team, remembering Steve’s furnace-like warmth and the way Nat sounds when she laughs, like she’s always surprised to find herself capable of it. He’d thought about games and cuddles and being bathed and listened to, like every word he said actually mattered.

He’d thought of Phil, in the immediate aftermath of the spell reversal, assuring him that they were still there, still his team, and that they’d be there the second Tony was ready to see them again. And though that entire de-aging episode was far more humiliating than even the public release of supposedly intimate sexual moments, his dying brain had clung fiercely not just to the memories, but to an even more embarrassing wish that everything hadn’t changed.

On this side of the water, that yearning to not be alone anymore is proving surprisingly difficult to shake. When Tony’s wandering finally leads him to a gas station and to some much-needed clothing, he starts trying to bully his mind back into focusing on the problem at hand. Of course, then he sees the payphone. His first reaction is disbelief that these things even exist anymore. But his tech-snobbery is quickly interrupted by an even more powerful wave of that same wanting. *It’s way more dangerous when it’s not some stupid dying fantasy,* he tells himself as his legs lead him, without his consent, a couple steps closer to the booth. *You’re not the kind of guy that gets to just*
call home, Stark. His feet still aren’t listening, so Tony gives up and starts to barter instead. Maybe just for a second. Just long enough to hear their voices, know they’re alright. I don’t have to say anything.

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Steve and Phil are the only two remaining in the penthouse. The others have left: Natasha and Clint to Malibu to be with Pepper and collect evidence from the ruins of Tony’s home, and Bruce to the lab to try to work through the data they currently have on the Mandarin attacks. But Phil and Steve have remained, unmoving. It feels foolishly optimistic to waste any manpower at all on the notion that Tony is not only alive but might actually call them, but Steve supposes that in an odd way, they are the two members of the team who feel like they have nowhere else to go if Tony Stark is really gone.

Though the urge to physically hurt Phil has passed, Steve still hasn’t been able to bring himself to speak to the other man. As opaque as Phil usually is, the transparency of his devastation now is almost impossible to witness; he’s not even answering his phone, which has been vibrating almost constantly since the attack on Tony’s house aired. Steve’s anger hasn’t burned itself out by any means, but the past few hours have turned it into a corrosive kind of regret; so much could have been different, if either of them had trusted one another just a little bit more.

“Incoming call for you, Captain Rogers, Agent Coulson, via Stark Secure Servers.”

“Tony!” Instantly, Steve is on his feet, heart thudding painfully in his chest. JARVIS puts the call through, but there’s a long moment of silence that greets from the other end. The prospect of losing this sudden, galvanizing source of hope is like losing the man all over again. “Tony? Please, if you’re there, if you can talk, please say something.” There’s a harsh, ragged inhalation, but Tony still isn’t speaking. Phil is already moving, has seized his phone from the floor and is typing so rapidly that it’s hard to believe that anything coming out could possibly be coherent. “Alright, that’s okay. It’s fine if you can’t talk yet, or if you don’t want to. I’m going to wait right here, though, Tony, okay? I’m not going anywhere. Just stay here on the line with me.” It tests every ounce of Steve’s restraint, because he has never been the type to handle not acting particularly well, but he sits there for close to a minute, just listening to the other man struggle to get a handle on his breathing. Finally, his patience pays off.

“…Steve.”

“Yeah, Tony. I’m here.” There’s another, shorter pause, and then Tony croaks,

“This was stupid. I’m going to go.”

“No, please, don’t hang up. Please, Tony.” He’s begging and it’s pathetic and Steve doesn’t care a whit. “Golly it’s good to hear your voice. Are you hurt?”

“Doesn’t matter. ‘m fine. Or I will be. I have a blanket now, so.” Tony is bragging about his apparent acquisition of a blanket in the same haughty tone he’d used to declare himself a billionaire, genius, playboy, philanthropist, and, unchecked, a laugh bubbles out of Steve. After a second of shocked silence, Tony starts chuckling too. “Fuck off, Rogers. It’s a good blanket.”

“I’m sure it is, Tony. Can you tell me where you and that blanket are at?” The line goes quiet again. Then in a quiet, hesitant tone so much closer to Tony’s younger self than his current state that it temporarily makes Steve’s brain go absolutely haywire, he stutters,

“Y-you don’t have to—”
“I don’t have to do anything, you’re right. I mean, you have a blanket so you’re basically halfway there anyway,” he grins. “But we’re a team, remember? You don’t need to do this alone.” There’s more Steve wants to say, so much more, but Tony is skittish enough. On impulse, recalling the footage he’s seen from Tony’s first interview post-Afghanistan, he adds, “If you want I’ll bring you a cheeseburger.” The throaty chuckle Tony gives in response might be the most beautiful damn thing Steve has ever heard.

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Phil and Steve show up, complete with the cheeseburger Steve had promised, a matter of hours later. And compared to that that first step, that first terrifying moment where Tony had reached out, all the while sure he’d find only rejection and humiliation, taking down the Mandarin (well, AIM, really) over the weeks that follow actually feels comparatively easy.

With as many skillsets and specialties as the Avengers bring to the table, poor Aldrich had never stood a chance, really. They’d even managed to turn the entire thing into a much-needed positive PR opportunity for the Avengers, and for Natasha in particular; making her and Rhodey the faces the entire world now associates with the dramatic rescue of the President of the United States has everyone eating out of the palm of her hand. A hastily-produced action figure set featuring Black Widow and Iron Patriot is the Christmas season’s hot item, and Tony makes sure to re-negotiate Natasha’s contract with SHIELD and the toy company so she gets a damn hefty cut of the sales to make up for the transparently sexist way in which Widow had been dramatically underrepresented in all Avengers merch.

He spends nearly two weeks solid in the lab with Extremis, science-drunk on the possibilities of what they might do with it once he manages to get it stabilized. When he finally figures it out, though, it’s an unexpectedly hollow victory. Because even though there’s still ample testing to be done, and potential applications for the drug that are relevant on an extremely personal level to Tony himself, this was the last major task left for this mission. And the end of this mission means everything goes back to normal. Only Tony has no idea what the means anymore, and he’s not entirely sure he wants to find out.

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When the first thing that happens after Extremis is solved is Tony and Pepper’s official breakup, all of these fears about what kind of life he might have after the mission increase exponentially. It’s not really a surprise; they had never really recovered from Pepper’s decision to leave while Tony was unprecedentedly fragile, nor from his incredibly foolish taunts toward ‘The Mandarin’ that had nearly cost both of them their lives. (When he finds out how close Pepper was to being in the house that day, he immediately pulls funding from several projects working to reduce LA traffic congestion, because that beautiful, inefficient mess had very possibly saved Pepper’s life.)

They had staged a messy, public break up in the wake of the Malibu attack anyway, largely to ensure Pepper’s continued safety and to separate SI’s brand as much as possible from Tony’s foolhardy actions. It had seemed equally wise to put the conversations they needed to have off until after the resolution of all of it, and if they both knew what they were really avoiding when they promised to speak after Tony had stabilized Extremis, neither of them acknowledged it.

When the end had finally come, it had been quiet and bittersweet and not remotely surprising. She had strode into the lab, magnificent and beautiful, better rested and healthier than she’d looked in months.

“You really did it. I mean, JARVIS told me, but I…you really fixed Extremis.” She’d smiled, then, not the pinched, strained CEO smile she’s perfected as of late, but the toothy, dorky grin he hasn’t seen from her in over six months. And he had never loved her more than at that moment when he
also knew for sure he could never keep her. “I’m not sorry, you know. About any of it. I’d do it all over again with you, Tony, even knowing how it ends.” From anyone else, these words might have been trite or empty in a moment like this, but to Tony, who had spent so much of the last few weeks wondering if their entire relationship was defined by him forcing Pepper to be what he needed when he needed it (assistant, CEO, girlfriend), it was nothing short of miraculous. They’d hugged for what might have been minutes or hours, and he hadn’t realized the constant stream of thankyouthankyouthankyou had been something he was actually vocalizing until she’d put a finger to his lips. “You called them.”

“I—what?”

“Steve. Phil. The Avengers. After Malibu, you called them.” She hadn’t seemed angry for the entire course of this conversation so it had seemed like such an odd way to twist the knife, to remind Tony that even then, his instinct hadn’t been to check in with his partner as it should have been. But Pepper shook her head and pressed her finger harder to his lips when he tried to marshal a defense, or an explanation. “I’m not upset, Tony. It’s…well, I’m trying to decide if I’m more proud of you about that or Extremis. And I think that phone call is going to win by a landslide.” He must have looked as stupidly bewildered as he’d felt, but Pepper had just smiled and leaned forward to press a kiss to his forehead.

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Natasha comes down to him that night, after Pepper has taken the remainder of her things and (according to the feed Tony had shamelessly watched, though without audio) had a brief but intense-looking conversation with Coulson. He wants a drink more than just about anything, but on Steve and JARVIS’s orders, the bots had gotten rid of all the workshop’s liquor when he’d been… small, and every time Tony had made mention of replacing it during the course of the mission, someone had always abruptly changed the subject. She isn’t carrying booze now either, not even the gorgeously smooth vodka he knows she has a store of somewhere, but she does have a mug of something. He blinks when he realizes he’s just taken it from her hand without even a second of hesitation. Then he nearly drops it when he realizes what it is: the creamy, thick hot chocolate she’d made his four-year-old alter ego on many a sleepless night.

“…thanks.” Natasha nods, and much as she’d done on those nights, she waits, calmly and patiently assessing to see if it seems likely that Tony wants to talk. He doesn’t, but she lets the somehow comfortable silence linger between them for a few more moments. She reaches out, seemingly to touch his arm, but changes course at the last moment and gestures to the cup in his hand.

“Make sure you go to bed when that’s done, Tony.” He’d always fulfilled this end of their bargain when he’d been little, and even if a part of him dreads trying to sleep, he can’t quite bring himself to shatter whatever lingers of that bond between them just yet.

****

Amicable break-up or not, the next week is one of the most challenging of Tony’s life. He has one major panic attack, several more mild ones, and food and sleep continue to compete over which basic need is the most elusive and frustrating. The team never lets him go long without some kind of quiet contact; Bruce helps him with the write ups on Extremis and cautiously offers to guide him through a meditation before they attempt another meal (Tony turns the latter down with an awkward joke about his adult self preferring access to Bruce’s big bag of weed); Phil sits with him through his panic attacks, and starts leaving resources about strategies for handling anxiety on Tony’s bedside table; Clint goads him into games of Mario Kart and a prank against Natasha that goes horribly awry; and even Thor, having spent some time with Jane after wrapping up the mission, arrives at the tower and immediately convinces Tony that he must bear witness to the epic poem the Asgardian has written to honour the team’s latest victory. (He doesn’t think about Steve.
At least some portion of his mental energy is constantly put into not thinking about Steve, who’s hung around the tower and brought Tony plate after plate of food in the shop and who looks at Tony sometimes like he might—)

Not long ago, this kind of attention and support would have been everything. It still is, really; the fact of these people not immediately abandoning him to his fate after having spent so long caring for his ass as an actual child is amazing. Tony is grateful for every damn second they willingly spend on him.

And it isn’t enough. That longing he’d felt in the Pacific that day still presses in on Tony. The ridiculous wishing for something he never should have had in the first place is made infinitely worse when it hits him that not one of the team has put their hands on him outside battle assistance since he’d come back to his adult body. Like that first night with Natasha, there’s been several close calls, moments where they’ve seemed to reach for him and then thought better of it. And he gets why. They’d just spent a month catering to the ways in which Tony’s life-long touch-starvation made him cling to any potential source of affection like a heat-seeking missile. They’re probably enjoying the space.

But he wants. And he doesn’t know how to stop.

****

If he’s being honest the last thing Clint wants to do after a hellishly long day at SHIELD working with new recruits is to talk to Phil. Things between Coulson and the team have warmed during the course of their work against AIM, true, in large part because Tony had been absolutely insistent that he harboured no grudge against Phil for his re-aging; moreover, Stark had made it extremely plain that if he wasn’t upset, none of the rest of them had any right to treat Coulson as if anything had changed. They’d all tried, for Tony, even if it had been awkward at first, and Clint can admit privately to himself that he’s grateful Phil stuck around instead of taking him up on the offer to move out and act only as a professional associate. None of this, though, makes it exactly easy for Clint to be around the guy, especially when his nerves are already frayed.

“You summoned?” he snipes, arching a brow when Phil looks up at him and, of all things, blushes. “Are you—”

“You called me Daddy once, when we were…” Phil trails off, face and chest turning even darker shade of red, but this time Clint is too stunned to mock him.

“I…dude, if this is your way of suggesting we hook up again, we really gotta work on your game.” Phil groans and appears to struggle with himself for a moment, before picking up his computer and placing it in front of Clint. He scans the page in front of him, taking it in slowly both because it’s long and text-heavy and because trying to catch up with Phil’s train of thought here is proving far more difficult than usual. “…okay. Again, if this is about us, Phil, I can’t do this right now.”

“When all of this happened, with Tony, with what I did, you asked—well, asked is probably gentling it a bit. You told me to fix it.” Phil’s normally ordered mind seems to be jumping all over the damn place, and Clint gives up on replying, hopping up onto the kitchen counter and surveying the other man, who is twitching with a kind of restless energy that’s entirely counter to his usual almost eerie calm. “And Clint, whatever else you might feel about me right now, I really never wanted anyone hurt out of this, least of all Tony. Or you. So I’ve been trying to figure out what the reality of fixing it would actually look like, because he’s come so far and we’re so close but he just can’t seem to make himself let us in that last step of the way. And then I—I remembered some research I did, after that night with you. Because I didn’t know what it meant or what you might want, and I wanted to be prepared. It never came up again before…before things changed, after
New York, but then I thought about Tony, and I thought maybe. Maybe this could work. But I don’t want to be making the call for all of us again, so, I’m, I wanted to ask for your thoughts, before I even pitch it to the team.”

Clint considers the screen again.

“I didn’t want this. When I said that to you. It was just a one-off, heat of the moment kind of thing, because I was in a particularly subby kind of headspace and you’d given me a dressing down at work for pitching myself off the roof of that factory.” Phil nods, looking neither surprised nor disappointed by this news. “And with what just happened, I don’t…I couldn’t mix sex in with this. I’m not saying I’m not attracted to him, but I couldn’t, not like this.”

“It doesn’t have to be a sexual thing,” Phil assures him. “And even without the de-aging making that complicated, I think keeping sex out of it is probably for the best anyway. He’s used to being wanted that way, even by people who don’t actually like him very much. I don’t want him getting mixed up or using this to end up pushing us further away.” Clint nods and turns his attention back to the screen, surprised by the bolt of entirely non-sexual desire that hits him as he looks over some of pictures and starts to imagine. His mouth goes a little dry, and he looks over at Coulson to find the fragile hope that’s suddenly coursing through him mirrored in Phil’s expression.

“I think we should call the rest of the team in on this. And soon.” A cautious smile fights its way onto Phil’s face; it turns into something that can only be called a stupid grin when Clint leans in and presses a whisper of a kiss to his lips before leaving the room.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been more heavily revised than the entire rest of the story combined. It took ages to get it to a place where I was happy; at one point, the IM3 plot took a lot longer to resolve. But although some plot elements from the film (*cough* Extremis *cough*) still have a big part to play, the realization I eventually came to was that I was far less interested in excited about a detailed IM3 re-write than I was in using the movie as a springboard for digging into the relationships between the team that have always been at the heart of this story.

The bit about Natasha's role in the resolution of the AIM plot is inspired by the Black Widow comics, which deal a lot with her finances and her perpetual underpayment by SHIELD. I was also thinking a lot about the place Natasha is in at the end of CATWS, and the potential political benefits of actually dealing with the effect that her dumping SHIELD secrets online has on her reputation in particular. (In short, maybe what I'm saying here is that if this story goes on long enough, it might start dealing a little bit with some of the themes of Civil War.)

I loved seeing everyone's reactions to last chapter. I especially appreciated as a new and anxious author that while some of you were upset with Coulson, that never got directed at me personally. You are generous and thoughtful readers, and I love chatting about this story and these characters with you. Thank you for the comments and kudos.
The Council of Coulson

Chapter Summary

The team spends time sorting out the details of their plans, which provides some unexpected insight into Loki’s original actions. Rhodey visits.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: this is an extremely dialogue-heavy chapter (named in honour of the Council of Elrond, also a very talky piece of writing). For people like me who enjoy reading negotiation sometimes as much as the actual kink, this should be right up your alley. I know that's not the case for everyone, though, and I apologize in advance for those of you who just want the ageplay to hurry up and start.

And on that note: this is indeed a story that is moving toward a consensual ageplay dynamic amongst the team. If you have concerns about the writing or tagging that's one thing, but please don't comment just to let me know you hate that kink.

Edited to add: Recently, this chapter has been getting some fairly negative attention in comments. To recap the concerns briefly, some folks don’t like that the team approaches Tony as a group (they feel he is ganged up on/manipulated.) Some also find the discussion insufficient and the resulting kink dynamic under-negotiated. I don’t personally agree with either of these critiques; the team comes to Tony as a group because they would be proceeding with the age play as a group, so they feel they should all be represented. And while I don’t think their conversation covers everything, I do think that they are all having this discussion in good faith and as adults on an equal footing.

However, in part because I am explicitly requesting that anyone with exclusively negative comments on this chapter or this story in general keep them to themselves I wanted to note that this was feedback that I’ve received so new readers can go in prepared.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natasha, of course, figures out that they’re planning something long before they’re ready to actually talk to the team. Phil presents the rough outline he and Clint have cobbled together so far with far less blushing (probably because he doesn’t explain what led him to look up the topic in the first place).

She takes everything in in unnerving silence, reading through the package of materials Phil has printed off and making little notes in the margins in her perfect handwriting. Phil clearly intends to give her all the time she wants and needs, but Clint has never had that kind of patience, and he kicks lightly at one of her muscled thighs, affecting a pout when her eyes dart up at him.
“You gotta say something here Tasha, you’re killing me.”

“Do you know how many ways I could put you out of commission with that thigh alone?” Shortly after this rather ominous reminder, Phil requests that Clint make them a pot of coffee. It’s a transparent attempt to keep him occupied while Nat does her thing, but he still does as he’s told. And this ends up requiring far more of Clint’s time and attention than he would have anticipated, because the coffee maker on Phil’s floor is one of those fancy damn things with the bean-grinder built in and about fifteen different settings. Clint’s own level has a single-cup brewer that uses K-cups, and he marvels again at Tony’s impressive attention to detail. Of course the man would know that Phil would never sacrifice quality over speed, particularly when it comes to coffee. Clint, on the other hand, grew up in the circus and has spent most of his adult life on missions where access to any food and beverage at all is not always a given. The speed and minimal clean-up of his own machine is perfect.

By the time he’s figured out the ins-and-outs of the brewer and prepared coffee for them all, Nat is finishing up with the last page of notes. She takes a long, slow sip of her black coffee (Clint is pretty sure just to fuck with him), and then she finally starts talking.

“From what I know of Tony Stark, this could work. This might actually be the only thing that can help him right now. But it will take an incredible amount of time and effort, and we need to make sure everyone here is prepared for that. Because if we do this halfway, if we don’t take it as far as I think it needs to go, then he will wind up in worse shape than when we started.” For the first time, her expression loses its carefully blank neutrality. “I wrote some ideas. Props, scenes, things like that.”

“You really want this,” Clint marvels. He doesn’t exactly mean to say it out loud, but he knows almost instantly that he isn’t wrong.

“Yes.” She doesn’t offer any elaboration, and neither man asks for any. To push Natasha when she’s this vulnerable is to court disaster, and even if he knows there are many more conversations that have to be had, this is also the closest Clint has felt to either of his former lovers in months, and he’s not willing to give it up.

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Their shared distance from the historical context familiar to the rest of the team makes Phil assume that Steve and Thor will be the hardest to sell on this. He decides to start with the latter, because in a lot of ways, Phil is all-too-aware that this will rise and fall on Steve’s response, and he isn’t quite ready to handle it yet if Steve takes all of this poorly.

Thor’s first reaction is nothing even he could have prepared for.

“I believe I may owe my brother an apology.”

“Uh. Not to sound…why, exactly?”

“When one lives for millennia, as we do, we are not so rushed to achieve maturity and independence. Long after Asgardian children have physically reached adulthood, they are still considered Younglings—they are given protection and care and guidance from their elders.” Phil still doesn't quite see the link to Loki, but he can’t help but be fascinated, as he always has been, by cultural traditions so distinct from his own.

“How long does someone remain as a Youngling?”

“There is no set measure. It is dependent on the needs of the Youngling. Sometimes it is several
decades; other times shorter. Some have need of returning to Youngling status later in life, often after a taxing battle. Or this is as it should be.” Thor hangs his head for a long moment, broad shoulders slumping. “Loki was…not permitted to remain a Youngling. I believe the gift he was attempting to bestow upon Friend Stark was the same one he never received himself: more time.”

The array of conflicting responses this revelation provokes in Phil is almost dizzying. To know that Loki had looked at Tony and seen this so quickly while the rest of them had stumbled around in the dark is equal parts astounding and frustrating. The weight of Phil’s own actions in ending the spell weigh a bit more heavily on him with the knowledge that Loki was actually acting in Tony’s defense, but it also makes Phil’s conviction to do this right, with the man’s actual knowledge and consent, stronger and more fierce. Phil doesn’t know at all what to do with the part of him that now pities the man who nearly killed them all, so he tries to expend that energy on Thor. The demigod’s normally proud, haughty features have fallen, and his eyes are closed, but he doesn’t jump when Phil presses a cautious hand to his shoulder.

“There’s still time. For both of them.” Thor doesn’t reply, but after another few seconds, he rises to his feet, every inch the Asgardian Prince again.

“When do we begin?”

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Bruce, it turns out, is the only one of them who has practiced anything close to an age-play dynamic in the past. He’s never been a ‘parent’ to a little, but he’s served as an uncle and a temporary caregiver, and his practical, on-the-ground knowledge combined with his attention to detail where it concerns Tony specifically moves many of the team’s more abstract desires and thoughts into the realm of the concrete.

The last thing to do is to speak with Steve, and the unlikely duo of Thor and Bruce proves highly effective and persuasive on that front. They let Thor open by explaining what he now firmly believes to be the intent behind Loki’s spell; he also goes into more depth than he had with Phil about Youngling status as a treatment for what Asgard apparently calls ‘battle melancholy’ (more familiar to Steve as shell-shock, and the others as PTSD). Bruce, still protective of his past and his privacy, offers no more context or background than he’d given Phil about how or why he’s encountered age play in the past, but he skillfully weaves together personal narrative with his more theoretical arguments about why he thinks this will be an effective treatment in Tony’s case.

Steve is quiet throughout the conversation, sticking mainly to factual, clarification kinds of questions. His usually open expression is giving very little away, and Phil wonders nervously if he should have been out of the room altogether for this, to try to avoid Steve mixing up any lingering resentment he might have toward Phil himself with discomfort about their plan. This anxiety is not lessened when Steve finally stands and addresses himself directly to Coulson.

“When do you know what I did almost every morning when I got back from my run, when Tony was under the spell?” Phil shakes his head. “I threw up. You have no idea how much it takes for nausea to even make it past the serum. In the past the most I’ve been able to manage is maybe a gag before the serum alleviated all the symptoms. I’d feel sick without actually being able to be sick. But for nearly two weeks I started every morning like that. Especially after the first message, I worried every second about how to keep him safe, alive, let alone happy and healthy, and it felt hopeless. The world is too big and too…complicated, now.”

“Steve,” Natasha says in that gentle tone she seems to reserve only for talking to Cap, “you don’t have to do this. No one is trying to force your hand here, you know that right?” Steve snorts.

“Force my hand? Tasha, this is…it’s so perfect that I’m terrified to think about it. If it worked he
would—he’d let me be there, help him, we could figure out the world together just like we were then. But I wouldn’t have to be so damn terrified all the time, because he’d still be him, and I—God, I’m scared of how much I already want this. What if he says no?” It’s the possibility, the extremely real possibility, that has haunted all of their conversations for days, and nearly everyone flinches. Phil, though, manages the first real smile he’s been able to give Steve since before it all fell apart.

“Then we try again.”

****

Tony should have realized sooner that something was up. The team’s been weird and distant for days now, exchanging secretive looks and having hushed conversations that trail off awkwardly whenever he walks into the room. But he’d attributed most of it to his own preoccupation with Rhodey, who’s been on his first short leave since the start of the Iron Patriot re-branding tour, and has spent nearly every second of it with Tony.

It’s the first time since the blow-out at the Malibu house on Tony’s last birthday that they’ve really gotten the chance to be together for any extended length of time. The residual tension between them had quickly bled away, replaced with the easy camaraderie and affection they’d shared since Tony was a lonely, skinny teenager at MIT.

That’s not to say it all goes as smoothly as Tony would like. Pepper has, rather unfortunately, spilled the beans both about Tony’s de-aging catastrophe and his ongoing problems with anxiety, and Rhodey spends entirely too much time grilling him about both. He’s proud, though, when Tony tells him that he’s quit drinking; Dummy and You have even created a stupidly adorable calendar charting Tony’s days of sobriety, and they share it smugly with Rhodey, who gives them all high-fives and congratulates them on a job well done. You, the biggest Rhodey-stan of them all, nearly swoons.

“Stop turning my bots against me, Honey Bear,” Tony complains, not bothering to even try to hide the wide grin on his face as he watches several of his oldest friends appreciate one another. Rhodey laughs and pulls him into the odd little group hug instead.

“Look, I know you said there’s no hard feelings about how all the shit went down with the spell. And Pep says they took good care of you when you were all shrunken and adorable—”

“Rhoooodey, I thought we agreed not to talk about this anymore.”

“No, you agreed to that. I intend to talk about it plenty, and to try to shake your team down for any and all evidence they have of your supposed cuteness the next time I make it out here.” Tony groans, and makes a mental note to wipe the surveillance feeds and anything on the team’s devices as soon as possible. “But Tones, for real, listen up. You called them, right? Pepper can’t stop bragging about it. I think she likes you more now than she did as your girlfriend.”

“Depressingly accurate, Sugarplum. What’s your point?”

“My point, you ingrate, is that you can’t go back to your lone gunslinger shit just because the mission is over and now you have time to maybe feel a little embarrassed.” Tony rolls his eyes, but Rhodey has never been one to leave well enough alone, not when it counts. He leans in close and grips Tony by the back of his neck like a kitten; it’s something he’s done ever since college, in the moments when he’s demanding nothing less than emotional honesty from his friend. The familiarity of the gesture combined with the all too-welcome feeling of being touched is enough to bring traitorous tears to his eyes. “Promise me?”
“If I say no, will you stay?” It’s a stupid, selfish, and just plain shitty thing to say, and Tony regrets it instantly. Rhodey looks downright alarmed now, and Tony hastens to walk it back. “I mean, the President himself promised me I can restore War Machine back to its former glory and get rid of that outrageous paint job, and—”

“Stop.” Rhodey has increased the pressure of his hold on Tony’s neck, and he frowns thoughtfully at the engineer in a way that can only spell trouble. “Alright. This is feeling far too much like the Funvee all of a sudden, so here’s how it is. I take you upstairs right now, with your full assurance that you’ll have dinner with your team and keep spending time with them and letting them send me updates. Or I take you with me and drop you off with Mama.” Tony’s eyes widen so fast he must look like a damn cartoon character, but Mama Rhodes is not a threat Rhodey breaks out often, and cannot possibly be taken lightly. The woman is equal parts wonderful and terrifying, and he knows if she got even one look at him right now, he’d be done. After his parents’ funeral, only Obie’s intervention had stopped the woman from putting him on the equivalent of lockdown at her place. The team might be intimidating in their own way, but there is absolutely no competing with Mama Rhodes.

Or, you know. So Tony figures.

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Things start easily enough. He says goodbye to Rhodey, and them makes science-talk with Bruce while he pretends to ignore the long conversation Rhodey, Phil and Steve have. Bruce is making Tony’s favourite chicken piccata, and even if Tony doubts that he’ll be able to manage more than a few bites in the wake of Rhodey leaving, it still warms something in him to think that maybe Bruce planned this meal with Tony himself in mind.

When his prediction about being unable to manage much food is sadly fulfilled, the team doesn’t even get on him the way they normally do about it. Steve just takes the plate and puts saran wrap over it while Tony stares longingly at the leftovers. They make relatively easy conversation about the pop culture that Steve has been catching up on lately, and Tony, remembering his promise to Rhodey (and his confidence that the man will absolutely call his mother in if he doesn’t think Tony is keeping up his end of the bargain), proposes a Die Hard screening for the evening.

The others get a little weird after that, either going silent (in the case of Phil, Clint and Natasha), or muttering vague and non-committal answers. Tony sighs, realizing their behaviour during Rhodey’s visit might in fact just be Tony’s not-so-charming self finally wearing their patience thin.

“No problem. I have those new Bites to take a look at anyway, and—”

“NO!” They all chorus, then glare at one another as if to accuse the others of being the ones to overreact.

“Er—what we mean is that we’d like to talk with you for a bit, Tony.” There’s no way this isn’t a capital T kind of talk, and Tony inwardly curses Rhodey again for making all this happen, because Steve is giving him the damn puppy eyes and he’s pretty sure that it’s treason or something to say no to that face. But he still tries.

“You guys, I’m pretty wiped.” Inspiration strikes, and he adds, “Rhodey and I were up drinking and reminiscing most of the night, and—”

“That’s funny, Tony, because he was just telling us about the calendar the bots made and how proud he is of you,” Phil interrupts. Traitors, the lot of them, Tony has no idea at all why he talks to anyone ever.
“…alright, but I only have half an hour before I have to check on the test I’m running—”

“JARVIS,” Clint almost sing-songs, “anything urgent going on in the workshop or the lab?”

“Negative, Agent Barton. The last of Sir’s most recent tests on Extremis was completed forty-seven minutes and thirteen seconds ago.” If J hadn’t only just recently forgiven Tony for his actions in Malibu, the bastard would be on mute for at least a week. As it is, Tony can only groan and bang his head against the wall before graciously accepting defeat and following Steve out into the living room.

Things only get weirder from there. Everyone keeps staring at one another very intensely (except for Bruce, who seems to be gone somewhere—maybe he’s the only one who had the sense to make a run for it?) and refusing to answer any of Tony’s anxious, probing questions. Steve and Phil are bracketing him on either side of the couch, Thor is perched regally on one of the oversized armchairs and nearly vibrating, Clint and Tasha on the armrests beside him, and just when Tony thinks he might go absolutely bananas from the anticipation, Bruce steps back into the room, holding a familiar notebook. Shame floods through Tony as he tries not to cry for the second time today. Of all the people, he wouldn’t have expected this kind of casual cruelty to originate from Bruce, his Science Bro, his first real friend on the team.

“That,” he points, “that’s not fucking funny, Bruce.” It’s only the fact that he can feel the edges of a panic attack creeping in that keeps him on the couch at all; he does not need to compound the humiliation of finding his kid-self’s stupid damn notebook with collapsing on the living room floor. Bruce comes to a cross-legged seat directly in front of him and nods.

“You’re right, it isn’t funny at all.” Bruce opens the book to the page with his own name, and Tony watches him trace the words (Christ, had he misspelled strict?) almost reverently. “Can you tell me what this is, Tony? This book? What were you trying to figure out?”

“I-he…I was kidnapped a lot, as a kid. At first people thought my Dad would pay the ransom. He never did, and it stopped for a while. But later they figured that if I was that much of a genius, I must know at least something about what Howard was planning.” Phil is peering curiously down at the book like he hasn’t seen it before (and Tony thanks Bruce for sparing him at least that much), but that still doesn’t stop Agent from knowing exactly where to put pressure.

“If you’re not him then what’s the harm in answering me, Tony? If you two are so entirely distinct that you can’t even refer to him in the first person, then why would that cost you anything?” Bruce should be the last damn person to ever talk about referring to a part of himself in the third person, and a deeply uncharitable part of Tony wants to point that out in the most vicious possible terms, but they’ll just read that as more defensiveness and keep pressing.

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“‘He was trying to figure out what was going on.’ His vagueness wins him nothing but a cocked eyebrow from Bruce. “Look, a house full of obviously impressive people were spending a hell of a lot of time catering to the ridiculous whims of a four-year-old, of course that seemed weird even then. He wanted to know what you…” He swallows, hard. “He wanted to know what you wanted
from him.” Several of the others look stricken, but Bruce nods as if he was expecting this answer.

“And what were the results of the preliminary investigation? The conclusion page was blank.”
Tony gives a self-deprecating laugh.

“I am Iron Man. And at least until you can talk Rhodey into taking the position, you need me on
the team. I get it. I have value. Can we wrap this up and get to the seasonally appropriate action
movie already?”

“I didn’t think I’d ever see the day where you could be so completely wrong, Tony. Try again.”
Bruce sets the book, open to the Conclusions page, on Tony’s lap, and despite himself, he looks
down to find the page isn’t entirely blank anymore. There’s one line, in Bruce’s familiar slanted
scrawl, and it steals the air from his lungs.
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Tony is reeling from whatever Bruce has shown him. The combination of Phil’s natural nosiness
and his day-job related tendencies are making not snooping a gargantuan task, but there has to be a
reason Bruce didn’t share this with any of the rest of them beforehand, and he wants to try to
respect that. After giving it a minute to ensure Tony isn’t slipping toward a panic attack, Phil
decides to take advantage of the way the other man has frozen in place.

“Tony, we’d like you to consider trying out an age play dynamic with us.” Tony’s big brown eyes
dart up to Phil’s and then back down to the page, as if he can’t decide which is currently perplexing
him more. Then he breaks into a peal of laughter, but it’s so plainly a nervous response that Phil
elects to simply wait it out, and then continue speaking as if nothing has happened. “It’s…actually
sort of what Loki was trying to do, with the spell. He wanted you to have more time as a kid, to let
yourself be given affection and attention and a lot of things he didn’t get much of either. And I
don’t regret giving you the choice and ending the spell, because you weren’t in a position to
consent before. But that doesn’t mean that any of us think he was entirely wrong, either. Before
any of this ever happened you were struggling, Tony, and you still are. And we’d like to help, but
you have to let us, and I—we think this might make that a little bit easier.”

The lovely thing about Tony’s mind is that he almost never discards anything immediately, no
matter how ridiculous it sounds. Probably because if he’d ever had to pitch some of his own best
ideas (JARVIS, the Suit) to anyone before just going ahead and building them, they would have
sounded impossible at best.

“Why?”

“Why what, Tony?”

“Everything, really. I mean if we want to talk shit childhoods, I don’t think mine could hold a
candle to several people in this room, for one. Howard wasn’t…I can only imagine what
impression of him I left you all with, but he just, he wasn’t good with kids. He didn’t know how to
deal with things or people who couldn’t be useful. It got better once I got older.”

“Well, trauma isn’t a competition, for one,” Phil says patiently. “No one here is denying that you
still had access to numerous kinds of privilege. But that doesn’t make what happened then, or
what’s happened since, any less meaningful. And a lot of the people in this room have had various
kinds of help dealing with what happened to them; for most of us, it’s a requirement of our
contracts. You don’t have that and you never have, Tony, both because you haven’t sought it out
and because people, myself included, have continued to encourage you to be productive at the
expense of being healthy.”
“Let’s…say for the moment that I buy that, because things are getting far too Dr. Phil in here and I don’t even know how to begin to respond to what you just said. Why would any of you want this? What’s in it for you? The last time you had a mini-Stark running loose in this place it nearly wrecked everything.” Steve frowns and crosses his arms over his chest.

“That is not even close to what happened.” Tony snorts, but now that Steve has broken the silence from the rest of the team, the others seem eager to be involved.

“He’s right,” Clint insists. “Shit, those few weeks were as close as I’ve been to anyone in a long time. Maybe ever. Christ, we were practically a 50s family, eating dinner together at the kitchen table every night and all that shit. It ended badly because we stopped talking to each other, not because you were a kid.”

“Eloquent as ever, Clint.” Natasha teases. “Stark—Tony, listen. We want this because on various levels, most of us are not trusted by very many people, not in the intimate, everyday kinds of ways that make people feel human. When he—when you, gave us that, when you never thought twice about letting me hold a pair of scissors to your neck to cut your hair, or when you sat in a room with the Hulk and didn’t worry at all that he could have crushed your spine in a matter of milliseconds, those weren’t just favours we were doing you. They were a chance for us to feel whole and capable of something more than destruction.” Looking rather awed at the pronouncement, and probably by the fact of Natasha being the one to volunteer so much information, Tony takes several long, slow breaths.

“I…age play is like role play, right? So it’s a sex thing?” Steve goes beet red next to Tony, but several days worth of frank conversations about the team’s experiences and limits and kinks have apparently paid off, because he answers in a calm, confident tone.

“It can be for some people, and if that ends up being something you’re interested in we could come back to it. But for now none of us are really wanting in bringing sex into it. We’d just like to spend some time with you in that headspace, help you relax and have some fun and not have to worry so much about anything for a while.”

“That doesn’t mean any of us don’t want you, T,” Clint interjects, wagging his eyebrows before adopting a more serious expression. “Just means that we think this needs to take priority for now.”

“And, um…punishments? Are those, would you, would that be a thing?” There’s a naked fear in Tony’s voice, and Phil decides to answer before the other man can get the wrong idea from the fact that Steve’s hands are suddenly clenching into fists.

“We could work that out. There would be rules you’d have to follow when you were little, and my guess is that once you got comfortable enough you might start to push a bit at some of the boundaries. If you did I could see doing something like time outs or lines. But none of us have any desire to physically punish you, unless that feels like something you need. And I don’t think you do,” he adds, barely managing to resist the urge to rub at Tony’s back. They’d all agreed not to touch him while this conversation was going on, but Phil is finding it difficult in the face of the man’s distress.

“So how often would…I mean, I can’t be…whatever it is you want, all the time. There’s the Avengers and SI, not to mention the upkeep on War Machine and the other consulting work I do for SHIELD.” At this, Phil winces.

“Okay, so here’s the part of the conversation where I’m about to piss you off a little bit, but can you promise to hear me out?” He receives a cautious, skeptical nod, which is probably the best he can hope for. “You’re going to take a little bit of time away from SI and your work with SHIELD,
regardless of what you decide about the ageplay. It’s been arranged with Pepper and Fury already.” The change in Tony is nearly instantaneous; the anxious but relatively open expression is replaced with mask of cool arrogance that is Tony F’ing Stark. Phil holds a hand up, but Bruce speaks before either he or Tony manage to get a word in.

“In addition to the severe psychological traumas you’ve been you’ve been putting off addressing, you’ve been fighting a low-grade fever for several days now. And I have to tell you that as the closest thing to a doctor you tend to let near you, Tony, I don’t plan on taking any chances with a cold given the additional risks they pose to your lungs with them compromised by the arc reactor. It’s a break now or almost certainly an extended hospital visit later.” Bruce’s calm and almost certainly accurate observation is enough to throw Tony’s anger at being handled slightly off course, and he flops backward onto the couch with a trembling sigh, tipping his head back and closing his eyes.

“It’s for a couple of weeks, not forever. No one wants to use this to try to take anything away from you; hell, you improved SHIELD tech as an actual child. We’d be hopeless without you.” Tony doesn’t open his eyes, but his lips quirk ever-so-slightly upward Phil’s admission. “I think eventually we’ll fall into a rhythm for how often and how long we all want to play. But getting into headspace is going to be challenging enough for you at first, I think, and I’d really like you to consider using at least the majority of your break to get in some solid, uninterrupted play time rather than forcing yourself to move between big and little too often.”

“And what would it…look like? The first time?”

“We thought if you wanted, we’d take tonight to kind of ease you down a little bit, and we’d start properly in the morning.”

“Ease…what do you mean?” Any thoughts Phil has about continuing much more with in-depth negotiations tonight are fading fast. Not only does Tony seem overwhelmed, but Phil is selfishly anxious to just get him past this first hurdle, to give him a taste of what it could be like before he gets so focused on all of the details that he loses sight of the big picture.

“Just some comfy clothes and a movie together as a family, Tony. Can we give that a try, do you think? Saying yes to that doesn’t mean you’re agreeing to anything more. But you look exhausted and we’d really, really like to try and help. What do you think?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks, as always, for the comments and kudos. And extra love and support to all those of you for whom this is a challenging time of year.
Tony is wavering between headspaces and pretty unsure of everything. Meanwhile, Bruce wages war against Tony's constantly bare, freezing feet. And Coulson has Pinterest now.

Though he’s been quiet during the course of their conversation (the concept of negotiating a dynamic so natural in his own culture had been challenging for him to grasp), Thor is the first to move the second Tony nods. He beams and crosses the room in a few short strides, then leans down as if to pick Tony up. Tony stares at him, nonplussed.

“Slow steps, Thor,” Steve reminds the overexcited god. Truth be told, his own enthusiasm is getting harder to restrain, but the very real risk of scaring Tony off is enough to keep Steve in check. “We picked up some clothes for you and Tasha is laying them out on your bed. Can Thor and I come help you get ready?” Tony blushes and chews his lip. “Too fast? That’s alright. Can I make you a deal, though? We’ll come in with you, but you can get yourself changed. Sound good?”

“…okay.”

Several of them had gone a shopping trip in hopeful preparation, and while they know better this time around than to put it all out in front of Tony in a heap, Natasha has laid out a pair of impossibly soft, fleecy green pyjama pants with a robot print and paired it with a pale green top featuring a T-Rex attempting to do a push-up and riotously colourful fuzzy socks, because Tony’s feet are constantly freezing. Beside them sits Tony’s stuffed sloth. He stares at the stuffie for several long beats, then picks up the pyjamas and darts toward the ensuite bathroom.

“Don’t lock the door, please,” Steve instructs. “I promise we won’t come in unless you need us, but I’d like to be able to get to you quickly if you do.” It’s the first gentle nudge toward the rules they’ll establish tomorrow, most of which centre around encouraging Tony to accept care and intimacy rather than hiding and trying to manage on his own. He pauses at the entrance to the bathroom with his back to them, his shoulders a long, tense line, but though he shuts the door slightly harder than necessary, there’s no ‘snick’ sound indicating he’s locked the door behind him. He creeps back into the room just over a minute later, eyes trained on the ground.

“You look most fine in your new apparel, Youngling,” Thor booms.

“We picked those PJs because the one robot looks a lot like Butterfingers,” Steve adds. “Everything fit okay? Hey, where are your socks?” Tony frowns, gaze still steadfastly on his bare feet.

“Don’t need ‘em.”

“I’m not a big fan of having things on my feet either, but you’re always cold as it is, and Bruce says...
it’s extra important for you to keep warm right now. Can you put your socks on for me, honey?”

He doesn’t mean for the nicknames to start coming back out this soon, he really doesn’t, and when Tony makes a sound like he’s been hit, Steve panics, moving as close to the other man as he can without touching him. “Hey, hey, it’s okay, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.” Tony shakes his head. “No? No what, Tony? Can you use your words for me?” Another, more emphatic headshake. “Alright, that’s okay. How about you put your socks on and I’ll grab Sanders and the rest of your stuff?”

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Tony decides that headspace, if that’s what it’s happening to him, is weird. A part of him wants to tell Steve to fuck right off; he doesn’t need ‘help’ getting dressed, let alone to be forced to wear stupid socks. But a tiny portion of his brain, the part that whimpered pathetically when Steve called him ‘honey’, wants to be good, to please them and earn another affectionate nickname or a smile from either of the overly-sincere blondes who are watching his every move right now.

Resolving to rid himself of the socks at the earliest opportunity, he puts them on and follows the super soldier and the demigod back into the living room. In his absence, the others have arranged themselves so that there’s ample space for him to curl up next to basically anyone; indeed, no matter where he chooses to sit, the only constant looks to be that someone is going to be immediately nearby. Going with the option that seems the least fraught, he flops down onto a large pillow on the floor next to Clint, who grins and reaches out to ruffle his hair.

Being casually touched after so long hits even harder than Steve’s return to nickname protocol, and Tony leans into the calloused hand. Clint gives Tony’s pillow a pull across the hard floor so it is flush with his own, and then loops an arm around Tony’s waist.

“Hey you. Nice jammies. Wanna go down and show your bots later?” Tony shakes his head rapidly. “Shy boy, huh? That’s alright. JARVIS has already ratted you out and told us your favourite Disney movies.” Taking this as a cue, the AI rolls Beauty and the Beast. Clint reaches behind them and settles something that turns out to be Sanders in Tony’s lap. He can’t bring himself to touch the stuffed animal, but he doesn’t push it away either, allowing its floppy head to lean back against Tony’s stomach and one of his long paws to rest on his leg.

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Bruce hasn’t seen Beauty and the Beast in ages, but he can’t even remember the last time he looked at the screen, because he can’t take his eyes off of Tony. The poor guy is fighting headspace tooth-and-nail; every time he starts to settle, to get pulled into the story and the music and the cautious half-cuddle Clint is giving him, he jerks back to adult awareness. His hands are his biggest tell. So used to being busy, they don’t handle idleness well, particularly when Tony is this anxious; they’re in near-constant motion, pushing his stuffed sloth out of his lap and pulling him back a few minutes later, toying with the drawstring that hangs down from Clint’s hoody. At one point, they start making shapes and motions Bruce is pretty sure are American sign language. The only time they’re still is when they’re in direct contact with the plush pyjama pants, and that gives him an idea.

When Bruce gets up to collect the blanket from his floor, he thinks for a moment about the other item he’d ordered specifically to help manage Tony’s hands; he’d been almost positive going in
that this would be a problem area. But it’s too soon to push him on this very directly, so he just
snags the heavy purple blanket and hurries back to the penthouse. Tony has taken advantage of
Bruce’s absence to kick his socks off, and Bruce arches a brow, crouching down and tickling
lightly between the bare toes for just a second.

“Lucky for you, I have another option to help keep you warm for now, but don’t think we’re not
going to have a conversation about keeping your feet covered, buddy. Want to give this a shot?”
He holds a corner of the purple minky fabric out to Tony, smiling as the man (boy?) reaches out to
touch, eyes widening at the feel of it. “It has little weights in these pockets, see? They’re supposed
to help with anxiety. Put your hands on your lap for me and I’ll get you settled in here.” Tony still
looks hesitant but Clint, bless him, yelps,

“Hurry up and tuck me in too. Those damn wolves are coming up soon and they freak me out.”
Bruce winds the heavy blanket around them both and fights a smug grin at the almost instant shift.
Tony makes a quiet little sound almost like a purr and his whole body sinks toward the floor. His
hands move under the blanket, but Bruce realizes after a moment that their position relative to the
lump in his lap means that he’s used the privacy of the covering to make a grab for his stuffed
animal. Clint looks over and gives Bruce a thumbs up before pulling Tony a bit more firmly
against him.

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Tony wakes up the next morning encompassed by two heavy arms that turn out to be Thor’s. The
previous night comes back to his slightly groggy brain in waves, and he quickly decides that his 4-
year-old self had maybe had the right idea about hiding under the bed and never coming out. His
entirely ineffective struggles cause Thor to stir and tighten his grip.

“Good morning, Youngling.” It’s the quietest Thor has ever been, but his deep voice still rumbles
pleasantly against Tony’s back. It’s tempting to slip back into the fuzzy state his brain had
somehow entered the previous night, but the thought is also terrifying and he’s pretty sure he’s
embarrassed himself enough for several lifetimes already.

“Cut it out with that. Can’t handle this before coffee.” Thor’s beaming smile turns to an expression
roughly approximating a kicked puppy, and Tony instantly feels like crap.

“You have shame, my friend. Why?” The thing about Thor is that he has absolutely no interest in
or talent for anything but total honesty, whether it benefits him or not. There’s not an ounce of
guile or irony in the man, and something in Tony is always tempted to respond to that easy
sincerity with more candour than he affords most people.

“Because this isn’t… I don’t need this. I was fine. Am fine. There’s so much to do, and I lost so
much time dealing with the mess I helped make with AIM, and I just, I can’t, okay?” He jumps as
Thor’s hand moves from his waist to slide up the back of his shirt, but then he’s rubbing soothing
little patterns onto his back, and Tony’s body seems to decide for him that this is entirely
acceptable.

“You are greatly in need of this, Youngling. And you have nothing for which you should feel
shamed. You are weary and hurt, and it is past time for you to rest and seek comfort with your
shield mates.”

“I…but this isn’t normal, I shouldn’t, I can’t just. It’s too.”

“My friend, our lives can be deemed many things, but normal does not seem to me to be one of
them. Why should this be any different?” Because it’s me. Tony doesn’t give voice to the thought,
but Thor (who, he is constantly reminded, is far smarter than he often lets on) seems able to sense
enough, because he lifts Tony right up and into his lap and leans forward until their foreheads are pressed lightly together. “You are allowing the malgäst—how do Midgardians say…bad ghosts? Yes? You are giving them too much credence, letting their voices drown out all else. We wish simply to remind you that there is much else to hear if you’re willing to listen.” Overcome by the words and the soft touch, Tony closes his eyes until he feels Thor reach down to brush a hand against the bare soles of his feet. “You have removed your feet coverings during the night, Youngling. Friend Bruce shall be most displeased. Though his instructions did indicate that your bare feet were not to come in contact with the cool floor, so were you to allow me to bare you to the kitchen, we would not be disobeying the word of the command.”

Tony really doesn’t want to put stupid socks back on, so he allows this rather transparent plot to let Thor carry him proceed. They enter the kitchen with Tony settled on Thor’s hip as if he weighs no more than an actual toddler, and it’s still embarrassing as hell, especially since the rest of the team is already awake and making breakfast, but none of them react as if anything out of the norm has happened. So Tony tries to proceed as usual too, making grabby hands in the direction of the coffee pot.

“I don’t think so buddy. How about some of the chocolate milk Clint bought you?” Now, okay, it’s true that Clint buys the best chocolate milk—the stuff is so thick that it sticks to the sides of the glass bottle as you pour it, and it’s so overwhelmingly chocolatey that no one in the house but he and Tony can manage more than a couple of sips of it at a time. But Phil trying to deny him coffee first thing in the morning is one step short of a human rights violation. The glare he gives Agent by way of reply is, Tony hopes anyway, nothing short of acidic. “Oh that’s quite the pout there kiddo. This doesn’t necessarily have to be a forever rule, but you’ve been practically living on coffee lately, usually with very little food to go with it. That can do really bad things to your tummy on top of making your anxiety worse.”

“If you start to get a headache we’ll give you a bit this afternoon,” Bruce reassures him, looking up from the pan of eggs he’s preparing. It smells amazing, and looks to be full of cheese and peppers and onion and sausage, but Tony’s stomach gives an ominous little roll. The arc reactor and surrounding tissue are always at their most painful and obtrusive-feeling right after he wakes up; breakfast, once his favourite meal, is damn near impossible nine times out of ten. Bruce frowns at whatever of this struggle he seems able to see on Tony’s face. “What’s wrong?”

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The edge in Bruce’s voice already has Steve on alert, and this is not made better when Tony turns to hide his face back against Thor’s chest. Bruce hands off the wooden spoon he’s using in the scramble to Natasha and moves closer to the pair.

“Tony look at me please.” Their charge doesn’t turn so he’s entirely facing Bruce, but he moves enough that his brown eyes are visible over the top of Thor’s shoulders. “Hi there. Can you tell me what’s up? I bet we can help if you use your words for us.”

“’m fine. Nothing to help.” Tony’s voice is a bit muffled, but Steve has no problems making the words out. Nor does Bruce, who looks entirely unconvincing.

“I know we haven’t talked about rules yet, so I’m going to let it go this once, but lying to us is not going to fly. Not ever, and especially not about your health.” It’s the first time any of them have had cause to call Tony to task for anything since they started this, and there’s a tense moment where everyone looks entirely prepared for his adult penchant for snark to come through. Instead, there’s a pause and then,

“Sorry.”
“That’s alright. Thank you for the apology, Tony. I know this isn’t easy for you, and there’s going to be some bumps as we all figure things out. Now, try again for me. Take all the time you need.”

“Reactor is…worse in the mornings. Achy and full and—‘m use to it, it’s not a big deal. But I can’t usually eat much.” Bruce nods and presses a hand to what he can reach of Tony’s forehead, frowning when he visibly shivers.

“And that cold you’re fighting isn’t helping matters either, I’m sure. Alright. You and I need to have a long talk about the RT sometime soon, little boy. But for now let’s focus on breakfast. Is something liquid going to go down easier?” Tony nods. “Good. And maybe not starting off with you sitting on a hard-backed chair, hmm? Tell you what. Why don’t you and Steve go get settled on the couch with some of your chocolate milk, and then I’ll bring you out a shake in a few minutes.”

Steve is almost embarrassingly eager to accept their charge from Thor; Tony grumbles quietly about being carried, though rather unconvincingly given how he burrows against the other man’s chest. His upset at being handed a sippy cup of milk by Natasha is far more sincere.

“Don’t need that.”

“That’s not your decision to make right now, zajka. We don’t want any spills, especially on your beautiful couch or your new pyjamas.” Tony crosses his arms, with a child-like certainty that hiding his hands will bring an end to the conversation. Nat smiles placidly and hands the cup, which is patterned with a little yellow rabbit riding a bicycle, to Steve instead.

“You’re too little to hold your cup by yourself right now? That’s alright, Steve can help you.” Tony flushes and makes a grab for it, but Steve moves it from his reach and shakes his head.

“I’ve got this sweetheart.” Their watchword for all of this has been consistency, and Phil and Bruce had both warned the others numerous times that Tony likely wouldn’t age down easily. Getting him to accept the kinds of care and positive attention they’re trying to give him will take time, and involve intentionally keeping him a bit wrong-footed at the beginning in order to break his usual patterns of thought and behaviour. But that doesn’t make watching their boy so visibly struggling is easy, either. “Sunshine, everything is alright. No one’s doing any of this to embarrass you. We just like helping. Can you let me do that for you?” Recalling something he read in the briefing package Phil distributed, Steve adjusts them so that one of Tony’s ears is pressed on his chest, directly over his heart. Whether it’s actually a response to the position or not, he still feels unduly proud when Tony opens his mouth for the spout of the cup without further prompting.

Steve could easily pass several hours listening to the sounds of Tony’s hesitant little sucks at the sippy cup—the noise is the first thing that feels like tangible evidence that they’re really doing this, that he trusts them this much. But he allows himself to be caught up in conversation as the rest of the team joins them, because Tony’s shyness and embarrassment will only be made worse if he feels like everyone is staring at him. When he empties the cup, Bruce rinses it and brings it back full of a dark green shake. Tony works at that for much longer, system apparently having a hard time even with liquid nutrients this morning; the conversation about the arc reactor is starting to feel more urgent by the second, but Steve reminds himself to trust that Bruce will get to it as soon as he thinks their charge is ready.

“Good job, sweetheart,” he praises when Tony finally manages to finish off the drink. Tony gives an owlish little blink in response, and it’s entirely possible that if they let him be, he might fall back asleep. Steve is already warm and content just imagining starting the day that way, feeding Tony his breakfast and then holding their little boy as he drifts back off to sleep atop Steve’s chest. But in their planning sessions, the team had mapped this first day out in a fair amount of detail, and
there’s at least one more crucial bit of ground they need to cover before some of them leave for work for the day. “I know you’re still so sleepy and I promise I’m going to put you down for a nice long nap this afternoon—”

“No nap. Not a baby,” Tony mumbles with a petulant little scowl.

“Regardless of exactly how little you are, you have a huge sleep-debt to start making up. There’s going to be lots of naps and early bedtimes in your future little man. But we need to have a little bit more of a talk this morning before some of the others have to go in to work, so I need you to try to focus.”

“No more talking. Talked yesterday.”

“Sorry to tell you kiddo, but there isn’t a set cap on this kind of stuff. Trust me, I tried to institute a mandatory Serious Talk maximum at SHIELD and it didn’t work there either,” Clint says mournfully. “So let’s start simple. Do you want to be big or little for this talk, Tones? Either is fine, and some people don’t like negotiating anything when they’re in headspace because it can mess with your ability to consent, especially if you’re really deep. But it might actually be easier for you to stay at least a little down. What do you think?”

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All Tony really wants is to curl up against Steve and get called silly little nicknames and have his hair petted until he goes back to sleep. Also maybe more chocolate milk later wouldn’t be the worst thing. But everyone in the room is looking at him now, and Phil has his Agent face on, and there’s going to be no getting out of this. The thought of coming up from the fragile headspace he’s managed to reach and having to really face the world is an entirely unpleasant one, so he grunts, “Little.”

“Okay buddy. You tell us if that changes, or if there’s something you don’t want to talk about while you’re little, alright?” Tony waves his arm in a lazy ‘get on with it’ motion, and Clint barks out a laugh. “Damn you’re cute. Hey, you want me to bring you Sanders, so he can keep you company and you guys can complain about the adults being boring together?” Having an ally sounds kind of awesome, but he forces himself to shake his head.

“How old are you right now, Tony?” Phil asks. Tony shrugs in what he hopes is a nonchalant way, and tries to ignore the tiny prickles of shame he feels about lying.

“10 or so. Maybe even older.” The skeptical look he receives in return reminds him entirely too much of how Rowling describes Dumbledore’s gaze as an x-ray, and Tony makes a mental note to make sure that Coulson has not in fact secretly perfected some kind of magical telepathy, because if anyone could do it, it would be him.

“You don’t have to pretend to be a bigger boy than you are. We’re going to love you no matter what age you settle at.” Phil waits for a reply, but doesn’t seem surprised when Tony can’t muster anything. “That’s alright. You don’t have to answer me right now if it’s too scary, but please remember what Bruce said to you in the kitchen, okay? The first big rule in our house is that no one lies to each other. That goes for grown ups too. We all have the right at any time to say we’re uncomfortable answering a question, but especially when you’re little, we need you to tell us the truth so that we know how to take care of you.”

“Are there, I mean…what other rules?”

“Well you get a say in the rules too, zajka. But the big three that we talked about were no lying, no
putting yourself in danger, and staying with at least one of us at all times when you’re in
headspace.” Natasha crosses the room holding a little magnetized whiteboard, and they’re all
written there in orange erasable marker. He imagines the completed list will go up on the fridge
once this conversation is over. The thought is utterly humiliating, but something about actually
seeing the rules in writing is also oddly comforting. Knowing where the lines are, having them
clearly spelled out rather than constantly having to guess at them is an entirely rare phenomenon in
his life now.

“That doesn’t seem—I mean, we’re in danger all the time. We have to be realistic about this.”

“As Avengers, yes we are, and no one is going to let any of this effect what goes on in the field.”
He didn’t quite know how badly he needed this reassurance, and needed it to come from Steve
specifically, until it does. “But when you’re little it’s not up to you to protect anyone, Tony. You’re
our responsibility, and it’s our job and our privilege to take care of you.”

“And I…never alone? I don’t, I mean you guys have to work and, I mean, what if it happens and I
wasn’t really planning on it and everyone is busy and—”

“Then you call one or more of us. Immediately,” Phil says fiercely, no trace of his usual
bureaucratic blandness. “It’s extremely important to everyone here that you aren’t in headspace on
your own, Tony. If it happens unexpectedly, that is for the grown ups to sort out, you understand
me?” He mumbles an agreement because it’s clearly expected of him, but Tony already knows that
these rules are going to be way harder to follow than the long list of unreasonable specifics he
expected, because they’re all the things he’s worst at—intimacy, attention, honesty; they might as
well be asking him to fly without the suit. It might be kinder to just end this now, before it goes on
long enough that they can be disappointed in him, but the very thought makes him whimper and
wish he had Sanders to cling to. Steve makes a startled noise and starts carding his fingers through
Tony’s hair.

“What’s—oh honey, are you getting a little overwhelmed?” He manages a nod, then goes back to
pressing his ear against Steve’s chest, listening to the comforting tha-thump of his heart. “That’s
alright. You did so well, you’re being so brave and good for us, and we’re all going to work on
learning to live by our family rules together. No one expects you to be perfect.” That last bit flies so
in the face of everything Tony grew up believing that it’s almost dizzying. “You’re a good boy,
Tony, and we can be done talking right away here. Can you just remind me of your word if you
need things to stop or slow down?”

“Suit.”

“That’s right sweetpea. That’s exactly right. Now unless you need to say that, you just lay here
with me for some quiet time, and then we’re going to do something fun, okay baby boy?”

“Not a baby,” Tony grumbles, choosing not to think about the hypocrisy of this statement as he
rubs his cheek against Steve’s soft plaid shirt.
****

Tony drifts in and out of sleep while the others prepare for their days. He’s aware enough to realize
that nearly everyone seems reluctant to leave; Bruce alone reminds Steve and Phil (who are
apparently charged with Tony’s care for the day) that he’ll be just down in the lab if he’s needed.
His brain is still battling between finding the entire thing deeply humiliating and kind of
heartwarming, because when has anyone except maybe Jarvis ever cared this much about anything
to do with Tony?

The meter swings a bit more toward the humiliation end when Steve and Phil insist on ‘helping’
him get dressed in clothes they’ve obviously bought for the occasion—stretchy, fleece-lined jeans, a light brown sweater with bright red foxes, and more thick, furry socks.

“Don’t start with me little one,” Phil chuckles as he pulls one up Tony’s foot. “Even were I inclined to make Bruce mad by letting you run around in bare feet and threadbare shirts like usual, which I’m not, you’re so thin right now you’re lucky we don’t have you wrapped up like a mummy 24/7.”

“I’m still not ruling it out,” Steve adds, giving one of Tony’s admittedly jutting waistbones a little pat. Unable to actually refute this, Tony settles for peering down at the ensemble. It turns out the sweater is annoyingly hard to hate. Like everything else they’ve put him in so far, it’s so soft it might as well be a blanket. And the foxes are all making silly faces, one of them with a smirk exactly like Clint’s when he’s trying to talk everyone into his latest scheme. Much like the real thing, he can’t help but smile back at it. “You like it sweetheart?”

“How much stuff did you guys buy for this, anyway? I hope you at least put it on the cards I gave all you.” Steve sighs and gives his nose a little flick.

“That’s not for you to worry about. Do you like your sweater?” Tony shrugs, and Steve smiles a little sadly, but doesn’t push him further on the topic. “Well let’s go have some fun, okay?”

Phil, it transpires, has discovered Pinterest. He returns from his floor with a bag chock full of glitter in nearly every imaginable colour, size and consistency, some mason jars, glue, as well as numerous essential oils and, most curiously of all, some liquid starch.

“Lots of things I read suggested putting together a bag of stuff to help during an anxiety attack. Some of it you already have or we can buy, but some of it we can make ourselves, and I thought that might be fun.”

“If you’re suggesting we fashion glitter bombs for me to use on people who piss me off during attacks, let me just say I am a hundred percent behind this plan,” Tony announces. Phil laughs outright at that and drops a kiss on Tony’s head before pointing to the image he’s brought up on his StarkTab. The easy affection is still a bit stunning, especially from Phil who had been so distant during much of Tony’s de-aging. It takes Tony’s brain a moment to catch back up.

“I thought we could start with some Slime, see? You can make it in lots of different colours; it can give you something to do with your hands when they won’t stay still, and adding different combinations of oils can really help too.” Phil actually seems nervous as he explains, and it’s this more than anything that halts Tony’s impulse to tease the man, or even get angry at the presumption that making some kind of glittery dough is going to be enough to occupy a mind like his. The team, he realizes with a jolt, is trying too, made vulnerable by the ageplay not in the same ways as Tony, but in ways that still lay parts of these usually isolated, self-protective people bare and open. It’s this thought more than any other that makes it somehow easier to allow his mind to quiet and slip a bit further.

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“Can we make green first? Like Flubber?” Steve looks confused by the reference (another pop culture item to add to the list), but Phil grins and rolls his sleeves up.

“One tub of Flubber coming up buddy.”

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They end up making three different kinds of Slime. There’s the green one, which smells like mint and looks exactly like Flubber, enough so that Phil feels it necessary to pre-emptively forbid Tony to try to give it sentience; they also make a purple one to which they add lavender oil, and a yellow
one that smells like cedarwood. Though he confines his chatter mostly to their project, Tony is more animated and relaxed than he’s been since all of this started, and particularly after the stress of the morning, Phil is deeply relieved, not to mention entirely smitten with the little boy just starting to emerge from Tony.

“You want to make some glitter jars too, baby?” He points, with some trepidation, to the image he’s brought up on his tablet of a young boy shaking a mason jar full of sparkling, glittery water. He’d really debated whether or not to bother with this at all; in all likelihood, it’ll be a long time before Tony is comfortable aging down far enough that he could be occupied or comforted by something this simple. It might never happen. But to his surprise, Tony cocks his head and considers it.

“Does that mean we finally use the glitter glue?” he asks, pointing to the unopened tubes at the corner of the table. All the instructions on Pinterest had warned, emphatically, not to let children actually handle this part, because that glue is apparently dastardly sticky and near impossible to get off of most surfaces, but seeing Tony look so honestly excited about the silly craft is way more than worth it. Plus he’s hardly aged that far down, the mess can’t be that bad, can it?

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“This whole room looks like unicorn barf,” Tony declares in delighted awe not half an hour later. It’s an accurate assessment; glitter clings to nearly every surface of the kitchen, not to mention all three of its occupants. Steve’s own hair is, he’s quite certain, more blue glitter than it is blonde. And Tony is absolutely covered in the stuff, from head to bare toe (and how does he keep doing that anyway?)

“It sure does. I think we’ll have to give the kitchen a good scrub down before anyone tries to eat in here—and probably ourselves, too. What do you think about having a bath with Phil and me?” Instantly, Tony stills, and adult wariness creeps back into his features. “Sweetheart, you can use your word or just tell me you’re not comfortable if it’s too scary. I’m not going to be angry with you.”

“I want…I miss baths. And it was...before, with him, you guys were...he loved it a lot.” Steve’s heart breaks, because while he’s normally with Bruce on finding it frustrating that Tony can’t conceive of recognizing his four-year-old counterpart as a part of himself, there are in fact several crucial distinctions between them, and their relationship to water is definitely one of them. After a moment of paralyzing indecision, he decides to follow his own advice to Thor the previous evening.

“We could try small steps. Just dipping your feet in and seeing how that goes. What do you think?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, yes, this chapter was mostly pure fluff. I can't help it. Once I realized that of course Phil would have Pinterest, things kind of took a turn. If you're wondering, everything in this chapter (the weighted blanket, the Slime and the glitter jars) are all real things used to treat anxiety in kids and adults.

Thank you so much, as always, for the kudos and thoughtful comments/questions. Keep them coming! And if there's things you want to see, I'll take them into consideration either for this story or for the one-shot/Timestamps set in this verse that
I'll be writing next.

Also, just a warning: I hope to keep to my posting schedule next week, but I'll be traveling for work and might be delayed. As a pre-emptive apology, this chapter is almost 1000 words longer than usual.
Baths, Bunnies and Tutus

Chapter Summary

Tony has a bath. Steve wrestles with his past and contemplates his future. Natasha and Tony finally get to spend some time together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Turn the water off please, Phil?” Tony distantly hears as he squeezes Steve’s hand again. They’ve been at this for nearly an hour, he and Steve seated on the edge of the Jacuzzi and Phil in the tub, controlling the flow of water and demonstrating the absence of ill-effects involved in actually being in the bath. They’ve had to drain and re-fill the tub twice because the water has cooled too much, and it’s still only up to just below Tony’s knees. It’s utterly ridiculous, and he has no idea how he hasn’t tried the last of their patience already. Frustrated tears are very close to welling in his eyes, and he tries to force his paralyzed brain to send the message to his body: *Nothing is going to happen to you, it’s a goddamn jacuzzi, and there’s not even enough water in it right now to reach the reactor, let alone your face. Just get in. Just slide down into the tub, you’ll be fine, you’re with a super soldier and a spy, they’re both about as far from terrorists as you can get.* His legs, however, are stubbornly not cooperating, and his hand refuses to relinquish its death-grip on Steve’s.

“Tell me where you are and who you’re with, Tony.” The direction, which is the closest Phil has come to directly acknowledging *why* Tony is so afraid, has been repeated like a mantra dozens of time already. Agent must have picked up the tactic from JARVIS, who tells Tony the time and weather not just first thing in the morning, but every time he thinks his creator is in need of grounding and reassurance. The thought of Phil and the AI working together is deeply frightening. But if he could convince the man to give JARVIS free reign of the SHIELD servers while they’re still rebuilding, Tony could make it so that Fury would never be able to shut the Avengers out again. Or he could build a separate AI altogether using the same base code; with the others all living in the tower, he doesn’t want J overstretching himself. He’s pretty sure his AI is learning Russian just to be able to speak to Natasha in her native tongue, and who even knows what else he has on the go beyond the things Tony has directly instructed. “I think we’re done for the day,” Phil adds when Tony neglects to answer him. He doesn’t outwardly sound disappointed or mad, but how could he not be pissed, to have wasted so much time and to still have to deal with the bulk of the glitter that’s still left on Tony.

“I can do it. I’m gonna get in. I can *do it.* I can.” Even to his own ears, his voice sounds less assertive and more frantic and terrified, but Tony plants his feet on the bottom of the tub and moves to stand on shaky legs. Almost immediately, he’s firmly tugged back toward Steve.

“Not today. You did so well, we’re real proud of you, but we don’t have to take all the steps in one day. We’ll just give you a nice wash with some wet cloths to get the glitter off, and then if you feel up to it, we’ll give your hair a quick rinse. How does that sound?”

“I can do it,” he insists, tugging futilely at his hand, still trapped in Steve’s. The man has clearly picked up on Tony’s fixation with hearing or feeling his heartbeat, because he slides Tony’s index
finger to press down on the pulse point at his wrist.

“Yes you probably could get in here with me,” Phil allows, “but it would be entirely counterproductive to force yourself into water before you’re ready. It would make the phobia worse. You took some really big steps today, baby, and stopping now doesn’t mean you failed.” Look, a part of Tony really wants to believe this, but Agent is, after all, the guy who threatened to tase him if he didn’t stop dicking around and save his own life, and Cap has probably never failed at a damn thing ever, let alone something as trivial as a fear of water. The best Tony can manage is to not voice his skepticism aloud.

The rubdown they give him is almost painful in its gentleness; hands and cloths slide over every inch of his body, stopping often to give knotted muscles little rubs or to massage moisturizer into dry patches of skin. At one point, Steve even trails a line of loud, smacking kisses up his arm, beaming when Tony laughs a little despite himself. The hair washing is harder, and they end up having to drain the Jacuzzi almost completely before Tony is able to get in, lie back in Phil’s lap, and allow Steve to pour tiny cups of water into his hair. The entire process takes probably another hour, and yet the other two men act like there’s nothing more deserving of their time. He tries to tune the whole humiliating and wondrous thing out to focus on his planned SHIELD AI, but Phil (purposely, Tony’s pretty sure) keeps interrupting his train of thought, forcing him to stay involved in the conversation.

“I think after this you’re going to go down for a little nap buddy. I’d like to get more food into you, but I’m guessing that’s going to be a no-go right now. You’ll have to have a bigger dinner though. Maybe some turkey burgers, and a nice salad. Have you had Clint’s turkey burgers before?”

“No.”

“Mmm they’re good. He throws a lot of fresh basil in there, and then he puts a little bit of goat cheese and green apple on the top. I’ll text him and tell him to pick up the stuff on the way home. Want anything else? Bruce suggested some popsicles might feel good on your throat if it’s sore.” Stuck between the rock and hard place of admitting he maybe doesn’t feel awesome and really wanting popsicles, Tony shrugs noncommittally. “You have a favourite kind, or should I just have him get a bunch, champ?”

“Rocket ones? With the layers?”

“Those are my favourite too,” Steve tells him as he starts to towel Tony dry. They keep up the mundane but oddly comforting conversation as they re-dress him and steer him to the bedroom. The whole nap thing is ridiculous, but he figures he’ll close his eyes long enough to fool Steve, and then he can use the dark and quiet to get some work done.

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“He go down okay?” Phil is sprawled across the length of the couch and already has paperwork in his lap

“Out like a light,” Steve confirms as he strides back into the living room. “He was faking it for the first couple minutes, but then his body seemed to realize how actually exhausted he still is, and it took over from there.” He grins fondly as he recalls their stubborn little boy, who he left making snuffly noises and curled up around his stuffed animal.

The longer he sits there without Tony, though, the uneasier Steve starts to get. He’s so damn happy they’re doing this with him, so grateful that Tony is brave enough to give it a try even though he’s quite obviously confused and nervous about the entire venture. But even as much attention and care as Tony currently requires (and even if that increases the way they hope over the week), he
can’t can’t occupy all of Steve’s time. Which would be fine, except that when Steve isn’t dealing with Tony, he has no idea what else to do.

He helps out at SHIELD sometimes, and he’s glad the organization is going to rebuild, but even if they succeed at scrubbing the place of all traces of Hydra, Steve isn’t sure that he can go back to just following orders and doing what he’s told. The world has changed too much, or maybe he has; whatever the case, he can’t seem to find a place to just slot himself in, and the present still feels too foreign and unfamiliar for him to be able to imagine what else he might do. It’s still a bit hard for him to trust Phil, the lingering resentment over their disagreements about de-aged Tony still hovers close to the surface of all their interactions. But the man is looking up from his paperwork and giving Steve that long, appraising look he has, and the words are out before he really stops to think about it.

“I never really had any idea what I was going to do after the War, back then.” Immediately, he has Phil’s full attention; the man puts his clipboard down on the coffee table and stands, going over to the kitchen and starting to prepare a pot of tea. The slight physical distance between them gives the conversation a kind of casual air, and even if it’s a lie, Steve finds himself grateful for it.

“That’s very common in soldiers, for a lot of different reasons. Do you know why you didn’t think about it? Was it because you were imagining a full career in the service, or were you afraid to really believe you’d make it out of the war when…other people didn’t?” Bucky Bucky Bucky Phil is careful not to say the name, and Steve is grateful, but it cuts anyway, especially when he realizes with a guilty jolt that he’s barely checked in on any of the leads he has on his friend’s whereabouts in days. “He’s gone to ground, Steve. There’s nothing you can do for him right now until he surfaces again.”

“…thank you.” That still leaves him with Phil’s question, which he considers for a long time as he listens to the quiet sounds of Phil making their tea (he doesn’t even have to ask how Steve takes it, and that small display of consideration and familiarity is everything Steve needs right now). “When I was small, I knew it wasn’t likely I’d survive the War if they ever let me in it. I had made my peace with that, because I knew without a doubt it was worth dying for. After the serum, well, everyone had put so much work and energy and time into making me who I was. It felt…disrespectful, I guess, to imagine doing anything but using the gifts they’d given me to serve my country.”

“Well, I’d say whatever debt it is you think you owed, it’s more than been paid by now, Steve. Not to mention that your work with the Avengers means you’re still using all of those gifts to help people, even beyond your own nation.”

“But I still don’t—I have even less idea what I would do with myself now than I would have then. Who wants a 40s relic who’s still learning to use a cell phone? I don’t even have a college degree, and half the people in this tower have so many that I’m pretty sure I heard Tony suggest that you all make some kind of enhanced paper airplanes with them.” Phil snorts, because yes that sounds exactly like something Tony would say, the wonderfully arrogant and privileged little brat.

“Well I’d remind you first that several people here also do not have degrees and are also some of the wisest and best I know. But if an education would actually interest you, and I think it probably would, that might be a good place to start. If you like, I can put together a transition package for you, the same way I would for any other outgoing SHIELD agent, just a bit more tailored? You can use the same break that Tony is taking to look it over and give it some thought.” Transition. The thought that being Captain America is something Steve can transition away from, at least sometimes, is bizarre and amazing and a slightly hysterical laugh is threatening to bubble out of him. He manages a tight nod, and Phil goes back to his paperwork without another word.
After the Red Room and all that followed, Natasha very rarely concedes to acknowledging she’s had a bad day, because really such measurements tend to be meaningless and relative. But today? Today was a bad day.

She knows how to be a spy, she’s damn good at, but between outing herself and her past online for the world to see and then serving as the Avenger’s public representative of the President’s rescue and the takedown of AIM, hers is one of the most recognizable faces in the world right now. And no one has much use for a spy who can hardly move an inch away from Avengers Tower without being mobbed by the press.

