My Two Front Teef

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Character: Darcy Lewis, James "Bucky" Barnes, Steve Rogers, Tony Stark, Natasha Romanov, Pepper Potts, Jane Foster (Marvel), Thor (Marvel), Clint Barton, Hulk, Bruce Banner, Hawkeye (Matt Fraction) - Character, Darlene Wilson, Paul Wilson, Peggy Carter, Gabe Jones, Timothy "Dum Dum" Dugan, Jim Morita, James Montgomery Falsworth, Jacques Dernier, Howling Commandos, Antoine Triplett, Antoine Triplett's Mother, Skye | Daisy Johnson
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My Two Front Teef

by ChrissiHR
Summary

[***My Two Front Teef will resume December 2020***]

“There was an accident.”


Two adorable brunette children walked into frame on the long distance video call. Two very small children with very familiar faces.

“Hi, Thteebie!” The little boy waved and smiled, showing off the gap where his two front teeth should have been.

Steve knew that face, maybe better than his own. “Bucky?”

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
There Wath an Exthplothion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One-word prompt: voice

“There was an accident.”


“Is yes and no an acceptable answer?”

“What does that mean, Tony?”

Two adorable brunette children walked into frame on the long distance video call. Two very small children with very familiar faces.

“Hi, Thteebie!” The little boy waved and smiled, showing off the gap where his two front teeth should have been.

Steve knew that face, maybe better than his own. “Bucky?”

“Told ya.” The boy elbowed the little girl by his side with the huge blue-green eyes in a petite, elven face. The girl raised her hand and flicked a few small fingers in a wave, then scooted behind Tony’s leg to hide and peer out at Steve. “Thath’th Darthy! Thee’th thy. Thy. Th—”

“Shy,” Tony interrupted. “Darcy is very shy and easily startled by loud noises, so we’re going to remember to use our indoor voices and tell Steve everything we remember about what happened.”

“There wath a big exthplothion, Thteebie! You thoulda theen it, pal!”

Poor Buck. That lisp was the worst. “Can you describe what happened for me?”

“There wath a flath of light and a crath and then thomeone cried and I wath wearing a giant pair of pantth! Wif kniveth, Thteebie! Loth and loth of kniveth. Before that, I wath in the lab. I think I went down there to thee if Darthy could come out to play thtickball at lunthtime.” He scratched his head. Obviously, some of the details were a little soft around the edges. Asking Darcy if she could come out to play? Grownup Bucky had only just started trying to get to know Dr. Foster’s lab manager. Three successful lunch dates later, Steve didn’t think playing good old fashioned stickball was on anyone’s lunchtime agenda.

“The lady pushed a button,” Darcy whispered into the back of Tony’s pant leg so low, Steve was pretty sure he was the only one who heard it.

“Which lady, Darcy?”

“The one with the Pop-Tarts. She said I could have one if I was good and quiet.”

“Darcy.” Tony clucked his tongue and bent over to lift her into his arms. He tapped her nose gently with a grease-stained finger. “We went over this. You can have whatever you want to eat, whether you behave or not. No one is withholding food for bad behavior.” Tony cast a long, meaningful glance at the camera—at Steve. “Which is why I’m on babysitting duty and Foster is barred from
unsupervised contact with the kids. Scared this one pretty bad until she realized Darcy’s memories are limited to the vocabulary and understanding of a three year old.”

“I’m five,” the tiny imp in Tony’s arms insisted, shoving all five fingers at his nose and making Tony laugh.

“And I’m thixth!” Bucky bounced on his toes and waved, jumping to make sure he was seen and acknowledged, too.

“I assume you have a plan?” Steve asked the engineer.

“I do, but I need to spend some time down in the labs. Darcy is an angel. Plenty of patience to sit and ask questions for hours. This one—” He laid a hand on Bucky’s bouncing head. “Not so much.”

“I’m on my way home.”

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Chapter End Notes

[UPDATED 12/4/2018]
This advent story has become something of a holiday tradition for me to update every December. I post updates every two or three days all December long now. I write for fun and I update as soon as I'm able to edit each chapter. Please don't abuse the comment section by using it to hint at/suggest/request/demand faster updates and more free content. Be cool and kind, and I'll update faster without the stressful demands on my limited free time during the holidays.
Redheadth and Brunetteth

Chapter Notes

Extra thanks go to MichelleLynne for pre-reading this update (and my outline) and her assurances that I’m not doing the kidfic wrong.

Suggested listening: Coming Home Part II by Skylar Grey

One-word prompt: home

“Buck! Tony!” Steve called out as he entered the common room, dropping the shield and his go-bag by the door. “Jarvis? Where is everybody?”

“In the service kitchen, sir, and if I may, welcome home.”

“Thanks, Jarvis. Yeah, I’ll just…” Steve wandered to the outer part of the kitchen off of the common room, toward the sound of pans clattering and chattering voices coming from behind the swinging service door. The door led to the commercial kitchen usually reserved for caterers and serving large events. The team rarely used it unless someone had a hankering for something baked or reheated in the oven. He peered through the pass-through window over the sink and a smile curved his lips at the sight of Tony, tiny Darcy, and his little pal, Buck, covered head to toe in dusty smears of flour, eating mini chocolate chips straight out of a trio of bags.

“Well, that’s one way to combine the ingredients, I suppose.”

All three started abruptly at the sound of his voice, Tony cursing as he banged a knee on the prep table.

“Ththeebie!” The lisped exclamation preceded the bang of the door as it swung wide and a fierce hug around Steve’s knees before that familiar pair of steel-blue eyes traced his legs up, up, up and widened in surprise. “Whoa. Mithter Thtark thaid you wath a grownup, but I didn’t think you’d got tho big! How’d you get tho big, Ththeebie?”

“Joined the army,” he answered with a wry twist of lips.

“Wow, that’th twwell, pal. Jutht wike your pop, huh?” He grinned that big toothless grin and Steve melted.

“Yeah, just like my pop, pal.” He reached out to pat him on the head, halting inches before his hand touched Bucky’s hair. Then, giving in to the urge, he ruffled his best friend’s messy brown mop until he giggled and twisted away. Bucky’s expression suddenly fell, turning more serious than he’d ever seen on six-year-old Bucky’s face.

“Mithter Thtark told me we wath both grownupth—before the exthplothion—and that— and that—” His little lip wobbled. “I’m real thorry about your ma, Ththeebie.”
“Me, too, pal.” Steve picked Bucky up and held him close.

“Mister Stark thaid my ma ith gone, too.” The whispered words and sniffle in his ear were almost more than Steve could bear. Bucky hid his face in Steve's neck. “But he thaid you’d be my famiwy now, juth wike him and Darthy, and he’th gonna find a way to fixth uth tho we can be big again, too, thomeday.”

“Mister Stark is right—I’ll be your family now, and I’m real sorry about your ma, too, pal.” Steve pressed a kiss to his best friend’s head and squeezed him as tight as he dared until Tony’s head appeared at the door with Darcy propped on his hip, peering around the door frame, too.

“Thanks,” he mouthed to Tony, so, so grateful for sparing him the worst of that heartbreaking conversation with his friend.

“He thaid you have a lady fwiend now, too, one that you libe wif in the towah, thometimeth. Did you get mawwied wifout me, Thteebie?”

Steve blinked rapidly in surprise at Tony, begging silently for help that was not forthcoming.

Tony grinned.

“When do I get to meet Mith Natathya?” Bucky wiggled in his hold. “Mithter Thtark thayth Mith Natathya’th a thuperhero and a real pretty one, too, like the fanthy ladieth in thothe paintingth at the mutheum the nunth took uth to that one time. And that thee’th a redhead.”

Delighted with the trip down memory lane, Steve spun them both in a circle and patted Bucky's butt with a resigned laugh. “You always liked the pretty redheads, huh, pal?”

“Yuh-huh.” Bucky grinned, his tongue poking through the gap, then twisted around to glance at Darcy with a small, secret smile. “Brunetteth, too.”
Darcy and Bucky sat on one side of the long farmhouse table in the common room, across from the infamous, redhead Natasha and the equally redhead Pepper.

Bucky crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “Tho, we meet at wath…” he began and Tony had to turn away, coughing a laugh behind Steve’s shoulder where they stood watching the meeting from behind the kitchen island. “Ttheebe tellth me your name ith Natathya Aliabnobna Romanoba.” Nobody so much as breathed, so Bucky continued, “That’th reawwwy hard to thay.”

Steve caught the barest hint of a twitch—the beginnings of a rare Black Widow smile, before the stoic mask slipped back into place. “You may call me Nat, if that’s easier.”

“Thankh, Mith Nat.” Bucky stuck a hand across the table to shake, climbing up on his chair to extend his reach. Natasha took the offered hand gamely, flicking a glance in little Darcy’s direction. Bucky remembered his manners at the silent rebuke. “I’m Jameth Boochanan Barneth. Ever’body calllth me Bucky, and thith ith my fwiend Darthy. Thee got blowed up, too. Thee’s thy.” He compressed his lips, annoyed, and tried again. “Thy.”

“Bashful , if I may assist, young master Barnes.”

“Yeah, Darthy’s bathful. Thankth, Mithter Jarvith. You’re thwell.” Bucky grinned up at the ceiling.

“As always, it is my pleasure to assist you, Master Barnes.”

Clearing her throat, Pepper laid her palms on the table, smoothing away imaginary crumbs along with her rattled nerves. Steve sympathized. None of them knew a damn thing about raising kids. His own advantage ran out after acknowledging that he’d met Bucky Barnes, age six, and knew all his likes and dislikes. Beyond that … not so much. Rapidly, Steve was developing an all new respect for his own mother who sent him out into the world every day, knowing any moment could be his sickly young self’s last, or that he’d come home again with bruises, bloodied and beaten for whatever great injustice little Stevie Rogers stumbled across that day.

Parenting was terrifying. Steve would almost prefer wrangling a horde of Chitauri over a six year old any given day. Today was not that day, however…

“If I understand correctly,” Pepper started, “neither of you remember your adult lives at all.”

“Kinda.” Bucky waggled his hand back and forth and cocked his head as if in deep thought. “I think I wath gonna hab lunth with Darthy when the accthident happened. I don’t know what elthe I fo’got, though.”

“Darcy?” Pepper looked at the quieter half of the pair. The little girl threw a startled glance over her shoulder at Tony, looking to him for support.

The engineer nodded and moved quickly to crouch by her side. “This is my fiance, Pepper Potts. She’s my lady friend like Natasha is Steve’s lady friend. Pepper knew grownup you, too. You were
going to work for her someday soon, helping her run the offices in this building and our big company. Grownup you is very smart and good at organizing people and things. No one expects you to do your grownup job right now, though,” he hurried to reassure the little tike. “Do you remember anything about being an adult?”

She lifted a small shoulder, but kept her eyes trained on her hands in her lap.

“Darce?” Tony dropped his voice to an even gentler tone. “It’s okay if you don’t remember, honey, and Doctor Foster isn’t here right now. No one beyond this room will hear what you have to say, if you do remember. There are other more important things for all of us to worry about, anyway, like bedtimes and what kind of candy-scented bubble bath is your favorite and finding you Powerpuff Girls pajamas.” He tweaked her nose when she smiled and slid across the chair to wrap an arm around his neck.

“I like Dexter’s Laboratory and Lester the Rat,” she whispered, hugging Tony and laying her head on his shoulder.

Tony laughed. “Lester from Beakman’s World. That’s my girl.” With a relieved smile, Tony patted her back and glanced at Pepper in a silent appeal for cooperation. “We’ll introduce you to Bill Nye Science Guy on the big screen later, too.”

Pepper tried a new tack. She rounded the table and crouched beside Tony. “Hi, I’m Pepper and I didn’t do such a good job introducing myself. I’m sorry about that.” She offered her hand, waiting until Darcy loosened her death grip on Tony and reached out to grab and shake her index finger. “I don’t know many kids and I might mess up sometimes, but I’ll do my best to take care of you just like Tony. First things first, you and Bucky definitely need pajamas and toothbrushes for tonight. Then, we can all get to know each other better.”

“A porter has been dispatched with a list of approximate sizes, styles, and preferred characters,” Jarvis interjected. “I extrapolated, based on what is most popular for young boys this year and what boys born in the same year as young Master Barnes preferred, which characters the young master might prefer in the modern era for his pajamas and other garments. All-natural, dye-free personal care products and other necessities have been ordered, as well, and the kitchens are working on Captain Rogers’ request for family-style dinner service in the common room for the entire team this evening. Neither Miss Lewis nor Master Barnes have any food allergies listed in their medical intake files, but Master Barnes’ file may require updating.”

“No known food allergies at this age,” Steve spoke up. “We’ll keep an eye out, though. Thanks for the reminder, Jarvis.”

“You are welcome, sir. Dinner will be served at five-thirty this evening, as an eight-thirty bedtime is recommended by experts at the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization for children of a similar age to Miss Lewis and Master Barnes.”

Chuckling, Tony tipped his head to the side and glanced up at the nearest security camera—sharing a proud look with his A.I.

“Thank you, Jarvis.” Pepper smiled and Darcy’s lips curved in response. “Then, we’ll introduce you to the rest of our … family in residence at dinner, and while you’re getting ready for bed tonight, Jarvis and I can find the other big things.” She waved away Steve’s and Natasha’s protests. “Nonsense. A few pairs of shoes, play clothes, a pair of coats, age-appropriate toys—how hard can it be?”

Steve grimaced. Famous last words, Pepper, because Steve helped Sam carry bags for Sam’s sister
during the back-to-school shopping trip for her three girls. Once. Only for Bucky and Darcy’s sake would Steve ever offer to run that terrible, glittery pink- and neon blue-hued gauntlet again. He shuddered and glanced at Bucky—a little boy who’d never been in a modern toy store.

A little boy who was, at that very moment, tugging at something under the table. “Hey, what’s that?!” he asked, yanking open a velcro strap and pulling an eight-inch bowie knife from the underside of the tabletop.

Cursing, the adults scrambled, Natasha relieving Bucky of the knife while Steve started crawling around on the floor, looking under every table, chair, drawer, and box to see where the three assassins formerly in residence had stashed more of their emergency hoard. Pepper herded the children away from the growing collection of weapons bundled on the table.

“The cupboards, too—pots, pans, the storage drawer built into the stove, and the bread-warming drawer,” Natasha called out to Tony as he ran his hand along and under the kitchen island, looking for more lethal hidey holes. Natasha asked Jarvis to request a backup gun safe for the common room when it became apparent that the armory closet on that floor would be too small to safely contain all of the found weapons Tony and Steve turned up within just the first minute or two of their search.

“What ya doin’, Thteebe?” Bucky asked, kicking his feet from his spot on top of the high kitchen island where Pepper had temporarily corralled the two kids until the room could be cleared of its nasty surprises.

Steve had to laugh. “Baby-proofing the living room, pal.”

“I’m not a baby! I’m five!” a tiny voice insisted.

Surprised, Steve popped up from behind the sofa. Darcy had her hands on her hips and a determined look on her face. “I can write my name and read, too, Mister Captain Steve!”

“You are as brilliant as you are sassy, little lady.” Tony kissed her forehead. “Baby-proofing is just a buzzword for making a room kid-friendly—safe for you to play without finding knives and sidearms under every flat surface, for instance.”

“Oh.” She settled down and scooted closer to Bucky.

Credit where it was due, Tony managed not to roll his eyes at his teammates’ preparedness planning, but even Steve was a bit shocked by the sheer volume of unsecured weapons they discovered. Jarvis helpfully directed them to all known locations as the A.I. reviewed security footage of the common room.

“You know how ta play jackth?” Bucky asked to distract and entertain his new friend.

Darcy shook her head ‘no’.

“That’th okay. I can teath you.” Bucky flexed his fingers like he wanted to pat her on the leg—like he would have done with Steve when they were kids. Darcy caught the movement out of the corner of her eye and tucked her hand into Bucky’s, blushing and blinking when their eyes met and they smiled at each other.

The look on Tony’s face in that moment, though?

Priceless.
The response to last chapter BLEW my mind. What, WHAT? I was so worried about it, I was sure I was going to lose half of you. What even, you guys? Thanks for being awesome! All the great comments and the prompt suggestions for tiny!Bucky and Darcy are the best fuel to feed my muse. Keep 'em comin'!

One-word prompt: eat

Dinner went better than expected, though probably not what anyone would call ‘smoothly’.

Bucky couldn’t eat ninety-five percent of the prepared food and had to wait while something else was brought up from the kitchens because of his missing and loose teeth. He also had a mystery bruise forming on his elbow and scraped right through the knees of the only pair of jeans the porters brought back from Jarvis’ emergency run that actually fit his sturdy little frame. Gravy fingerprints smeared the right thigh of the jeans.

Darcy didn’t know how to use her knife and everyone but Tony forgot they’d need to cut her food for her. She ended the evening sitting in Tony’s lap, wearing a stained grease rag from his pocket as a makeshift bib, and picking at the food on their shared plate with her fingers while Tony plied her with little nibbles of everything the kitchens sent up. The less processed the food, the harder it was for Darcy to chew with her tiny milk teeth.

Grilled porterhouse steak—no good.

Lightly steamed broccoli—nope.

Multi-grain dinner rolls—not even close.

Her eyes lit up when Tony sliced a grilled sausage link into neat little coins, then handed her a shrimp fork to spear the pieces herself.

“Kids love miniature things,” he said with a nonchalant shrug. “Jarvis, tell whoever’s on duty for dinner tomorrow night that we’d like sliders on plain white rolls, peas or cut green beans, and those little fried potato nuggets they do at that drive-in I like in L.A.”

“Tater tots, I presume, Sir?”

“That’s the one.”

“I wike tatuh totth,” Darcy said with certainty around a mouthful of half-chewed food. Tony piled up more mashed potatoes on their plate and sculpted them into funny shapes to pour gravy over and make Darcy laugh, spitting bits of sausage and potato down her front and Tony’s lap.
Pepper poured herself another glass of wine and counted to one hundred.