The coverage in the aftermath of their decisive victory over AIM has been overwhelmingly positive, and given that she has little else to do these days except occasionally pop in to scare SHIELD recruits, Natasha had relented to SI and the Avenger’s shared PR team’s encouragements for her to make the rounds with major news outlets. Rumblings about a potential Superhero Registration Act have died down recently, but no one is naive enough to think that they won’t start up again the second the Avengers lose public favour; the longer they can delay that, the longer they all have to prepare and fight it.

And while some part of Natasha, who had long ago accepted that the best of what she had done for the world would never be known, is the tiniest bit pleased when little girls run up to her in the streets and tell her how they want to be just like Widow when they grow up, it’s impossible to simply turn away almost a lifetime worth of instincts that make being known this way by this many people terrifying. And the horrifically stupid questions she’s been asked in stereo today (what underwear does she wear under her battle gear? Really?) have certainly not helped matters.

After the last interview, a puff piece for Vanity Fair, is finally done, she spends several hours in the SHIELD gym sparring with any agents foolish enough to accept her offer. Two of them cry. She nearly breaks another’s nose. So she’s not entirely surprised when someone rats her out to Clint.

“Planning on leaving Phil any recruits at all?” his voice sounds from somewhere atop her head. Natasha doesn’t even bother looking up, though she does briefly consider chucking a throwing knife in that general direction just to make him give that aggrieved little noise he makes when he thinks she’s being unnecessarily vicious.

“They’re weak and lazy. I’m saving their lives by getting most of them out of here.” Clint drops down from the ceiling and lands almost soundlessly on the mat behind her; she’s on him within seconds, but she’s exhausted and slow and he knows better than anyone else how to exploit those weaknesses in her that wouldn't even be visible to anyone else. He has her pinned after less than two brutal minutes. “Interviews went badly, I take it? Anyone I need to have a private word with, or the usual bullshit?”

“Usual bullshit,” she grunts, fighting to free her trapped wrists. To her surprise, he releases them easily and sits back, weight resting only lightly on top of her.

“Go home, then. Cuddle our kiddo. Tell him I’ll be right behind you, I just have to stop at the store. Phil wants turkey burgers and Tones and Steve want popsicles. And Thor undoubtedly will start writing sad odes to absent Pop Tarts any day now.” An ugly part of her envies that of all of them (except perhaps Phil), Clint is now the most able to be out in public without facing a mob of people and press. But the the thought of having a home to go back to, let alone Tony all warm and soft and trusting in his headspace…that sounds like more than she’d dared to hope for for most of her life.
Tony comes to sudden post-nap awareness with a gasp, and then yelps as a hand comes across his waist and prevents him from falling off the bed.

“Tasha? When did...how long was I—huh?” He’s never at his most eloquent when he first wakes up, and this is only heightened by finding a super-spy next to him.

“Steve says you’ve been out for about an hour and a half. What woke you, zajka? Nightmare?” Tony doesn’t answer on the grounds that he might give himself a panic attack. Plus he’s pretty sure the non-answer will be plenty easy for said super-spy to work with. He peers up at her instead. Nat’s hair is tightly curled today, and though it’s smudged in a couple of places, her make up is thicker and more showy than she normally likes it. The tightness of her posture confirms his suspicion; she had another round of interviews today. Absolutely the last thing she needs is to deal with his silly child-self, so he pulls his way out of the fuzziness he’s come to associate with being little the best he can.

“You look tired and pissed off in a way that can only mean Fox News or Vanity Fair. Or both. They wouldn’t be so absolutely foolish as to have you do both in the same day, would they? I think that would constitute cruel and unusual punishment. Want me to make you a drink? Just because I’ve dried up temporarily doesn’t mean the whole house has to get boring.” In a shocking and slightly arousing show of force, Natasha growls and pulls him bodily across the California King bed so that they’re almost nose-to-nose.

“Stop that. Stay down, Tony. I didn’t mean to wreck your headspace, I can go if I’m making it hard for you.” She actually...Natasha Romanov, one of the most terrifying and brutal people he’s ever met, came in here actually seeking Tony, specifically Little Tony, out? Wanting his company? His brain is going to need to reboot or something, because damn. Before she can get any fancy ideas about leaving and taking her actually kind of awesome cuddles with her, Tony tries to give himself permission to go back, to let go and just cling to her the way he wants to.

“Don’ leave.” Feeling daring, he lets one of his hands rise up to touch her hair; even with whatever product that she uses to keep the curls in place, it’s still soft and silky, and she doesn’t just permit the touch, she actually smiles as he threads his fingers through her pretty red locks. Tasha’s actual smiles are nothing like Natalie Rushman’s wide, sultry smirks. They’re far smaller and more restrained, but way better because they’re her, and he did that.

“There you are. Hi bunny.” He knows what she’s been calling him in Russian since this morning, but hearing her say it in English is still enough to make him blush and want to hide his head against the crease of her neck. “Such a shy little bunny, aren’t you? And is that...is there glitter in your hair? What did you get up to while I was off trying not to stab anyone?”

“Phil found Pinterest,” he says, as if this explains everything. And maybe it does, or at least it’s enough to make her burst out a clear, ringing laugh that makes Tony feel instantly warm and happy everywhere.

“I missed you today,” she tells him. Even when he was under Loki’s spell she was never quite so open with Tony, and he nearly preens.

“You could stay home and play with me tomorrow?” he offers. For a moment her face goes back to being unreadable, and instantly he feels like such a damn idiot for having misread things and ruining everything, but then she leans in and presses a kiss to the tip of his nose, chuckling again when he goes a bit cross-eyed following the path of her lips.
Tony sticks close to her side the rest of the evening, letting Natasha feed him dinner and settling himself in her lap during the team-wide bedtime story. It’s the first time they’ve read together since the spell ended, and though there’s a long and significant look between Phil and Tony when Steve digs Prisoner of Azkaban out that she plans to investigate later, they settle back into the rhythm of the story with relative ease. Tony seems just as enchanted under all the attention as he did when he was four, and he adorably insists that they recap the first two books for Thor so as not to leave the god out. As they ease him off to sleep two chapters later, Tony mumbles something about a surprise for Natasha, but she writes it off as a the half-dreaming babble of a sleepy baby and thinks very little about it. Until the next day, that is, when he sits through drinking his shake and getting dressed all like he has ants in his pants, and then practically yanks her to the elevators, leading her to a room on one of the floors she thought was unused and throwing the door open with barely contained excitement.

A dance studio. Tony Stark, a man she’d once deemed narcissistic and unsuitable for working on a team, had built her a dance studio in the Tower. The wood floors shine, and the long brass bar at the front of the room gleam, spotless and perfect. A rack on the eastern wall is filled with ballet slippers in a range of fabrics, the leather kind that’s best for training, canvas, and several in gorgeous, supple satin so perfect that Natasha is almost afraid to touch them. There’s split soles and full soles and pointe shoes, too, and all of it is offered to her in at least three colours.

Somehow, long before they’d ever thought to consider what a child-version of Tony right want, Tony Stark had seen into her, had crafted the perfect space, and filled it with the kinds of objects that had been the stuff of her wildest childhood fantasies. And somehow, he’s still looking over at her like he’s nervous she might be disappointed.

“I got your measurements from the pair of pointe shoes in your closet, but if any of this is wrong or not what you want, you can just tell me. I’ll fix it.” A huge part of Natasha wants to run from the room long enough to gather herself, because even Clint and Phil have never seen her vulnerable in precisely this way. But one look at the little boy next to her is all she needs to know she could never do it.

“It’s perfect, Tony.” She longs for a moment to be able to do what Steve and Thor manage to easily and pick Tony up, but she settles for herding him over to the bench next to the shoes so she can pull him into her lap. “You’re so thoughtful, zajka, and this is incredibly kind. I’m just processing.” Tony nods, expression serious, sitting patiently as she peers around the room as if expecting it to disappear at any moment. Eventually, her eyes fall upon the shoes again. “Hey, did you get shoes in any other sizes? So you can dance with me?”

“Um, well I got a couple of spares in a range of sizes, but you should wait until Clint or someone gets here. I’m like the least graceful person in the world; I can make things with my hands, they’ve always been steady, but not much else. I’ll be no good at it.”

“Well you don’t have to be good at something to enjoy it, or for it to be worth doing.” Tony frowns thoughtfully, and she thinks, not for the first time, that she’d give almost anything to know what’s going on in his head sometimes. “It’s fine if you don’t want to, you know. But it might be fun.”

“You won’t get mad if—I screw it up?” From the look on his face, Tony regrets the question the second it leaves his mouth, and it costs Natasha significant effort to not push him further. For now, she just answers the question he’s asked.

“I promise I won’t get mad, Tony. I haven’t danced in years, I’m sure I’ll be pretty rusty too. But
we’re not auditioning or something, we’re just having fun together, okay? Now come with me, if I
know you there’s some tulle in this cupboard over here you thought I would never actually wear.”
She gets both of them outfitted in outrageously bright purple tutus that look even more ridiculous
on top of their street clothes, and the absolute absurdity the image presents seems to accomplish
exactly what she was hoping, lowering the stakes and making this something playful and silly.

Natasha warms them up with some stretches, a few toe touches, and some leg extensions. They
hop around the room like frogs and lift their arms, pretending to blow like trees in the wind. Their
attempt at a straddle split, even a lose one, is less successful, and Tony takes his perceived failure
(which, really, is entirely consistent with the tightness of many men’s hips) hard. He becomes quiet
and hyper-focused on perfecting the stretch, even when repeating it begins to put him in
increasingly visible amounts of pain.

“Your hips are all stretched out now, bunny, you did well. Let’s move on to something else.”

“I can do it,” he growls, trying to force his legs wider with a wince.

“Tony, stop that. Hey.” He abandons the attempt after another moment, but only in favour of
bringing his legs in to his chest and rocking himself slightly. “You’re doing just fine. Bodies are a
lot like machines; you can’t just force a part where it isn’t ready to go yet, you have to finesse it, or
change the design. You have to be just as patient and gentle with yourself as you are when you’re
fixing Dummy, Butterfingers and You, or reprogramming JARVIS.” Tony looks wholly
unconvinced his own vessel deserves the same consideration as his beloved AI and his bots, but he
doesn’t fight Natasha when she puts a hand out to pull him to his feet. “Now we’re going to try first
position, alright? Nearly every ballet in existence ends in one of the five positions.”

“Oh Natasha, only five? You’ve been doing it wr—” Tony gulps as the innuendo he was about to
fling at her becomes something he’s actually conscious of. Several options for how to deal with
this present themselves to Natasha at once, but she decides to do essentially what she’d do if an
actual child tried to hit on her, mimicking a parental figure or something they’d seen on TV: blow
right past it.

“In first position, the biggest thing is to keep the soles of your feet on the floor.” She kneels in
front of him, and presses his ankles and calves together, and then slowly begins to turn his feet
outward. He can’t make quite the full rotation, but it’s close. “Good. Now hold here for a
moment…”

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When they call an end to their practice an hour later, they’re sweaty and sore but Tony seems to
have recovered nicely from his slips earlier, relaxing back down and just allowing himself to be
little. He’d spent the last ten or so minutes watching Natasha practice the more complicated moves
she could remember, cheering her on and calling out requests for repeats of some of them as he
started to learn their names.

“You want some lunch, zajka?” She’s wary even as she asks, and fully prepared for this to end in
either a fight or his second liquid meal of the day (though, as Bruce keeps reminding them, they
really need to try to keep that down to a maximum of one).

“Yeah. Can we have macaroni? The box stuff? Steve says I shouldn’t have it even when I’m big.
Whoever taught him about preservatives is the worst.” Natasha makes a mental note to tell the
others that moderate exercise also seems to have a positive effect on Tony’s appetite, but otherwise
tries to react like nothing at all remarkable has just happened.

“I won’t tell if you won’t. You want the Kraft one, or the white cheddar one with the pasta shaped
like rabbits?”

“Rabbits!”

“Okay, little one, rabbits it is. Do you want me to find one of your colouring books so you can make me a picture while I get lunch ready for us?” Tony nods and takes off across the penthouse at a near run, sitting at the kitchen table and accepting a forest-themed book and a huge box of crayons Natasha hands him shortly after with wide eyes.

“What’s your favourite thing that lives in the forest?” he asks as she stirs the pasta. Truth be told, Natasha’s associations with dense woodlands are not particularly good ones (too many places for very human enemies to hide), but she thinks as seriously as she can on this question, because her boy wants to colour her the animal she likes best and it’s making her ache in wonderful kinds of ways, ways she had been sure the Red Room had stolen from her forever.

“Well, I like little bunnies of course,” she grins. Making Tony Stark blush is never going to get old for her, but she takes pity on him for now. “I also like bears. They were usually meant as an insult when the West used them to represent Russia, but I didn’t quite understand that as a child. Even once I did I’ve always felt very fond of them.” With that, Tony loses himself in his project; Natasha peers over at him as often as she dares, and smiles when she sees that his tongue is sticking out the side of his mouth, the same way it sometimes does when he’s really concentrating in the workshop.

Twenty minutes later, she feeds him macaroni from a plastic bowl and wonders how this peace has actually become her life.

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Tony buzzes through most of the afternoon, body clearly enjoying a combination of more calories than he’s been able to handle during the day in ages and two consecutive, relatively uninterrupted, sleeps (Natasha had managed to wrestle him down into a short nap after lunch). When Steve, Clint, and Phil wander in together, he nearly throws himself at the latter, babbling happily about his day while all three of them look at him with varyingly open levels of amazement.

“And tutus are weird, but kinda cool. And Tasha can do lots of spins and stand right on her toes and everything. She said she’ll show me how once I get more practice!”

“That sounds great, sweetheart. Maybe you and Nat can put on a little show for us, hmm?” While Phil and Tony debate the relative merits of different costumes and shoe colours, Steve and Clint almost drag Natasha into the kitchen.

“How did you…but he’s so little…and…” Steve can’t seem to finish a sentence, looking between Natasha and their boy in the living room in amazement.

“He’s just easing into his headspace, that’s all. Plus the exercise seemed to help and he got lunch and another popsicle down no problem, so he’s high off the calories and a decent couple of rests.”

“…nah, I think you’re actually just a witch. That’s the only logical explanation,” Clint decrees. “Is that even our kid out there? I’m pretty sure the baby I left this morning was pretty quiet and kinda sulky and so shy that he could barely stand to meet any of our eyes.” Natasha’s feeling a bit drunk of the success of the day, and all she can manage in reply is the smuggest of smug smirks. “Damn, woman, of course you’d be a ninja-mom too.” It’s too soon for that word, way too soon, but she can privately admit to herself that it doesn’t sound horrible.
Okay, yes, more fluff. Natasha and Tony haven't hung out much in this story so far, and she found this outrageous and sort of took over the chapter. Tony and the team have some more challenges immediately ahead (that cold Tony's been fighting, for one!), but I had a lot of fun letting these two relax and just be in one another's company.

Also, your responses to last chapter were extra kind at a moment when I really needed it. Reading them was like a balm to my overly-anxious soul. So I finished this chapter on the plane so I could still get something to ya'll this week <3
Sick Day (Part One)

Chapter Summary

Tony has a cold, and (of course) arrives at the most ridiculous possible treatment solution. Clint teaches the team about Sick Days.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Sir, I have been asked to inform you that Doctor Banner is outside the workshop door and requesting entry.” Tony has at least thirty holographic screens open at once, but they’re all sightly blurry. Dummy is hovering next to him, inexplicably carrying his familiar fire extinguisher, and there is only so much damn shame and guilting he can take from his bots and his AI. The last thing he needs is to see exactly how pissed the team is on top of that.

“J, come on. Hush protocol—”

“The terms of Hush protocol forbid me from transmitting information about you, Sir, to any outside parties without authorization. It also restricts incoming communication, specifically between yourself and any hostiles in the Tower. As the Avengers are decidedly not hostile, I am well within its parameters; indeed, you might consider that perhaps I am acting more in accordance with them than yourself at the present time.” J’s anger is a thing to behold; the part of Tony that rankles at being lectured is easily eclipsed by awe that he actually made something, someone, who feels his own convictions so deeply, who is willing to go toe-to-toe with Tony and defend himself and his actions. A harsh cough interrupts the sappy reply he’s tempted to give, which is probably for the best. The sooner he can get his eyes to focus on the last round of testing he did with Extremis the better.

“Request for entry denied,” he wheezes. The thud he expects to follow, indicating Bruce has transformed into the Hulk and is forcing his way into the workshop, never comes. And the lingering adrenaline from the prospect of a confrontation with Bruce or Hulk sharpens his gaze enough that he can finally focus on the material in front of him. He’d already worked all of this out in theory, now all he needs is to triple-check the equations, and then get his hands on the test solution of the altered virus they’d prepared in the labs the other day. He might need to adjust it slightly to compensate when they take the shrapnel out, but the regular dose should be more than enough to knock out a stupid cold. He works at his usual frantic pace, and has secured most of the materials he needs when J’s voice sounds through the unusually quiet lab.

“Sir. Tony. Please.”

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Several Hours Earlier

Tony is so used to being woken by nightmares these days that when he startles awake and doesn’t struggle for breath or feel his heart thudding painfully, he’s rather confused. Is it possible for the body to develop a psychosomatic kind of response to frequent night disturbances, becoming so accustomed to being terrified that it doesn’t even matter if he actually dreams about space and alien ships and—
“Sir,” JARVIS interrupts the probably disastrous train of thought. “Your temperature has risen substantially in the last hour. I require your permission to alert Doctor Banner, and any of the rest of the team you might wish to have with you.” Fuck. That’s what woke him up; he’s clammy and shaking and everything hurts more intensely than usual. The damn cold Bruce has been on about has obviously caught up to him.

Tony has only been sick once since Afghanistan, and it was a damn nightmare. He’d picked a brutal fight with Pepper to make her stay away, and then alternated between attempting engineering while wrapped in most of the blankets he owns and coughing until he threw up (on one occasion very narrowly missing Butterfingers, who excels at holding a grudge). It had been beyond humbling to realize how completely debilitating a simple damn cold could be with the arc reactor housed in his chest. And there is absolutely no way he’s going to force the team to have to deal with him in that state.

“Sir, your pulse is—”

“Hush protocol, J. Override code A Stark, 0423.” A long pause and then,

“Sir. The intent behind that protocol was to secure the house in the event of—”

“It’s my damn protocol, I’ll use it however I want. Do it.” Not following up this command by vomiting on the floor ends up taking far more of his energy than Tony would like, but he eventually manages to wrap a quilt around himself and stumble to the elevator. If a part of him wishes that tonight of all nights someone were awake to stop him, he spares that thought at as little time and energy as he can. “Workshop, J.” His extremely pissed off AI doesn’t respond, but after a lengthy pause, the elevator starts to move.

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Bruce finally has a day off. Between his own work and handling what he can from Tony’s ongoing projects, he’s barely been out of the lab for the last few days. And while it’s been worth it to make sure the other man finally gets a break, it’s been hard to feel so peripheral to the whole thing. Especially yesterday, when he’d come upstairs to find their little guy so little—Tony had been soft and sweet and pliable, curled up between Natasha and Clint under his weighted blanket and giggling as he and the archer played a cute-looking video game that seemed to revolve around making and serving cake. It had been wonderful to see him like that, and to witness the rest of the team so content, too, but Bruce doesn’t want to be just a bystander. He’d immediately decided to ensure his schedule was clear the next day so he could get in some quality time with their baby.

Maybe they’ll bake today? He doesn’t want to press too hard on Tony’s complex issues surrounding food, but Bruce feels confident that getting him involved in the preparation process sometimes might really help. And appealing to Tony's sweet tooth rarely backfires. They could try some kind of sweet pastry, start working on trying to get solid foods into Tony in the mornings with more frequency…

Bruce is so caught up in imagining what their day might look like that it takes him several long moments to realize that Tony’s bed is empty. He searches the rest of the penthouse, then sighs and decides to cheat a little bit before he gives into the foolish urge to check under the bed, where Tony would definitely not fit as an adult.

“JARVIS, is he down on Steve’s floor or something?”

“Sir is in the Tower. That is all the information I am currently permitted to provide you, Doctor Banner.” The AI’s voice is not just apologetic but angry and scared, and the last is such a painful reminder of how he’d sounded after the attack on the Malibu house that Bruce’s pulse is almost
immediately in the danger-zone.

“Damn it, Tony.” Bruce had known things wouldn’t stay as calm and smooth as they’d been the night prior. It was far too soon for someone as stubborn and broken as Tony to simply accept that he needed and enjoyed what they were giving him without any further hesitation or resistance. But their little boy was going to learn very quickly that running from them was not an option. He takes several long, calming breaths, then starts as he realizes the pillow underneath his hand is damp.

“JARVIS, what are his vitals?”

“I am not permitted to provide you with that information at the current time, Doctor Banner.” Shit. There’s really only a few reasons Tony would have forbidden them access to his medical information, and none of them are good. JARVIS is damn smart and on their side, though, and the emphasis he put on the word ‘current’ is enough to lead Bruce in the right direction.

“Can you tell me what they were before he instituted whatever blackout he put on the house?”

“99.7 degrees Farenheit, Doctor Banner.”

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“Sir. Tony. Please.”

The shock of hearing his unerringly formal AI use his first name, something Tony had spent years trying to get the guy to do to no avail, is enough to stall the frantic movements of his hands as they swipe through the chemical formulas and mathematical equations that had yielded the solution to stabilizing Extremis.

“I know it is not strictly within my programming to do so, and you may alter my coding should you wish, but I am…asking you. Please don’t proceed.”

“Of all the damn things, J—you’ve watched me nearly die of Palladium poisoning and said nothing when I asked. Watched me nearly break my neck a dozen different ways testing the suit. Saw me drunk and high and broken in every possible way. And this? This is really the hill you want to die on? You want to come down on the thing that could end up making everything better?”

“Please,” JARVIS repeats. “You don’t have to allow him inside. Just permit me to update Doctor Banner as to your intentions, then let him speak to you on the holoscreens. If you can convince him this is in fact a sensible plan I will not interfere further.” He gives a tight nod, and soon the rest of the screens are pushed to the side as the feed of Bruce in the hallway is brought up. He looks, if possible, worse than Tony feels. And as usual, Tony starts to babble in the face of the stress.

“I named the Hush protocol after that awesome episode of Buffy, you know. Do you think Cap would like Buffy? I think he would; we could show him Twilight after, let him see how far the genre has fallen.”

“We’d have to start with the classics, I think. Half of what makes Buffy great is the conventions that it’s playing with and subverting. But I’m sure you’re right, he’d love it.” They grin at one another, and for just a moment it’s like old times with the Science Bros. “I promise we can have any kind of movie marathon you want, Tony, but we have to talk this out first, you know we do. And I’d really, really like to be able to touch you and look at you while we do that. I recognize that you’re big right now, and I promise I won’t do anything to try to force you down without your say so. But can you please let me in there?” Oddly, the assurance that Tony will be treated as big makes the little part of his brain mouth off before he can stop it.

“Don’t wanna be in trouble. If I let you in I’m gonna be in trouble.” Bruce’s eyes widen slightly,
but he gives no other indication that he can tell how tenuous Tony’s hold on his adult headspace is.

“Yes, when you’re ready to be little again we’re going to have to talk about you running from us, and using JARVIS to do it. But no one here, including me, would ever hurt you. You know that right?” Tony doesn’t reply, not directly, but he makes a tired gesture with his hand and seconds later, JARVIS has released the lock on the workshop. Bruce is at his side in a few quick strides, pushing aside sweaty strands of hair to press his hand against Tony’s forehead. “That’s quite the fever you have going there. You must feel awful.”

“I could end it. Right now, half an hour to prep the injections and this could be over. You’re the only one here other than me who really understands how remarkable Extremis is, what a game-changer it could be. Why don’t you care? Why aren’t you excited? Why won’t you just let me—do this?” Tony has to force the last words out before he succumbs to another round of coughing, and he doesn’t fight it when Bruce leads them over to the couch.

“I do care, Tony. I expected to have this conversation with you weeks ago and I was shocked you didn’t bring it up the very second you were sure it was stable.” Tony blinks. Several times. Because Fever Brain is clearly just making things up now, since Bruce just implied both that he’s excited about Extremis, and that he somehow already knows Tony’s deepest secret, that something has been stopping him from feeling the same.

“Well, I don’t know if you remember, Brucey-bear, but I was a tad busy getting treated like a toddler by all my friends.” Bruce is making the face, that ‘my magic powers of Zen see through your bullshit’ face; it’s a relative of Coulson’s Dumbledore expression, but yet entirely different. When Phil does that, he’s looking for answers, searching out the smallest signs and tells to lead him to the right conclusion. When Bruce makes this face it means that he firmly believes he is already at the answer and is now waiting patiently for everyone else to catch up.

“You didn’t want to deal with it. You were avoiding everything to do with what this could really mean for you. And I didn’t get it at first, because you have always rushed headlong into everything. I’m usually prepared for any possible response from you but caution. And I still don’t totally know why you’re hesitating—maybe because we know nothing at all about long term effects. Maybe something else entirely. You’ll tell me when you’re ready for me to know, and whatever the cause, we’ll deal with it and come to the decision that’s best for you together. But the one thing I absolutely cannot bare is for you to make this huge decision out of fear.”

“I’m not—” For the first time in this conversation, a hint of green flashes behind Bruce’s eyes.

“Don’t. Lie. You’re terrified, The Hulk can practically smell it on you. He’s going fucking crazy with the urge to get to you, by the way.”

“You—you’re aware of him? What he wants?” It’s such a startling bit of news that all the other goings-on are temporarily driven from Tony’s mind entirely. To make matters far more interesting, Bruce follows this up by blushing.

“When I read what you wrote in your notebook, about us not really understanding one another, I went back and watched the footage of him with de-aged you. Since then he and I have been… working on it.” This is fucking fantastic, Tony already has at least three separate proposed tests, maybe there’s a way to help strengthen the neural pathway between them, maybe even alter the reaction that actually causes the transformation— “Woah, woah, take about fifteen steps backward from wherever your head is at. Things are at an incredibly early stage and we might never get past occasionally acknowledging each other. And besides, brat, we’re supposed to be talking about you.” Ugh. Crap. “Since your book came up, do you remember what I wrote?”
“Brucie I already have a fever don’t make me blush any more—”

“Tony. I think you need to hear yourself say it. Tell me out loud what it said in the Conclusions. I know you remember.” He’s going to get Bruce for this one day. Clint will help. The prank war will be like none the world has ever seen, no matter what nonsense rules Natasha has about not pranking Bruce for fear of triggering Hulk-outs. He has no idea why he talks to any of these people, actually.

“Saidyouloveme.”

“Well technically it said we love you a lot, but you’re sick. I guess I can forgive a certain degree of imprecision.” That warm tone that’s like honey is back in Bruce’s deep voice, and damn it all, that’s why he talks to them. Because it feels like this. “I know that’s hard for you to hear. I know you can’t even come close to believing it, and that’s okay. We’ll keep saying it and showing you until you do. And Tony, for the record, I want to figure out Extremis with you. After so many years of resenting science for what it ended up bringing to my life, I want to figure out every secret of the universe with you in here, in the labs we share, that you built for us. But not because you’re afraid, and certainly not when the only thing you’re afraid of is letting us care for you during a cold. We got this, buddy.”

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The fever and the emotional upset of the morning have Tony shaking continually against Bruce. There’s more to say, so much more, but it can wait. For now they need to get him back up in bed where he belongs, and quickly.

“Anything else you want to say to me while you’re big, Tony?” Tony gives a jerky shake of his head. “Okay little boy. I’m sorry I can’t carry you, but all you have to do is follow me to the elevator. Just a few steps, and you’ll be all huddled up in bed in no time. Can you do that for me?” His boy glares, obviously still enough in adult headspace that he’s offended by what feels to him like condescension. But Bruce has every intention of beginning as he means to go on today, and that means reminding Tony of his role in the house right now.

They make it back up to the bedroom, after a quick stop on Bruce’s level, without incident. Tony collapses onto his bed with a quiet moan and makes to burrow under the covers, but Bruce plants a hand on his tummy.

“Not yet. We need to get you dressed first, and take care of a couple other things.”

“Don’t want clothes. Don’ feel good. Please, just want jammies.”

“You’re staying in PJs, don’t worry about that. But you’ve sweated through the ones you have on. Let’s get you in something nice and clean and toasty, alright?” He strips the boy of his damp clothes and grabs what he needs from the bag he’d made up downstairs, chuckling when Tony lets out a little grumble as he realizes what he’s being dressed in.

“Don’t need feets.”

“I beg to differ little boy. You keep taking your socks off and hiding them. Now, do you need to go potty before I get you dressed?” Tony’s face goes almost blank, the way it does on the rare occasions when someone really manages to surprise him. Bruce hurries to continue before Tony can move on to rage or hurt. “I’m not trying to embarrass you. But when you ran from me this morning, that told me that you’re pretty little right now, and not ready to have to make big boy decisions. Honestly, with this cold, I would rather just put you diapers so that you didn’t have to get up at all, but I know you’re not ready for that right now. So this is the compromise. No diapers,
but someone will be taking you to the potty and staying with you. Deal?” Tony crosses his arms against his chest, lower lip sticking out in a little pout, but he isn’t safe wording or even cussing Bruce out, both of which are telling in and of themselves.

“If I say no do I get to be bigger?”

“No, not today. You can be our big boy later if that’s what you want, but for right now you need to relax and let us handle things.” Seeing Tony trying so hard to fight something Bruce is almost certain he actually wants is a tad frustrating, but he reminds himself that unlike the Littles Bruce has known in the past, Tony is brand new, unsure of everything and probably hating himself a lot for taking comfort in any of this. “It might be fun, you know. And you have your word if anything really upsets you, love. We’ll always, always listen to that.” Tony’s eyes widen at the word ‘love’, and while Bruce usually leaves the terms of endearment to Steve (the man is basically an endless stream of them where Tony is concerned), this might be a really good strategy for chipping away at Tony’s resistance towards hearing that word directed at himself.

“Don’t gotta go right now,” Tony finally mumbles. Bruce is fairly sure he’s lying, but accepting the general premise is a pretty big step, and he makes sure to reward it with a smile as he finishes pulling the sleeper up and onto his Little. It’s printed black and white like a panda bear, and is complete with a little tail on the drop-seat. Tony gives the latter a little glare, but doesn’t seem to have the energy to muster a more sustained protest.

“There we go. You look very sweet and cosy. Just one more step to getting ready and then I’ll go make your breakfast.” He holds out a pair of mittens to Tony. They’re made of the same fabric as his purple blanket, and are likewise very lightly weighted. There are also drawstrings at the wrists to ensure they can’t be easily removed by the wearer. “These are just like your blanket, see? I know fidgeting can sometimes help with your anxiety and I don’t mean to say you can’t if that’s what you need at any point, but sometimes having weight and pressure around you seems to help too. And I think mitts will help you remember that you’re little right now, and that you need to ask us for help.” He doesn’t expect Tony to be instantly comfortable at losing control over his hands, and his boy definitely isn’t. But he’s obviously aging back down nicely, because Tony’s painfully cute solution to avoiding this is to slide his hands under—well, generously he could say they’re under his thighs, but they’re definitely under his bum.

“I-I don’t. I. I need my hands.”

“For what?” Bruce asks calmly. “Your only job right now is to be little, Tony. And with being sick, you’re not even going to be doing too much intense playing. If you need or want anything you can’t get for yourself, all you have to do is ask for it.”

“But I can—”

“Yes. You can. But remember during the spell when you and I talked about how can and should are different? That doesn’t stop applying just because you’re Little right now instead of de-aged. It’s actually more important because you’re capable of a lot more as an adult, but that doesn’t mean you should always push forward as hard and fast as you can.” Tony chews his lip, and Bruce fleetingly thinks about the pacifiers Steve bought, but he’s probably pushing Tony more than far enough for one day, regardless of how much their orally-fixated little boy will probably love having something to suck on once he’s deep enough in headspace. “It’s just like the coffee, Tony. It doesn’t have to be a forever rule, but for right now I think it’s something we should try.” He gives Tony another long minute or so to safe word, and when he doesn’t, Bruce gently slides Tony’s hands out from under his bottom, takes them into his own and then pulls the mittens carefully onto them. Tony shivers as he does them up, and immediately starts testing their strength,
trying to flex and move individual fingers, frowning when he finds how restricted his range of motion is.

“Perfect. Now I need to go make you up something for breakfast and get you some medicine. Any preference on who you want to sit in here with you while I do that, or should I just see who’s awake?”

“I come with you,” Tony says quickly. Bruce takes the clinginess and the childish wording both as another very good sign; Tony wants to be with him more than he wants to hold a grudge over being treated younger than he thinks he is.

“No, little love, I want you to stay wrapped up warm in bed for me, okay? I’ll bring your breakfast here when it’s done. Won’t that be nice? Breakfast in bed?” The conversation over who to call for is immediately cut short when a voice sounds from the doorway.

“Everything alright in here?” Judging from the look of him, Steve is recently returned from his run. He smiles as he sees Tony, though the expression falters a bit and he gives Bruce a long, nervous look once he realizes what Tony is wearing.

“Tony isn’t feeling very well this morning,” Bruce explains. “And then he thought it would be a good idea to run and hide in the workshop rather than come and get anyone to help. So he’s going to spend some time being our very little guy today while we try to get a handle on this cold before it turns into bronchitis or pneumonia.” Steve’s eyes widen dramatically at that, and Bruce instantly realizes his mistake. “Woah, Steve, it’s okay. It’s not, I mean, pneumonia is still serious and we want to avoid it if at all possible, because then Tony would probably need to be hospitalized. But it’s not as serious a thing as it used to be. It’s okay.” He watches the super soldier take several long, calming breaths and gives what he hopes is a reassuring smile. “I need to go make him breakfast anyway; why don’t you come sit with him?”

Steve needs absolutely no more encouragement, pausing only to slide off his shoes before slipping into bed and putting an arm around the baby. Confident that Tony is in good hands, Bruce heads for the kitchen. The others are start to file in, and he fills them in on the events of the morning as he prepares several sippy cups for Tony.

“He was going to use **Extremis** to get over a **cold**?” Clint repeats for the third time. “Fucking hell. Sometimes I think Steve’s protectiveness of him is absurd, and then he pulls stunts like this and I just want to sit on him and never let him out of my damn sight ever again.”

“I’d advise against sitting on him,” Bruce comments drily. “But Tony is going to be spending the duration of his cold a little bit younger than he has been so far.” Nat looks up sharply from adding a second teaspoon of sugar to her coffee.

“Are we sure that forcing him to age down further as a punishment is a good idea?”

“It’s not a punishment so much as a lesson. He ran, used JARVIS to cut off all of our access to the workshop, and then he almost injected himself with an experimental virus all to avoid admitting he needed help. He has to learn to trust that we’ll be there, that we **want** to be there. And if it also… encourages him to realize that his headspace is already a lot younger than he wants to admit, well, that’s just a handy side-benefit.”

“You’re a sneaky bastard, Banner. It’s kind of hot,” Clint opines, and then promptly gets sidetracked as his attempts to steal Nat’s perfectly prepared coffee quickly go sideways. Bruce watches the two spies trade joking insults with one another while Thor roots them both on through a mouth full of Smores pop tarts and Phil rolls his eyes and poorly conceals a grin.
before the Avengers and their shared home in the tower, Bruce had grown so used to quiet and solitude that being surrounded by the team’s constant noise is still a startling and unexpected kind of joy.

“Do any of you have anything up today that can’t wait until tomorrow?” he finds himself asking, trying to ensure that his tone sounds casual, as if what he’s about to offer is entirely for Tony and not at all because Bruce himself isn’t quite ready for this to end. Everyone, even Thor who is not under SHIELD’s purview in any way, looks at Phil, who snorts.

“Oh sure, now you miscreants want me to be the boss of you? Unbelievable. Yeah, we can make ourselves available, Bruce. I might need to get some work done from here, but it should be fine. What do you need?”

“I just thought if we’re trying to make sure Tony differentiates what’s happening from a punishment, it might be fun to have a Sick Day all together. He’s not up for much in the way of activity, but we could watch some bad TV and stay in pyjamas and—”

“And make a fort!” Clint interrupts with a cheer, then looks scandalized at the rest of the team’s bemused expressions. “Have you people never made a Sick Day blanket and pillow fort? I was literally raised in the circus and I’ve done this. My God this is disturbing. Alright, then we better do it right. Coulson, get me some graph paper; I’ll make a sketch, and then we can all gather the necessary supplies. Hey look, I’m making a mission plan and everything! You have rubbed off on me!”

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If Tony weren’t alternating between feeling freezing and overheated, coughing, and plotting against the stupid, stupid mittens that Bruce had forced onto him, he might have fallen back asleep. His four-year-old self had really been onto something about the power of Steve’s hugs. Maybe they should run tests! Then everyone else would have to give Tony lots of hugs too, for comparative purposes, and it would be For Science, so they couldn’t even argue.

Though sleep remains impossible, he’s fuzzy enough from the combination of illness and headspace that he yelps in alarm when Steve suddenly gathers him into his arms and stands.

“Shh, you’re okay sunshine. The others want your mattress for some reason, so we’ll let them get it and then follow.” He watches with confusion as Thor single-handedly carries and maneuvers Tony’s mattress from the bedroom, while Natasha and Coulson follow behind with all the covers, but this is nothing to when they enter the living room and Tony sees the mattress being set down at the centre of—

“Fort?” he croaks. Fort is rather underselling it; the thing is a damn work of art. Blankets and pillows have been artfully arranged over basically every available surface. Tony didn’t even know there were this many linens in the entire tower, but they’re draped over the windows, blocking out the harsh glare of the sunlight, and hooked over and around furniture to form a huge canopy. The thing is almost as wide as the room itself, and the TV is inside, as are piles of pillows, snacks, Sanders, and Clint, who grins as Steve sets Tony back on his bed once it’s been re-made.

“Fort!” he concurs. “Do you like it? I’m sure it’s not as glamorous as what you must have done when you had Sick Days as a kid, but if there’s anything you want we can get it, and—”

“Never had a Sick Day,” Tony interrupts the archer’s rambling, shrugging at the look of surprise he gets in return. “I mean I skipped work plenty as an adult, but as a kid…well, Howard didn’t really believe in missing work or school for anything short of open heart surgery. I always went.”
Everyone looks all sad, and Tony is stunned again at their ability to bother caring at all about the comparatively minor trials of his childhood.

“Well Friend Clint has informed us all that Sick Day Forts are an essential treatment for Midgardian illnesses! How fortunate we are to share your first with you, Youngling,” Thor announces, seating himself on the bed and settling at least ten pillows behind Tony.

And yeah, right now, mittens and all, he does feel pretty fortunate indeed.

Chapter End Notes

I ended up getting sick during the course of writing this chapter, so I feel Tony's pain here.

I hope the 'reveal' of what Bruce wrote in the notebook didn't feel too anticlimactic to those of you who were waiting on this. But I think open declarations of affection would be pretty revelatory for Tony. It was also a reference to an all-time favourite poem of mine, "I'll Teach You Cree", in which the speaker offers to teach their lover/student about their language and culture, constantly repeating 'Because I love you a lot' as a rationale/motive.

Also, can I just say how much I love how that everyone liked ballerina-Tony and ninja-mom Natasha so much? Thank you, as always, for the support and encouragement, and I hope you are all are getting into the swing of the New Year as happy and healthy as possible.
Sick Day (Part Two)

Chapter Summary

Tony’s condition is not in a rush to improve, but if one must be sick, Avengers Sick Day forts are a generally pleasant way to do it.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: There is a brief and not very graphic description of Tony coughing until he throws up. If this is a trigger for you, skip the paragraph that begins "As he sucks in a breath to lodge a formal complaint about all of this..." (or let me know and I can redact that section for you).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Sick Day remains delightful fun for the first couple of hours. Steve feeds Tony his breakfast (a shake, plus another sippy cup of water with a vitamin C tablet that makes it go orange and fizzy), and Bruce gives him drugs to help the fever go down, and the team squabbles over who gets to cuddle him, of all things. At one point, competition for the position becomes so fierce that they organize a Mario Kart tournament for the honour.

“Thor, I told you, you can’t just pick me up and shake me around to try to make me drop the controller every time you’re losing!” Clint fumes as his Bowser turns again into the car-eating flower. Thor grins and makes a grand bow to Tony.

“I believe our most esteemed judge has ruled decisively on this matter, haven’t you Youngling?” Tony giggles and nods, just to hear and see Clint’s overly dramatic reactions, which do not disappoint. As he tries to recover from his spot in 12th, Clint shouts accusations of everything from betrayal and bribery to an apparent Asgardian plot to overthrow humanity via Nintendo Wiis. He still comes in tenth, and flops down next to Tony (who is currently leaning against Bruce’s chest) with a long sigh. Thor’s mocking taunts quickly turn quiet, however, when he realizes he’s now up against Natasha.

She gives the god one look and one delicately arched eyebrow. Thor immediately sits down on the mattress, keeps his hands entirely to himself, and proceeds to lose decisively.

“Anyone else? No?” she smirks, then sidles over to Tony and Bruce.

“Hand him over, Banner.”

“Technically the Hulk never got a go,” Bruce muses idly. The room goes dead silent for a long moment in surprise at hearing Bruce willing and able to joke about his alter ego, but Tony’s delighted cackle at the thought of Hulk attempting to play Mario Kart (and then probably smashing the entire console) sets the rest of them off. The mixture of their laughter makes the most ridiculous cacophony—Thor and Steve both have rumbling chuckles (Thor’s bordering on a roar) that are layered atop Clint’s and Tasha’s snickers and Bruce’s deep belly-laughs, and to an outsider
it probably would sound like they were murdering small animals in here or something. Hearing the beautiful mess just gets Tony going again, though his second fit of giggles is cut short by a far less fun wave of coughs that leave him gasping and clawing at his chest.

Or he would be, if the stupid mitts would let him. They’ve been making him absolutely bananas all morning; so much of his ability to not die of shame at any given point in time during this whole Little experiment has relied on being able to distance himself from it slightly, to pretend that everything is mostly normal, slight fuzziness of headspace aside. The constant weight and restriction of the mitts refuse him the comfort of that fiction. Every twitch of his finger is a reminder of what Bruce said: Tony is little, and he’s never felt that quite as acutely as he does right now.

“Oh Tony, I could feel how much that one must have hurt. Shhh, shh, stop fighting your mitts. I have you, we have you. Everything’s alright.” To his absolute horror, Tony’s mouth opens and doesn’t release a stream of abuse or a demand to have the mittens taken off immediately. Instead, a pathetic little whimper sneaks out.

“Hurts.”

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On an intellectual level, Bruce knows he should be thrilled. Not that Tony is in pain, never that, but that he’s deep enough down to be able and willing to actually vocalize his discomfort. It’s a huge, unprecedented step. But it’s impossible to feel relieved or smug at hearing that distressed noise coming from his little boy. The Hulk stirs, furious at the thought of his Tony hurting, but seems to realize that Bruce is more needed than he at the present moment, and he fades back into the background after only a few seconds.

“Oh love I’m sure it does. And I’m very proud of you for telling us that. Maybe we’ll make you a reward chart, with stickers for when you do really brave stuff like using your words to tell us big important things, hmm? Would you like that?” Tony shrugs, and whimpers softly again when the movement strains at his chest. “Stay nice and still for me if you can. Can you tell me one reward you might want to earn?”

“Don’t need anything,” Tony mutters hoarsely. Clint, who is rubbing their boy’s feet through his sleeper (something Bruce has seen the archer do to calm Natasha as well), looks up with a grin.

“Rewards aren’t about stuff you need, buddy. They’re about things that are extra fun or special. Like maybe a drum kit?” Every inhabitant of the fort (excepting Tony) glares at him in unison. “What? Just offering suggestions.”

“Might be fun to shop for some more books for us to read together,” Steve offers gently. “Tasha taught me about Amazon. Or if you don’t want things, you could pick your favourite meal and we could have that for dinner. Anything you want, sweetheart—within reason,” he adds as Clint’s eyes sparkle again.

“Dunno.”

“That’s alright, you can give it some thought,” Bruce assures him, smiling when a Tony’s hand slides atop his own and presses down hesitantly. “What’s up, Tony ?”

“Gotta. Um. Please, can.” Another time, if Tony weren’t sick and distressed and painfully shy, Bruce might pretend he didn’t know what he meant and push the boy to say it. But today is not that day, and he presses a proud kiss to the top of the warm head beneath his chin.
“Yeah, buddy, of course you can go potty. Good job asking, that’s exactly what you’re supposed to do. Just let Thor or Steve carry you, okay? I really don’t want you walking.” Truth be told, he doesn’t really want his charge moving around at all. Between the stress even a mild cold risks putting on Tony’s already compromised lungs, and the chronic pain he seems to have from the arc reactor (which has to be made worse by the harsh coughs shaking his frame), Bruce just wants to keep him still and monitored at all times. He thinks longingly again of the diapers (which they’d mainly bought because Clint, of all people, had been insistent on trying them out at some point); there’s no way they’d be able to push Tony that far without spooking him, but with the amount of fluids Bruce is going to have to make sure their Little takes in today, he’d be so much better off… But they’ll have to make due for now.

“I may need to put an IV in Tony to keep him hydrated. With a fever like that he’s losing fluids fast, and if he starts to get nauseated, that’ll only get worse. For now, though, can someone make him up a few sippy cups of water while I go get my stethoscope? I want to get a listen to his lungs.” Looking far more grave than usual, Clint stalks into the kitchen, while Nat follows Bruce onto his floor.

“You’re nervous. Explain why.”

“I’ll hospitalize him if I have to, not even a second of hesitation. But he would have to age up for that, and he’s not used to moving between headspaces so quickly, not to mention his existing issues with doctors and the whole thing would probably be deeply traumatic for him. And I don’t…I don’t want someone else’s hands on him. He’s ours, mine, and I want to be able to help him here. Maybe I should go to med school.” He fully expects, knows he even deserves, a mocking jibe in response to this petulant and possessive declaration. So when Nat leans over and drops a kiss to the sensitive spot just behind his ear, Bruce very nearly drops the bag he’s holding.

“You’re a good man Bruce Banner.”

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Tony, unfortunately, heartily disagrees with this assessment of Bruce’s character by the late afternoon. He’s burning with fever (still not high enough to cause panic, though enough to make him very uncomfortable), and the force of his coughing and the resulting pain in his chest leave their boy crabby and exhausted. And now Bruce wants to listen to his lungs and do a blood draw (just a precaution, but a necessary one, to ensure that his charge isn’t coming down with something more serious). Tony isn’t having it. He’s huddled against Natasha, and he clings to her arm like a koala every time Bruce tries to get close to him with any medical supplies.

An entirely unexpected intervention arrives in the form of Clint, who holds Sanders out—not to Tony, but to Bruce, who takes the stuffed animal reflexively but then holds it awkwardly out in front of him as he tries to figure out what exactly this is supposed to accomplish. Trying to make Tony work to ‘earn’ a toy that’s already his seems unduly cruel.

“What if Bruce demos everything he’s going to do first on Sanders? This is one seriously honest sloth you have there buddy, he’ll tell you if anything isn’t on the level.” Bruce braces for the explosion, because trying to get Tony to engage in this level of fantasy-play when he’s already so crabby seems like it’s bound to backfire, but instead the Little’s face emerges from its hiding place against Natasha’s shoulder for the first time in several minutes. And that’s when the genius of Clint’s plan hits him. Tony doesn’t trust doctors, never had, and from all accounts this had gotten markedly worse after Afghanistan, where he’d been subjected to invasive and painful procedures he could neither consent to nor even understand at the time. Modelling his actions on Sanders isn’t just silly play at all; it’s a way to prepare Tony for what’s coming, to assure him that there won’t be any surprises. Coulson looks like he might leap across the fort and kiss the archer, and Bruce is
“…kay.” He doesn’t seem at all inclined to leave Natasha’s side, but Bruce can work with that for now. With every appearance of professional severity, he sets up the stethoscope eartips, then places the diaphragm against the furry body of Tony’s sloth. He ‘listens’ for several beats, even pausing to write down findings on a little notepad, then hands the sloth over to Tony. Ever the scientist, trusting only his first-hand observations, Tony subjects the stuffy to a thorough inspection.

“See, love, he did just fine. And everything sounds very good, he’s in excellent sloth health. Can I take a listen to yours now?” Tony nods, and though he shivers when Bruce presses the diaphragm and then the bell to his chest and back, he otherwise stays perfectly still and lets the other man get a good listen. When he taps lightly at Tony’s chest over his lungs the sound is hollow, which is good news, but he thinks he can detect a very slight crackling when he breathes; if so, they could be looking at at least bronchitis. It’s so faint though, there’s no cause for panic just yet, not without other confirmation. “Good job, Tony, that was great. Now we need to do the blood draw. Can I borrow Sanders again?” Bruce gives as convincing a show of jabbing the sloth as possible, and even caps and labels one of the spare specimen tubes he brought with him. “Great job, Sanders, you were really brave. You and Tony are probably both due some stickers on the reward chart when all this is done. Now buddy I know you’re nice and comfy with Tasha, but I need you to come over here with me for just a minute, okay?” The little boy looks between his stuffed animal and Natasha several times before he hands the sloth to her.

“Can…will you ask him if it hurt?” She blinks, her eyes staying closed just a couple of milliseconds longer than is required. Bruce wonders if her past might make Natasha incapable of giving Tony what he needs right now, but feels ashamed of having ever entertained the thought when she lifts the stuffy to her ear, ‘listens’, and then answers in a softer voice than Bruce has ever heard. Not just from Natasha, but possibly from anyone, ever.

“He says it was just a little poke, zajka, and that Dr. Bruce is really fast and careful.” Tony nods seriously, accepting the assessment, and slides down the mattress and toward Bruce’s waiting hands. He talks their boy through the rest of the draw like he’s done with dozens of kids before, and for all his anxiety, the pain of the needle barely seems to register with Tony. It makes sense; the man has endured so much worse, both as Iron Man and Tony Stark, that the anticipation is far greater than the actual reality of being pierced by such a (relatively) small needle. Bruce makes sure to be extravagant with his praise anyway, and the others join in; Tony is deep enough in headspace by this point that he actually pulls his blanket over his head in embarrassment, and Bruce’s insides basically liquefy at the sight.

Hulk makes a sound almost like a purr somewhere in the back of his mind; it’s the first time he’s ever been aware of the Other Guy experiencing pleasure at anything but smashing.

Now, regardless of what the others are thinking, Tony is a Big Boy. He is Big, and Sanders and Natasha both say he’s brave, and he’s trying very hard to be good. He sits through Bruce’s endless doctoring, including answering the man’s billion questions about everything from how much pain his chest is in to how much sleep Tony got last night before going to the workshop. He even takes the stupid cough medicine that is also definitely laced with something that makes him almost immediately pass out for a nearly two hour nap.

And sure, waking with his head pillowed on Thor’s surprisingly comfortable tree trunk of a thigh is not the worst, nor is having his vote about what to watch on TV count as triple, unprecedented in the history of the Avengers’ perpetual struggles over control of media in the penthouse. (They all
have TVs on their own floors, of course, but the penthouse has basically become a common space except for sleeping, and Tony is way too in love with that to complain, even if it means he sometimes has to watch some really weird stuff.)

The point is, everyone is trying really hard to make the Sick Day fun, and parts of it really are (he really really hopes J recorded the Thor/Clint puppet show, because that had been surreal and he wants to view it again when he’s well to make sure it wasn’t a figment of his illness-addled brain), but by that evening Tony’s had enough and would like to be better now thank you very much. As ever, though, his stupid body refuses to heed his wishes. By 9, his temperature has shot up substantially again; this has the pleasurable side effect of Bruce finally removing the stupid horrible mittens, but also Tony’s head is all foggy and the team is putting ice packs all over him and it’s cold and wet and altogether pretty miserable.

As he sucks in a breath to lodge a formal complaint about all of this, however, it catches in his throat, leading to a coughing fit that just. Won’t. Stop. It shakes his chest, his whole body, really, and leaves him without air for so long that he ends up throwing up. Steve (probably able to recognize the signs better than most given his own history) manages to grab a container just in time, so at least the sick doesn’t get all over his bed, but Tony is humiliated and exhausted and just so done with all of this. When Bruce reaches over with a wet washcloth to wipe his face down, Tony’s leg acts almost of its own accordance, darting out from under his blanket and kicking the scientist’s arm. Hard.

“Tony!” Before he can talk his obviously suicidal limb into retreating, Steve has seized his foot in one hand, and is saying his name in the disappointed tone, the one makes the addressee feel like they’ve just kicked several puppies and burned down an orphanage. “You know better than that. I know you’re upset, but we don’t hurt each other, not ever.”

He lives the next several moments as if in two entirely disconnected minds. His adult self is ready to blow it off, to make a joke about Steve’s unvarnished 40s morality and his tendency to lecture. Probably even adding a jab about testing Bruce’s anger management issues and how at least there were no electrified tools this time. That self is safe, he knows how to push people away, how to make it so eventually they’ll stop coming back, and he can die of this ridiculous cold alone. Sure, the obituary would be humiliating, but he can try to make sure J has the published cause of death listed as something way cooler. Maybe he can intimate that he developed a functioning lightsaber and then was stuck down by Jedi Knights wishing to protect their secret tech.

This is a good and workable plan. Also it involves lightsabers, which is always a plus. But Tony… maybe isn’t feeling so big right now. He’s spent nearly the last 24 hours being accompanied to the bathroom, and being coddled and be-mittened and constantly attended to, and though he’s fully committed to trying to stay right at the age he’d identified at during the first day, he’s found himself slipping. Just a little.

Or he thinks it’s just a little, until the struggle in his mind results in the least logical and most absurd response to being gently rebuked by Steve Rogers ever: Tony bursts into tears.

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For a moment, Bruce and everyone else in the fort is stunned utterly silly. Steve’s face is a mask of calamity and guilt; he looks almost as upset as Tony himself. The three SHIELD agents huddled together in the corner have all frozen, stock-still. Thor is reflexively grabbing for mjolnir. Moving feels sort of like he’s in slow motion, or pushing his way through quicksand, but eventually Bruce closes the distance between himself and his sobbing little boy, pressing up behind Tony and enclosing him as completely as he can.
It’s terrible timing, really. If anyone ever needed a good cathartic cry it was Tony Stark, and on any other occasion, Bruce would encourage their boy to just let it out. But Tony is struggling hard enough to breathe as it is; the absolute last thing his body can deal with right now is more of a challenge on that front, particularly if this ends up developing into a full-on panic attack. So, feigning a calm he doesn’t feel, Bruce exploits Tony’s confessed attraction to his voice, letting it deepen into the low, slow tones he uses to lead them in meditation.

“Shh shh, Tony. It’s okay. You’re here with us and everything is alright.” Tony hiccups and then winces.

“S-sorry, sorry, please, m’sorry, didn’t mean to be bad.”

“I know you are, little love, and so does Steve. And you are not bad; you made a bad choice, and you made it because you’re sick and tired and in a lot of pain. I was an easy target, because I’m the guy who’s been poking at you and asking you questions and making you take icky medicine all day, huh?” Though he looks positive he’s walking into a trap, Tony nods slowly. “Yeah, I know it’s been a rough day buddy. And Steve’s right, we don’t hurt each other, but you took responsibility and apologized like a good boy, and it’s over now, you understand me?” Tony still looks devastated, and Bruce has a feeling he knows why. The man always internalizes and then magnifies any criticism he gets from people he actually respects; with Steve, and the myriad of issues wrapped up in their history with one another (and with Howard) that’s bound to be even more of a risk. They’ll have to be extremely careful in future with how and when Steve is the one to call him to task for anything, because Tony will undoubtedly always take it harder than with anyone else. “Steve, c’mere and hold your baby while I go get the shower running for him.”

"No bath,” Tony interjects tiredly, reaching out to cling onto Steve’s shirt the second the super-soldier picks him up. He does not, Bruce notes, object to being called a baby.

"No, no bath bud. We’re just going to sit in the bathroom with the shower on really hot for a while to try to give your lungs a bit of help. Now you just hush for a couple of minutes and soak up all those cuddles. Doctor’s orders.”

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Tony is still sniffling sadly against him and Steve’s heart is breaking. He can barely reconcile the fragile little boy in his arms, so shaken by a few corrective words from Steve, with the arrogant, seemingly untouchable man he met not that long ago. Steve had wanted the ageplay from almost the second the idea had been introduced to him, but could never have been prepared for how much his little boy forces him to confront and re-write most of his initial assumptions about who and what Tony Stark is.

“My poor sweet boy. I know, being sick is just awful isn’t it? I was never any good at it either, I have no idea how Bucky and my Ma put up with me.” It’s the first time he’s talked about anyone from back then since waking up in a new century, and no one in the fort is even pretending not to be listening, but Steve just keeps his eyes on his baby, who is peering up at him with rapt attention. It still aches fiercely to speak their names, like a slow wrenching sensation all through him that threatens to tear Steve apart, but another part of him wants this desperately. Wants Tony, all of them really, to know the skinny kid from Brooklyn, not just what the serum has made him. “I was never smart like you, but I did like school, and I used to get so sore when my Ma made me stay home, which she had to do a lot. When I could manage it, I would sneak out of the house and go anyway; eventually, she and Bucky sort of teamed up on me. When I was sick and made it out of the house all the way to school, he got so good at knowin’ the signs that he’d take one look at me and drag me home by the ear.” Tony gives a watery little giggle into his shoulder.
“We didn’t…the Red Room did not like to acknowledge illness.” If Steve volunteering information about his past is rare, Natasha doing so is almost completely unprecedented. Everything in the fort goes still; even Tony’s lungs seem to sense that coughing can’t happen now. “The first time I showed up at SHIELD sick I had a fever of 102 and I nearly passed out during a briefing. When Coulson realized, he bullied me all the way to the Med Bay—”

“After making me strip you of weapons,” Clint interjects. “It was like one of those cheesy movie scenes where the hero is forced to disarm and it takes like half an hour. I swear by the end I half expected the underwire of her bra to be made of Barb wires or something.” Everyone laughs, even as Nat affects an unconvincing glare at them.

“Then he sat there in Medical all night until the fever broke. I was—completely bewildered. I kept asking if there was a problem with my After Action Report.” Phil smiles and encircles her left elbow with his hand; Steve’s not sure if it’s a gesture that’s somehow meaningful to them or if any grounding touch would serve right now, but it’s as intimate as watching two people kiss. He’s almost grateful to look away when Thor begins speaking.

“It was a grand affair when the Prince of Asgard took ill. My father would order the finest potions and summon the wisest healers in all the realms. My brother, however, wished to suffer no other to attend me.” Thor trails off, wiping away the smile that’s crept onto his face at this obviously fond memory of Loki. Steve doesn’t have the right, not really, to absolve him of whatever guilt he still feels about his brother’s actions, which had so directly harmed so many of them in the room. Tony, though, wiggles in his arms and points at Thor until Steve gets the hint, moving until they’re close enough for the baby to reach out a feverish hand and press it to one of the god’s arms.

“Story? Wanna know ‘bout him. The him that loves you. The one who was nice to me.” Nice to him? It occurs to Steve that in all of the upset immediately following Tony’s return to adulthood, he’d never asked what Loki had said or done that night. Now isn’t the time, however, not when Thor is staring at Tony like he’s something immeasurably precious.

“Loki was but a Youngling like you. And to him it was quite plain that when his brother was stricken ill, he must take up the charge of caring for and protecting me. He would have to be dragged from my sickbed; finally, the healers learned it was far less onerous to permit him to haunt my bedside. The more patient among them would even allow Loki to administer certain treatments and would place him in charge of monitoring my condition. He believed himself to be my foremost healer, and took great pride in his position. It was not a fiction our—my Father permitted him for long. Though I wonder, now, if my brother had a better sense of which was fact and which fiction than the rest of us. I have never healed so quickly or so well since.”

“My brother Barney was definitely not interested in playing nursemaid.” Clint’s tone is a bit harsher than his usual jovial voice, but the comparison between his own brother and Loki, the man who had invaded Clint’s mind and forced him to cause harm to his friends, has to be costing him a lot. “Hey, Rogers, what gives? I’m participating in story time, I want baby cuddles damn it.” Steve laughs and obediently hauls Tony over and sets him down in Clint’s lap. “Mmm much better.”

“What ‘m I like the sharing stick?” Tony grumbles, all the while burrowing as deeply as he can into Clint’s baggy sweater. The archer does him one better and undoes the purple hoody, then zips it back up with Tony inside with him (seriously, did the thing used to be Thor’s or something?)

“Yeah I can tell you’re really miserable here snugglebug. Now, where was I? Ah, right. Yeah Barney wasn’t a great caretaker, he was too busy trying to keep us alive to have much energy to care about me like getting the flu or breaking my finger or something, but the circus…well, most of us made our living off our bodies. We had to take illness seriously. When somebody got sick,
everyone rallied around them. For just a while it didn’t matter who was pissed off at who, or who owed someone else money, it was just us. Almost all my favourite times were when someone was ill. It’s a wonder I’m not a hypochondriac.”

“Wait does this mean if I let you build a fort in medical that you’ll actually go without a struggle?” Phil wonders aloud, looking entirely ready to rush off and make a note in Clint’s file immediately.

“Fat fucking chance—woops, sorry baby.” As Phil and Clint bicker and Tony lazily watches the whole thing like an amusing tennis match, Steve surveys his team. Not so long ago the histories and intimacies so many of them shared had felt like wounds, reminders that everyone with whom Steve had ever had secrets and inside jokes and casual, affectionate touches was long gone, taking all those parts of him with them. Now, it feels like just maybe the team can do more than build new, shared stories—Steve’s therapist is all about the power of making new memories, and he gets it, he does, but that doesn’t feel any less like losing what he had. Maybe they can also keep the people they’ve loved and lost (and might someday find again—BuckyBuckyBucky) present too, not as legends or heroes or villains, but as integral parts of the stories that brought them all here.

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When Bruce returns, Tony is deeply worried about his having been left out of story time. Their little guy, Bruce is learning, is very concerned (as many kids are) with things being fair, and he’s devastated on Bruce’s behalf that he was unfairly, if unintentionally, excluded from the earlier proceedings. There is far too much of Bruce’s childhood that he doesn’t want to, can’t, relive, but he can’t handle being the one to get their Little so worked up again.

“What if I tell you my best Sick Day, would that help?” Tony gives this very serious consideration, then nods. “Well—”

“No! You gotta cuddle me when you tell it. Is rule.” He’s never against holding their little guy, but Tony looks quite comfortable nestled in Clint’s sweater with him like a baby kangaroo. Bruce considers trying to convince him to take a raincheck, but Clint mimics Tony’s severe expression and repeats,

“Is rule, Banner.”

“Oh well if it’s a rule that even Clint is willing to follow who am I to go against it,” he grins, sliding down next to the archer and gathering Tony to him as carefully as he can. As he does, he tries to sneakily press his wrist to Tony’s forehead and get a sense of where his temp is at, but Tony immediately squirms away, looking affronted.

“Not Dr. Bruce time.”

“Right, right, sorry love. My bad. Meanie Dr. Bruce tries to sneak out sometimes, even when it’s not his turn. Now you wanted to know my best Sick Day right?” Tony still looks highly suspicious that the stealth doctoring night begin again, but he gives a little nod. “It’s today. Today I got to make a fort with all our friends, and I watched some truly horrifying things on TV—”

“Dude, if you’re talking about Supernanny I’d advise against it. Phil can be unexpectedly vindictive. OW! See what I mean?”

“—ahem. As I was saying, I watched some excellent, critically celebrated and not at all ridiculous TV, and I witnessed Nat crushing everyone at Mario Kart, and I saw Clint and Thor make borderline obscene flashlight finger puppets. And that wasn’t even the best part. Want to know the best part?”
“When Tasha and Clint played that game where they tried to see who could make Steve blush harder?” The super-soldier in question flushes at the mere mention of said game, so it’s a pretty solid contender, but that conversation had also contained some pretty not child-friendly moments (they’d thought Tony was still napping until the kid had laughed during the middle of a highly salacious account of Natasha’s first case with Phil as her handler), so Bruce does not want to dwell on it just now.

“Nope. It was all the time I got to spend with you, silly. I’m not glad you’re ill, but I’m very happy to be here with you.” Tony goes at least as red as Steve at his most embarrassed, but he doesn’t pull away from Bruce or make light of what he just said, either. “Now it’s getting late for sick little boys to be awake. Let’s go get you some steam to maybe help you breathe, and then you can take your nighttime medicine and try to get some sleep."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this is fluffy to the point where I was almost embarrassed to post it. But also, I (like Tony) am still sick, and today is an awful awful day in history for many of us, and in such circumstances, sometimes baby!Tony getting zipped into Clint's hoodie is just necessary. Right? ;)

Thank you all so much for your kind comments and your kudos. It never fails to make my day to know people are still reading and enjoying this.

(Edited to add-A reader requested that I unlock this fic, and I've done so on a trial basis. If you're new here, welcome! Fair warning, though: if this ends up making me too anxious for any reason, I may lock it again without warning.)
Five Steps Back

Chapter Summary

Tony starts to (slowly) recover, and ages up for the first time. No one's totally sure how to handle it.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning/Notes: As a general warning so no one is disappointed, Little!Tony doesn't make an appearance in this chapter.

A reminder, too, that this is an (extremely slow-build) poly-Avengers fic; with the characters all in adult headspaces in this chapter, there's a bit more building toward the romantic/sexual aspects of their relationship.

Finally, there is a scene involving one character kissing another without asking/discussing it first, and doing so for reasons that are not particularly healthy or appropriate. If you want more information before deciding to read, or if there are more specific tags/warnings I should add to account for this, please feel free to let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next several days are full of highs and lows. Tony, despite Bruce’s best efforts, has bronchitis; the fever very nearly lands him in the hospital, but the worst of it finally breaks in the middle of the third night, thankfully before Tony gives in to his desire to start begging Bruce, anyone, to just make it stop. He still wakes with low-grade fevers more often than he doesn’t, and is still prone to coughing fits that leave him breathless and doubled over in pain, but even inching his way toward wellness feels like a relief at this point.

On the morning of the fifth day, Tony comes to more lucid than he’s felt since the fever began in earnest. He’s lying on his side, left hand curled around his stuffed sloth; his right is oddly close to his mouth, and he considers and then quickly shoves aside the notion that he might have been inching his thumb toward it. Such a thought is particularly unbearable, because for the first time in a week and a half, Tony is pretty close to feeling Big.

Disturbing evidence of potential thumb-sucking aside, there’s really no comparison between the way he’d felt when he’d briefly forced himself to age up when he’d first been sick and the way he feels now. Rather than a violent kind of tearing from one mindset to another, there’s just a gentle awareness creeping back into his body and his mind; he thinks for the first time in over a week of SI and of his other ongoing projects, of the fact that he’s wearing a sleeper adorned with ladybugs while lying in bed next to Bruce, his first friend on team. The awareness is accompanied by a slight edge of embarrassment, and he’s pretty certain that it’ll get worse as he continues to come up, but for now he wilfully lingers in the in-between for just a while longer, enjoying the light press of Bruce’s body against his own, and Sanders’ soft fur between his fingers.

It’s extremely appealing to slip back down, to keep letting all of his adult thoughts and
responsibilities be someone else’s problem. But the others have taken ample time out of their
extremely busy lives to be with Tony, particularly during the worst of his illness, and whatever it is
they insist they get out of this whole ageplay thing, there’s still a line he doesn’t dare to cross
between that and just plain selfishness. Letting go of Sanders seems like a good first step. His hand
annoyingly doesn’t want to cooperate, though, mind taking him back to the night Loki’s spell had
been ended, when he’d likewise clung to the animal as he prepared to face adulthood. But this isn’t
like that. They’ll probably be willing to play again sometime, maybe. And once you’re fully big you
Sloth.

Eventually, his little pep-talk to himself works, and he moves onto item number two on the list:
confessing to Bruce. This action-item becomes slightly more complicated when he turns over to
find the scientist already awake and smirking slightly.

“Good morning.”

“’m big,” Tony blurts, then narrowly resists the urge to find under the pillow in abject humiliation.
He did not used to be this awkward, damn it, especially with Bruce. Hell, before the spell he’d
flirted shamelessly with the guy, and had actually thought he had a decent shot.

“Okay. You’re big,” Bruce echoes.

“I just meant…your work here is done, Brucey. I am in full possession of my faculties and
imminently capable of dressing, going to the bathroom, and all other adulting that is necessary.
Annoying Kid-Me has left the premises.” Bruce rolls his eyes, and instead of taking this golden
opportunity to run away and science, he reaches down to twine his long, graceful fingers with
Tony’s.

“I don’t even know where to start with how much work we have to do on your self-esteem, buddy.
But let me make one thing very clear right off the bat. I do not want to hear one single unkind word
about little-you, understand? I get that you’re big right now and you might be working through a
lot of feelings about how it all went, but that little guy is sweet and shy and working so very hard to
be good, and I’m not going to let anyone hurt him, even—no, especially, you. Got it?”

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It goes against every instinct Bruce has to leave Tony alone after their brief chat in bed; he knows
some littles like time to themselves after play, but he’s almost positive the other man is not one of
them. But everything with Tony is fragile and new right now, a constant play of choosing which
limits to press against and which to leave in tact, and trying to get Tony to admit he wants some
degree of aftercare is simply not as high a priority this time around. And the time alone in the
kitchen does give Bruce a moment to indulge his own panic, which he definitely needs.

It’s not that he doesn’t like Tony when he’s big—the man is one of is his closest friends. But
keeping their little boy resting and relatively stationary was hard enough; having to deal with a
still-sick version of Big Tony, who will be chomping at the bit to get back to the shop and the
armor and all of his other responsibilities is going to be nothing short of a nightmare. But it’s
already been longer than the trial period they’d asked Tony to give them, and bronchitis can stick
around for a month or more. They’ll never be able to keep him little the entire time. And so Bruce
decides to play dirty, seizing the coffee pot before Tony can grab it as the other man makes his
way into the kitchen.

“Brucey Bear—”

“Nope. You’re not getting this until we establish some ground rules.”
“Holding my coffee hostage after denying me access to it for over a week? You know, when I told you to strut, Bruce, I didn’t mean turn into a brutal dictator, oddly fixated on depriving me of my life force.” When Tony really ramps up his teasing like this he can go on until the person listening either gives him what he wants or starts yelling, so although Bruce isn’t necessarily grateful for the fact that Tony has to stop and cough just then, he does take advantage of the opportunity.

“And that’s exactly what we need to talk about. You have bronchitis, which is a very big deal with your pre-existing conditions. Regardless of what headspace you’re in, you can’t go right back to sucking down four pots of coffee and working thirty hours without resting or eating. I’m not your caretaker right now, but I’m still your doctor, and I won’t allow it.” Tony makes a dramatic show of flopping down onto a kitchen chair and laying his head against the table; his usual morning fever must be in full swing, too, because he lets out a quiet moan when his skin touches the cool glass surface of the table and turns to rest his entire cheek on it. The fact that he does so, entirely unselfconsciously, in front of Bruce is enough to tell him his friend is not entirely out of headspace just yet. And truth be told the transition is not so easy for Bruce, either; he’s horribly tempted to get Tony wrapped back up in a sleeper and some blankets and settle him on the couch so Bruce or Steve can feed him breakfast from his favourite bunny sippy cup.

“What’r rules, then, Brucey? Hit me,” Tony mumbles, lips half pressed against the table. God. It would really help if the adult version of Tony wasn’t also so damn cute. Deciding some distraction is probably in order, Bruce digs Tony’s MIT mug out of the cabinet and starts to prepare his coffee.

“Well, this, for one,” he says, motioning to the cup that Tony is already eyeing covetously. “Two cups a day, max, and none after four pm. You can start to get back to work, but there will be no lifting, no heavy power tools, and absolutely nothing to do with the armour. And I know you’re imagining a record-setting engineering binge, but you will not be working any longer than three hours at a time until I clear you for more. You also will not be down there when you have a fever, and you’ll take breaks for medication or other treatment as often as I say. With me so far?”

“Bruuuuuuuuuce.”

“Yes yes, I know, you have complaints. We’ll get there. For now can you temporarily peel your face off the table? This part is especially important and I’d like to be able to actually see you.”

“Tyrant,” Tony grumbles, but does as he’s asked.

“We need to talk about, or rather with, JARVIS. Are you available right now, JARVIS?”

“Oh course Dr. Banner.” Tony must have a sense of where this is going, because the last semblance of headspace falls away within seconds. His shoulders lose their lax, lazy droop, rising nearly to the bottom of Tony’s ears, and his left arm twitches. Though Tony knows (or Bruce damn sure hopes he does) that he won’t actually need it, Bruce is positive the man is reminding himself of the nanobots imbedded in his skin that will allow him to call the armour to himself at any time. Though Bruce’s rational self knew that a week in little headspace would hardly even put a dent in Tony’s deep-seated trust and intimacy issues, it hurts to watch so many of his walls come back up so quickly.

“I wanted to wait until you were Big to talk about this so there could be no question about consent. But the three of us need to talk about what happened with Extremis when you were Little, and about how we are all going to proceed from here.”

“My AI is not going to be turned into a nanny-cam. I wouldn’t let Pepper use JARVIS that way and I damn sure won’t let anyone else,” Tony snarls. Ah. So Bruce has already hit a sore point without even trying.
“Of course he isn’t,” he says evenly. “And Tony, I’m not Pepper or anyone else. It’s you and me and JARVIS here right now—and Steve. Morning, soldier.” Tony seizes his chance while everyone is exchanging greetings and makes a grab for his coffee; the moan he makes at the first sip is utterly indecent, and it absolutely does not help Bruce try to avoid the very much adult feelings he’s held towards Tony Stark since the first time they met and Tony had fanboyed over his research. *Focus, focus, for the love of—do NOT look at what his tongue is doing to the lip of that mug, and definitely don’t look at Steve and his stupidly endearing blush, either, don’t do it.*

“Uh—we—uh.”

“I believe, Dr. Banner, you wanted to establish parameters for when Sir is in his younger headspace?” JARVIS offers.

“…yes, that’s, yes thank you JARVIS. But I actually want to start with revisiting the medical protocols first. Tony, you deactivated all of them right before the attack on the Malibu house, correct?”

“Ugh, yes, what of it?”

“If you want me to keep acting as unofficial Team Doctor then I would like to have full access to what the protocols are, as well as permissions to restore them and potentially add new ones. I can give you a written list of the specifics if you want them, but essentially I’d like to be alerted to any sudden changes in the vitals and other major physical health indicators of anyone in the tower. I would also like it to require at least two team members to consent to any alterations to or removal of those protocols once I’ve set them.” Tony gulps down the last of his coffee and gives a sad little sigh at his empty cup.

“Look, I can agree to the general need to have the protocols, and it makes sense for the person who actually gets what’s going on to be in charge of them. But I just…yeah, I guess I’ll want a list, and I’ll want it distributed to everyone on the team. I’m not sure I want J telling you every time I have a panic attack, for example, or any time anyone here has a nightmare, even though either could conceivably put our respective vitals somewhat outside of normal range. And the needing two people to disable them thing…I know I hared off and scared the shit out of everyone last time, and you want to stop that from happening again with me or anyone else. But that’s big. I need…can we table that?”

“While you’re big, absolutely. I’ll draw up the list of what I’m thinking and we can all talk about it as a team. But Tony, when you’re little…I need you to give this to me then. You have no idea what the other morning was like, to know you could be injecting yourself with an experimental virus that could have had any range of complications that you weren’t fully prepared to deal with alone, especially while still mostly down in headspace. And even if Extremis hadn’t been in the picture, even if you’d just been scared and locked yourself down there for days like you usually do, your fever could have gotten dangerously out of control, the pain from coughing could have made you black out, or choke on vomit.” Steve’s face goes white and Bruce feels a little guilty for doing this with him in the room, but more than anything he needs Tony to get it, and that means pulling no punches about the very real danger he’d been in. “For the most part I can’t stop you from taking some risks with your health when you’re big, not unless it falls under ‘Dr. Bruce’ purview. But I can’t—if you’re going to be little then I need you not to ask me, or any of us, to leave our *child* with the power to use the most advanced AI in the world to refuse to let us protect you, or even know if you’re okay.”