Meanwhile, Bucky glommed onto his share of the mashed potatoes, too, and got caught flicking little blobs of them down the long table at Hawkeye with surprising accuracy. Steve laughed when Bucky suddenly stopped like a deer in headlights, catching the stern look on Natasha’s face before putting down the potato glob on his finger. Glaring down the table, he pointed to his own eyes with a pair of messy fingers and turned them on Hawkeye, murmuring under his breath, “Later, Hawkath.”

Bruce sat opposite Clint, next to Dr. Foster, who eyed the two children and Tony warily as she scarfed down her meal, said goodnight to the room at large, and hurried back to work. Thor was still away on Asgard. Blessing, curse—Steve couldn’t be sure. He was more worried about what might happen if the children accidentally met Hulk, rather than the over-excitable, Labrador-like Thor.

Enthralled with Tony’s potato sculpting, Darcy asked for another small pile and started in on it with her bare hands.

Then Bucky saw what Darcy was doing and had to have his own fresh scoop of potatoes and gravy to fingerpaint with.

All in all, it was a successful, if messy family dinner. Steve was reasonably sure both children had eaten enough of something to fill their bellies. Then Tony announced it was time for dessert. Pepper didn’t entirely manage to hold in her groan of dismay.

“Watch this,” Tony whispered to the kids as he poured a spoonful of hot chocolate sauce over a large, hollow ball of milk chocolate. It melted in a cascade away from the center, collapsing in on itself to reveal the fancy confection within, surrounded by berries covered in more chocolate sauce. Mindful of the struggle with utensils, Tony held the spoon with them as they each melted their own dessert ball, then showed the kids how to pick their dessert up with one hand and eat it like a small sandwich.

“Oh, Tony’s pretty good with them; don’t you think?” Steve asked Natasha on the way back to the apartment he shared with Bucky after dinner. Though Natasha frequently spent the night, she didn’t actually live with him. Yet. She was a tough nut to crack, but he had hope they'd get there someday. He was surprised when she got up with him to follow along as he carried an exhausted six year old home for the night. It was ... nice. Normal in a way Steve didn’t know he’d been missing.

Natasha hummed, bumping shoulders with him, and taking hold of the fingers of his free hand. “I think Stark knows better than most of us what it’s like to be a small child at a table full of adults who’ve never raised a child before.”

“Mither Thark ith nithe. He hugged Darthy weal good when Doctuh Fothter made hew cwy, then he yelled at Doctuh Fothter that thee wath bein’ an unreathonaboo athhole.”

“Buck!” Steve barked the reprimand, shifting Bucky from his shoulder to hold him out in front a few inches. “Your ma would wash out your mouth if she could hear you right now.”

“Juth repeatin’ what Mither Thark thaid. Don’t wanna be caught lyin’—do I, Thteebie?” The little brat had the nerve to grin.

“I ever told you what a cheeky punk you are, James Buchanan?”

Sucking in a sharp breath, Bucky whipped around to Natasha with a look of mock horror. “Did ya heaw that, Mith Nat? Thteebie’th callin’ me nameth!”

Natasha leaned against the doorjamb, blocking their entry. “Is this how it’s going to be?”
They shrugged together, matching smiles on their smug faces. Steve knew, even though he couldn’t see it, that Bucky’s cheek would dimple just so and his eyes would sparkle.

The Black Widow didn’t stand a chance against six year old Bucky Barnes’ charm.

She sighed and stepped aside with a shot across the bow, “You both need to clean up your language and you need a bath, James. Plenty of soap should do the job all the way around.” Then she shoved them in the direction of the bathroom and announced she was going to track down pajamas for Bucky to wear after his bath. Under her breath, she told Steve to take his time so she and Jarvis could clear Bucky’s room of weapons.

As he started filling the tub (and holding onto a griping, squealing Bucky one-handed), he heard Natasha ask Jarvis to remind Pepper that they’d need to do a sweep of Darcy’s apartment, too, in case she unexpectedly returned to it as a child rather than the arranged guest room in the penthouse. It was a good idea and plain good sense. Natasha looked at the whole picture and saw the potential for things to go south. If Clint could get anywhere in the tower by air duct, so could a pair of small children. Actually, they might find some new way around that the larger duct-crawler had missed.

“Aw, Thetheebie, come on, pal. Not a baff!” Bucky started wriggling the moment they stepped over the bathroom threshold and didn’t stop until he was half-drowned in a lakeful of apple-scented bubbles, soaking Steve up to his armpits.

“Try to remember how much this sucks for both of us the next time you’re flinging handfuls of mashed potatoes and gravy at spies across the dinner table,” Steve grumbled, trying to pin Bucky down to pour a cupful of clean water over his shampooed hair.

“Mitther Hawkeye’th a thpy? Like in da nickel nobbelth?” Bucky’s soapy eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Jeeperth creeperth, Thetheebie! That’th neat!”

“Yeah, real neat. Next time, he’s the one scrubbing all the crap—”

In the other room, Natasha cleared her throat. Loudly.

“All the dried stuff off of you afterward.”

Holding up a pair of purple and blue plaid flannel pants and a shirt with a bunch of crazy cartoons on it, Natasha stood in the doorway and asked, “How do you feel about Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends?”

“I wike it jutht fine ath long ath it’th any Fothter but mean Doctuh Fothter from da lab.” Bucky shrugged and continued to pile up bubbles at the front of the soaphawk he’d fashioned on his head.

The rest of bathtime was subdued as the adults considered Bucky’s strong feelings about Dr. Foster and Bucky continued smearing wads of bubbles everywhere Steve washed them off. Eventually, though, Bucky consented to a warm rinse-off with the handheld shower head. From parts unknown, Natasha procured a child-sized Captain America hooded towel. The hood looked like Steve’s cowl and kept falling over Bucky’s eyes. He grinned and giggled and made silly faces behind it as the adults worked to dry him off.

When they were done, Steve cleared his throat. “You’re still pretty upset with Dr. Foster, Bucky. You wanna talk about it before bed?” he asked as he took the tiny Hulk underpants from Natasha and held them out for Bucky to step into. Then the flannel pants, and finally, the T-shirt.

It took Bucky a few tries to get his head through the neck hole instead of one of the armholes because he tried to talk and get dressed at the same time. “Nah, Mitther Thhtark took cawe of it. Jutht
didn’t exhpct t’ee ‘er again tho thoon at dinnew. I’ll twy ta ‘membuh my mannerth bettuh nextht time, Ththeebie. Pwomithe.” He crossed his heart and held out his pinky.

“What’s that for?” Steve asked.

“It’th a pinky thwear. Darthy taught me.” Bucky hooked his pinky with Steve’s and shook them up and down. “It’th WAY better than thpittin’ in ya hand ta make a pwomithe, that’th fo’ thure,” he said before climbing into the big bed Steve pointed to.

“You want a book or anything, pal?”

Bucky’s brows drew together. “You know I can’t wead, Ththeebie. The nunth thaid we don’ wearn that til nextht yeaw.”

“Right, right… I forgot. Umm…” Steve looked around his best friend’s spartan bedroom, a smile lighting briefly on his lips when he spotted the Bucky Bear gifted to grownup Bucky by Sam as a joke on the bureau. “Grownup you doesn’t keep any kids’ books handy. Uh, I can check my room…”

“If I may—” Jarvis interrupted. A children’s’ interactive storybook hologram appeared on the far wall.

“Hey, I know this one! We’ll have to watch the movie after we finish the book.” Steve settled down on the bed with his back to the headboard by Bucky’s side and started reading, “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much…”
In the morning, Steve found a pair of shopping bags, overflowing with durable little boy clothes and a half dozen boxes of shoes in different styles sitting outside his apartment door. A pair of the tower’s porters stood nearby, waiting for the go-ahead to store Sgt. Barnes’ king size bed and frame and replace them with a top of the line loft bed. A note from Pepper (on behalf of herself and Jarvis) said the loft bed gave Bucky the best of both worlds: the top bunk with a safety rail and more floor space to play in his bedroom.

After a quick perusal of the bags’ contents, Steve outfitted Bucky for the day in a fresh pair of blue jeans, an unbranded baseball tee, and a pair of tiny Converse in fire engine red.

Insisting he could do it himself, Bucky tied his own shoes and, while he was distracted playing with his new electric toothbrush, Natasha tightened up and double-knotted the loops. Afterward, she offered to take Bucky up to the common room for their turn at table-setting duty while Steve dealt with the deliveries. While he helped uncrate the new frame and piece it together, Jarvis confirmed that Clint and Pepper cleared Darcy’s apartment overnight of all adult paraphernalia, tasers, knives, and everything Jarvis thought might be questionable if discovered by a small child. Not that Darcy was expected to return to her apartment before they reversed the results of the lab accident, but an ounce of prevention, as they say…

“How is Darcy doing today, Jarvis?” Steve had no idea why he felt the need to make conversation with the A.I., but being around the porters always made him feel awkward, and he needed to fill the silence with inane chatter.

“Miss Lewis … had a difficult night. As with anything new, I assume there is an adjustment period to be expected.”

Digesting the cautiously optimistic status report, Steve inquired, “Anything I can do to help?”

“Miss Potts has an unavoidably full morning, but Sir could, perhaps, use an extra pair of hands for an hour or two so he can rest his eyes for a bit.”