“I…J’s been on my side, always, no matter what. I don’t want to risk feeling like I’ve lost that.”

“You will *never* lose that, Tony,” JARVIS says immediately and fiercely. Hearing the AI use his
creator’s first name stops Bruce in his tracks, but he’d venture a guess that it’s not the first time, because Tony just smiles faintly.

“I don’t want to take JARVIS from you. No one here wants that. The relationship you two have is a huge part of what makes both of you so incredible. What I’m asking from you is to trust the team, and to trust JARVIS, just like you did the other morning when you let him talk you down. And to be clear, JARVIS, I never want you to do anything we ask if you believe it endangers what you understand to be in Tony’s best interests.”

“Thank you Doctor Banner. Sir? This sounds like a very reasonable way to move forward.”

“…gimme a second cup of coffee right now and I’ll consider it.”

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Several hours later, Tony is blissfully restored to his workshop. Well, okay, blissfully might be overstating things, because he still feels kind of shitty. It’s nearly impossible to concentrate when you have to stop to cough, and then take several minutes to recover from the pain of said coughing, roughly every fifteen minutes. And when the coughing isn’t interrupting him, it’s Bruce insisting he stop to drink some water or check his temperature. Not to mention the sheer exhaustion he feels despite having done nothing but laze around for over a week.

And with SI work, SHIELD consulting jobs and the suit all still off the table for another few days (stupid two week holiday, what the hell had he been thinking agreeing to that?), Tony doesn’t quite know what to do with himself. It’s been so long since he got to be down here without a to-do list spanning several holoscreens (usually complete with an anxious voicemail from Pep, too, reminding him of more things he hadn’t even bothered to read let alone include on the list) that he’s kind of just…wandering.

He contemplates pulling up schematics for the suit anyway, but Bruce’s logic against that when pressed had been characteristically airtight. All it had taken had been one gentle question about whether Tony was ready to talk to Bruce, or anyone, about why there are currently 48 versions of the armour to make his whole body freeze in terror; from there, agreeing to the other man’s suggestion that, barring emergencies, they treat the armour as a trigger best avoided until Tony is able to work through some of his issues, had really been the only option.

“J, what did I used to do for fun down here? Besides drink, I mean. Although hey, I’m starting to get pretty desperate here, so if you’re holding out on me, buddy, now is the time.” Truthfully, he doesn’t actually expect JARVIS to offer anything in response to this but a verbal finger-wag. Tony really has to stop underestimating his AI, because seconds later, a dozen screens flash to life. In front of him are a range of half-finished projects; designs for new bots, a coding curriculum he’d wanted to design for one of the local community colleges, his initial work on B.A.R.F. (man he really had to work on that acronym)…he hasn’t had time to touch most of this in months. “Oh buddy you’re the best. Tomorrow I’ll hack Siri so that she tells everyone who tries to ask her anything what superior technology you are. I’ll have Thor write epic poems in your honour. I’ll—hey what’s the one on the far left?”

“That design is actually mine, Sir. I thought it might be worth revisiting the plans for a StarkWatch you discarded several years ago. External devices can of course be removed or damaged, but they might still be useful to the Avengers in battle as a crude way of accessing…certain health and locational data.”

“There’s probably a hundred more efficient ways for us to get that information, J. Fess up. You fully supported my dropping the watch at the time, what changed?” Nothing. Silence. “J, are you keeping secrets from me?” When his usually prim and proper AI answers, there’s definitely a bit of
mischief in this tone that would be frightening if it weren’t so damned fantastic.

“Well, Sir, you could always build it and find out.”

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When Steve is admitted to the workshop to collect Tony at the end of his three hours, he only makes it a few feet inside the door before stopping dead, mouth hanging open in a gape.

He’s had so much fun taking care of the little version of Tony over the last week that Steve had kind of forgotten what it is to see the adult version his element. Tony is all graceful, rapid motion, chattering away to JARVIS while his hands move so quickly between projections on multiple screens and a pile of electronic components on a bench in front of him that Steve can hardly follow them. He insults the bots like he always does, but he also laughs freely and halts work to dance his way in a circle around You when what seems to be a family-favourite song blares through the speakers.

And while Steve is quite certain that Bruce’s instructions had included a demand that Tony keep socks on at all times today, a command the man is flagrantly disregarding, seeing him dart his way across the workshop floor in bare feet, ripped jeans and a well-worn t-shirt is distractingly, ridiculously…well, hot, for one thing. Tony Stark is a damn attractive man, never moreso than in here when he’s not even trying to be. But the sight is also making Steve warm all over, because somehow without him really realizing it, the Tower, the team and Tony himself have become home. If a part of Steve had worried he’d feel awkward or embarrassed around Tony when the ageplay was over, unable to feel close to him without the aid of headspace, it is decisively proven wrong after just a few seconds of drinking in the sight of his friend.

It’s probably for the best that JARVIS turns off the music several seconds later, because who knows how long Steve could have kept staring.

“Hey what gives…oh come on. There’s no way it’s been three hours. Oh, and Bruce sent you in for this one, Cap? As what, a subtle reminder that you can and will carry me out of here if I don’t comply? He’s such a—a—ugh the fact that I can't think of a suitable insult right now does not mean I intend to passively comply with the Mean Green Regime. Dummy, attack the intruder!”

The bot rolls over to Steve, who spares a brief moment of concern that perhaps Tony actually has programmed some kind of aggressive battle functions into his robots, before Dummy’s claw extends to hand Steve a—“Broom? I tell you to defend against an intruder, and your solution is to try to see if you can pass your cleaning work off onto him? You are beyond a tragedy, Dummy, you have jumped right to farce.” Tony begins coughing before he can move on to promising retribution and increasingly unrealistic consequences for the bot. By the time the spell passes, he’s wavering on his feet, Steve holding him by one elbow and Dummy hovering protectively at his other side.

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“What’s with all the college admissions stuff? You going to school, Cap? I’m pretty sure NYU has a course about you, you know. That’s gotta be an automatic pass if you take it.”

“The nebulizer can’t work if you don’t keep the mask on. And stop calling me that,” Steve snaps. It’s been so long since Tony has heard anything close to that tone coming out of the man across from him that it hits embarrassingly close to the bone. He’s even short on snappy comebacks, so he does as he was instructed and presses the mask back over his mouth and nose, taking as deep an inhalation as he can manage. Maybe he can convince Steve to let him back in the workshop after this, the guy is obviously a little sick of his company, and he’d been very near to sorting out the improvement to the haptics for the watch. And he’d promised that he’d take a look at the files of
all the AIM people SHIELD wanted to try to recruit rather than incarcerate, no one could possibly argue that was too strenuous, even if Tony was starting to feel like he’d just run a marathon rather than spending a measly few hours engineering.

Like usual, Tony’s mind is able to retreat into itself in the face of stress, and when he finally realizes Steve is speaking, his tone suggests it is not the first time he’s repeated himself.

“Tony, I’m sorry. Really. I didn’t…it’s just, it’s embarrassing to talk to you about this stuff.”

“I have spent the past several days being fed and carried and bathed and taken to the damn toilet by you, so how about you try me, Rogers?”

“Put your mask on and call me by first name and I will.” Steve waits until the first instruction, at least, has been followed, and then he gestures to the course catalogues scattered across the coffee table. “Phil has been helping me try to think about what I might want to do. I’ll always be an Avenger, as long as the team wants me, but I thought…well, maybe there’s something else out there I’d be good at or something. It’s just, well, kind of humiliating to be trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up in company like yours and Bruce’s.” The very idea that anything Tony is or does could make someone like Steve feel small would be laughable if the other man didn’t so obviously believe it to be true. Even so, it takes Tony long than he’d like to summon a response; his little self’s impulse to reach out and hug Steve is way too close to the surface right now.

“I think a lot of us ended up where we are because we had things decided for us, by fate or circumstance or what have you. Doesn’t mean we aren’t happy where we are now, but no one’s going to judge you for putting some real thought and energy into figuring out what you want your life to be. If anything, we might be a little jealous. Do you know what courses you might want to take?” The blonde glances cautiously at Tony out of the corner of his eye, like he’s just waiting for the punch-line or the snark, and it hits Tony again just how young the man across from him really is.

“I uh…I’m not sure. It all seems really complicated, and different programs have really specific requirements that I don’t really understand. Phil suggested maybe history, and that would probably help me get caught up on some things, but it kind of feels a bit like giving in, too, somehow? I—forget it, I don’t even know what I’m saying. I’m sorry.” Steve moves to sweep the calendars off the table, and before Tony realizes what he’s doing, his hand is on the other man’s arm. It’s not really the way the movies would have it; there’s no instant connection, no long slow look into each other’s eyes. It’s more than a little awkward, because however much they’ve touched when Tony was de-aged and then little, they have rarely done so as adults. Part of Tony is painfully tempted to draw his hand away. But he doesn’t, and Steve doesn’t pull away either, and for now, that’s enough.

“You want to be in the present, too. There’s nothing wrong with that, Steve. Now hand me that brochure, the one under your hand. Yeah. They might be a good bet, from what I remember they have a pretty developed open studies program that’ll let you sample a bunch of stuff and see what you like. Maybe something in policy or contemporary political science? Hey don’t give me that face, I know you hate politicians and I’m not saying Cap for President…well, okay, that thought is not entirely unappealing. But my point is that whether you like politics or not, our work is inherently political. So it might be helpful for you to get a sense of how things work now, be in the room where it happens and all. Or at least standing nearby with the high-tech equivalent of a glass pressed against the door.” He loses Steve with the Hamilton reference (and damn does he need to get the team tickets ASAP, because Cap will absolutely love it), but gets him back quickly with a story about he and Rhodey during their own college days, struggling through 8 a.m. classes and performing questionable experiments with optimal Red Bull intake.
It’s a different kind of closeness from that of the past few days. It’s a conversation between equals, one where Tony is even the expert as someone both older and more experienced than Steve. But it also doesn’t feel like something less than what they’ve had before; it’s comforting, actually, to know they can have this, too, that Steve doesn’t seem less inclined to take Tony’s advice seriously just because he’s held him while he cried and fed him from sippy cups.

“Now look, I’m not saying you need to be some kind of science genius; there’s only so many of us one Tower can take, quite frankly. But one calculus class—"

“Tony, I already told you I am not taking math!”

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The team has a movie night that evening, full of extremely grown-up commentary and copious snacks; like Steve, no one seems disappointed to be dealing with big Tony rather than his little counterpart. They’re all a bit freer with their touches, brushing against one another as they pass by and leaning in carelessly to steal popcorn and candy from each other’s hands and laps rather than respecting the careful, polite distance most of them had maintained at the beginning, but it’s impossible for Tony to feel self conscious about that, because it isn’t just directed at him. Nat spends most of the evening with her feet pillowed on Steve’s lap, and Clint flits between nearly every seat in the living room, flirting outrageously with whomever has possession of the food he wants most at any given moment.

It’s…well, nice. In fact, the longer Tony is back up in adult headspace in the days that follow, the more he’s convinced that the whole Little thing has served its purpose. They’re all closer, easier with one another, and wasn’t that the point? They’ve given him some valuable new coping mechanisms (he’s even started keeping a bit of the slime he made with Steve and Phil in a little container in his pocket, because the stuff really does help during the more moderate anxiety attacks), and reminded him that he isn’t totally alone in the world. But the team is busy too; Steve and Nat are figuring out their respective futures, Phil and Clint are throwing themselves headlong into rebuilding SHIELD, and Thor has Jane and Asgard and his brother to consider (at least, Tony is pretty sure Thor is talking to Loki sometimes now). Bruce is still insistent about the doctoring end of things, because bronchitis is an annoyingly persistent monster that Tony is increasingly sure might never go away, but his Science Bro is plainly enjoying the chance to be back to work in his lab. After a few days, he even stops harassing Tony about socks as much.

It’s a relief, really it is. In just a few more days Tony will be cleared to start back on his work for SHIELD and SI (still on restricted hours, but maybe Bruce is going to start letting up on that too); maybe he’ll even take another crack at his own armour, or try to fabricate those boomerang arrows Clint keeps insisting could have some kind of strategic advantage in the field. He’s excited. Mostly.

Admittedly less nice is waking up from a nightmare for the second time in one night. The dreams are hell when mixed with the lingering symptoms of bronchitis. His body keeps fighting to gasp, then dissolving into coughs instead, and the trembling that usually shakes him apart in the wake of dreams about the portal is particularly unbearable with his chest already so achy.

“Tony? I came up to get a book I left up here and heard you—holy shit, you told me the coughing wasn’t that bad at night anymore,什么 the hell, man?” Bruce sounds so damn disappointed, and his hands are all over Tony, fingers pressing on his wrist for a quick measurement of his pulse, pushing his hair back to brush his clammy forehead, and all Tony’s panicked brain can think, on endless, painful loop, is don’tleavemedon’tleavemedon’tleaveme. And so Tony does the only thing he can think of to make Bruce stay.

He gathers as much breath as he can, and then leans up to kiss him.
Eek, don't hate me for the semi-cliffhanger!

Oh Tony. One step forward, so many steps back. It was a bit hard to write him in such an angsty place after all of the fluff, but his many issues are not going to go away overnight, and both Tony and the team are still learning how to manage their multiple dynamics. (We'll hear more about/from the team next chapter, which may or may not make any of you currently a little pissed at them for pulling back a bit from Tony in this chapter feel better!)

Thanks, as always, for your comments and kudos. I'm having so much fun not just writing this fic but hearing what you think, and chatting about the characters and the world with you. (ETA: And thanks to LittleMittens for help correcting the medicine in this chapter!)
**Forward**

Chapter Summary

Bruce and Tony discuss The Kiss. Thor (unknowingly, in his lovable Thor way) pushes Tony past a major barrier. And he also learns how to picture message.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: This chapter follows immediately after the events of the previous; as such, we're still dealing with Tony's sometimes not-so-great ideas about sex and intimacy (namely, his belief that he can 'earn' the latter using the former). There is also a brief but graphic discussion of some of the things that can happen to the human body in deep space.

If you want more information or think either of these might be a trigger for you, or want me to add any tags, please feel free to let me know.

Tony Stark has imagined kissing Bruce Banner exactly 73 times since they first met. These fantasies have taken place in a range of imagined locations (their labs are the most popular, but there was also a particularly good one involving the helicarrier that he should really revisit sometime), in a variety of positions (Bruce on top, tugging Tony’s hair; Tony on top, goatee leaving possessive friction burns around Bruce’s mouth and chin; neither of them on top in that one excellent dream he’d had where gravity was temporarily suspended and the two of them decided the only logical solution was to immediately make out), and with an impressive array of expected sensations (Bruce’s lips soft and malleable upon his, like they have all the time in the world to learn one another, or hard and demanding and just this side of the Hulk, and everywhere in between). In absolutely none of these scenarios did their first kiss involve Tony pressing his chapped, fevered lips to Bruce’s for approximately 3.2 seconds before he’d had to pull away, narrowly preventing himself from hacking right into the other man’s face. Short of occasions where Tony had been chemically impaired…no, actually, even including those, it’s the worst he’s ever performed as a romantic or sexual partner. And how very in keeping with his luck that it has to be with Bruce, someone he actually gives a damn about impressing.

When Tony manages to get his wind back, Bruce is eerily still, eyes hooded and expression strained.

“Bruce—”

“No. I need you to shut up right now.” People tell Tony to shut up all the time; he’s developed a selective hearing that tends to filter it out ninety percent of the time, because most of the people who say it to him are the kind he enjoys actively antagonizing. Bruce, though, is the one person who has never said shut up or any variation on the phrase to him; he is an active and enthusiastic listener, even when Tony is at his most manic and can barely keep up with his own thoughts, let
alone translate them to those less scientifically inclined than the two of them. So if Bruce is telling him to shut up, that is distinctly Not Good.

“I—”

“Nope. You need to keep focusing on your breathing and doing whatever else you can to try to calm down, because you are, I’m pretty sure, in the middle of a panic attack. Meanwhile I need to devote every ounce of energy and attention I have left to keeping my heart rate down, because the only thing that could make this into more of a disaster is if I transform into the Hulk and start tearing apart your bedroom. So we’re both going to do what we need to do right now, and we’re going to do it quietly.” The slightly suicidal side of Tony is inclined to believe that the Hulk, who is in a lot of ways a manifestation of Bruce’s most base needs and emotions, might actually be a better ally right now than Bruce himself, but even he can recognize that this is not a road to push them down right now.

He settles for trying to do as he’s been told, eventually getting his breathing timed to his mental chants of don’t leave. How painfully ironic that he seems to have found a mantra that works for meditation after all. Bruce would probably be proud if it weren’t so sad.

“Okay,” Bruce says, after what feels like hours have passed (though it’s been roughly three minutes and twenty seconds according to Tony’s annoyingly accurate internal clock). “How are you doing? You able to talk yet?” Hearing the other man’s voice mostly returned to its usual even, measured timbre has the opposite effect that it usually does on Tony; without the immediate threat of the Hulk and Bruce’s visible desperation to gain regain control over himself, Tony’s own shame and frustration surge to the forefront. Just seconds ago he might have clung to Bruce’s leg if he’d tried to leave, and now all Tony wants is to push him away so that their parting can at least be on his own terms. The emotional whiplash is dizzying. “Tony?”

“Brucey, I can’t imagine I’m the worst you’ve ever had, even with the bronchitis. After all, it’s been quite a while, hasn’t it? Not a lot to be compared to and found wanting, if you know what I mean. So let’s not make a production out of this, shall we?” The blow hits where he means it to. Bruce sucks in a sharp breath, and for a moment his face contorts into an expression that feels like it should belong to the Hulk even though the green shades never enter his eyes. But Bruce Banner never really does what Tony expects him to do, and instead of leaving like he’s supposed to, the ridiculous man smirks.

“Ah, so this is how you do it, huh? How you push them all away? Never actually had the full Tony Stark treatment directed at me before. Gotta tell you, not sure how anyone falls for it. You are more transparent than acrylic, you know that right?” Anyone else would have said glass, but perfect, wonderful, infuriating, stubborn Bruce’s mind refuses to sacrifice accuracy for accessibility, and Tony honestly doesn’t know if he wants to kiss him again or crawl into his lap and cry or what.

“Get out. Just…please?”

“Tony, if you really need space right now I will respect that. But my dear friend just tried to kiss me even though he quite obviously had zero desire to do so at that moment, and I’d really like to know why. Because the conclusions my head is jumping to aren’t the most comforting. Nor the most conducive to avoiding Hulk-outs and the accompanying damage to people and property. So selfishly, it would really help me out if you would let me stay.”

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It really does feel like maybe the most selfish thing he’s ever asked for. Because Bruce gets the desire to run, he’s been doing it most of his life, and he’s knowingly denying it to Tony at a
moment when some distance and time to recover his pride probably feels really appealing to the other man. But if anyone is going to understand how Bruce’s mind will spin itself into something destructive and ugly if he’s left alone right now, it’s the man across from him.

“J tried to call Pepper for me.”

“When was this? Earlier tonight?” From what Bruce knows JARVIS (who is more prone to holding grudges where Tony is concerned than even Tony seems to realize) has been giving Pepper the cold shoulder whenever she checks in with any of them, but who knows. And the important thing is that Tony is talking; Bruce’ll catch up eventually.

“No. Battle. Portal. When I…when I knew I was going through, that I probably wouldn’t come back. He called Pep and she didn’t answer. And it was so damn stupid, what would I even have said, but for just a second I thought…I thought how nice it was that I actually had someone to call and say goodbye to. Who’d care. Way better than dying after Obie had just ripped my heart outta my chest.” Obie? The name rings a vague bell, and they will damn well be coming back to whatever that cryptic little comment meant, but Bruce is pretty sure this is the first time Tony has said anything to anyone about what happened in New York, so he tries to keep them focused.

“That must have been really hard.” Tony doesn’t reply, hands fidgeting with his wine-red sheets, and then running through his hair, down his neck and halting at his chin, almost like—ah. “Is that what you dream about when you have nightmares about the portal, love? Being alone?” The nickname is a gentle test of the water. If Bruce’s suspicions are wrong, Tony will notice and immediately balk at being addressed by the name Bruce only uses when he’s little. Instead, he gives a shuddering little nod, fingers inching a closer to his mouth.

“Bein’ ‘lone and…not enough. When I got up there, saw first-hand the kinds of forces we’re really up against, I realized…I was going to die and it didn’t even matter. The Chituari would be back, or something even stronger, and I wouldn’t even be able to warn Pep, warn anyone, let alone do anything to stop it. And God the pressure, Bruce…felt like I was exploding from the inside out.” Ebullism. Of course. The suit was impressive, it could handle substantial shifts in pressure no problem, but the thing hadn’t really been designed for deep space exploration. Probably even before the armour had lost power and started to break apart when the RT went out, the vacuum of space had started to change the boiling point of Tony’s body fluids below 37 degrees; the fluids had started to bubble slightly, making Tony feel like his blood was literally boiling in his veins.

“God, Tony. I can’t imagine.” He waits a few moments to see if Tony has more he wants or needs to say, but he’s quiet, probably dangerously close to reliving the experience and sending himself into another panic attack. Bruce changes gears just slightly. “So you had this really bad dream, and then you woke up and had a panic attack that I walked into the middle of, is that right buddy? Can you talk to me about what happened next?” Tony appears perilously close to being full-on little, and honestly Bruce’s own headspace is near enough that all he really wants is to cuddle his boy and shield him from anything that might ever dare upset him again, but if they don’t talk about it now, they might never.

“Didn’t want you to go.”

“How did I give you the impression I intended to go anywhere?”

“Everyone does. And ‘m so broken and you guys did all that stuff with me before, so’s I could be Big and Iron Man again and I’m still not, so it was for nothing. Didn’t want t’disappoint you again. And ‘m good at…that. Usually.” Bruce’s skin is almost crawling as the pieces of Tony’s stuttering explanation start to assemble themselves in his mind.
“Tony, I need to repeat what I think I just heard you say, okay? Because when we’re having really important conversations like this, it’s critical that we not misunderstand each other, alright?” His friend (his little boy, Bruce’s Daddy-brain insists), sniffs and makes a little noise of assent. “I’m hearing you say that you somehow thought we were just letting you be little last week as one time thing, so that you could be Iron Man again sooner. And when you woke up tonight, you were maybe already feeling kind of little again, or like you might want to be. At the very least, you really just wanted comfort. But you were scared that would somehow upset me and make me leave, so you tried to kiss me so I would stay with you. Is that right?” Tony makes another soft noise, and Bruce hates himself a bit, but he reaches over and turns the other man’s chin so they are looking one another in the eyes. “I need words, Tony. Is what I just said what you meant?”

“Yes.”

“…okay. We have a lot of talking to do, you and I and the rest of the team, because so much of that is not in any way true. But it’s also late. We’re both pretty tired, and you’ve been really, really brave for me tonight. So for now I need you to listen close while I say one thing, and then we’re going to cuddle up together and try to get some rest, okay love? You listening really close?”

“‘kay.”

“Good boy. That’s really good. Alright, here it is buddy. It doesn’t matter if you’re big or little—if you want comfort from me, or from anyone on the team, you got it. You don’t owe anyone anything for that, especially sex. If you want to kiss any of us when you’re big then that’s great and anyone would be lucky to have you like that, including me. But that’s not something you do when all you really want is to be hugged or told it’s going to be okay after a scary dream or a bad day. Sex isn’t something you give to anyone for any reason except that you want to do it and they want to do it and it feels good. Can you repeat that back to me?”

“…n-no.” It’s not ideal, but at least Tony is being honest that what Bruce has just said is too much for him to bear right now. That’s probably more than he should have expected.

“Alright love. That’s okay. We can talk about it again tomorrow, and any day after that for as long as it takes. Now, I’m going to go get your sleepy-time cough syrup—”

“Don’t go!” Tony yelps in panic, arm darting away from his mouth to clutch at Bruce’s wrist.

“Sweet boy, I’m going to come right back.” Tony’s grip only tightens. “Okay. Alright, baby, it’s okay. You can come with me to the kitchen then, how’s that sound? We’ll get your medicine, and when we come back, we’ll get you changed into some softer pajamas, and we’ll cuddle you up under your nice heavy blanket. Where is that, anyway? I thought I left it out for you.” Tony points to the closet. “Why’s it in there silly? Don’t you like it?”

“Thought maybe was just for bein’ little. Didn’t wanna get in trouble.” So. Many. Talks. When they’re both more awake, Bruce is going to talk this kid’s ear off, again and again and again until Tony actually starts to believe the rug isn’t always just about to be pulled out from under him. For tonight, though, he just wants to hold Tony close and watch him sleep and fantasize about letting the Hulk out against everyone who’s ever made his boy feel like he had to ‘earn’ basic human affection.

My Tony, Hulk grumbles. Bruce is fatigued enough that he’s not entirely sure whether he’s projecting the thought onto that sometimes-presence in his mind, or if if Hulk has actually managed his very first verbal expression via the fragile mental bond they’re forming. Given that he is in wholehearted agreement with the base, protective impulse behind the sentiment, he supposes it doesn’t much matter.
When Tony wakes he is decidedly still little, and almost unbearably excited about it. Bruce had mentioned wanting to bake with him, maybe they could do that today, and they could try out some of the Lego Natasha had purchased for de-aged him and never returned, and there could be snuggles, lots of snuggles!

Bruce, though, insists on more talking first. It goes on for-ev-er; when Bruce fills them in on the events of the previous night, the team is Very Serious about the entire thing (and somewhere in the back of his mind Tony sort of gets why, but right now it feels a lot less pressing than getting to the fun stuff). The eventual result of this endless conversation is a decision that the team is going to focus exclusively on developing non-sexual relationships with Tony, at least until he is at least able to repeat in his own words what Bruce had told him the previous night about what sex is and is not to be used for. Phil also floats the idea of making a schedule that will ensure Tony gets a guaranteed amount of little-time a week (barring any Avengers-related emergencies). Tony’s quite sure that his grown-up self will have a lot to say about both of these points, but his mental processes currently feel slowed and simplified to the extreme. All he knows or cares about at the moment is that agreeing means making them happy and that will mean they’re closer to the talking being over.

“I think we’ll need to hold off on anything else for now. I don’t think Tony feels up to much more grown-up chatter, is that right sweetpea?” Steve chuckles as Tony nods his emphatic agreement.

“Go play now?” he asks, feeling his stomach drop a little in disappointment when Steve’s eyebrows furrow and he frowns.

“Oh honey I would love to play with you, but I actually have some meetings on campus today, remember? The college wants to talk to me about what I’ll need to catch up on that wouldn’t have been covered in high school in my time so that I’m ready to go come September.” And Tony did know this, had actually helped set up the meeting, but right now it feels like a crushing blow and he hates stupid school for taking Steve away from him. “I could try to reschedule?” Steve proposes, bouncing Tony slightly in his lap.

“Absolutely not,” Phil says immediately. The two of them do that annoying thing grown-ups do where they have conversations entirely with their eyes. Tony wishes his little self were as good as his Big self at deciphering these kinds of glances, but the only thing he knows is that Phil seems to be the winner of the small contest of wills, because eventually Steve sighs loudly and nods. Phil pokes Tony’s lower lip, which is sticking out in a slight pout. “Tony, Thor’s never actually had the chance to hang out with you by himself, even during Loki’s curse. It might be pretty fun for you guys to spend the day together, don’t you think?”

It’s not as if Thor has ever been anything but kind to Tony when he’s been little, but the thought is still kinda frightening. It’s hard enough to convince himself that a group of superheroes that includes Captain America truly doesn’t mind how Tony’s little side is pretty silly and kinda clingy. Thor is basically a god. How could he possibly not have a million better things to do? None of these anxieties are at all assuaged by the hesitant look on the blonde’s expressive face.

“The Youngling is still ill, is he not? I am inexperienced with Midgardian maladies—I had never even encountered the much-heralded Blanket Fort until Friend Clint taught us of their greatness. I fear I shall make other errors in my ignorance.” Everyone rushes to assure Thor that Tony would not have actually been harmed by the absence of a blanket fort, and his uncharacteristic show of nerves seems to convince all of them of the necessity of Phil’s plan. Though Bruce assures both Tony and Thor numerous times that he’ll be just downstairs if he’s needed, they all clear out
almost comically fast, leaving the two of them alone in the kitchen. Tony’s stomach chooses this inconvenient moment to growl. Loudly. “You need sustenance, Youngling!” Thor declares, springing into action. He haphazardly empties half of the kitchen cabinets, very nearly breaking at least three mugs and a punch bowl as he seeks out Tony’s sippy cups. Tony now vaguely recalls hiding them in a coat closet (his Big self is really, really weird about all things little), and he is considering whether or not to volunteer this information when Thor gives a triumphant cry, producing a bottle that had been tucked into the very back corner of a rarely used cupboard over the fridge. Like his cups, it’s sized for an adult, but it’s also the most unapologetically babyish thing they’ve ever tried to give him; on top of it being a bottle, it’s pastel pink, and covered in pictures of all kinds of brightly coloured candies.

“I—that’s not—I’m not—” Thor’s face falls.

“Is this not correct? The readings provided to us by the Son of Coul indicated that Midgardian Younglings make use of such containers.” A plan occurs to Tony. It’s a somewhat sneaky plan. And he might not dare try it with anyone else, especially Steve who he’s pretty sure can actually smell dishonesty of any kind. But Thor genuinely has no hang-ups about how weird all of this age-play stuff is; he’s an actual alien who encounters the world without judgement or preconceptions about what it should be. So if Tony, hypothetically, doesn’t find the concept of the bottle entirely unappealing just now, he can try it. If he hates it, he can somehow convince Thor that he made the mistake, they can put the bottle back where it came from, and no one will be any the wiser. Even if Tony does like it, he can probably convince the god to keep that just a secret between them for now… There’s really only one additional condition that needs to be met for this plan to be foolproof.

“Chocolate milk?”

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“You’re pushing very hard to keep Rogers focused on his schooling. Anything you’d like to tell me?” There are way, way too many places in the new SHIELD HQ that Natasha can use to sneak in and startle Phil. It’s starting to get ridiculous.

“Christ Nat. Just once could you, or Clint, use the door and knock? At this point, I would be just as likely to be shocked by that as I am by these little drop-ins of yours.” Nat gives him that smirk, the one that doesn’t even move her lips, just some of the small muscles surrounding her mouth. But successfullystartling Phil usually makes her more smug than this. “…Sitrep, Natasha. What happened?” The appeal to his agent’s genuine respect for following orders, and specifically orders from him, very nearly works. But after a clear moment of hesitation, she crosses the room and goes for the extremely good bottle of scotch on the table beside his desk instead, pouring each of them two fingers worth and sliding one glass across the desk toward Phil.

“You first. I’d say you owe me that much.” Natasha has built most of her professional life on an almost religious devotion to checks and balances. There’s going to be no way to convince her otherwise if she feels Phil still has a debt to pay her that can be erased now by his honesty. So he takes a long, slow drink, thankful that it’s at least a good bottle.

“I think we’re closing in on Barnes.”

“Maria wants me to retire as an active agent and start training to take over as director of SHIELD once she’s done.” It had been far from a secret that Hill is the only real successor to Fury; the only reason the man had even consented to return to help rebuild had been to prepare her to take the reigns as quickly as possible. But their proposed course concerning Natasha is news to Phil.

“You’re afraid,” he breathes.
“So are you.”

“You first this time.” Nat takes another pull of her drink, and then she sits on the edge of his desk like she’s done dozens of times post-mission. But unlike each of those occasions, Phil doesn’t have to worry that she’s hiding injuries, or wonder what other traumas a mission has evoked for her. He doesn’t need to try to figure out how he can try to help staunch the wounds enough to remind Natasha of everything about herself that remains untouched by all the damage she’s seen and inflicted. God, how hadn’t he thought of promoting her long before this?

“There’s too much red left. I was supposed to do more, find a way to make it all right. I was supposed to die in some horrible corner of the world, nameless and alone. I was never supposed to have all of this.”

“And I don’t want to tell Steve his incredibly traumatized best friend might be back on the grid because I don’t want to risk all of this,” he confesses. “At some point, Natasha, I think we both have to realize that all of it, everything we’ve fought and clawed and bled to build, it’ll never be enough to answer for everyone and everything we couldn’t save. People like you and I will never get to wipe out all that red. But if we run from what’s left, or treat it like it’s too fragile to bear the weight of those contradictions, that doesn’t make us noble or virtuous. It just makes us lost.”

The longer he looks at her and really thinks, the more Phil realizes Natasha doesn’t really needed a handler anymore, and hasn’t for a long time. She’ll be ready, soon, to start learning what it is to be on the other side of the desk for these kinds of conversations, to help heal rather than injure, build rather than break. But for today, she’s still his, and like she has always done ever since she inexplicably decided to put her faith and trust in Phil, Nat accepts his assessment without argument or doubt.

Perhaps she’s still feeling a bit fragile than she lets on, however, because she stays in his office the duration of the morning, reading from what looks to be a SHIELD training manual. Maria must have thrown out whatever materials they had before Hydra’s infiltration, because the thing is somewhat haphazard, a mix of handwritten and typed pages, many of which have post-it notes and other additions attached. It couldn’t be more different from the pristine, set-in-stone manuals he’d been given when he’d started, and for the first time Phil is positive his decision to stay on with SHIELD, to try to help rebuild it rather than let it whither and die, was the correct one. He doesn’t even hear his phone’s alert noise until Nat clears her throat and gestures it.

“Thor must have learned to picture message. He sent it to you too, Nat, you should take a look.”

In truth, JARVIS was more than likely involved, because the photograph on Phil’s screen is a clear aerial shot; the demigod and Tony are on the long penthouse couch, Tony settled at an angle so that he’s between Thor’s long legs, lying with his head in the crook of the other man’s elbow. The baby’s eyes are drooping, almost entirely shut, while his mouth is closed lazily around—

“Is that—Thor got him to take a bottle?” If Phil so much as looks at Nat right now, they’re both done for. They still have so much work to catch upon after taking several days in a row off to care for Tony while he was ill. And really, if they rush home any time their baby does something adorable they are all going to be fired within the fortnight. Phil is in the midst of repeating all of this to himself in a steady loop when Clint’s voice echoes from the vent over his head.

“Holy shit that’s the cutest fuckin’ thing I’ve ever seen. Who wants to pull the fire alarm and get us out of here?”

“Clint, NO, you cannot pull—hey, Nat, get back here right now! Both of you, you can’t just—”
Okay, sometimes it seems the Avengers still do need a handler.

Chapter End Notes

As always, you're all wonderful. I was really feeling my own limitations are a new writer while working on this chapter, and your kudos and comments gave me a much-needed boost.

And a question from me: I'm thinking about incorporating some aspects of Agents of SHIELD (namely things related to what happened with Phil after he was stabbed), as well as some elements from Civil War (particularly Bucky's backstory). Would this bother anyone, because of desires not to be spoiled, or for other reasons?
Hooky, Googly Eyes, and Phil Coulson as the Voice of God

Chapter Summary

The Avengers play hooky with their baby, and then spend some time with Big Tony making plans to ensure the continued safety and survival of the team on perhaps the most important battleground...public relations.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings (I don't think) needed for this section. Do note the change in tags though; I will be incorporating some elements of Civil War (see my longer notes at the bottom if this freaks you out) and Agents of SHIELD.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Avenger's continued need of a handler is brought into even sharper relief when Phil arrives at the tower (alongside Clint and Natasha, who are still way too gleeful about their abrupt departure from SHIELD) only to run into a very shocked-looking Steve and Bruce in the elevator. For a moment everyone stares at each other, and then they're all talking at once.

“What are—”

“Don’t you have—”

“Aren’t you supposed—”

“Did we all decide to play hooky after getting that picture message? Seriously?” Clint cackles, rubbing his hands together. “Oh this is way too good. I mean, honestly, people expect this from the likes of me, and no one dares to expect anything one way or another from Tasha, but all it takes is one shot of Tony Stark cuddling with Thor to get Phil Coulson, Captain America, and Bruce Banner, to drop all their shit and come running?”

“My meeting was over!” Steve interjects.

“I’m rather certain there was a lunch planned with the Dean, was there not?” Phil asks. Ribbing his childhood hero is still going to take some getting used to, and he barely avoids giving in to the temptation to immediately apologize and salute the man for good measure, but this is far outweighed by the pleasure of feeling like he’s really one of the guys in moments like this. Especially because Steve gives just as good as he gets.

“And I’m pretty sure you told us to expect the three of you home by around five!”

“A fire alarm went off at SHIELD, Rogers, so unless you expected the three of us to stick around —”

“No, but he might have expected you not to be the one to pull it, Natasha!” Phil laughs, raising his
hands in mock surrender as she whirls around and drags her eyes slowly up his torso; it only faintly resembles the far speedier and subtler way in which she evaluates both lovers and targets in the field (the two are so frequently intertwined in the course of Natasha’s work, after all), but it’s enough to send a tiny shiver down his spine all the same.

“I believe what Agent Coulson means to say is that the source of the faulty alarm has not yet been determined.”

“I should have thought of pulling the fire alarm,” Bruce muses. “I’m pretty sure I fooled exactly none of the lab assistants by getting a message on my phone, blushing like hell, and then muttering something about a forgotten Avengers meeting. Shall we all just agree to never speak of this again?”

“Agreed,” everyone choruses. Of course, Clint hardly gets the word out before he’s harassing Steve about being kicked out of school before it even begins, but Phil does his best to stick to the spirit of the agreement and at least avoid outwardly laughing.

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Thor is extremely gracious about having his alone-time with Tony invaded by the rest of the team. After Tony had finished his bottle (which he seems unaware is not a secret, given the way he hastily shoves the thing in between two couch cushions), Thor had been entertaining him with tales of Asgardian wildlife, and they all settle in for what looks like it will be a highly entertaining story-time.

“Its whole head can spin around?” Tony asks, bouncing his feet on the ground in wide-eyed excitement. Thor, who is surrounded by an odd collection household objects he has been using as props to demonstrate, shakes his head, against which he is currently holding a set of straws.

“No, Youngling, only the horns could change direction, you see?” He places one straw at each of Tony’s temples, then bends one so that it curls backward around the boy’s ear. “This way, the beast could keep one shielded during battle, bringing it forward only if the other horn became damaged.”

“Are you talking about a Yale?” Bruce asks.

“You do have them on Midgard!” Thor beams. “Might I take the Youngling to view one? From a safe distance, of course,” he adds as Steve’s face immediately goes pale. Bruce pats his arm.

“Not exactly. Well, at least I don’t think so. As far as I know they’re a medieval myth—but then again, a lot of people would have said the same about you not so long ago, so maybe Pliny was onto something.”

“Loki summoned one as a child—entirely by accident, he assured us. It wreaked much havoc, tearing apart the Great Hall and nearly felling two of our best warriors with its mighty jaws. Eventually, my Father was forced to locate a basilisk, for they are the beast’s only natural enemy —”

“Basilisks are real too? Like in Harry Potter? I wanna go see, please please can I? Or you could bring one here?” Tony is almost vibrating in excitement, and admittedly the scientist in Bruce is right there with him; there’s at least a manuscript worth of material to be written on the intersections of human myth and alien zoology, and even if neither is really Bruce’s field, he’d love to be involved. But his Daddy-Brain, already hyper-protective after the events of the previous evening, is balking at the thought of their baby attempting to talk Thor into importing a basilisk, or for that matter a hippopotamus-sized beast with giant, reversible horns, an elephant tale and boar-
“Alas I think it best that you remain within your home realm and they within theirs for now. But when I return to Asgard I shall commission the best of our artists to produce a rendering of the beast, just for you. Perhaps not just the Yale—mayhaps the portrait could depict many of our native creatures. It would please me much for you to have something of my home. Should you like that Youngling?” Tony’s features are alight with a joy that seems beyond words; he answers by essentially launching himself at Thor, who catches him easily and laughs.

“Maybe the picture could be one of your rewards for your good behaviour chart, sweetheart,” Steve suggests. “Do you want to work on making that today?” Their previously relaxed boy immediately panics, fidgeting and chewing on his lip while his eyes dart reflexively around the room to scan for an exit; Bruce wants to both laugh and cry at the realization that Tony genuinely finds the prospect of positive reinforcement more frightening than a giant serpent that can kill you by looking at you.

“I think that sounds like a really good plan,” he agrees. “But we don’t want to step on your toes, Thor, did the two of you have other plans for the day?”

“I would be most pleased to participate in the creation of this reward system. The Youngling had mentioned wishing to build a structure out of the small bricks—”

“Lego!” Clint supplies. “We can do that too. There’s a really wicked Simpsons set I’ve been trying to get Tasha to give me ever since she got ‘em.”

“After the chart,” Bruce says firmly.

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It’s probably for the best that the entire team is around to help out, because their sweet little guy who (unlike his Big self) so rarely argues with anyone does his very best to undermine the entire process. He talks everyone in circles about each and every item they want to contribute as instances of good behaviour, and is full of a seemingly endless number of reasons that any and all proposed rewards are unnecessary. Half an hour in to the exercise, and the large sheet of sketching paper on the table in front of them is still blank, and Steve decides it’s time to get a little firmer.

“Allright pumpkin pie, listen up. You can’t keep sitting here and saying no to everything; it wouldn’t make you feel good if we always tried to tell you your ideas were wrong, right?” He doesn’t expect an answer from the increasingly crabby baby who is bracketed by Thor and Phil, and he doesn’t receive one. “So if you want to reject a suggestion, you have to offer something you think should take its place. Okay?”

“Don’t wanna do this. Is stupid,” Tony grumps, looking around the room in evaluation before apparently deciding that Clint, his fellow Lego-enthusiast, is his most likely ally. “Make Springfield now?” To his credit, the archer recognizes the manipulation for what it is, and doesn’t hesitate for a second.

“Sorry squirt. If you want, a marathon Lego-building session can be one of your rewards though.” Tony shakes his head, then fumbles in his pocket, pulling out the now-familiar container of slime that he takes with him everywhere and starting to manipulate the bright green material with nimble fingers.

“I’m proud of you for using one of your coping strategies, Tony,” Steve offers. “But remember what I just said. What do you want as a reward instead of Lego?”
“Extra workshop time. Hate three hour limit.”

“Sorry, but we always have to follow Doctor Bruce’s instructions. Remember our big three house rules, the ones everyone follows? What’s rule number two?”

“Not putting ‘selves in danger.”

“Good, that’s exactly right, Tony. And listening to Bruce, and other folks at Medical when that’s required, definitely falls under that heading. Plus this chart is for when you’re little. If you want a different one for when you’re big we can do that, but for now let’s stay focused on things that would be appropriate rewards for little-you. Work stuff doesn’t count.” Tony’s hands start working faster and more aggressively with his slime, pulling and stretching it until he manages to start pulling some pieces apart from the whole with an audible snapping and popping sounds. “Honey, can you talk to me about why this is so hard for you?”

“Not a baby.” Tony’s continued fixation with age is wearing a little on everyone, especially in light of how sweet and content he’d been curled up with a bottle just hours before, but they haven’t pushed him on it since that first morning, and now doesn’t seem the best time to start (especially since Tony still seems unaware that they know anything about it).

“…okay. Well, that’s…we’ll talk about that another time. For now I’m a bit confused about what how old you are has to do with anything. Grown ups get rewards for things all the time, right? They get medals and prizes and commendations and all sorts of stuff.”

“Yeah, for things that matter,” Tony bites out, “not for dumb stuff like eating lunch.” The sudden viciousness to his voice sounds so wrong coming out of their little guy that Steve is briefly taken aback. And Tony is just working himself up more and more, yanking at the slime and breathing rapidly and harshly enough that Steve starts to fear he will trigger a coughing fit.

“Different things are hard for different people, and they all deserve to be rewarded. You might not think it’s a big thing when you understand references people make to movies or TV or music, but when I do that it makes my whole day. I feel proud of myself because it means that all the work I’m doing to try to fit in in this time and place is working. Like isn’t all for nothing.” As ever, coming at Tony with logic seems to cut like a blade through the web of anxiety and anger that’s surrounding him. “Can you tell me something that makes you feel proud of you, something that isn’t about your work with SI, or Iron Man?”

“…I-I dunno.” This may not come as much of a surprise to Steve (or to any of them, he suspects) but damn if it doesn’t hurt, anyway, to know how actively Tony despises himself.

“Alright. Well the chart is going to be one of the ways we work on that, alright? Because you need to see and understand and feel proud of all the great things you do. And yes, given that you have a huge piece of metal right in the middle of your chest that makes it a challenge for you to even breathe or lay down sometimes, you eating lunch is a very big deal. Can you trust us to see those things for you for right now, and you can just focus on one reward you’d like? Anything at all, we really love seeing you have fun sweetheart.” Every eye in the room is on their little guy, who sort of looks like he might crawl under the table in the face of all the attention; Phil evidently expects the same, because he loops his arm loosely around Tony’s waist, grounding him as much as he is comforting him.

“I…maybe fly? With Thor?” Steve’s immediate instinct is to say no, because this plan is not without its risks, and a part of him hates the idea of Tony going anywhere Steve can’t follow, especially while in headspace. But this isn’t just about him, not right now.
“You miss flying love?” Bruce asks gently, sliding his hand across the table and placing it gently atop one of Tony’s, which are mostly still now. “I think we could do that, but there would have to be conditions. You would have to promise to listen to Thor and do exactly what he says. And we would need to talk a little more first about some of the reasons flying in the suit is hard and scary for you right now, so that this doesn’t end up making things worse by accident. But you took a really big step yesterday when you talked to me about your nightmares, so I think you’ve already earned one sticker toward that reward.”

The creation of the chart remains a challenging activity for Tony; after proposing the flying, he withdraws back into himself as everyone continues adding reward-worthy behaviours to the chart. But he doesn’t try to stop them, and when he presses his painstakingly-chosen dinosaur sticker to the page, the cautious hint of a smile playing on his lips feels worth every second of frustration.

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The rest of the day goes so smoothly that it’s almost alarming; they are, after all, a group of people whose very existence as a team is predicated on the belief that worst-case scenarios will continue to arise. These moments of stillness and calm, while increasingly the very thing Steve lives for most, are also still a bit unnerving. The group ends up tearing into not just the Simpsons sets but several others, resulting in a bizarre pop culture mashup involving Lego-Homer teaming up with Lego-Indiana Jones to mount an attack on the Lego-Death Star. Ever the military strategist, Steve remains entirely unconvinced about putting their troops up against a battle station with nothing but a box of pink doughnuts and a tiny whip, but his objections are decisively overruled. It’s hard to be too upset about that when Tony is perched in Thor’s lap, correcting the building instructions that come with the toys and generating narratives for their play that are a bizarre mix of actual science (usually confirmed and enhanced by Bruce) and ridiculous fantasy (almost always encouraged and egged on by Clint and, surprisingly, Phil). No one can quite bear to tear down any of the structures, even though several of them were heavily ‘damaged’ during the course of the battle, so Clint eventually unveils a large dome cover (dear God is that crystal?) and places it atop the Lego. Struck by sudden inspiration, recalling the labels he’s seen next to artwork at the museum, Steve finds a thick sheet of fancy-looking paper and a fountain pen and writes ‘Battle of Springfield—Lego on Lego’ in his neatest penmanship before folding the sheet so that it can stand on its own. Tony giggles and everybody claps as the baby sticks the paper in front of the dome while Clint hums a ceremonial little tune.

It’s probably for the best that Tony himself had called the meeting they are all to attend the next day; the temptation to try to encourage their friend to stay little and for them all to find ways out of their adult commitments might have been too strong otherwise. But Tony is using his precious three hours of Bruce-approved work time to run his first team meeting, so nobody complains or acts as if they are anything but happy to see the Big version of the man standing at the head of one of the tower’s official meeting room in one of his usual crisp, expensive suits.

“The PR team sent me a very thorough report on how things are going post-AIM takedown. They’re thrilled with how Nat’s being received; her approval ratings have held steady, and they actually took a little bump after she told off that douchebag who tried to imply that her presence here is just symbolic. They have asked me to add, however, in a very large and bolded font—and who even uses Helvetica anymore?—that this does not mean you have free reign to start snarking your way through all remaining media functions. And there’s also a reminder here about leaving all weapons outside the door—aww, how adorable that they think they’re actually going to find all the places you have knives hidden on you at any given point in time. They’re so cute.”

“So more of the same, then?” Phil asks, sounding a little doubtful. “With Nat being groomed to take over for Maria, it might not be in SHIELD’s best interests to continue to have her be so publicly accessible.” Natasha’s promotion is news to Steve, and he’s clapping her on the back...
before it even occurs to him that most of them never really touched much before any of this started, especially not in settings as explicitly work-focused as this one. She stiffens just slightly, but doesn’t make any other move away from him as they all congratulate her.

“We can of course coordinate directly with SHIELD’s own PR team—”

“They were almost all Hydra and we have yet to really build that division up again, actually. Your team seems solid, Tony, and I’m sure we’d welcome their recommendations.”

“J, make a note. Right, anyway, my people actually agree with you to some extent, Coulson. They do think that in the wake of the Hydra infiltration SHIELD needs to have a bit more a public presence, and building on what’s already there with Tasha is a great place to start. But from the Avengers side of things, they don’t want Nat to be our only public face, especially given that the press and the public are so much more inclined to turn on women—yes I know it’s bullshit, but it’s true. They want us to consider doing a series of profiles, either with one of the more reputable networks, or with an independent online source.”

“Not it,” Clint says quickly. His tone is a very close approximation of his usual jovial manner, but there’s a tension to his frame that wasn’t there just a minute ago, and Steve frowns at the visual reminder that Clint, too, is still healing from the events of Loki’s takeover. And whether or not Steve continues to work for SHIELD beyond the Avengers Initiative or not, this is still his team, so he makes a note to speak to Phil about what forms of assistance the archer is receiving as soon as possible.

“Yeah I’m right there with you, Tweety,” Tony sighs with a self-depreciating little smile. “If things were different I would be the most natural place to start because I know this song and dance backward and forward by now, and I do have some work to do to recuperate from how things went down with AIM. But there’s no way we’ll be able to negotiate avoiding all questions about New York, and my having a panic attack in the middle of being asked about one of the only things I’ve ever done right is hardly likely to inspire confidence.” The parental part of Steve’s brain is not entirely dormant yet, and he can’t help but bristle at this.

“You’ve done a lot of things right, Tony. And it’s more than understandable that you don’t feel ready to talk about what happened just yet.”

“Thanks Captain Self Esteem.” The nickname lacks the bite of his and Tony’s initial exchanges, and Steve realizes that he’s actually missed this side of Tony. He loves their boy, loves his softness and his vulnerability, but Tony Stark is also fierce and unapologetically snarky, and teasing like this is just as meaningful a show of affection as his hugs and snuggles are when he’s little.

“Whatever, Shellhead.” They grin at each other, apparently for a little too long, because Clint starts making highly suggestive remarks about something he calls ‘googly eyes’.

“Oh don’t be jealous Birdy, I have plenty of Googly Eyes for you too. Now, as I was saying, Clint and I are not ideal candidates for this right now. Thor, you’re horribly charming and people are going to love you, but we probably want to give them a little more time to cool down about what your brother did before we try to get them invested in you. And naturally they want to save America’s Darling Spanglepants for last. So they’re wanting to start off either with Bruce or Phil.” It’s hard to say which of the two men looks most alarmed by this news, but Bruce is the first to vocalize his objection.

“I don’t see how letting a bunch of camera people follow me around as Bruce Banner is going to make anyone more comfortable with the Other Guy.” Tony simply arches a brow and waits, and Bruce follows where this is heading almost immediately. “Oh God, Tony, no. This is a terrible
idea. A profoundly awful—"

“I’m sorry, Science Bros, speak up for those of us in the back?” Clint asks, mercifully sparing Steve the need to ask. “What’s the play here?”

“They want Hulk, not Bruce. Well, more precisely they want both, but with an emphasis on humanizing Big Green,” Tony explains with a grin. Bruce shoves his chair back from the table and begins to pace the length of the room, fists clenched. Everyone tenses and begins subtly reaching for weapons. Everyone, that is, except Tony, who remains in place at the front of the room, looking entirely unconcerned.

“The Hulk can’t be humanized because the Hulk is not human,” Bruce snaps. “I know he cares about you, both sides of you, Tony, and that might make things confusing—” Steve winces, because Bruce bringing up Tony’s little self in the middle of a team meeting is a rather low and unexpected blow, but again, perhaps he himself is underestimating Big Tony, because he looks almost bored.

“Remember when we had that conversation transparent materials, Brucey Bear? Sit down and stop using unrelated shit to try to make this end quicker. I honestly don’t care because it couldn’t be more obvious that you don’t mean a word of what you’re saying, but you’ll regret it later, and I still do not do apologies.” Looking very much like he already does regret the words, Bruce folds himself back into his chair and rolls back to the table, avoiding everyone’s eyes. “Good. Now, the thing about the Hulk is that there’s already been a lot of footage taken of him, but unlike with the rest of us, we haven’t been able to get out in front of any of that. It’s always reactive, never something we planned. So they want us to hook some cameras up in the Hulk Room here in the tower, and show people what the Hulk is when he’s not responding to imminent threat in the heat of battle. It would be like a carefully curated video diary of sorts. I like that because it puts us in control of what people see and what they don’t, and it would also be a prime opportunity for you two to keep working on your mental pathway, Bruce. And I don’t have to tell you what kind of strategic value it could have if you and the Other Guy could actually communicate more clearly and consistently.” Leaving Bruce to take this in for a moment, Tony turns his direction to Phil. “You’re almost too easy to turn into an icon. You’re a hero, your ‘death’ triggered the team finally coming together, and while we were pretty pissed to learn you were enjoying a vacation in Tahiti while we were still in mourning—”

“It’s a magical place,” Phil grins.

“Yeah yeah, so we’ve heard.” And they have, Steve realizes, heard this exact phrase from Phil countless times. It sticks out not only because there have been moments where it has seemed breathtakingly cruel of Coulson to brag about his relaxing retreat to the very people who had liked and (in Clint and Natasha’s cases) loved him and been devastated by his loss, but also because Coulson is not typically a fan of repetition. His efficiency extends far beyond the speed with which he can submit paperwork or assemble a strike team; even when he’s only saying a few words, he always makes every single one of them count. Something prickles at the back of his neck, and he barely hears it at first when Tony keeps speaking. “Anyway, the point is, we might have been pissed, but that doesn’t erase the fact that you ‘died’ a hero, and for something you believed in when no one else, even the rest of us, did. You’re also the closest to an ‘everyman’ this group really has; hell, you’re a fan of Cap. People can identify with you.”

“Then maybe we have Coulson narrate the entire series,” Natasha suggests. “We can still have an objective external interviewer asking the actual questions, but using him as a kind of through-line is another way to give some sense of consistency to this group of, let’s face it, extremely different people.”
“Phil Coulson as the narrative Voice of God. I like it. So that would mean you and Big Green are up first, buddy. I’ll get to work installing the cameras in the playroom tomorrow. Too bad we can’t get Hulk into a suit, that would be adorable.”

“I hate all of you,” Bruce declares petulantly.

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Apart from the multiple attempts Tony makes to escape into the workshop as the remnants of his bronchitis continue to dissipate, the team settles into a comfortable rhythm in the days that follow. Steve spends the majority of his time at home studying, occasionally assisted by his teammates in helpful and not-so-helpful ways. (The fit Tony pitches when he finds out that they’re trying to teach Steve something called New Math is truly epic and results in the near-destruction of several of his textbooks.)

They also put together the schedule Phil had suggested, and Tony has little time coming up tomorrow. Even though it hasn’t been that long since he saw their little guy, Steve is so excited and full of potential plans for the day that he’s still awake when JARVIS announces Phil’s arrival on his floor at quarter after two in the morning. His entirely Stark-centered brain’s first assumption is that maybe Tony has had another nightmare (he’s been struggling with them all week), but Coulson’s expression and the suit he’s slipped back into practically scream that this is all-business.

“You’re needed. The helicarrier will be ready to transport you and Agent Romanov in roughly two hours.”

“I thought—I mean, I’ll help, of course I will, but I thought you had put me on some kind of leave from SHIELD while I was focusing on school. And Natasha’s all but retired, is she not?” Realization comes before Phil even has the opportunity to respond. “Bucky.” Coulson nods.

“We located Barnes. Or, to be more accurate, I believe Barnes has allowed us to get a fix on his position. Suit up.”

Steve has never thought of himself as a particularly complex man, emotionally speaking, so the onslaught of entirely conflicting feelings that arise from this news are almost more than he can take. The thought of finally bringing Bucky in from the cold, having the chance to help his best friend remember, and to be able to keep discovering and learning this new, bizarre world they’ve found themselves in together…after SHIELD’s fall, that had been all he could think of. The idea of someday bringing Bucky home had kept Steve’s feet moving one after the other, prevented him from curling up in bed and just giving up.

And then he’d found the team. Found Tony, and this, their ageplay, and it was…everything. But it was all still so damned fragile; Big Tony was still frequently ashamed of needing this from them. He’d already started trying to postpone tomorrow’s playtime—not, they were all quite sure, because he actually wanted to put it off, but because he feared becoming some kind of burden or obligation to them. To have to leave him now, however necessary the reason, risked setting back so much of their hard-earned progress.

And there’s absolutely no way Steve can avoid it.

“JARVIS? You’ll look after him for me? I mean, I know he has the others, and I trust them, I just…can you promise me anyway?”

“Of course, Captain Rogers. And might I make a suggestion?”

“I’d take every bit of help I can at this point, JARVIS. What do you got?”
“There’s three Stark Watch prototypes on the bench in Sir’s workshop. Take one for yourself and Agent Romanov?” Okay, that was not exactly the kind of assistance Steve was expecting.

“JARVIS, you know how I am with technology, unless the watch has a very large, very easy to operate button to turn that turns into a weapon of some kind, I’m not sure—”

“It’s not for you, Captain Rogers. You have asked me to care for Sir in your absence, trust that this will assist me in doing so. Keep the watch on as much as is practical, and do attempt not to damage it. And Captain Rogers?”

“Yes JARVIS?”

“Good luck.”

Chapter End Notes

The response to the last chapter was amazing! I am running out of new ways to say how incredibly touched and grateful I am for your support. But I’m going to keep saying it anyway, because you're all wonderful.

And thanks to those of you who weighed in about some potential future plot points; I want to re-emphasize that while Bucky is (as you can guess from the last scene) going to have a role to play, there's going to be more divergences than alignments with the events of Civil War. The team is already in a such a different place that having them completely break down like that wouldn't really make sense (and also it would put a real damper on the snuggling, and Tony needs snuggles!)
Choices and Hurts (Part One)

Chapter Summary

Tony struggles in Steve and Natasha’s absence, but finds an unexpected ally in Clint. Steve and Bucky begin making their way back to one another, but the reunion is not without its complications.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Brief, canon-compliant and canon-typical mention of Bucky’s treatment at the hands of Hydra.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reassuring words he’d spoken to Tony when Nat and Steve had made their goodbyes at four in the morning aside, Bruce is not entirely convinced this isn’t going to be one of the hardest days their makeshift little family has faced yet. Unable to get back to sleep, he fiddles with a StarkWatch prototype (given to him by Steve, with instructions to deliver it to Tony—as if the man wouldn’t know where the tech he’d just built was?) until JARVIS alerts him that their charge is awake.

The slightly foreboding feeling he’s been struggling against is in no way lessened when he arrives on the penthouse level to find Tony on his knees in his walk-in closet, shoving a large box Bruce would bet anything is filled with Little items into a back corner behind a row of dress shirts. They’d had a long talk when they made up the schedule about Tony’s habit of hiding all of his Little toys and clothes in bizarre corners of the Tower—this is not good. He’s also wearing a Ride the Lightning t-shirt and an extremely form-fitting pair of jeans he would never actually wear in the workshop because they’d constrict his movement too much. In short, the other man is doing everything he can to present himself as Big, and trying way too hard for it to be remotely convincing. Doing his best to hold in a thoroughly exasperated sigh, he reaches out to put an arm on Tony’s shoulder. The engineer awkwardly shuffles away from the touch (yep, definitely faking it—Tony loves being held and brushed against in any headspace, so if he’s avoiding it now it’s almost certainly because his hold on his adult-self is too tenuous to hold up to any show of affection).

“What are you doing?”

“Uh, well, traditionally one enters a closet to find clothes, Brucey bear, unless we’re talking about the more metaphorical meaning of being closeted. But that particular ship has long since sailed, I’m afraid; pretty hard to be in the closet when there’s footage of you having, if I do say so myself, pretty radical and imaginative sex in every possible combination readily available online.”

“See, I’d be inclined to think you’d just forgotten that you’re scheduled for some Little time today, but the fact that you’re aggressively bringing up sex in a clear attempt to make me uncomfortable tells me you are already well aware of that and are trying to deflect.” And if Bruce is honest with himself, Tony using sex this way after what had happened between them a few nights before is
enough to get under his skin. Because Tony might not have really known what he was doing when he’d offered it to Bruce in exchange for comfort, but he knows precisely what the effect of his words is right now. Bruce strongly considers leaving the room, giving Tony the win even briefly so that he can recover himself, and then remembers that while they’re down a couple of key members, he’s not alone in the Tower. “So you wanna stop this right now, or shall I have JARVIS call in the others so we can all help you get ready for the day? Nah, let’s skip right to that, actually, I’m sensing I’m going to need the reinforcements this morning—JARVIS?” A few seconds later, the AI confirms the others are on their way, and the knowledge that he’ll soon have support is enough to put Bruce back on even footing. He surveys Tony with an indulgent, amused kind of smile that a parent would direct at a child playing dress up in adult clothes, and his boy’s reaction is exactly as vehement as he expects.

“Just fuck off, Banner, alright? I’m not in the mood for this shit today, schedule or not.”

“Whatever messed up ideas you have about consent, Tony, if that were the case I genuinely think you would have used your safe word by now. And if it were true, if you just just couldn’t get into headspace or really didn’t want to for whatever reason, then your hands wouldn’t be shaking and clenched into fists, and you wouldn’t be breathing like you’d just run a marathon. But before the others get here, let me make space for you to say it, just on the off chance that I’m reading all of this horribly wrong and owe you a hell of an apology. Do you need to use your word?”

Bruce regrets the offer almost as soon as he gives it. Not because he ever wants to genuinely act without Tony’s consent, but because he suspects that if there were ever a time Tony might use his safeword to hide himself from them rather than out of genuine discomfort with the ageplay itself, this would be it. And they would respect it, they would have to, but the guilt would eat their little guy alive, and who knew when they’d be able to drag him out of the workshop and what condition he would be in when they did. Several times, Tony’s mouth starts to form the shape it would need to make the ‘s’ sound in suit, and Bruce braces himself, but the seconds that feel like hours tick on in silence. The feeling of relief is enough to make Bruce’s knees tremble slightly, and he makes a mental note to put a sticker up on Tony’s Good Behaviour chart for honesty. And then the others are streaming in, Thor wielding the hammer while Clint and Phil both look at him in amusement.

“JARVIS told us this wasn’t an emergency that required weapons, but some of us apparently had separation anxiety,” Clint explains. “What’s up, you two?”

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It only takes Phil a cursory glance between Bruce and Tony to recognize the tension in the room, but the former is affecting a deliberately casual air, leaning against the wall of the closet as if nothing is amiss. “Well, our boy is pretty insistent that he’s not in fact our boy today. Now, I’m somewhat skeptical myself, but I thought who better than the three of you for some additional input.” Thor, bless him, looks entirely confused by the play Banner is making here, and Phil himself is still attempting to choose the best way to proceed. Clint, who has often been quiet during the heavier conversations with Tony, beats all of them to the punch.

“Well, I mean, if dude says he isn’t little then he probably isn’t.” Bruce is completely stunned, not even seeming to notice the triumphant look Tony throws him, but as Stark makes to exit the now rather cramped closet, Clint spreads his arm across the length of the doorway. “But T, you know how these guys are, Phil and Bruce especially; they like their evidence before they can really accept that they’re wrong. So just for this once, maybe we humour them? We’ll get you all dressed for a little day, and we’ll go ahead like we normally would. And then in exactly three hours, when you’re undoubtedly still Big, I’ll personally give you back that rad shirt and those damn fine jeans and you can go on your merry way to the shop; I’m still waiting on those boomerang arrows, by the way.”
One of the things that has kept Clint alive all these years in the field is the way that he rarely does what anyone expects, not even the people on his own side. Every handler he’d had before Phil had tried to train this out of him. One by one, he’d watched as frustrated men and women had read Clint the riot act, subsequently complaining to each other about the agent’s inability to follow protocol, his seemingly random calls in the field that were nearly impossible to keep up with, let alone predict. None of them seemed to realize that in nearly every instance, Clint adhering rigidly to what SHIELD expected of him would have resulted in more civilian casualties, fewer objectives achieved, and, on at least two occasions, Clint’s own certain death. On the second occasion, when Phil had overheard the trainee working with Barton bitterly threatening to refuse to send in the med-evac team as punishment for Clint’s insubordination, he’d thrown the guy against the nearest wall, hissing furiously that trusting the system was not supposed to mean blind trust. When he’d been called to Fury’s office later that day, he’d fully expected to receive a notice of termination.

Instead, he had been handed Clint Barton’s file. And while he could probably blame a significant amount of his premature hair loss on the full-time job it was to try to keep Clint as safe as humanly possible (just hearing the phrase ‘Okay, this looks bad’ is still enough to make every muscle in Phil’s body clench), neither of them had ever looked back.

Since Loki, Phil has barely caught glimpses of this Clint; he hadn’t even consciously realized how very badly he missed him until this very moment, as he watches his ex-lover effortlessly manipulate the situation in their favour. In just a few carefully-chosen sentences, Clint has turned what would likely have been a drawn-out and ugly confrontation into something else entirely. Tony isn’t a fool, of course, he very likely knows Clint is not quite the ally he’s set himself up to be, but there’s no real way for him to disagree to this proposal without first admitting that he’s lied about feeling Big. And while Phil and Bruce’s first instinct is usually to call him on that kind of stuff, coming at Tony’s multiple layers of defenses head-on all the time risks making the entire process too hard on all of them.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Good! Tell you what, how about you pick out whatever you want to wear; still little stuff, just to appease these guys, but your call.” Tony chews his lip and then brushes past Thor to dig out something from the corner of the closet. Phil can’t help but sigh.

“Baby, we talked about this. You don’t need to hide all your little stuff away just because you’re not using it at a particular moment.” Tony doesn’t even seem to notice the mini-lecture he’s receiving; he’s peering down at the contents of the box, hands hovering above as if he’s afraid they’ll somehow harm him. Clint slides down onto the floor next to him and lightly nudges the other man’s knee with his own.

“Want some help, Tones?” he offers. “Doesn’t mean you’re not Big, there’s just a lot of options, isn’t there?”

“Shoulda never taught Steve about online shopping,” Tony mutters. His speech is already softening and slowing, losing the harsh and frantic edge it so often takes on when he’s his adult self. Even at his most stubborn, Phil would wager there’s no way their boy is going to make it through even half of the three hour trial period Clint had gotten him to agree to while keeping up this charade of being Big.

“I still regret re-introducing him to musicals most, myself. He hummed the Chicago soundtrack for like a week solid. I’m pretty sure Tasha was one bar of All that Jazz away from stabbing him.” Rifling through the hastily-gathered collection of clothes and toys and books in the box, Clint fishes out a red t-shirt printed with classic cars, and another covered in bright, multi-coloured
balloons. “Wanna pick from these?” The car shirt is a favourite of little-Tony’s, and Clint looks utterly unsurprised when he points to it. “Good choice. This shirt is badass. And I think there’s matching red underpants, isn’t there? And then how about your stretchy jeans on top, that okay?” Even far deeper in his headspace than he is now, Tony is usually difficult about having underwear chosen and put on him by other people, but he nods and follows Clint out of the closet to get changed without another word of complaint. For several long moments, everyone left in the room just stares after Clint and their charge, dazed.

“…damn.”

“Quite,” Thor agrees.

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No one seems to want to break the spell that Clint has cast over the day, so they all follow after him like recently-imprinted ducklings as he leads Tony to the kitchen with a casual arm around his shoulder.

“Sippy cup or bottle this morning, babe? As long as you’re just humouring us, I gotta say we were all pretty jealous to find out we’d missed the bottle, but it’s totally up to you.” Tony, who has been staring at the coffee pot with an almost fanatic glint in his eye, snorts.

“Jealous?”

“Yeah, jealous, buddy. Big time. We all brag like hell whenever we get to have one of your firsts; what do you think led to the epic Bruce/Nat armwrestling match the other day? They were bickering over who was going to get to teach you how to make that chocolate layer cake you wanted later this week. Before she left this morning she made Bruce swear on pain of death that he wouldn’t do it while she was gone. We might need to establish some kind of rule book at some point or things could get ugly. Just imagine what’ll happen when Steve starts to give Phil competition on Pinterest?”

“Never going to happen. I keep changing the passwords on his account,” Phil confesses, and it’s worth the slight pang of humiliation that comes along with this admission when the baby gives a reluctant giggle.

“If I have the bottle, can I have more chocolate milk after stupid juice? And can we sit on the couch and watch TV?”

Everyone is quick to agree to Tony’s conditions (especially since he’s already at the point where he’s asking for permission instead of making demands), and Phil smiles at the great pride Thor shows in teaching Clint how to get Tony comfortably situated in his arms to take the bottle. At first, Tony insists on holding it for himself, but his tendency to get dozy when he’s little in the mornings is making this a challenge; the bottle keeps swaying in his grasp and leaving drops of milk on his shirt.

“Want me to get that?” Clint suggests. “This episode of Pinky and the Brain is awesome—kudos on tracking all of these down, by the way, 90s cartoons are the best—and I don’t blame you if you don’t wanna have to mess around with holding the bottle while you’re watching.” Seriously, if Nat is some kind of Ninja-Mom, Clint is at the very least some kind of parenting wizard, because Tony takes him up on the offer and starts to nurse at the bottle without even bothering to take his eyes off the screen.

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“I thought you used pencil pretty exclusively for your sketches. Branching out, Cap?” After a
couple of months spent living amongst some of the most observant people he’s ever met, Steve really should be used to the fact that they notice things like this, but it still manages to take him by surprise more often than not. He considers trying to shove the sketchpad under the cushion beneath him, but he has long since accepted that between the paparazzi outside and the spies and geniuses inside, most concepts of privacy don’t really apply anymore. If he were very emphatic about being left alone about something he has no doubt the team would listen, but this, well, they’re going to find out anyway, so there’s no real use in delaying the inevitable. Capping his thick-tipped brush pen, he hands the book over to Natasha.

“Is this…are you drawing him a colouring book, Steve?” One day, Steve vows, he’s going to make it through an entire conversation alone with this woman without blushing like a primary schooler. Today is not that day. He can actually feel the blood rushing to his cheeks and the tips of his ears.

“I just…he seems so uncomfortable with us buying him stuff. I still plan on doing plenty of that anyway, because shopping for him is way more fun than shopping for myself—”

“Well if you expanded your horizons beyond plaid and grandpa-khakis when you’re in the Tower…” Nat interrupts, grinning unrepentantly as he glares.

“Anyway, I thought maybe something homemade would make him a little less guilty. And there’s so many books out there that show what a hero his alter-ego is, and none that know anything about the rest of him. I’m still learning, so the images aren’t nearly as complex as most of the colouring books nowadays, and lots of them aren’t very good—see, I messed up the tracing over the pencil sketch just there, and”—It becomes apparent rather quickly that Natasha is paying absolutely no heed to his anxious rambling, so Steve shuts up and tries not to fidget as she flips through the rest of the booklet. It’s full of little domestic scenes—one page shows Tony asleep on the workshop couch, Dummy hovering protectively over him. Another features a stylized Sanders dressed up in bits of all their costumes—the Iron Man helmet is on his head, face-plate open; Steve’s shield in one hand and Thor’s hammer in another while Widow’s bites adorn his wrist; Clint’s bow is also visible, slung over the sloth’s right shoulder, and he’s wearing the stretchy shorts Tony has recently developed for the Hulk.

Then she flips to Steve’s current favourite in book: a shot of Tony in one of the tutus he wears when he and Natasha dance together. (Tony hasn’t been well enough to practice again since the first time, yet, but Nat had brought out several of the tutus during his recovery when he’d been particularly down one day.) The background of the picture is filled with little renderings of ballet slippers and ribbons other costume details, so that the baby will have more to colour, but Nat appears to only have eyes for their boy, reaching out to run two fingers carefully over his dishevelled hair and the wide, broad smile that belongs to little-Tony alone.

“It’s beautiful, Steve, all of it. But this is…would you make a copy of this for me?”

“Of course. JARVIS is actually going to teach me to scan all of the pages into the computer before I give it to him, so that he can print as many of the pages over again as he wants.” She nods her thanks, and spends another several seconds staring at the page before handing Steve back the book with the kind of care he’s seen her use to dismantle weapons or care for injured civilians.

“You thought about how you want to deal with…all of that, and Barnes?” Not so long ago, he would have been inclined to read the fact of this question coming now, after the rather intimate and personal moment they’ve just shared, as a shrewd bit of manipulation on Natasha’s part; and really, until not that long ago, she probably would have meant it that way.

“I…I think I’m mostly afraid to get my hopes up about Bucky at all. I know it’s not like me, I usually like to have a strategy, to always be planning the next step. But with him…I feel like the
second I accept that it’s real, that he’s here and that he might be in good enough shape now to consider coming back with us, it’ll all slip through my fingers again.”

“Hope can be dangerous,” Nat concurs in that flat, toneless voice she uses when she’s repeating the many ‘lessons’ forced upon her in the past. “But you have to know what you’re going to say to him, and part of that probably needs to be based on some sense of what’ll happen if he does agree to go with you. You know we’ll back you regardless, right? If you need a break from...what we’ve all been doing, if you and Barnes need space—”

“NO,” he snaps. “I—that is, I appreciate it, Natasha, but I made a commitment and I’m not just going to abandon it. And I wouldn’t want to. Sometimes that’s the only part of my day that actually makes sense to me. I’m not sure how Bucky will fit into it, or if he’ll want to. The man I knew…we wouldn’t have had the fancy language for it like you do now, but he did like caring for people. After the serum, he sometimes seemed like he was...well, not disappointed that I was well, but like he wasn’t quite sure how to be around me now that I suddenly didn’t need the kind of help he was so used to giving me. But my therapist and I have talked a few times, about him, and she’s done her best to remind me that no one really knows who Buck is now, and pressuring him to be the man I remember could just leave him feeling rejected. So I guess all I was really planning to say was that he...well, he has all the time and space he needs to figure that out, and all I really want is to just be there. However and whenever he wants.” It sounds laughably clumsy and simplistic when he says it out loud (see, Sam, this is why I don’t practice speeches ahead of time). “God, Nat, I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“You’re offering someone back their right to self-determination, not because it’s yours to give, but because they need to be reminded that it was theirs before it was stolen away. It doesn’t need to be eloquent, it just needs to be honest, and that does tend to be your forte, Rogers.” She touches a small scar on her left hand, just below her thumb joint, and smiles faintly. “When Clint made a very similar offer to me, the first thing he said was ‘come with me if you want to live’ and I didn’t find out until almost two years later that he was quoting a shitty action movie. If I’d realized he was pretending to be Arnold Schwarzenegger, I probably would have shot him on the spot.”

Tony wakes with a start from his mini-nap grumpy and re-committed to fighting his headspace with all he’s got. Phil starts to consider the mittens Bruce had used to drop Tony so hard and fast the first day he’d been ill, but Clint continues to take things in stride, acting as if Tony’s internal struggle isn’t even registering with him. The archer returns briefly to his floor, and returns to the penthouse with a new board game that he insists was not even for Tony, just something he’s willing to share.

“It’s co-operative, see? We have to work together to stop a bunch of deadly viruses from overtaking the globe.”

“So just a regular Tuesday then,” Tony quips, mustering something resembling his Big-self’s smirk. The game turns out to be more complicated than what they would normally play together, especially when Tony is little, but the complexity and the team-based play seems to be working in their favour now; the engineer is easily drawn in without feeling insulted by an activity he deems too young for him, and Thor and Phil’s lack of familiarity with this style of game puts him in the position of an expert. He, Bruce and Clint lead them all through a few rounds, and soon they’re off and running. It takes Thor in particular a while to catch on to the rules, but what he lacks in procedural knowledge of how games like this work, he more than makes up for with supportive and highly entertaining commentary. Phil is in and out of the room frequently to check in with SHIELD, but he chimes in when he can, and (okay, pretty unsurprisingly) he’s especially talented at ensuring the team’s resources are spread out strategically across the board. Just as Tony is about
to create a cure for the last virus, JARVIS interrupts.

“Sir, my apologies, but Agent Barton asked me to alert you once three hours had elapsed.” Phil is pretty tempted to snap at the AI, because seriously could he not have given Tony one more minute to finish the game he’s been enjoying before they deal with his inevitable crisis over whether or not he wants to admit that he’s little today? Before he can, however, Bruce stamps on his toe and inclines his head toward Tony, who is pouting in the direction of the nearest camera. And damn if Phil isn’t feeling constantly behind today; the unexpectedly effective combo of Clint and JARVIS obviously know exactly what they’re doing.

“Aww man, just a couple more minutes?” Tony pleads.

“You can have all the time you want. We can even play another game of this, or try something else. If you really want to be Big today that’s one thing, but you don’t have to be, especially not for our sake, squirt.” It’s still a conscious thing Phil has to work on, to let his guard down enough to be expressive around Tony the way the boy sometimes needs in order to feel assurance. It’s even more complicated on days like this one, when he has to switch frequently between being Agent Coulson and Tony’s caregiver. But he tries to let as much of the fondness as he feels for their charge come through as he can, and between that and Thor’s wide, inviting grin, and the silly little wink Bruce gives him, their boy finally seems inclined to accept Clint’s word. He’s still way more wound up than he tends to be on little days—Steve and Nat’s absence is really doing a number on him, and Phil doubts they’ll make it through the rest of it without needing to try to get at why that is. But any step that isn’t backward feels pretty big right now, and he’s pretty sure they all breathe a sigh of relief when Tony leans against Clint’s side. “Hi buddy. What’s that noise for?”

“Change,” the baby grumbles, tugging at the clingy long-sleeved shirt Clint has on. Phil is rather enjoying the view, himself, and leans over to ruffle Tony’s hair.

“Excuse you? Don’t you think that’s a little rude, champ?” Tony seems as unconcerned about this breach of etiquette as many young children would be, and tugs harder at the shirt.

“Please? Want sweater.”

“Oh, you want the big purple hoodie so you have an excuse to get zipped up in there with me? And you thought the best way to get there was by making me doubt my fashion sense, huh snugglebug? Devious little stinker. Tell you what, you go ahead and create the last vaccine to secure our victory, and then I’ll go find it.”

“Agent Barton, you may wish to start your search in Agent Romanov’s quarters.”

“Ha! I KNEW she’d been stealing it! Now I’ll have proof. You’re the best, JARVIS.”

“I ask only that you remember this when Agent Romanov attempts to disable my access to her floor and force me to speak only in Latin, Sir.”

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Since learning his best friend was still alive, Steve has imagined their first real conversation hundreds of times. None of them, however, started with Bucky declaring,

“I hate you.”

Yeah, not so much what Steve had dreamed about. And he’d had every reason to be optimistic; far from hiding, Bucky had made himself extremely easy for SHIELD to find today, setting off a series of explosions that had rocked a small Hyda-operated compound and then standing amid the
ruins until they'd arrived. SHIELD had had the sense not to confront the Winter Soldier immediately with the sight of a helicarrier given that both Steve and Bucky had nearly died the last time they had been on one together, so they’d dropped Steve several miles away and he’d made his way on foot with Nat following behind. So here he now stood in front of his oldest friend, whose willingness to be found apparently did not mean his feelings about Steve are wholly positive.

Bucky’s hair is still long and scraggily, so different from the clean, short cut he’d worn so well in the forties, and the sight of his massive silver arm is a continual, jarring reminder that the man before Steve has faced decades of harm and isolation. But he’s also here, and even the venom in Bucky’s voice right now is such a sharp contrast to the robotic, emotionless tones of the Winter Soldier that a part of Steve welcomes it, the same way he welcomes the continued absence of the mask Bucky had been wearing when they’d first re-met.

“So you still..know who I am, then?” Bucky’s silver arm twitches, which seems like an emotional response until the other man winces and clutches at it with his other hand. “Buck? You okay?”

“Hasn’t worked right since…mission. Has to be punishment for failed mission.” And all of a sudden, Bucky loses his unnatural stillness entirely, raising a piece of heat-blistered wood from the ground and throwing it past Steve’s head with a low scream that sounds more like an animal than anything else. Steve dodges it easily, doesn’t believe it was ever meant to actually connect with him in the first place, because even with one arm potentially down, neither Bucky nor the Soldier tends to miss. “This is your fault. I had orders and when I followed them it didn’t hurt. Things made sense. Nothing makes sense now, and it hurts, it hurts all the time. Why did you do this?”

“Because you had a right to know. You might not be my Bucky anymore, and if you want nothing to do with me I swear I’ll…I’ll do my best to leave you be to build whatever life you want. But someone once told me…” He swallows past the lump that rises in his throat every time he lets himself linger on thoughts of Peggy. “They told me that I had to allow the people I love the dignity of their choices. HYDRA tried to take that from you, but they failed, they were failing long before you and I crossed paths again. I’ve seen your file; they had to…wipe you, constantly, use force to keep you compliant and following orders. They did that because whatever else may have changed, you have always been a good and decent man, Buck. I didn’t magically give that part of you back. I just…reminded you it was there. I’m sorry it hurts. I’m sorry I didn’t look for you after that day on the train, I’m sorry for…so many things. And I swear to you, if you come with us today and let us help you that doesn’t have to mean anything about our future. I wouldn’t blame you if you can’t forgive me. But there are people who can help with the hurt, really incredible people. Hell, I live with most of ‘em—Howard’s son, do you remember Howard Stark?” Steve’s babbling, he knows he’s babbling by this point, but the wounded, guttural noise Bucky makes in response to the name is the very last thing he could have anticipated. “Buck? What’s wrong?”

Chapter End Notes

Phil’s internal musing about Clint saying "Okay, this looks bad" is a reference to the Fraction/Aja run of Hawkeye comics, almost all of which tend to start with Clint introducing the action by saying this.

You all remain the best, most supportive readers anyone could ask for. Thank you for the kudos and comments; they really do keep me going! And on that note, I have reading week coming up next week, and while I need to get a ton of dissertation writing done during the 'break', I'm also going to try my best to get two chapters (or
perhaps just a particularly lengthy one chapter, depending on where the breaks end up feeling most natural to me) posted to celebrate.
Choices and Hurts (Part Two)

Chapter Summary

Steve learns what happened to Howard and Maria Stark. Clint continues to shine as a caretaker even as he faces unexpected stresses.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Brief but graphic description of Howard and Maria Stark's deaths from Bucky's point of view. As usual, if you need a redacted version, or more info, just let me know and I'll be happy to help.

And just a general warning that there's some fairly heavy angst in this chapter. If you need a fluffy palate cleanser afterward, I suggest re-reading the Sick Day chapters ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alright, jokers, the first, and even the second and third times that one of you managed to steal half the stirfry ingredients out from under my nose was pretty funny. But like, we’re about to run out of vegetables for me to cut up, and while a sick part of me finds the thought of Tootsie Roll stirfry appealing, I suspect that's one of those dreams that is better off never being realized. So confess, repent and vow never again to thieve from thy Hawkeye overlord, on the double.”

“I’m pretty clearly all the way across the room,” Phil volunteers immediately.

“I so wouldn’t put it past you to have a way to get around that. You’re not in the clear, but you’re not highest on my list of suspects. Banner?”

“I’m a genius. If I were going to steal food from you, I would definitely not be standing so obviously nearby, thereby making myself the easiest one to blame. I’d suggest talking to the never-not-hungry demigod over there.” Thor replies by opening his mouth, which is full of half-chewed Swedish Berries.

“Gross, dude, seriously. And why are you eating candy when I’m in the middle of cooking dinner anyway?”

“I feel the pangs of hunger now, my friend!” Oddly, Clint believes all of them, but this only leaves one suspect, and Tony has such a hard time with food, he couldn’t possibly—he turns just in time to see the baby, who has been seated on the island and watching Clint, pop a slice of carrot in his mouth. The sight is such a surprise that Clint entirely forgets his mock outrage.

“You’ve been eating all the veggies baby boy?” Immediately, Tony stops chewing and freezes, turning his absurdly big brown eyes on Clint. Even if he were actually pissed instead of over the goddamn moon that their kid is voluntarily eating more than he’s required, that look would slay him for sure. The rest of the team is staring at the Tony in hope and disbelief; Bruce is slowly advancing on the baby, and he appears about a second away from digging out the notebook
tracking all-things-Stark that Clint is quite certain stays on him at all times now.

“Love, no one is upset with you, believe me. Can you tell me something though? Are you just particularly hungry, or is there something about this dinner you really like? Or were you just having fun driving Clint a little bit batty?” Tony grins at the last, but seems to really there’s at least some degree of earnestness behind Bruce’s question, because he gives it thought as he finishes chewing his stolen carrot.

“Small?”

“What, like the pieces are small? Does that make it easier for you sometimes?” In what has become his go-to de-stressing move of the day, Tony reaches out with grabby hands to snag a bit of Clint’s hoodie. Phil’s all-knowing shtick sometimes comes in handy, and this is one of those times, because before Clint even has to ask him to take over the food prep, the man is right behind him holding a hand out for the wooden spoon. Not so long ago they’d spent a lot of nights like this, sharing the close quarters of one another’s kitchens, exchanging teasing touches and burning more than one meal when many of those touches became something more frantic and needy. Perhaps Phil’s stuck in memory lane a bit too, because he take far longer than necessary to take the utensil from Clint, letting his fingers drag slowly across the pulse point at his wrist, and he gives Clint a long, heated glance. Once a look like this would have been a promise; now, it’s more like a gentle, probing question, but the incendiary effect is rather similar. After taking a minute to feel just a tad sorry for himself (and, okay, more than a little horny, because damn, living with two of his exes and a houseful of other gorgeous people is definitely a blessing and a curse), Clint scales the island and presses himself up behind Tony so he can zip them into the sweater.

“Alright squirt, we’re all tucked in tight together. Answer Bruce’s question now please?”

“Sometimes small feels like…won’t get stuck.” Banner beams in response; it’s hard to believe he’s even the same quiet, reserved dude Clint had first met when the guy looks about a step away from tossing Tony into the air in celebration. Even Phil, who has been anxious and tense about Nat and Steve’s mission all day, cracks a smile.

“Buddy, that’s really good. And that’s a really simple way for us to help make things easier for you; it costs us nothing to cut things into smaller pieces before you see them. You’re such a good boy for telling us that. Wanna come help me put a sticker up on your chart?”

“But I shouldn’t need that…specially when I’m Big. Should be able to do it myself. ’s silly. No sticker.”

“Who’s in charge of deciding that, munchkin? I don’t think it’s you,” Clint reminds him. “Besides, that puts you one step closer to a reward!”

“Wanna really earn ‘em.” Bruce holds out a page full of Lord of the Rings-themed stickers, distracting Tony a bit with the sticker-choosing decision that, it has turned out out, their baby always treats with the same hyper-focused attention he gives to upgrading the bots or making gear for the team.

“Love, Phil was right. It’s a really really big deal that you told us something that can make getting food into you easier. We have a whole list of stuff to help with that now, don’t we? Sometimes we meditate, and sometimes you exercise right before meals, and now we know that it’s a lot easier for you to deal with food when it comes to you in small pieces. You’re making real progress, and we know it’s hard for you to be proud of you, but that just means we get to be extra proud in the meantime. Now can you tell me which stickers you want? You get to pick two. One for helping us learn how to help you with food, and one for the very brave choice you made when you and I were
talking this morning.” Tony fidgets nervously in the sweater and peers up at Clint. As he’s at least stopped actively arguing about being rewarded, Clint doesn’t see any harm in helping the baby out a little.

“Well we should probably pick a hero and a villain so things stay balanced right? Don’t want your sticker chart getting overrun by bad guys. So let’s see. How about Saruman for the villain. Now you pick a hero for me.” After more serious consideration, Tony selects Merry, and he allows himself to be freed from the hoody long enough for Thor to pick him up and help him press the stickers on his chart.

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Though everyone is buoyed by the success of dinner, Steve and Tasha’s absence casts a long shadow over the evening; Tony tenses every time Phil leaves the room to check-in, and on the third such occasion, when Phil is gone for over half an hour, even the rousing game of piggyback he’s been playing with Thor isn’t enough to distract the baby.

“Go find Phil?” he asks Clint, turning the damn doe eyes on him once more. Clint is already more than tempted enough to use the vents for unsanctioned updates, he so does not need their kiddo encouraging him further. It’s a relief when JARVIS unexpectedly steps in.

“Dr. Banner, do you have the watch I asked you to bring up? Put it on Sir’s wrist, please.” From the puzzled way his brows knit together Tony seems just as in the dark about this as the rest of them, but he trusts his AI absolutely, and holds his wrist out without even asking for further explanation. After several seconds, he gives a little start and beams at the nearest camera.

“J, is that—”

“Captain Rogers’ pulse, Sir. Forgive me for admitting that the idea was originally derived from the iWatch, but your haptic technology is far superior. And as you seem to take a great deal of comfort from hearing the Captain’s heartbeat, this seemed like it might ease your anxiety when he’s absent on missions without you. Agent Romanov is wearing one as well, you need just swipe horizontally to move between them.” For once, Tony is staring at his own tech with the kind of awed amazement that the rest of them always do, and Clint would definitely kiss JARVIS if it were humanly possible. “He is perfectly well, Sir. They both are.”

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Many miles away, Steve doesn’t necessarily feel well, even if his heart rate is holding steady. Bucky is coming apart at the seams and he doesn’t even know why; to the best of his knowledge, Bucky and Howard had numerous interactions, all of them reasonably pleasant, so he’s at a complete loss as to what trigger he’s even stepped on here. And the longer he takes to puzzle it out, the more distressed Bucky seems to grow, pacing the ruins of the Hydra facility and occasionally reciting an incomprehensible string of numbers mixed with what sounds like several foreign languages.

“Buck, we don’t have to talk about whatever it is that upset you, I’m sorry I brought it up. I just thought…well it doesn’t matter what I thought, it was obviously wrong. Still just a punk, I guess.” The invocation of Bucky’s old nickname for him wins Steve a weak smile, even if the pacing keeps up.

“…is he one of the ones you live with? His son?”

“Wha—oh, yeah. The whole building is his, actually. He’s this really successful businessman and inventor, and I can barely even follow what he’s saying sometimes, but he’s absolutely brilliant.” Steve could probably keep going on this topic for an embarrassing length of time, but he’s afraid if
he keeps talking he might give away too much. And even if he trusted himself not to just blurt out all the ways in which Tony is incredible, it’s hard to miss the way Bucky’s face falls further. “There’s plenty of room for you there, too. I mean, we would have to ask Tony, of course, but he’s a real generous guy, and I’m sure he’d like—”

“I can’t come with you.” The temperature outside feels like it instantly drops several degrees at this pronouncement, and it’s all Steve can do not to lunge at Bucky and cling to him, beg him to stay, because they can’t have got this close only for his best friend to slip away again. He can’t.

“That’s not true, you can, I swear he’s not the kind who would judge or hold any of this over your head. Everyone in the tower, we’ve all made some pretty big mistakes.” Bucky lets out another of those horrible noises he’d made when Steve had first mentioned Howard, but this time he turns on Steve, shoving him against a beam that wobbles perilously when they collide.

“You. You have no idea what I’ve done. You stand here and hand out forgiveness like you can even conceive—Captain fucking America.” Steve has never had simple or unmixed feelings about his title, but to hear his best friend in the world spit it at him like it’s something dirty hurts far more than it should, certainly worse than any physical blow Bucky could have landed. “The War made you into the embodiment of heroism, and it wasn’t even a lie; you’ve always been that good. But you can’t imagine what it is to be twisted and broken and remade into something you can’t even recognize, to know you can never even begin to atone. Hell, parts of it I don’t even remember. You get that, Stevie? I’ve taken enough lives that I can’t remember them all.” The silver hand is at Steve’s throat, and he can feel it, how easily even his serum-enhanced frame could be broken apart by the man next to him. And he would let him, the same way he had on the helicarrier, because the only option worse than Steve dying by Bucky’s hand is the thought of Steve himself being the cause of any more harm coming to this man.

“You don’t remember because you were brainwashed and tortured. And we can do this all day, you can threaten me and hurt me and cuss at me all you like, and I’ll take it, because I meant what I said before. I’m not leaving you again—’m with you to the end of the line.” The hand at his throat spasms and tightens.

“I killed them just like this—Howard Stark and his wife. Well, her I strangled—him, I used this hand, the one around your throat. I hit him and hit him until I felt his skull cave in, and he—he knew. He said my name, before he died, rank and everything. Of the two of us, he was the only one who knew who it was that was about to take his life.”

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Though being able to remotely assure himself of Steve and Natasha’s safety does wonders for his state of mind (thank you JARVIS!), absolutely no one believes Tony’s claim that he’ll be fine sleeping on his own that night. To head off his complaints, Clint lets the baby choose two people he wants in bed with him; this backfires slightly when the little genius picks Phil and Clint. The mischievous glint in his eyes suggests their boy is attempting to play matchmaker, probably trying to build off of what he must have picked up between the two of them in the kitchen.

“You’re a little troublemaker you know,” he informs Tony, sliding into the giant bed next to him. It’s annoyingly impossible to stay upset with him, though, especially when the kid is dressed in a white sleeper that’s made to look like it’s covered in multi-coloured marker scribbles. “And really, do you have to be so cute? It’s honestly obnoxious how adorable you are, I hope you know that.”

“Shh. Sleepy.”

“Oh now you’re sleepy? Try to put you down for a nap and you act like I should be locked in the Fridge, but now that I’m trying to talk about your absolutely shameless manipulation of all your
caretakers with your big brown eyes and wiggly little bunny nose and suddenly you’re invested in getting the recommended eight hours of sleep?” Phil walks in midway through this little rant, wearing a set of pyjamas made to look like a business suit, kind of like the t-shirts that look like tuxedos. Clint had bought them for him as a joke nearly two years ago, and Phil had sworn he’d incinerated them at the earliest possible opportunity.

“Is Clint keeping you awake, sweetheart?” The little shit somehow dial up the level of pathetically adorable in his gaze, and lets out a little whimper for good measure. “Aww poor thing. ’Mere, I’ll protect you.” Tony snuggles down into the blankets, Sanders tucked securely under one arm, and nearly purrs as Phil puts an arm across his belly and rubs lightly in circles. And apparently he is legitimately tired, because he’s out in near-record time. Though before he falls asleep the little brat makes sure to reach over with his free hand and tug Clint’s arm onto his stomach too. Clint very nearly calls him out again for the sheer gall of this ploy, but then Phil interlaces their fingers.

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Clint falls asleep happier than he can remember being in ages. And then he wakes to chaos. Phil, who tends to dream in silence, is begging, screaming actually, for someone to let him die. Every few seconds his entire body jerks and shudders with such violence that it manages to move the huge, heavy bed slightly. For far too long, Clint is frozen in place; while some missions are above his clearance level, he knows most of Phil Coulson’s service history intimately. The other man has endured torture multiple times, and of course he’d screamed (one of the first things SHIELD teaches its agents is that toughing it out in silence is strategically foolish, and something that only happens in the movies). To the best of Clint’s knowledge, though, Phil has never, ever been brought to the point of pleading for his life to end. He could of course ‘just’ be dreaming, but his nails are digging into the palms of his hands hard enough to draw blood, and his voice is going hoarse with the force of his shouts and it just doesn’t feel likely that this is something his mind is fabricating. It’s surprising he hasn’t knocked Clint or Tony straight off the bed, actually...

Tony. For a moment his stomach leaps to his throat, because the baby is no longer between them, but a hurried glance around the room reveals their little boy to be curled up in the corner. His legs are pulled up to his chest, and he’s rocking himself quickly backward and forward, sobbing silently.

The choice between comforting his former lover and his kid is absolutely agonizing, but there’s no way he can leave Tony on the floor by himself in headspace another second.

“Babe, ’Mere. Come see me. It’s alright, buddy, it was just a bad dream, and JARVIS is going to help us wake Phil, right J?”

“Of course, Agent Barton,” the AI confirms grimly, and he begins speaking to Coulson at increasingly loud volumes. Meanwhile, Clint works on untangling Tony’s limbs, which is proving more difficult than anticipated because he only starts crying harder and flailing every time Clint lays hands on him.

“Tony, it’s just me, squirt. I’m not going to hurt you, but you gotta let me check you over and make sure you’re alright.” Phil comes to with a sudden gasp, and Tony is so startled by the noise that he forgets to fight Clint for just a moment. Feeling only slightly better than pond scum about doing so, Clint seizes the opportunity and unfolds Tony’s body from its pretzel-like formation, realizing almost instantly why his boy had so resisted being touched: almost the entire bottom half of his sleeper is sopping wet, and he sobs with renewed intensity when Clint’s hand brushes against it. Phil is still audibly struggling to regain control of himself in the bed, and the helplessness of watching two people he cares so much about in pain at the same time is almost enough to push Clint into panic. But for better or for worse, his training kicks in, dulling the metallic taste in his
mouth that strong hits of adrenaline have always brought with them.

“JARVIS, call Bruce and ask him to bring his medical stuff so he can take a look at Coulson—shut up Phil, you don’t get a say in this right now. And JARVIS, can you also call Thor, tell him I need his help carrying Tony down to my floor for a bath? I know, I know you don’t want to buddy, but you’ll feel so much better once you’re all cleaned off, trust me.” Tony keeps struggling in his arms, but after a moment Clint realizes he’s trying to get at Phil, and maybe it’s not the best idea, but the prospect of being able to help both of them at once is damn appealing right now, so he helps Tony back up onto the bed, settling the baby in Phil’s lap and then seating himself against Coulson’s back, legs straddled so he’s encompassed from both sides. As Clint had guessed, Phil doesn’t even seem to realize that Tony’s wet, let alone care that it’s gotta be seeping through the silly suit pyjamas; he just takes a shuddering breath and wraps a trembling arm around Tony’s waist. “Okay you two. We’re all going to breathe to my count, nice and slow until the others get here. You gonna be my helper, Tones? Wanna remind Phil how we breathe from our bellies to help ourselves calm down?” And of course if there’s anything that can get their little guy to force his way through his own panic and shame, it’s the prospect of aiding someone else, particularly a team member; Tony gives a serious little nod, and presses Phil’s hand to his chest just below the arc reactor. “That’s my good boy. Now in, two three and hold, out two three. Again.”

They’re still in their human-centipede formation when Bruce comes into the room at a dead sprint.

“What happened? Who’s hurt?” By this point, Phil has recovered himself enough to sound a bit embarrassed as he answers.

“Nothing, Bruce, just a bit of an overreaction from Clint. Sorry to have woken you—”

“Shut. Up. And keep breathing, Coulson. Bruce he had—dream would be way underselling it. Have JARVIS show you the footage once Thor and I take Tony downstairs, but I think he might have been remembering something. Not any mission of his I’m familiar with, but not like any nightmare I’ve ever seen him have either.”

“I’m not even the kind of doctor you guys usually act like I am. I’m definitely not a psychologist or any other speciality that might be most called for here, Clint. But I’ll stay with him and check him over, get him changed.” The last seems like a bizarre addition until Clint realizes Bruce must have picked up on the smell of urine and assumed it originated from Coulson. To his everlasting credit, Phil doesn’t bother correcting him.

After extracting multiple promises from both Bruce and JARVIS that he’ll be called the second Phil’s condition changes, Clint follows Thor and Tony down to his floor. Without both their attention devoted to assisting Phil, Tony goes back to the horrible, silent sobs that had rocked him upstairs, and Clint…well, Clint’s pretty damn terrified.

Part of him might have resented being slotted pretty firmly in the ‘Fun Parent’ role when this all started, but he can hardly really blame the team, either. When surrounded by hyper-competent people like Steve and Bruce and Phil, who always know exactly what to say and who seem to handle the innumerable Serious Conversations they’ve had with Tony without even breaking a sweat, it had been easier not to fight it, to just let it happen. And though for very different reasons, Thor too has been a bit sidelined through most of this process, his fear about making a mistake leaving him content to leave the major decisions to the others and act primarily in a support role. They are, quite frankly, the last two people on the team anyone (themselves included) might have picked to handle this.

But they’re also all Tony’s got right now.
“Okay bud. I know you and Phil and Steve have been working on baths. How high is it okay for me to put the water up?” Tony gestures to a spot just under his belly-button, which is totally workable, and from what Clint knows from the others, a vast improvement from where he’d started. “Great. Thanks babe. Will it help you to sit right in Thor’s lap?”

“’m icky,” Tony protests, gesturing to the soiled sleeper that the demigod has just stripped from him.

“It would comfort me much to have you close, Youngling. Worry not about that which is so easily washed away.” Thor settles himself in the Jacuzzi and then lifts Tony into his arms like the other man weighs nothing. Clint spares a moment of jealousy for the way Thor and Steve both can lift and move their baby so easily, but more than anything he’s grateful to not be alone right now.

It’s a quiet, strictly functional bath; no one tries to engage Tony in play, and other than the occasional words of comfort in English and Asgardian, particularly when they wash Tony’s genitals, thighs and butt, no one says very much. Clint considers trying to summon a Steve-esque motivational speech, but it seems such a waste when Tony is so obviously exhausted in every possible way and unlikely to take in more than every fifth word. But eventually, Thor starts humming softly, a slow, haunting tune that sounds both like a lullaby and like an expression of mourning. Though he’s uncharacteristically quiet about it, the sound fills the entirety of the room, settling over everything like the light coating of frost that currently covers the windows of the Tower.

“Our mother used to sing it to Loki when sleep eluded him, as it often did,” Thor explains, rising to his feet as the tub drains without even bothering to set Tony down. Clint dries them both off with one of Tony’s thick towels and they all move into the bedroom. Clint’s bed isn’t quite the size of Tony’s, but it’s more than large enough for the three of them, and he has no intention of letting the baby go back upstairs to deal with his wet mattress tonight. “Shall I fetch a fresh set of pyjamas?”

“Sure, Thor, that’d be great. Get a status report on Phil for me too, would you?” Tony is shivering, and moves to slide his naked body under the covers, but Clint puts a hand on his hip. “Shh. I know, I know you’re cold. But I want to talk to you about something quickly.” Without giving himself too much time to second-guess the decision, Clint digs quickly through his closet, and returns to the bed with what is quite clearly a diaper bag over his shoulder. Immediately, Tony whimpers. “No, buddy, don’t panic. Just listen to me okay? We don’t have to use these. I will never, ever force them on you. But you are very little and very upset right now, and Steve and Nat are gone, and you just saw something pretty scary happen to Phil. This might be a really nice way for you to feel just a little bit safer for a while. Saying yes to diapers right now wouldn’t mean saying yes to them forever, either; we could use them tonight and then never again if that’s what you want. You just have to be our good, brave little guy for just a couple minutes longer and tell me what you need.”

“D-dunno.”

“Alright. That’s okay. How about we give ‘em a shot, then, but the second you start to feel not okay, you tell me and I’ll Hulk tear it off you. Deal?” He receives a hesitant little nod, and immediately gets to work.

Much as it does during mission-critical moments, Clint’s head starts to filter out all other stimuli while he comes to grips with this. The diapers were his idea, something he’d argued vehemently for and taken charge of researching and ordering. He hadn’t been able to explain why at the time, but he’d had a lot of time to consider it since then, and he thinks it comes down to the importance of fluids to field agents. Blood, sweat, piss, come, agents often exchanged these most intimate substances with one another in circumstances beyond their control, but when they chose it?
first time they willingly let another see them bleed, see them cry? That was as close to many of them ever got to saying ‘I love you’, and it was often far more permanent; he’d expressed love to Natasha dozens of times, some joking, some serious, but he would remember, always, the first time she had come to him after a mission gone wrong and let him patch her up instead of licking her wounds in private. He might never be able to give Tony everything the others can, but Clint is absolutely confident that if their boy lets him, he can give him this, can show him how painfully wonderful it is to have your body known and cared in such intimate ways by another person.

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The next few minutes happen as if Tony is somehow both outside of his body and intensely within it at the same time. Nervous goosebumps erupt on his as he feels Clint gently part his thighs. He rubs Tony’s penis and thighs with a bit of creme and then sprinkles him with a light dusting of powder. While not quite Thor or Steve level of strong, the archer still moves his body around with ease, lifting Tony’s hips up in the air to slide the diaper underneath; the padding feels way thicker than he’d thought it would, and he makes a quiet nose of protest as Clint does the tapes up.

“What’s up, babe? Too tight?”

“Uh-uh. Big.”

“Aww yeah I know it’s pretty thick buddy. These ones are specifically made for nighttime so there are no leaks. If you’re still in them tomorrow we can put you in something thinner, promise. Now let’s just get this other side done up, there we go. Wanna give a little wiggle for me, make sure it stays on okay?” He does, blushing anew at the loud crinkling sound. “Good, thanks buddy.” It’s possible Tony drifts off a little, because he seems to blink and Thor is back, holding a sleeper Tony hasn’t seen before; it’s bright orange and covered in pictures of ice cream.

“I hope this shall suffice, Youngling; our Captain recently taught me how to make purchases on this Web of yours. I did look for one with Pop Tarts, but sadly no such garment yet exists.”

“’s nice. Like sprinkles,” he mumbles, and Thor makes a pleased noise as he helps Tony slide one leg, then another, inside. After sitting in a damp sleeper, the combined warmth of the diaper and the fresh jammies brings a visceral kind of relief, and he grumbles when Clint again prevents him from burrowing under the covers.

“I know, I know. Just…shit, cards on the table, kiddo, I’m pretty scared of messing things up here. Do you want to talk about anything that happened tonight?”

"Sleep now. Talk later.” Clint laughs, and then finally allows Tony to curl up under the blankets, pressing as much of himself against both the archer and Thor as he can manage. The grown ups are still talking as he starts to drift off, not even trying to prevent his thumb from inching steadily toward his mouth.

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Steve, being Steve, cuts the com-link the second he actually reaches Bucky in order to give them privacy. Natasha does not one bit like being out of the loop, and this paranoia feels entirely justified when she finally reaches the pair only to find that Cap looks like he’s aged ten years since she last saw him. He informs her in a robotic (and extremely raspy—Steve can’t bruise so there’s no proof, but she’d bet almost anything that Barnes had had his hands around Cap’s throat at some point) voice that Bucky has agreed to make the trip back and even to be looked at by the medical staff on board the hellicarrier, and the very fact that he doesn’t sound absolutely thrilled by both these developments is downright alarming.

“And we’ll need a place to stay in New York for a while,” he adds. “The Tower isn’t an option
right now.” She’s in motion before her mind even catches up, and while Natasha is under no illusions that slamming Steve against a wall would be quite so easy if he weren’t allowing it, that doesn’t make the resulting thud any less satisfying.

“What the fuck happened out there, Rogers? What happened to ‘I made a commitment’? You cannot just bail on this now—not just him, but all of us. Even if you don’t want the rest of it, there’s a lot we still have to do as a team, not to mention that we could get called out again at any moment—”

“I know that, Natasha. I just…I need time, I have to figure out how to—how to balance all this, how to help them both, and I can barely remember how to breathe right now. You want to hit me? Wanna call me a coward? Do your worst. I’m not going to stop you.” During the length of their relationship, she’s seen Steve tested in nearly every way; he’s never seemed unfazed by it, at least not to her as someone who has been around enough soldiers to recognize the subtler signs, but he has never seemed so perilously on the edge of being broken as he does right now. Mind still spinning, trying to assemble the pieces in a way that can possibly make sense of what could have done this to Rogers in such a short period of time, she takes a step backward, moving the arm she had had pressed hard against his upper chest.

“You have a month. Clint owns an apartment building—don’t ask, it’s a long story. I’ll get you a key to one of the vacant units. Do whatever it is you think you need to do, but if I have to come after you, I will do a lot worse than hit you.” The temptation to continue sweeping her way out of the room when Steve says her name is strong; Natasha compromises by halting her progress but keeping her back turned on the super soldier. She’s left there long enough that she starts to wonder if the guy might actually be petty enough to leave her, but finally he jogs his way in front of her, holding two objects in hands that would likely be trembling if he were anyone else.

“Give these to him? Please?”

“I’ll give him the watch since it’s his prototype in the first place. But Rogers, you keep that damn colouring book and give it to him yourself. One month, I mean it.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I posted this early partly because I am kicking dissertation ass this week and wanted to reward myself, and partly because this is another chapter I’ve had planned since very, very early on, and I’ve been dying to get here. Here's hoping it lived up to the hype it had in my head. (Is it weird that posting chapters I really like actually makes me more anxious than posting the ones I feel so-so about? That's weird right?)

Clint owning an apartment building is another bit of comic-canon I shamelessly stole because it was convenient. And also because did I mention those comics are great?

Finally, since I’ve gotten a couple more questions along this line, a reminder to anyone panicking that there will be no Civil War. Seriously, re-watching the last half an hour or so in order to fact-check this chapter was devastating. Trying to re-create those events after all the team in this story has been through would not only not make sense, it would probably leave me perpetually sobbing in the corner. They aren't going to have an easy time of things for a while, but I remain 100 percent committed to a happy ending for everyone. (tl;dr? This fic is all civil, no war.)
Thank you, as always, for the comments and kudos. You are all the best!
Chapter Summary

We join the Avengers two weeks after the events of the previous chapter. Everyone is still reeling, but the HulkCam is rolling, so the show (such as it is) must go on.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings for this chapter beyond the fact that the team is still dealing with the fallout from last chapter, so there's some angst and generally complicated feelings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alright, and we’re rolling. Welcome, one and all, to a historic event: the first amateur video destined to be released on the Internet involving myself in which I can truthfully claim I appear one hundred percent sober.” A low growl echoes through the playroom. “Woops, sorry Big Guy. He can’t stand me hogging the spotlight for long, see.” Okay, that one might not be entirely the truth, but ‘Hulk as diva’ is probably going to be a lot easier for the public to buy than ‘Hulk as self-fashioned protector of Tony Stark’. “Right, now, the other reason this film is groundbreaking and destined to go down in cinematic history—well except for the score, we’re all pretty shit at music, and my lawyers are refusing to pay the frankly outrageous fees involved in licensing most of my faves—is that you’re about to get your first look into the hyper-secret, uber-exciting and generally awe inspiring lives of the Avengers, starting with the Hulk.

Now a lot of you probably know him as the giant green rage-monster that smashes bad guys. And make no mistake, Hulk is a badass, second only to Iron Man—there’s a boo you probably can’t hear in the background, by the way. It’s coming from a bitter, jealous, shell of a man named Hawkeye, you’ll meet him later when he’s done being a critic and dreaming of being as cool as me. Anyway, the point is, Hulk is great at smashing, but that’s not all there is to him, so we’re going to spend some time in his equivalent of the Batcave today. Say hi to the camera, buddy.”

“Jenga!”

“Ah yes, see, Hulk: he’s just like us! Well, admittedly I had to build this super-sized set especially for him because his fine motor control is kind of hit and miss, but the Hulk is a big fan of games. And he has yet to pull a Chewbacca and rip my arms off when I win—though maybe I shouldn’t say that, add some tension to all this?”

“JENGA!”

“Right, yeah, sorry buddy. Your move.” Tony never totally forgets the camera is there, but in a way it’s the easiest thing that’s been asked of him in a long while to flash a charming smile and keep up a constant commentary, punctuated with occasional input from Hulk. After their game (which he does let Hulk win, not to fend off bodily harm to Tony, just an epic tantrum), they watch a cooking show that Phil has managed to get everyone in the damn tower addicted to. This of course leads to the Hulk demanding snacks, an eventuality they had all prepared for in advance,
and which results in some hilarious footage of the big guy ranking various Hulk-themed foods that are for sale across New York. A bright green lime cupcake is a particular favourite, and they’re still trying to get the icing off his face when the voice in Tony’s earpiece announces they have enough and can be done for the day. “That’s a wrap, Big Green! Awesome job.” Tony’s mind is already moving on to the next task (of which there are way too many—he’s still playing catch up now that he’s finally back to working a full schedule), and he’s midway through sending a text to Pepper about the latest round of StarkWatch testing when the loud series of thumps heralding Hulk moving is followed by a surprisingly delicate tap on his shoulder. “What’s up buddy? I really don’t have any more cupcakes, but I can have someone stop off for some later—”

“Don’t want cupcakes. Want Hulk’s Tony.” Fuck fuck fuck. Clint and Phil had better be clearing the PR team outta here, because if Hulk is talking about his little self—he really thought the dude had understood their multiple chats about the need to keep some things secret, but maybe that was too much to ask.

“Hulk, remember our talk about boundaries? Right now is work time, and—”

“Hulk remember! Just want Friend Tony. Tony without all—talk and stupid cameras. Snuggles, and more Chopped?” Christ, it’s not enough that Bruce can practically peer into his soul sometimes, now he has Hulk thinking in complex enough patterns that he, too, can recognize when Tony is full of shit and call him on it? Sometimes he really, really misses living alone.

“Aww buddy I know it’s a strangely addictive show, but I really have to get going, Pepper has put off the board as long as she can, and her temper is the only one that can really rival yours.”

“Tony sad. Hulk not fix, but Hulk give good snuggles. Snuggles help. On NDAS pie chart.” That ‘Non-Destructive Alternatives for Self-Care’ chart (Bruce’s idea, exploiting Hulk’s attraction to bright colours in order to attempt to reduce collateral smashing damage) is never going to stop biting Tony in the ass. He really does consider sticking around for a while, because like Thor, Hulk has always been heavy on the comfort and light on the questions and judgement. But there is a very real chance that if he gets settled in here, he might never leave, and the only thing keeping Tony going right now is stopping as rarely as possible.

Salvation, such as it is, comes in the form of Steve Rogers, who Tony realizes is due to be lurking outside the doorway any moment now.

“Hey, just because I can’t stay doesn’t mean you don’t have company, buddy! They’re going to get a couple shots of you and the rest of the team, remember? And Cap’s up first.” Hulk makes a noise that does not sound as if he is entirely pleased with this compromise, but he permits Tony to beat a quick path out of the Playroom before the Big Guy can change his mind.

Steve looks as annoyingly perfect as he always does—his skin-tight workout wear suggests he probably ran here, but he’s neither sweaty nor out of breath, and if he didn’t know better, Tony would swear the guy has somehow gotten taller. He’s frowning, of course, the same kicked puppy expression he always seems to have around Tony these days, but he doesn’t let himself consider that for more than a fraction of a second.

“He’s ready for you. They don’t need much, just a couple of shots of you two chatting or whatever.” The assurance that Steve would appear in the video had been the only thing that had kept Heather (the Pepper of the PR department) calm when they’d learned the Avengers’ team leader had vacated the tower; it was true that the last thing they needed on a professional (or personal) level was for a #WheresCap hashtag to suddenly trend.

“Thanks, Tony. Look, can you stick around, maybe we can grab lunch or something after?”
“No can do, Cap. Pep promised to do very violent things to me with her spikiest pair of heels if I’m late to this board meeting, and her threats were way too specific and descriptive to be things she just made up. I’ll catch up with you later; say hi to Barnes for me.”

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Steve likes Hulk, he genuinely does, but like almost everyone else in his life right now, the guy is decidedly unimpressed with him, and it’s like pulling teeth to get footage that suggests anything to the contrary. Eventually, he manages to make Hulk laugh (he assumes they’ll edit out the fact that this is caused by Steve dropping one of the heavy Jenga blocks on his own foot), and he does his level best not to run out of the room when they call a wrap.

Bucky will still be in with his therapist for another two hours, and will more than likely sleep after that. Their apartment, while fine, is sparse and boring and not home, so Steve can’t help but torture himself just a bit further by moving to the elevator and pressing the button for his floor. The ride there takes nearly a minute and a half (clearly JARVIS is pissed too), but eventually he steps out and into his living room—only to find Natasha sprawled across his couch.

“Should I even ask—”

“I wouldn’t bother, no. How’s your deadline coming?” The urge to protect Bucky from any potential threat flares to life, and Steve very nearly turns back toward the elevator, but quickly becomes distracted by the lights all simultaneously flickering. His first thought is hostile attack, but while he’s drawing his shield around from his back, Natasha just drawls, “JARVIS, behave.”

“I’m checking into the cause of the localized systems failure now, Agent Romanov, my apologies. It might be best if you avoid use of the elevator, Captain Rogers, while I investigate the disruption.”

“Hear you loud and clear, JARVIS,” he sighs. Natasha is showing absolutely no signs of willingness to make room for him on the couch (her ability to take up huge amounts of space with such a tiny body will never not be incredible), so Steve settles on an armchair that he’s never even had a chance to use before today. It’s ridiculously comfortable, the perfect mix of structure and coziness, and several of his back and shoulder muscles seem to unclench entirely against his will.

“And no, Natasha, I haven’t made any headway. It doesn’t help that I can’t get Tony to talk to me —” For the first time, Natasha loses her lax posture, coming to a seated position and glaring at him.

“No. You don’t get to put any of this on him. He is doing the best he can, and he’s one of the only ones here defending you right now. He gave Clint shit just yesterday for snarking about how much less we spend on food in your absence.”

“Yeah, when he’s Big he’s the picture of politeness, and he always makes sure to ask after Bucky, which is far kinder than I expected. But when he’s little he won’t even talk to me on the phone, let alone allow me over to visit.” And that’s hurt the worst—the anger and frustration of the others isn’t pleasant, but hearing their little boy laughing and playing in the background, only to have him refuse to even hear Steve’s voice has been torment.

“Because he doesn’t want you to just visit. He wants you here, all the time, feeding him and cuddling him and playing with him and bathing him and calling him overly sentimental nicknames. You left, on the very first mission any of us have been called out on since we started all of this, and you didn’t come home the way you promised him you would. And if he needs to compartmentalize that and only let himself be upset with you when he’s in headspace, that’s still a vast improvement over some of his old methods of coping. So you are absolutely not allowed to judge him or be pissed at him for that.” This is as openly passionate as he has ever heard Natasha sound about anything, and Steve honestly doesn’t know if he’s more jealous of Tony for being the object of
such intense affection, or of Natasha for still having access to their boy. “Let’s…avoid that topic for a while and focus on you. How about we start with you telling me, just me, why you took off right after we recovered Barnes.”

Steve would like to say he makes it more than a few seconds under the combination of Natasha’s even stare and his own aching desire to not be (excepting Bucky) the sole carrier of this knowledge. Even just for the sake of his own pride, it would be nice. But his conviction to respect Bucky’s privacy until Steve had a plan for how best to present this information collapses almost at once.

“The Winter Soldier killed Howard and Maria Stark.” Even for Natasha, the spy seems unsurprised by this in a way that reminds Steve of the way she’d looked at him back on the ‘pirated’ SHIELD boat. “You knew?”

“I suspected,” she corrects. “When Zola showed us evidence of Hydra’s survival and taunted us with that article about the Starks, I assumed just like you did that what happened to them probably wasn’t an accident. I wasn’t sure about Barnes’ involvement, but it makes sense that they would have used the Soldier for something as high-profile as that. You certainly wouldn’t want to fail to try to kill a Stark; look how well that worked out for Ten Rings.”

“So you understand—”

“Yeah, I get why you didn’t want to bring Barnes here straight away. It wouldn’t be fair to have him already living in Tony’s house when he found out. But listen, Tony’s made a lot of big mistakes in his life. He places extremely high value on forgiveness and the chance to make amends. This won’t be easy for him to hear, and he may need time, but he would never willingly deny that to anyone. The thing he won’t be able to forgive is the lie; you need to figure out a way to tell him before someone else does, and you aren’t going to do it by hiding.” She pauses, then adds, "And Steve, you look like shit.”

“Gee, thanks. I missed you too, Nat.”

“I just meant you’re pretty obviously exhausted, at least to someone who knows what to look for. I know you told the SHIELD docs that you’re staying at the Tower, and my sense is that their belief that you have help with Barnes is the only reason they released him into your care to begin with.”

“You didn’t tell them, did you?” he blurts. “Natasha, he’s been talking about going back into cryo. If they just show up one day and try to take him, if he hurts someone, he’ll never come back. Please, you can’t—”

“I didn’t tell anyone anything. Yet. I’m just saying that not only are there numerous elements of this that you can’t deal with alone because they’re not just about you, I didn’t really realize how much you’d be taking on when I let the two of you leave by yourselves. Maybe instead of playing at having help, you should actually just take it.” It's tempting, really damn tempting, but the sheer number of reasons they could all collapse in on themselves is enough to keep Steve from agreeing quite as quickly as he ratted out Bucky. Natasha, of course, proceeds as if his hesitation is nothing but a minor inconvenience. "We’ll start slow, alright? Slow steps, just like you told Thor. Come to dinner tomorrow, both of you.”

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“Knock knock. You sleeping with me tonight, buddy?” It’s a bit of a foregone conclusion; since the night of Phil’s nightmare, Tony has been diapered and in Clint’s bed every evening without fail, regardless of what headspace he has spent the day in. It has the archer more than a bit conflicted; he’s proud that his friend continues to trust him in a way that resonates so deeply with
Clint himself, but he never imagined getting there this way, with Tony so messed up from the events of the past two weeks that he’s struggling with continence at night. True, he’s dry most mornings, but there have been a few occasions where Clint has woken to the feeling of his baby racked with quiet sobs over having wet himself. No one has even come close to succeeding at getting him to talk about it.

Tony also never goes to Clint himself for this, and some nights he puts up a token show of resistance, but there’s always a naked relief that lingers on on his face when Clint first appears at his door. Tonight he’s still dressed from work, wearing one of his stupidly expensive (and damn attractive) grey wool suits, but when Clint walks toward him and starts carefully stripping it away, starting with the tie, Tony just lets out a long breath as if didn’t know he was holding it, and allows his arms to hang loose at his side. If nothing else, his nighttime problems have given Tony ample practice with slipping into headspace; it’s a more shallow version than the way he gets when he’s had hours to go down slowly, but the transformation is still kind of a marvel for Clint to witness.

“Hi babe. Long day?” Nothing but a grunt that sounds vaguely like an agreement. “Do you want me to call anyone else to come cuddle with us tonight?” This is another part of their new nightly ritual, and Tony tries the same response he gives every time.

“Daddy Phil?”

“Spidermonkey, what did I tell you about that? Daddy Phil doesn’t want to sleep with anyone else until he figures out what’s happening with his nightmares. Try again.”

“Papa Bruce?” Still not an ideal choice; after recovering from the Hulk PR work, Bruce has spent the day in the labs, and Clint is pretty sure he’s not come upstairs yet. But ever since what happened with Steve, they’ve all agreed to make themselves as available as humanly possible to Tony, not wanting to risk him feeling further rejected than they know he already does.

“Sure squirt. JARVIS can you tell him Tony asked for him, and remind him to meet us on my floor?” Though the mattress was replaced the day after Tony had wet, he’s steadfastly refused to sleep there since; even when he goes down for naps when he’s little, the baby insists on staying on the couch, or in any other bed in the tower. He won’t even let himself be diapered there, so Clint spreads the changing mat on the bedroom floor and gently pulls his little down onto it. “There we go. Let’s get you all set up here. You know one of these days you’re gonna let me use the fun diapers with the pictures on ‘em instead of these boring ones.”

“Not a baby.” Given that this protest is barely legible because Tony’s thumb is in his mouth, it’s particularly hard to take seriously, but this is another area no one is putting too much pressure on right now. It always leads to Tony trying to stubbornly force himself to be their Big Boy, and the very last thing he needs is to lose any other sources of comfort.

“Yeah yeah. Alright, you’re all set. Now you know if we’re sleeping with Papa Bruce that means feeties.”

“Too hot!”

“Yeah yeah I know you hate ‘em, but he says your circulation there is pretty bad because of the Arc, and you’ve just gotten over being sick.” Tony rarely bothers to put up much resistance to footed sleepers these days, so it comes as a genuine surprise when he suddenly starts kicking and flailing. “Hey, hey, babe come on, what—” Tony points at the cloth in his hand, and Clint winces. He’d just grabbed one of the only remaining sleepers in the drawer without bothering to look (they really need to do laundry sometime soon), but this one happens to be navy blue and adorned with a large picture of Captain America’s shield on the front. Shit. “Ah, right. Sorry buddy, Daddy’s bad.
Tell you what, to make it up to you I’ll brave Bruce’s wrath and put you in something without feet as long as you promise to keep the socks I’m going to put you in on for at least half an hour before hiding ‘em in whatever dark corner it is that you keep all the others that we can never find.”

“Fifteen minutes,” Tony counters, sniffling as he casts a sad look at the Cap sleeper. Not for the first time since this entire mess had started, Clint finds himself wanting to give their team leader a solid kick in the ass.

“Deal.”

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“Okay, you’ve reached new levels of pathetic, and this is coming from the guy who only sometimes remembers where and who he is. Spill, punk.” Bucky is having more and more periods like this, where he’s lucid and closer to his old self, snark and all. And it’s wonderful, but there have been a few occasions where Steve has wished the other man didn’t still know how to read him quite so well. Having already been put through the ringer by Hulk and then Natasha, today is definitely one of those times.

“I’m not your problem right now, Buck. How’s the homework going?” The doctors have Bucky completing a daily set of memory, logic and reasoning puzzles to help him work on his focus and attention, both of which have been problem areas. At least half the time they lead to minor breakdowns, with Bucky throwing things or cursing a blue streak; on particularly bad days, Steve can’t even bring them up without bringing the Soldier far too close to the surface. Today, though, the question brings nothing but a smug grin that is all-Bucky, and a completed set of puzzles tossed neatly into Steve’s lap.

“Finished half an hour ago. Been watching you stare at your phone since then. You know they dial out too, right?”

“Yeah, I’m aware.”

“So if you’re not confused by the technology, what exactly is the hold up? You been lookin’ at that thing like it holds the mysteries of the universe the entire time we’ve been here, and it’s just getting worse.”

“I’m sorry, Buck. Really. I’ll put it away.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry, dumbass, I want you to open your stubborn mouth and talk!” Bucky rarely initiates contact with anyone these days, so it takes a conscious effort not jerk in surprise when the other man slides his chair over and bumps their shoulders together. But after the sudden loss of the frequent casual touches and cuddles that had so quickly come to mean home at the Tower to Steve, he could almost sob in gratitude. “Stevie, you’ve been here every step of the way, every physio appointment, most meetings with the headshrinkers. You take, frankly, absurd amounts of notes about everything I do, and you stop me from hurting myself even when it means I end up hurtin’ you instead. And other’n that last one I’m glad and grateful you’ve done all this, but it’s pretty hard to feel like we’re…fixin’ what he had, or makin’ something new when you know every damn thing about me and I know almost nothing about what your life has been like since they got you out of the ice.”

He can’t start with the stuff he most wants to say, but Bucky probably has a point about how one-sided things have been lately. Casting his eyes about the room, Steve smiles as his eyes fall upon one of his textbooks, buried under a stack of doctor’s reports and at-home physio exercises and pamphlets about PTSD.
“I’m thinking about going back to school.”

They talk for several hours after that, about Steve’s future plans, about what happened to the men and women they’d known in the 40s, about how totally bizarre the Internet is. They compare modern food experiences and Steve stumbles his way through a halting description of what it had been like when the plane had gone down. Most of it is not easy conversation material, but it’s an almost painful relief to feel as if he really may get some version of his friend back when all of this is over. By one in the morning, though, Bucky, used to a pretty regimented sleep schedule to try to help normalize his body’s natural rhythms, is fading fast; he successfully keeps Steve chatting for a while longer, but he soon starts slipping in and out of English the way he tends to do when particularly tired or agitated.

“Fuck, Stevie, ‘m sorry. Don’t mean to be so damn,” and though Bucky growls the last word out in Russian, Steve doesn’t really need to know the specific to get the general point that his friend is frustrated with his own limitations.

“Ain’t nothing to apologize for, Buck. We don’t have to do all our catching up in one night; got all the time in the world, you and me.” He helps Bucky through the process of getting ready for bed; with his metal arm malfunctioning, the other man is down to doing most things solely with his right, and between the overuse and the lingering remnants of numerous traumas, the limb is showing increasing signs of strain. Tonight he can’t hold his toothbrush up to his mouth without Steve supporting him at the elbow, and he flinches (out of embarrassment or instinctive fear, it’s unclear) as Steve brings a facecloth up to wipe away the remnants of toothpaste at the corners of his mouth. He also refuses Steve’s offer to sleep in the bed with him. This almost guarantees that he’ll wake in the night, scared and unsure where he is, but everyone has stressed the importance of letting Bucky make his own decisions as long as they don’t risk imminent physical harm to himself or others, so Steve just wishes him a quiet goodnight and heads over to the couch.

When Bucky goes to sleep like this, though the next day is almost always rough, so Steve calls in a message to the warn the therapist that Bucky may miss his nine o’clock appointment. He means to unearth the textbook he’d seen earlier, because he’s fallen way behind on his studies in the past week (and how sadly ironic given that he’s already playing catch-up on that front), but falls into exhausted sleep before he can manage.

Confirming Steve’s predictions, Bucky wakes after a mostly restless night speaking only in Russian. He’s not fully in the Soldier’s mindset—he still seems to know and recognize Steve—but there are a lot of shades of grey now between the man he’d known and the person Hydra had spent decades programming and torturing into existence. Currently Bucky is crouched, as he has been for several hours, in a corner near the entryway that has the best sightlines to the rest of the apartment, and is refusing to move. Given that Steve never leaves Bucky alone on bad days (especially with all of the other man’s recent comments about going back to cryo, because Steve absolutely refuses to home one day and find his friend just gone), and add to that the fact that the two super-soldiers are running out of groceries in a hurry, Steve can genuinely say he’d prefer to be jumping out of a plane without a parachute right now.

Plus there’s the dinner with the team tonight; a plate Steve is drying from their beans on toast the night before shatters in his hands as he loses track of his strength for just a moment while trying to come to terms with the inevitability of cancelling. It wouldn’t be fair to drag Buck out of the house on one of his bad days, but after weeks of living and breathing the other man’s health, taking obsessive notes about his triggers, his sleeping and eating habits, the physical symptoms he’s able to pick up on that Bucky has yet to share with his doctors, Steve can admit to himself that he wants
to be out of the apartment pretty damn badly. He misses the chaotic noise of the penthouse when everyone is home, the smells of Bruce and Clint’s cooking, the booming sound of Thor’s voice as he composes odes to breakfast foods, the way Nat and Phil both hide less behind the neutral masks that they’ve perfected over decades. And Tony…he misses Tony, both big and little, often enough that the moments where Steve is not thinking about something he wishes he could tell or ask the man, or wondering what his boy has been up to, have started to feels like the rare exceptions to a general torturous rule. When Buck is asleep he draws the team obsessively, and when he’s awake Steve keeps a constant eye on his phone, not only in hopes that he’ll hear from them, but because Tony made it, and clinging to something his friend and little boy poured his energy and attention into sometimes makes his absence cut just a little less deeply.

Of course, sometimes Steve is still pretty nervous about modern technology, and when the damn thing rings just as he’s thinking so hard about it, he briefly entertains a suspicion that Tony has uploaded some kind of mind-reading software onto it. Seeing Nat’s name pop up on the screen does not dissuade this line of thinking.

“Yes?”

“Do not even think about bailing on tonight. The others may actually have you drawn and quartered, plus I know you haven’t been out for supplies in a week. You can’t sit in there and starve.” Sometimes, a dry, sarcastic voice in Steve’s head that sounds a lot like Tony concludes, mysteries just solve themselves.

“You’re spying on me. Of course you are.”

“Oh course I am,” she agrees. He can almost see her eyes rolling, and he wonders how the experience of being simultaneously exasperated by and fond of someone has come to be such a standard way of being for him.

“Look, it’s not like I want it to be like this. But he’s having a particularly bad day, he’s not even speaking in English right now and—”

“Ah yes, if only you had at least two teammates who are fluent in Russian and who might make his bad days easier because he’d actually have someone to communicate with.” Steve would like to pretend the hissing noise he makes is a response to the glass shard he’s digging out of his palm (the skin of which is attempting to heal itself with the foreign object still embedded), but the realization of his own arrogance is rather more painful. “I’ll be there to pick the two of you up in three hours. Don’t be late. And wear that horrible red plaid monstrosity Tony likes to tease you about.”

Chapter End Notes

Author notes/apologies: I know this chapter is both a little late and quite rough. I’ve had a hell of a week; my partner and I are trying for a baby, and while I’m tremendously privileged and grateful to have access to fertility treatments, they’re also kind of awful. Add on the fact that this is a kind of bridging chapter that has to happen but is also the kind of writing I find most challenging, and you get one anxious writer! I promise that once I have a beta and/or time to go back through this monster and edit it, this chapter will be first on my list.

And yes, BTW, we will find out more about what happened during those missing couple of weeks. Like how and when Tony started calling folks Daddy and Papa! And
how he reacted in the immediate aftermath of the mission to retrieve Bucky. And how Phil's doing. The fact that this chapter is a little bit jarring is intentional, because it's primarily from Steve's POV and he's currently on the outside looking in.

In only slightly more exciting news, I have a Tumblr now? Or more accurately, I'm going to try to actually use the Tumblr I've had for a while. My page isn't yet tremendously interesting, and I'm still figuring the whole thing out, but if you want to chat about this story, or anything else, you can follow me at http://ketchupcrisp.tumblr.com/

Thank you, as always, for your comments and kudos. And requests! I'm getting requests for stuff people want to see! I'm so excited by all of this.
The Avengers and Bucky Barnes have dinner, and Steve finds himself feeling out of place in his own home.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings for this one, I don't think. Feel free to correct me on that if you find anything upsetting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay, no. Dummy, all I’m feeling is extreme irritation with you, so either this is stimulating my amygdala instead of my hippocampus like it’s supposed to, or you’re actually frustrating enough today that you’re hijacking my brain. Which of those options would you prefer? Man, I thought putting you on fire safety was a disaster.”

One of the great joys of walking into Tony’s workshop is that it’s never, ever boring. Phil has seen the engineer do everything from maintaining his classic cars to generating weapons, tech, and household appliances for the Avengers, and he’s seen him do it wearing his usual grungy shop-wear, a tuxedo and, on one memorable occasion, nothing but boxers when inspiration had struck in the middle of the night. The latter had prompted a lengthy lecture from Bruce (“For the love of God, Tony, proper work boots might be a losing battle with you, but I’m drawing the line at not wearing pants while operating a circular saw! Sit down, it’s time to watch the lab and workshop safety Prezi again”), but excepting when Tony had been down here and hallucinating from lack of sleep, Phil’s never actually been frightened of anything he’s walked in to find the other man doing.

The combination of ‘Dummy’ and ‘my brain’, though, that’s enough to at least get him speeding up his walking pace, no longer caring about the clicking of his dress shoes on the floor distracting the genius. It’s a sincere relief to lay eyes on Tony a few seconds later and find that there isn’t some kind of tool imbedded in his skull, but the speed with which the man whips what looks to be a pair of augmented glasses from his head and orders JARVIS to save and close all open ‘B.A.R.F.’ files still sets off several alarm bells.

“What exactly is BARF, Tony?”

“A project that really needs a better acronym, Agent Agent. I’d ask for your advice, but I notice that the SHIELD rebuilding project did not involve finding a new and improved name, so forgive me if I seek rebranding advice elsewhere. Oh no, uh-uh, you so don’t get to avoid your well-deserved shaming by trying to convince people to take your side, you ridiculous collection of rusted bolts and broken code. In the corner. No, not your charging station, the ‘Think About What You’ve Done’ corner. Don’t make me get the hat, I’ll do it in front of Agent, don’t think I won’t.” The bot lets out a truly pathetic, low-toned beep and Phil damn well Tony is playing this little family drama of theirs up as a distraction, and that Dummy is probably even helping him. But
if there were ever a day to pick their battles, it’s probably this one, so he follows the bot the corner and gives him an affectionate pat, grinning as this leads to the predictable outraged rant from Tony about Dummy’s emotional manipulation and attempts to stage a coup.

“Steve and Bucky are going to be here in forty-five minutes, so once you feel Dummy has been sufficiently chastised for whatever it was he was helping you do to your brain—and don’t think we’re not coming back to that, I am not even remotely a fan of you messing around with your own head down here with no one but JARVIS and the bots supervising—you should go get ready.” Tony doesn’t reply, busying himself with clearing off the work-bench and brushing away Butterfingers and You’s attempts to help. Phil should just allow him the fiction of his distraction and make a smooth departure; offering Tony comfort or gentleness down here in this space is almost always a mistake, particularly lately where it concerns anything remotely related to Steve. But he tries anyway. “It’s going to be alright, Tony.”

“Of course it will. It’s just dinner with two guys from Brooklyn, the biggest risk we face is running out of food, and Nat promises there’s enough to feed an actual army,” the brunette snaps, wrapping a rubber band around a bundle of multi-coloured wires and shoving them haphazardly into a drawer. Phil raises his hands in a surrender position and begins to back out of the shop. “Hey, Phil? How’s—are you, any progress on the dream front? Clint said you were following up on some leads, but he hasn’t told me if you found anything.”

Tony is nowhere near little right now, but there’s still an open vulnerability to his expression that hadn’t been there just a moment ago, and that’s enough to halt Phil’s immediate impulse to refuse to engage with this topic right now. He still can’t look Tony in the eye, though, not when he remembers the way the other man had shaken and sobbed in the wake of Phil’s…dream, memory, whatever it had been. The guilt of scaring their baby like that had been overwhelming, even once his own terror and embarrassment had faded. Instead, he follows Tony’s lead, collecting a series of screws scattered across the floor near his feet.

“Not much. I’ve been trying to look into the circumstances surrounding my death and subsequent treatment, but it’s proving difficult to find. As is Fury, conveniently enough.”

“I could—”

“I’m sure you could do a lot of things Tony, and I appreciate your willingness to help. But this is something I would like to deal with on my own, at least for now. I promise when I find out more, or if it gets to the point where I need assistance moving forward, you and Clint will be the first to know. Now go get showered and dressed, alright?” The other man has now removed the wires he just bundled and is sorting them by colour (another anxiety-management technique, Phil is proud to realize). “Tony, it really is gonna be okay. We’re all going to be right here with you, and we’re going to have shish-kabobs which’ll be nice and easy for you to eat. And try to remember that everyone here, including Steve and Barnes, wants this to go well because we’re all on the same side.” Tony’s hands still and he gives a slow but visible nod. The part of Phil that’s slightly irritated with how Steve has handled the last couple of weeks isn’t quite dormant apparently, because he can’t help but add, “But if you want to make Rogers suffer just a little bit, wear those jeans that make everyone in the tower incapable of doing anything but staring at your ass.”

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Tony does wear the jeans, and a green silk shirt Phil is certain is a personal favourite of Steve’s to boot. He’s also still nervous as hell, and at first he makes somewhat of a nuisance of himself in the kitchen, questioning and critiquing every decision being made with the food and distractedly attempting to chop a mini red onion with a meat cleaver.
“Alright, and that’s enough of you helping,” Phil declares firmly, seizing the cleaver and exchanging it for a bowl of chopped vegetables Clint has put aside especially for Tony. The archer looks distinctly relieved as Phil directs the protesting engineer out into the living room with Thor (who also is not permitted, under any circumstances, to assist with the preparation of food in the Tower). But once he and Phil are alone, Clint picks up the chopping with a highly unnecessary amount of force. When the knife skids across the cutting board and onto the granite countertop with a truly unpleasant noise, Phil arches a brow. “Don’t tell me I have to confiscate yours too. This meal might be pretty hard to make with only the safety knives we let Tony use when he’s little.”

“I hate that he’s nervous when he didn’t do a damn thing wrong,” Clint growls. “I hate that you still can’t sleep and you’re not getting the answers you need, and I’m scared about what Fury has to tell you that could possibly scare him into hiding. I absolutely despise the fact that I only got one night of being back in the same bed as you before all the rest of this happened, and I’m embarrassed that I’m selfish enough to be pissed about that with everything else going on. Plus don’t even get me started on the things I want to do to Steve Rogers right now.” Midway through this list of complaints, Phil gives into his own highly selfish urges and moves in closer, wrapping one arm around Clint’s waist and the other around his upper chest. It’s a total, almost suffocating hold, one that’s very nearly a restraint, but it had once been Clint’s preferred way of being touched when he felt nearly out of control. The way he relaxes into after the briefest of pauses is enough to tell Phil this, at least, hasn’t changed.

“Every one of those things sucks, and it’s legitimate to be upset about all of them.” The impulse to try to fix the items on Clint’s list is nearly overpowering; at times, Phil finds it a lot harder to be the family member and equal the other man has asked for rather than the handler whose job it is to take over in times of crisis. It comes as almost a revelation to realize he can just tell Clint what he’s thinking, and he does. “I wish I could fix all of it for you.” After turning the heat on the stovetop down to minimum, Clint spins in his grip and cautiously rests his head against Phil’s chest, just above where the skin had been pierced by Loki’s blade.

“Don’t need you to fix it. We’ll get it all sorted, I know we will. Just…don’t let go yet, okay?”

“Never.”

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Even despite all his nerves, the person that ends up saving the meal? Tony Stark. While Natasha, Phil, Clint and Thor all have varying levels of experience and skill with putting on a game-face for awkward and slightly uncomfortable events, none of them are really used to having to do it outside of workplace contexts, and each of them stumbles a bit at first.

Tony, though, grew up a Stark, and is more than used to needing to use his considerable charm and charisma in personal as well as public settings. He doesn’t morph into the smarmy caricature of himself he sometimes plays for the media (which was Phil’s other greatest fear for the evening), he just throws himself wholeheartedly into the role of host, stitching bits of seemingly unrelated discussion together and preventing the team from breaking into smaller, disconnected conversational groups. It might be the first time, Phil thinks, that Tony has been quite so transparently his mother’s son, managing the different personalities in the room and smoothing over awkward gaps and pauses with an ease that someone like Maria Stark would have cultivated as the wife of a rich, brash, and prominent businessman.

Most remarkable by far, though, are Tony’s interactions with James Barnes. At first the former Winter Soldier is skittish and brooding, speaking only to Natasha and only for the most utilitarian of reasons, like asking for a drink or for the location of the washroom. Through dinner, however, Tony (who also speaks what sounds like passable Russian) refuses to allow Barnes to be left out of
the loop, stopping frequently to translate and contextualize the conversation with a patience and skill that has everyone else exchanging astonished looks, particularly when Barnes actually laughs during a story about Steve and Thor’s ill-fated eating contest.

Phil Coulson has rarely been accused of being an optimist, but that particular sound is enough to make him start to wonder if they might make it through this meal unscathed after all.

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Bucky is laughing, and everyone else around the table is slowly relaxing and enjoying one another’s company. For the most part, the team is even warming back up to Steve—Bruce has just passed him a fourth dinner roll without even asking—and yet Steve himself is focusing almost the entirety of his energy on trying not to break or throw something in a fit of jealous pique.

The worst part is that, much like he’d felt when he’d spoken to Natasha on his floor the previous day, he doesn’t even really know who or what he’s jealous of. Especially on his bad days Buck rarely smiles, let alone making that barking chuckle that’s an odd mixture of his 40’s self’s belly-laugh and the grittier sounds typical of the Soldier. After all the work he’s put into helping his friend over the past two weeks, it’s admittedly a bit painful seeing someone else bring that out so easily in Bucky. If it were just that, though, Steve likes to think he’d probably be fine, especially because there’s also a very visceral relief in watching two men he cares deeply for appreciate one another.

But it’s not just that. Everything feels just slightly…off. It’s small stuff, for the most part, like the way Clint has drawn his chair flush with Phil’s (have those two officially reconciled?), or how Tony has a bowl of cut up vegetables beside his plate (despite the fact that they seem to be the same ones Clint used on the shishkabobs), and how Thor seems to have mastered modulating his voice indoors (a consequence of a lot of time with little Tony, or a deliberate attempt to put Bucky at ease?). But there’s just so many tiny pieces of evidence constantly reminding Steve that life here has gone on just fine without him, a disconcerting echo of what it had been to wake up after decades and find himself unmoored from the web of connections that make people feel human.

When Bucky follows up his laugh by actually asking Tony a question, the Russian suddenly sounding slightly less harsh and more pleasantly gravelly, Steve can’t take it anymore. He beats a hasty retreat to the penthouse kitchen, slamming the fridge door closed in frustration when he realizes that his search for beer is going to be fruitless, not just because he can’t get drunk, but because Tony is actively trying not to get drunk these days. And what kind of a dick is he that he could have forgotten that anyway?

“We out of iced tea? There’s another pitcher in the fridge on Thor’s floor, and he swore on several gods I’ve never heard of that he wouldn’t drink it all ahead of time, so there’s at least a fifty-fifty chance that some of it is still there.” Steve jumps, and while Natasha’s ability to creep into a room unseen and unheard even by his enhanced senses is usually both amusing and the slightest bit hot, today it’s just contributing to his bad mood.

“I’ll go get. I just need a minute first, alright?” Natasha heave a put-upon sigh (and is it Steve’s imagination, or is that particular exasperated noise starting to sound more and more like Fury’s ‘Everyone-around-me-is-a-fool-and-my-tension-headache-has-a-tension-headache’ sound? This promotion of hers could really backfire on all of them…) and points a long finger at the nearest kitchen chair. Seeing no other option, Steve sits.

“I’m getting incredibly tired of having to be the one to explain your feelings to you, Rogers. Thankfully, that won’t be my job tonight, because I’m going back to your apartment with Barnes and you’re staying here for a little sleepover.” Steve has at least seventeen objections to this plan,
and definitely does not appreciate the way Natasha presses her thumbs under his jaw, forcing his mouth to close. “No. You want this to get better? You need to be here when he’s little, even if he doesn’t want to see you. And then you have to be here when he wakes up, rather than sneaking out like you’re ashamed of having spent time with him and the rest of us.”

“How do you know he’s even going to want to be little tonight?” Steve demands. “I remember the schedule, didn’t we opt for times when he had at least a full day?” Natasha’s plump lips are suddenly a thin line, and she doesn’t meet his eyes when she says, darkly,

“Trust me, he’s always little at night right now.” Now that he’s looking, really looking, it occurs to Steve that Phil is not the only one in the Tower who looks completely exhausted these days. The bruises under Nat’s eyes that her makeup doesn’t quite cover and the renewed tension she’s carrying that forces her body into rigid lines are almost as frightening as the tone she just used, and he reaches up to put a hand on her cheek.

“Natasha…” He doesn’t really know what to say, how to apologize for the hurt that he’s caused all of them and the work that she in particular has gone to to try to put it back to rights. Maybe her all-knowing spy thing is sometimes to his benefit, because she seems to hear it anyway, and gives him a faint smile.

“Just fix it, alright? And the next time I need feelings explained to me, because seriously I’m one of the least emotionally competent people here and I will need help at some point with the constant affective-landmine that is being in a relationship with this many people, I expect you to be the one to step up.”

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Though he sees Bucky and Natasha off after dinner and dessert with a not-inconsiderable amount of anxiety, Steve has also had time to adjust and even get excited about the idea of staying here and seeing his boy. Things seem to start promisingly enough; Tony gets changed into the robot pyjamas he’d worn on his first night as their little, and after avoiding Steve’s gaze for several minutes, big brown eyes finally meet Steve’s blue ones and the baby manages a shy, hesitant little smile.

“Hey there sweetheart,” Steve greets, standing in preparation to go pick him up. Tony nearly comes out of his skin. He jumps backward nearly a foot, tripping on the area rug, and then he makes a tiny, distressed little mewl that turns into a whisper.

“I can’t do this.” This would be distressing enough, but what happens next is even odder: almost as one, everyone else in the room (including Tony) looks at Clint.

Now, it’s not that Steve doesn’t like the guy, or would ever have wanted to do the ageplay stuff without him. Clint is great with Tony, always has been. Hell, Steve has more than once envied the easy, relaxed way in which the archer is able to interact with their boy. But everyone in the tower also knows that Clint is his own worst enemy. It’s not because of any actual faults in his approach to caretaking, it’s just that Clint tends to be the last person willing to take himself and his own input seriously. He prefers to watch from a slight distance, even when it means that many of the decisions they make in a day when caring for Tony in headspace are left up to other people, usually Phil, Bruce, sometimes Nat, and Steve himself.

So it’s more than a bit of a shock to see the man not hesitate for a second in response to Tony and the rest of the team’s entreatying stares. He comes to one knee in front of Tony and puts each of their boy’s hands on his shoulders as if he’s done it a hundred times before, as if he knows exactly what to expect.
“Hey, that’s alright. We have a kickass plan b, remember? You and I are going to leave the grown ups to talk about boring stuff, and we’re going to go play that cool new game we found, yeah? With the hunter chasing the fox? And you and Sanders are not allowed to cheat this time, I totally know he was helping you when we played Monopoly. It’s the only explanation for my crushing defeat.”

“Yeah, that or the fact that you blew all your money only buying properties that shared names with popular songs or movies,” Phil opines. Clint replies by flipping him the bird behind Tony’s back.

“See, just like I said, grown ups are boring. How else is one to buy property, I ask you? Now, can you be our brave guy and say goodnight to everyone before we blow this Popsicle stand?” Tony chews his lip, eyes skating around the room again, before he shakes his head. “Okay munchkin. You’re alright, I got this. Goodnight to one and all from Sir Tony, who is far too busy and magnificent a ruler to provide individualized nighttime well-wishes to you commoners.” Everyone except Steve, who is still standing stock-still in numb surprise, wishes the pair a good sleep; Thor promises to be join them later, earning him a small smile from Tony before the boy slips his hand into Clint’s and, at the latter’s invitation, they take off for the elevator at a run. Clint is still crowing about his apparent victory in their race when the door closes, and Steve makes it about three seconds after that before demanding,

“What the hell was that?”

“Not sure what you mean, Steve,” Phil replies placidly, scooping up bowls from the banana bread pudding Clint had made for dessert. The other man’s calm is completely unbearable to Steve just now. He normally appreciates the evenness of Phil, who is such a powerful counterpoint to the more explosive personalities in their group, but right now something dark and awful in Steve hates the idea that any one of them can even pretend to be okay right now when it feels like so much of his world is imploding.

“I…what—since when are they so close?” The good and the terrible thing is that the second this question (this stupid, poorly-worded, insensitive question he didn’t even mean) leaves Steve’s mouth, Phil is no longer an impassive mask. Because he looks utterly furious. “Shit, Phil, I didn’t mean—”

“You didn’t mean what, to undermine Clint and his relationship to our little? Well that’s certainly a relief. I’m sure the man who has slept every single night since you left with your terrified, heartbroken kid would be thrilled to hear it’s not a huge shock that they’re ‘close.’”

“Guys, let’s maybe take a breath here,” Bruce interjects smoothly, placing a cool hand on Steve’s forearm. “Tempers are running pretty high and everyone is liable to say some things they don’t mean in the next few minutes that will be very hard to take back. Phil, why don’t you finish getting the dishes cleared up. Thor, do you mind helping him? I think Steve and I need to have a little chat in Tony’s room. Steve, meet me in there, alright? I just need to grab something.”

Steve feels very much like a chastened child himself, but he also can’t say he hasn’t earned that treatment tonight, so he stalks down the hall and to the bedroom where he and the team have spent so many enjoyable hours with their boy. The bittersweet relief he expects on entering the space is thwarted, though, because even this room is different. He can’t put his finger on how, at first, because outside of his workshop Tony has always been a pretty neat guy.