“Did he sleep at all?”
“Very little, I’m afraid.”

“That bad?”

“Miss Lewis was in some distress throughout the night. We are both learning and the Stark family doctor has been summoned to look over both children this morning, if you will agree to have the doctor check young Master Barnes, as well.”

“I appreciate that. Thank Tony for me, Jarvis?”

“Of course, sir.” There was a pause. “The porters have finished and Agent Romanov reports breakfast is served. You are to move your rear, so to speak, or young Master Barnes will have your bacon.”

Steve chuckled. “Thanks, Jarvis. Tell her I’m on my way.”

A few minutes later, though, he walked into a scene like nothing he expected.

Bucky sat on the counter, sniffling in Natasha’s arms. Pepper’s eyes were red like she was trying not to cry and Bruce stormed out, looking much too green around the edges for safety’s sake as Steve stopped in the middle of the room. Perched on top of the fridge, Clint had murder in his eyes, a knife in his hand and at the ready.

Bawling in Tony’s arms, Darcy all but gagged on the thumb she had jammed in her mouth. Her face was flushed with splotchy red patches and her limp hair stuck to her forehead. Tony looked like hell, too. His eyes were watery, bloodshot with dark circles like he hadn’t slept in days rather than a single rough night with a clingy five year old. He had Darcy zipped up inside his hoodie with her legs hooked over his hips while Pepper tried to slip a set of noise-canceling headphones playing soothing music over the little girl’s ears.

“Wh…?” Steve didn’t know where to begin trying to find out what happened. Everything was fine five minutes ago!

Without a word, Tony gestured to the big screen in the living room. The scene from the accident in the lab the previous day looped over and over again; the moment before the screen turned to static snow, a flash of something dark and red expanded like a gaseous cloud between Dr. Foster and Darcy. Both of them looked furious, like they were in the middle of a heated exchange, but Foster’s eyes were black, the whites no longer visible, and strange red lines snaked across Foster’s skin. Milliseconds before the screen blacked out, Bucky dove in front of Darcy, grabbing her by the shoulders and partially obscuring her from the full blast of whatever the hell went down that day.

“What is this?” he asked, approaching the screen, drawn to it as if he needed to trace the lines on the doctor’s skin to understand what they meant.

“We figured out why Darcy didn’t want to talk about the accident or her adult memories,” Tony explained. “She started crying in her sleep last night about the darkness and dark elves.”

Sniffling, Pepper tucked Darcy’s lank curls inside Tony’s sweatshirt. “She begged for her blankie and wouldn’t stop crying about the darkness. We thought it was just a recurring nightmare, but Tony asked Jarvis to play the footage from the accident while Darcy was helping Natasha and Bucky in the dining room just now. She heard Dr. Foster’s voice and, before we knew what was happening, she was standing in front of the screen, shaking and screaming about the darkness again—like last night.”

“Foster had a run-in with the Aether—the Reality Gem—in London,” Tony murmured. “Darcy was
there. We talked about it once. What being in its presence did to her. She knows what Darkness looks like.” He took a deep breath and still looked like he might crawl right out of his skin.

“Where’s Foster?” Steve demanded. “It’s time we got some concrete answers.”

Whimpering, Bucky turned his face into Natasha’s neck when another video began to play, the sound off this time, captions splayed across the bottom of the screen. Natasha ran soothing hands across his back, reassuring the little boy in her arms as she murmured to him quietly.

The new camera angle showed Foster on the roof of the tower at what appeared to be dawn, screaming at the skies for Heimdall to send Thor or anyone who could help. “I think I did something terrible and I can’t fix it!” she shouted. “I can’t even remember it!” she raged, hands buried in her hair, maddened eyes swirling black until all traces of light disappeared. Trails of the same red miasma twisted up her arms and neck, then temporarily disappeared in a flash of light. Standing on the helipad in the background, the Warriors Three and Lady Sif stood armed and ready for battle. In silence, the warriors known as Hogun and Fandral escorted Foster to the center of the great bifrost sigil, returning from where they came in another burst of blinding light.

“Guardian Jarvis?” Lady Sif called out.

“Yes, Lady Sif?” came the reply.

“Guardian Jarvis?” Lady Sif called out.

“Yes, Lady Sif?” came the reply.

“Please inform the Avengers of Midgard that Dr. Foster is in the custody of Asgard, being treated for her condition. We are aware of the event that occurred in your Halls of Science. I shall return with one of our Elders to see to the children and repair the damage done here.”

“I will pass on the message, gladly. Thank you for your assistance, Lady Sif.”

“Before I depart, I would know— The children are well? Heimdall only briefly described what transpired in your Halls of Science before delivering us in dispatch of our duties. Thor will worry for Lady Darcy’s well-being especially. I would bring news, if there is aught to report.”

“She suffers frequent nightmares and has difficulty sleeping. She’s frightened, in a strange place with strange people.”

Lady Sif closed her eyes, her sword arm dropping as a range of emotions crossed her face. “I’m sorry to hear it. Please give her our love. I will return with help,” she repeated, lips firm in a determined line, then disappeared in another burst of light.

“We have visitors,” Jarvis announced as the video feed ended and both the elevator doors and the balcony doors opened simultaneously.

From the elevator, an elderly, Asian gentleman with snow-white hair and wire-rimmed spectacles entered the room, immediately homing in on Tony and the troubled children. The other visitors, clad in clothing reminiscent of Asgard, waited patiently on the threshold to the room.

“Anthony, you haven’t gone and started a family without telling me,” the old man demanded in kindly fashion.

“No—have you?” Tony asked with a wry smile.

The old man waved him off with a laugh. “And my Ben would—what? Give up his car collection
for a minivan full of booster seats in our old age? Not likely."

During the exchange, Tony’s face relaxed and Steve felt something tight and strained loosen within himself. On top of the fridge, he saw Clint relax by degrees, too. Pepper crossed the room to welcome their off-world visitors while the others watched their human guest with wary eyes.

“So then, what? You worried our last visit didn’t take, Doc?” Tony quipped, sliding a hand up Darcy’s back in a soothing gesture.

“I may not perform many vasectomies, but I do a thorough job, young man, and I do it well.” He tapped Tony on the nose with a familiarity Steve had never seen Tony engage another person. "What I didn't expect was to read about your vasectomy in Vanity Fair, after the deed was done." He raised one distinguished brow and Tony laughed.

“Doc Lin.” Tony kept his voice down as he introduced their guest to his charges, “this is Darcy and that’s James. Who they are is a lot harder to explain.”

“Why don’t you start at the beginning while I look over this young man?” He leaned over and peered into Bucky’s tear-stained eyes. “If that’s okay with you, James.”

The little boy sniffled and buried his face in Natasha’s breasts. Steve really, really hoped Jarvis was getting video footage for later. The home movie nights would be fantastic for years to come, he thought with a small smile.

“You’ve had an upset. I’m sorry to hear that,” the doctor said to Bucky as he pulled up a barstool after Tony explained the circumstances of the lab accident and what they thought they knew. “Would you like to talk about what happened?”

Bucky shook his head ‘no’, burrowing deeper until Natasha grunted from the force of his nose against her breastbone. “Thorry, Mith Nat,” he muttered, turning to face the doctor.

Natasha gave him a squeeze. “You worry too much for a little boy, James,” she murmured into his messy hair, resting her cheek on his head.

“Da uv’er doctuh yelled at Darthy and thcared hew,” he whispered. “An’ me, too,” he finally admitted.

“I’m a different sort of doctor altogether.” Dr. Lin assured him. “Did you know I was once Mr. Stark’s pediatrician?”

Bucky blinked. “Ithn’t that a baby doctuh?”

Dr. Lin nodded. “Yes, I also delivered Anthony many, many years ago at Stark House, just a few blocks from here in the city.”

“Mither Thtark wath a baby?” Bucky asked with wide eyes.

“Mm… Yes, and quite a handful sometimes.” The doctor laughed.

The snuffles dried up and Bucky scooted closer to the doctor. “I’mma han’ful, too,” Bucky stage-whispered.

The doctor gasped. “You don’t say?!”

Bucky threw his head back and laughed. Natasha joined in, laughing and running a hand through
Bucky’s tousled hair. Their remaining tension melted away as the doctor continued to ask questions meant to put Bucky at ease. While they got to know one another (and trusting Natasha implicitly to see to Bucky’s needs), Steve drifted to the other conversation underway in the living room.

An Elder Aesir woman with long, curling blonde hair coaxed Darcy out of Tony’s hooded sweatshirt into an oversized, red garment. “My son sent this for you with his apologies,” she explained. “He’s so very sorry he forgot to leave it on Midgard when he departed.”

“Is this…” Pepper paused. “Is this Thor’s ceremonial cape?”

“Indeed it is.” The Elder wrapped the little girl up expertly in the royal raiment. “One of his favorites. I put a little something extra special in it just for his darling friend, Darcy.” Her fingers traced a line of protective sigils Steve recognized from the designs on Mjolnir.

Darcy pushed the headphones up out of the way as she scrambled to get a hand back on Tony’s neck. “You’re…” Her little brow furrowed. “I knowed you,” she said as if remembering, the tips of her fingers ghosting down the woman’s cheek.