But the room isn’t just clean. It’s stale. As if no one has been here or touched anything for a while. It’s hard to say how he knows it exactly; Tony has a maid service on his floor, so it isn’t as if there are inches of dust or dirty clothes lying around. It’s more the absence of all the things that usually mean Tony has recently inhabited a room—books or scientific journals on the nightstand, multiple
chargers plugged into the wall, Sanders on the pillow, his weighted blanket atop the comforter. The latter two could easily be the product of Tony going through another of his shamed fazes where he hides all of his little gear, but the combination of all of it leaves the space looking almost sterile.

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When Bruce makes his way into the bedroom, all the fight seems to have vanished from Steve. Just a minute ago he’d looked ready to come at Phil, or at the very least to make a sizeable dent in the living room wall, but now he’s holding a piece of Tony’s comforter between his fingers as if it’s the only thing keeping him from drowning.

“I’m going to tell you some things. You’ll probably have questions, but I need you to hold onto them until I’m done. Because this is…not easy for me to talk about, some of it. And also, some of these are other people’s stories I’m telling, and they’re trusting both you and I a lot by allowing me to do that. So I want to honour their trust as best we can.” Steve nods tightly, and stands in what would be a picture-perfect parade rest—back straight, feet shoulder-width apart, eyes forward—if he weren’t still clinging to Tony’s blanket with one hand. Bruce drops a familiar piece of poster-board on the bed in front of them both: Tony’s behaviour chart. It’s full of a lot more stickers than the last time Steve would have seen it, but that’s not what gets his attention. That would be the long tear down the centre, carefully mended with clear packing tape. “The first night you were gone, Tony was sleeping in here, with Clint and Phil. Phil…is dealing with what we think might be some repressed traumatic memories, and he had an absolutely vicious nightmare. You know the kind, the ones that leave your throat hoarse and your skin crawling for hours after the fact.” Steve nods again, otherwise keeping to his promised silence. “Tony was in headspace when it happened and it—fuck, it was bad, Steve. He was absolutely terrified, to the point where he wet the bed, and then he curled up in the corner of the room, shaking, until Clint got to him. Clint was…Clint was a goddamn rock, man, I have no idea how he did it. His partner and his little were both in tremendous distress, and he just held it together like a champ. Called me and Thor up here, and then somehow found the strength to actually leave Phil with me, even though it killed him to do it. He took Tony downstairs, and he and Thor bathed him, diapered him, and put him to bed.

You can’t even begin to imagine how embarrassed and upset Tony was the next day. Honestly, I think there’s a conversation we have to have with him about the diapers; JARVIS hinted pretty strongly that there’s a reason Tony had worked out how to deal with urine in the suit before he’d even flown it for the first time or solved the icing problem, and his reaction seemed to go beyond more than just a little bit of embarrassment. But anyway. He was a mess, but Clint was with him every second, and Steve, I’m telling you, I could never have handled it half as well. He and Thor both just stepped the hell up.”

Now that he’s gotten to the point of actually explaining the damage to the good behaviour chart, Bruce doesn’t want to. At his most pissed off he’d fantasized about giving this information to Steve, using it like a weapon to wound the super-soldier the way his sudden departure had hurt all of them. But with Steve actually in front of him, standing there lost and young and devastated, all Bruce wants now is for it to be over, so they can start trying to fix this mess they’re in.

“Then you took off the watch that JARVIS had you bring with you so that Tony could remotely feel yours and Natasha’s heartbeats.” Steve inhales like the air has been forced from his lungs, but Bruce doesn’t pause to let him take that in. Can’t pause, because he might never finish if he lets himself stop now. “At first he was convinced you were dead. I very nearly hospitalized him, because the panic attack he had…it was one of the worst I’ve ever seen. For a while we got him to calm down after Phil had confirmed with both the helicarrier and with Natasha herself that you were fine. And even when Nat showed up here alone, he seemed to take the explanation about why you weren’t with her alright. But then JARVIS woke us later that night, under what was honestly a
pretty loose interpretation of the health and safety protocols Tony let me set up, and thank Christ he did. We found him Tony up here, trying like hell to tear this thing apart.

He wouldn’t tell us why. Tony hasn’t spoken about anything remotely related to you when he’s been little, and you’ve seen how he is when he’s Big. Unfailingly polite and supportive of you and Barnes, and defensive of you both if anyone goes at you, even in a joking way. He’s going through all the motions, saying and doing everything he thinks he’s supposed to, even being little when we ask him to without putting up a fight about it. But he is not okay.” The only thing Tony had asked to remain private was his continued use of the diapers, so Bruce bites his tongue on that and allows Steve to assume whatever he will from the more general statement. “I know Barnes needs you, and you him. I know it’s complicated; Natasha told us what happened with him and the Starks, and I can appreciate what an impossible situation that put you in. But please just…come home, alright? I don’t know how we’ll balance all of it, I don’t know how we’ll tell Tony, or explain our dynamic to Barnes or any of that, but just come back.”

“Doctor Banner, Captain Rogers” JARVIS interjects, “I’m not sure if or how this impacts your decision, but under the terms of the protocols in the Tower related to the sharing of politically and strategically sensitive information, I was required to inform Sir about the role Sergeant Barnes played in the deaths of Howard and Maria Stark. He has known since roughly two o’clock this afternoon.”

Chapter End Notes

Some of you totally called that swerve at the end! And here I thought I was being so sneaky. For those of you upset with JARVIS, or with Tony for allowing the AI to violate the team's privacy, remember that most of the protocols Tony built into the system were made before he ever would have dreamed he'd have people living with him. The assumption on his part was that anyone discussing strategically or politically sensitive intel in the Tower without Tony present was very probably hostile.

Also, for those of you wanting a bit of fluff to go along with these growing pains, I wrote the first short story in the Timestamps series. It's Natasha/Sanders centric! It's up on my Tumblr (http://www.tumblr.com/blog/ketchupcrisp), and I'm aiming to have it up on AO3 later today as well.

Thanks for sticking with me through the roughness of last chapter. Your comments and kudos always mean the world to me.
Bring Your Asgardian Prince to Work Day

Chapter Summary

Natasha and Bucky talk about the weird complexities of identity. The rest of the team tries to sort out what to do with the news JARVIS gave them last chapter.

Chapter Notes

No warnings for anything this chapter, I don't think!

With Bucky’s reputation as a smooth talker, and the Soldier’s experience with getting information out of people in far more unpleasant ways, Natasha expects the hard questions to start coming within three minutes of the two of them entering and independently confirming the security of the apartment. It takes nearly five, because Bucky’s bad days apparently mean a bit more paranoia than she’d anticipated.

He sweeps the entire space three times, casually lifting heavy furniture with his good arm to check for surveillance equipment, (though she’s pretty sure that motion is costing him a lot more energy than he puts on—they really need to get Barnes in the Tower ASAP for his sake too), and running his eyes carefully over the light layer of dust coating several of the room’s surfaces to check for breaks in the lines. Presumably before he and Steve had departed for the tower, he’d also placed a piece of tape that he’d then made a mark on in Sharpie over each of the window openings, and he confirms several times that none of the strips have been split or in any way damaged before throwing over his shoulder,

“So Steve is sweet on Howard’s son, then?” It’s a deceptively simple question, the type of thing Natasha herself would have thrown at a mark she was trying to surprise information out of. It’s probably slightly unhealthy, because it’s not as if Bucky chose to be how he is, but she finds herself almost excited at having a new verbal sparring partner, one who knows how to play the game. Clint and Phil are, of course, some of the best, but by now they all know one another too well to get much out of feigning the twinned play of seduction and extraction that are the hallmark of these kinds of exchanges between spies. Barnes pulls a kitchen chair out for her, and she lets the sway of her hips become just slightly more exaggerated as she crosses the room and then perches on the edge of the table itself, facing Barnes.

“And which of them are you ‘sweet’ on? Or is it more of a both/and situation rather than either/or?” Bucky had spoken to her in Russian, but she’s fairly certain his anxiety has come down enough that he’ll understand her in English, and the abrupt switch is another way to get him slightly off-balance. He laughs, but not the same way he had for Tony; it’s something darker and richer, probably too close to the Soldier for most people’s comfort. And he answers in English, the first strategic retreat of the evening.

“Where do you fit in all of it then, Widow?” If they trade questions without answers for too long
this will grow boring, and Bucky had conceded the first victory to her, so Natasha inclines her head slightly and gives a slow smile, the type of look that had first attracted Tony Stark to Natalie Rushman.

“Anywhere I want.” Several expressions seem to play across Bucky’s features all at once; perhaps it’s projection given that she doesn’t yet know the man very well, but Natasha is almost certain she can see some of her own excitement and desire being reflected back at her. He seems to settle, though, on something conflicted and almost mournful.

“That’s gotta be nice.”

“It isn’t as hard as it seems. Where do you want to fit?” He reaches out a hand to tug at her shirt, but before she even has time to consider whether or not jumping straight into things would be as bad an idea as it seems, Barnes’ finger traces the scar his own bullet had left behind on her abdomen. It’s fucked up, sure, but it’s also one of the most intimate ways she’s ever been touched, and she sees rather than feels her breath start to pick up based on the way her stomach flutters more quickly under his hand.

“That presumes there’s a single me to answer that question. I know what Steve wants, what the docs want; they want the Soldier outta my head, they want me to go back to the man I was when I first knew Stevie. And maybe I want that too. At first I couldn’t even remember everything he’d done, but the longer I’m…without a handler, without missions, the more it comes back. I see their faces when I sleep, I feel the Soldier under my skin, in my head when I walk down the street and calculate how many ways I could break the neck of the person walking a bit too close beside me. It would be…nice to go back. Easy. Simple.”

“That’s what Steve and the doctors want. What do you want?” His fingertip presses just slightly harder against the mark on her stomach, and even though it triggers a ghosting kind of pain, she presses right back into the touch, unyielding and unafraid.

“I don’t want to be the man who did this to you, who nearly killed Stevie, who did kill so many other people. I don’t want to take orders. But I don’t think there’s any going back. I…I don’t think I get to choose one or the other anymore, and I don’t know that I would get rid of all of the Soldier even if I could.”

“So don’t.” Natasha shrugs, grinning at the bemused look her gives her. “I’m not trying to oversimplify. It’s a much harder path, to rebuild yourself into something, someone, new rather than letting yourself be shoved into a mold that’s already comfortable and familiar. But almost no one is just one thing, even if they tell themselves otherwise. That’s doubly true of all of the people you spent tonight with, even Rogers.” Bucky snorts.

“Please. The guy is still the same stubborn, idealistic bonehead that followed me into war while he weighed ninety pounds soaking wet and came away Captain America.”

“Cap might be mostly the same, yes. But Steve Rogers took a nosedive into the ocean, slept for decades, and woke up to find the entire world had moved on without him. Don’t fool yourself into thinking Steve Rogers came away from all that undamaged just because his shield did.”

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Clint wakes what is fast becoming a familiar sensation: the feeling of Tony’s body coming to slow awareness, muscles twiching and limbs stretching, against him. The baby went to sleep in nothing but one of Thor’s shirts and his diaper the night before, and the puffy material is pressed against Clint’s thigh. It’s also, he realizes after a moment (so sue him, not all spies are morning people) wet.
“Wake up buddy,” he murmurs, not wanting to give Tony time to get upset when he realizes that he not only wet but managed to sleep through it. “We gotta get you changed.” Thor, the lazy demigod who can sleep through anything, is still snoring on Tony’s other side, but Clint aims a light kick that connects with the blonde’s calf. “Can you grab the diaper bag?”

“Certainly,” Thor agrees with a yawn, leaning down to brush his lips across Tony’s forehead. Despite Clint’s best efforts to treat all of this calmly, Tony is instantly alert and tense the moment what the archer has said registers to him.

“I’ll do it myself. And I don’t need ‘nother one. Just grab me my boxers from yesterday, Thor.”

“Tough noogies, kiddo. What’s our rule about diapers, you and I?” Unlike most of the others, Clint rarely makes or enforces additional rules for little Tony apart from their broader, house-wide set, but Clint is absolutely not okay with the thought of his baby hiding out somewhere with a wet diaper, too scared or ashamed to ask to be changed. Not gonna happen.

“If Daddy puts me in a diaper only Daddy takes it offa me,” he recites, glaring down at the sodden garment as if it has personally offended him.

“That’s right, buddy. Good job. Now you don’t have to let me change you into another one if you don’t want to, but maybe even a pull up under a pair of boxers or some sweats might be a nice way to feel extra safe at breakfast this morning? Remember we promised Phil we’d come up, and Steve has already called me like ten times this morning, probably to confirm.”

“Not hungry,” Tony declares predictably. Clint has a counter to this argument all prepared, and he’s comfortable enough with how he predicts the conversation will go that he starts multitasking, spreading the changing pad on the bed and maneuvering Tony on top of it. So naturally, this is when their kid chooses to make life interesting. “JARVIS, you told them I knew, didn’t you? That’s why…Cap called so many times.”

“I felt it prudent, Sir. And you yourself gave me permission to inform them should the matter not come up organically during the course of the evening.” Clint is feeling more than a little out of the loop, and so, from the look of it, is Thor. The blonde is gazing up at the ceiling with his head cocked.

“Friend JARVIS, what is this matter of which you speak?”

“According to existing protocols in the house made prior to the Avengers taking up residence here, I was forced to alert Sir as to the nature and cause of his parents’ death yesterday afternoon.” Tony squeaks as Clint drops the cool baby wipe he’s just taken out of the packaging onto the boy’s thigh.

“Holy fucking shit Tones,” he bursts out, unable to bother with regulating his language the way they all try to do when Tony is little. “Holy fuck.” Thor, far from berating Clint about his word choice, looks entirely stunned. For the first time since they’ve met, Clint gets the impression that he could actually knock the man over if he came at him right now.

“Youngling,” he says in a near-whisper, far quieter than even his most concerted attempts to be quiet indoors that. “Why would you not tell us this? We would never have asked you to—” Tony seizes the wipe on his leg and gives his genital area a brisk rubdown before sliding off the bed and to his feet. He’s wearing nothing but Thor’s bunched up tee-shirt, but he’s rapidly pulling himself up and out of his headspace, and Clint feels powerless to do anything but gape, still trying to come to terms with what he’s just heard.
“Look, I get that there’s a shit-ton of ‘Talks’ in my future. I know I’ve been…not dealing with a lot of stuff. But first of all, this doesn’t have to be a bad thing. J emphasized, a lot, that you were always planning on telling me and it was just a matter of when and how. Now no one needs to worry about that. And before anyone gets pissed off, the protocol that forced JARVIS to tell me has been altered. I wasn’t trying to invade anyone’s privacy.”

“But Youngling, while we all have much esteem for JARVIS, this is not the way any of us would have chosen.” Tony smiles bitterly, an expression that’s so jarringly out of place on someone whose diaper he just removed that Clint winces. His boy might be getting better at moving between headspace quickly when he feels he has to, but Clint’s own brain tends to need a lot longer to go from ‘Daddy’ to friend and teammate.

“I’ve dealt with worse on my own. Anyway, the point is, it’s done. And I don’t have time to deal with the other parts of it today. No seriously,” he says, raising his voice when Clint crosses his arms and prepares to speak, “JARVIS, read through today’s schedule please? Only the essential items.” The AI takes nearly two minutes to narrate the entire list, and by the end of it Clint is not entirely sure if he’s being trolled or not.

“How can you possibly be on two conference calls at the same time?”

“Pep is leading one of ‘em, I’m just listening in. And the other one is going to be boring as sin; I could probably talk to these folks in the middle of a battle and still manage to ooh and ah at the right times. They’d just take my extraneous swearing and muttering as signs of my ‘eccentricity’.”

Thor meets Clint’s eyes and shrugs, and the archer is in about the same place. So much of this is not in the least bit okay, but Tony isn’t wrong that they won’t always be able to halt the rest of their obligations every time their cobbled-together little family’s stunning array of baggage requires dealing with. Sometimes all they can do is stumble through it together.

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Phil takes in the absolute mountain of breakfast food that’s practically spilling out of the kitchen; he didn’t think food waste could ever really become a risk in a house with a super-soldier, a god, and two spies who had been without food on enough occasions that they still covet and guard it protectively. But there’s a pound cake on one counter, a teetering stack of pancakes and French Toast on the island, and Steve is currently in the middle of cutting up several bananas. Because apparently the heaping colander full of berries, peaches and mango in the sink is not enough.

Now, to be fair, Steve is not the only one who is a bit off this morning; most of them have been a mess since the bomb JARVIS had dropped the night before. But Steve had, understandably, been completely broken up by the news. It had taken everyone present to stop the man from immediately busting in on Tony, Clint, and Thor, and he hadn’t exactly been quiet about his displeasure in being made to wait.

“I have to see him. I have to talk to him, make him understand that we were going to tell him, and that I never would have paraded Bucky under his nose like that if I’d known—”

“I understand this is news to you like it is to all of us, Steve, but try to remember that it isn’t news to Tony. He made an informed decision about what he wanted for tonight, and that incredibly brave, if also troubling, decision was to have you both here, and to work damn hard to make Barnes feel welcome. And then after putting himself through what I can only imagine was a pretty trying and difficult evening, Tony decided that he wanted to be alone with Clint and Thor. What you or I or anyone but Tony wants doesn’t matter right now.”

Cap had taken Bruce’s extremely direct advice to heart (thankfully, given that it probably would
have taken Hulk to physically prevent the super-soldier from invading Clint’s floor if he’d really wanted to), but it had been a difficult, tense night for everyone. No one had even bothered to make an attempt sleep; the most they’d done was change into pyjamas (Steve wearing a set of borrowed sleep pants and a t-shirt Thor had left for him), and then huddle back up in the living room, watching mindless television in silence.

At around five in the morning, however, Steve had started becoming increasingly worried that Tony would be a no-show for the team breakfast. It’s wasn’t unreasonable, the notion that Tony would avoid dealing with all of this as long as he could, so no one had actively tried to convince him not to make the first call to Clint’s cell. By the fifth, sixth and seventh calls they’d all exchanged looks that were equal parts fondly amused and exasperated. After the eighth, Phil had seized the phone in a slight of hand that would have made Natasha proud and suggested (well, it was probably closer to an order) that Steve go get a start on breakfast.

He can see now that leaving no one in there to supervise had been a rather severe miscalculation.

“Put down the knife.”

“But—”

“There’s already more food than we can possibly hope to eat. Drop it before you force me to call in backup, Captain.” The weak joke draws a self-depreciating sigh out of Steve, who does as he’s been bid and allows Phil to guide him into a chair. “JARVIS just told us they’re on their way up. Tony’s big this morning, because he’s heading straight from breakfast to a conference call, and then nearly two dozen things after that.” Steve’s face falls.

“Oh. I thought…I mean, it’s not like I’m disappointed to see him regardless, but I figured he’d be __”

“Little, I know. And he desperately needs it, but he’s also already given up a lot lately by agreeing to take time off, and then letting Bruce regulate his work hours while he recovered from the bronchitis. Fortunately and unfortunately for us, Tony is an extremely busy guy. So just be prepared for that fact that he might not want to talk much about last night, or Bucky, or anything very heavy, okay? It’s still important that you’re here, I promise.”

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Despite Phil’s sensible and convincing warning, Steve is pretty certain he’s not going to make it through the meal sticking only to non-serious topics. Tony strides in wearing a perfectly tailored striped black suit, chatting amiably to Thor about some aspect of Jane’s research, and the urge to be touching some part of him, not for Tony’s comfort or reassurance but for Steve’s own, is nearly overwhelming. It’s a pleasant surprise when the engineer selects the seat next to Steve’s, but then Tony falters mid-sentence when he looks down at the plate Steve has put in front of him.

“I know it’s a lot,” Steve admits, rubbing the back of his neck. “I can make you a smoothie instead if you want?”

“It’s not—I just—uh.”

“We’ve found that eating is a lot easier on Tony if the food comes to him in small pieces,” Bruce explains, smoothly sliding the plate away and walking into the kitchen with it. The explanation was gentle, and no one seems mad (including Tony, who looks more embarrassed than anything). That actually makes it worse, though. It’s another thing Steve has somehow missed, something else that’s changed during his absence.
“I’m sorry,” he mumbles, spearing a piece of strawberry far too hard and scraping the fork loudly across his plate. “Damn it.”

“Don’t worry about it, Steve.” Tony’s tone is still the same deliberately breezy and non-confrontational voice he’s been using for weeks, but it’s the first time he’s addressed Steve by name rather than as Cap or the myriad of other nicknames he always has on hand, and this, at least, comes as a relief. “Now, we should talk about you and Barnes.” Steve nearly chokes on the piece of fruit in his mouth.

“I—sure, yes, Tony, of course. We didn’t think you’d want—”

“Hold up there cowboy, I don’t mean a…capital T kind of talk, with the feels and all that. I just…can’t right now. But we need to discuss how the two of you are planning to go forward, because what you’re doing isn’t sustainable. So you should move back in here, and bring James with you.” The offer (well, it’s less an offer and more of a statement) nearly bowls Steve over, and he’s entirely grateful when Phil steps in.

“Tony. That’s very kind of you, and I’m sure both Steve and Bucky appreciate it, but do you really think that’s wise? There’s so much all of you have to work through, and you yourself just said that you can’t even conceive of talking about it right now. Hell, we’re all getting half our major news about one another from JARVIS right now, does that seem healthy to you?”

“Nope. But does it seem like a problem that’s going to be solved by half of us continuing to avoid one another?” Tony volleys back, taking a piece of the cut-up pound cake on his recently-returned plate and moaning. “Damn that’s good.” Bruce smiles a bit at that (as does Steve, because it’s a relief that he can still get something right these days), but then he points out,

“You need little time for longer than a few hours at night, and soon, Tony. I know we let the schedule slip, and you have been good about letting us help you go down here and there since Steve left, but it’s not enough. Especially with everything that’s happened lately. How do you propose to do that with James in the Tower?” The two scientists eye one another, doing that thing where they seem to be having an additional conversation with their eyes. Tony ends the standoff by popping a piece of pancake into his mouth.

“That’s Steve’s call.” Tony turns in his chair to more directly face him. “Tell him if you want, if you think he’ll understand, or don’t. It’s a big tower, and I’m working on gathering a lot of the equipment he needs for PT and his other treatments onto one of the empty floors, so there’ll be plenty to keep him occupied if…if we all want private time together.” His brief stumble at the end is the only obvious indicator of how much this offer is costing Tony, and how unsure he apparently is that Steve still wants to care for his little self. The desire to be holding his boy right now is like a constantly growing itch under Steve’s skin.

“Are we…agreed, then?” Thor asks, once the silence in the room has gone on for nearly a minute. Most everyone’s eyes are darting between Steve and Tony, and, praying he isn’t making a huge mistake, Steve replies,

“I guess we are. I’ll talk to Buck about moving and see what his thoughts are.”

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Tony is pretty damn proud of how well he holds everything together during breakfast, actually, and to top it off he clears at least three quarters of his hilariously overfilled plate. It’s still, however, a bit of a relief to be able to make his escape while the others are lingering over coffee and the remnants of the meal they pretty thoroughly destroyed.
Well, most of the others. Thor gets to his feet as soon as Tony does, and follows him to the elevator.

“Heading to the training floor, big guy? Or to go see Jane? Do you need a car?”

“I have no need of transport, Friend Tony. I shall share yours.” This announcement isn’t imperious the way Thor can sometimes be when his upbringing and background peek through, but neither is the man standing across from Tony the overly-anxious version of the demigod that often inhabits the Tower these days. On another occasion it would be great to see Thor so matter-of-fact and assertive, but at the moment it’s mostly baffling.

“I’m going to SI. I’m going to be there all day and probably into the night. Is where you want to go on the way or something, Point Break?”

“No, I shall be joining you.”

“If you want a tour of the offices or something, I’d be happy to arrange it for another day—”

“I don’t wish to see your building, grand though it undoubtedly is. It is your company I desire, my friend.” The part of Tony that used to worry constantly about being undermined as an adult after spending time in little space has gone a bit dormant as of late, mostly because the team hasn’t ever given him a reason to suspect they’re pulling that. But it flares to life pretty instantly now, and it’s only Thor’s newly-gained confidence that stops Tony from snapping out the most vicious retort he can.

“I don’t need supervision, Thor. I am a fully capable and qualified adult going to work, most of which I could complete half-drunk and sleep-deprived. And that’s not hypothetical knowledge. I have actually done almost everything I’m about to do today in way worse shape than this. So back off, alright?” There. Direct, unambiguous, but not a personal attack. Pep would be proud.

“You misunderstand my intentions. I recognize that you have no need of a parental figure. I wish not to be your caretaker, just to…care, if you will allow it. I think it wise that you not be alone this day, and I would be most honoured to accompany you if you shall have me. You are welcome to provide any excuse for my presence that you would like, and I promise that I shall remain silent and try to avoid, as Friend Clint once accused me, ‘breaking all the things.’”

And Science Gods help him, but it sounds…kind of nice. Bruce is always a great go-to if Tony wants to chat about what he’s gotten up to in the labs or his workshop, and everyone else always makes a point of asking how he spends his time during the days, but the only time they’ve really bothered much with SI is when the company’s interests intersect with those of SHIELD or the Avengers. Or, like this morning, when the work Tony has to do for SI is an obstacle to their age playing. To have any of them interested enough in spending time with him as an adult that they’re willing to brave multiple conference calls, a marketing meeting, a brainstorming session with R&D (and that’s just in the first few hours) is surprisingly affirming.

“Bring your Asgardian prince to work day at SI, huh? I guess we can do that. But hit the button for your floor first—Pepper will kill me if you show up in a Back to the Future t-shirt.”

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Thor, it turns out, has acquired a few pretty decent dress shirts (an impressive feat, considering his frame), and Tony has great fun dressing him and admiring the results for several long beats before they head to the office. The other man does not entirely keep to his promise to be seen and not heard. He interrupts the first conference call, which he mistakenly thinks has been muted on their end, to ask if a grumpy board member being exceptionally combative with Tony has been
overtaken by a hostile enemy and may “require vanquishing”, but a part of Tony suspects based on Thor’s grin when the man immediately falls silent that this was not entirely an accident. The blonde also insists on lengthy and extended introductions to every member of Tony’s staff that he comes into contact with. Most of them (even the few who don’t seem to recognize Thor for who he is) are utterly charmed, offering up their life-stories, replete with numerous cat, dog, and kid pictures, on a platter. This causes the R&D meeting to run nearly two hours overtime, but Tony has always gone to bat for the magnificent nerds of this department, and he’s not about to stop any of them if they want to start worshiping Thor (so long as he himself remains their chief object of adoration).

Some of Thor’s interruptions are a bit more pointed and, Tony’s positive, Bruce-engineered. He brings Tony meals and snacks at regular intervals and insistently moves them back in front of Tony’s computer or paperwork whenever he brushes them off to the corner of his desk. And when Fury calls when they’re nearly on their way out of the office at eight-thirty to berate Tony for withholding SHIELD tech upgrades, things get…a little ugly.

“The business with Coulson has nothing to do with our goddamn contract, Stark. You’re putting my people in danger, and making me wonder if Natasha’s original assessment of you wasn’t correct after all.” Another second and Tony will be able to push past the way that stings in precisely the way Fury means it to, but Thor gets there first.

“Tony Stark is an Avenger and a friend. I think it wise for the sake of SHIELD’s alliance with Asgard that you never attempt to suggest that either position is in peril again.” Even Nick doesn’t have a gruff, snarky comeback for that one, and it is somewhat satisfying to hear him mutter an awkward apology and hang up. It’s the type of thing that would normally leave Tony gleeful to the point of indecency, actually. So why isn’t he doing his patented “Fury-screwed-up-and-got-nailed-on-it” dance, or at least texting the rest of the team to relay the story? Especially after such a good (if often ridiculous) day, why can’t he just laugh the rest of it off the way he’s always done?

A quiet click breaks the silence of the office, and Tony turns to find that Thor has just closed and locked the office door.

“What’s up?” The other man crosses the room in several long strides and wraps his arms around Tony. It’s everything and nothing like being held by the man when he’s little; there’s the same strength, the same powerful awareness that very little could get to him while he’s in this man’s arms. But it’s a rougher and more forceful grip, too, perhaps a recognition on Thor’s part that the version of Tony he’s currently embracing doesn’t need to be cradled or sheltered from the world, just supported.

It’s then that Tony starts to cry. It isn’t really tears for what Fury said; except on his very worst days, he’s pretty secure in his place on the team, even if he hasn’t piloted the armour in months. He cries for the loss of Steve, for the way it had felt to have the watch suddenly go still against his wrist and to wonder if the man was dead, or had simply found a superior option for companionship than Tony and the rest of the team. He cries for Phil, for whatever it was that had been capable of making one of the bravest men he knows scream and plead for death the way he had, and for the fact that even now he has no real answers. He cries for Barnes, for the unimaginable pain that must be involved in trying to break Hydra’s conditioning despite the guilt and self-disgust it leaves behind.

But mostly Tony cries for his parents, dying at the side of the road, alone and frightened. He cries for himself, for the simultaneous feelings of guilt and relief that the revelation that their deaths were not an accident caused by Howard’s drinking have brought up in him. Because his lingering resentment towards his Dad had had a clear purpose, an object, before now; it was was reasonable
to be angry at the man whose struggles with addiction had resulted in not only his own death, but the loss of his wife. But without that, now he has to face the fact that he simply wishes Howard had loved him, not because of his potential contributions to science and technology, but because he was his son, and that was how it was supposed to go. He cries because everything he faced in the years after their deaths—the cave in Afghanistan, Obie’s betrayal, his near-miss with Palladium poisoning, New York and its aftermath, through all of it he never had the comfort of believing that it all would have been better, easier, if his Dad had been alive.

Thor never once loosens or abandons his embrace, doesn’t move one inch away from Tony even though it feels like it takes ages for his body to finally start running out of tears.

“Thanks,” he mumbles into Thor’s royal blue shirt. It’s woefully inadequate response to the steadfast and non-judgemental comfort Thor has just given, but his throat aches from the force of such sustained sobbing, and for once, words seem to be in short supply. The demigod leans down to press their foreheads together, the same way he had the first morning Tony had been little, and Tony speaks again without even really realizing in advance what he’s about to say. “Think I need to be little tomorrow. Even if Steve’s not there.” It’s the first time Tony has ever been the one to explicitly ask for this, to seek out the headspace that’s become such an unexpected source of stability and solace in his life, and Thor smiles almost fiercely in response. The intense pride in his expression is almost enough to bring Tony to tears again all on its own.

“I agree most heartily. And for now, we shall go home to our friends and shield mates. I believe they have plans to order an ample supply of rations and and watch the next installment of the small humans doing battle against the eye of fire.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this felt like a weirdly structured chapter to me, and I promise we hear more about the Bucky/Natasha/Steve side of things soon. And yes, I know, more angst! But this moment of Tony actually letting himself break down in his adult headspace is a really good and important thing, and an important turning point.

I so very much appreciate your comments and kudos. I genuinely feel stunned that y’all have stuck with me for over 100,000 words!
The Icing on the Cake (Pops)

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve make their way to the Tower; Steve and the others begin the long, slow process of helping put their family back together, with the help of cake and bath crayons.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Mentions of Tony being shamed as a child by a parental figure for bedwetting, and as an adult for continence problems during his time in Afghanistan. If you want to avoid, skip the paragraph that begins "After the first kidnapping attempt when he was three...", as well as the next paragraph. I can also provide a redacted version if you need/desire/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve plans the entire ride home from the team breakfast how best to broach the subject of moving to the Tower with Bucky. Dinner the previous evening had gone well, far better indeed than Steve had dared to hope, but that hardly meant that all of Bucky’s lingering guilt about the death of the Starks or his general discomfort around other people was going to instantly be washed away. And Steve himself was so intoxicated by the idea of a return home being potentially so near that he did not entirely trust himself to present the options without giving away his hand and making it obvious that he was far from neutral on the subject.

His brain comes to a rather sudden halt when he enters the apartment to find Bucky and Natasha curled up together on the couch, surrounded by the broken remains of what looks like nearly every dish in the apartment. Alert as ever to noise and motion, both are awake when Steve steps into the living room, but it’s plain from their mussed hair and Bucky’s slow blinking that they have not been so for long.

“I…really don’t even know what to say right now,” he says, tiptoeing amongst the shards of glass to loom over the pair. Natasha shrugs, unruffled as ever.

“James felt like breaking shit. The dishes seemed like a safe option, all things considered. Trust me, it’s not even close to the worst thing that’s ever happened in this apartment complex.” Steve decides not to bite on that one, though one day he really does want the story as to how Clint ended up owning an entire apartment building in the first place. Right now, the majority of his focus is on Bucky, who is looking back at him in a way Steve has never seen before. He’s still in that way his time as both the Soldier and a sniper have made him prefer, but without the whole-body tension that usually accompanies it. This isn’t happy Bucky, not as Steve has ever known him, but neither is this the distressed, anxious and guilt-ridden man Steve has spent most of the last two weeks with.

“How was the rest of your night?” he asks Steve, uncurling himself from Natasha, though Steve
notes that his good hand remains splayed across her low back.

“It was uh…informative, I guess?” The two assassins across from him just sit back with nearly identical expressions, waiting for Steve to give more information without even bothering to press him. It’s…odd. Really damn odd to see them together and realize how many of their behaviours are now so similar. “Tony…well, technically Tony’s AI, JARVIS, you met him yesterday—anyway, JARVIS overheard Natasha and I, and then Natasha and the rest of the team, talking about what happened to his parents. And he was sort of forced to pass that on.” Bucky’s features lose the very little colour they have, even as Natasha mutters something to him in Russian that Steve assumes is meant to comfort.

“So he knows and I can’t go back. That’s fine, I get it, you still need your team. I can stay here, or go to SHIELD—”

“No, Buck. He knew before we ever got there yesterday. He still had us over. And this morning he asked if we wanted to move in there, both of us. He’s…I think he’s been planning it for awhile, JARVIS showed us all the equipment he’s bought to help with your treatment, some of it is better than the stuff at the doctor’s offices. And he’s got paperwork in place to put a bunch of your docs on retainer, so that they can come to the Tower basically whenever you need them, and I’m pretty sure he has plans to fix your arm already in place, though JARVIS won’t officially admit that one.” Bucky blinks. Then blinks again. Natasha hides her own surprise only slightly better.

“That’s…sorry, what?”

“Add about ten more ‘what’s to that and you have my reaction for the first five or so hours,” Steve laughs. “It’s not that he’s suddenly fine with it. I don’t think anyone could be. But Tony’s a good guy, and he’s seen first hand the type of damage Hydra can cause. I think he’d rather we all face it together, and be given the chance to help you heal, than hold a grudge. But before you give me an answer either way on what you think, there’s something else I should tell you. About him, and about all of us.” Natasha tenses, and it occurs to Steve too late that while he has everyone else’s permission to be speaking about their ageplay, he never got hers. “I’m sorry, Tasha, I should have—is this okay with you?”

“If it’s fine with him and the others then yes,” she says carefully. “But I, it’s too…I’m going to get this glass cleaned up while you two talk, alright?”

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Steve talks for nearly half an hour. It’s probably longer than he meant to go on, but he’s desperate to make sure this comes cross clearly, the way he wants it to, and nerves sometimes turn him into a bit of rambler. When he finally forces himself to stop talking, Bucky says,

“Huh.”

“Huh?”

“’m processin’, gimme a second here wouldja punk? And actually, could you get a notepad and a pen? I…everything I’m thinking feels real jumbled right now, and Doc Fisher said writing it all down first and then trying to sort it can help.” Steve almost trips over himself in his haste to grab the items Bucky had requested, all the while berating himself for his impatience. This is a huge amount of information for Bucky to take in at once, and the other man has really been struggling to reconstruct what used to be his natural thought patterns. He’s still re-learning how to break down complex concepts and ideas while bypassing or minimizing the influence of his programming; the more complicated the conversation, the more Bucky struggles with what he calls ‘jumbling’—words and thoughts and feelings all come upon him at once without any clear order or logic.
Breaking them down and imposing that organization often takes time, and this is no small thing Steve is asking him to digest.

Recalling Phil’s actions during their conversation about Steve’s desire to cut back his time at SHIELD, Steve tries to make up for it by heading into the kitchen and making tea (the mugs having thankfully escaped the dish-smashing exercise from the previous evening). They don’t have the same fancy blends that Tony keeps in the Tower, and brewing tea with the bags isn’t nearly as time and labour-intensive as the loose leaves that Bruce, Tony and Phil all prefer, but it’s enough to take the edge off his anxiety. By the time he sets the cup down in front of Bucky, leaving another on the counter for Natasha, Bucky has set his pen down. He takes another five or so minutes to stare down at the page, occasionally picking the pen back up and drawing arrows or crossing things out, but finally he seems happy with the result.

“Is…is this something you want me to be involved with?” There’s an edge to Bucky’s tone that Steve can’t quite identify, something that could just as easily be yearning or discomfort, and a part of Steve hates that he can’t always tell anymore.

“Well for one I think it isn’t just about what I want. Your involvement would depend on a lot of things, yours and Tony’s feelings about that most importantly. It probably isn’t something we could just jump into. It’s…he’s in a really vulnerable place when he’s little, and even though he seems to forgive you and want you around as an adult, having you there when he’s in headspace would probably require that you have a more established relationship as adults first. From there, we could see how it goes, maybe have you meet him when he’s little?” Bucky nods, making a little check on the page in front of him.

“I know you said it isn’t about sex, that none of you…are like that with him, when he’s acting little. But, can you…what is it about, for you? Why do you want this?” Bucky pauses, frowns, peers down at his paper, and adds, “I’m not…I didn’t mean to be judgemental or nothin’. Did it come out wrong?”

“It came out fine, and it’s a completely fair question,” Steve smiles. “He asked almost the exact same thing when we proposed the idea, actually. I guess for me it’s mainly about being trusted. I don’t mean…I know a lot of people trust me because of Captain America, and I’m grateful for that, I am. But it all still feels like such a show, sometimes. People don’t actually trust me because they know me, and in fact it’s just the opposite. They trust me because they don’t, because to them I’m this larger-than-life icon that can’t ever make mistakes. Tony…he shows me that he trusts me a hundred times a day, by letting me feed him and hold him and read to him and bathe him, all these little everyday things that are just…everything. And I don’t have to be perfect to give him those things, I just have to be there.”

“You love him,” Bucky whispers.

“I do,” Steve agrees. “I love all of them. They’re…I was so alone, Buck, and then suddenly I had this shot at a family again, and it’s strange and a pretty constant amount of work, but it’s worth it, you know? At the end of the day, that’s what I want for you, too. I don’t care what form that takes; you can participate in the ageplay or not. But I want you there, in the tower, with my family, not just because I’m selfish and want everyone I care about in the same place, but because I think having that could help you too.” Bucky sticks his index finger into his mouth, and for a long second it’s so reminiscent of Tony when he’s trying not to suck his thumb that Steve is stunned silly. But then he remembers something Bucky had told him about his time as the Winter Soldier, about how they used to use bite guards when they were ‘wiping’ him. Perhaps touching his teeth and tongue is Bucky’s way of reminding himself that, unlike his captors, Steve wants him to give voice to his thoughts and has no intention of inhibiting or placing limitations on that, physical or
otherwise.

“I have more questions. But I think…slowly. For now, this is enough. We can go tomorrow. Ain’t makin’ any promises about how long I’ll stay, or how it’s gonna go, but if nothin’ else, we gotta get you home, Stevie.”

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Tony wakes the following morning with Clint and, to his immense surprise, Phil. Coulson is seated on the edge of the bed, not even tucked under the blankets, so he definitely didn’t fall asleep here, but after weeks of the other man’s careful avoidance of everyone during sleeping hours, it’s a pleasant surprise all the same. Then Tony remembers his plan to take the day off and linger in headspace, and he beams as he realizes this means he doesn’t have to fight off the edges of littleness that always cling to him when he wakes up in a diaper.

“Daddy!” he yells happily. Phil still looks drawn and exhausted in a way Tony is very very not happy about, but the greeting brings a warm smile to the agent’s face that make the lines around his eyes crinkle.

“Good morning honey. Did you have a good sleep?” Tony pauses only long enough to kick free of the blankets, and then he’s scrambling into Phil’s lap.

“Slept forever and ever. Daddy Clint made us go to bed super early.”

“That’s because you were at work from eight in the morning until almost nine at night, squirt,” Clint says from the other side of the bed. “You nearly fell asleep in your dinner. So a little less ‘tude, huh?”

“Don’t gots ‘tude,” Tony sasses back, laughing and squirming when Phil tickles lightly at his sides. “No no stop it Daddy not faaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiir.”

“Huh, who knew the word fair could be drawn out into at least four syllables,” Clint observes. “Phil, what else can you make him say?”

“It does seem to bear further study, doesn’t it?” Fingers dance across Tony’s ribs lightly again and he squeaks and cackles and tries to move away from Phil’s surprisingly strong grip. Phil stops long before he risks putting actual strain on Tony’s lungs, conscious as always of the arc reactor, but Tony’s concerns are a bit more pressing.

“No more tickles. Stupid diaper already wet.” Phil and Clint exchange looks before the latter gets up and walks around to the other side of the bed.

“Munchkin, can you put on your listening ears for me for one second?” Feeling just fanciful enough to go along with it, Tony mimes putting a large pair of ears over his own, grinning in satisfaction when this makes both of the other men laugh. He really likes making his Daddies laugh, especially when Phil has been so sad and preoccupied lately. “That’s my good boy. Okay, here’s the deal. Daddy Phil and I had a little talk before you woke up, and we’re thinking it might be a good idea if you stayed in diapers for us today.”

“Uh-uh,” Tony protests, before remembering about the listening ears and reluctantly quieting back down.

“I know that scares you. This has been pretty private, something we’ve kept down here in this room mostly between me and you. And if you need it to stay that way, that’s alright, buddy. But you really, really need to stay down in headspace today, and we think the diapers might help with
that kind of the same way your mitts sometimes do. And not a single person in this Tower is gonna be mean about it, you know that right? We like taking care of our boy, and this is another way we get to do that. It doesn’t have to be more complicated than that.”

Tony allows his thumb to slide toward his mouth as he considers this. The diapers are horribly, painfully embarrassing, especially when he wets at night without even waking, as he has a couple of times now. When he’d woken up in diapers after that first night, he’d very nearly taken off for Malibu before remembering he no longer had a home there. To say the experience had brought back some pretty unpleasant memories would be rather understating things.

After the first kidnapping attempt when he was three, the one where he’d been held for nearly six weeks in a cold warehouse while his father flatly refused to negotiate until mom had threatened to leave him, Tony had gone through a spell where he’d wet the bed at home. It had absolutely infuriated Howard, who had railed at him about Stark men and responsibility and how he would never amount to anything if he couldn’t stop pissing the bed like a fucking baby. After the first couple of times it had happened, Jarvis had taken to entering Tony’s room in the wee hours of the morning, helping him change out the linens and his clothes and wiping down the plastic sheet he’d secretly placed on the mattress. Howard assumed the problem had been solved and went back to largely ignoring Tony, a far more desirable option for all involved.

It had happened again in Afghanistan, especially when he’d first been healing from his injuries. He remembers his captors mocking his lack of control, their sneers as his bladder released itself on the floor, or the thin gurney he’d been on as he went in and out of pained consciousness. Even once he’d recovered enough to stumble to the makeshift bathroom in the rooms he was held in, his captors had still loved bringing up Tony’s inability to regulate his body as they tortured him with the water. What’s wrong, Stark? All this water make you want to piss yourself again? Pathetic.

To learn that even this most unforgivable mistake was, in fact, no big deal at all to Clint in particular was still something that left his mind reeling when Tony thought about it too hard. But hiding down here in the privacy of Clint’s bedroom, wearing diapers only because he was currently struggling on occasion with nighttime continence, that was worlds away from voluntarily wearing them during the day time. He would feel less exposed bare-ass naked. But Clint rarely asks him for things like this, rarely pushes him the way the others sometimes do, and the man has been such a rock for Tony the past couple of weeks…

“Only Daddy Clint change?” he offers, chewing on the tip of his thumb.

“We can start that way, of course we can buddy,” Clint agrees. “But it would also mean a lot to the others to be able to help with this sometimes, so do you think we can maybe work up to it? Like can Phil give me a hand this morning, just getting you all set up on the changing pad?”

“No tricks?” he confirms, looking between the two men. “And no teasin’?”

“No tricks and no teasing,” Phil promises, voice just as solemn and grave as if he were agreeing to the most secretive and high-stakes of missions.

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They’re almost to the elevator, Tony dressed in his favourite fox sweater and a pair of loose-fitting shorts (not the easiest for diaper changes, but they’ll make do), when the baby stops in his tracks. Phil nearly collides with his back, halted only by Clint reaching out to steady him.

“Is um…Steve, is he?”

“Steve is helping Bucky get settled,” Phil explains gently. “The last update we got, he was with
Barnes while JARVIS was giving him the tour. You and JARVIS did a great putting that together by the way, kiddo. Steve said seeing and being talked through the security measures here really put James at ease. And he says half the equipment you have here for Bucky’s rehab is miles ahead of even the stuff they have at SHIELD. Where’d you get it?” Tony shrugs.

“Got it at a medical supply place and then modified most of it. I can do more once I have a better first-hand sense of what he needs.” Too much of the weird combination of sadness and pride Phil feels at Tony’s selflessness must come through in his expression, because the baby shrugs again and stares down at his toes (which are already bare, though they’d put socks on him when they left the bedroom—how does he keep doing this?). “No big deal.”

“It is a big deal, baby. You’re…it is a very big deal, okay?” There’s a lot more Phil wants to say, but they’ve learned by now that pressing heavy discussion topics right before a meal almost never goes well. “Anyway, once Bucky is all acclimated and you’ve had time to get some breakfast in your belly, Steve is going to come up and join us in the afternoon as long as that’s alright with you.” Tony nods, but slips his hand into Phil’s and squeezes just shy of too-tight all the way up to the penthouse.

Bruce leads everyone present through a round of meditation, and then everyone settles in the living room for breakfast complete with cartoons (Darkwing Duck this time, another 90s favourite apparently). Tony remains Phil’s little shadow through all of it, and Phil’s stuck between finding it adorable and feeling guilty that this is probably an indicator that his preoccupation with other matters lately has made their boy feel even more insecure.

“Daddy’s just getting up to help wash the dishes and go get your bottle, baby boy,” he pleads as Tony makes a protesting little whimper from his spot in Phil’s lap. Bruce looks just as concerned as Phil’s beginning to feel, but he plays it casually, making a joke about not wanting to disturb their comfy boy and heading into the kitchen in Phil’s place. Soon, though, Phil is feeding the baby his bottle, and he’s completely drawn in as he always is by the gentle little suckling sounds Tony makes as he works at the nipple. The baby gets drowsy as he usually does post-breakfast, but they don’t want him waking up to suddenly find Steve there. It could too-easily result in a panic attack, or Tony feeling as if he doesn’t have a choice but to accept the man’s presence. So, very reluctantly, Phil nudges him. “I know, I know you’re tired. Too many long days for you lately, huh? We’ll get you down for a good nap later, I promise. But you don’t want to go to sleep when we’re going to make cake pops do you?”

Everyone on the team even slightly inclined toward cooking and baking (Clint, Nat, Bruce and Phil himself, to some degree) have taken up the challenge of providing smaller portioned foods to Tony with gusto. The cake pops specifically were Bruce’s idea, and on top of keeping Tony involved in food prep, which has worked out very well for them so far, they fit in with their general plan of attack for today, which is to go hard on active playtime. The less time they give Tony to obsess about Steve’s arrival, or to worry about the talking they’ll need to do as a group today, the more they hope they’ll be able to keep him calm and actually enjoying his much-needed time in headspace.

Tony’s eyes go wide with excitement, and though he threads his fingers with Phil’s again, the baby almost pulls him to the kitchen, dissatisfied with what he evidently feels is Phil’s insufficient commitment to getting to the cake ingredients as quickly as humanly possible.

“Daddy hurry!” he whines as Phil slows his steps to a crawl just to tease.

“Oh are we in a rush to get somewhere?” he asks, peering around the room and feigning confusion.

“Yes, frosting!” Tony yelps. It’s so nice to see their little guy excited about food, and actually
about anything as of late (even in headspace, Tony has frequently fallen into bouts of listless silence since Steve’s departure) that Phil laughs in delight, pulling the boy to him and planting a kiss on the top of his head.

“I love you, kiddo.” This is, Phil is somewhat impressed to note, enough to make Tony temporarily forget about his disregard for all things not-cake, because the boy turns and stares at him. It’s always a little unnerving to the sole focus of Tony’s incredibly intense attention, even in headspace, but it’s worth it for the moment when Tony finds whatever it is he was seeking in Phil’s body language and expression and smiles shyly.

“Love you too.” The moment, however, is a short one. Two seconds later, Tony yells again for frosting and begins pulling Phil toward the kitchen with renewed vigour.

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For such little things, the process of making cake pops turns out to be pretty complex. Though they try to distract him with a card game while the one inch balls of carrot cake have to sit and firm up in the freezer, Tony runs over to ‘check’ on them often, usually with Thor not far behind. Once the cake is finally ready, the baby is thrilled to be given the very important task of dipping the frozen balls into melted white chocolate (into which he’s already stuck his fingers several times during the wait while they all pretend not to notice) and toasted walnuts. He’s far less pleased when he learns he has to stick the lollipops into a foam block to let the toppings set rather than immediately enjoying the products of their labours, but he’s distracted from his disappointment when JARVIS announces that Steve is on his way up.

Tony immediately freezes, nearly dropping the little stick in his hand.

“It’s alright, love,” Bruce assures him quietly, guiding the baby’s hand over to the block. “Just poke that one in there next to the others. There you go, you got it. Now the next one.” Tony’s hands are shaking a little as Bruce guides him through getting the rest of their treats ready, but he doesn’t take off or immediately request to be taken back to Clint’s floor, so Bruce is counting this one as a win. Steve soon finds his way to the kitchen, and though he still looks anxious and a bit lost the way he had the previous evening, he smiles when his eyes find Tony, whose face and clothes are coated in a layer of almost all of their ingredients.

“What are you making, honey?” Tony becomes hyper-focused on arranging the cake pops in a perfectly straight line, and doesn’t answer.

“Tony made cake pops for everyone,” Bruce supplies, when it’s clear their boy either isn’t willing or able to say anything. Tony shakes his head.

“Just dipped ‘em.”

“And you helped stir the cake mix, and grate the carrots, and melt the chocolate. Plus you defended the cream cheese frosting from Thor’s ‘testing’. You did a lot, buddy,” Clint corrects, ruffling Tony’s hair and laughing as this makes the substantial amount of flour that’s found its way there fly into the air, briefly forming a little white cloud around the baby’s head.

“Daddy! Stoppit!” Steve makes a wounded noise, and when Bruce looks at him, the supersoldier’s face has drained dramatically of all its colour. It takes Bruce an embarrassingly long time to realize what’s causing the extreme response, but when he does he winces in sympathy. Steve hadn’t been here when Tony had started calling them by parental names; it’s another thing he missed, and a big one at that. Nat seems to put the pieces together a few seconds after Bruce, and she gives Steve’s forearm a subtle, comforting squeeze.
“They look really good,” Steve offers softly, delivering the compliment to the room in general so Tony isn’t pressed to reply. He doesn’t, but Bruce catches the tiny smile that plays across his boy’s lips, and comes to a decision.

“Well you came at a great time, because they need to set for a little while now. And I know a little boy who could really use a bath. Steve, you want to give me a hand?” The blonde nods, though he looks highly skeptical that Tony will permit it. Bruce leans down to whisper gently, “That alright with you little love? You don’t have to talk to Steve if you don’t want to, and Papa will be there the whole time.” Tony looks near to agreeing, actually, but then suddenly flushes beet red and turns to look at Clint.

Right. He must be diapered this morning, and still very nervous about it. Definitely too embarrassed to allow Steve to know what he has on under his pants; Bruce would guess that Steve’s enhanced hearing will pick up on the rather tell-tale crinkling sound as soon as the baby moves, but he’s not going to be the one to point that out.

“You want Daddy Clint to get you all ready, and help you find your bath toys, while Steve and I get the water running?”

“Kay,” Tony mutters, still looking a little as if he wishes the floor would open up and swallow him whole.

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Bout of hurt jealousy in the kitchen aside, Steve is tremendously patient with Tony in the bath, and it pays off nicely. Tony starts off quiet and subdued, nothing like the bubbly, confident baby Bruce and the others had spent the morning with. But Bruce coaxes him into playing with his rubber animals, and slowly Tony allows Steve to become more and more involved. At first, the super-soldier is permitted only to hand Tony things from the mesh bag full of toys. Eventually, though, their little guy glides through the water to hand Steve a little rubber warthog; Steve accepts it like he’s just been handed a priceless jewel. A few minutes later Tony speaks to Steve directly for the first time.

“Could you…draw houses for the an’imals on the wall? With the crayons?” Bruce watches the two as Steve skillfully brings Tony into the process, asking a lot of questions about his preferred design and colours that allow the boy to ease into talking by having a set of fixed objects to focus on. Before too long, the baby is almost in Steve’s lap, excitedly asking if the rubber owl’s house can really have a whole room full of rats and bugs for the bird to munch on. (A little macabre, sure, but Tony wouldn’t be Tony if he didn’t sometimes inject a little graphic realism into his play.)

“I really hate to break up the party,” Bruce says with genuine regret nearly a half hour later, “but this water is getting pretty chilly and a certain little guy is starting to get pruny fingers. I think we’re gonna have to wrap this up for today.” It’s Tony who whines,

“Papa noooooooo,” but Steve looks almost as unhappy at the prospect.

“Don’t you want to go have some cake, love?” Bruce tries. Tony considers this, then points at the wall.

“Can the drawings stay up for next time?” They’re on Steve’s floor (a deliberate decision on Bruce’s part to try to get both of the other men comfortable in this space again), and Bruce does consider pointing out that Steve might not want the tiles to remain covered in crayon for an indeterminable amount of time, but the cautious hope in Tony’s voice at the notion of there being a next time halts the words before he can get them out. There is no hesitation at all in Steve’s voice when he promises,
“Of course they can, sweetheart.”

Chapter End Notes

So far to go, but it feels so nice to have them all under the same roof right now!

I've had an extra crazed week, so I might be a bit delayed getting comment responses up, but they're definitely coming. As is the next Timestamp, I swear!

Thanks so very much, as always, for the kudos and comments. They never fail to brighten my day and get me excited about writing and posting the next sections.
Not Fair (and other grievances)

Chapter Summary

Tony's day in little-space does not go entirely as anticipated; Bucky watches the team from a safe distance and wonders.

Chapter Notes

No warnings for this chapter, I don't think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For nearly two hours, Bucky prowls the two floors dedicated to himself and his recovery in numb disbelief. It was one thing to know from Steve’s description that Stark was both a rich and a generous guy, but it was another entirely to actually see it before his eyes. There were two entire rooms full of PT equipment that looked to be designed specifically for Bucky; there was also an office/library-looking space full of books about managing PTSD and trauma, printed in both English and Russian. He stopped investigating the therapy floor when he opened a door at the end of the hall to reveal an actual pool. There was only so much he could take in in one day.

His living quarters, though, turned out to be perhaps more overwhelming than the treatment spaces. It was a thoughtful mix of forties and now—lots of modern technology, which the Soldier had always been forced to remain proficient with, but small touches of home throughout, like a record player and a collection of thick paper and expensive-looking pens, and aftershave Bucky had used when he was young that he didn’t even think was made anymore. (Steve must have had a hand in that one.)

It was enough to make the guilt he had already been wrestling with churn painfully in the pit of his stomach. How could a man whose parents he had brutally murdered not just allow him to exist, unpunished, but put what could only have been countless hours of work and boundless energy into plotting out these spaces, making them not just habitable but the closest thing to home Bucky had seen since he’d gone off to war? For both Bucky and the parts of his brain that still belonged to the Soldier, it was unthinkable. Combine the shock of all this with the fact that he had now been apart from Steve far longer than he had since returning to the States with the man, and Bucky was finding himself more than a little unsteady.

He tried to sit down at the fancy desk near the window and write out the conflicting thoughts and feelings that seemed to be coming even faster and more chaotic than usual, but his good arm was particularly sore today, and words were reluctant to come. There were other coping strategies the docs had suggested when his head got like this, but mostly he just wanted to see Steve, to reassure himself that everything he felt now didn’t mean Bucky was about to lose himself again, or hurt someone. He doesn’t realize he’s voiced this desire out loud until Stark’s electronic butler replies,

“Barring a few exceptions, during which I will temporarily disable your access, you have been given permission by Captain Rogers and the others to view all of the Tower’s security footage,
Sergeant Barnes.” Before Bucky could even bother asking why this was relevant, a projection came to life before him: Steve, smiling fondly (if a little sadly) at someone (Stark? That had to be Stark) who was sitting on the floor next to Natalia—Natasha, she goes by Natasha now—stuffing some kind of white balls on a stick in his mouth.

“Uh…JARVIS, is he…he’s little right now, isn’t he? Are you sure he wants me to be able to see this?”

“Affirmative. Sir doesn’t wish to discuss anything he says or does whilst in headspace directly with you, but he’s aware you might be curious. He felt this might be a comfortable way for you to get some of the answers you may be seeking. If he was incorrect, or if you would prefer to review the footage at a later time, I will be happy to power it down.”

Bucky considers that offer pretty seriously, because even despite the immediate comfort he gets from seeing Steve, today has already been a hell of a lot to take in. But he can’t quite manage to say it. Natasha is wiping crumbs from Tony’s mouth with a tenderness he would never have dreamed her capable of, and Tony is grinning back at her, unselfconscious and content. Steve appears to be slightly more hesitant than the others with the man (boy, maybe?), but when Tony finishes his second treat on a stick and looks utterly bereft, Steve kneels down and hands his own over.

It’s a painfully familiar form of care to Bucky. With all of Stevie’s medical expenses, Sarah had not always been able to keep a steady supply of food in the house, and though Bucky’s own family was far from flush, he’d always made sure to save even a few bites of anything he could to give his friend. It was never enough, and more often than not it just meant that both Steve and Bucky went through the day with growling stomachs. But it had meant everything to him, then, to care for Steve and to help out in whatever small ways he could manage. To see Steve do the same for Tony now is bittersweet in the extreme, a reminder of how somehow both everything and nothing has changed since he and Stevie were just two nobodies in Brooklyn.

He sits on the plush, hunter-green couch of his floor, attention still entirely devoted to the scene playing out in front of him.

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Phil only needs a quick glance at Tony to recognize how blissed-out and content their boy is post-bath. Having eaten three cake pops with gusto, he’s reclining lazily on the floor with his head on Natasha’s thigh, and it’s incredibly tempting to just give them all this one day to simply enjoy one another’s company and not worry about anything else. Phil is not the only one feeling the pull, either; Clint directs a damn adorable pout at him, a look that has in the past gotten the archer everything from extra range time to early morning sex.

More than anything else, it’s the memory of the pained noise Steve had made when he’d heard Tony call Clint ‘Daddy’ that allows Phil to push forward. However pissed he’s felt at the supersoldier in the past several weeks, no one has ever really wanted to see Steve hurt. After confirming that Tony’s anxiety bag is near to hand, tucked beside the couch in case they have need of it, Phil slides to the floor and runs a finger through their boy’s damp hair.

“You full, little man?” Lips and chin covered in white chocolate and bits of cake, Tony nods, tilting his head up toward the touch as he always does. “That’s good. Buddy, we need to do a little bit of talking before you go down for your nap.” Midway through sucking the cake remnants off one of his fingers, the baby freezes and peers cautiously up at him. “I know it’s kind of scary. Want to know a secret?”

“Ye-es?”
“We’re a little nervous too, just like we all were the very first time we all sat down together to talk about you being our little guy. But we got through that, didn’t we? And we can do this. Thor went and got your bag; is there anything in it you want, or would you like us to pick some things out for you?”

“Glitter jar. And blanket. And Sanders.” They all praise Tony for voicing a preference, something he still struggles with when he’s little, and get him set up with his requested items. Nat and Clint are on either side of him, not close enough to be touching, but easily within reach if the baby decides he needs comfort.

“Alright buddy. I know we have a lot of things we need to talk about, way too much for one day. So we thought we’d focus on just a couple of things today, and anything else you feel up to discussing after that can be just a bonus. It’s really important that we all be honest while we’re talking, even when it’s hard or even if we’re a little scared. But anyone is also allowed to pass on any topic or question they don’t want to talk about today. Does that sound good?” Tony gives his glitter jar a little shake and nods, watching the contents begin to fall slowly to the bottom. “Okay, baby. Do you think you can talk to us about your behaviour chart, and what was happening in your head the night…Nat came home?” It’s only a last minute correction that prevents Phil from saying ‘the night Steve didn’t’ instead, but from the look on his face, Steve hears it anyway. But Phil tries the best he can to take his own advice; if they focus too hard on sparing one another’s feelings, they won’t really make any headway.

Tony gives his jar several violent shakes, but doesn’t ask to pass on the question, so Phil just sits back and tries to give the baby time to formulate his response. Or at least he does until the call to Assemble rings through the tower.

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For several seconds, everyone stares at each other a bit stupidly. In other circumstances it might be funny for Steve to realize that though they came together explicitly for the defense of the Earth, the Avengers are far more used to everyday domestic dramas than potentially world-ending threats. Today, though, with Tony still half in little headspace in front of him and Bucky alone downstairs and the rest of the team looking just as stunned as Steve feels, he can’t say that he’s appreciating the comedic irony.

Phil is the first to his feet, tapping rapidly on his phone. The others are quick to follow; Tony is a bit wobbly when he stands (an effect of the diaper Steve can tell he’s wearing or the jerk out of headspace, who knows), but he jerks away from Nat when she puts a hand on his elbow to steady him. The fact that the hurt is visible in her expression is enough to tell Steve he’s not the only one struggling to turn off the caretaker part of his brain.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Phil mutters. “There’s a troop of Doombots attacking Midtown, but it’s extremely small, and half of them look to be malfunctioning without any external assaults. And the Fantastic Four already offered to handle it. Why the hell is Fury insisting…” He trails off in that annoying way that the overly-smart people in this tower sometimes do when they figure something out, but Tony picks up the thread and, thankfully, vocalizes it.

“It’s a power play. He’s reminding us, and you, Phil, that most of us are still technically under SHIELD’s purview, and that he can do as he likes with us, within limits.”

“Then I think you in particular don’t play that game with him, Tony,” Bruce advises. Instantly, Tony is right in the other scientist’s space, bearing absolutely no resemblance to the child he was not two minutes before now.

“You told me that none of this would effect how you treat me in the field. Do not pull this shit with
me, Banner, you of all people.” Tony punctuates the accusation with a hard jab of his finger against Bruce’s chest.

“I’m not pulling anything with you, but listen. You haven’t piloted the Iron Man armour for months, and if you rush into it for the wrong reasons and under the wrong conditions, you could end up making your phobias in that area a lot worse.”

“So what, you’re suggesting that until I’m 100 percent healthy again I’m benched? Wouldn’t that qualification limit most of the damn people on this team? Who here is entirely whole, a show of hands please?” Bruce growls and steps forward just slightly back into Tony’s space. It’s a mark of how much better everyone understands the Hulk and his deep affection for Tony that no one even flinches.

“No, Tony, and stop trying to find the worst possible interpretation of everything I say. I’m saying that since this is a bullshit mission anyway, you remotely pilot the armour the same way you did during the fight against AIM. I know that tech isn’t foolproof, but to let Fury get you into the armour for no real reason other than his own ego being threatened just seems like such a waste of all the work and energy you’re putting into getting better.” When Bruce finishes speaking, both he and Tony look to Steve.

There’s absolutely no question of what Steve wants. He wants to agree with Bruce in the strongest possible terms, to use his position as team leader to forbid Tony from entering the field in the armour right now, especially under conditions like this. He wants that desperately, but the last time he had held onto the de-aged Tony too hard, those decisions had ended up contributing to Steve’s losing the chance to say goodbye. And this version of Tony, ultimately, was not a child, not when he was not consenting to play that role for them. He was a wildly brilliant, damaged but still entirely capable adult who knew better than any of them what he was prepared to do and what he wasn’t.

“I can’t—no, I won’t make the call for either of you. I agree with Bruce, Tony, but I will back you on this whatever you decide to do.” When he’s not in headspace Steve often finds Tony pretty difficult to read, and this moment is no exception, but after a brief pause, the engineer gives a grim little nod.

“I’ll remotely pilot from here, but I’ll have another suit on standby. If anything goes wrong or if you guys need me—”

“Goddamn right you’ll know it, Tones,” Clint assures him. “And if I’ve just leapt off a building, do try to hurry would you?”

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Though Tony has access to basically all the same intel that SHIELD does from the tower (being the guy who does all of the organization’s security upgrades means he always builds himself at least three ways around it), Phil insists on going in. His reasoning, that he wants to demonstrate to Fury that the team is still doing things by-the-book, is unfortunately sound, but it also sucks pretty hard, because this leaves Tony alone in the Tower while his team suits up and departs for battle. And it’s almost impossible, particularly as he strips off the diaper Clint had put on him that morning (and damn if he still doesn’t feel a twinge of guilt about doing that, even if this is a clear exception the rule), to not suspect that on some level, he’s sitting this battle out because of the ageplay.

He’s still with them on the comms and piloting the armour, of course, but it’s still nothing like being in the thick of things. It’s hell to watch even the pathetic attacks being mounted by the malfunctioning Doombots being aimed at his teammates; when one bot accidentally shoots a laser
too close to Steve’s head (while aiming for Clint—the damn things really are a joke), Tony not only blows the thing out of the sky, but shoots repulsor beams at the heap of metal on the ground until Thor diplomatically suggests his efforts might be more useful elsewhere.

Tony is doing just that, seeking out a new target for what remains of his fear and frustration, when he realizes that he is not in fact alone in the Tower. James Barnes is pacing at the threshold to the workshop. Though he’s been preparing for the man’s arrival for several weeks now, there’s still something disconcerting about actually seeing Bucky all huge and muscled and seeking entrance to what is in some ways Tony’s most private and cherished space.

“Let him in, J,” he mutters before he risks losing his nerve. Thankfully, he’s distracted shortly thereafter by Clint requiring transportation (the hug and fly is still infinitely more challenging when remotely piloting, gotta work on that in the next round of upgrades, or at least get in more practice). When Tony has time to pay attention to Barnes again, the man is standing perfectly still while Dummy leads the bots in a thorough and ridiculous-looking inspection. “Dummy, for God’s sake leave the man alone—”

“Nah they’re fine,” Barnes says quietly, reaching out and running a finger along one of Butterfingers’ struts with an absurd and endearing amount of caution. “Does Stevie still favour his right side when he starts to get tired?” Tony is all but ready to deny this, but when he turns his attention back to the battle and actually pays specific attention, it’s almost harder not to pick up on. Huh.

“J, project Mark 48’s view on the holoscreen. Barnes, tell me anything else you got. And J, unmute the coms. Cap, stop favouring your right side, wouldja?”

“I am not—wait, is…is Bucky with you?” Tony destroys another doombot and lets his silence serve as his answer. Bucky is hardly chatty for the rest of the battle, which Tony appreciates because piloting the armour and keeping up a conversation would be a bit much even for him, but whenever the soldier does speak his observations are precise and accurate, and after a while Tony stops even bothering to confirm them himself before passing them on to the restive the team. The battle wraps up under an hour later, and the team will be back soon with only minor scrapes and bruises.

When Tony turns around to thank Bucky, the other man has already departed the workshop.

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Fury (who is likely avoiding both direct contact with Phil and a conversation with the Avengers who are irritated to have been called out on such a tedious mission) decides to skip the usual debrief, so the team makes it back to the tower in record time. No one knows quite what to expect from Tony, or themselves really, post-battle. Will any of them be able to slip back into their headspaces from earlier? Or is their planned little day better off abandoned as they all come down from the adrenaline high that even a minor skirmish provokes? Can Tony, who was already close enough to a breaking point, really wait for another time? Steve is occupied enough with all of these questions, and with worry for Bucky, whom he hadn’t even had time to speak to before he departed the tower, that he doesn’t even really remember the short trip back home.

Tony, as per usual, turns out to be one step ahead of all of them, and is waiting in the Hulk’s room to help him come down from the battle. After having so recently seen the Hulk in angry, destructive mode, tearing apart two Doombots with his bare hands, it’s momentarily a bit nerve-wracking for Steve, and he suspects everyone else who is all waiting with him on the other side of the glass, to watch Hulk lumber into the playroom and peer down at Tony.

For Steve, who hasn’t recently seen Tony move between headspaces except for the abrupt and
rapid way he had aged up in response to imminent threat, what happens next is incredible. After just a few beats of peering up at the Hulk, the other man starts to transform before their eyes, stance softening, the sharp hyper-awareness that’s usually present in Tony’s eyes and face dulling just slightly into something hazier and unfocused. Steve’s not sure if the quick drop has something to do with Hulk’s sheer physical presence, or if this is just something Tony is capable of doing at will now, but it’s like one second he’s staring at his friend and teammate, and the next he’s undeniably looking at his Little.

“Hi,” he greets Hulk in a voice far quieter than his adult self’s. Hulk surveys Tony for only a few moments and seems to pick up on the same signs that Steve has, for he leans over and hoists their boy into his arms.

“Hulk’s Tony safe?” he demands, sniffing and poking lightly at his charge.

“Yeah big guy I’m fine. You guys did real good out there.”

“Stupid robots easy to smash. Should give Hulk challenge next time.” Tony laughs, promising to build some exciting training sequences for the team to practice with. Hulk grunts an acknowledgement, but doesn’t appear inclined to talk shop with the baby any longer, electing instead to plop heavily down on the reinforced couch with Tony still held carefully in his grip. For a long time, neither of them says anything else, and Steve wonders if the two of them are going to end up taking an early evening nap. Then Tony glances up at the Hulk and begins speaking.

“I never get to keep people.” Hulk tilts his head, waiting for further explanation with uncharacteristic patience. “They always go, because they have to or they want to or I make ‘em. Everybody leaves. Parents and Pep and Obie, I always end up saying or doing all the wrong things, even when I’m trying so hard. When…that night, I just…I’m tryin’ hard to believe you guys when you’re telling me that I’m not always bad, but Steve is one of the very best people I know. I just…if I made him go, too, I didn’t want to try to keep pretending that I’m good.”

Thor sucks in an audible breath. Steve himself doesn’t feel like there’s any air left in the entire room; knowing on an abstract level that he’d hurt Tony, even hearing accounts from other members of the team, it was nothing compared to hearing in his little boy’s own words that Steve had managed to make him feel entirely worthless. The process of trying to repair the damage he’s done feels almost hopeless.

“You can’t go in there,” Clint advises. “I know it’s tempting, but there’s a reason he chose Hulk for this. I think he needs the conversation to be as…simple as it can be.” Steve lets out an entirely humourless laugh. And like usual lately, Clint is bang-on where Tony is concerned. The Hulk says little in response to Tony’s brief monologue, just hugging him closer and repeating ‘Hulk stay’ in a voice that’s as close to gentle as he can probably manage, and their boy clings to him, seeming to revel in the way his frame is almost swallowed up by the Hulk’s.

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“You can’t go in there,” Clint advises. “I know it’s tempting, but there’s a reason he chose Hulk for this. I think he needs the conversation to be as…simple as it can be.” Steve lets out an entirely humourless laugh. And like usual lately, Clint is bang-on where Tony is concerned. The Hulk says little in response to Tony’s brief monologue, just hugging him closer and repeating ‘Hulk stay’ in a voice that’s as close to gentle as he can probably manage, and their boy clings to him, seeming to revel in the way his frame is almost swallowed up by the Hulk’s.

“I would have no idea what to say to him even if I did.”

“Maybe we need to try to get him to make some rules or expectations for us.” Phil’s even tone is like a life-line right now, and Steve grasps onto it with both hands, motioning for him to continue. “So far our play has been primarily about us providing him with rules and structure. And he needs that—in some ways he craves boundaries more than anyone I’ve ever met. But we’ve never given him the opportunity to make demands on us in return. He probably wouldn’t have done it at the beginning, but I think he might be capable of it now.” Relieved beyond measure to have some concrete steps forward, Steve nods. “But tomorrow, I think,” Phil adds. “He’s answered the question we asked, so unless there’s something else he brings up, I say we just let him be for tonight.”
Bruce has never been more grateful for the strengthening mental bond between himself and the Hulk than he is when he changes back with a mostly clear memory of what Tony said to him present in his mind. When he realizes who he’s now dealing with the boy makes to slide out of his arms, but Bruce maintains a firm hold, carding his fingers through Tony’s hair.

“Shh, no, you’re just fine right here. Shh, I’ve got you little one. Papa’s got you.”

“’m sorry. I didn’t…’m sorry, didn’t mean to.” Bruce has absolutely no idea what Tony is even apologizing for, he’d bet Tony himself doesn’t have a particularly firm idea, and it hardly matters right now.

“You haven’t done anything wrong. No one is upset with you. You just did a very brave thing by talking to the Hulk, and you managed that after a really long, mixed up day. And now I’m betting you’re pretty exhausted and confused, huh buddy?” The baby makes a watery little sniffling sound and nods, letting his head fall back against Bruce’s shoulder. “Yeah I know you are. Want to hear Papa’s plan?”

“Dunno. Will I like it?” Tony asks, a faint echo of his most mischievous grin curving his lips upward ever so slightly. Bruce laughs and pokes his nose.

“Dunno, kiddo. Going to have to take that risk, aren’t you? Alright. So we’re going to get you back upstairs and back into a nice soft diaper and your little clothes—maybe we’ll skip right to some PJs so you can be extra cozy, huh? Then we’re going to order anything you want for dinner, whatever you think might go down easy. And we can curl up in your nice big bed with our food, and have lots and lots of snuggles and maybe read a little, and have absolutely no more serious talks for the rest of the day. You can just be our little guy, as little as you need, and you don’t have to worry about anything else.” It’s a bit of a gamble trying to gently nudge Tony back toward using his bedroom again, let alone trying to talk him into putting a diaper back on, but Bruce pairing those requests with a hell of a dangling carrot. Tony’s absolute favourite thing is to be physically surrounded by his family. He’s also a huge fan of eating in bed, though with the baby’s inclination toward being a kind of messy eater, the team rarely allows it.

“Not fair,” he complains after evaluating the offer. Bruce grins into his boy’s hair, trying not to point out that a de-aged Tony had voiced an identical grievance not so very long ago.

A couple hours later, Tony is willing to admit that perhaps not all of Papa’s plans are mean and evil and designed to force him to do boring stuff. He’s in the middle of his bed (and how had he forgotten how comfy his bed is, and how everyone fits in it just right?), wearing his favourite jammies and being fed as much Chinese food as he wants from all directions. All he has to do is open his mouth like a little bird, and turn his head toward any member of the team, and within seconds he’s guaranteed to be given something delicious. He’s eaten so much today his tummy feels like bursting, but Tony is very sure there has to be some kind of undiscovered scientific principle behind the fact that everything tastes better when eaten in bed, especially when it’s fed to him and he doesn’t even have to go to the effort of making up his own plate. It’s the most luxurious thing he can remember, decadent to the point that he almost feels bad about it. But every time his brain tries to go to Bad Places, someone always seems to interrupt with more ginger beef or snuggles or kisses.

The grown ups carry on some kind of conversation, and Tony tunes in and out occasionally as he pleases, but no one seems to expect him to really keep up, so he lets his mind do as it’s wanted for ages and go further into the fuzzy places he associates with headspace than he’s ever allowed it.
before. It’s scary, and it feels kinda like falling but in a nice way, like the swoopy feeling in his tummy when he dips really fast in the suit but knows JARVIS and the suit will keep him safe. Contemplating these developments, Tony lets his thumb slip into his mouth and gives a firm suck. Hmm.