“I listen often for your prayers,” the woman subtly shifted the subject away from Darcy’s memories. “What has happened to you and your young friend—this was accidental seidr. Uncontrolled potential in the hands of an untrained novice. The doctor, Lady Jane, once came in contact with a dangerous relic not of this realm. She meant you no harm, but a trace of the relic remained within her, dormant, awaiting an opportune confluence of events to reawaken. She deeply regrets the harm caused here and begged me to attend you to ascertain if I might help.”

“Will you undo it?” Tony asked, tightening his hold on Darcy.

“It isn’t as simple as ‘undoing’ a known spell, I’m afraid. This is unskilled seidr—the combination of science and magic, as you would call it. These types of spells simply draw to an end when they are no longer effective, or the need which generated the original, accidental spell ceases to exist.”

Tony stared at their guest, puzzling out the meaning of her words. “You think this happened for a specific reason.”

“It’s possible, yes,” she agreed. “I will consult with the Norns to be sure, but I suspect this is a result of some unresolved problem or problems faced by the people affected most.”

“Because I yelled at the lady?” Darcy whimpered.

“No, darling. More likely you needed something that was revealed in the heat of the moment, some thought or feeling or unfulfilled desire that could only be accomplished through this act of seidr.” She pushed aside the shoulder of Tony’s sweatshirt, to reveal a dark, thick strap. “This—you’ve already begun to fill this need for your young friend.”

“What is that, Tony?” Steve asked.

His interest piqued when Tony blushed bright red to the tips of his ears and tried to disappear into the shadows of his hood. He cleared his throat. “Jarvis and I did some research last night. Darcy exhibits a lot of self-soothing behaviors—sucking her thumb til it bleeds when she’s nervous, inconsolable crying for her blanket after a nightmare, clinging to the only adult she trusts or assuming no one will help her when she truly needs it—all subtle signs of neglect. And I knew a little of Darcy’s history—from before. There’s a parenting movement that opposes the cry-it-out method—attachment parenting, babywearing, co-sleeping. It’s supposed to be responsible for increased IQ and improved language skills, too.”
“As many as twenty to thirty IQ points,” Jarvis added helpfully.

“This is a good start—a wise choice to fulfill your friend’s need, Anthony,” the older woman assured him.

The woman—Frigga, she called herself—helped settle Darcy in Tony’s sweatshirt—inside the sling carrier strapped across his chest. Darcy’s thumb slipped from her mouth. She rubbed the silky edge of Thor’s cape with her finger and damp thumb. “Thank Mister Thor, please, Mrs. Frigga.”

“Certainly,” the woman agreed, leaning in to press a soft kiss to Darcy’s hair and another to Tony’s cheek. She whispered something, too—an incantation, maybe, because a soft glow emanated around them for a moment. “Just a bit of help so they’ll get some much needed rest,” she assured Steve who smiled in genuine gratitude.

As Frigga made her farewells, promising to return after speaking to the Norns, Bucky and Natasha hurried over to join the others. Clint handed a small bundle over to Bucky and called him a good egg. If only Barton knew…

But Bucky surprised him again. Holding the bundle up to Frigga, he asked a question too low for Steve to hear. When she nodded, Steve got a peek at what was in the bundle—the Bucky Bear from Sam. Thor’s mother placed a hand on the bear’s head. It glowed a soft golden-pink, then Frigga was gone and Bucky hauled an exhausted Tony by the hand over to the inside corner of the large sectional in the living room.

“Polarize the balcony windows and dim the lights ninety-six percent, Jarvis,” Pepper requested as Tony settled on the sofa with Darcy.

Bucky scrambled up beside them, tucking himself into Tony’s side and holding out the bear. “Ith fo’ Darthy. He’th mah Bucky Beaw fwum mah fwend, Tham, fwum when I wath gwowed up. Mith Fwigguh put the whammy on ‘im to help Darthy hab no mo’ nightmaweth.”

Tony’s arm fell across Bucky’s shoulders and pulled him in close. “Clint’s right. You are a good egg, kid.”
The first time he woke up, it was to the tickling sensation of baby-soft hair rubbing his cheek. Without conscious thought, Tony turned his head, seeking the source of warmth and the light, floral female scent he’d know anywhere—even in the half-space between wake and sleep.

Pepper.

Breathing deep, he opened his eyes and she was right there, head canted to the side, her face inches from little Darcy’s, both of them nuzzling Thor’s plush cloak. They were a disheveled, lovely mess, hair sticking up in every direction, faces puffy from the overwrought start to their day and the long night before.

Was it weird that he’d never felt more at home?

“It’s snowing,” a voice murmured. Clint. “You need a ride back to the hotel?"

“No, no. Don’t go to any trouble,” Doc Lin replied. “I’ll stay a while yet. Jarvis will call me a driver when I’m no longer needed. You go on. Thank you, though, Agent Barton.”

“Tell Jarvis to give a yell if you need anything. I’m covering Steve’s meetings this afternoon, so I’ll be downstairs all day. Banner’s taking Pepper’s schedule—the essentials. Pepper’s PAs rescheduled everything else for her and Tony.”

“It’s a pleasure to know Anthony has such good friends, Agent Barton. Thank you.”

“He’d probably argue, but we’re more family than friends.” Clint chuckled. His voice drifted closer. “Especially now.”

“Well, it’s still appreciated,” the doc reiterated, going quiet when Darcy shifted and murmured into Tony’s chest.

The second time Tony woke, the light had shifted to that of early afternoon. Looking around the room, the sight of Rogers and Romanoff stretched out on the long end of the sectional almost made him laugh out loud. Romanoff had all but disappeared under the super-soldier’s bulk with little Barnes draped over his back, snoring and drooling on Rogers’ neck.

“Pictures, J,” he reminded his A.I., then tightened his hold on Darcy and Pepper, and drifted off again.

The next time he woke, mini Barnes’ butt was pressed against his hip. The kid wriggled and
snickered, and was definitely up to no good.

“Whatcha doin’, kid?” Tony whispered to avoid waking Darcy.

“Tyin’ Th teenie’s thneakerth to Mith Nat’th.”

Heh. Excellent. This Barnes was Tony’s kind of sneaky little shit. Still, though—adulting; he had to do it. “Why?” he asked for good form.

The pint-sized troublemaker turned a sparkling grin on Tony and shrugged. “Why not?” His little tongue poked through the gap when he smiled.

Tony tried not to laugh—he did, but there was something in that smile he couldn’t resist. And maybe a little bit of what he figured Steve saw in the one-time assassin—before war and strife and ice and time.

“It’s late. D’ja eat yet?” Tony made an effort to get his bearings.

“Doc Win made me a toathed cheethe thammich with tomato thoup,” Bucky assured him.

“Good, good.” Working a hand free from the folds of Thor’s cape, Tony ran it through his greasy hair. Christ, what a mess. “Listen kid, we haven’t had a chance to get much done around here. If you’re bored—”

“Mithter Jarvith taught me how to uthe the Netflixth. I watthed a thow about the moon landin’. Tho neat!” he tried to whisper-yell.

“Still…” Tony shook off the dregs of sleep. “We’ll do better. Tomorrow, we’ll … I don’t know … do something fun in the workshop. Learn stuff. ‘kay?”

“‘kay,” Bucky agreed readily. “Can I help build robotth an’ thtuff?”

“That depends. Can you behave yourself around power tools and blow torches?”

“No.”

Tony laughed. “I appreciate your honesty, James Buchanan Barnes, and I like your style. Yes, you can help.”

The final time he woke in the common room, Darcy patted his cheek, whispering, “Tony, I gotta go real bad.”

“I’ll take her,” Pepper’s sleepy voice offered.

In the kitchen, Bucky laughed uproariously at something Doc Lin said.

Steve and Natasha woke with a start and promptly fell off the couch in a heap of flailing limbs and tumbling curses in a mixture of English and Russian.

Darcy’s tiny laugh could be heard right before a hurried, “Uh oh—Miss Pepper, I really gotta go!”

A door slammed and Tony sat up just as Bucky clambered up over the back of the couch to cackle at the results of his handiwork. He held up a hand which Tony promptly high-fived. “Well played, kid.”
Chapter Notes

Today’s one-word prompt was provided by Musichowler.

Thanks go to chimyra and MichelleLynne for pre-reading and weighing in on this chapter while it was still under construction.

*I shamelessly borrowed one of my favorite lines from a Christmas movie for this update, too. *wonders if anyone will spot it*

Suggested listening: “How to Save a Life” by The Fray

One-word prompt: hugs

“That’th Mitther Hawk?” Bucky scrambled up onto the ledge and pressed his face to the shatterproof glass, leaving nose, lip, and tongue prints Tony could only be grateful were not his responsibility to scrub off later.

“No, ‘HULK’,” Clint corrected.

“That’th what I thaid!”

“That’s still Dr. Banner, not Hulk,” Steve pointed out. “And this is a really terrible idea.”