“Can Daddy give you something that might be a bit better on your teeth, honey?” Phil asks after what might have been several minutes of Tony experimenting with the oddly pleasurable sensation of sucking his thumb. He’s pretty sure he knows where this is going, and the very tiny part of his brain that still cares about Big stuff informs him this is highly embarrassing, but it’s very hard to care what Big brain thinks when he’s so warm and comfy and surrounded by almost everyone he loves. When he realizes the pacifier he’s being given has Cap’s shield on it he pauses for a fraction of a second, but then Steve beams, that special smile just for little Tony that makes him all tingly. And whatever lingering and complicated issues he still has with the man, Tony would challenge anyone to not become complete putty in the face of that smile, so he opens his mouth and accepts it.

“Is this…has he used one before?” Steve asks. Vaguely Tony realizes that there seems to be an undercurrent to the question, something that makes it more than an insignificant inquiry about something silly he’s doing, but he’s quickly distracted by figuring out how best to work at the small piece of rubber in his mouth. He hears Phil assure Steve that this is a first, sees that smile come back to the blonde’s face, and Tony finally just gives into the urge to crawl into Steve’s lap. Immediately, strong broad arms encircle his waist as Tony develops a lazy rhythm with the pacifier. “Hey sweetheart. Gosh it’s so good to cuddle you again. I missed you so much.”

One of the best things about the soother, Tony quickly realizes, is that he can't talk with it in his mouth. Normally this would be annoying—he's resisted every attempt everyone's ever made to shut him up when he doesn't want to be—but the constant chatter is also very much what's expected of a man like Tony. The opportunity to have his mind and his mouth just be quiet and still like this is entirely new, and he listens to the soft rumble of Steve’s gentle, comforting words with one ear while he presses the other to the man’s chest to listen to his heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes

Oh right, the Avengers have to do superheroing stuff sometimes! I hope the return of Hulk/Tony (which several of you have mentioned missing) made up for the interruption in their day.

Huge thanks to indiw, whose thoughtful comments inspired Phil's soon-to-be-realized plan to help Tony get passed what happened with Steve partially by letting him know he gets to have rules/expectations for them as well. And thanks to all of you who are reading, commenting and/or kudosing. The only thing more fun than writing this monster of a story has been sharing it and chatting about it with all of you. Have a great weekend, everyone!
Chapter Summary

The Avengers have a team-wide bad day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony wakes up knowing three things. The first is that he’s in his own bed for the first time in weeks, and that judging by the heat coming off the arms that are around him, Steve is still there. The second is that he is still little. Not just the way he usually wake up kinda little most days right now, but little little, like all he wants in the world is to stay cuddled up here with Steve and never ever do boring grown-up stuff ever again. The third, which unfortunately trumps the other two, is that his diaper is very, very wet.

Panicking but trying to be sneaky, Tony opens his eyes and almost sobs in relief when he sees that, while Phil had evidently left last night to sleep alone, and Natasha too seems to be absent (down with Bucky, perhaps?) everyone else, including Clint, is still there. The archer is fast asleep, though, and Tony whimpers as his headspace-slowed brain tries to figure out how he’s going to wake him without alerting anyone else to his extremely embarrassing problem. Naturally, the noise is enough for Steve’s super-soldier hearing to pick up on it.

“Tony? What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Tony shakes his head so quickly it hurts his neck, all while trying to plot his immediate escape and subsequent exile, because the diapers are humiliating enough with everyone else. He can’t tell Steve when everything between them is still so fragile and he might decide to leave Tony anytime and go back to only being friends with Bucky. The diapers might push him into doing just that! Annoyingly, the clever, snark-filled part of Tony’s mind is completely inaccessible to him right now, and all he manages is another whine and a half-hearted attempt to free himself from Steve’s suddenly steely grip. “Pumpkin, I promise I’ll do anything I can to fix it, but you gotta talk to me here.”

“I believe the Youngling has need of Clint,” Thor suggests gently. When Tony nods emphatically, the demigod leans over and murmurs quietly to Clint, who comes awake with a slow blink and a groan that would have been cutely endearing on any day when Tony didn’t fear actually dying from embarrassment.

“Okay buddy, you’re alright. You guys, can Tony and I have the room for a minute, please? Actually…babe, is it alright if Steve stays and gives me a hand, just like Phil did the other day?” Tony thought Clint was the one who understood him! How could he offer such a humiliating, awful thing? Doesn’t anyone understand that they have to make sure Steve stays this time? “Oookay that’s quite the death glare squirt, I gotcha. Everybody out then, just me and Tones this morning.” Though Steve seems kind of reluctant to let go of Tony, eventually the room clears and Tony sighs with relief as Clint pulls out the changing mat and gets him settled on it. “Oh bud you’re really wet huh? I think you might have gone more than once. I’m sorry, I should have checked on you during the night maybe.”

“Agent Barton, if Sir permits I could alert you when he has been in a wet diaper too long, or once it reaches a certain saturation point,” JARVIS offers, because apparently everyone is conspiring
against Tony this morning.

“NO!” he shouts, wiggling in frustration and shame and sending diapering supplies spilling all over the bed. Clint curses under his breath, coughing when the little cloud made by the spilled baby powder reaches his nose, but the anger in his expression sort of evaporates the second he takes a long, evaluative look at Tony.

“You’re still really tiny this morning, Munchkin, aren’t you?” This might in fact be true, but Tony doesn’t want to be really tiny! He’s usually way better at waking up little but coming up quickly, why won’t his head cooperate today? “Aww babe, it’s okay, it’s not your fault. You were down really, really far last night, and I think you’re just having a hard time getting out of headspace.” Clint is using that easygoing voice of his, the one that suggests this is no big deal, but it is. Even though their planned little time yesterday was cut kind of short, they all had work to get through today, and Tony couldn’t just not come up. Anxiety is starting to creep up on him, making his chest feel even tighter than it always does in the morning, and his breath come out in short, painful pants. “Oh fuck, no, no don’t panic, Tones. Nice big breaths for Daddy, c’mon. Can you tell me about a fun time you had lately?” Tony vaguely recognizes this as another coping strategy they’ve been trying, but the request feels way too large right now. “Okay, that’s alright. What about when we made cake pops? Remember what flavour they were?” That’s a simpler question. Tony can do that.

“Carrot.”

“That’s right, buddy, they were carrot. Your hands turned all orange when you graded them, just like a little oompa loompa. What else do you remember about them?”

“Ch-chocolate. White.”

“Hey yeah, we melted a big bowl of white chocolate didn’t we? And you kept sticking your fingers in it to sneak a taste, didn't you?” With very material memories and sensations to focus on, Tony manages to calm down, though by the time the tension has leeched out of his muscles and his breath has stopped coming out in wheezes, he feels exhausted. And Daddy Clint looks very, very worried, and he’s doing an increasingly bad job hiding it.

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Unaware of all of this, Natasha had spent a quiet morning sharing breakfast with Bucky before departing for SHIELD. She’s scheduled for another full day of training with Maria, and though sometimes a bit dry, she’s come to look forward to these sessions. Today, though, Maria seems... off. She’s nervous and twitchy and unfocused, none of which are words Natasha would have ever used to describe the other woman’s presence. It’s tempting to demand information from her the way she would with Coulson, or indeed with any of her family, and a bit of a shock for Natasha to realize that she’s become so accustomed to the commitment to transparency in the Tower that she has a lot less patience for waiting situations like this out.

Finally, after their mid-morning coffee run, Maria seems to steel herself and shuts the door to her office. Sensible heels clicking quietly on the floor, Maria comes to stand before the wall-mounted safe behind her desk, allows it to perform retinal scans and fingerprinting, and then removes a single file, which she places on her desk with the label facing Natasha. It says “T.A.H.I.T.I.” Instantly, Natasha’s blood feels like it drops several degrees in her veins.

“You want me to deliver this to Coulson?” she guesses, knowing already that is a far too-optimistic option, one she wouldn’t have even bothered voicing if she were the person she had been six months ago.
“Of course not,” Maria snaps impatiently. “I want you to read it, and then I want you to prove to me that you can handle this job one day by committing to never telling Coulson or anyone else a single word about it. I’m not Nick Fury, Natasha, nor do I expect you to be. But if you want the position we’re promising to you, then you have to make a choice. You have to show us that you can put aside your emotional commitments to the Avengers when it’s necessary for the greater good.”

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Breakfast is, there’s no other way to put it, a goddamn nightmare. Tony can’t get any food down, and is embarrassed and frustrated enough at being stuck in headspace (and in a pull-up that Clint had insisted on) that he refuses to take a bottle or a sippy cup. Clint has dealt with their boy in almost every conceivable mood in the past few weeks, but even he is coming up short and growing rapidly frustrated with his own helplessness. None of this is improved by the realization that most of them have commitments out of the Tower today that can’t move. Phil and Natasha have already left for SHIELD, and Clint needs to follow them shortly because his re-certification tests are today and he’s been itching to be back on the active-agent roster for what feels like forever; Bruce and Thor have made plans to spend the day discussing the science behind the Bifrost with Jane, which might be the most easily changed of their plans, except that Tony is well aware that Bruce has been salivating over the very idea of this knowledge forever and he won’t hear of them cancelling.

This leaves only Steve and Bucky, neither of whom are ideal candidates for supervising Tony on their own today. Tony himself, meanwhile, is insisting in a highly offended voice that he doesn’t need any supervision, all the while still wearing a pull-up and dropping consonants and sometimes entire syllables on his words the way he only does when he’s really down.

“Listen up, squirt. Just because rule three has never been an issue up until now does not make it any less important than the others,” Clint finally snaps, tugging his boy firmly toward the mini whiteboard on the fridge and pointing. “Can you read that for me please?”

“Not ‘posed to be little by myself, but no one else listens to the stupid rules either and it’s not fair!” Tony accompanies all of this with a heartfelt stamp of his foot, frustrated tears welling in his eyes. “Everyone kept secrets and lied and Steve didn’t come home and if I want to go be inna shop workin’ with the bots then you can’t stop me! You can’t!” Though maybe they should have seen this coming based on what Phil had said the day before, the force of the outburst from their usually sweet and quiet boy still comes as a bit of a shock to Clint. Even knowing that it’s actually a good sign that Tony’s finally willing to display some anger toward Steve (and toward all of them to a lesser extent) doesn’t lessen the sting, nor the rapid way in which this entire day feels like it’s spinning totally out of control. From the corner of his eye, he registers Steve taking a couple steps closer to them, and can’t even muster the energy to consider whether or not the super-soldier involving himself is a good plan or not.

“Sweetheart, it’s absolutely okay that you’re frustrated and hurt by me right now. But do you think I can take you to the living room to calm down and then we can talk about it while your Daddies and Papa go to work? It’s very important that they get where they need to be this morning.” Tony wails his discontent and stomps some more, but doesn’t safe word even when prompted. So when Steve nods at the others in clear dismissal, Clint exits the room at a near-run, trying not to feel like the world’s worst Daddy.

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It’s only Maria’s slightly irritated look after Natasha has stayed rooted in place for several minutes that gets her up out of her chair and moving. She makes it only a few steps out of the office before she realizes she has nowhere to go. Everything about SHIELD feels…tainted, right now, somehow worse than she’d felt after the HYDRA takeover. Then, there had still been identifiable enemies,
and more importantly, clear good guys still left to fight for. But whatever had happened to Phil had
been kept from him by the very organization he had quite literally given his life to, and that
violation is so much more intimate that she feels like she could take ten showers and never feel
clean again.

When she’s felt discontented with SHIELD in the past, or just needed to escape for a while, it’s
been a relatively easy thing for her to slip into crowds and disappear for days or even weeks at a
time. Now, though, with all of her secrets and disguises having been dissected on the Internet for
months, and with her face constantly plastered on every major news publication in the country,
there is little safety or anonymity to be found in the side-streets and bolt-holes that used to be the
constants of her life.

During the rare times when both digging into and avoiding SHIELD have failed her, her next stop
would usually have been Coulson’s office. Right from the beginning Phil has known how to deal
with even the blackest of Natasha’s moods—when to try to wheedle her into talking, when she
needs silence, when she needs to be sent out on the first possible mission whether it really requires
her particular skill set or not. Discounting his brief absence, she’d never truly felt alone since he’d
calmly and efficiently worked his way past all of her barriers and into her life. And since pleasing
Phil had almost always meant pleasing SHIELD (even if sometimes the latter needed a bit of
Coulson’s particular brand of convincing), it had never really occurred to Natasha that someday the
two would be so directly at odds.

There is really no choice in it. She’d known what she’d do since Maria set the folder down in front
of her. But it’s not a decision Natasha is ready to face just yet. Right now all she wants is a place to
hide.
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Tony’s tantrum (and there’s no other word for it, regardless of how fair and understandable his
feelings) lasts for nearly forty-five minutes. At one point, Steve almost has him calmed down until
he makes the mistake of sliding a hand down to pat at his boy’s bum. Normally Tony finds this
comforting, but apparently he’s still doing his best to pretend that Steve is ignorant of what he
wears under his pants at night and sometimes during the day, and the unmistakable crinkling noise
sets off another wave of tears and yelling.

It’s a marker of just how badly Steve missed his baby that all he really feels is grateful to be be
here, and to be trusted with handling Tony’s first real show of temper.

“I know. I know. You have a lot of feelings, huh baby boy? Anything in particular you want to say,
or do you just need to stomp a little bit more?” Tony frowns suspiciously, as if the permission to
continue being angry must be a trap. Then he cautiously stamps his foot once more, immediately
looking up at Steve to test his reaction. Steve just smiles placidly and pops a strawberry into his
mouth. This seems to take the wind out of the sails of his baby’s righteous outrage, and he plops
down next to Steve on the couch with a tired little huff.

“Hungry,” he grumps, as if the team has been actively starving him instead of spending the bulk of
the morning trying to get food of any form or variety into him.

“Yeah I bet you are, sweetheart. Want me to make you up some bottles and then we can maybe
have a little talk?” Tony whimpers and grudgingly lays his head against Steve’s bicep.

“Don’t wan’ bottle. ‘m ‘posed to be big today.”

“I know you don’t want to honey. But do you know what I think? I think I have a very smart, very
brave little boy who knows he has things he needs to say, and who also knows that his Big self
might try to force those things to go away because they’re scary, and maybe because he thinks he’s
not allowed to be mad. And that same clever little boy probably also knows that I’ve missed
feeding him his breakfast very much. So I think for now we listen to him, since he’s doing a pretty
good job at taking care of both of us this morning.” The praise earns Steve a blush, but also a tired
little nod of agreement, and he makes no time in making up several bottles for his baby, one half-
full of chocolate milk, another with a meal-replacement shake, and a third with some apple juice.
Tony points to the latter, and even permits Steve to hold it up to his lips for him. As ever, the
gentle sucking noises are endlessly calming, and they give Steve a very needed moment to collect
his thoughts. “I know you’re upset with me, Tony. And it’s okay that you are. I never meant to, but
I hurt your feelings and made you very sad by not coming home, and then by keeping something
important from you.”

“You were gonna tell me.” Tony’s loyalty, particularly after such a recent display of hurt outrage,
is enough to make Steve want to cry just a little. Instead, he buries his face in Tony’s hair, which
smells like the baby shampoo they use when he’s little and a bit like the various oil and greases of
the workshop.

“Yeah, I was. But I didn’t figure out how to do it fast enough, and you found out in a way I never
would have wanted. And that was after I promised you I’d come straight home from my mission
and didn’t. I really messed up.” The baby shakes his head, but Steve puts a finger to his lips. “I did,
honey. Parents and caretakers make mistakes sometimes. And it doesn’t make them bad, just like
you’re not a bad boy when you break a rule.”

“Just made a bad choice,” Tony recites.

“That’s exactly right, baby boy. I made a few bad choices all in a row, and you got really hurt. And
we think maybe that felt even harder for you because we have a lot of rules for our baby, so when
we call you out on something, you can see in black and white what went wrong and what choice
you should have made instead. But other than our big three house rules, you don’t have rules for
us, do you? You never got to make demands on us or set out expectations, so when you’re upset,
you don’t feel like that’s something that’s allowed.”

“Is ’cause you’re grown-ups?”

“Yes, sweetheart, we’re the grown-ups but that doesn’t mean you’re not allowed to need and want
things from us. While you have your milk, can you try to think about some rules you might want us
to have? Things that would make you feel safe and happy?” Though he still looks incredibly
anxious at the prospect of demanding anything from his caretakers, Tony obediently opens his
mouth for the nipple of the next bottle and sucks thoughtfully. He takes his time with it, but Steve
is more than happy to let him, rocking his boy gently and humming a quiet tune he thinks might
come from his own childhood.

“Come home?” The suggestion is so quiet that Steve might not have caught it without his enhanced
hearing, but he makes an encouraging noise in Tony’s ear and his baby keeps talking. “Maybe…
can it be a rule that everyone has to come home when they can? No matter what happened or if
they’re ready to talk about it yet? I know I’m nosy and it might be hard for me to not ask, but if you
had just come back anyway and told me there were things you couldn’t tell me yet, I think…
mighta been better. Didn’t like it when you were just…gone. And when I…after Malibu, I was real
scared to call home, but when I did it felt real nice.” Steve was not particularly inclined to argue
with this suggestion anyway, but the reminder of that phone call seals it for him, because he will
always remember what it had felt like to receive it. Knowing Tony trusted him, trusted them,

enough to call even though he’d messed up and was hurt and embarrassed and scared, it had been
absolutely everything.
“I think that sounds like a really good rule, sunshine.” As subtly as he can manage, Steve turns the little circles he’s rubbing against Tony’s back into gentle thumps, smiling fondly when the baby burps. For the first time since coming back to the Tower, Steve is starting to feel like he might begin still belong here, like things might settle back into some degree of comfortable normalcy. “Anything else?” Tony makes a negative sound, but he hides his face against Steve’s chest in a surefire signal that he’s fibbing. “You sure about that? I don’t want to have to find the tickle monster so early in the morning.”

“Want goodbye kisses,” Tony mumbles. “JARVIS tells me who’s in the tower when I wake up, but I don’t like not knowin’ who’s leaving when I’m sleepin’. Makes me wanna stay up so I don’t miss it so that—so that if you don’t come back, I don’t gotta wonder if...if you knew that I...” The baby’s voice cracks, and he’s gripping at Steve’s shirt so tightly the thing is probably near tearing. Steve’s own hold is probably not much looser, and he wonders how it’s possible to feel simultaneously grateful to Phil for this suggestion (because he never would have guessed this was something Tony might want from them) and devastated by his reasoning.

“I’m pretty comfortable speaking for everyone else when I say that we’d love to give you goodbye kisses. You’re really good at this, Tony. My perfect, brilliant little boy.” He murmurs comforting assurances to his baby, who looks like he might very well fall asleep atop Steve’s chest exactly the way Steve had imagined their very first morning together, but fate, apparently, has other plans.

“Sirs, my sincerest apologies for interrupting. But Sergeant Barnes appears to be in considerable distress. I believe his mechanical arm has started delivering shocks.”

Tony’s brain has done some pretty weird things since they started this whole ageplay deal, but this one might very well be the strangest. The surge of adrenaline following JARVIS’s message has kicked him back toward his adult mindset, but it’s not like yesterday when it had basically been like flipping a switch. Today he had been so far down that even the urgency of this situation is not totally enough to wipe away the hazy slowness of headspace. It’s the most bizarre set of contradictory feelings and impulses he’s ever experienced. But halfway little or not, he had better take control of this situation and fast, because next to him, Steve looks like he might throw up.

“JARVIS, tell Barnes to meet us in the shop. Pull up all the data we’ve grabbed from SHIELD about his arm, and all the external research I’ve done, and have it displayed by the time we get there. And have Dummy start some coffee, would you?” Tony is already in motion, only vaguely noticing when his bottle rolls off the couch and onto the floor, already mentally reviewing what he knows and suspects about how the limb operates.

“Tony,” Steve says, sounding pained. “You can’t...I can’t ask you to, and you’re still—”

“Yeah, I am still half in headspace, and yeah the situation is beyond shitty. But I’ve seen SHIELD’s notes, Steve; they have no idea what to do with that arm, and absolutely no contingency plans for if something goes wrong beyond knocking him out and trying to remove it. It took me two minute with Barnes to realize that was a terrible plan, so right now I’m your best option. I’ll have JARVIS try to get through to Helen Cho, and maybe Bruce, but we’re all Barnes—Bucky has right now and we need to get to him.” He pauses and chews his lip, half wishing for the pacifier from last night, before adding, “You won’t...let him make funna me, right? Or hurt me? If I’m...sort of little?” This finally gets Steve moving, if only so the other man can stand and pull Tony tightly against him.

“I promise, sweetheart. I’ll be right there the whole time.”

They’ve almost reached the shop before Tony realize he still has a pull-up on. The thought is
humiliating enough that he fully intends to head back to his own floor to change first, but then the elevator doors open and they can both hear Barnes screaming from down the hall. Steve breaks into a run, skidding to a halt at his friend’s side and half-carrying him to sit down on the edge of a table. Tony takes a long, deep breath and follows them.

“What seems to be the problem, Mr. Barnes?” he asks with his best attempt at a grin. Barnes snorts, his good hand still gripping tightly at Steve’s bicep.

“Oh nothin’ doc, just here for routine checkup, oh and to see if you can do somethin’ about the fucking lightning bolts goin’ up my arm and down my spine every few minutes.” Tony nods, searching through the multiple open screens in front of him until he finds what he needs, enlarging the visual of Barnes’ arm and sliding it closer toward the two super soldiers. “This is everything SHIELD knows about your arm. Most of it is intel gathered from HYDRA’s notes; the docs you have now have been pretty hesitant to confirm or gather any further information.” With a flick of Tony’s index finger, he removes several plates from the top of the limb and zooms in further to a spot directly under the painted red star. “A lot of the biomechanical feedback seems to be routed through this point here. I can definitely make the shocks stop by shutting down everything under this panel, but my guess is that would also effectively make the entire limb useless until I could get a better sense of where exactly the problem is. At best you’d have a very broad and clumsy range of motion, but none of the other sensory input or fine motor control you’re used to. Or…” he trails off, sucking in a nervous breath. “Or I could try to figure out how to isolate and disable the shocking from the rest of the sensorial controls on the fly, right now.”

“That,” Bucky grunts, muffling a yell into Steve’s shirt when the shocks start up again.

“James, it could really hurt. I’m not…the wet sciences aren’t typically my area, and I’ve never seen anything like the way this circuitry seems to be connected to your entire nervous system. I’d be flying blind, with no more of an advanced plan than triggering particular sections of the wiring to see what happens. I’d basically be mapping the system with you wide awake and feeling everything. If we take our time with this, if we shut the entire thing down and let people way smarter than me and better at this take a look at how it works, we could build you something better —”

“Need my goddamn arm, Stark. It’s a heavy piece of shit and if you wanna replace the whole thing one day then have at it, but I can’t just have it lying there as dead weight, or just suddenly gone, until then. I’m broken enough.” Steve immediately protests this description, but Tony has already accepted that this is how they’re going forward. He’s done far worse things for far more foolish reasons, after all.

Even despite the unfamiliar sensation of having very little information to go on, Tony’s finding it easier and easier to stay in his adult headspace. The complexity of the problem is actually helpful, because it requires every ounce of his attention and energy. Things are going well, at least until the first time he triggers something painful, and Barnes growls, metal arm shooting out in front of him and attempting to seize Tony’s wrist. He gets the reflex under control in a matter of seconds, but it’s long enough that everything Tony has been trying not to imagine all morning (did this arm hurt his mom? his dad? Was it one of the last things they saw? Did Barnes have to wash their blood off of it afterward?) hits him with what feels like G-force strength. He whimpers and rolls his chair backward from Bucky, trying to catch his breath. Steve is there almost instantly, kneeling in front of him and taking Tony’s shaking hands in his own.

“Tony, Tony it’s okay. I’m right here, I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you baby. Shh, shh you’re alright sweetheart.” Eventually, Tony gets himself back under control and picks up the tool he’d dropped on the floor, trying very hard to avoid Barnes’ eyes and pretend the entire
episode never happened while Steve keeps a grounding hand on his low back. But like his equally stubborn friend, Bucky apparently isn’t going to let it be.

“I’m sorry, S—Tony. Can I call you Tony?” He chances a look up at the soldier, and finds him looking at Tony not with scorn or malice, but with a cautious, gentle kind of smile. It seems like a hard expression for Bucky to hold, probably because he’s rarely had cause to smile as the Winter Soldier, but it still makes his entire face seem ten years younger. For the first time, he really resembles the guy from Tony’s comic books.

“I-If you want.”

“Okay. Well Tony, I’m sorry I scared you. You’re doin’ me a real big favour here, and I appreciate it. I’m gonna do my best to be brave like you and stay nice and still, alright? Maybe we can talk a little while you work? Or would that be too distracting?” Tony’s always been one to mutter to himself and the bots anyway, so this sounds like an okay plan. He takes one more big, deep breath from his tummy like Phil taught him before settling back in and orienting himself over the mess of wires that is Bucky’s arm again. “You have a favourite colour, Tony?”

“Like red.”

“Red’s pretty awesome,” Barnes agrees. “What about animals? You like those?”

“Mama calls me bunny sometimes,” he offers shyly. He trips another series of wires that Bucky says makes the arm feel suddenly cold (temperature control centre, has to be), but true to his word, the other man stays as still as he can. “I like hippos too.”

“I’ve never seen a hippo before, I don’t think.” This seems outrageous to Tony.

“They’re awesome! They’re really big, and they like to laze around and sleep in the water a lot, but they’re real fast too. I saw one at the zoo once, with Mr. Jarvis.”

It takes nearly three hours, but Tony manages to isolate the part of the system that’s causing the shocks and manages to shut it down without any significant issues for the rest of the system. He’s in and out of headspace while he works, but Bucky handles it far better than Steve could ever have dreamed, keeping the baby calm and chatting about things he finds pleasant. When it’s finally over, the three of them collapse on the penthouse couch, Tony cuddled under Steve’s left arm and Bucky pressed lightly but insistently against his other side. Steve murmurs gentle praise to both of them until they all fall asleep, waking only when JARVIS starts announcing the team’s arrivals. The AI has thoughtfully briefed everyone else on what happened at the Tower during the day, so no one asks questions, they just add themselves to the growing huddle of superheroes. When Steve manages to get a good look at them, he realizes it might not be just the warning keeping everyone quiet. Every single one of them looks as exhausted as he feels.

He knows why some of them are down; Clint had been devastated to leave the Tower with Tony so upset, and indeed the first thing he does is grab the baby tightly and mutter soft apologies into his ear for nearly ten minutes before Tony squirms impatiently and declares his Daddy ‘silly’. Others, like Thor (who is uncharacteristically quiet and defeated-looking) are a bit of a mystery to Steve.

“Shit day,” Clint summarizes succinctly, receiving grunts and groans of acknowledgement.

Nat is the last one in just after eight, and she seems to be in the worst shape out of anyone. Before they can ask, she takes out a beige file folder and sets it on the coffee table. Phil stares down at the label the longest, then looks back up at Natasha and holds out a hand to her.
“You’re not going to look?” she asks.

“Tomorrow. For tonight, I just want to hold my family, and you look like you need it most.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm blessed with incredibly kind readers in general (so this probably isn't even necessary), but a plea to be extra gentle this week. For whatever reason, my usual posting-day anxiety is through the roof this time around. Because I had a request for a reminder of my preferences on notes about spelling/typing errors, though, I should note that I'm always happy to receive this kind of feedback. Without a beta, the editing of this beast is all on me, so inevitably there are things I just don't catch, and I very much appreciate your help.

Also, because one of the things I'm starting to feel super self-conscious about is the length of this story, I should warn that things are actually starting to wind down even if it doesn't seem that way. I'm guessing a maximum of 35 total chapters (with the timestamps still living on as their own separate thing.)

Thanks as always for the comments and kudos. Hope you all had a great week!
Human/Nature and Other Fallacies

Chapter Summary

Phil and the others learn the details of the TAHITI project. Tony gets his swagger back. Natasha makes an important decision about her future (which naturally involves breaking and entering.) We learn what had Thor so down at the end of last chapter.

Chapter Notes

This chapter relies heavily on Phil's storyline from Agents of SHIELD. If you haven't seen the show and need or want more explanation than the chapter provides, the endnotes contain a brief summary.

As a warning, there's no little Tony in this chapter, and it's particularly dialogue-heavy, even for me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everyone awakes with what Clint describes as a ‘feelings hangover’, which (quite akin to a real hangover) makes them all slow-moving and quiet the next morning. Well, almost everyone, that is. With no one seeming inclined to rush off anywhere, Steve and Bruce are in the middle of cooking a big breakfast when Tony practically bounces into the kitchen. He’s undeniably Big today, clad in loose jeans and a band tee and chattering a mile a minute, but the other man’s abrupt return to his almost manic energy still has Bruce putting himself between Tony and the coffee pot.

“How much have you already had this morning?”

“None! Ask JARVIS if you must. Now outta the way Brucie Bear. I have a date with a very special dark roast. It’s so earthy it’s almost like chewing dirt. I have had actual dreams of this coffee while you all have been forcing juice and milk and other travesties on me. Wait, are you still standing here? Bruuuuuuce you have absolutely no valid excuse for keeping me separated from my life force today. Move it or I really am going to start thinking you’re playing a long game that will result in my eventual demise from caffeine deficiency.” Tony does, oddly enough, have a point; Bruce has no cause to intervene in the other man’s coffee consumption right now other than his own confused curiosity.

Still, he keeps an eye on Tony, nearly resulting in several burns as he finishes making breakfast rather more distracted than when he started. Other than a slight awkwardness around Barnes (which is entirely understandable—no one had anticipated Tony being little around James so soon, let alone under the trying conditions of the day before), Tony is just—and there’s no way to not sound cheesy about it—kind of vibrant. He’s teasing Steve and exchanging rapid-fire jokes with Clint; he even manages to make Nat crack a smile and JARVIS speak to him in that almost painfully fond tone he reserves only for his creator, all while he wolfs down a full plate of breakfast and starts on a second. Even Barnes can’t keep his eyes off the man, and while his gaze is not quite as admiring as the others, there’s an undeniable interest there.
There’s still plenty of tension and exhaustion to go around, particularly for Phil who has got to be itching to get at that folder by now, but despite themselves, they’re all sort of drawn in to Tony like magnets, his elation not quite contagious but certainly producing a noticeable shift in the room’s atmosphere. Bruce wonders if this is how fans of Tony’s public persona feel when he’s got his charismatic game-face on; if they only knew how much more powerful the man’s presence was when it's genuine like this.

“Alright,” he finally cracks. “I give. What’s up with you this morning, Tony?” Half the inhabitants of the kitchen glare at Bruce, as if acknowledging Tony’s renewed energy and mood might somehow make it vanish, but the other man just takes lazy sip of his second cup of coffee.

“Well, it’s possible that I took my own advice and got my swagger back.” No one at the table even bothers pretending they aren’t all listening to the conversation now, and Tony laughs throatily. “I don’t know. Yesterday was…humiliating in a lot of ways, and I may never be able to look directly at Barnes for fear of bursting into flames, sorry about that by the way James. But the past few days, they’ve also been…it’s been nice to remember that I’m useful for more than just Iron Man. I mean, not to toot my own horn—no wait actually I love doing that—I kicked ass yesterday. I’ve never worked with anything like what’s going on under the hood of Buckaroo’s arm, but I just damn well figured it out. And now we’re finally going to get some answers about Phil, and I have absolutely no doubt some of that’s going to be infuriating and bizarre, because hello it’s us and it’s Fury, but I just…for the first time in a really long time, I feel sure we’ll be able to handle it.” Tony being Tony, he barely lets this rather remarkable sentiment sink in before he switches gears entirely. “Can I kiss you, Bruce?” Next to him, Natasha nearly chokes on a piece of grapefruit, but Bruce’s attention is pretty strictly limited to the man sitting across from him just now.

“Why?” It’s not that he doesn’t want to kiss the guy—if this morning is anything to go by, Bruce’s new number one kink is a confident, happy and settled Tony Stark. But it couldn’t be this simple, could it?

“Because you’re extra soft and ruffled in the morning and it’s my favourite look on you. Because your lips are goddamn edible right now. Because you’re my Science Bro and you’re way more excited by the stuff that I think and build than the stuff I can blow up. Because instead of writing it off as the rambling of a shrunken toddler, you listened to spelled-me about you and the Hulk. Because…because I really, really want to kiss someone without an agenda, and you said you’d wait for that moment and that when it was here I could.” If up until this moment Tony was like a magnetic force, now he’s more like gravity. Bruce can’t say no, would never even dream of wanting to. Even feeling the eyes of the team almost boring into them as he and Tony stand to face one another isn’t a deterrent. It should be, Bruce’s interests have never run much in the way of exhibitionism, but it doesn't feel like they're intruding. Maybe it’s already become impossible for Bruce to find any situation where it feels like the team doesn’t already belong, and isn’t that a revelation all in itself?

Tony leans in, one hand curling around the back of Bruce’s neck, his breath hot and slightly fast against his cheek. When their lips touch, it’s absolutely nothing like their first disastrous attempt. When he’s not doing it under duress, Tony kisses with the same kind of joy he brings to new discovery in the lab or the workshop, licking his way into Bruce’s mouth as if there is nothing but possibility and endless time and space to explore. Having all of that barely contained energy and attention brought to bear on him is the absolute best kind of overwhelming, and by the time they break apart to breathe, Bruce is pretty willing to spend the rest of his life doing nothing but this. They both stare at one another, dazed and surprised at their own happiness, at least until Clint wolf-whistles. Tony flips the archer off and gives Bruce another long, predatory look before traipsing out of the kitchen and toward the elevators.****
Bruce and Tony’s impromptu little show leaves everyone slightly dazed for a while after breakfast, but Phil has put off dealing with the file long enough. Nearly everyone offers to be with him when he reads it, and he turns them all down politely; Clint and Natasha both insist. The part of Phil that’s been their boss for so many years rankles at the insubordination, but Clint in particular is wearing his guilt over his treatment of Phil after his return on his sleeve, and Coulson just can’t bear to make him look any more miserable (even if it’s entirely possible the agent knows that and is being slightly manipulative.) So instead of yelling at them (never a good plan), or trying to evade their attentions (an even worse one), he allows Tasha to steal one of Tony’s numerous sports cars and directs her to a SHIELD-owned warehouse. Surprising Natasha is an extremely rare event in Phil’s life, and he savours the slightly pursed lips and narrowed eyes suggesting he’s done just that.

“I was sure I knew where all of your personal effects were stored.” The admission of ignorance is even rarer, and Phil smirks ever so slightly as he slides the heavy metal door open to reveal Lola, his pride and joy. The classic car is a little dusty (Fury was normally good about having someone keep her clean—must be another expression of annoyance on his part), but still gorgeous, and for a minute he almost forgets why they’re there. It’s so easy to imagine bringing Tasha and Clint here under entirely different circumstances, showing off one of his most prized possessions and getting to enjoy that little grin they both reserve just for moments when they’re amused by Phil’s enthusiasm for the classics. They could take Lola out, maybe out of the city for something as mundane as a picnic, even. He could watch their skeptical expressions turn to cautious glee as Lola flew smoothly through the air, could see Natasha’s soft curls move in the wind and Clint close his eyes and just relax in that way he so rarely has time or opportunity for.

Right now he’s using her not to connect to his lovers, but to try to stay connected to himself, the man he was before he’d…well, whatever this file was about to tell him. It’s about as far from his fantasy as it can get, but he can’t bring himself to regret allowing them to join him here, either.

“I used to work on her with my Dad. Since then she’s gotten a few…upgrades that I’ll look forward to demonstrating to both of you another day.” Clint’s eyes spark in interest, but both he and Natasha follow Phil’s lead. Settling into the car is a bit awkward—there’s only two seats, so after a brief scuffle, Natasha grudgingly settles herself in Clint’s lap. Phil lets their quiet bickering over the relative strength of their thighs become background noise as he takes the folder out of the glove compartment and finally lets himself start to learn the truth.

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Thor and Steve have been in one of the tower’s many gyms for going on three hours. At some points, breaking the never-used space in had become rather too literal for Steve’s comfort—even the reinforced walls and equipment of the room can only hold up to so many blows from mjolnir, and Thor is decidedly not in the mood to hold back at all today. Like all of them, the god had been affected by Tony’s good cheer, but after most of them had all parted ways for the day, Steve had watched Thor’s low mood from yesterday settle back over him like a weight, making his every movement look slow and almost pained. Convincing Thor to train had been a kind of diagnostic measure on Steve’s part, but even the serum could only handle so much, and he was starting to wear. Which meant he was going to have to take a more direct approach.

“You’ve been quiet since yesterday. Did something go wrong with the Bifrost lessons? Is Jane upset that you’ve been spending so much time with us at the Tower?” Thor’s mind seems to take a moment to catch up, and he aims a heavy swing at Steve’s head before adjusting his course at the last moment and allowing his fist to collide with a nearby wall.

“Neither. Friend Bruce and Jane are most enthusiastic to learn more about the Bifrost, though our language for discussing such matters is often…frustratingly incompatible, even with the All-Speak. And my Jane is most understanding of my commitments here. I once imagined our lives very
differently, as did she, but we have never truly been in a position to commit ourselves only to one another. Too much of our hearts and minds and time have always belonged to others. I have tried to convince her to consider relocating to Friend Tony’s great tower, but she believes she is happiest as we are.” Steve, who has rarely wanted anything more than to be surrounded by all the people he loves, can’t really understand the desire for distance, but he’s also not one to judge. They are lucky enough that Jane willingly shares Thor with all of them; her own desire for some space away from the complex and at times all-encompassing dynamics of the tower is hardly an onerous demand by comparison.

“So if not either of those, then what? You really haven’t seemed like yourself since you got back last night.”

“It is my brother. As I was already making use of the Bifrost, I wished to check on his status. He is…not enduring Asgardian justice well. Few in his position would. His crimes are many and great, and his punishments are…well, for any other I would likely have thought them just not so long ago. But I see him how and I fear there shall be nothing left of my brother when it is all over.” Thor is never usually one to eschew eye contact, but now his gaze falls to the floor even as he holds a hand up to prevent Steve from speaking. “He has done nothing to earn your pity or your compassion, and I have no right to make this your burden, Friend Steve. Please do not make my shame greater by offering me comfort I do not deserve.” After taking a moment to gather himself, Thor stands and gestures to the wrestling ring in the corner of the room. “Shall we?”

Steve only just manages to hold back the groan that wants to escape him. But if this is all the comfort Thor will accept for now, then it is his duty as team leader to provide it. Even if he might not be able to move tomorrow.

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“Huh. Turns out, not such a magical place.” The weak joke is about all Phil can manage, and neither Clint or Natasha even bothers to respond. Natasha has managed to mask the majority of her reactions to what they’ve read, but Clint’s face is so open it’s almost painful just to glance at. Phil can see the guilt there, the shame that he’d blamed Phil and accepted SHIELD’s cover story for what had happened without ever digging into it. He can see the rage simmering under the surface, and the fear, too—it’s almost certainly fear for Phil and not fear of him, but it’s still more than he can bear to witness just now. “Natasha, I need you to take Clint home.” Neither looks like they intend to go quietly, but Phil barrels on, pressing as much authority into his tone as he can manage. “I allowed you both to be here and to access this intel, and I’m glad I did. And when we’re ready to act on it, I’ll expect both of you there. But now I need some time to myself to…well, I don’t know, to be honest, but I need time. And if you still respect me as your handler at all, then trust me when I tell you that Clint needs not to be alone right now, Natasha, and I don’t trust him with anyone but you. Clint…” Phil’s voice cracks just a little as he meets the blonde’s panicked, wide eyes, but he forces the words out with what little air it feels like he has left. “This is what I need from you right now, please. Don’t go back to the tower and hide in the vents, or get SHIELD to assign you the first fatal-looking mission you can find. Let Tasha hold you or spar with you or fuck you to within an inch of your lives, whatever you both want and need.”

“Rule One?” Clint grits out, gripping the door handle like . “Tony’s, I mean? You’ll come home? He can’t…fuck it, I can’t handle it if you don’t. I know that’s selfish and shitty and I’ve probably earned it if you want to punch me in the face just like—”

“I’ll be home in a few hours, Clint. I promise. Go with Tasha now. I’ll find my own way back.”

The silence was what he asked for, but when he finally gets it after he watches his agents drive away, it’s terrifying and all-encompassing. His mind wanders, fantasizing about all kinds of
options; finding Fury and attacking him, quitting SHIELD, staging a hostile takeover, walking away from all of it and living on a farm the way Clint had once rambled on about when he was stoned out of his mind on the good pain meds after a disastrous mission gone wrong.

Mostly, though, Phil stares at his hands. It’s foolish, and it’s not like he expects the alterations to his physiology to suddenly become visible just because he’s now finally been made aware of them. But in a lot of ways that might be less terrifying than knowing that he was no longer himself at the most basic level. These were his hands, still calloused and scarred in all the same places, but the muscles, nerve impulses, and the very cells that made them are different now, alien by very definition. These are no longer the same hands that had once touched Clint and Natasha, that had cradled his treasured Captain America cards with cautious awe, that had handled all manner of weapons with confident ease.

“You know, my Dad’s notes on the whole flying car thing are actually some of my favourites.” He jumps, but doesn’t bother asking how Tony has gotten in without tripping the numerous security measures protecting this building; Phil has long since learned that Stark will always be the exception to whatever SHIELD thinks is the best, most comprehensive forms of protection. Nor does he ask how Tony knew where to find him, but that one Tony tells him anyway. “Tweety told me to come out here if you weren’t home in exactly three hours. I gave you four. He also told me to, and I quote, use my goddamn Bambi eyes on you, but I’m not feeling at all little today, so you’re going to have to make due with me.” Rather than getting into the passenger side of the vehicle, Tony lifts the hood. “Anyway, I was telling you about Howard. This is a man who actually invented the element that saved my life, who helped make the serum…and he just couldn’t master the flying car. I love the notes he kept on that project because they’re one of the only ones where you really see him falter. During one particular low point, he actually decides it’s not working because there must be something about the nature of cars that makes them want to stay on the ground.”

“Lola would definitely beg to differ,” Phil says proudly.

“I’m sure she would, and if you ever let me get my hands on her I’m pretty sure we could get her running even more smoothly. But that’s the thing, the big mistake Howard made when he started to lose faith in this project: he started thinking about cars, an object humankind literally created from nothing, as something that had just one immutable, unchanging nature.”

“Let me guess: I’m the car in this scenario? You know, this whole metaphor actually reeks of something I would do during a pep talk.” Tony snorts a laugh and shuts the hood, continuing to circle Lola with a covetous gaze as he replies.

“Well maybe I’m trying to learn the ways of the force here, Darth Smartass. And no, it’s not just you who’s the car in this half-baked tale. It’s all of us, really. I mean, you live with a god, a giant green rage monster, two and a half super-soldiers, and a dude whose heart was once literally run by a car battery. If we were playing according to the rules of what counts as natural or human, only Clint would check all the boxes, and Agent, you cannot ask me to live in a world where only Clint is right.”

“Tony, these things aren’t the same—”

“Well no, none of our circumstances are identical. But if you think we all jumped straight to feeling pride about the ways we’ve changed, you’re wrong. You know how much Bruce struggles with the Hulk; the guilt tears him apart, the same as it does with Barnes, I think. And Steve hates his strength just as much as he loves it. You would know better than I how Natasha feels about what was done to her, but I would bet it isn’t uncomplicated. And when I got back from
Afghanistan… I talk a good game, but for a long time the only thing I valued about the arc reactor was that Yinsen helped me create the original. It hurt like hell and I spent half my time wishing I had just died in that cave. It was actually Pep that changed my mind about it.” If it were directed toward anyone but Pepper, that special smile that Tony reserves just for talking about her might make the absurdly possessive part of Phil flare to life. But he himself still misses Pepper some days, and finds himself longing for the moment when she and Tony might grow comfortable enough with one another again for her to spend time in the Tower.

“What’d she do?”

“When I took the first one out, I wanted to destroy it; never been a particularly sentimental guy.” This is, Phil thinks, a pretty questionable claim. Tony practically hoards things and people that mean anything at all to him, then protects them with all the ferocity of a dragon guarding treasure, but now is hardly the time to make the other man defensive. Despite his skepticism toward the ‘lesson’ of this narrative, he really does want to hear the end. “And more than that, to me the arc was just… more proof that I was less than human, that maybe I always had been and now there was just proof. Pep took it and turned it into evidence that I had a heart.” Inspection apparently complete, Tony finally opens the door and slides into the passenger seat. “There’s not a wrong way to deal with this. If you want me to take blood and tissue samples so that Bruce and I can figure out everything we can about how this has affected you, we will. If you want to try to figure out a way to get it out of you, we’ll find a way to do that and keep you alive. If you want to storm SHIELD and punch Fury in the face for doing all this without your consent, just give us the word. If you want to forget, if you need us to carry this knowledge for you, I bet I can do a better job of masking those memories than SHIELD did so that you can stop dreaming about it. Whatever you want, Phil. No pressure. But just… just know that not a single one of us feels any differently about you than we did yesterday.”

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The second Tony arrives back at the Tower with Phil in tow, Clint attaches himself to the latter not unlike Tony’s little self had a few mornings prior. He hovers a few steps behind Phil, constantly finding excuses to follow any time the other man leaves a room. Phil’s patience for that won’t last long, Natasha knows, but today he seems content to allow the shadowing. This suits her fine; it makes her exit that much quieter.

Maria’s apartment hasn’t changed much since the last time Natasha had snuck in here; there’s a new painting on the wall behind the couch that is likely to be a new defensive measure, befitting her imminent change in status at SHIELD. The couch, a brown and buttery leather number that Hill probably sleeps on more frequently than she does her actual bed, is also new, though looking at makes Natasha kind of miss the horribly stiff and uncomfortable one that used to be here. Or maybe she misses the woman who used to own that ridiculous thing, the one who would complain constantly about the damn couch and yet refuse to replace it because it was the first piece of furniture she’d ever bought for herself in college. The version of Hill who sits on the new one, tense and exhausted-looking, is sometimes unrecognizable.

“We know you gave the file to Coulson, so if that’s what you broke into my apartment to tell me, I’m afraid my reaction is going to rather disappoint you.” Natasha allows her face to settle into the neutral mask she’s perfected over the years; even if it feels slightly unfamiliar now, after so much work in the Tower to be more expressive (especially around Tony), it still fits more or less like it always has, smoothing out her features until they have almost locked in place.

“I wouldn’t waste a trip on something I was sure you were aware of within minutes. I do give you some credit, Maria. I came to officially withdraw my name from consideration for Director.” Though she’s been preparing to say them for days, it surprises Natasha how little the words hurt.
She’s turning away not just from a promotion, but from a validation of the work she’d spent her entire life basic her identity around. That it feels so little like an actual loss is both heartening and disturbing.

“Natasha, the Avengers were formed around the sacrifice of someone who, it turns out, didn’t even die, and if that isn’t the perfect symbol for how fleeting all this is going to be, I don’t know what is. I’m sure it’s...exhilarating, the intensity of the bonds that all of you seem to have formed. I know it must feel like you’re getting everything you didn’t know you could ever have again. But what is the Avengers at the end of the day, Natasha, but a group of remarkable, volatile, and damaged people always on the verge of turning on each other? It can’t possibly be sustained, and if you give up everything you’ve worked so hard for, you’ll have nothing left when it falls apart.”

For the first time in quite a long while, Natasha is tempted to use her strength against one of her own people and strike out, hard and fast, at Maria. The other woman’s no-holds-barred assessment of the Avengers is not so different from what she herself would have said of the team mere months ago, but there is almost nothing that hasn’t changed since then. She doesn’t want to try to articulate what it’s meant to her to have Tony in their lives, to watch him start to heal and grow, or to witness Thor, Bruce, and Clint gain their confidence back, or to see Steve (and now maybe Bucky) start to find his place in the world. Not only are there not enough words in English or any of the other languages she knows to capture all of that, but the part of her mind always devoted to threat assessment wants to protect that knowledge as ruthlessly and completely as she has all of the secrets that she’s held for others during her career. Letting SHIELD believe they’re always just one step from falling apart is far safer than letting them know how unlikely that potentiality is.

“I’m not doing it for them. I’m doing it because of TAHITI.”

“You really think that convinces me you’re not throwing everything away on account of your feelings for them?”

“I said TAHITI, not Coulson. Do you really not know why this would bother me, Maria? Our whole lives are given to something else, to an organization that operates mostly in the shadows, and we accept that. Hell, I miss that part of my life more than you could possibly know. But our deaths are supposed to be the one thing that are ours. I didn’t sign up to have that taken away from me, to be strapped to an operating table begging to die while someone else forces life back into my body for no other reason than that they aren’t done using it yet. There have to be lines somewhere, Maria, and if it is now SHIELD’s policy to cross that particular one then I was never going to be the right one to lead it.” The best thing about using this explanation as a cover is that it’s still true. However else her feelings for the others might be clouding her judgement exactly the way Maria has accused her of, TAHITI is a profound violation of the trust that Natasha has always had in the finality of death. When she had little else in the world, she’d had that. To learn that not only had this unshakeable truth been violated, but that the TAHITI project had originally been intended for her and the other Avengers had shaken her deeply.

“Where would you go? The Avengers aren’t enough for you. They’re not enough for any of you. And when I joined SI after SHIELD fell, it was you who told me people like you and I don’t last long on the outside.”

“I wouldn’t be not the outside, not entirely. I’ll still work for SHIELD if you’ll have me. I just don’t want to be put in the position of making that kind of call. And I want my contract altered to prohibit the use of any similar procedures on me; when it’s my time, I’ll have it as much on my own terms as I can make it. You and Fury can discuss that and get back to me. And Maria?” The brunette raises her eyes to Natasha’s. “I liked the old couch better.” For just a moment, a hint of a smile flashes across Hill’s face, a smile that doesn’t quite fit on the Future Director of SHIELD,
because it belongs to the woman who was once one of Natasha’s closest friends.

“Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

It was a hard balance to achieve in terms of explaining enough of TAHITI that its general events were clear without delving into just recapping the AoS at length. If any of it is a bit too opaque after the chapter, here’s the broad strokes (obviously, AoS spoilers ahead; skip to the next paragraph to avoid): Coulson indeed died after Loki’s attack. Using an alien technology originally designed to treat mortally wounded Avengers, Fury brought Phil back to life. He implanted him with false memories of being on vacation because the technology has tended to produce very negative long-term effects on patients' mental stability. (There's also a brief allusion to AoS when Phil makes the joke about Tony using Lola as a metaphor; in the show, Phil uses Lola that way to comfort a junior agent.)

Other notes: Your response to the last chapter, and to my concerns about the story being too long and such, were overwhelmingly kind and thoughtful. I heard from so many of you: people who have been here and commenting the entire way through, people who have never commented before, folks who are new to the story, so many of you stopped by to say you're enjoying it, and I'm touched by every single one of those comments. There was definitely some grateful weeping on my end as I read them. My responses are a bit delayed because of the holiday and general end of semester business, but they are coming, I promise.

Thank you now and always for your support. Happy long weekend to those of you celebrating!
Chapter Summary

The Science Bros get a bit too involved in researching Phil's condition, leading everyone remember to that Tony is not in fact the only workaholic in the house. Tony spends some more time bonding with Bucky, and focuses some of his considerable charisma on cheering up Thor. Also, never underestimate JARVIS and the bots.

Chapter Notes

No warnings I can think of. As always, feel free to correct me on that if I'm missing something.

Natasha arrives back at the Tower just as most of the others are turning in. Clint, though just as attached to Coulson at the hip as he had been when she’d left, is slightly more aware of the rest of his surroundings. He regards her re-entrance to the penthouse with a suspicious once-over. But he drops it when she gives a slow shake of her head, especially because Phil takes this opportunity to decide to pass responsibility for the archer back off to Natasha. Unfortunately for him, Clint isn’t having any of it.

“Clint, come on now, I’m just going to bed.” In other circumstances, the scene would be almost comical. The two men are performing a kind of bizarre two-step about the living room, Phil attempting to put space between himself and Clint, and Clint not even bothering to hide the fact that he’s in pursuit. At one point, he steps carelessly on top of the coffee table to prevent the success of an impressive bluff on Coulson’s part that otherwise would have had him successfully at the elevator, which is clearly his target. Exasperated, Phil’s eyes find hers. “You going to help me out here, Natasha?”

“Seems rather useless. I assume Clint’s intention is to not allow you to keep sleeping and dealing with the fallout from the memories alone, and for once he and I are in total agreement.” Clint lets out a triumphant squawk from his newest perch atop the back of the sofa, but losing the person he thought would be an ally in this conversation turns Phil tense. He starts to move about the room like a cornered, frightened animal; it hurts to see, but the desperation also makes him sloppier, and it’s only a matter of steps before Natasha has him backed into a corner.

“Tasha, you weren’t here. They’re not…it’s not like a regular nightmare. I could hurt you, either of you. I did hurt Tony.”

“You scared Tony, who was also little at the time. I agree you shouldn’t be around him during sleep when he’s in headspace. But we’re adults, Coulson, trained, battle-tested adults who have had our share of brutal nightmares and equally vicious wake-ups. The circumstances don’t have to be precisely the same in order for us to be capable of handling it.” Slowly, giving him plenty of time to move or duck if he truly wishes, Natasha reaches out and puts a hand on Coulson’s cheek. She
hadn’t seen him after he’d died, none of them had (for reasons that were now obvious), but she’d imagined it often enough in the weeks that followed: how his skin would have been cold, his calming, even voice silenced, his expression frozen forever in resigned, bittersweet acceptance. Since he’d come back, the temptation to reach out and seek out all the signs of life she could feel beneath her fingers was near-constant. The impulse had been halted primarily by her resentment (which had been no less deeply felt than Clint’s even though it had been far quieter), and a far older fear of allowing Phil to really know what he meant to her, all the ways he made her weak.

Though for different reasons, both of these objections are now impossible to sustain. Her other hand rises to cup Phil’s left cheek, fingers traveling greedily over muscles and bones and gloriously warm skin, and a part of Natasha just wants to stay there forever, cataloguing every intact bone of Coulson’s skull and the tiny twitches around his mouth as he tries to fight a smile.

“Nat…”

“Come to bed with us, Phil.” It’s as close as Natasha has ever come to begging a man for anything, especially something like this, and the very real risk that she might be refused is almost nauseating. How do people do this all the time? How didn’t they realize that taking another’s life, or risking your own, is far less terrifying than openly caring about someone else?

She’s very close to withdrawing her hands, and potentially making a quick escape from the tower, when Coulson reaches up to surround one of her hands with his own. The other he extends to Clint, and Natasha realizes when she looks down that all of them are holding on so hard their knuckles are nearly white.

****

There’s a thing the Avengers should have realized about giving Tony and Bruce a task and expecting them to monitor one another about small matters like food and sleep: it was a terrible idea. To be fair, for the first several days following Phil’s request for the two to find out everything they could regarding the changes to his physiology, the Science Bros had done a reasonably good job. They slept and ate in shifts, ensuring that they were constantly making progress while also keeping their minds and bodies reasonably refreshed.

The problem came on the fourth day. Both Tony and Bruce are accustomed to working alone, but more out of necessity than preference: it’s genuinely hard for other people, even most experts in their respective fields, to keep up with either of them. Collaboration tends to require the two to constantly slow themselves down, explaining connections and insights that feel painfully obvious. More often than not, it’s frustrating and unproductive.

But on day four, when the two started bouncing ideas off one another while Tony was supposed to be on his way up to the penthouse for dinner, they started to really understand what it is to be speaking to someone on their own level. There was still some translation required; their areas of expertise do not entirely overlap, and Tony tends to favour visualization and digital models while Bruce is typically more inclined to talk his way through and around a problem. But they could follow each other’s ways of thinking, connecting the dots they both tend to skip over, and it was such a damn delight to be connected in this way that they actually giggled through most of the night like schoolboys.

When JARVIS showed the team the feed, not even Steve had the heart to disrupt them. Besides, one night without sleep or food really wasn’t that bad, not compared to how Tony used to live…

It didn’t stop at one night, though. Occasionally, one of the men takes a cat-nap on the workshop couch, or inhales the remnants of whatever food has been brought down to them by their increasingly concerned teammates, but for the most part they are a non-stop blur of
incomprehensible babble and equally hard to follow Sciencing (or so Tony calls it). Neither is willing to heed the team’s attempts to get them to surface. They don’t even seem to really hear them after a while, entirely consumed by the joy and novelty of intellectual compatibility, as well as the far less exciting but equally pressing reality that it’s not just anyone, but Phil they’re harnessing that energy toward saving. While the former is unique to Tony and Bruce alone, the latter is a pressing force on all of them. Phil looks slightly less drawn these days, now that he’s allowing Nat and Clint to help him through his nightmares, but that haunted look still clings to him and they all despise it. So when Bruce and Tony continue to refuse to be cajoled away from the labs, somehow persisting primarily on caffeine and energy bars, the rest of them let it happen. After a solid week without seeing either of them outside the shop, though, Steve is starting to get nervous, and he finds an unexpected ally in Phil himself, who declares over breakfast, “This is getting ridiculous. We need to get them out of there.” Natasha and Clint, both of whom would have been extremely useful allies to have in this ‘mission’ of theirs, remain silent, plainly torn between concern for their friends and their desire for information about how to help Phil. Thor, who Steve knows is additionally concerned with the health and welfare of his own brother, watches warily, possibly unsure whether or not his opinion would be welcome. (It’s such a step back from the more confident version of their friend Steve had just started getting accustomed to, and he makes a promise to himself that as soon as he manages to wrangle the rogue scientists in the basement, he’s going to figure out how to help Thor in a way that doesn’t just involve getting his ass kicked regularly in the gym.) Bucky is downstairs with his therapist, and would likely be equally unwilling to give his take on matters. After a glance around the room, Phil too seems to realize that he and Steve are on their own, but if anything the other man seems oddly pleased by this.

“Strategy, Captain?”

“Tony’s no problem physically—I can carry him if I have to. Bruce…that’s a little more delicate. We don’t want to trigger a Hulk-Out, and trying to force him out when he’s concentrating this deeply could easily do just that.” While casting his eyes around the kitchen, Steve’s gaze falls upon one of the cameras in the corner, and a bolt of inspiration strikes. “JARVIS, I discounted you once when it came to Tony, and I try very hard never to make the same mistake twice. Any ideas?”

****

The new house rule, Steve decides, needs to be amended. He’d been planning on adding *Never Underestimate JARVIS* to the board for weeks, but he realizes now that he still would have been making the same mistake had he neglected to add *And The Bots* to the list.

It goes down like this: Phil and Steve enter the workshop with a tray of food and drinks. Bruce and Tony promptly brush aside the offerings, mumbling vaguely about being full and about the delicacy of their current work. Even to someone as comparatively uneducated as Steve, though, it’s obvious the two men are mostly just talking in circles at this point. It’s even more tempting to just drag them out of there, consequences be damned, but they owe it to Tony’s oldest friends to at least give their plan a shot.

Feigning resigned frustration, Phil and Steve begin to move toward the workshop door, vowing to return in a few hours and making vague threats about what will happen if they find the breakfast food and smoothies untouched when they do. Bruce and Tony wave them off as expected, and that’s when Dummy makes his move. He collides with the table, spilling one of the smoothies onto Bruce’s groin and right thigh. While Dummy spins in confused-looking circles, making apologetic beeping sounds while the other two bots rush to his ‘aid’, Bruce stumbles, grabbing at the central holotable to steady himself. The impact is nothing, really, but JARVIS rig an impressive little
lightshow, making the numerous screens floating around the room flicker and shake unsteadily before announcing an unknown error.

“How could…that couldn’t have corrupted the data, Bruce barely touched it, and most of it is autosaved to at least three different servers—godDAMMIT Dummy, you tool” Tony curses, words slurring slightly the way they do when exhaustion is really starting to hit him. For a moment Steve fears they’re about to fail, that Tony is onto them and that he’ll be more resolved than ever to stay down here just out of sheer spite. But JARVIS isn’t done.

“Perhaps if Dummy, or Butterfingers and You for that matter, had been permitted to charge for more than two hours in the past five days, he wouldn’t be so uncoordinated.” Apparently enjoying the chance to flex her dramatic muscle, Butterfingers makes a whining sound so piteous that on a good day, Tony would have realized from this alone that something was up. But today the engineer’s face just twists in guilt, and he summons the bots to him in a much gentler tone.

“I’m sorry. I know, I know, Dummy let me see your camera, did you crack the lens when you hit the table? I’ll fix it, buddy, I promise. But after you get some rest okay?” The bots make little noises of assent before whirring off toward their charging stations.

“Sir, you might consider taking your own advice. It will likely take me several hours to reconfigure the open datasets and confirm their accuracy, and we cannot proceed further without that information.” Bruce and Tony exchange glances, and Phil and Steve do the same. Allowing the scientists too long to think about what just happened seems to Steve to be a very bad idea, and Phil is obviously of the same frame of mind, because he reaches out and grips Bruce gently by the elbow.

“Come on, Bruce. You two can have some breakfast actually sitting at a table like human beings, and then you can get some rest.” Steve inches closer to Tony, who is still frowning and looking between the holotable and the bots.

“Just a few hours. You can’t get any further for now anyway, you heard JARVIS. Might as well take the opportunity to let your mind settle and to get some real food into your system.” The wide-eyed, slightly pouty expression that is Tony’s only reply is far too close to his little self for Steve’s comfort, and it suddenly feels all the more imperative that they get him out of here.

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Getting both men into bed after they manage some food proves to be a relatively easy task; Bruce nearly falls asleep in his breakfast, and the longer he’s away from the lab, the more he seems to realize the absurdity of the schedule he and Tony had been keeping. Tony himself seems to have no regrets at all, but he still allows himself to be shuffled to his bedroom, and when Steve spreads his weighted blanket out on top of him, the engineer makes that happy purr-like noise they’re all fond of and is out like a light within minutes.

The trouble comes when Tony wakes up. After a solid eight hours of sleep, he’s not just ready to go, he’s nearly frantic at having lost so much time, berating JARVIS for allowing him to sleep so long while he hurriedly changes clothes. He’s still tired enough that he stumbles putting his pants on, and Steve re-enters the bedroom in time to steady him with an exasperated sigh.

“There a fire I don’t know about? What’s the rush?” Tony mutters something back that sounds like an equation. “English, please, Tony. Talk to me.”

“Only if you help me find my belt.” Steve is far more interested in ensuring his friend stays standing up, but he obediently makes a show of peering around the room. “Gotta get back to the lab. JARVIS will have fixed whatever the hell happened last night, and we’ve already lost so much
time. I think I’m close to figuring out how the alien biochemistry affects Phil’s neurotransmitters, which has to be a huge part of whatever psychosis it is that the other subjects developed. I just…I need—”

“You need to rest,” Steve interrupts. “Bruce used the medical protocols to restrict both of your access to the workshop for 24 hours. And then your time down there will be mainly in shifts, though he’s blocked off a couple hours on either end for you to work together. I know that seemed to help.” Steve expects an explosion, but Tony barely seems to take in what he’s said; he just goes on muttering about his belt. “Tony?” More muttering, but this time Steve distinctly hears Phil’s name, paired with a word that sounds very close to ‘Daddy’. “Sweetheart?”

“No time. No time. Did this the other day to help Bucky. Can make little brain mostly go away, just gotta concentrate. Can’t let anythin’ bad happenna Phil. Need—where’s—why can’t I find my belt?”

“Honey, I think you’re holding it. That’s it in your left hand, isn’t it?” Tony stares down at the thing mystified, like he’s never seen a belt before in his life, and much like their first day together when Tony had been de-aged, Steve very suddenly can’t take not touching him any longer. He pulls his still-stunned boy back toward the bed and into his arms, pressing a kiss into his hair. “It’s okay, baby. You’re okay.”

“m tired, Dada.” Something fierce and wonderful feels like it grips Steve by the heart at that name, and it’s a very conscious effort he makes to not squeeze the baby as hard as he wants to. He’d resigned himself to having lost the chance at having Tony call him by any kind of parental monicker the way he does the others, and even if he had hoped, he’d never dared dream of being called something that made Tony sound even younger and more vulnerable.

“I know you are. You’ve been working so hard lately, haven’t you? Even when you’ve been little, you still helped Bucky, just like you said, and you fought with us on what was supposed to be a little day too. And then all this with Phil.” Tony twitches and strains in his arms a little at the name. “Shh, shh, Daddy Phil is fine. When he asked you and Bruce to look into this, he never meant for you to get so wrapped up in it that you didn’t take care of yourselves. He’d really like it if you took a break today, and he’s even following his own advice! He and Tasha and Clint are going for a picnic. So what do you think about spending the day with me, Thor and Bucky?”

“…selfish?” Tony asks in a voice near a whisper, chewing anxiously on his lip. Steve carefully tugs his boy’s lip away from his teeth, making a note to find him a pacifier when they get up (and if he secretly wants to see Tony sucking on the Cap-themed one again, well that’s just a side-benefit, right?)

“No, sweetheart. It’s not selfish at all. In fact I think Thor’s been feeling a little sad lately and he could really use some hugs from our little boy. And Bucky’s been pretty excited to spend some more time with you.”

“Dada too?”

“Dada always likes being around you Tony,” Steve agrees. The baby looks just slightly doubtful, the wounds of Steve’s abrupt departure obviously not entirely healed just yet, but Steve will reassure him every damn day if that’s what it takes. “Let’s get you changed into something more comfortable. Do you want a pull-up or a diaper today, baby?” Tony’s now able to sleep without protection of any kind, though as Clint has reminded them, it’s possible that’s less because whatever was causing the nighttime struggles with continence is totally resolved than it is because he’s slept so little lately anyway. Whatever the case, the others had suggested Steve use today to try to push Tony past his odd reluctance about allowing Steve to be involved in that side of their
play. By the flush that immediately stains not just Tony’s cheeks, but down his neck and the tips of his ears as well, it might be pushing a bit too hard.

“I—I—”

“You know I don’t mind, right Tony? I know the diapers are a little embarrassing for you sometimes, but you know Dada has never once thought something bad about you for wearing them, don’t you?” From the incredulous look Tony shoots him, he did not in fact know this. Immediately, Steve chuckles out his plan of trying to deal with the diapers as quickly and efficiently as possible aside. “What if I give you a nice rubdown before we put one on? You’ve gotta be sore after so many days working downstairs, it might feel really nice.”

At first, Tony is extremely wary of the entire venture, startling whenever Steve moves in a way he doesn’t expect and occasionally wrenching his neck to try to look behind him and watch what Steve is doing. Steve just acts oblivious, though, keeping up a gentle prattle about how he’s been spending his time lately and what he, Bucky, Thor and Tony might do today. By the time he reaches Tony’s shoulders, where he spends nearly half an hour working at what feels like knots on top of knots, the baby is sprawled almost bonelessly beneath him, his thumb tucked into his mouth.

“That’s my good little boy,” Steve grins. “I’m gonna roll you over and get a nice soft diaper on you, alright sweetie?” Steve takes his time with this just as much as he had the massage, rubbing creme thoroughly into Tony’s thighs and between his cheeks, then covering that with a thick layer of powder. By the time Steve has used the tapes to secure the diaper at his hips, Tony’s face is hidden under his blanket, but he manages a shy little smile when Steve pulls it away. “There we go. All set.” He completes the outfit with a simple black romper; Tony looks dubiously at the snaps that go up the legs and to the crotch, but he doesn’t seem to have the energy to muster an argument. He even seems a little…relieved, maybe? Steve could just be projecting, but he’d swear he feels the last of the tension drain out of Tony’s body when Steve lifts him up and gives his padded bum a few gentle pats.

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Tony still feels a little guilty for not being down in the shop right now, but he comforts himself with the notion that he’s not not working, he just has two new missions. The first is to cheer up Daddy Thor, who is far too quiet and gloomy-looking for Tony’s liking. He even tries to avoid giving Tony cuddles! The first time Tony asks (rather politely, he might add), Thor encourages him to stay with Steve, and mutters something about going down to his floor to clean. For anyone else this excuse would be flimsy; for Thor, it’s downright laughable, because the only person in the tower that hates cleaning more than Tony himself is Thor, who had been devastated to learn they couldn’t just eat off paper plates and plastic cutlery for all eternity. So Tony decides to get insistent, widening his eyes and holding his arms up to Thor in the universal baby-sign for wanting to be held.

“Up?” Maybe Tony isn’t quite as sneaky as he thinks, because Thor snorts under his breath, but he still leans down and hoists Tony easily into his arms.

“Youngling, I am not fit company for you today.” Tony makes a pfft sound with his tongue and points at the cabinet.

“Bottle. Hungry. Please?” Thor glances at Steve for help, but the super soldier just hands over a bottle. This momentarily distracts Tony, because it’s a new one, with hippos! His joyful squeak is not at all planned, and Steve chuckles.

“Buck ordered that for you after you guys talked about them last week.” While Thor prepares a
smoothie, Tony gets to work naming the hippos on the cup, informing Thor about their long backstories and heroic deeds, including a zoo escape and their rescue of a failing cupcake factory. At first Thor just lets Tony babble, but the man has always been a sucker for a good story, and while Tony works at his drink (mmm he remembered to put peaches, Daddy Thor is best), Thor takes over, telling Tony about how some of the hippos learned space travel so they could visit Asgard and make new animal friends and spread word of their cupcakes. Steve watches them with such open affection that Tony blushes every time he looks at him, and before he can even whine too much about his bottle being finished, Steve gives him his Captain America soother, complete with a little clip that attaches to the front of Tony’s romper.

“You wanna go down and see Bucky now, sunshine?” Tony does, but it’s also still a bit of a scary prospect (what if Bucky doesn’t really like him? what if he thinks Tony is a stupid baby? what if he knows Tony should be in the lab or the shop working?). But he also wants to be brave, and he knows it would make Dada really happy if he and Bucky were friends. By way of compromise, Tony nods, but lets himself grip the neck of Thor’s shirt and suck a little harder at his pacifier.

When they get to Bucky’s floor only to have JARVIS announce that James is in the pool Tony had made for him, his nerves grow a lot more intense. Steve looks completely floored.

“You had a pool put in for him, baby?” Tony reluctantly takes out his soother.

“Read it was good for PT and stuff.” After many, many check-ins and confirmations that he can handle it, Thor carries him inside. Bucky’s metal arm, Tony’s pleased to see, is covered in the waterproof layer he himself had designed, and though swimming with the heavy-ass limb is still a challenge (he really has to get onto redesigning that thing as soon as they figure out how to help Phil), the man still moves with an almost eerie kind of grace. When he sees them enter the room, Bucky immediately swims over to nearest edge to greet them. Thor finds a towel, then sets Tony down on the pool deck on top of it. He’s still several inches from the water, and Thor is settled behind him so that Tony’s back is pressed against his chest, so it’s not quite as scary as it could be.

“Heya doll. How you doin’?” Tony shrugs, but Steve helps him out a bit.

“Tony really liked his present, didn’t you sweetheart? Can you say thank you to Buck?” Though it feels a little bit like he might be being tricked into a larger conversation, Tony takes out his soother and murmurs, “Thanks.” Bucky smiles, that same warm look from before that makes his entire face look different and far less scary.

“That was most brave of you, Youngling.” Thor actually sounds happy for the first time today, and Tony did that, which is pretty cool. Feeling daring, he kicks his feet just a little, and he grins at the feel of the water moving between his toes.

“Do you want to get in, kiddo?” Bucky offers. “Stevie could carry you so just your legs or feet or whatever you want would touch the water. Or we could stay in the shallow part.” After a confirming glance at Steve and Thor, Tony makes his way to the other end of the pool (which is, thankfully, zero-entry) and slowly makes his way forward. He doesn’t make it all that far; between
his residual anxiety and his almost equally strong fear of getting his diaper wet, Tony doesn’t dare
let the water go past his knees. But Bucky and the others don’t seem to mind at all, and they play a
rousing game of fetch that only ends when Thor accidentally punctures the ball in excitement.
Tony’s all for continuing on, but his stomach gives a growl that Steve decides means lunchtime.
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Though it makes Steve wince, he cooks Tony’s requested macaroni and cheese for lunch. As he
does, he tries to resist the urge to peek his head out of the kitchen and stare at Bucky and the baby,
who are playing with a set of blocks that light up when they’re pressed together. It’s hard, though,
and not just because watching Tony play when he’s little is always one of Steve’s favourite sights.
He can barely stop force himself to leave the living room because he’s really starting to wonder
about Bucky.

It’s easy to get sucked into the little worlds that Tony creates for himself, Steve knows that as well
as anyone. And Bucky really does seem to enjoy acting as another of Tony’s caretakers at times;
it’s an outlet, Steve guesses, for the same energies that had led him to fuss over Steve while they’d
been growing up. But watching him now, and at times in the pool, Bucky seems…less like a
parent, and more like he’s at Tony’s level, riveted by their play and relaxed in a way Steve hasn’t
seen since they’d reconnected.

Now, for example, Buck is lying flat on his belly, peering through the illuminated blocks with a
look of wonder and a grin so wide it nearly reaches his ears. Tony has somehow wound up sitting
in a straddle on top of his back, and far from seeming bothered by it, Bucky happily moves around
the floor however and whenever Tony asks so they can add to their growing tower.

It’s not a conversation they’ve needed to have so far, because everyone seems pretty happy with
the singular role they’ve taken on in the age play. But maybe it’s possible for Bucky to be more
than one thing? He’ll have to talk to Phil or Bruce, someone who knows more. But for now, the
thought of his baby with a new sometimes-parent and sometimes-big brother is enough to put a
grin on Steve’s face, even as he dishes out bowls of unnaturally orange pasta.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is going up a lot later than I planned, but it's still Friday, so I'm counting it
as a win. Also, I'm done teaching for the semester! I have graded all the things!

I hope you all have had wonderful weeks. Thank you as always for the comments and
kudos. I love chatting about this story with y'all. I'm hoping to get a Timestamp based
on a past reader request up over the weekend or early next week as well.
Picnics and Other Promises

Chapter Summary

Tony and Phil develop a strategy for treating Phil, but carrying it out ends up being far from easy on anyone.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Graphic (ish) descriptions about hand-wavy medical procedures make up the bulk of this chapter. Redacting it might be impossible, but if you want to skip it and receive an extended summary or anything else, feel free to let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the weeks that follow, Natasha looks back at their picnic like it was a day out of someone else’s life. True, they’d had two baskets, because Phil insisted on keeping the cache of weapons she and Clint had brought separate from the food, but it was still one of the most shockingly normal things she’d ever done. They’d flown Lola (flown! why is she doomed to care for such utterly ridiculous men?) to a tiny ‘park’ that barely deserved the name, but it had been gloriously empty. On top of getting to steal food from Clint’s hand while they both pressed tightly against Phil, it had been the most time she’d spent outdoors since before SHIELD had fallen.

Perhaps Maria’s complaints about the Avengers making her weak are not entirely without merit, though, because she should have realized that it couldn’t last. They’d spent their few glorious hours in the sun, eating and reading and exchanging light, teasing touches, but as soon as Lola’s wheels touched back to the ground as they’d neared the warehouse, Phil had started to draw away. The signs were subtle, but easy enough for people like she and Clint that there was never any doubt it was deliberate. So when he’d stayed seated in the car long after they’d parked it, no one had moved. Clint barely breathed without occasional nudges from Natasha.

“I want it out of me,” Phil had finally declared.

“Well, Tony and Bruce are working on it, right?” He’d been trying for the same easy calm he could manage in every crisis situation that didn’t involve Phil Coulson, but the raised pitch of Clint’s voice had easily given him away. Natasha had gripped his thigh, just this side of painful, trying to ground him and keep him quiet long enough for Phil to say what he needed to say.

“Tony and Bruce are working on modifying it. Tony provided the removal of all of the alien material as an option, but I very much believe he intended that as a last resort. He believes he can break it apart, shut down just the parts of it that had undesirable effects in the others while continuing to rely on the rest of it to keep me alive.” Not seeing any problem with this, Natasha shrugged. “I don’t want it modified. I want it gone. Every day I feel it…everywhere. I’ll never know for sure if I make a mistake, did I do it because I had a bad day, or because it’s changing me, making me into something else. I’ll never know if my motives, my thoughts, my feelings, are my own, or if I’m being influenced…I won’t know if I’m me anymore, ever. I can’t live like that. I
won’t.”