“It’s really not,” Tony insisted, eyeing Steve over Darcy’s head. The entire group stood behind the observation window of the Hulk-out room, including a curious Dr. Lin who’d agreed to remain in the city and on-call at Tony’s request, for the time being. “We can’t reasonably prepare the kids for a real-deal emergency or hold a fire drill or show them how to get into the panic rooms during an attack on the tower, and ignore the great big green elephant in the room. You saw what nearly happened yesterday. And that was just day one, Rogers. What happens if we can’t reverse their age regression right away? Or if it takes months or years to wear off? They’re going to meet Big Green sooner or later, one way or another. Better under controlled conditions where we can explain the science and Hulk isn’t, you know—extra-smashy, right?” He turned back to the window as Bruce moved to the center of the room in his super-stretchy, comfy Hulk pants.

“Doeth he glow wike Mith Pepper thowed uth?”

“No, Pepper is the only one … in our family with a version of the serum that makes her glow.” Tony explained. “Dr. Banner changes all over—like the video we watched on the big TV of Steve’s transformation inside the Vita-Ray chamber, but Dr. Banner gets very big and turns green when he becomes our friend, Hulk. Hulk is … different. He doesn’t think like Dr. Banner. He’s still learning how to speak, a lot like you and Darcy. His vocabulary will grow as he gets older.”

Darcy’s little fingers pinched Tony’s neck and she asked in a shaking voice, hugging her new Bucky Bear extra close, “Does it hurt Dr. Bruce?”

Taking over from there at the pleading look in Tony’s eyes, Steve answered, “Maybe a little bit, but not for very long. It’ll make him tired later, and very hungry.”
“Like you get hungry and eat lots and lots?” she asked.

“Yes, kind of like me, but I’m hungry almost all the time. Dr. Banner is only very hungry after he changes back to himself. The busier and more active Hulk is during ... playtime, the hungrier Dr. Banner will be afterward.”

“It’s important to remember—” Natasha joined the discussion, “—that Hulk should be treated just like any new friend you meet, politely and with respect. Seeing Dr. Banner transform into Hulk the first time can be unsettling and that’s a very normal reaction, but it’s important to remain calm so we don’t frighten him, either. Okay?” She stared at the back of Bucky’s head until he felt her burning gaze and turned around.

“Yeth, ma’am,” Bucky nodded, tucking his bottom lip in under the top, making his eyes big and round and innocent.

“Does that look ever work?” Tony asked.

“Thometimeth.” Bucky smirked and shrugged. Then a thought appeared to occur to him. “What doeth Mithter Hawk wike ta eat?”

“I’m not sure what his favorite food is, but you can ask him yourself in a few minutes, if you like.” Tony waited for Bucky to settle down while Darcy’s little legs squeezed him almost to the point of pain around his middle. She was very nervous. He patted her rump through the padded sling and whispered quiet reassurances in her ear as Barton and Romanoff entered the Hulk-out room to flank Bruce in relaxed positions, at ease and loose-limbed—the only way the team could think of to show the kids there was nothing to fear from the Hulk, no matter how intimidating he might look after the change.

Darcy’s nerves proved contagious, pushing Bucky to climb Steve like an oak tree, clinging to his back, arms tight around his neck. He watched with wide, fascinated eyes as Bruce transformed from mild-mannered doctor to Big Green.

Sucking in a shocked breath, Darcy trembled and pulled her legs up and into the sling. The toes of her little sneakers dug into Tony's ribs, but she kept her cool, mimicking Tony and Steve as they took deep, exaggerated breaths, too. Tony felt rather than saw Pepper’s approach, her skin warm with the Extremis active in her system.

She held a hand up, glowing a low amber color. “It’s a physical change—just like mine. I’m still Pepper, but I’m a little stronger and more durable like this. Bruce changes a little more than I do, but he’s still in there,” Pepper crooned the reminder. Tony had to give her credit—he'd never seen Pepper so at ease about her use of Extremis. She was really making an effort to help smooth things over for the kids and he loved every glowing, pretty part of her for it. He loved Darcy like the snarky, little sister he never had even before the lab accident—shared life traumas and all that, but those feelings had only deepened since her overnight change to extremely little sister. Thank god for Pepper and her ability to roll with the punches.

Hulk lumbered closer to the observation room and peered through the window with a curious lift of brow. “Brony,” he said with certainty, thumping the window with a stubby finger and grinning at his friend.

“Brony?” Steve asked, coughing on an aborted laugh.

“We’re Science Bros. I’m Tony. He’s an enormous green good guy machine. He gets to pick the nicknames.” Tony switched his attention to the kids, testing the waters to gauge how they were
processing the change in Bruce. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Wow, he’th gween.”

“We told you he’d be green. It’s no big deal,” Tony bluffed. "Lots of people are green.”

“Name five,” Darcy piped up.

The room burst into raucous laughter.

“I knew our Darcy was still in there,” Tony teased, tickling her ribs, making her giggle and squeal.

When she settled against his shoulder, breathless with laughter, she relaxed her death-grip on his neck and slid her legs around his middle again.

Tony asked, “Would you like to say hi and introduce yourself?”

They watched Hulk look around to make sure no one was too close, then plopped down on his butt right there on the other side of the window to watch and wait for the kids to come say hello. He wiggled his big green toes and made hysterical faces at his reflection in the glass. A range of expressions crossed his face that surprised a giggle out of Bucky. Darcy seemed particularly fascinated by the toe-wiggling and the way he grunted responses at Romanoff and Barton when they tried to engage him in conversation.

“Can he come out to play?” Darcy finally asked and Tony knew it was going to be okay, as odd as the request might have seemed to someone who hadn’t befriended the Hulk.

“Usually, when he comes out to play, he sticks pretty close to his Hulk-sized room. It’s a playroom we built special just for him where he can smash and play and make as much noise as he wants.”

Darcy looked thoughtful for a moment, then asked, “Can we go in and play with him?”

“Wait, wait, wait…” Bucky took one appalled look at Darcy, then eyeballed Steve, as if to say, “I can’t believe there are two of you crazy numbnuts in this world.”

But Darcy was already shimmying out of the sling and tucking her Bucky Bear into her backpack. She hitched Thor’s cape up over her shoulder as best she could and pushed her backpack into Tony’s arms. “Hold this,” she demanded, then marched into the Hulk-out room, Thor’s cape trailing regally in her wake. “Come on, Bucky, it’ll be okay.” She held a hand out as she passed through the door and waited until Bucky caved, grabbing her hand and following her into the room.

Laughing, Tony realized he was left holding another of the world’s great ladies’ purses as she marched right up to fear and looked it in the eye.

“Nice to meet you, Mister Hulk,” her little voice rang out in the echoing space. “I’m Darcy. This is my friend, Bucky. Do you wanna play?”

“HULK NOT KNOW.” The big guy shrugged.

Head tilted, Darcy considered his answer with care. “Don’t you know how to play?”

Hulk shook his head.

“Whatta ya wike ta do?” Bucky worked up the nerve to ask.

Another shrug.
“I wike ta eat and cwimb thtuff,” Bucky tried again.

Hulk blinked.

“And I like Jarvis and music!” Darcy added with just a touch of forced enthusiasm. “Me and Tony and Jarvis listen to it lots. And I like classic rock and pop and R&B and jazz and 90s alternative and 80s power ballads!” She fist-pumped in excitement and Hulk threw his head back, laughing his deep belly laugh. Darcy climbed right up into his lap and started telling him about the great 80s bands Jarvis taught her all about.

“She gets that from Barton’s side of the family,” Tony insisted to anyone still listening, but all Pepper did was smile like someone who knows something she’s not telling.

“Sure she does, honey.”
Chapter Notes

Beta/PR thanks go to MichelleLynne for reading this update at two minutes after dark this morning (and for the titular assist, again).

Inspiration: this natatorium

One-word prompt: alone

Darcy hated baths.

Which wasn’t such a big deal, except that Tony hosed her off in the bots’ autowash in the shop the last few days—ever since her meltdown when Pepper tried to carry her into the shower instead of the bathtub since she clearly despised the bathtub. (Tony had never seen a temper tantrum before and he never wanted to see one again, so the bathtub was fucking out and that was that, as far as he was concerned.) But the autowash wasn’t meant for kids and Darcy was getting a little funky around the edges. Dr. Lin was no help. He said Tony would figure it out and Darcy wouldn’t perish from her own stink in the meantime, but Tony started thinking that was seriously debatable.

Because his lil’ girl was ripe.

The tub’s too big, she said. It’s scary.

And, of course, because he is Tony Stark, every bathtub in the tower had to be enormous with every bell and whistle a bath-lover could want and Darcy is emphatically not a bath-lover, but if he didn’t get her into something soapy soon, she was in danger of becoming Pig Pen, so he swallowed his pride and knocked on Rogers’ door.

Rogers, in the way of the greatest generation, offered lots of suggestions, but no useful solutions. Romanoff suggested Tony get in the tub with her because it probably worked in Mother Russia or something and—Jesus Christ, really? Tony wasn’t going there. He had his own water phobias to deal with. He sure as shit wasn’t inflicting them on his newfound little sister.

Then, some sort of shared mind-meld thought occurred to Rogers and mini Barnes at the same time. They huddled up and asked Jarvis to ping Pepper and ask her to bring Darcy to the Rogers/Barnes floor. It was a Saturday afternoon, five days since the lab accident that changed Darcy and Barnes, and Darcy … she looked like hell. Her sleep quality improved since the arrival of the cape, the gift of the teddy bear, and a few afternoons of hard play in the Hulk-out room with her two new pals, but her skin looked dry and patchy. Her hair was greasy, no thanks to Tony’s robot car wash. And she was still a little high-strung yet, since her sleep hadn’t settled to one or two long, uninterrupted periods of rest. Soon, Dr. Lin assured him.

In the meantime, though, she really needed a good scrubbing.

Romanoff ran a bath in Barnes’ en suite and Rogers pulled Pepper aside to talk about … whatever. Tony had no idea. Figuring out this bathtub thing was taking up all his bandwidth right now. Standing at the balcony doors, looking at the Hot Wheels spread across the terrace by a busy little
boy, a pair of splashes and delighted squeals were the last thing he expected to hear.

And she laughed.

*Darcy laughed.*

What the hell.

Natasha stood in the bathroom doorway, smiling, arms crossed, as Darcy and Bucky made an unholy, soapy mess of everything the light touched. Steve and Pepper were drenched, but the room was filled with the light scent of apples and Darcy actually sat in the water looking relaxed. Upon closer inspection, Tony discovered a pair of waterproof bathroom stools in the water under each tiny butt.

“She can’t swim,” Natasha murmured under her breath. When Tony looked at her with the question in his eyes she explained, “Barton told me once when I pulled bodyguard duty in London after the Convergence. Darcy never learned how to swim. Her parents—I don’t know everything, but I know they weren’t the kind of people who’d sign their kid up for swimming lessons. The tubs must seem huge to someone that small, sitting in it alone. Steve swears Bucky was born half-fish, but even the kid all but pulls Steve half-into the tub with him at bath time. Bucky’s not afraid of baths because it’s also playtime with his best friend, so Darcy might need the same thing, right?”

Tony didn’t know what to say, so he tried out something new, “Thanks.”

“You and Rogers are peas in a self-flagellating pod. You’re too hard on yourself. You’re doing okay. Who cares if she got a little crusty for a few days? She’s five and she’s probably never been showered with this much love and affection in her life. You’re doing okay,” she repeated.

And he was, he *and* Pepper were figuring it out, but that didn’t prevent Tony and Jarvis from hiring a discreet swimming instructor (who signed about a dozen NDAs) and inviting the Rogers-Barnes-Romanoff household down to the old Stark Mansion at Fifth Avenue to take advantage of the indoor pool and swimming lessons.

Rogers and Romanoff only made it half-way down the south hall before mini Barnes stripped off his shirt, kicked off his shoes, dropped his towel, and barreled into the natatorium at full speed, poised to cannonball.

Christ, that kid was built like a Mack truck. He hit the water with the kind of force Tony would expect the full-sized version to crash into the pool and came up shrieking, “DARThy! YOU GOT A POOL IN YA HOUTHE!”

“ ‘A pool in your house’,” Pepper helpfully translated for Tony.

Steve’s eyebrows nearly shot up off his head when he walked into the airy room. The glass ceiling and chandeliers hanging overhead were a bit much.

Tony rolled his eyes. "My old man heard JFK had an indoor pool in the sixties, so he decided he needed to one-up the White House. You don't have to tell me it's over the top. I've seen five-star hotels with pools this one puts to shame. He built a bowling alley in the basement, too, because they have one at Camp David."

Darcy sat on the edge of the pool in the tiniest one-piece bathing suit in the history of ever and it still sagged loose on her petite frame. Dark blue fabric with sparkling stars in the shape of constellations; she picked it out herself online with Jarvis playing personal shopper. And because she was Darcy in all things, she also had goggles, flippers, a snorkel, and a lightweight life vest on over the new suit.
She would have put on the inner tube, too, but left that ’til last and couldn’t figure out how to get it on over the vest.

“Pictures, J,” Tony reminded his A.I. for the hundredth time that week.

After a quick explanation about why most of the swimming gear would have to stay on the deck because it was for more advanced swimming techniques, the swim instructor coaxed Darcy into the water in her life vest beside an enthusiastic Bucky. In the shallow end, they practiced putting their faces in the water and blowing bubbles, learned how to float on their backs, then tread water to stay upright, and held onto the side to kick like hell. It looked like so much fun, the adults eventually joined in, churning the pool into a roiling mess of waves that swamped Darcy once until she remembered how to float and bobbed upright all on her own.

So it was, later that night, Tony pulled on a fresh pair of swim trunks, climbed into a bathtub full of lavender bubbles, and accepted the hand-off of one exhausted, chlorine-scented five year old from Pepper who scrubbed her down over the side of the tub while Tony flipped her over against his shoulder like a limp noodle.

She slept fourteen hours straight and had to be carried to breakfast the next morning.
“Tony?” Rogers hurried into the observation lounge outside the Hulk-out room. “What's going on? Jarvis pulled me out of a meeting—thanks for that, by the way. That meeting was awful,” he said as he came abreast of the engineer and peered into the oversized play space on the other side.

Darcy and Bucky sat on the floor with Hulk, one by each of his feet. (Darcy perched in a nest made entirely of Thor's cape.) They took turns grabbing a toe and laughing. For the life of him, Steve couldn’t figure out what game they were playing.

Tony snickered and insisted, “Just listen,” as he reached over and toggled the sound inside the Hulk’s playroom. The speaker suddenly crackled to life.

“No, no, no, silly,” Darcy insisted. “It goes like dis: Dis little piggy,” she grabbed Hulk’s big toe and he giggled, “went to market.”

Bucky did the next on his side, “Thith wittle piggy thtayed home.”

Hulk’s chest shook with suppressed laughter as he tried not to shake the children loose. “HULK TICKLES!” Big Green warned his small friends.

“Dis little piggy had rose beast,” Darcy proclaimed, wiggling her little fingers around Hulk’s delicate middle toe.

Bucky picked it up, “Thith wittle piggy had gum.”

“But that’s not how it—”

“Sh!” Tony hushed Rogers.

“LIL’ PIG!” Hulk lurched forward and grabbed his pinky toes, pulling his feet up off the floor in his eagerness to complete his first nursery rhyme. “WEE WEE WEE, HOME!”

“Hohmygod, that’s adorable. Tell me we have it on video, Jarvis?” Rogers begged.

Tony pretended to knuckle away a tear. "This is the best thing science has ever done for me."
The team developed a routine quickly after the children came into their lives, everyone coming together to provide a home as close to normal for the children as possible. Family meals became the norm with everyone clearing their schedule for family breakfast and an hour together at lunch, so getting together for Taco Tuesday at Darcy’s request in the common room was practically routine by the second week.

Not routine?

No kids.

“Umm…” Tony looked in all their favorite spots and hidey holes. “Has anyone seen the kids? They were playing tag with the bots this morning, last I saw.”

The room paused. Everyone looked up from the devices they were switching to ‘do not disturb’ or the plates they were filling with tacos, the whites of their eyes showing as all the adults came to the same conclusion at once.

“Jarvis?” Tony demanded. “Where the hell are the kids?”

An image appeared projected on the kitchen back splash. Darcy and Bucky sat at Pepper’s vanity in the penthouse master suite. Bucky dabbed dark green cream eyeshadow on Darcy’s eyes up to her eyebrows and fumbled to outline her lips in lip gloss. Not to be outdone, Darcy appeared to be drawing a mustache and goatee on Bucky and laughing uproariously every time he made a Tony face.

“Perfooms!” Darcy cried, sliding off the padded bench and hurrying to Pepper’s collection of fancy French perfumes in their display case. It took her a few tries to wrap Thor’s cape around her middle so she wouldn’t trip. Grabbing the prettiest perfume bottle off the shelf, she sprayed herself directly in the face. After a few tense, eye-watering moments, she coughed, decided that one wasn’t for her, and grabbed another. She worked through six more before asking Bucky what he thought.

He wrinkled his nose but clearly had no sense of self-preservation because he added, “Wow. You thmell like lotth of great thingth, Darthy. You thould wear all of dem.”

She was certainly doing her best.

Next, they crawled deeper into the closet, coming up with a dozen of Pepper’s shoes to try on.

They clomped around for a few moments, laughing at how hard the fancy shoes were to walk in.

Then Bucky found the mother lode. “What’th thith?” He held up a pair of odd-looking dark shoes with squared toes and thick, stacked heels.

“Oh, those are my da—” She stopped and composed herself. “Those are Tony’s fancy boots for when he wants to feel big, like Captain Steve.”

Bucky shrugged and stepped into the boots. His eyes lit up when he stood up to his new, full height. “Wow. I do feew big. Now I jutht need—”

A pair of traitorous bots wheeled into frame, holding up one of Tony’s concert tees and a fire extinguisher.

“No, no, silly robots. Bucky needs a suit to be Tony!”

“He wears suits,” Darcy assured him.

“Why?”

“Because Miss Pepper makes him.”

Tony’s eyes met Pepper’s over the Taco Tuesday spread. Her face was bright red and she wasn’t even pretending not to laugh.

Pepper took the kids’ opinions into account when buying replacements of the many things they destroyed on a daily basis. How two children went through so many T-shirts and underwear, they’d never know. Tony peered over her shoulder, making suggestions on her StarkPad, too, but they all had very definite opinions.