“Phil, you’re thinking in black and white here. You’re the one who always reminds us about the importance of nuance, about all the levels between one extreme and another that we neglect at our peril, because that’s where actual human lives happen.”

“This. Isn’t. Human. I know what you’re thinking, it’s the same thing Tony thinks. That it could be compared to what happened to Bruce, or Steve, or even you, Nat, that it’s just another version of the many shades of human that exist now. That’s not what this is. I’ve seen what it does, and the file Maria gave you doesn’t even convey a tenth of it. It tears people apart, makes them utterly unrecognizable to themselves. It’s not some kind of…mutually beneficial sharing of the host, it’s a hostile takeover. And when it’s done, there’s nothing left.” He’d laughed then, the noise raw and tearing and bitter. For the first time, Natasha had started to panic. “It’s poetic justice of the most transparent kind, really. I wanted to inflict this on you, on both of you. Before I really knew what it was, I was…consumed with the thought of what it would mean to be able to send you out into the field without feeling that sickening worry, knowing you would always come back. Even when the first few tests went wrong, I just…I just had more subjects brought in, because I needed to know I wouldn’t, couldn’t, lose you or anyone else I cared about. I didn’t—I didn’t see, not until far too late, that you would have been lost to me in a far more comprehensive way if I ever let them put this into your veins.”

“You saw that it was wrong. You shut it down.” By the time she’d grated those words out, Clint had been gripping her instead, hard enough to bruise, but she’d barely felt it. “You think any of us human-shades types ever get to feel sure, or whole? We don’t. It is work, Coulson. Every day, all the time, we learn to balance our abilities with whatever identities we had before. We think we’ve just got it right, and then it falls apart. So we learn to live with the red in our ledgers, and we try to do better the next day. And we rely on everyone around us to keep whatever versions of ourselves we treasure intact when we can’t. So if you’ve somehow convinced yourself that dying from this is some kind of penance for what you did with TAHITI, you’re wrong. I can and have already forgiven you for plenty, but not that. Never that. Are we clear?”

Assertiveness of her language and tone aside, she’d been begging, as surely as she had the evening prior, and with far more desperation. Maybe Phil had known that. Or maybe at least some of what she’d said had sunk in. Honestly, she didn’t really care about the reasoning so much as the shaky nod and equally unsteady smile he’d given her.

That wasn’t to say that either she or Clint entirely trusted Phil’s change of heart. They shadowed Phil constantly over the nearly three weeks that followed, abandoning essentially all of their other responsibilities and entirely ignoring Coulson’s increasingly annoyed objections. And she didn’t necessarily feel great about everything she was neglecting either, particularly Bruce and Tony who were still practically living in the labs. True, they were doing a better job of sticking to their assigned shifts, but even when one of them did come up for air, it was usually for sleep and food and little else. Natasha missed both of them, and her little boy, with an ever-present longing. And it’s clear that adjusting and healing is still very much a process for Barnes; he vanishes onto his floor for days at a time, only permitting Steve to see him, and he emerges with the kind of tormented, broken expressions that are far too familiar to Natasha. Thor is still prone to periods of melancholy that no one can manage to drag him out of, though Steve (who seems to have at least some sense of what’s causing them) does his best.

In short, they’re all nearing their breaking points when Tony and Bruce stumble onto the penthouse floor one Wednesday, looking both exhausted and cautiously elated.

“I think we have it.”
‘It’ turns out to be a complicated series of surgeries and treatments. The first step is to completely destroy the false memories that have been implanted in Coulson’s brain. Earlier in the process, Phil had lobbied for the use of a machine recently recovered by SHIELD agents that could theoretically do the same thing, but as he had neglected to mention that it would likely put him in almost unendurable pain, the team had decisively moved against that option.

Tony and Bruce’s option was riskier, because the only way to avoid the physical agony of rewriting Phil’s memories was to keep him unconscious for the duration of the process. This meant they wouldn’t know if it had been successful until he came to, and whether it worked or not, no one knew exactly what to expect in terms of how Phil’s mind and body would respond. Presuming they were successful, the next stage was an even riskier procedure. The changes that GH325 had brought to Phil’s system were largely undetectable, but Tony suspected that he could trigger the genetic memories of the alien DNA and then implant nanobots whose job it will be to permanently disrupt the signals the alien memories produce in Phil’s brain, forcing his own thoughts and memories to always take precedence. For that, Phil would have to be awake so that he could be monitored and any necessary adjustments could be made immediately, before any of the most severe side effects of GH325 (including aphasia, catatonia and psychosis) could take effect.

That is the part Tony feels guiltiest about, clearly aware that having his brain operated on when he’s awake is bound to trigger deeply unpleasant memories for Phil. When he’s on his eighth or ninth explanation/apology about why it has to be this way, Coulson interrupts.

“Tony. Beyond getting this material out of me entirely this is the absolute best I could have hoped for. You and Bruce both…I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve already put into this. Can you promise me one thing?” Wide brown eyes meet Phil’s blue ones. “After this is over, I want some time off with my little guy. I know you’ve got to be behind on about 800 other things —”

“Not as much as you’d think.” Bruce interjects. “Whenever Tony gets stuck on a project, he starts working on something else. Pepper actually called the other day to ask what the hell was going on, because he’s done so much for SI lately that their HR department is getting concerned.” Tony flushes and mutters something like ‘betrayer’, and Phil marvels again at the fact that he ever thought this man to be an arrogant narcissist when he actually spends so much time trying to hide or minimize all the good he does for other people.

“Well good then. So it’s settled. I’ll get to spend some time with little nurse Tony while I recover? Maybe we can take another picnic, but this time with the whole team, somewhere private. You’ve never gotten to be little outside, Tony, you could play in the grass and the sun and toss a ball around with Clint and gang up on Steve with Bucky for a tickle fight.”

“Y-yeah,” Tony stutters, voice thick with longing that seems reflected in the faces of everyone in the room. Phil hopes like hell that he’ll be around to see it happen, but he fully intends to extract a promise from Clint tonight that he’ll make sure they all go on that picnic regardless. He has to know that his family is going to remain intact, no matter what.

He comes to after the first procedure and feels like his head is going to split in two with the sudden influx of memories that he now finally has access to. Even fully recalling the pain of the operations is enough to make him open his mouth to scream again, but when he does nothing but a rasping gasp comes out.

“It’s okay, Phil. Listen to me. You’re in New York City, in Avengers Tower—yeah that’s right,
“Safe. ‘live. Yours.” And it’s worth every bit of the pain for the way Clint beams and brushes a tender kiss across his forehead.

“You bet your ass.” Slowly, the others (excepting Bruce and Tony, who are meeting with the team of surgeons who will be assisting and monitoring and prepping for the next stage, and Bucky, who isn’t comfortable being near medical procedures of any kind at present) trickle in, cracking silly jokes that are probably way too funny to Phil because he’s still coming off the drugs. When he can manage full sentences and describe his surroundings in detail, Clint texts Tony to let them know Phil is ready for the next step.

There’s almost nothing that’s not terrifying about the many, many hours that follow. He’s given a local anesthetic, so there’s no pain when a small piece of his skullcap is removed, but the noisy whirring of the machines in his ear is far too recent a sensation, especially with his memories now vividly in-tact. Phil can barely manage to remember how to breathe, let alone stay as still as they need him to be. Then he starts to beg.

“I can’t, I can’t, please I don’t want, please just let me die, please.” Some instrument clatters loudly to the floor, and Tony is suddenly in his eyeline, barking at everyone else to stop.

“Agent. Phil. Listen to me—no one’s moving, no one is touching you in any way until you give us the green light. If you need this to stop, just say the word. I’ll find another way, or we can try it again later when the memories aren’t so raw. Whatever you need. You’re calling the shots.” Phil has rarely been the type of man to need this kind of assurance. He’s been in command positions long enough to feel wholly confident in his own authority; the louder and more showy people tend to be about that kind of thing, in his experience, the more insecure they are about actually being in charge.

But right now, well, maybe he is a little insecure. It felt like only hours ago that he’d been in such a similar position, with people who hadn’t listened, hadn’t even slowed down, as he’d screamed and cried and begged for release. Tony and Bruce, though, are listening. They’ll stop if he asks them to, and he believes them when they say it, and for now that feels like enough.

“O-okay. You can start.”

It’s still entirely unpleasant to have people poking around in his head, but his panic is at least back to a manageable level. For what feels like hours, nothing really happens. Tony is wary of triggering the alien genetic memories too strongly if he can avoid it, so he starts the drug cocktail off at an extremely low dose and lets it slowly build up, adding occasional physical stimulation that Phil dimly registers, though the entire thing remains painless.

Though he’s disappointed, Phil is not entirely surprised when the gentle approach doesn’t work. Most test subjects had taken weeks, even months, to manifest the symptoms they are now trying to force through Phil’s system in a matter of hours.

“Up the dose, Tony, you know you have to.” An agonized groan sounds from somewhere near Phil’s left ear.

“We can wait, we can—”
“I appreciate that you’re trying to make this easy on me. I know, even if you haven’t said it in so many words, that you’re worried that forcing the genetic memories to the forefront like this might risk losing mine. But the waiting, I can’t…I’ll come back to you, I swear it, I’ll fight with everything I have, but I need this over. I need it done.” Tony wheels his little stool back down the bed so that he and Phil can lock eyes again and demands,

“We’re going on that picnic, Coulson. Promise me.” Phil narrowly avoids gasping in a way that would probably wreak havoc with the delicate operation going on above him. The Tony before him is undoubtedly his friend, and an adult right now, but the odd mix of terror and wistfulness in his voice sounds so painfully familiar… (“So—he gets a family?”) It’s tremendously irresponsible of Phil to promise anything, just as it’s slightly unfair of Tony to ask for it, but when his mind makes the connection back to that scared, brave little boy in the SHIELD labs, there’s nothing else he can say.

“I promise, Tony.”
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As an Agent of SHIELD, Clint Barton has seen just about everything and then some. There were times when he’d genuinely wondered if he lacked something crucial inside that prevented him from feeling things the way other people did, because there had been more than one occasion where he’d comforted other agents who were crying, vomiting or otherwise devastated by what they’d seen and done, all the while feeling curiously detached from most of it. He wasn’t like Natasha, who still actively cultivated that kind of removal in herself at times, but there’s just a kind of numbness that tends to overtake him when he knows intellectually that he should be at his most scared or angry or disgusted.

When Phil starts to scream again in earnest, Clint would give almost anything to have that detachment back. It’s only Steve’s steely grip on his upper arms, and the absolute conviction behind the words he repeats into Clint’s ear that stops him from busting his way into the labs.

“Tony’s got the right dose. He forced the memories to the surface, and that means he’s going to be able to stop it. He has this. And Phil promised him, promised all of us. He’s ours, just like you said, so he’s not going anywhere, right?”

Even Cap, though, shudders when Phil’s screams die in his throat just as suddenly as they’d started, leaving him silent and non-responsive.
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Tony is confident enough to implant the nanobots roughly three hours after Phil goes quiet. All of them more or less expected the results to be instantaneous, that the bots would immediately get to work and in seconds they’d all have their friend, handler, and partner back.

It doesn’t go down like that. Coulson remains eerily still and completely silent. His stats are all holding steady, and the doctors insist on getting his skull cap back in place as quickly as possible to minimize potential infection, but he just. Won’t. Move. Won’t blink, won’t twitch, won’t give them any indication at all that he recognizes them, that his memories and identity have won the battle being waged inside his body right now. When he hears a light tap on the lab door, a shamefully large part of Tony wants to hide, or pretend he doesn’t hear anything. Because if he fucked this up, if he lost them Phil, how can he ever look at any of them ever again?

He opens the door genuinely expecting to be punched, or screamed at, or at least to be facing the worst possible variation of Steve’s disappointed faces. Instead, he finds himself face-to-face with the arm of a couch.
“What—”

“I recalled Friend Clint’s lesson about the power of the Sick Day fort, and thought we might apply a similar principle here,” Thor explains. To Tony’s astonishment, the demigod and Steve proceed to bring half the couches and armchairs in the tower into the lab, shoving lab benches and tables aside and arranging the furniture into a horseshoe formation around Phil’s bed. The rest of the team follows close behind bearing numerous blankets and pillows. Tony is happy enough just to have them close, but after allowing him to check the monitors for the umpteenth time, Steve tugs him onto one of the couches in the middle of the half-circle. He squirms and wriggles and does his absolute best to evade the hold, and it’s almost depressing how utterly ineffectual the attempt is against what he suspects is not even a tenth of Steve’s strength.

“I need—”

“You need to rest and give Phil some time to heal. Clint is going to take the first shift staying up with him, and he’ll alert us if there’s any kind of change.” It occurs to Tony’s scattered, exhausted brain that this is the first time Steve has held him while he hasn’t been in headspace, and even for someone as skin-hungry as he can be, he thinks it should feel weirder than it does. And he definitely should not feel comforted by the sound of Steve’s heart thudding against his right ear when he’s Big. Absolutely not. His mind fights the way his body is trying to relax into the embrace for a while, running the numbers and the different hypotheticals he and Bruce had discussed, trying to figure out where he might have gone wrong, how he’s going to fix this. Steve slides one of his huge hands over Tony’s eyes. “Shh. Stop it now.”

“Talk to me,” Tony begs. Steve immediately obliges, launching into a whispered narrative about Howard and Peggy and fondue of all things, that is so damn charming, even for Steve, that it’s gotta be made up. Tony intends to point this out, but he somehow falls asleep before he can quite manage to voice his skepticism.

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“Is…did you make a fort in the labs? How can this be sterile?” The voice that wakes them all (except Clint and Natasha, who had apparently joined his watch several hours later) is gruff and raw, but it’s also a perfect mix of incredulity, teasing and fondness that could never be mistaken for anyone but Phil Coulson. Tony knows he needs to get up, unwind himself from Steve and get moving; there are tests to run, calls to the medical team they’d sent home for the night to make. He wants to make sure the bots are running as they should be, needs to question Phil about any lingering effects…but right now he’s shaky with relief, gasping quietly into Steve’s shirt and maybe dampening it with more than a few tears.

Steve never says a word. He holds Tony, lets him get a handle on himself again, and then makes a show of nudging him and loudly informing him that Phil’s awake so that Tony can pretend he’s been sleeping the entire time. He shouldn’t be surprised; this is a man who’s held him and bathed him and changed him, for God’s sake, but as an adult, he’s also the man Tony had wanted deeply to impress who had instead measured him and found him wanting on their very first meeting. He shouldn’t need confirmation that Steve’s opinion has changed, not with everything they’ve been through, but something about having that proof so freely offered is enough to almost make him dizzy all over again.

*They’re going to be alright.*

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They transfer Phil to his own floor shortly after he wakes, but with him comes the entirety of the fort, and the rest of the team. It’s nearly a week before he finally convinces most of them (he’ll
have a hell of a time ever getting Clint and Tasha to return to their own floors from the looks of things) to start going back to their own lives. The only reason Steve permits himself to be convinced at all is his knowledge that Bucky has been suffering in his absence. The veiled updates from his various care providers have indicated that his friend has had a particularly grueling week both physically and mentally, and his ongoing reluctance to appear weak in front of the others combined with Steve’s need to be with his team has meant Bucky has dealt with all of it alone.

Even with Steve around, Buck has been anxious and twitchy all day. He’s come a long way from what used to count as Bad Days—he rarely speaks Russian when he doesn’t mean to anymore, and he can almost always be coaxed out of whatever defensive tactical position he folds himself into within a few hours. But Steve wants him to actually relax if at all possible, and there seems no better time than to try to put his theory from before to the test. He hasn’t had a chance to speak to any of the others about it yet, but they’re in private. If he’s horribly wrong, no one will ever know but the two of them.

“Hey Buck? Is it okay for me to interrupt you right now?” The other man is sitting at Steve’s huge desk by the window, attempting to put his scrambled thoughts on paper and into some kind of order, and growing increasingly frustrated as he does so. The ball of crumpled papers on the floor next to him can attest to that, as can the smaller pile of broken pens next to it.

“Guess so. Not getting anywhere with this anyway,” Bucky sighs, spinning his chair around to face Steve. A bout of nerves hits Steve with surprising strength (how can this be so much scarier than some of the other things he’s done in his life?), and he strongly considers chickening out and asking if Buck wants a drink or something instead. But honesty is a house rule, damn it, and Steve makes every attempt to live by it even when there aren’t many people around to witness it.

“Do you…would you be interested in me reading something to you?” Bucky’s expression goes blank and unreadable; some part of Steve still hates it when this happens, because it’s more evidence of the Soldier, proof that he’ll probably never be entirely gone. But he’s learned, too, that while he often has troubling ways of showing it, the Soldier is in some ways equally as invested in protecting Bucky and those he loves as Steve is. So he’s trying to learn to love them both. “I’m not…you don’t have to, and I’m not trying to take over or make you feel incapable or something. I just…I know sometimes it’s hard for you, especially at the end of the day when you’re doing so much work, and I thought it might be a nice way to relax.”

“Are…are you going to call Tony too?” Huh. Steve hadn’t actually planned on it. Bucky so rarely wants to see anyone but Steve when he’s feeling this way. And Tony has been in a kind of strange place since Phil’s operation. He’s kept his work schedule to a minimum, particularly after Pepper had locked him out of SI’s systems, but he hasn’t been able to age down at all. He’s not fighting his headspace the way he tried at the beginning, far from it; the sincerity of his numerous attempts has been obvious, but he just can’t seem to shut his mind off enough to get there no matter how hard he tries.

The last thing Steve wants is to see Tony frustrated and upset after another failed attempt. But maybe if he doesn’t make it explicitly about that for either Bucky or Tony…

“Sure, Buck. How ‘bout you ask JARVIS to invite Tony, and tell him to bring PJs and a new book for us to try if he’s interested?” Bucky conveys the request with a shyness that’s almost enough all on its own to convince Steve that he’s onto something, but he keeps his expression carefully schooled as he helps his friend get changed for bed. Sooner than he expected, Tony joins them. He hovers in the doorway, clad in plain grey sleep pants and a large, faded MIT t-shirt that Steve suspects once belonged to Rhodey. He’s holding a book, but he also looks like he might bolt at any second, peering cautiously between Steve and Bucky and then back at the hallway he’s just come
“I’m not…Steve, I haven’t been able to…”

“You don’t have to be little if you don’t want to or can’t, Tony,” he soothes. “This isn’t about that. I just asked Bucky if he might want to read together, and he suggested that we see if you might want to join us. Do you want to give it a shot?” Tony shrugs. “What book did you bring with you?”

“The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. It’s old, but I remember liking it growing up, and I thought…I can get something else, though. This is probably too…I dunno. I’ll just—” After the past few days, Steve has grown more comfortable and less cautious about touching Tony when he’s big, and he puts that to work for himself now, rising from the bed and holding a hand out to his friend. Tony takes it after only a moment of hesitation, and allows Steve to pull him gently toward the bed, depositing him next to Bucky.

“That sounds great, Tony. C.S. Lewis has been on my list for a while, and it might be nice for Buck and I that it was published so long ago. It was a really thoughtful choice. Now, do either of you want anything to eat or drink before we start?” Bucky shakes his head shyly, but after some consideration, Tony asks if Steve knows how to make Natasha’s hot chocolate. Steve doesn’t, but is quite sure that if he asks for her help, she’ll be more than happy to give it. He leaves his friends (boys?) with an assurance that he’ll be quick, and makes his way to Phil’s floor. Clint and Phil are in bed, but Natasha is up and, as predicted, more than happy to help, though she levels a thoughtful look at him the entire time she melts and stirs the thick blocks of chocolate.

“You trying to get Tony to go down?” she asks.

“Maybe? I mean it’s not a concentrated effort, but I know he wants to, and it might help if he just stops trying so hard.” Natasha nods, digging a small container of whole milk out of the back of the overstocked fridge (Tony had tripled the usual food order to ensure that Phil had every possible thing he might want to eat while recovering).

“That’s not all, though. You’re anxious in a way that doesn’t make sense if this is just about helping Tony.”

“None of those sentences are questions,” Steve points out uselessly. He doesn’t really want to burden Natasha with anything else when she’s been spending every waking and sleeping hour helping Phil, but she just keeps stirring the thick mixture in the pot in front of him at a perfectly even pace that’s almost hypnotic to watch, and he knows he has not a shot in hell at wearing out her patience. “I think Bucky might…is it possible for someone to be interested in both sides of the ageplay at different times? Because he seems to really like parenting Tony sometimes, and he’s voiced excitement about being involved in that capacity again. But every once in a while I feel like I see something…he reminds me of Tony, a little bit, too.” Natasha never stops stirring, taking all this in with the same patient silence that is both her most maddening and comforting quality. The milk has just started to froth when she speaks again.

“James and I have talked a few times about what it is to cobble together an identity that’s never just one thing. What you’re saying…seems consistent with what I know of where he’s at right now, and it might be very good for him. We would need…for tonight, I think you should keep doing what you’re doing, try to ease them both down gently and see. If there’s nothing there, it’s not even worth worrying about upsetting him over. If there is, we would have to be very careful with how we went about it, for both their sakes. Does Barnes like whipping cream? Tony doesn’t usually, but I’m sure there’s a can of the spray stuff somewhere.”

“Uh…no, I don’t think so. He likes peppermint though, if you have any of that.” Natasha nods and
finishes up the drinks, adding a pump of peppermint syrup to Bucky’s, a sprinkle of cinnamon on top of Tony’s, and leaving Steve’s plain. The domesticity of the scene is kind of shocking, and apparently the thought hits Natasha as well, though her response is to narrow her eyes at Steve, daring him to say anything. Steve, far too much a tactician to do something so foolish, says nothing except to thank her for the drinks and wish her a goodnight.

Chapter End Notes

Late again! I'm unexpectedly in rural Alberta for a funeral, so honestly I'm just happy to be posting at all. (Comment responses will definitely not happen until I'm back home on Sunday though!) While there's SO MUCH hand-wavy science in this chapter, I'm also oddly proud of it. The stuff going on with Phil is material I would have been inclined to gloss over quickly when I started writing this story, and I'm proud that I pushed myself and tried something new here.

A couple of shoutouts: the reading scene (which continues next chapter) was entirely inspired by queergodzilla sending me a delightful video of Chris Evans reading to the smalls on BBC's Bedtime Story Readers on Tumblr. It is perfect and pure and melted my heart. And Phil's longed-for picnic was the result of a lovely comment by valentinesday, which quickly wormed its way into my heart and brain and insisted on being written (or at least promised...but let's be honest there's no way that I won't end up writing it, is there?). And thejester's remark about the picnic food/weapon ratio definitely contributed to the musing Natasha does at the beginning of this chapter...

Okay, long author's note is long. The point is, you're all great, and your kudos and comments keep enriching this story and making me excited to keep returning to it. Thank you!
In-Between and Other Transitional States

Chapter Summary

Tony, Bucky and Steve tentatively experiment with their changing dynamics. Thor and Bruce and the Hulk have a surprisingly productive chat.

Chapter Notes

No warnings needed for this chapter that I can think of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve returns to his floor to find Tony and Bucky in the middle of an animated conversation about the latter’s metal arm. On another day he’d be thrilled, because the thing really does need to be replaced and Steve has every confidence that Tony will construct something far lighter and more user-friendly than HYDRA had been willing or able to make, but it’s not exactly the type of conversation he anticipates will help either of the two men really relax. Fortunately, distracting them both is made relatively easy by the steaming cups of chocolate in his hands. In no time Tony has his whole face practically stuck in his mug; Bucky’s a little more cautious in his approach, but he beams at Steve when he finally takes a big enough swig to get a good taste.

“Peppermint!” he announces, staring down at the drink in wonder. It hurts, it makes Steve rage to see his best friend so surprised and grateful at being shown even the slightest bit of consideration. Sometimes when he’s reminded of the lingering remnant’s of Bucky’s treatment at HYDRA’s hands the rage is enough to overtake him, but he’ll be damned if he’s going to let it happen now. Not today, when two people he loves so deeply are warm and safe and content in Steve’s bed.

That’s right, bud. Tasha has all the good hot chocolate fixins. Tony, do me a favour and take a breath, wouldja? Your drink isn’t going anywhere. And scooch over for me.” Tony at least heeds the second instruction, which is probably the best Steve can hope for. The adjustment leaves him in the middle between Steve and Bucky. Buck’s gaze travels over to the smaller man now pressed up against him in an evaluative kind of way, but after a moment he seems to decide Tony poses no threat, and he takes another sip of his hot chocolate with a little moan of pleasure. Steve grins and grabs the book from the nightstand. He pauses over the inscription (To Tony, Love Maria) and considers remarking on it, but can’t quite find words for what he wants to say. So he flips to the next page and starts to read. And makes it exactly two sentences in.

“This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids. Uh…Tony? Is this—” The engineer’s eyes are wide, not in the cute kind of way they get when he’s little, but in panic. He nearly spills his hot chocolate all over the bed in his haste to seize the book from Steve, as if the thing is toxic or on fire. The rambling apologies that are spilling from his lips are too fast and jumbled to follow, though Steve definitely catches several highly uncomplimentary references to Tony himself that would have him lecturing his boy if he were in headspace. “Tony, hey, hey, it’s fine. It’s fine. It wasn’t on purpose, I know it wasn’t, we just might want to talk about whether this is the right pick for the three of us
right now.” Casting his eyes around the room for something to try to calm Tony down, Steve’s gaze falls on Bucky, who appears to be glaring at him?

“You don’t think he feels bad enough Stevie? Jesus.” Given that Steve had been in the middle of trying to comfort Tony, the criticism strikes him as rather unfair, but his attempts to defend himself die on his lips as Bucky raises a cautious hand to press against Tony’s back. Is it too optimistic to think that Bucky had perhaps not been angry so much as protective? “You ain’t done nothin’ wrong, sugar.”

“Was such a stupid fuckin’—sure, Tony, take the two war heroes and read them a nice story about kids escaping the London air raids who stumble into a new world—really brilliant, really—” Bucky’s touch, previously so light that Tony could probably hardly feel it, quickly becomes something else entirely; he wraps his heavy metal arm around Tony, pressing it against his chest above the arc reactor. The effect is not unlike Tony’s response to his weighted blanket; his whole body sort of sags, his chin coming to rest against the plated metal.

“Stop that racket and listen to me. If it bothers Steve we can switch to something else, but it really doesn’t upset me to hear things about the War. I don’t much go in for stories about mind control or anything, but the rest of it…sometimes I find it nice, actually, to watch or read things that are set back then. Makes me feel more…like it was real, too, and like all that history isn’t going to be taken away from me again at any second. And the headshrinkers say as long as I’m not dwelling too long or hard on it that that can be good for me. Alright? So just settle.”

For a moment, Steve isn’t really paying attention to what Tony says or does in response, too lost in his own stunned embarrassment. Though he was very involved in Bucky’s treatment at the beginning, he’d never since bothered to ask Bucky how he deals with his triggers, instead electing to immediately change channels or put away materials that might remind the other man of their shared experiences in the War. It’s frustrating as hell to keep learning the same lesson over and over, because hadn’t Natasha pointed out to him that by isolating Bucky from the team, he was denying him access to people who shared parts of his skill set that Steve himself didn’t, like the ability to speak Russian? And hadn’t he decided what was best for Tony, too, by avoiding the Tower and electing not to tell him what had happened to his parents?

“I’m sorry.” Only Tony actually meets his eyes, and of course he looks more bewildered than anything, as he tends to whenever he’s the recipient of an apology. “Bucky, it didn’t occur to me that this wouldn’t bother you, and I apologize for assuming. Tony, I was never angry at you, I was just surprised. Now, I’ve never purposely read anything fictional set back then, so I might have to stop and I hope neither of you will be upset if that’s the case, but I think we can at least give it a try. Okay? So can we all take Buck’s advice and get settled again?”

Once he’s no longer nearing a panic attack, Tony grows self-conscious at the realization of just who it is that’s holding him. Bucky, apparently, does not share these concerns. Though Steve has no doubt he’d release Tony in a heartbeat if he seemed really distressed, Bucky pays absolutely no heed to the engineer’s experimental little wiggles, slides, and other attempts to evade their unprecedented closeness. Steve bites the inside of his cheek to stop himself from smiling, and feigns ignorance of the little drama playing out next to him as he starts to read again.

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Steve wakes in the morning to an insistent tap on his arm. A glance at the window reveals it’s still mostly dark outside, so he’s ready to tell Tony to go back to sleep (he’d been so close to little by the end of last night that there’s little doubt in Steve’s mind that that is who he’ll be dealing with today), but when his brain unfogs a bit more, he realizes the hand is too large to be Tony’s.
“What’s up, Buck?” he whispers. Though Bucky typically moves around a lot in his sleep, he looks to be in almost exactly the same position he was the night before, with his metal arm wrapped securely around Tony. But while last night Buck had been as close to lazy with pleasure as Steve had seen him since the forties, the morning has brought with it some of his usual tense, sharp awareness.

“What…what’s wrong with me?”

“I don’t know what you mean, buddy. Try to walk me through it the way we’ve practiced. What feels wrong?” Bucky’s hand goes from tapping to squeezing Steve’s arm.

“I’m, I…my head isn’t…I feel weird. Everything is…I can hardly smell the gun oil at all, just your sheets and Stark’s soap. And there’s lots of yellows and blues, was it always like that in here? ‘m I goin’ even more crazy, Stevie? ‘m I losing myself again? I didn’t mean to, I been watching for all the signs, especially with Tony here. Didn’t want…hurt ‘em. Don’t let me, okay?” Steve doesn’t always understand how Bucky’s brain processes things now, but he knows enough of the colours and smells he associates with the Soldier to be fairly certain of what’s happening.

“No, Buck, you’re not going to hurt anyone, I promise. I don’t think this is something bad, okay? I think the Soldier maybe just recognizes that you’re especially safe and comfortable right now, and so that part of your mind is taking a little bit of a break.” Bucky narrows his eyes.

“…there’s something else. I thought you had sneaky face on last night just because you were trying to trick Tony into aging down, but there’s something else. Explain. I don’t like secrets.”

“I know you don’t, and I never planned on keeping anything from you for long. I just didn’t want to upset you for nothing if what I guessed was totally off-base. But I kinda think that sometimes you might be…a bit like Tony.” They both glance down at the sleeping form in Bucky’s arms, Steve with fondness, Bucky with an expression that’s far more complex. “You’re a good caretaker to him Buck and if that’s all you want then that’s absolutely fine. But sometimes, like last night, I watch you together and it seems like you go down a bit with him. You still protect him, but it seems more…big brotherly? I think what you’re feeling this morning might be the edges of what’s called little headspace.”

“I…I can’t…I don’t. Stevie.”

“You don’t have to decide this second,” he soothes, unable to stop himself from reaching over with his free hand to run his fingers through Bucky’s long hair. When he’d first returned Steve had waited anxiously for Bucky to crop his hair short the way it used to be, but this look is really growing on him. “We can do some more thinking and talking about it together, or with any of the others. Lots of them are probably going to be better at explaining things than me, honestly. Or if you want we could…have a kind of trial run this morning? I would need to talk to Tony first, but if it would be easier for you to let me show you, we could try that too.”

For what feels like ages, Bucky doesn’t say anything. The hand that isn’t holding Tony retreats from Steve’s arm so that the other man can trace his fingers over his lips and teeth, just as he had when Steve had first broached this topic. This time, at least, Steve does a better job restraining his need to babble anxiously to fill the silence.

“I don’t like things in my mouth. Like pacifiers or somethin’, I don’t think I could—and I don’t…no diapers, kay?” Trying to appear like his heart isn’t thudding out of his chest, Steve keeps up his gentle stroking of Bucky’s hair.

“Alright. Any other dos and don’ts you can think of right now? You’ll also have a word so that if
you really hate something in the moment and need everything to stop, you can tell me right away.” Bucky shrugs. “Okay. Now, I need to talk to Tony, and I think he deserves to have privacy for that conversation just like you did. But it’s also a very important rule in our house that if you’re feeling little, you’re not by yourself. Do you think you’d be okay putting your noise cancelling headphones on for me, and sitting in that chair by the window?”

Steve gets Bucky set up with his headphones and a glass of milk, then turns his attention to Tony. He’d grumbled a little when Bucky had let him go, but in the few minutes it took for the other occupants of the room to re-arrange themselves, Tony has managed to pull all the blankets around him to form a little nest into which he’s cuddled so deeply that he’s only visible from the nose up. It really is a shame to wake him this early, but there will be no going back to sleep for anyone else on the floor, and Tony despises waking up alone. Steve leans down and presses kisses to every bit of face and neck he can reach, chuckling as one of Tony’s hands emerges from his nest to bat lazily at him.

“I know, I know it’s early. I just couldn’t wait any longer to see your pretty eyes. And there they are. Hey you. How you feelin’?” Tony yawns and emerges from the blankets enough to stretch his whole body like a cat in a sunbeam.

“Sorta…between. Not totally down, but it at least feels possible, which is more than I could have said a day ago.”

“Maybe try to stay in the in-between spot for me, just for a few minutes?” Steve requests. Tony frowns and sits up, looking far more awake. “It’s nothing bad, sweetheart, really. I just need to talk to you.” Tony does not appear comforted by this, particularly when his gaze finds Bucky, whose back is to them. Alright, so Steve is going to have to dive right in then. “I think Bucky might be…Natasha called it a switch, I think? He likes caring for you as an adult when you’re little, but I’ve been wondering for a while if he might also like to be little with you sometimes. How do you feel about that?”

“Uh. I. Mostly okay, I guess?”

“Mostly?” Steve prods. He has a reasonably good idea of what some of Tony’s potential fears or objections might be, but it’s far more important that Tony know and be able to articulate them.

“Mostly. I…it makes me a little bit scared, but I don’t know why. ’s stupid, probably.”

“Your feelings aren’t ‘stupid’ just because you don’t totally understand them, Tony. I’m asking you a big question seconds after you woke up, it’s okay to need some time. Here’s what I need to know for now. Bucky isn’t sure what he wants either, but he thinks having a kind of trial run this morning might help him. Do you want to be up here with us for that, or would your rather spend some time with someone else?”

“You want me to go?” Tony asks, frowning and pulling his knees up to his chest.

“No, sunshine, I don’t want that at all, and neither does Bucky.” Honestly, Steve isn’t even sure he’ll be able to ease Bucky into headspace at all without Tony there. So much of his ability to go down right now seems centred on relating to Tony, protecting and sheltering him but also playing with him, making him laugh. But that’s far too much pressure to put on Tony right now. “I just don’t want to force you to be involved if the scary parts of what you’re feeling are too scary, you know?”

“I…I can try. Not sure I’ll be able to stay down, though,” Tony confesses with a disappointed frown.
“I think I can help you with that sweetheart. But what I have in mind will probably work better if I don’t tell you ahead of time. You remember your word if you’re uncomfortable?” The baby nods.

“Alright. So first we’re gonna get you all dressed for the day, and then you and me and your brother will make breakfast. I thought we’d take it down to Daddy Phil’s floor to eat, if you’d like? He’s been so excited to see his baby boy.” At the mention of Phil, Tony’s whole face lights up, and Steve grins to himself as he seeks out the diaper bag in his closet. Two serious talks before breakfast, and no tears or storming out? He’s on a roll.

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He abandons his plan to leave the boys to their own devices in the living room after watching them for less than a minute. They’re anxious and awkward with one another, sitting at opposite ends of the couch and afraid to even make eye contact, let alone talk or play the way they normally would. Tony in particular seems hesitant to so much as move, perhaps hyper-aware of being dressed in little clothes and a diaper when Bucky just has on a pair of sweats and one of Steve’s shirts. It hadn’t been Steve’s intention to put Tony at a disadvantage that way, but none of Tony’s stuff would fit Bucky, and he’s pretty sure trying to jump into anything too kiddish would backfire anyway.

“Can you two come in the kitchen with me? I could use some help getting these muffins ready.” They both shuffle in, and Bucky instinctively goes for the pan full of bacon. Admittedly, Bucky makes amazing bacon, and when he’s big Steve takes full advantage of that whenever his friend feels up to cooking. But clothes are one thing; he needs to be consistent with the stuff that really matters. So he catches Bucky’s hand in his own and shakes his head.

“I’ve got that buddy. Stove’s too hot for little guys. Can you and Tony give that big bowl over there a stir for me?” Bucky rolls his eyes, and he seems completely stunned when Steve hands them both large, bright spoons themed with Wizard of Oz characters, but he does as he’s told. For a few minutes, things are still quiet and Steve fears they might never get this trial run off the ground, but when he glances over his shoulder, he finds Bucky alternating between stirring the mixture and taking blueberries out of the bowl beside him to pop into Tony’s mouth. “Kiddos, those are actually for the muffins, you know.” Tony gives him an adorably apologetic look, sensitive as always to critique especially when it comes from Steve, but Bucky looks entirely unrepentant.

“Tony’s hungry. His tummy was growling.” Steve chuckles and digs into his fridge, emerging with a flat of raspberries.

“Well we can’t have growly tummies now can we? You’re doin’ a real good job taking care of your brother, Buck. But I am gonna need the rest of those blueberries, so can you give these a quick wash for me and then you two can snack on them instead?” Bucky looks not at Steve, but at Tony for a response. Only after the baby nods happily does Bucky take the fruit from Steve’s hand and wander off toward the sink. Steve should be worried about maintaining his parental authority, or even feeling jealous of how fast these two have managed to bond. He should at least worry that he doesn’t feel either of those things, right? Because damn could these two be trouble if they put their minds to it.

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Though he heeds all of Steve’s reminders to keep his voice quiet and avoid jumping on the bed, Tony almost explodes his way onto Phil’s floor, bounding off the elevator and narrowly avoiding dumping the plate of muffins he’s holding as he takes off for the bedroom. Bucky is far quieter, maintaining a death-grip on Steve’s hand. By the time they make it to the bedroom at their more sedate pace, Tony is chattering away to Phil, Nat and Clint.

“Daddy, take more muffins,” he commands Phil, who already looks to have at least three of them
in his lap. “We made them special and I didn’t even eat all the blueberries, and you need strength ’cause you’re recovering. And bacon! Dada has bacon. You gotsa eat that too.”

“How ‘bout I eat the ones you’ve already given me, and you can offer some to Mama and Daddy Clint too, alright? Then you can climb up here and see me once your muffin distribution duties have been completed.” The invitation spurs Tony on, and he damn near throws the rest of the food at the bed’s other inhabitants in his haste to get to Phil. He’s still endearingly cautious, though, even resisting it when Phil tries to pull him against his side. “Do you know how long I’ve waited for baby-cuddles, honey? You’re not gonna hurt me.”

“And where was all this caution when you almost kneed me in the junk in your rush to get out of bed a couple weeks ago?” Clint grumbles, snorting when Tony giggles. “Think that’s funny, do you squirt? I’ll show you funny.” The tickle war that results is entirely predictable, but no less charming a sight. Bucky, meanwhile, is still gripping Steve’s hand and positioning himself as far behind him as he can manage. But there’s no hiding from Natasha, who trails a long, considering gaze over them both before smiling at Bucky.

“You want to come up here and sit with me?” Bucky frowns and kicks lightly at the floor in front of him. “I still have some food leftover and I’m pretty willing to share.”

“In exchange for what?” Steve winces, but if anyone is going to appreciate Bucky’s directness, and the reasons behind his assumptions that kindness is rarely simple, it’s probably Natasha.

“Well, I’d like to hold you and maybe pet your hair like last time we hung out, because it’s smooth and soft and it feels nice between my fingers. But you can still have some of my muffin even if you don’t want that. There’s no shortage of food here, James, and it’s never withheld as a punishment.” Bucky gives this another long moment of thought before tugging Steve with him toward the bed. The one thing Steve is almost positive of as far as the ageplay goes is that he’s caught Bucky looking envious when he carries Tony around, so he lifts the boy off the floor and settles him on the bed in front of Natasha. Next to them, Tony whines, then slaps a hand over his own mouth. (Perhaps that jealousy cuts both ways?)

“You alright, sweetheart?”

“I…yeah. I just, uh. Yeah. Maybe I should—”

“Stay right where you are and take care of your Daddy? I agree. I’m actually surprised he’s survived this long without his Nurse Tony.”

“It’s true,” Phil agrees. “You should have seen the gruel they had me eating, and the paperwork they forced me to do at all hours! Oh the horrors.” Tony looks utterly appalled at the very mention of paperwork, and he drapes himself across Phil’s chest as if to shield him. Next to them, Natasha is offering Bucky little hunks of muffin. Though he’s evidently not willing to cuddle with her yet, he lets her fingers linger on his face after she feeds him, and he smiles and blushes when she murmurs something to him in Russian.

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Like the other occupants of the Tower, Bruce receives the invitation to breakfast on Phil’s floor via JARVIS. He’s thrilled to realize this means Tony has finally managed to sink down into his headspace, and it is definitely tempting to go see his boy for himself. He makes it all the way to the elevator, though, only to hesitate long enough that JARVIS prompts him.

“To Agent Coulson’s quarters, Dr. Banner?”
“You really can call me Bruce,” he notes absently. It’s a losing battle; it’s still an extremely rare thing for the AI to call his own creator by his first name, but especially given J’s increased willingness to take an active role in little Tony’s parenting, Bruce doesn’t plan on giving up any time soon. “And no, to the penthouse, please.”

Even as he makes the request that JARVIS immediately fulfills (if sounding slightly confused), Bruce isn’t totally sure himself why he’s asking for it. But when he gets there, he learns that whatever impulse drove him may have been shared. Thor is seated on one end of the largest couch in the living room, his face in his hands. When he hears Bruce enter, the demigod makes an attempt at something resembling his usual smile, but it’s so far off and so counter to Thor’s usual sincerity that it almost hurts Bruce to look directly at him.

“Decided not to head to breakfast either, huh? Not hungry?” Thor gives up his attempt at fooling anyone, sighing so heavily that his whole body seems to deflate as he exhales.

“It is true, as of late I have not desired even Midgard’s finest delicacies. And I wish not to sully the Youngling’s reunion with our friends with my dark mood.” Aside from Tony in both his headspaces, because the rules always tend to be different where he is concerned, Bruce is usually the last one in the tower to be willing to reach out and touch someone else. And the way in which Thor, even in the midst of melancholy, is so gorgeous and otherworldly that he looks like he could be carved out of marble hardly makes the prospect less daunting. But if he’s learned anything from these people, from his family, it’s that they can be brave for each other. Not in the huge, world-saving ways that they are for everybody else, but in the small, quotidian ways that are far more terrifying for people like them. So even though his hand trembles and his stomach does a kind of somersault, Bruce reaches out to put a hand on Thor’s knee. For a horrible second, it feels like he might have made everything worse. The other man’s head bows again, face obscured by his long golden mane of hair. “Friend Bruce—how does one accept that there are some not worthy of redemption?”

They’ve got to be talking Loki here. Bruce levers himself to sit down on the coffee table, hand still resting on Thor’s warm leg. With his other hand, he reaches into his shirt pocket and takes out a small, folded piece of yellow construction paper. The front panel features a childish but still recognizable rendering of the Hulk; his broad arms are thrown out in front of him, shielding a group of what looks to be children hiding behind him. The inside of the card is even simpler, but all the more devastating for it, reading ‘Thank u Mr Hulk’ in shaky but exuberant purple crayon.

“The video that we shot with the Hulk was released four days ago. I already have a huge bag full of messages like that one, and social media is going absolutely nuts. A gif with footage of him eating those ridiculous cupcakes had been shared thousands of times within minutes, and I’ve lost count of the number of hashtags that whole thing inspired. This is a being that I have wished dead so many times I’ve completely lost count. I distanced myself from him when I could, called him the Other Guy in much the same way as Tony still sometimes talks about his de-aged and little selves like they’re not him. But on my worst days, I didn’t think about us as separate at all. I thought of the Hulk as…the personification of everything that was vicious and ugly and brutal about me. The very worst I was capable of. And he has…fans.” His voice cracks just a little on the last word, but Thor makes no move to intervene, seeming to sense that now that Bruce has started, he needs to get through this. “I…I can’t pretend to you that I know what to do with that. I’m hiding from our family the same as you are because I don’t have a clue how to manage feeling so—so proud and happy for someone I hated for so long. But I do know that if this child, and the hundreds of others like her, can decide there’s something worth caring for in him, there can’t be many out there totally beyond some kind of redemption.”

Thor’s fingers trace over the message, leaving behind faint purple stains.
“You really think something like this…might be possible for my brother? He has harmed so many, included all those residing in this tower.” Bruce doesn’t insult either of them by doing anything but nodding in agreement.

“He did. Very deeply, in ways that are still healing. But everyone here loves you more than they hate Loki, and if you believe there is something left in him worth saving and protecting, I’m willing to take your word on that. And I bet everyone else would be too.” Thor gently moves Bruce’s hand from his leg, standing and making his way to stare out the tall bay window. Now might be the point where it would be kindest for Bruce to make a quiet exit and leave the other man to his thoughts. Having come further than any of them have managed to get with Thor on this topic, though, he can’t help but push just a little further. ‘You shouldn’t have to be constantly torn into so many pieces. I know you say it works for you and Jane to be living apart and maintaining somewhat separate lives, but between that and missing your home and worrying for your brother, you’re stretching yourself very thin. Even if we didn’t believe you that something about Loki was worth saving, I think anyone here would do almost anything to give you a chance to just be here with us a little more completely.”

Thor doesn’t say anything to that, but he doesn’t need to. When he turns back from the window to face Bruce, his expression is settled and confident in a way it hasn’t been for far too long. He’s startled when the Hulk stirs to life in the back of his mind, but Bruce tries to take his own advice and nervously allows the other being’s consciousness to come to the forefront. Hulk-Bruce reaches a surprisingly tentative, careful hand out to press against Thor’s cheek.

“God not so puny now.”

Chapter End Notes

It feels so good to be back! Apologies for the lack of update last week. It was the first time I've missed a weekly posting and I felt super sad about it, but I just wasn't in the right frame of mind to get the chapter finished and polished in a way that I was happy with.

Thank you as always for your supportive, encouraging and engaging comments and kudos. I had some really lovely conversations about the future of this story with a lot of you, and it genuinely helped me clarify several things for myself. The short(ish) version of what I'm thinking right now is:
1) Thor's storyline probably will not be resolved in this story. You'll definitely have a sense of where things are headed, but I think trying to deal with the integration of Loki when things are already so new and fragile with Bucky would be too much for this little family to deal with too quickly. However...
2) I'm thinking quite hard about writing a sequel to this fic. While the ageplay dynamics would still have a very important role to play, that story would be less focused exclusively on that, and more upon the development of the team's romantic and sexual relationships alongside the ageplay. (The ageplay, to be clear, will always remain entirely non-sexual.) Originally I intended the romantic stuff to happen in (That Would Be) Enough, and I hope no one is upset that it's mostly been hints and teases toward that, but I ended up needing more time and space than I realized to get the characters comfortable with each other in non-sexual ways. And particularly given Tony's issues in that area, it seemed important to let those other forms of intimacy get fully established first.
3) The timestamps are still a thing, I swear! When I realized I might want to do the sequel, I slowed down on the timestamps so that I didn't end up stepping on my own toes, but I do have a ton of ideas and requests, and they're still going to happen in one form or another.

If you've braved your way through these rambling notes, I'm happy to hear your thoughts on any/all of this. Would you read a sequel? Would your rather the future scenes play out in one-shots and timestamps instead? Do you just wish there were more bots? (Spoiler: I always wish there were more bots.)
Tony is trying very, very hard to stay little. Daddy Phil has wanted to see him for ages and ages, and if he can just make himself stay this way, soon they can go on their picnic, and make crafts, or maybe colour some more. He hasn’t coloured in forever, and he’s pretty sure that before he got all sad, Thor bought a super big package of glittery crayons that he’s been just waiting for the opportunity to bring out.

So why oh why can’t Tony make his stupid brain cooperate? And why does watching Nata—Mama—whoever she is to him right now—interact with Bucky make Tony feel like he’s being stabbed all over by something cold and sharp? It’s not as if he isn’t still getting plenty of attention, after all. Phil is smiling bigger than Tony can ever remember while he and Clint continue detailing all of the fictional mistreatments inflicted on Phil during the course of his recovery. And all Tony had wanted for all these weeks was to see Phil, to have him like this, safe and whole and happy, why can’t he just be grateful for that instead of feeling like he’s one step away from breaking down into uncontrollable sobs? Stopitstopitstopit he pleads with his head, and doubles down on his efforts to just focus on the two men next to him, those people not potentially being stolen away by Bucky Barnes.

For a while, the plan works fairly well. Clint and Phil are damn charming when they want to be, and they’re almost as fascinating to watch when they’re interacting with one another as when they’re speaking directly to Tony. The positive outcome of the surgery combined with the news that Phil had never truly chosen to lie to any of them about his death has obviously washed away whatever remnants of hurt distrust had separated the pair. They touch and laugh and exchange secretive little smiles with such frequency that it almost feels wrong to intrude, except for the fact that they never really let Tony feel like he’s an outsider for long. Right now, for instance, Clint and Tony are attempting to teach an endearingly confused Phil to play pattycake; the agent is either surprisingly uncoordinated or intentionally playing it up, but regardless his ineptitude still makes
Tony cackle, especially when Phil nearly ends up smacking Clint in the nose.

He has almost forgotten to feel anxious and jealous at all, really. And then he hears Steve call Bucky 'sweetheart'. The closest approximation for the feeling is the first time he woke up with the arc reactor in his chest; everything North of his waist seems to tighten and shrink as he turns his eyes back to watch the trio beside him. Bucky has finally consented to sit between Natasha’s spread legs, his head resting against her shoulder. His feet are in Steve’s lap, and he laughs quietly as the blonde leans down to nibble playfully at one of his toes. For all his hesitation earlier this morning, it all seems to come so damn easily to Bucky. He doesn't seem to be struggling at all the way Tony had at first, fighting the headspace, pulling away to give in to shame or embarrassment. He’ll be such a good boy for all of them, but especially Steve, who has loved Bucky nearly all his life, and who received his deepest, most improbable wish when the other man came back.

Tony doesn’t remember getting out of the bed, or stumbling to the living room. He’s pretty sure he hears his own name being shouted by multiple voices, but they sound very far away, like he’s separated from them by some impenetrable layer of stone. It comes as somewhat of a surprise that a panic attack doesn’t seem to be on the immediate horizon, but he realizes as he half-collapses onto an armchair that he’s quickly reaching something beyond panic or anxiety, something that more closely resembles the dull, apathetic nothingness he’d felt immediately after Loki’s spell had ended. His mind is still racing, making plans for what’ll happen next (maybe he’ll take on some SI business trips for a while, give the team some space so that they don’t have to see him wandering the tower like a sad ghost of babies-past; or he could think about getting the house in Malibu rebuilt sooner rather than later?), but the thoughts come to him with almost complete detachment. They’ll hurt later, he knows they will, but for now something in his head is shielding him, and he can't help but feel grateful for it.

When Steve enters the living room at a run (and okay, it’s slightly surprising that he even bothered when he could have sent one of the others, but that's gotta be Cap’s overdeveloped sense of guilt), Tony doesn’t struggle to look up and meet his eyes, nor even to smile.

“I’m gonna head up to the penthouse. I’ve been away from SI long enough, and there’s a conference in Milan that I swore up and down I would finally make it to in person this year.”

“Tony—”

“In fact, it could be quite a while, because after that I should probably head straight to Japan. We’ve set up some talks with this brilliant little startup that does amazing things with haptics. I think they could really improve the StarkWatch, we're talking medical-grade monitoring. Now, the PR people want to meet sometime soon to talk about the next video, but people are still losing it over Hulk's, so that buys us some time. Especially if we can talk Bruce into making the rounds on some of the major networks and blogs.”

“Tony, please stop—”

“I also finished the upgrades to the gym. If you have any trouble with the new reinforced bags, or the automated training sequences, just have JARVIS send a text and I can try to do some remote troubleshooting. The Quinjets are a bit behind, and I’m absolutely not willing to hand that project off to someone else, but I should be able to get the prototype finished the next time I’m in New York.”

“The next time you’re...okay, I’ve missed about fifteen steps here, so I need you to take a big, deep breath, slow down, and walk me through it. Why are you suddenly talking like you’re not coming back? What happened?” Sitting down, Tony decides, was a mistake. Steve is looming over him, tall and huge and looking oh-so-concerned, and the part of Tony’s head that’s still little wants
to curl up in his arms and never let go, refuse to surrender him to Bucky or anyone, ever. He makes to get to his feet, but Steve puts a hand on each of the arm rests, effectively caging Tony in. “Tony, please. I need you to talk to me. You’re really scaring me right now.”

As ever, Steve’s vulnerability is his most effective weapon. If he’d just gone on the offensive, even a little bit, if he’d gotten shrill or chiding the way Pep sometimes does under severe stress, or angry like Rhodey can get when Tony pushes too far, Tony would have had him. A few blistering, unforgivably comments in reply and he would be on his way out the door and halfway into one of the suits by now. Why can’t this ridiculous, self-sacrificing, way-too-good-for-the-likes-of-Tony-fing-Stark man just, for once, do the right thing for himself?

“Tony. Suit.”

The safeword, spoken in a voice so harsh and rasping that it barely even sounds like Steve’s, brings Tony’s every thought, every breath, to a sudden and grinding halt. He dimly registers Steve’s hands moving off of the chair, and he entertains a brief moment of fear that this is it, that he’ll look up and find the other man gone, but a second later Steve sinks gracefully to his knees on the floor. He looks suddenly lost and painfully young, but he’s there and he doesn’t appear to be leaving, and something about the combination of all of that is enough to bring an odd sense of calm over Tony. “Okay,” he murmurs softly. “Okay.” Steve bows his head, and Tony wants more than anything to reach down and tip his chin up, but some people have rules about being touched after a safeword, and since they’ve never established a protocol on that, he doesn’t dare risk it. Silence stretches between them, the clock on Coulson’s wall ticking so loudly in the background it feels like a prop on a cheesy family drama. Tony fights the odd urge to giggle. “Steve, it’s okay if you need more time, but when you’re up to it, could you tell me why you safeworded? Not that you have to justify it or anything, it just…it would help me to know, if you can.” Steve nods, squares his shoulders like the soldier he still is, though he still can’t quite manage to meet Tony’s eyes. (Is it this frustrating for them, when Tony is all with the gaze avoidance?)

“Everything happened really fast today. I was—I had no idea Buck would go down so quickly, and I felt nervous about just jumping into it like that, but I didn’t know what else to do. And at first it seemed to go well, so I figured I was just worryin’ about nothing. But suddenly you were so upset, and you were talking about leaving, and I didn’t know whether to pick you up and hold you and refuse to let you go because you’re my baby, or if that would be… abuse, or something because you seemed mostly Big while you were saying all these things. It just felt like everything was spinning out of control and I didn’t want to be the one who said or did the wrong thing and cost us all…everything. Cost us you.”

Steve has no idea yet what was going on in Tony’s head this morning, and somehow this annoyingly perfect man at his feet has already made Tony’s fears feel so much smaller. He’d always imagined a safeword as a nuclear option, a sure sign that a scene and potentially a relationship is doomed to fail. But Steve had used it to protect him, protect them. And if he could give Tony that, surely he can give Steve some honesty in return.

“You called him sweetheart.” The eyes that have been everywhere except on Tony’s face are suddenly locked on his with fierce attention. “It was the first thing you called me, when I was… short, and it meant everything. You called him that, and you left us to be with him before, and he’s so much better at this than I am, and I thought maybe it would be kinder to just let you go. It’s—it’s okay if you want that, Steve, I would never blame you, and I wouldn’t let the others either.” Steve appears to fight with himself, clenching his fists and making as if to stand several times.

“Tony I—god, can I please hold you? I don’t care if you’re little or big. I swear I don’t, I’m not
trying to force you back down. I just need—” Tony doesn’t bother to let him finish. With little care for his own knees, which are just a tad more fragile and prone to aches and pains than the super soldier’s, he moves from the chair to the floor and right into Steve’s lap. Steve makes a noise somewhere between a moan and a growl, and wraps his arms so tightly around Tony’s waist that he may end up leaving bruises. “I love you so fucking much it scares me sometimes,” he says, his voice a near-whisper that forms an odd contrast to the desperate harshness of his touch. “I had nothing before the team, before you. I felt like I’d never really come out of the ice, not any part of me that really mattered, and I wished every single day that they’d left me down there, or that when they’d found me, they’d let me die. The Battle of New York was…important, and I was glad to be able to help. But caring for you was the first time it felt like I was doing something worthwhile, not just as Captain America, but as me.”

“But you left,” Tony’s traitorous mouth forms the words before he can stop it. “You left for him. You don’t need me for that anymore.”

“I didn’t leave just for Bucky. I wanted to help him, yes, and sure I knew he didn’t really want anyone around at first but me. But he told me that first day we met again what happened to Howard and Maria, and I didn’t…the thought of him already living here before I told you that, I didn’t want you to feel pressured or manipulated into forgiving him before you were ready. I wanted to keep you just as much as him. I did a terrible job of showing you that, I know I did, but I never once thought of it as choosing him over you.”

“So you still want—with me, I mean, you still want to be—” Tony’s Big brain can’t seem to force the word ‘Dada’ past his lips, but Steve grips him even harder anyway.

“Everything. I want everything with you,” he says forcefully. “I want to be your Dada. I want to cuddle you and feed you and bathe you and do everything else I possibly can to care for you when you’re in headspace, because I love doing it and for some reason I may never totally understand, you actually let me. And when you’re Big I want to be your friend, and your teammate, and your…your lover, if that’s something you’d be interested in. I want you to kiss me the way you kissed Bruce, and I want to take you on dates, and pay with cash even though you’ll never stop laughing at me, and so many other things Tony. I want anything and everything you are willing to share with me. Whatever ends up happening with Bucky could never change that.” He pauses, then adds, “And I promise I won’t call him sweetheart again. I honestly didn’t even mean to say it, I’ve just never been around another little except you, and it just kind of came out. I promise to be more careful and respectful of the rituals and things that are just yours and mine.”

Tony’s brain is a confusing mess of big and little right now, and he doesn’t know if he wants to curl up in Steve’s arms and cry or kiss the life out of him. He’s not sure, either, how long it’ll be before some part of his brain stops feeling threatened by James Barnes and everything he represents to and for Steve. But he’s sure, for the first time since he’d lost the other man’s steady heartbeat against his wrist, that Steve isn’t going to be going anywhere before Tony figures all of that out.

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Steve anticipates a certain level of awkwardness in moving back into their scene after the upset of the morning. To some extent, that’s exactly what happens. By the time he and Tony return to the bedroom, Bucky has registered the length of their absence and Natasha is having a hard time containing him. She, Phil and Clint are also plainly curious about what happened, but don’t dare come out and ask Steve with two edgy littles in the room, and Steve is grateful for it. He’ll fill the others in, he wouldn’t dream of not doing so when something as significant as a safeword being used has happened, but he feels utterly drained by his conversation with Tony and can’t really bear the thought of immediately reliving it.
Tony solves several problems at once by hopping back onto the bed and straight into Bucky’s arms. The engineer, though, is not entirely recovered from what’s just happened, and it doesn’t take Buck long to detect the subtle shaking of Tony’s shoulders.

“Whas’ wrong?” he demands, glaring at Steve. This time, feeling he’s entirely earned his older boy’s overprotective resentment, Steve can’t even muster outrage on his own behalf. Tony, though, shakes his head, burying his head under Bucky’s chin.

“Want to go to the shop and play with the bots. Maybe teach Dummy to colour. Can we?” he asks the room at large. It’s a kind of brilliant plan, really. It’ll put an insecure and nervous Tony in the place he feels safest, surrounded by some of his oldest friends. And it’ll still give Bucky a chance to be included, to get to know his potential little-brother better and spend time with the rest of his family.

Before long, their little troupe is making their way downstairs, ridiculous sight though they must make. It takes Natasha and Clint both to carry the heavy roll of butcher’s paper Steve purchased on a whim a few weeks ago, and everyone else’s arms are stuffed full with the absurd amount of art supplies they’ve managed to accumulate in the tower. Even Bruce and Thor, who they run into in the penthouse, are drafted into serving as pack-mules for paints, crayons, pencils, markers, chalk, glue, feathers, and other bits and bobs.

It’s hard to feel that any of the ample supplies are wasted, though, when they get the paper spread out on the workshop floor and watch boys and bots go to town. Dummy and Butterfingers get more paint and ink on Bucky and Tony than they do on the paper, but neither of the littles appears to mind. Tony turns attempting to see any recognizable shapes or patterns in the bots’ artistic experiments into a game akin to seeing shapes in clouds, and Bucky happily joins in, especially when the bots start participating, whirring and beeping loudly for whoever’s interpretations of their work they like best. You, meanwhile, turns out to be a more sophisticated creator, and Bucky beams when he peers down at the butcher paper to realize that the bot has created a recognizable representation of the mark on his metal arm in red marker.

“It’s my star!” he shouts, tugging at Steve’s pant leg and pointing. The rest of the team makes a huge deal of it, crowding around the drawing and congratulating You on its likeness. Bucky, who has never before had cause to feel anything positive about the arm HYDRA had forced on him, is almost vibrating with pride and excitement at being chosen as the bot’s artistic inspiration and the team’s object of interest. And yeah okay, maybe Steve is overemotional after everything that’s happened today, but he definitely wipes away a tear or two.

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After an extremely rough start, Tony’s been having an excellent day thank you very much. His colouring with the bots idea has been a hit with everyone. Even Thor looks happier than he has in ages, allowing Tony and Dummy work together to trace an outline of his body onto the butcher paper without getting mad when he somehow winds up with green marker in his hair. Bucky is returning You’s favour by making a sketch of the bot (with Natasha and Clint’s assistance), and Bruce and Phil are playing a giant game of Xs and Os while Butterfingers occasionally drips and scatters paint, Jackson Pollock style, perilously close to them.

Yeah, he’s feeling pretty awesome, so it comes as a genuine surprise when he’s suddenly lifted off the ground and into warm, bulky arms that can only be Steve’s. It’s possible that Tony even squeaks a little, though he has no plans to ever admit that fact to anyone.

“Dada nooo go,” he protests as he’s carried from the workshop and toward the elevator.

“We’re going to come right back sweetheart I promise. Dada just needs to check on something and
I need your help, okay?” This sounds like it could have potentially exciting, secret-mission style implications, so Tony decides to allow this to play out. When they reach Steve’s floor and he’s carried to the bedroom, however, he starts to feel distinctly like he might have been tricked. “No nap!”

“Nope, that’s right, baby, no nap right now,” Steve agrees calmly. “You looked a little squirmy downstairs though. Do you maybe need to pee?” It makes zero sense that Steve would bother bringing him all the way up here just for that when there’s a perfectly serviceable washroom attached to the workshop, and Tony wants to point this out. However, being questioned about his bladder gives him a more urgent issue to deal with, and he makes to slide off the bed and to the bathroom. Oddly, this makes Steve tighten his grip on his hand.

“Where do you think you’re going, sweetpea?” While Steve often downplays his own intelligence, the man is far from stupid, and Tony is startled enough by the totally unnecessary question that his eyes find Steve’s without prompting. Something of the ‘duh’ that he restrains from voicing must come through in his expression, because Steve smiles just a little bit. “You don’t need to go anywhere to pee, Tony.”

Within seconds, Tony’s entire body feels like one big blush. He still wears and uses his diapers at night sometimes when he’s stressed, and the entire team seems weirdly invested in trying to keep him in them during the days when he’s little, too. But he’s never, ever used the diapers when he’s been awake, and none of them have ever tried to press the issue. Someone usually walks him to and from the bathroom and that’s more than embarrassing enough. The very thought of actually… going in them when he’s awake and capable of walking just down the hall to the toilet is utterly horrifying, and he’s going to tell Dada that right the hell now.

“I-I.” Yeah, that wasn’t quite as forceful as the version he’d planned in his head. He settles for trying to slip his hand out of Steve’s steely grasp again.

“Shh, honey, you’re okay. Everything’s alright. Remember that you can use your word if you need to. Otherwise, you’re going to wet your diaper and I’m going to change you right away, I promise. Do you need Dada to help you?” Tony’s non-verbal groan is apparently taken as a ‘yes’, because Steve rises to his feet and carries Tony to the kitchen, where he wets a cloth and grabs a bottle he’d apparently stashed away in the fridge. Then he gets them settled on the couch, slipping the nipple of the bottle into Tony’s mouth with one hand while he starts undoing the snaps of his orange romper with the other. This, Tony realizes with a start, must be what Steve meant this morning, about having something in mind to help Tony stay in headspace.

“D-Dada,” he whimpers pathetically, dripping apple juice down his front. Steve wipes it up tenderly with a corner of his own shirt.

“Shh, sweetheart. You just drink your bottle for me like a good boy and relax. I’m going to handle the rest, alright?” With that promise, Steve pulls the front end of his newly-opened romper up enough to get his hand and the wet cloth underneath, settling both directly over Tony’s bladder. Then he starts to massage. He’s incredibly gentle about it, the pressure so light it’s almost non-existent, but it’s also way too much given Tony’s intense awareness of everything down there at the moment. He makes a louder noise of protest, but doesn’t dare try to escape again because he has the distinct sense that moving right now would only spell disaster. If Steve keeps this up, he’s gonna—he can’t—“This is what babies do, they use their diapers and the people who love them change them. You’re my little boy, Tony, and I want to help you with this. All you would need to do is let me. Can you do that for me? Can you let go for Dada, and trust that I’m going to take care of you, that I’ll always take care of you?”
Tony doesn’t reply. He can’t, it’s too big, too huge and embarrassing and so damn weird. But he works at his bottle, and slowly he starts to let the muscles in his groin that he’s been squeezing and clamping as hard as he can since this conversation started begin to loosen. From there, his body and Steve’s gentle massage seem to take care of the rest. A warm wetness spreads across the front of the diaper, and Tony should hate it. He should want to crawl under a rock and never ever come out again, but Steve is murmuring words of encouragement and affection into his ear, and he doesn’t leave, or seem the least bit mad or disgusted.

“’m sorry,” he whispers anyway.

“Nope. No sorries allowed. Baby boy I’m so so proud of you. I know that was scary, and I’m sure you won’t be very happy with me when I tell you that the potty is off-limits for you the rest of the day unless you need to do more than pee.” Indeed, this is not news Tony is particularly happy to hear, and he wrinkles his nose at Steve. “I know, sunshine. And if you really hate it we don’t have to try this again. But I think you need to see that Dada can handle this, that I want to handle this so that making it to the potty is one less thing for you to have to worry or even think about when you’re little.” Getting to just play and not think about going to the bathroom doesn’t actually sound like a bad thing when Steve puts it like that, but Tony’s determined to figure out a reason this is bad bad bad, and his brain supplies one a few seconds later.

“Bucky doesn’t gotta use diapers.”

“That’s true. They’re a no for your brother, both because I think he’s a little bit bigger than you are age-wise, and potentially for…well, other reasons. But you and Bucky don’t have to want or need the same things from us all the time just because you’re both sometimes little.” Tony is in the midst of trying to decide if it’s worth throwing a fit over being considered the youngest when Steve nudges his shoulder with his own. “I call you sweetheart, and that’s just our thing, right?” Tony nods emphatically, so hard that it makes his neck hurt, because he does not want any confusion on that front ever again. Steve chuckles and kisses his head. “Your diapers don’t need to be any different than that. They’re something that you do with us and Bucky doesn’t, and that doesn’t make either of you wrong or right. It makes you each different and special.”

Tony considers this long and hard. It’s still a bit mortifying to be sitting here discussing pissing in a diaper, and with all the issues he has with urine, he doesn’t imagine that feeling will totally go away any time soon. But what Steve is talking about…no, not just talking about, actively, excitedly advocating for, is such an investment of time and energy on his part (and presumably the rest of the team as well) that it’s hard not to feel weirdly happy about it. The idea that they’d really consider doing this all so that Tony has one more responsibility off his plate when he’s little is staggering in a way he can’t claim is entirely off-putting.

“Dada,” he says, “wet.” It’s not quite the ‘yes’ that Steve might have been hoping for, but he seems to understand well enough that it’s as close as Tony can manage for right now. He smiles that special just-for-Tony smile that lights up his whole face, and after he gently strips and wipes Tony, he spends the innumerable minutes that follow pressing loud, silly-sounding kisses to every bit of him he can reach. He tells Tony that he loves him after each and every one, and the diaper change ends up taking ages, but it’s impossible to worry or be upset about that when Steve is still beaming at him, panting and flushed and so obviously happy. Tony isn’t even that upset when he realizes, contrary to his original protests when they came up, that he’s feeling a bit tired. It feels like the easiest thing in the world, actually, to tell Steve that he’s sleepy.

“You want to nap with Dada, sweetpea? That sounds really nice. I’m…a little bit nervous, though, about leaving Bucky again for so long on his first day being little. So we can try to handle that in a few ways. We can call someone else up here to sleep with you, or I could have JARVIS set up
some kind of monitor so I could keep track of Buck—”

“Just invite him,” Tony interrupts, a bit surprised to realize he really isn’t bothered at all by the thought. “Or—’vite everyone, and we could go to my bed? Bucky’s never had family snuggle time before.” Steve peers down at him in suspicious surprise, but seems to realize quickly that all Tony feels right now, beyond tiredness, is excitement at the idea of getting to share this particular tradition with his maybe-big brother.

“If you’re really sure, sweetheart, that sounds pretty perfect to me.”

Chapter End Notes

The response to the last chapter was phenomenal! Thank you! It never gets less fun to hear what you're all thinking about the story, and I really enjoyed your input on the future of this verse as well. (I also love that several of you share my deep love for all things bot-related.)

In regards to the latter, I think I’ll go ahead with the sequel, as well as adding occasional one-shots to the timestamps as inspiration strikes. There may be a small break between this story and the next so that I can get things more firmly plotted out, but it shouldn't be more than a couple of weeks. And there's still a few big chapters coming up in this one that I'm so excited to get to!
Picnic (Part One)

Chapter Summary

The Avengers depart on their long awaited picnic...after a few delays.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: Bucky has a minor PTSD-fuelled anxiety attack at the beginning of this chapter. If you want to skip it, you can begin after the first (***).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky comes to slowly. All on its own, this is a deviation from the norm. He’s usually groggy and disoriented when the handlers take him off ice, but excepting that, he’s slept the light, shallow sleep of a sniper since the War. For a matter of seconds he entertains the notion that maybe he was iced again, but he’s able to dismiss it almost immediately. This grogginess really bears no resemblance to the frantic, bewildering and violent process of being removed from cryo.

And on top of that, he’s warm. Almost stiflingly so, actually, and that’s never been a sensation he would ascribe to being woken from the ice. Deciding this factor alone makes the risk of alerting potential hostiles to his being awake, he slowly, carefully lifts one eyelid. He’s able to relax almost immediately, because his gaze lands first on Steve, who he recognizes, and who has one arm each curled protectively around Bucky and Tony Stark. The sight of the brunette, whose head is pillowed on Steve’s chest directly above his heart, is curiously comforting too, and Bucky quickly averts his gaze to avoid dwelling on that.

It lands next on a set of mossy-green eyes that are staring right at him, bracketed by smooth red curls. The Soldier recognizes her before Bucky does, and he starts, shoving himself out of Steve’s grip in an attempt to force his body into a better defensive position. The redhead, though, doesn’t respond with antagonism or force; she leans down and murmurs something to Steve, who had jerked awake at Bucky’s sudden movement. He gives her a nod and a smile and is back asleep before Bucky has even finished extricating himself from the pile of bodies on the enormous bed he’s found himself waking up in. So Steve trusts this woman (Natasha, his brain supplies, though he’s not entirely certain that’s right). Seeing no other option, he follows her from the bedroom, fingers still itching for some kind of weapon.

They make their way into a spacious seating area, and the redhead allows him to lay claim to an armchair that has the best sightlines to the rest of the living room and into the kitchen. She settles across from him on a long sectional couch, but doesn’t speak, apparently waiting for him to gather his own thoughts. The more the hazy memories of the last few hours come back to him, though, the more actually doing that becomes impossible, and eventually he meets her eyes again in desperation, silently begging her to go first, to say something.

“Tony describes headspace as a kind of slowing down. Usually his mind is frantic—not quite chaotic, because it still makes sense to him, but it’s sort of like he’s constantly laying the tracks
right before a speeding, oncoming train. When he’s little, words and thoughts and sometimes even movements come to him at a more manageable pace. What was it like for you?”

“Like golds instead of reds. Soap instead of gunpowder.” This description probably makes even less sense to her than it had to Steve the other morning, but the doctors don’t think Bucky’s new ways of processing particularly strong or complex thoughts and sensations is going to change. They’ve told him the best he can do is help the people in his life understand how he makes sense of the world, so that they can learn to translate. And some of the details surrounding Natasha might still be a little fuzzy in his head just now, but he knows he enough to be sure he wants her to understand.

“And are those good for you?” He blinks. “Pleasure, James. Did you enjoy it?” Joy and pleasure are not the kinds of concepts that belong to the Soldier. But the way she’s asking, he thinks maybe they might get to belong to whoever he is now sometimes. She certainly doesn’t seem like she’s trying to trick him, or that she might punish him if he says yes.

“I…I think so. I did not seem to have a function, and that was…odd. Even when directives were provided, they did not seem to be useful in any way I could recognize. Yet fulfilling them was… gratifying, somehow.” He hesitates, because seeking validation or even assessment was not something permitted of the Soldier, either, but he’s suddenly desperate to have some sense of how he’d performed in this area, if the others had gotten as much out of this with him as it was obvious they did with Tony. “Did I—did I do it wrong?” Natasha’s eyebrows rise, but she smiles. It’s still not an expression that comes entirely naturally to her, he can tell; she has to consciously think about it, remember which muscles to relax and which to contract, just like he does. But the result is no less comforting, perhaps even moreso because of the effort he recognizes her putting into it.

“You were perfect, James. Absolutely perfect.”

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The several days that follow are so filled with Talking that even Phil and Steve, who are usually the instigators and biggest fans of constant discussions, are left a bit emotionally wrung-out by the end. Despite his own frustration and occasional longing for his far less communicative days, even Tony can recognize why it had to happen—there had just been so much ground to cover. Negotiations with Bucky over his headspace and the rules that he and the team wanted, conversations with Tony about the inclusion of Bucky and the many feelings that might provoke in him (all of which, he was repeatedly assured, were okay as long as he made sure to talk about them with someone). Plus Steve had insisted on apologizing countless times to he and Barnes over the somewhat haphazard way the three of them had jumped into playing together, despite repeated assurances from them both that any other course of action would have likely spooked at least one of them. It was necessary but exhausting work, and they were all looking very much forward to their long-awaited picnic by the time it was over.

SHIELD, naturally, decided to throw a wrench in this by calling Clint in for a solo mission. The archer had tried, half-heartedly, to encourage the rest of them to go anyway, but the combined force of their resulting glares had been enough to shut that down in a hurry. He’s all packed and ready to leave, Phil at his side so that he can monitor the mission from HQ, and all Tony can think about is how grateful he is that he isn’t in headspace. Big him is hardly thrilled about any member of the team going where he isn’t permitted to follow them, but he can deal, and be satisfied with the thought of hacking into SHIELD’s databases the second anything starts to feel off. Little him, though…well, the last time anyone had left on a mission, Steve hadn’t come home for weeks, and though their recent heart-to-heart on that topic had done a lot to reassure Tony, he’s still way too aware that if he slipped even a little into headspace right now, he’d be sobbing and holding onto Clint’s leg for dear life.
Attempting to avoid such a reaction, because Clint has a particular way of…well, not forcing Tony into headspace, but just bringing it out him in such a way that Tony doesn’t even realize it’s happening until too late, he says a quick goodbye and then retreats in the direction of the elevators. His plan to make it to the shop is annoyingly thwarted when the blonde breaks off from the others and immediately catches up to him.

“Tones. Hey, wait.” Tony forces himself to take a long, deep inhalation before turning around.

“We don’t have to do the leavin’ on a jet plane thing do we? I’m not really great at dramatic departures.” Clint rolls his eyes, digs a hand into his jacket pocket, and shoves something at Tony that he realizes after a moment is a StarkWatch. He very nearly drops it, but Clint just takes it back and fastens it gently around Tony’s left wrist before pointing to the matching bit of tech on his own.

“I won’t take it off unless I absolutely have to, and I promise to do my best to give Phil notice if that’s going to happen. Got it?” Tony nods. “Good. I’ll should be home in a week. Keep the rest of our pack of weirdos on their toes for me, won’t you? There’s a present in it for you if you and JARVIS can team up to troll Natasha in particular.”

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Natasha is not sure what exactly Clint said to Tony before he left, but when he gets back they are definitely having words. Though the man is clinging firmly to his Big headspace, Tony keeps a near-constant eye on her in one form or another. He finds excuses to have meals with her, invites her to the shop to test equipment improvements, even brings her along to SI with him one day using the highly improbable excuse that her former colleagues have asked after her. And he’s in bed with her every night, just as he had been with Clint during Steve’s absence. He won’t permit her to diaper him as Clint had done, though she strongly suspects he puts on a pull-up before he comes down. She could and perhaps should push him on that, because it violates the rules he and Clint have made about caretakers handling all diaper-related issues. Not to mention that it’s symptomatic of the larger problem, which is Tony’s newfound determination to avoid headspace at all costs when any member of the team is out on mission.

But truth be told, she’s felt a bit shaken by Clint’s departure, particularly by the awareness that her role as the most public face of both SHIELD and the Avengers means she won’t be able to follow, not even if things go pear-shaped and he requires help or extraction. She’s on the outside, now, of that part of his life, and knowing that Phil still shares that with Clint is both a comfort and a corrosive source of jealousy. Tony’s devoted attention, while occasionally frustrating, has also been comforting enough that she hasn’t wanted to do anything that might send him away.

Tonight, though, when she wakes with a start to realize that Tony is not beside her in bed as he should be, she starts to worry that that had been selfish. JARVIS doesn’t leave her to stew in self-loathing panic long, supplying in a tone that sounds almost…amused that Tony is out in her living room. Seeking him out reveals Tony curled up in an armchair in almost total darkness, face partially illuminated by a light too small to be a laptop or even a tablet.

“How’s he doing that, zajka?” Rather than bothering to answer, Tony reaches out to place her hand
on his wrist. Several seconds later, she feels the watch vibrate against his arm in a pattern that’s nothing close to resembling a human heartbeat. It’s almost like—“Morse Code. You two are using the haptics to talk in Morse?” Tony beams and nods.

“Daddy started it. He asked if I was bein’ good. I came out here because I didn’t want to wake you. But you can say hi if you want?” he offers. She taps out one of their coded check-ins, and feels her entire body almost sag in relief when he replies instantly with the corresponding word. Then she calls him a dumbarse for good measure, laughing at the scandalized expression on Tony’s face as he mentally translates the message. “I know it’s a bad word, but I promise he won’t think it came from you. It’s how he and I say we love each other sometimes.” Tony still seems suspicious, especially when Clint instructs him to go back to sleep not long after, but he’s so alight with happiness at having confirmation that Clint is both safe and in no danger of abandoning or forgetting him that he allows Natasha to hustle him back to the bedroom with little struggle.

“What do you feel better now, little bunny?” she asks as Tony presses himself right up against her back. “He said he missed me. And I believed him.” Natasha is far too familiar with the bewildered awe she can hear in Tony’s voice to have any clue how to respond. “It feels nice.”

“Yes it does,” she agrees.

“Daddy also says I’m the boss of you till he gets home,” he adds with a yawn.

“Fat chance. Go to sleep, Tony.”

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Clint arrives home bearing relatively minor injuries as far as he’s concerned; this doesn’t stop everyone in the tower from being upset by the set of recognizably finger-shaped bruises around his throat, though, and it’s with a bit of lingering tension and anxiety that they begin preparations for their long awaited picnic at the Stark mansion. Even Steve, who has been studying almost non-stop in preparation for his upcoming entrance into college, is showing signs of strain. This vacation, Clint thinks as he watches little Tony unsuccessfully attempt to persuade Cap to abandon his flashcards in favour of helping him use cookie cutters to cut the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches into shapes, couldn’t come soon enough.

That doesn’t mean they don’t all struggle in their own ways with leaving. Phil drafts so many memos and contingency plans for SHIELD, attempting to account for any possible crises that could take place in his absence, that Clint is contacted by a hilariously frazzled Maria Hill, who believes the entire thing to be an elaborate prank Clint himself orchestrated to troll her. (He wishes he’d thought of that, actually, and makes a note to arrange something similar when they return.) Natasha and Bruce both throw themselves into ensuring that the property and its surrounding area will be both secure and private, a venture that an anxious James Barnes, who has hardly been out of the Tower at all, eventually joins them in. Thor is the only one who seems relatively unaffected, and that’s largely because he spends much of those days off-world, apparently locked in negotiations having to do with Loki’s future. Clint, who can’t decide how exactly he feels about that last one, decides not to ask, and instead throws himself into the far more fun aspects of preparation, like food and entertainment preparation.

The day of their departure there’s a small scuffle when Bucky hides the study materials Steve had been attempting to sneak into his bag, but eventually they’re on their way. The change in the group’s mood starts to happen almost immediately. For the first time in a week, Natasha stops fondling the knife sheath on her thigh with her left hand, instead using it to tap out a lazy beat along Phil’s spine. Snacks are shared and ridiculous car games played, and there’s signing. A lot of singing.
The latter is the fault of the playlist Clint had arranged on his phone before their departure. He’s
damn proud of it, actually; the thing contains some music familiar to everyone in the vehicle, and
while that had taken a lot of work in some of their cases, every bit of it is worth it when Steve and
Bucky light up during big band numbers, or when Natasha closes her eyes in transparent pleasure
during the orchestral arrangements for famous ballets. When a weird Asgardian song involving a
lot of drumming and chanting comes on the speaker, Thor actually cries, then proceeds to alternate
between singing along and praising the glory of StarkPhones (or, in his words, ‘These most
magical rectangles’). It’s slightly less amusing to most of them when he promises to procure little
Tony an Asgardian drum of his own, but that’ll be a problem for another day.

The baby, high on sugar and joy, almost bounces out of the car, but he halts just as suddenly the
second he steps into the mansion, causing a human traffic-jam that almost lands Clint on his ass.

“Munchkin? You okay?” Tony nods, but his eyes are fixed at a spot on the wall in front of him,
and Clint winces as he follows the little boy’s gaze. The entryway features a large oil painting of
Howard, Maria and Tony Stark, all dressed in rigid, expensive-looking clothing with stiff
expressions to match. Not so long ago Clint would have taken this as more evidence of Tony’s
privileged and comfortable childhood, proof that he had never once suffered as the rest of the team
done. And to some extent that was still true at the basest level; other than during his captivity,
Tony had probably never once wanted for anything material. But now that he knew the man, knew
intimately what he looked like when he was actually happy and loved and comfortable, all Clint
could see was how far away the boy in this picture was from all of that. “We can colour on it later
if you want,” he offers. There’s some discontented rumbling from behind him; Steve and Phil in
particular have capital-t Thoughts about the right and wrong ways to handle Tony’s ample Daddy
issues. But that doesn’t mean Clint has to agree, and it’s entirely worth pissing both of them off
when Tony turns back to face him and gives Clint a watery smile.

“Thanks.”

Not in a hurry to confront any of the other Stark family ghosts likely to be haunting the more
public areas of the mansion, Clint leaves the others to unpack and hustles Tony upstairs. Nervous
about being photographed despite the dark tint of their SUV, he’d worn Big clothes for the journey,
but he lets out a relieved little sigh as his t-shirt his slid up and off. Once Clint has his pants and
underwear stripped away as well, the baby glances to the bag beside them on the bed several times,
fingers twitching nervously.

“You could…um….maybe we try the fun diapers? You said some had pictures and stuff?” Clint is
not remotely embarrassed by his strong desire to punch the air in triumph, though he restrains it for
Tony’s sake. Tony may never be a hundred percent at-ease with the diapers; getting him
comfortable with using them when he’s awake in particular looks like it’ll be a long, difficult
journey. But he’s made tremendous strides over the last few weeks, and the realization of just how
far they’ve come stirs a fierce, possessive pride in Clint.

“You bet. But you can tell Daddy if you change your mind or they make you too uncomfortable,
alright?” Tony nods his assent, worrying at the sheets of the bed with his fingers. Unlike Steve,
whose lengthy diaper changes have become somewhat of a loving joke around the Tower, Clint
usually leans toward efficiency. It’s just in his nature, given how often his job relies on speed, plus
Tony is often so embarrassed during the process that it would have felt cruel to draw it out. But
today he permits himself to linger just a little, enjoying the sight of his boy calm and relaxed under
his attentions (not to mention damn adorable in his car-printed diapers). He lets his fingers trail
lovingly over Tony’s not-quite-so-prominent hipbones, pleased with the physical evidence of how
positively their ageplay has impacted the baby. “There we go buddy, you’re all set. Want to just
put a t-shirt on for now so you can show the others? I’m sure they’ll love ‘em.”
“…is Bucky gonna be little today?” Clint shrugs.

“Dunno, kiddo. I think he was going to see how he felt once we got here. Want to tell me why you asked me that in response to the question I asked you?” Tony groans dramatically, head flopping to the side as if he’s been struck, and Clint can’t help but laugh. “Yeah I know you’re sick of talking, buddy, but if I just pretend none of this happened, I’m pretty sure I’ll end up in Daddy prison. Can you save me from that terrible fate, please, because I really want to go to the picnic.”

“Everyone thinks Bucky’s bigger’n me.” Clint blinks and shrugs, because of course they all think that; Bucky’s age range is still fluctuating a bit, maybe it always will, but he’s solidly in the toddler range, while Tony never fails to settle lower than that whenever he allows himself. With an exasperated snort, Tony sits up on the bed. “If he’s being little and I’m not even wearin’ pants, they’ll just think they’re right. But ‘m not a baby. ‘m not.” Don’t smile don’t smile don’t smile Clint chants to himself. Amusing as it can sometimes be to watch their little’s unconvincing attempts to play at being a bigger boy, it comes from some pretty deeply-rooted fears and insecurities that the archer has no desire to make light of.

“Okay, I know Daddy Bruce is your Science Bro, and I’m not trying to take his place, but I think maybe the best thing to do is treat this sort of like one of your experiments.” Tony cocks his head, considering. “What I’m hearing you tell me you want, or actually don’t want, is kinda at odds with what you seem to like best when you’re being little. So my—what’s that fancy person word for an educated guess?”

“Hypothesis,” the baby supplies, without any hint of the judgement Clint has often faced from people far less brilliant than Tony.

“Right. My hypothesis is that maybe whatever is making you upset about being called a baby isn’t actually about how old your headspace tends to be. If that’s the case, we can work together to try to figure out what’s up there. But I think we should make sure, because if we’re actually reading you wrong, then we would want to re-negotiate ASAP.”

For what feels like an eternity, Clint watches his little struggle with himself and what he’s being asked to do. The prospect of putting himself wholly and honestly in the hands of his caretakers, of letting this last major barrier between them fall away, is obviously a frightening one for Tony. For once, Clint entirely relates to Steve’s tendency to crowd their boy when he’s struggling—it hurts like hell to see him so unsure, to feel the small tremors that shake his hands and the increasing pace of his breathing.

“I’m scared.”

“I know you are, buddy. But do you remember the first time you called me Daddy?” It felt wrong in some ways, how much and how strongly Clint treasures that memory. Tony had been distressed, after all, missing Steve and worried their family was about to dissolve. He’d been half asleep, too, body in the process of shutting down after near-constant tears and stress several days in a row. But he’d reached over, midway through being diapered for the evening, to seize Clint’s hand, and whispered that word into the dark, voice quiet and strained as if he expected nothing but disdain in reply but still couldn’t hold it in. The weight of protective responsibility that had settled over Clint then had been immense, a weight that was freeing and, yes, terrifying. “I was happy, Tony, but I was scared too. Being your Daddy is not something I take lightly, and I still worry pretty often that I’m gonna mess it up somehow. But I’d rather be scared with you than go back to how we all were.” Tony seems to attempt to speak several time, but can’t get anything out beyond a quiet whine. “Can we be scared together, munchkin? Can you try your very best for me today to put aside worrying about how old you think you should be, and just focus on letting yourself do or
Given that the Avengers includes numerous enhanced humans and a god, it takes a shocking amount of time to unload the SUV. The amount of stuff they’d brought with them hadn’t seemed so outrageous before, probably because they’d slowly added things over the course of several days. But unpacking it all at once, with ‘all’ ranging from bags and baskets full of food to weapons numerous and deadly enough to supply a small army, makes it imminently clear: they are none of them light packers.

Being relegated to ‘supervision’ by his overprotective team makes the entire process all that much more of a spectacle for Phil. He’s in the middle of attempting not to laugh about a struggle between Natasha and Steve over which and how many weapons should be hidden in different rooms of the mansion versus brought outside with them when he hears the familiar sound of Clint’s heavy footsteps (a gait he purposefully affects when off-mission to avoid unintentionally surprising the house full of overtrained soldiers and spies) accompanied by a set of lighter ones. He turns to find Tony, clad in nothing but a t-shirt, a thick, colourful diaper printed with cars, and the weighted mittens Bruce had got him when they’d first started all of this.

It’s debatable which of the combination is more surprising. Clint had all but given up on Tony ever being comfortable enough with his diapers to wear the ones he’d special-ordered, so to see him not just doing so, but allowing the archer to show them off to the others is certainly unexpected. But the mitts…god, he’d hated those things, hadn’t he? Surely Clint isn’t using them for some kind of punishment without talking to everyone else first? Phil is not a man who deals well with curiosity, but he’s skilled enough at affecting patience to settle for keeping a careful eye on Clint and their boy.

Aside from what Tony is wearing, it’s not immediately obvious that anything is different. Tony’s quiet, hovering behind the archer as he moves through the kitchen with his unique form of chaotic grace, but that’s not unusual for their little when he’s in headspace. Clint, too, seems mostly the same as always, cracking silly jokes and feigning grumpiness at the ratio of healthy food options to what he calls ‘real snacks’. But there are little tells for someone who knows Clint as intimately as Phil does: a softness to his voice that supersedes even his usual gentleness with Tony, and what seems like a subconscious way of orienting his body to protect the baby from even the smallest possible ‘threats’, like pantry doors and the sharper-edged corners of some furniture and appliances. When Tony reaches his be-mittened hands up to attempt to help lift a bulk-sized box of individually-wrapped packets of yogurt covered raisins, Clint reacts immediately, steering the baby over to Phil and boosting him into Coulson’s lap, though his chair is not tall and Tony could easily have gotten there without assistance.

“Stay with Daddy Phil for me please. I’m going to make you a bottle and a snack and then we can go outside, alright?” The behaviour far exceeds even Steve’s most helicopter-parent days, and Phil is entirely prepared to hear some complaints from the warm bundle in his lap. But Tony remains perfectly still other than to nuzzle his head against Phil’s chest.

“Hey honey. You feeling okay?” He hopes Tony would have told at least one of them if he was feeling under the weather before they left for this trip, but some kind of illness would seem to be one of the only explanations for the bizarre collection of evidence he has to work with right now.

Tony nods, making a muffled, lazy noise. Lazy actually seems to be the key word right now; after unconsciously shifting to accommodate him, Phil realizes that Tony isn’t just sitting in his lap, he’s draped himself bonelessly over the agent to the point that Phil is the only thing stopping him from slumping to the ground. For most of the team, that might be evidence to support a suspicion of illness, but in Phil’s experience, a sick Tony is typically a tense Tony. Slowly, he slides his hands
down the baby’s arms until he hits the top of the mittens. Even as deep in headspace as he is, Tony recognizes the silent question for what it is.

“Just…wanted ‘em. Is okay?”

“Course it is,” Clint answers firmly, long before Phil can work past his surprise to muster a response. He had been in the middle of putting what looks like half the kitchen onto several child’s sectioned plates, but Tony’s small show of self-consciousness has Clint crossing the kitchen in several long strides and holding a handful of small orange crackers. “Want some guppy crackers for the road?” Reflex has Tony reaching up to take the food, but Clint calmly halts the movement, wrapping his free hand around Tony’s wrist just above the mitt. “I’ve got it, just open up for me, baby.”

As Tony takes the food from him, there’s a fervent triumph in Clint’s expression and in the proud, straight set of his shoulders. And while it seems at odds with the minor domestic scene in front of him, it hits Phil that he hasn’t seen the other man this sure and at peace since before Loki.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your patience during the unexpected hiatus this story went on. I've had a tremendously difficult few weeks on a personal level, and just wasn't up to posting. On a similar note, because I'm still a bit of a mess, I'm going to ask to not receive constructive criticism on this chapter. It's not that y'all haven't been tremendously kind and helpful when providing that kind of feedback, but I just don't feel up to adding posting-related anxiety to my plate right now. Thank you in advance.

I also promise to get caught up on comment replies soon! Your encouragement and support were a huge comfort over the last few weeks, even though I haven't had a chance to chat back yet. <3
Our heroes enjoy their well-earned picnic.

Content Warning: Brief allusion to the (comic) canon abuse faced by Bruce Banner and his mother. (This may also be movie-canon, too, but I haven't actually seen the Hulk movies.) If you want to skip it, it's the second sentence in the paragraph that begins "There had been something special, though..."

"There’s a lot of pictures of you in this house. I didn’t know you and Howard got so close.” Steve winces, and tries to fight the urge to tear the newest find, a candid shot of he and Peggy taken only days before he’d steered his plane into the Atlantic, off the wall. Tony had tried to prepare him for this in the days leading up to their departure, he really had. But whether because Steve had been distracted with his studies or slightly flattered by the attention of someone as flashy and impressive as Howard had been, he’d mostly brushed it off. But being here to see it all, realizing that the number of images and other representations of Steve and Captain America dwarf the few stiff, posed shots of Tony that seemed to exist only in the areas of the mansion where people would expect to see them…if anything could make him actually hate Howard Stark, this might be it.

“We weren’t,” he bites out. Bucky, the little shit, just cocks an eyebrow at him, the expression so typical of his old self that most of the rage leaves Steve as quickly as it had come. “I think we’re in here. Make a left.” The bedroom Tony had directed them to is huge and opulent like the rest of the house, but thankfully Steve and Cap-free, and Steve can’t help but laugh as Bucky leaps onto the bed with glee. Life gets even better when Bucky wraps a cautious arm around his waist to pull Steve down next to him. “Hey jerk.”

“Hey punk.” After the happy chaos of the car, he imagines Bucky feels just as relieved as he does by to revel in the silence for a moment, so he doesn’t force conversation. He doesn’t even move except to occasionally run his hands over the solid, real presence of the man who had haunted his dreams for so long after his loss. Far too often, his fingers trip slightly over the hardened skin of scars, but he does his best to afford them no special treatment, for better or worse, and his carefully neutral response is rewarded. In the early days, when Steve had displayed anger or sadness at the sight of Bucky’s missing arm and the other physical evidence of Hydra’s lasting impact, the other man had been quick to turn away or leave the room; now, though he keeps a wary eye on Steve, Bucky is still and relatively relaxed under his hands.

“Think I want to be little today,” Bucky murmurs, after what could be two or twenty-two minutes. “That okay? I don’t want Stark to feel like I’m cutting in on an event that was just supposed to be his.” Steve holds back a sigh of fond exasperation. If Tony and Buck ever expect even half of the consideration and concern for themselves that they give to one another, he’ll consider both of them
to have made huge strides in their respective recoveries.

“Of course it’s okay. We talked specifically about today, remember? And Tony told you that he’d love to spend the picnic with his big brother if that was what you wanted too. Want me to help you get dressed, bud? I made sure to pack some of your new clothes.”

Unlike Tony, for whom it is a rare and pleasant release to not make most decisions when it comes to his little self, Bucky had been far more comfortable with the idea of kid-friendly clothes once Natasha had had the foresight to invite him to take part in the shopping. He mostly differs from his ‘brother’ too, in the types of clothing he seems to prefer. Little Tony enjoys bright, bold prints and colours, seems to need a sharp visual distinction between his little self and the Big version usually clad in either worn denim or bespoke suits. Bucky’s little wardrobe, meanwhile, is not all that dissimilar from what he wears when he’s Big. His shirts are dark, usually without text or images, and the bottoms closely resemble the loose sweats her prefers when hanging around the tower. With Bucky, Steve has learned, the distinction is entirely in the quality. Whether out of preference or habit, the clothes he wear when Big tend to be both cheap and rough, the kind that leave skin raw and irritated if kept on too long. The few more forgiving items Tony had stocked Bucky’s closet with prior to his arrival at Avengers Tower have all gone entirely untouched.

But when they’d prepare to shop online for their play by sampling some of the numerous fabrics in Tony’s ample clothing collection, Bucky had quietly lingered over the more sumptuous materials. While he still occasionally had issues with cost, he’d blushingly permitted the team to order things in softer, higher quality forms of cotton and bamboo; at Tony’s gentle urging, he’d even green-lighted the purchase of a couple of sweaters in cashmere and merino wool for when the weather turned cold again. He hopes, maybe selfishly, that someday Bucky will be comfortable finding similar items when he’s Big, but for now Steve’s happy to settle for encouraging him to start learning to treat his own comfort and pleasure like it’s something that matters again.

He gets Bucky set up in a green spun cotton t-shirt and grey sweats, smiling at the way his boy appears to try to sink into the fabrics, shifting around continuously on the bed so that the clothes are pulled taut against various parts of his body. Bucky actually stays there long enough that Steve begins to wonder if, overtired from his own physio and other recovery work this week as well as his efforts to aid Steve with his studies, Bucky might just fall asleep. But the little rubbing motions come to a sudden halt when their enhanced hearing picks up on the sound of Tony, Clint and Phil speaking in the kitchen.

“Tony!” Bucky shouts, squirming impatiently when Steve loops an arm around his waist to prevent him from taking off at top speed.

“Shh, I know you want to see your brother, little man, but we had a talk about stairs when you’re little, remember? What’s the rule?”

“Gotta hold someone’s hand,” Bucky reluctantly answers, sulking and continuing to squirm with enough force that only another super-soldier (or maybe Thor) could have comfortably held him. It’s hardly Steve’s idea of a good time to be playing the bad cop right out of the gate like this, but this particular rule is entirely a practical one. They’ve learned from a few too many scrapes and bruises that little Bucky does not have the learned awareness of his changed body that his Big counterpart does. Balance, on stairs in particular, is a major challenge, so for now he’s not permitted to go up or down them on his own while in headspace.

“Exactly. So you can’t take off down that big set of stairs over there without me, yeah?” He waits for Bucky’s acknowledging nod, then puts his boy of his misery, leading him downstairs and outside onto the ample grounds. Immediately upon getting eyes on Tony, who is seated on a large
blanket between Phil and Clint, Bucky is off at a run. Steve tenses at the speed he manages to pick up, but before he needs to make chase, Natasha comes out of nowhere to intercept. She encourages Bucky to chase her around the yard, probably in an attempt to burn off some of his excess energy. Steve watches with warm pleasure (and not a little amazement) as the game soon turns into a hybrid of tag and hide-and-seek that would only be possible for people with the type of training both Bucky and Natasha have had. To see them using that experience this way, for the sole purpose of amusing themselves and making one another and their onlookers laugh and gasp and cheer, it’s more than he would ever have hoped for even all those weeks ago in that lonely apartment he and Bucky had shared.

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Bruce had taken his time unpacking in order to survey the manor in solitude. Regardless of the amount of information about the place’s existing security and privacy measures, as well as the ones they’d had installed as part of their planning, he is still a man used to trusting and relying primarily on himself when it comes to his own safety. With the added responsibility he now has to protect one, and sometimes two, littles, that drive is only stronger.

Eventually, though, even his paranoia is satisfied, and the lure of laughter and chatter from outside are too strong for him to convince himself a third going-over of the house is really necessary. He steps into the warm sunshine to find Thor, Natasha, Bucky and Steve running around the yard at speeds that would be a little frightening if all of them didn’t have variations on the serum running through their systems (or, in Thor’s case, the physical benefits of being a god). The others are settled on a blanket several feet away, and he feels the tension in his shoulders and neck start to drain away as he steps toward them. But that’s nothing to the swooping sensation in his stomach when he gets a good look at Tony.

Tony, who is between Phil and Clint, apparently wholly at ease in a colorful diaper, a t-shirt and the mitts Bruce had gotten him so long ago. Phil leans down to murmur something to him and Tony actually makes a cooing noise response, reaching up to pat Phil’s face with his mittened hand. Some of Bruce’s plans for the day look like they might need some alteration, but if he’s reading this situation correctly, it’ll be entirely worth it.

“Hey little love,” he greets softly, sinking down beside Clint who looks to be sneakily rubbing sunscreen onto every bit of Tony’s exposed skin he can reach. “Any interest in being Papa’s assistant for a very important bit of science?” This definitely catches the baby’s interest, and Bruce can feel Tony’s excited stare following him as he starts to unpack a large plastic tub. “I thought we’d experiment with bubble recipes, see which one makes bubbles that are hardest to pop. Papa’s going to mix up the ingredients, and then you can be my tester, alright?” Originally, he’d thought to have Tony more involved with the entirety of the process, but those fantasies pale in comparison to the reality of seeing his little so obviously relaxed and at peace with, well, his littleness.

Eventually, everyone gets drawn in by the bubble-making process, shouting out suggestions for additional ingredients and making wagers about their potential success. Some are both silly and disastrous, like the ones Clint called unicorn bubbles, involving ample amounts of both food coloring and glitter. Adult Tony would have been fully aware that as a gas, bubbles hold neither colour nor anything as heavy as glitter particularly well, but as a baby he had simply seemed amused by the fact that it was he and Bucky that ended up multi-coloured and sparkly. Both littles are equally delighted by the mixture Bruce makes using glow pigment, even though the effect will be far more visible come nightfall. They do also manage to accomplish the goal Bruce had set out with, producing a mixture of white corn syrup, glycerin and home-made soap (that had taken Bruce almost a week to perfect, which he will never tell anyone—shut up, he might need it in the lab someday) that yields large and nearly indestructible bubbles. Bucky instantly regains his energy and begins chasing the super-bubbles around the grounds; Tony sticks closer to home-base,
alternating between giggling as he pokes and prods at the bubbles and staring at Bruce in wide-eyed amazement, as if he can’t really believe anyone would go to all this trouble just to have fun with him.

“Tony, come play?” Especially given how energetic Bucky has been today, it’s surprising to Bruce how quiet and gentle his voice always is, especially when he’s addressing his brother. The older little has been using the largest bubbles as makeshift soccer balls, attempting to aim them between two fence posts with his feet before they pop. Though the bubbles are strong, Bruce imagines the game actually requires a concentrated gentleness on Bucky’s part, and makes a mental note to suggest a similar game as part of Bucky's ongoing physical therapy. Tony, meanwhile, chews his lip and looks up at Bruce, who isn’t entirely clear on the source of his hesitation.

“What’s wrong, bud?” He receives a shrug in response. Sometimes the extent to which little Tony can become almost non-verbal does become a challenge. “You too tired to play?” Head shake. “Hungry?” Another negative. “Do you want to try playing something a little quieter with your brother?” Pause, and then a nod.

“James, your brother’s a bit too little for soccer right now. Would you like to keep playing that with Steve for a bit, or do you want to come try this bean bag tossing game that Phil brought out?” Serving as a caretaker for James is still new enough that even minor conflicts feel like potential landmines, but given Barnes’ history, Bruce imagines that emphasizing the boy’s right and ability to make choices for himself, even when little, is a good bet. And sure enough, Bucky just considers the offered options and then ambles over to join them.

The game, comprised of a simple board with numerous holes for the bean bags to be tossed through, was certainly well chosen by Phil. It’s simple enough that it doesn’t require much in the way of concentration (even Big, Bucky had struggled with more complicated games the one time they’d had a board game night after he moved in), and it’s an old enough game to be familiar to nearly everyone; chances are good that Bucky and Steve may even have played it as kids themselves.

“Can Tony and me be a team, Mr. Bruce?” Bucky requests shyly. Bruce registers out of the corner of his eye that Tony looks quite relieved by this proposal (perhaps afraid of being in competition with his brother, even in such a minor way?), but most of his energy is devoted to not ‘aww’ing out loud at being addressed so formally.

“Of course you can, bud. I’ll just get Tony’s mitts off, alright? And you can just call me Bruce, you know, or anything else you’re comfortable with.” The boy nods but doesn’t reply, busying himself with coaxing Tony to his feet and toward the board. The baby gets to stand closer to throw, Bucky insists, because he’s littler than Bucky, a rule that no one (even Tony, though he does blush slightly) opposes. The ‘older’ boy also takes it upon himself to be Tony’s personal cheerleader, keeping up a continual flow of encouragement and compliments, even on the occasions where Tony’s shots don’t land where he intends them. Tony visibly thrives under the approval, panicking less when he makes mistakes and even laughing when a particularly misdirected shot hits the fence and startles several birds that had been resting on top of it.

It’s honestly a bit humbling for Bruce to watch, for the first time in any kind of extended way, just how sweet little Bucky is with Tony. He’d never, of course, have said as much to Steve or James himself, but it had been hard not to harbour some resentment towards the man, both for his role in Steve’s abrupt departure from the tower and for Howard and Maria Starks’ deaths. Even though Bruce knew better than most that the latter especially was not within Barnes’ control, the man’s association with so much hurt for Tony had not been an easy nor a simple thing to move past. But to see him now, gently aiding Tony in adjusting his throw, caring not a whit that an adult Tony
Stark could probably deliver a convincing half-hour lecture about the physics of the game, Bruce can’t muster even a hint of the old anger. Not when it feels like it all just…fits, like they’ve been missing Bucky without even knowing it the entire time.

“Papa, did you see?” Tony asks excitedly when his next shot lands squarely in the furthest hole, worth the most points. Chiding himself for missing a second of this nearly-perfect present lost in reflection, Bruce stands and joins his littles, ready to make the biggest deal possible of both their successes.

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So far the family picnic has been awesome, and Tony had not been remotely interested in being put down for a stupid nap. However, after he and Bucky had allegedly slipped into a post-lunch doze outside (Tony still wants proof of this!), they’d been carted off to their respective bedrooms with instructions to remain there until they were retrieved by a grown-up.

Initially, this hadn’t turned out to be such a horrible thing. Daddy Clint had packed Tony’s weighted blanket and Sanders, so he had been toasty warm and cozy and maybe not entirely upset to drift off while whispering to his stuffed pal about his day. Waking up, however, was a different matter. There are too many memories in this house, way more than he’d really reckoned with, and right from the start his sleep had been haunted by Howard: his anger, his disappointment, his disinterest, Tony’s brain had seamlessly weaved memories and imagined scenarios into a series of scenes both terrifying and depressing in equal measure. The one that had finally woken him had involved Howard coldly insisting that he needed the arc reactor from Tony’s chest to repair and enhance Steve’s shield. Surely you understand, Tony, the man is Captain America. The specific situation had never happened, obviously, but God, the number of times Tony had heard those exact words from Howard, justifying everything from his worst rages to his absences at various landmark events in Tony’s life…well, it was a little more believable than Tony could handle.

He had come to with tear streaks down his face, an extremely wet diaper, and James Barnes kneeling next to the bed.

“I heard you scream.” His voice sounds has the sharp edges of the Soldier, alert and seeking out potential threats, but also the softer tones of Tony’s big brother. The combination should probably feel stranger than Tony finds it. “Tell me who to get. You want Stevie?”

“No,” Tony yelps. Most of his brain knows that Steve is a separate entity from Cap, and especially from the version of the Captain that Tony had grown up both idolizing and measured against. But still, the thought of seeing him right now is way, way too scary. Moving as if Tony and the entire bed are made of glass, Bucky stands and slides in next to him. A moment later, a couple of fingers are pressed against the sopping diaper between his legs, and Tony whimpers in humiliation. Now Bucky, a man who has endured war and torture and who knows what else, is getting distressed too, and Tony wants to cry even more. He wishes for a moment that they were back at the Tower, because he suspects JARVIS would have taken the decision to get a grown-up in here out of their hands by this point, but his AI isn’t here. It’s just Tony and his brother, and so he has to either get himself under control, or give Bucky permission to find one of the others. With Howard’s voice still so recent a presence in his mind, the former feels like the good, brave option. But this afternoon, Clint had said that letting himself be as little as he wanted was its own kind of brave too, right? And Daddy Clint wouldn’t lie to him, none of them would, because it was one of the Big Rules everyone follows.

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“H-hello?” The voice from the top of the stairs is soft enough that even sitting in the kitchen, Phil almost doesn’t hear it. Barnes sounds so small and scared that he nearly drops the recently-refilled lemonade in his hand in his haste to get to the little.

“I’m right here, James,” he assures him, using a bit more Agent Coulson in his tone than he typically would at home, hoping it’ll soothe the part of Bucky that is still sometimes comforted by military-style hierarchies and structure. “And you did well calling for me from there instead of coming down the stairs by yourself.” The boy doesn’t even seem to register the praise.

“Tony needs…Big person. I tried, but I’m not—I can’t.” That has Phil speeding his ascent up the stairs immediately, post-surgical exercise restrictions be damned.

“What happened?”

“He hadda bad nightmare. And he’s, um, really wet.” Damn. Based on Tony’s reactions to even stepping inside the mansion they probably should have expected this, and they definitely should have remembered that monitoring the littles requires a bit more active work without JARVIS’ constant, helpful presence.

“Okay, James. You did exactly the right thing in coming to get someone. I’m going to text one of the others to come get you, and I’m going to go see to your brother. Is that alright?”

“Yes Mr. Phil.” Coulson does exactly as promised, and waits until he sees Steve come running, taking the steps two at a time, before hurrying down the hallway to his baby.

Tony is, as Bucky warned, both extremely wet and very upset. The first is the easier problem to rectify, so Phil starts there, folding out the changing pad and sliding Tony on top of it. For the first time in a while, the little attempts to resist being changed, squirming and making quiet, incomprehensible noises of protest.

“It’s okay, you’re okay. We’re just gonna get you into a dry diaper, that’s all. Nothing to worry about. Daddy’s got this. Do you have Sanders with you there?” Tony lifts his arm just slightly to reveal the sloth. “Good, honey, that’s really good. Do you want to tell him about your dream? I know he’s a very good listener.” Tony’s not just being withholding or attempting to tough it out, because he takes a long, deep breath, and leans his face close to Sanders’, but after he chokes out the word ‘Howard’, he can’t seem to manage anything more. After several aborted attempts that leave Tony crying harder than when he’d entered, Phil smiles sadly and leans up to press a kiss to his baby’s head. “That’s alright, Tony. If you can’t or don’t want to talk about it, you don’t need to. But the offer doesn’t come with an expiry date either, okay? You can always come to any of us, no matter what.” Phil rushes through the rest of the diaper change (not the best idea, given that Tony’s skin was looking a little red and irritated—he’ll have to make sure to put some extra cream on him later) and sits down, gathering Tony into his arms. “My perfect, brave little boy. I love you so much.” Tony replies in kind, voice a little less tremulous and uncertain, and Phil smiles. “Wanna know what we’re going to do tonight?”

“Glowbubbles?” Tony guesses.

“That’s one thing for sure. Papa Bruce put the mixture in the fridge so they’ll be even more durable. Tasha also tracked down a few things so we can watch a movie outside, projected on the big tall fences out back. Would you like that, honey?” Tony Stark, the man who already has, or could build or buy almost anything, reacts like he’s just been given something magical and priceless, staring at Phil with wide eyes and bouncing in his lap. All of a sudden, it’s Phil who feels perilously close to tears. When he’d gone into surgery, uncertain what shape he would be in when he came out (if he came out), he’d imagined this particular day dozens of times. Even despite the
nightmare and Tony’s consequent upset, though, the reality is a hundred times better, because Phil gets to be here to soothe the hurts and chase the demons away. He murmurs a quiet thank you into Tony’s ear and rocks him gently, promising himself that they’ll go downstairs and join the others in just a few more minutes.

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Leaving the mansion, Bruce reflects several days later, had produced some seriously mixed feelings. If and when they choose to return, they’ll definitely need to do some renovation first; the place is almost palpably haunted by Stark family ghosts, and as a result both Tony and Steve had been far too prone to disrupted sleep and long periods of sullen silence for everyone else’s liking. And even though the vastness of the Tower had taken some getting used to, it was now hard for him to imagine spending extended periods of time anywhere else.

There had been something special, though, about being in a more traditional (if still massive) house with his family. It had been the kind of thing Bruce had fantasized about during his own childhood, moving to a huge house full of people and love and far away from his Dad or anyone else who might want to cause him or anyone he cared for harm. And getting the chance to be outside with Bucky and Tony, however controlled a setting, had been so idyllic that the pessimistic part of Bruce had spent half the time waiting for a major crisis to hit. Short of a few minor tantrums (mostly the result of Tony’s poor sleep) and a short fall down the stairs on Bucky’s part (it’ll definitely be a relief to have JARVIS’s help caring for their more energetic little again), no such problems had arisen. They’d watched movies and played games and eaten way too much junk food. It had been a lot like the earliest days of having Tony as their little, only this had been even better, because Bucky had been there too, both Big and little, and Tony himself had been at ease, possibly for the first time ever, with himself and his headspace.

If Bruce wasn’t halfway in love with the Big version of the man already, he would have said it was a shame to come back to the Tower and immediately lose Tony to a flurry of meetings and time spent in the workshop. So, it’s a relief (if also a bit of a surprise) when Tony requests access to Bruce’s own labs in the middle of a quiet Wednesday. They exchange quick greetings, and then Tony sits down atop one of the empty lab benches and takes one long, deep breath.

“I’m ready to talk about Extremis now.”

Chapter End Notes

Team, we're almost at the end (max 2-3 chapters left)! But I already have so many thoughts about the sequel and hopefully my life will continue calming down enough for me to get going on that soon.

I seriously have the best readers. I can't believe this fic has over 1000 kudos. I can't believe how kind and supportive and patient you all have been. Thank you thank you thank you.
The chopper touches down on the Avenger’s Tower helipad at exactly 7:00 PM. Because while Pepper Potts’ To-Do list is the only one that can usually come near matching Tony’s, she is also punctual, detail-oriented, and above all a fiercely committed friend to Tony himself. From what Phil understands, she had actually made every attempt to convince Tony to allow her to arrive last night, but he’d been adamant that she not cut short a series of crucial meetings all over the Eastern seaboard. Pepper had reluctantly agreed, on the condition that Tony permit James Rhodes to take an immediate personal leave.

It had bothered several of the others to get what seemed like confirmation that Rhodes is still the only one Pepper really trusts when it comes to Tony’s safety and security. Clint in particular, whose protective and possessive tendencies where it concerns Tony Stark are equal parts endearing and exasperating for Phil, has been pouting for days. And sure enough, when he looks back, he sees the archer hovering awkwardly as far away from the helicopter as he can manage. Adorable, ridiculous brat.

The thing is, though, Phil’s pretty sure that Pepper’s request for Rhodes to be present doesn’t mean what the rest of them think. He’d been the one she’d called, after all, when Tony had been at what was arguably his lowest point. And while not all of it (particularly Tony’s de-aging, near-death, and their subsequent breakup) had turned out the way she’d probably imagined, he was certain she didn’t harbour any resentment towards them. Indeed, during their numerous phone conversations
over the past few weeks, Pepper has been nothing but glowing in her assessment of Tony’s mental and emotional health, which she credits almost entirely to his relationship with the team. Phil isn’t foolish enough to think there isn’t some part of that joy that’s a little bittersweet on her part, but even at their worst and most volatile points, Pepper had never wanted anything but the best for Tony.

He believes her desire for Rhodes, who steps forward to offer her a hand down and out of the chopper, has a lot more to do with the fact that it was he who brought Tony home from Afghanistan. And however many ways what’s happening now differs from 2008, there’s probably a part of her that will always be tempted to turn to Rhodes when she feels Tony’s physical survival is at risk. The part of Phil that is Tony’s family and caretaker and teammate and maybe someday more than that catches up with his more analytical side, and his stomach gives a small roll. The risk is minimal. Some of the best people in the world, including Tony himself, have made damn sure of that.

After sharing an extended hug with Rhodes, Pepper makes a bee-line straight for Phil. She looks immaculate in a rose-gold silk blouse and a perfectly-tailored pinstriped skirt; the only concession toward her own comfort she must have made on the flight here was the removal of the (probably) matching suit jacket. Her bare arms are slightly goose bumped in the cold, and as she gets closer his trained gaze finds a few of the subtler signs that betray her tiredness and worry. None of this, though, means that she feels anything but strong when she grabs him in a hug almost as long and close as the one she’d given Rhodes.

“Natasha promised hot chocolate,” she mumbles into the juncture between Phil’s neck and shoulder.

“Natasha is wrapping a few things up at HQ. But if she made you that promise I’m entirely sure she plans to fulfill it. Come on inside and get comfortable.” His text alert sounds, and he releases his hold on the woman in his arms enough to slide it out of his pocket, only to give an extremely undignified snort at its contents. “Tony requests that I remind everyone present that the bots are extremely sensitive right now, and that the first one of us to cry or otherwise show intense emotion of any kind in front of them is to be exiled to the 39th floor of Avengers Tower. He then adds that, on a completely unrelated note, Dummy is refusing to be separated from him right now, so, through what he insists is no fault of his own, no ‘feels’ are permitted within 100 yards of Tony.”

“What’s on the 39th floor?” Clint queries, then immediately looks annoyed to have been drawn into the conversation despite himself. Pepper shudders in Phil’s arms.

“We don’t talk about the 39th floor. We never talk about the 39th floor.” Immediately, Clint’s curiosity and his regretful interest in all things potentially dangerous overcomes his attempts to remain distant from Pepper Potts. The little shit even goes so far as to hold the door into the tower open for her, and gives a little bow as she passes.

“Methinks you and I have many fascinating things to discuss, Pepper Potts, including the passcodes that’ll get me into the vents over the workshop. Let’s go get you a drink, shall we?”

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Two Weeks Earlier

It’s plain that a not-insignificant part of Tony wants to take the words back as soon as he’s said them. Bruce’s still, shocked silence doesn’t help matters, he knows it doesn’t. But it’s a response to genuine surprise that he’s worked long and hard to cultivate in the hopes of avoiding other, greener reactions, and therefore not something he can simply turn off. As (hopefully) a compromise, Bruce manages a noise he hopes sounds like an agreement before slowly and methodically gathering up
his materials. The experiment he had been running, an attempt to generate a synthetic neurotransmitter that would theoretically enhance his tentative ability to connect to and communicate with the Hulk, was early enough along that it will be easier to abandon it and start again another time rather than try to preserve it. He carefully disposes of the compounds in the proper bins, holding back a chuckle at Tony’s impatient complaints about cleaning and the point of having lab assistants.

“I’ll leave the tests tubes for someone else to deal with sanitizing, how’s that?” he offers.

“Uuuuuugh remind me to never let you in the shop when I’m testing suit or weapon upgrades.”

“You test those in the shop?” Bruce frowns. He’s abandoned all his remaining materials and is halfway across the room, preparing to deliver yet another safety lecture before he realizes what Tony has done. “Oh very mature, Stark.”

“If it’s any consolation, despite his rather shameless attempts to distract you from your admirable commitment to proper laboratory procedures, Sir was not in fact lying about how he produces and tests Iron Man and Avengers-related products,” JARVIS offers. Bruce’s scowl deepens, and Tony instantly begins a rambling and increasingly ridiculous series of threats to the AI involving a child’s birthday party, Dummy on a sugar high (is that possible? Dear God, Bruce hopes that’s not possible) and the song from *it’s a small world*.

“Let’s stick to the matter at hand, and address your appalling disregard for your own physical well-being in the workshop at another time, shall we?” Tony nods forcefully at the offer, all earlier reluctance to engage with this topic forgotten, and Bruce marvels again at the way JARVIS’s well-timed interventions can change the course of an entire conversation for the better. “Now, I’m guessing since you came down here instead of asking me to meet you, you’d rather discuss this here, in relatively neutral space?” Tony makes a noise of agreement, so Bruce leans against one of the unused benches, close enough that he’ll be able to reach the other man after a step or two, but far enough to try to ensure Tony doesn’t feel smothered. “So talk to me.”

“What do you know about how Extremis works?” Bruce casts his mind back to the notes he’d reviewed during and after Tony’s experimentation. He hasn’t looked at them much, since, half nervous that Tony would find out if he had and feel rushed toward making a decision. But he’s confident that at least the majority of the details have stuck with him.

“Once the host is successfully exposed to and bonded with the virus, the most immediate and obvious effect is the development of restorative capabilities. Extremis forms an interface with the brain’s healing centres, directing it to reproduce any wounded or damaged tissues.”

“Which, in Extremis’s ‘understanding,’ is essentially *all* bodily tissue,” Tony interrupts.

“I thought—in the videos…”

“The footage we saw depicted the latter portion of a multi-stage process. The subjects basically enter a cocoon-like formation, during which their bodies are re-written. It’s not quite as dramatic as the super-soldier transformation, it’s not providing musculature or bone structure that wasn’t there in the first place, but Extremis reads any of the usual wear-and-tear on the human body as damage that needs to be fixed. The whole body is interpreted as a wound.” There’s something sort of wrong about hearing Tony sound calm when he talks about science; he’s normally excited, bordering on manic, when he makes new discoveries, and his explanations tend to become correspondingly frantic. By the end of some of the man’s most lengthy rants, even Bruce has barely been able to keep up. But now, Tony’s speech is measured and controlled, as if every word is weighing him down instead of lifting him up like it usually would. “What do you know about what else it does?”

“Sir was not in fact lying about how he produces and tests Iron Man and Avengers-related products,” JARVIS offers.
“Well, your notes suggested, and I agree, that that kind of regeneration would also leave the host with enhanced strength and speed. Enhanced cognitive capabilities are likely, as is boosted immunity to most diseases and other viruses. I’m…assuming that the subject would still conceivably be able to exude fire, though I’m guessing your fix made that something that could be manipulated at will.” Tony smiles, then, though a brittle and bitter version far closer to his public persona than the man he is at home. Bruce prevents himself from flinching in response, though it’s a very near thing.

“You think I can’t tell when you’re holding back on me, Brucey Bear? C’mon, out with it. Stop repeating my notes to me and tell me the rest. The things I was too scared to keep a record of, but that you must know by now.”

“Regenerated, enhanced organs. Little need for respiratory or digestive processes, and no need at all for water. Potentially the ability to generate and discharge electricity at will. And…” Bruce inhales, knowing this is the part Tony objects to the most. “…well, not immortality, but that kind of repair would vastly extend a person’s life.”

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Present

“Do you have the paperwork I requested drawn up?” Maria hadn’t made many changes to her apartment’s security since Natasha’s last visit, so either she’s gotten complacent and lazy with her own safety (unlikely), or she’d concluded that Natasha was the only one likely to be capable of finding, let alone successfully exploiting, the building’s weaknesses, and had therefore stopped trying (also unlikely, though definitely the more flattering of the two options). Whatever the truth is, she still manages to look irritated when she steps inside to find Natasha in her living room.

“Agent Romanov, you realize I do in fact have a day job, one that does not involve catering to the every whim of a group of costumed vigilantes who—”

“Who have collectively and individually saved the world numerous times over? Stop trying to impersonate Fury, Maria, you were never any good at it.” Hill steps out of her black heels (she must have had meetings with the Council today, she never wears heels when she’s really working) and blows a stray chunk of hair from her face with an irritated sigh.

“And yet he’s the only one you’ve ever seemed to listen to. Is that why I’m the one who keeps receiving these visits from you, Natasha? Because you think you can manipulate me in ways you can’t manipulate Nick Fury?”

Natasha could sever all remaining personal ties she has to Maria Hill right now with a few well-chosen words. It would certainly be the smart thing to do, now that Natasha’s loyalties have so decisively shifted; never letting the future head of SHIELD get close enough to realize just how much her team has come to mean to her would be another way to keep them safe, hidden from the prying eyes of an organization that would want to either exploit or destroy those bonds depending on what suited them.

Annoyingly, Natasha finds that it’s those very same attachments that she has to her team that stop her. She’s capable, she’ll always be capable, of the kind of self-protection and near-sociopathic detachment that are required for her to do the things she needs to do when she has to do them. But outside of those rare situations…she’s tired. She hadn’t known just how exhausted she was by it all until she’d taken the absurd risk of caring for so many people at once, had learned that she was not just capable, but good at it, in her own way. And even if a part of her wants to chip away at her newfound vulnerabilities, to make herself hard and closed and avoid the potential for utter ruin involved in letting people so close to her, she doesn’t want it enough. Not anymore.
“I’m here because I think you are a different leader than Nick Fury. He is brilliant and decisive and I owe him my life several times over, but I never once made the mistake of trusting him. He would be the first to tell you that was the right call. I want to trust you; for its own survival, SHIELD needs the Avengers. If we walk, if we work under the purview of another organization, or entirely independently, SHIELD loses the last chance it has at legitimacy in the eyes of the public. And the Avengers…we need SHIELD, too. They’re coming for us. The Accords might be a distant rumble at the moment, but when we make a mistake, and we will, it’ll get bad and quickly. But I need some kind of proof that you’re on our side, that things are going to be different. So I’ll ask you again. Do you have the paperwork?”

Maria doesn’t even attempt to disguise the long, evaluative stare that follows Natasha’s little speech (which might, she reflects, be the most words she’s ever spoken to anyone who works for SHIELD with the obvious two major exceptions). She holds herself as open to that gaze as she can bear, for as long as she can; even when she can’t handle it anymore, when her every instinct is screaming at her to run or fight or even fuck her way out of this, she doesn’t disguise the retreat by pretending the adjustments to her posture and the way her fingers reflexively reach for the knife at her wrist are anything but what they are. Thankfully, Maria appears to find what she was looking for. She lifts the briefcase at her feet up, enters several codes and provides a retinal scan, and takes a ream of papers from inside. Natasha holds a hand out to receive them, but Hill hesitates, seems to struggle with herself for a moment, then pleads,

“We could change it. With Stark onboard, I’m sure he could find the flaws, figure out where we went wrong and—”

“That’s not what he wants. That’s not what any of us want.” Maria sighs, a bone-deep and weary sigh that makes Natasha wonder if some of this isn’t personal, if maybe what Hill hasn’t been able to say through all of this is that she wants a way to ensure that a woman she once called one of her closest friends will be safe.

“I made the alterations on all of your contracts explicitly prohibiting the use of the TAHITI protocol, and anything like it that may be developed in the future.” The sensation of relief Natasha feels when she takes the papers from Maria’s hand takes her a bit off-guard; she’d been fairly certain of this outcome from the moment she’d made the request, even if she’d made everyone’s lives a bit difficult by insisting it be done today, per Tony’s request to her. But there’s still something viscerally soothing about holding the proof that her death, all of their eventual deaths, belong only to them again. “There’s one more thing in there. It’s not…the contracts are not conditional on you agreeing. You have that regardless of your answer. But I’d like it if you did.” Natasha thinks longingly of hot chocolate, and the Tower, and even of seeing Pepper and Rhodes again, but she can’t not ask, and she does. Maria, thankfully, is not one to keep her in suspense long. “It’s a contract that would make you one of the co-directors of SHIELD.”

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Two Weeks Prior

“There’s another reason I wanted us to talk in here: it’s not far from the workshop, and us being in here gave the bots time to get some things ready for us. Come with me?” Even Bruce, who is perhaps more used to Tony’s non-sequiters than anyone, pauses at the abrupt shift in the conversation. But he takes the hand that’s being held out to him and he follows, as he will always follow Tony. That does not make it entirely reassuring when Tony enters the shop and immediately begins talking to Dummy about barf, of all things. “It’s an acronym,” Tony adds defensively once gets a look at Bruce’s expression.

“A terrible one,” he can’t help but insist. Tony grins at the snark, but the smile falls away just slightly when Dummy rolls over and holds out what looks like a pair of modified sunglasses.
“Terrible acronym or not, I… I’ve been working on this for a long time. I’ll explain the science behind it as much as you want later, and I’m sure you’ll find a lot to yell at me for concerning how and why it was constructed. But for you to understand why some aspects of Extremis frighten me as much as they do, there are things you need to know and I… can’t say them. I’ve never said them out loud to anyone, not even Rhodey; Pep knows a bit, I think, because I talked in my sleep even more when I first got back from Afghanistan than I do now, but she knew better than to ask. Really, in a nutshell, that’s why I loved her and that’s also why we never would have worked,” he muses. At any other time, Bruce would be fine with being Tony’s sounding board on this topic; Tony’s never really spoken much about his breakup with Pepper, and as amicable as it seemed to have been on all sides, it had to hurt more than he let on sometimes. But Bruce’s concerns are a bit more immediate just now.

“Tony, I, you have no idea how much I want to be the one who’s here for you for this. But if I see — the Other Guy doesn’t handle you being hurt very well, and I don’t think our communication has advanced enough for me to explain to him that he can somehow be seeing you but it’s not you now.”

“JARVIS is monitoring your vitals, and if necessary, Butterfingers and You are both on Hulk-herding duty; the big guy is crazy about them, and he’ll go where they lead. But I’m not planning on showing you any of the boring stuff anyway.” Only Tony Stark would refer to being tortured as boring. “Please, Bruce? Someone has to know, before… well, whatever happens next. And I won’t force you, or at least not anymore than I already am by bringing you in here and then giving you my pathetic kicked-puppy face, but I’d really like it to be you.” The selfish part of Bruce nearly wins—he almost asks why it has to be him, what it is he could have possibly done to earn this kind of trust. But for now that just isn’t the point, can’t be if they’re going to get anywhere.

Not trusting his voice, he nods, and Tony boots up the system. In minutes, Bruce is watching in crystal-clear picture as Tony wakes from what can only in the loosest sense of term be called surgery. He witnesses Tony grow close to the man who had hooked his heart up to a literal car battery (of all the part of the legends that have built up around Iron Man’s origins, Bruce had always somehow believed the car battery thing was one of the lies, perhaps spread by Tony himself to enhance his mystique) and saved his life. He hears them talk about their lives, and the aching sadness he feels for Tony (“You are a man who has everything. And nothing”) is quickly eclipsed by the look in the other man, Yinsen’s, eyes when he talks about his family and how he plans to see them again soon.

More than perhaps anything else, Bruce Banner is entirely familiar with the look of a person who has already given up. He knows what’s coming next, realizes what Tony hadn’t in that moment, and the urge to shield the other man from it is almost overpowering even despite how completely illogical it is. The Hulk stirs, demanding to touch Tony, to take off the stupid glasses making him see these things and hide him away somewhere safe. Resisting the intervention is more of a challenge than it should be, and his pulse must be close to the danger zone, but JARVIS, like Tony, has too much faith in Bruce. He says nothing as the struggle with Bruce’s mind and body plays out, and eventually Bruce manages to soothe the angry, frightened presence in the back of his mind with promises he might never be able to keep about protecting Tony from similar occurrences in the future.

He watches in what feels like slow motion as the suit struggles to boot up, sees the desperation and agony in Tony’s expression when he thinks their plan is about to fail, only for both to triple when Yinsen leaves to buy him time. The Tony in the footage, frightened and exhausted, fights his way nearly out of the cave, stopping when he finds Yinsen on the ground, struggling for breath.

“Don’t waste your life, Stark;” the real Tony in front of Bruce murmurs along with the dying man
in the memory. Bruce barely registers Tony removing the goggles and shutting down the BARF system, and he winces in guilty relief when the dead man’s face suddenly fades from view. “Every day of my life since then, I’ve tried to live up to what I promised him. I can’t atone for everything I’ve done, can’t even make up for the fact that I could have had this brilliant man in my life for years if I hadn’t been too drunk and stupid to listen to what he had to say back in 2000. But I’ve still tried.” Bruce opens his mouth to reassure him, to insist that Tony hear him and believe it when Bruce tells him he’s the best man Bruce has ever known, but Tony closes the distance between them and puts a finger to his lips. “Just…let me get this out, okay? I created two modified versions of Extremis. The first, which I used on all the living patients that had already been exposed to the virus, essentially renders it inert. It’s like it never existed, and those subjects will live and get injured and, eventually, die all like nothing ever happened. The one I developed for myself…well, it essentially trades in a lot of the biological benefits. No Road Runner speed or lightning bolts out of my fingers, and, annoyingly, I would still have to eat and drink and breathe and all that nonsense I barely remember to do now. The modified version builds on the bio-electronics components of Extremis; if my math is correct, and it always is, I would essentially have a direct cybernetic interface. The suit and I would be one. I’d also get killer wifi, but that’s genuinely just an unexpected fringe benefit.” Bruce already has a million questions, but as surely as Tony had sensed it about Bruce earlier, he knows now that they’re not done. He can’t quite force Tony to say it, though, not when he already has a pretty decent sense of where this is going.

“But you think it will still substantially prolong your life.” Tony hangs his head. “The life I have now, every second of it, was bought and paid for with the blood of people like Yinsen. That’s already a debt I can never repay, and one of the only things that’s kept me from being swallowed whole by the guilt of it has been the knowledge that I’ll most likely die young and painfully, either in a fight or because of complications from what happened to me in Afghanistan. If I choose this, I let Extremis re-write me all shiny and new, without the arc reactor and the scars and all of it, then I…I’ll break that promise—yes, I will, I can see you wanting to argue this with me, but believe me I will. Because the reasons I want to say yes to Extremis already have very little to do with keeping that promise and using my time to make the world better and safer. My reasons are so fucking selfish, Bruce, that I’m too ashamed to even look at you right now. And they make me so furious with you, with all of you, because I had accepted what was coming, and the Avengers Initiative was supposed to be, at most, a tiny bit of validation. It wasn’t supposed to…I wasn’t supposed to want these things.”

Tony confesses his desire to live with the same guilt-ridden air another person would admit to committing murder or adultery. Bruce, rather unfortunately, responds by breaking into laughter. The betrayed, confused expression on Tony’s face makes him truly wish he could stop, to at least explain, but the most he can do is try to stifle the sounds of the chuckles that are bubbling uncontrollably from his chest.

“Tony, you brilliant, beautiful genius; you remain entirely ignorant of the the big picture in ways I sometimes find oddly comforting.” Admittedly, this was not the best thing he could have said once he finally got his hysterical laughter under control, but Tony demanding that Dummy seek out the nearest electrified item shows far too much potential for escalation, so Bruce holds his hands up in a conciliatory gesture. “What was the first question Yinsen asked you, the first really personal one?” The response is immediate, because even when pissed as all hell at someone, Tony can almost never bear not to provide the correct answer to a question when he knows it.

“If I had family.”

“And what can we hypothesize from that?” Tony, it should also be noted, hates being asked leading questions on the rare occasions when someone else has managed to arrive at the right
answer before he has. But just saying it isn’t going to have enough of an impact, and when the stakes are as high as his friend’s life, Bruce isn’t going to take chances just because Tony doesn’t appreciate his methods. “You give that some thought, then, and you come find me when you’ve figured it out.” If nothing else, this pronouncement is enough to drag Tony out of his sulk.

“Wait—what? You’re not going to just tell me?” Grinning slightly, Bruce shakes his head.

“I’m going back to my lab, Tony. I have full faith that you’ll come up with the right answer.” Just to be cheeky, because this is, after all, the man who told Bruce to start strutting, he gives Tony a little pat on the top of the head before turning toward the exit of the shop.

“Bruce, can’t you give a man a fish now and teach him to fish later? The man in question is hungry, dammit, and he wants his life-lessons handed to him on a pretty platter instead of—Bruce? Get back here! Jesus Christ, no, Dummy, no one wants to play ball right now, can you just—wait, are you intentionally delaying me, you traitorous hunk of metal and circuits?”****

Tony is a constant, often irritating, shadow over next several days. He sticks his head into the lab without warning to shout out answers to questions that are definitely not the one Bruce had asked (“42!” “To get to the other side!” “The Taniyama-Shimura conjecture!” “Because Stone Cold said so!”) whose sole purpose is to annoy Bruce into just giving him the answer; when Bruce locks him out, he gets JARVIS to relay messages over the sound system. (The AI is quite apologetic about it, and Bruce gets the sense that JARVIS occasionally delays passing on these missives when Bruce is actually at sensitive points in his work.) Tony hides a number of Bruce’s possessions, and programs his phone to play the numerous (and somehow all horrible) songs in existence titled “Tell Him” at random times of day. He interrupts Bruce’s sleep, gives food delivery people exorbitant tips to write messages and pleas on food cartons, and, in perhaps the lowest blow of them all, convinces Thor to compose a sad poem featuring a hero who could have saved the world if only he’d been given access to the King’s secret vaults of cheese. (If there’s sense in that metaphor, Bruce definitely doesn’t see it.)

Three days in, Tony follows him into the damned shower. Bruce, halfway through shampooing his hair and (obviously) sans glasses, can barely make the other man out at first.

“What the—Tony, did it never occur to you that sneaking up on a guy who turns into a giant raging monster is not the best idea?” Tony doesn’t even defend his poor decision making. The entirety of his energy and concentration instead seem dedicated to running his eyes hungrily over every inch of Bruce’s naked body. Which should just be obnoxious. It definitely should. Not to mention entirely unfair, given that Tony is still fully-clothed, the ridiculous bastard. “Uh…Tony?”

“I’m sorry what?” Having spent several long moments lingering on Bruce’s chest, Tony’s gaze has trailed steadily downward. Without waiting for a response, he asks, “What’s the mark on your right thigh from? I didn’t think the modified version of the serum left you capable of scarring.”

“There’s a small shard of glass from a beer bottle under the skin. Been there since I was a kid. It’s never come out during a transformation,” Bruce supplies automatically, without even considering that he might refuse to answer. It’s annoyingly easy to provide even this extremely intimate bit of information to Tony, probably because of the way the other man asks for it: like he knows he’ll get what he wants, like there’s nothing wrong at all with strolling into Bruce’s shower and demanding to know the stories written on his body. It’s the kind of arrogance most people would expect of Tony Stark, but that those closest to him rarely ever actually see because Tony’s confidence and charisma are so often in competition with his intense anxiety and self-loathing.

It’s hot. Mind-numbing, toe-curling kind of hot. And there’s not exactly any way to hide the
extremely positive effect all of this is having on certain portions of his nude body. Tony registers this too, smirks, and Bruce should get a damn medal for the amount of self-control he’s forced to summon in order to not just push the other man against the shower wall and make him just as exposed as Bruce himself. It’s only fair that he should get the chance to let his eyes wander everywhere over Tony, studying him just as intently as Tony is unashamedly learning Bruce now, tucking every shiver and goosebump away for future perusal.

“I assume there’s a reason you forced your way into my shower beyond leering at me and asking invasive personal questions about my childhood traumas?” He wants another medal (or, at the least, an extremely stiff drink) for the way that his words come out relatively steady, even while Tony seems to be spending just as much attention studying Bruce’s lips as he does actually listening to what he’s saying. After a moment, though, the words finally seem to kick in, and Tony blushes.

“I…well, yeah, actually, now that you mention it. Although if you want to chat about this later, I would be more than willing to put the self-actualizing on a temporary hold—” A growl, guttural and low and just this side of the Hulk, erupts from Bruce’s chest. And instead of backing away from him like any sane person would do, a very quiet moan escapes Tony’s lips. His body pitches forward, so that they’re pressed chest-to-chest; Bruce can feel the hard outer-casing of the arc reactor even through Tony’s shirt.

Soon. Soon. Soon.

“Don’t. Tempt me. Out with it, Stark. I assume you finally sorted it out?” Tony sighs, and Bruce knows a moment of intense self-doubt, because despite his awareness that this conversation is urgent and necessary, he’s not entirely sure he’ll be able to resist Tony a second time.

“He wanted…when he said, don’t waste your life. He didn’t just mean the stuff I’ve done, with Iron Man and changing the direction of SI. I mean, I hope Yinsen would be happy about that, for my own sanity I have to believe that he would care and think that what everything I’ve tried to do has meant something. But he asked if I had a family because—because he knew then that he might have to die for me to live, and he wanted to make sure the life I was going back to would have… richness and texture and all the things beyond the next mission that make it worth getting up in the morning.”

“That,” Bruce says, so full of pride and relief and arousal that he can hardly choke the words out, “was the right answer.” There are plans to make now. No matter which option Tony chooses (and regardless of what he might think, Tony does have a wider range of options than just Extremis or a short life and painful death), there are plans that need to be made now. Bruce needs to call Dr. Cho, he needs to go over the specs of the arc reactor, and the tests Tony ran on Extremis; he should arrange a time to bring the rest of the team up to speed. They should call Rhodes, and Pepper if Tony wants her, and he should run a full diagnostic scan on Tony just to make sure there won’t be any unanticipated complications regardless of which way they go.

But those plans, he decides, pulling Tony even closer to him and kissing him for all he’s worth, are going to have to wait just a little while longer.

****

Present

“Sir, Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes are threatening to smoke you out of the shop if you don’t join them and the rest of your team within precisely the next two minutes. And I’m sure I need not remind you that you rashly removed the fire extinguisher last week during your spat with Dummy.”
Okay, it’s possible Tony deserves that one. While he’s not a big fan of ultimatums, it is pretty rude even by his standards to bring everyone to the Tower and then ignore them all in favour of completing tasks that are technically marked ‘Non-Urgent (Complete Only When Excruciatingly Bored)’ in his calendar. And the thing is, he really does want to see everyone, especially Rhodey and Pep. But the thought of leaving them in the lurch with all of his unfinished bullshit tasks should something happen is distinctly unpleasant.

“What’s left on the list, J?” The damn upgrades to the StarkPhone have taken him the better part of eight hours, but they’re nearly complete, and even the board should be thrilled with them for once. In addition to giving them the boring updates to the camera they’d requested, he’d also redesigned the hardware almost from scratch, and he was thrilled with the results. The flexible screen in particular, capable of being unfolded to three times its original size, was sure to be a big hit (and it would hopefully get them off his back forever about making a tablet, since it essentially functioned as a two-in-one).

“The StarkPhone updates were the last of it, Sir.”

“…huh. Double check that for me?”

“All essential and non-essential tasks, excepting those projects currently in fabrication, are now complete. Your inbox is at 136, an all-time low, and none of those messages are marked urgent.” The workshop is eerily silent for several long moments. Then Tony stands, wincing slightly at the resulting pops and groans in his shoulders and back.

“I guess I should head up then.” But he can’t quite make himself move, not with the uneasy feeling that he’s left something undone. “J?”

“Sir?

“I…look, if something happens, just…thanks, okay? I’ve had a kick-ass time working with you, and I can’t even count the number of times you’ve saved my life—”

“117. And I fully anticipate doubling that number before I even consider allowing you to go anywhere, Tony.” Is he ever not going to be brought to near-tears when his AI uses his first name? It’s seeming less and less likely.

“JARVIS…”

“It’s going to keep being, as you say, ‘kick-ass’. I shall permit nothing less. Now go upstairs and have dinner with your family before I am forced to allow them to resort to drastic retrieval measures.” Tony gives a sarcastic little salute in the direction of the nearest camera, but then stops once more at the doorway to the shop.

“…our family, J. They’re our family.”

“Of course, Sir.”

"I can't believe after all these years I finally got you to curse."

"Goodnight, Tony."

THE END
Well, this monster of a chapter was the last full one for this story; we'll check in with the team in an epilogue that will be posted next week, and that's it! The rest of their adventures are going to happen in the sequel. I've always known roughly this was where things would end, but this chapter did go through some pretty heavy revision, and the result is a little more open-ended than I originally thought it would be. I hope it's clear why (even though you'll find out some of the more pressing stuff, like Tony's decision, in the epilogue), but I'm also happy to discuss it in comments. It remains slightly challenging for me to deal with harsh feedback at present, though, so even if you hated the ending, keep being your gentle, encouraging selves if you don't mind?

And on that note, thank you for going on this weird and winding and waaaaay longer than I thought it would be journey with me, folks. It's been the constant highlight of my days to receive your kudos and your comments, and to go back through and re-read them when I've felt low; many, I'd even say most, of the comments have also shaped the direction of the story in large and small ways, so thanks to those of you who took the time (and were hella brave! I still rarely comment because I find it even scarier to comment than post) to have really enjoyable conversations about these characters and their journeys.

I hope to see many of you around for the sequel!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Thor makes good on a promise to Tony.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings I can think of here; as always, if I’ve missed something you think should be tagged or warned for, feel free to let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Friend Tony.” A large hand slowly finds its way to Tony’s head, fingers scratching gently at his scalp and tangling into his hair. If they would just stop talking and trying to wake him, it would be absolutely perfect. He extends his leg in what he intends to be a discouraging kick; somehow, it turns into more of a stretch, the really deep kind that makes even the tiny bones in his ankles and feet crack satisfyingly. Well then. Verbal protest it is.

“Mmf.” Tony thinks he’s made himself and his position about being woken quite plain. But his tormenter is apparently not frightened, judging by the deep chuckle sounds near his left ear.

“Ah, it is my Youngling I am addressing then, is it? This is also acceptable, though should I find that my charge was attempting to hide his headspace from us, I shall be forced to have a catoblepas sit on him.”

“Whassa cato—catbol—whassit?”

“A catoblepas is a bull-like beast, with a head so great and heavy it can only look down. So it could keep a constant eye on wayward Younglings who try to keep secrets from their caretakers.” Having a giant beast sitting on him does not sound like something Tony would enjoy, not at all, so he reluctantly lets Thor pull him into a seated position so that he can stare earnestly at his Daddy.

“Didn’t know was gonna be little when I went to sleep. No fibs. Big promise.” Much like after Phil’s surgery, Tony has had a bit of difficulty sinking into headspace after his own procedures and recovery; part of it, he’s sure, has to do with the fact that both Pepper and Rhodey had stuck around for a while afterward, making it impossible to play. (And maybe, on Tony’s worst days, there’s a small part of him that feels like he shouldn’t need this anymore, but he’s not totally ready to have that conversation with any of them yet.) The point is, they’d all be genuinely disappointed to think that he had known headspace was coming and hid it, and he can’t quite bear that thought just now. The demigod evaluates him for a moment, expression all royal severity—except for his eyes, which are always kind of sparkly, especially when he’s looking at little Tony.

“I never truly doubted your integrity, Youngling. In fact, I’ve woken you as a reward for many of your good behaviours.” Instantly, Tony goes from drowsy to nearly bouncing straight off the bed.

“Really? We’re going to go flying?” It’s now been just over a year since he was in the Iron Man
suit (remote piloting is so not the same), and as he continues to inch toward recovery, he’s begun to miss the sensation of flight more and more. There’s absolutely nothing in the world like gliding, fast and smooth and unimpeded, through the sky; it should probably give him a sense of being distanced from the world, but it never has. Tony’s never felt more connected to everything than when he’s peered down over urban cityscapes and deserts and deep blue water and everything in between. “I mean—really really?”

All the way through getting dressed in some of his warmest clothes (including his most hated pair of thermal socks, courtesy of one Dr. Bruce Banner), Tony keeps making Thor reassure him that it’s true. He’s still a little incredulous when Thor carries him, balanced on a hip, into the living room of the penthouse, but this line of thinking is put temporarily on hold when he realizes that the entirety of the team, including Phil and Natasha who were both supposed to be working late at SHIELD, is waiting for them. Most of them are smiling widely at him, but Steve looks slightly green.

“He’s—Tony, are you little, sweetheart? Thor, are you sure this is the best idea—”

“I believe our flight was originally intended as a reward for the Youngling, was it not?” Thor’s voice is still gentle, but there’s also a firmness there that Tony has rarely heard from him during discussions of his little self’s wellbeing. For all his confidence (which occasionally still crosses the line into arrogance) during battle, Thor had once been quick to yield decisions about Tony’s care to others, too afraid of making a mistake to assert himself. Tony’s Big brain is just near enough to the surface that he notices and appreciates the change, and he loves Steve all the more for the way that he realizes it too, and smiles, pushing past his protective anxiety to be happy for his friend and teammate.

Of course, Steve ceding ground on this one front doesn’t mean that what follows does not involve talking, rules, a quick health check-up on Tony, more rules, and just plain worry-warting. Tony is starting to think his original intuition that this trip wasn’t going to happen might be correct, but after checking the harness (which is way too similar to a baby-carrying harness for Tony’s comfort, and they better not get ideas about using this on him beyond today) one more time, and wrapping Tony in a blanket so thick it basically functions as a straitjacket, Bucky shuts everyone else up with his most Soldiery glare and grins at Tony.

“Have fun, sugar.”

It’s everything and nothing like flying in the suit. Many of the sensations are the same—his stomach swoops and his eyes (covered by goofy-looking goggles to protect against the wind) grow impossibly wide, trying to take in absolutely everything they can. And there’s still that perfect moment where the bright lights of the city are just barely visible against the enveloping dark of the sky at higher altitudes. Tony could, and has, stayed at exactly this elevation for hours before, in love with the sensation of absolute present-ness that he so rarely manages. Today, though, they don’t stay there, but climb ever higher, and Thor’s laughing, an exhilarated, booming noise that seems as big and encompassing as the sky itself. They swoop and curve and coast around for what might be minutes or hours, and Thor just keeps laughing, and pointing out particular constellations and planets to Tony as if he hasn’t seen them dozens, maybe hundreds, of times before. Like they’re all brand-new because Tony’s with him.

Tony had been afraid, still, deep down, to be up here again after what had happened with the portal. He’d been alone, so profoundly alone and swallowed whole by the darkness and the the pain when he’d crossed through, that afterward he’d worried the whole thing might be ruined for him forever. Even though he’d ached for it like a phantom limb sometimes, he’d tried to prepare to surrender the sky to all but the most utilitarian of duties. Slowly, though, a ghost of the sheer delight that had
“Overtaken him during his first flight has crept forward, and Tony can see and hear it reflected and magnified perfectly in the man holding him close.

“‘s pretty, Daddy,” he whispers. Not because it’s enough, or because it comes even close to encompassing all of what he wishes he could say to Thor right now (i love you; thank you for giving the sky back to me; thank you for saving my life). What he’s said is in fact laughably inadequate. But Thor still smiles and kisses his head like it doesn’t matter that there are so many things Tony can’t say, might never be able to say. And that makes him just brave enough to make one more request.

“Can you undo the harness?” Thor’s arms tighten reflexively around Tony’s middle and he shakes his head almost violently, long strands of blonde hair brushing against Tony’s face.

“Youngling, that is against rules 2, 4, 7—”

“Trust me,” he begs. “Not gonna hurt myself.” On top of being against the rules specifically laid out for tonight, what he’s about to do is technically a violation of a broader restriction on what Tony is and is not permitted to do whilst in headspace, but he’s like 80 percent sure they’ll forgive him just this once. (If they don’t, he’ll get Bucky on his side. Even when Big, the man is an excellent ally in mischief and fun.) Thor still takes a bit more convincing, but he eventually carefully releases Tony from the straps binding them together and helps him unwind the large blanket surrounding him.

He wastes no time after that. He doesn’t have to; it’s been calling to him since the first second that he started to feel truly comfortable up here. The armour emerges from inside Tony just as easily as releasing a breath, surrounding him completely in a matter of seconds. On his worst and most ashamed days, he’d thought of the armour as a cocoon, or a security blanket. It’s neither of those things. It’s just—Tony, as surely and completely as the heart beating away, no longer threatened by shrapnel, in his chest.

“Race you back to the Tower?” he challenges Thor right before he flips the faceplate down. He savours the startled laugh that chases him across the night sky just as deeply as he does the HUD flashing to life in front of his eyes, and JARVIS’s pleased, smooth voice guiding him home.

Chapter End Notes

*sob* Okay. So that's it! Even though the epilogue was short, I hope it was satisfying, and that it answered some/most of the lingering questions left by last chapter. Thanks again for coming on this ride with me.

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