Bucky bounced from one square to the next on the hopscotch grid they laid out on the playroom floor with duct tape. “I want Black Widow underth!”

Black Widow boy shorts would have to do, but Tony would put a word in the ear of the manufacturer about making more of the Widow merch available in unisex styles.

Taking her turn at hopscotch, Darcy called out her request, “Me, too! I want Thor panties!”

“HULK, THREE. PUNY GOD. ON BUTT.” Big Green insisted, turning from their game of hopscotch to look at Pepper and point at the seat of his stretchy Hulk pants.

Three days later, Tony and Steve sat in a brainstorming session with Clint, Sam, and Rhodey, reviewing last minute designs for tactical suits before they went into production. Romanoff and Banner had already signed off on theirs, so they were on kid duty for an hour so Tony’s back could get a break from the sling and its wiggling occupant.

But Romanoff’s voice suddenly filled the air. “Could Tony and Steve please be excused to come down to the Hulk room? Pepper and I are going to need a hand. Actually…” she paused, “maybe this is an all hands on deck kind of situation.”

“Is it a Code Green?”

“Nothing like that,” she insisted. “Don’t get your star-spangled knickers in a twist, Rogers. Just come downstairs. Maybe stop by the garage and pick up some sponges and buckets … and soap, lots and lots of soap.”

Well, okay then…

Hurrying to do as their lady loves bid, Tony and Steve led the way, stopping for the requested supplies and hustling downstairs to the Hulk-out room.

The Hulk-out room that was covered as high as the Hulk could jump with fingerpaint. Gallons of
fingerpaint in every color of the rainbow. Every wall, every window, every surface.

“Before you freak out, you should know that Jarvis supplied the paint and these three,” Pepper pointed at the bots, also covered in paint splashes, “did his dirty work.”

The bots perked up when the kids rounded the half-wall separating the observation room's entryway from the Hulk-out room and Tony laughed so hard, he cried.

Darcy and Bucky were stripped down to their fancy new Thor and Widow undies, every inch of them covered in paint. Even their eyelashes were coated in paint. The three bots lined up to trail after the kids like Rorshach-on-acid ducklings. All of which would be no big deal, except that big kid number three came lumbering along behind the first two and the bots, wearing a pair of Hulk-out pants with an iron-on Loki face splashed across the ass and every color of fingerpaint known to man smeared from his messy hair to his toes.

It was in his ears.

Rainbow, Hulk-sized footprints were everywhere.

Tony grinned. “I can’t wait to show Bruce.”
This chapter immediately follows the bonus scene, “It’s A Girl”, I posted separately last night as part of this series with appropriate warnings. I recommend reading it before this update, but you can skip it if the warnings are a problem and not miss any important details that I haven't covered in this chapter.

Watch out below for hand-wavy medical terminology and diagnoses. I wanted the kids to contract an illness that took less than two weeks to incubate because I’m working within a timeline here, so I made one up, but I should have done my research because regular old strep only takes 2 - 5 days to incubate. Enter streptococcus tachenarxis (rapid onset strep throat) because I am a dumbass. :-P

Today’s prompt was provided by SionnachOiche3.

One-word prompt: cold

Patience was not Tony Stark’s strong suit.

He bounced lightly on the balls of his feet, waiting for hours, it seemed, for the return of the inbound quinjet from SI’s upstate storage facility. The upstate property consisted of a dozen hangars around an aging airport and runway, a short half-mile from Howard’s old Adirondack camp and horse farm, built as a family retreat on an island in the middle of a lake (not at all surprisingly re-named after Howard in the late forties) around the turn of the century by one of the big, new money, steel barons. From the fifties to the late eighties, it was used for SI’s up and coming movers and shakers. A young Tony would have loved the camp, if he and his parents ever stayed there for anything other than business conferences.

Darcy would love it, he considered. Might be worth fixing up to get the whole team-turned-family away from the city next summer for some sun and fun on the lake and a real vacation. Darcy could have a pony at the farm and ride every day all summer, if she liked. Bucky could wear himself out at the swimmin' hole and paddling around the lake in one of the museum-quality preserved canoes. Or… He reconsidered. With a little TLC, able bodies, and elbow grease, the superintendent of the farm could ready the main lodge for an old fashioned family Christmas celebration. Like those Rockwell paintings. People did that right? Families? With a real tree and stockings hung by a thing with care and a big, brown bird of some sort, baked and … er, slathered with the gravy. He'd have to ask Jarvis, but that sounded right.

A signed order of adoption was on its way to the clerk of courts, making the family part true enough, and he was determined not to fuck it up right out of the gate. Christmas was just two weeks away. He could give her one really great Christmas memory to hold onto from her second childhood, if he got it right.

If she remembered her second childhood when the regression spell wore off, that is.
And if she didn’t, they’d have countless terabytes of photos, video, and audio recordings to share the experience later. Tony resolved on the spot to install more cameras everywhere. Darcy should have a cell phone and a tracker, too, maybe embedded in something pretty, like a necklace or one of those monogram bracelets with the little letters for “Darcy Morgan Stark”. And were her ears pierced? Now he couldn’t remember. She might want to do that with Pepper, if they weren’t pierced already. During Darcy’s nap, he and Jarvis could look up ear piercing aftercare online.

(The experts advised against naps for most five year olds, but Darcy’s disrupted sleep habits made her the exception to the rule. She was still catching up and keeping up with Bucky and Hulk was no easy feat. Tony heard through the busybody A.I. grapevine that Rogers and Romanoff started a phonics program with Bucky, something to keep him busy during Darcy’s afternoon downtime. Jarvis especially enjoyed the challenge of creating customized reading and math programs to catch Bucky up to current public school standards, in case their age regression was more permanent than Frigga warned.)

A pinpoint appeared in the distance, slowly making its way toward the tower. Tony sighed in relief. He didn’t like the idea of them being out there, vulnerable, even with Rhodey, the War Machine suit, and a terrifying Black Widow on board. Anything less than four Avengers was not enough, as far as he was concerned. He made a note to finish the designs for Pepper’s emergency suit and get Jarvis started on the early fab today. No time like the present to outfit his lady love in titanium armor than to protect their little ironlette.

But there were some things even Tony couldn’t protect his little girl from, which became immediately obvious as Pepper and Romanoff disembarked, each with a limp child in their arms. Mini Barnes was a beast of a six year old, too. Tony rushed across the hangar to take the kid from Romanoff.

“What’s this about?” he asked, shifting Bucky to get a better grip under his thighs and haul him up to hitch the kid’s legs over his own hips.

“We were just wrapping up the tour, heading to the lodge for lunch, when Darcy and Bucky both started complaining about how warm it was.” Pepper clucked her tongue and brushed the hair off of Darcy’s damp forehead. “It can’t be forty degrees up north, outside, Tony. There’s no way they were just overheated in light winter coats.”

But Darcy’s emerald green pea coat was unbuttoned and her face was flushed. Bucky’s fleece-lined parka was unzipped, sleeves pushed up, hood thrown back. His hair was soaked, skin sheened with sweat. The poor kid was roasting in his own juices.

Tony stopped, demanding, “Help me get this off of him. Something’s wrong. He’s burning up. Darcy, too. Get the coats off.”

Romanoff unbundled the coat and reached around his neck to unbutton the rugby shirt for good measure. Rhodey did the same, slipping Darcy's arms out of her sleeves and pulling back the collar of her T-shirt to check her temp. The look on his face was not good.

“Jarvis,” the Russian called out, “please page Dr. Lin and Steve. Tell them to come to the common room. Tell the doctor to bring his bag. Then, contact medical, let them know they’re at Dr. Lin’s beck and call until informed otherwise, and get a pair of nurses upstairs to help Dr. Lin as needed.” She worried her lip. “This happened fast. Ten minutes ago, they were flushed, but chatty, talking about playing hide and seek with the bots before dinner.”

Fifteen minutes and a flurry of activity later, Dr. Lin advised moving the children to one of the guest suits off of the common room, to make it easier for the nurses to come and go as needed.
“I know it’s sudden and seems quite frightening,” he assured the four inexperienced guardians, “but it looks like good old streptococcus. Nothing to worry over, especially, but we’ll keep a close eye on James to be sure, since he’s hasn’t had a chance to develop modern antibodies like Darcy. Fortunately for him, his playmate is also sick. If we keep them close, some of her natural antibodies will be shared.”

“Do you think it would help if one of us with the serum stayed close, too?” Steve asked, pointing to himself, Natasha, and Pepper.

Dr. Lin smiled a knowing grin. “While I don’t doubt the medical marvel that is Dr. Erskine’s formula and its many varieties, I think you’ll have to fight Anthony for who’s watching over the children.” Then he laughed as Tony’s bots pushed back the pocket doors leading to the guest room next door where a pair of engineering interns were busy setting up an interim workshop for Tony and portable charging stations for the bots.

“Tony, that’s hardly conducive to—”

“Finding the cure for strep and the common cold?” He waved Pepper off. “I’ll make it work. Don’t mind me, Doc Lin. Go about your business,” he wagged a dismissive hand as he leaned over to lift and transfer Darcy to a custom-made adjustable king size bed. Without waiting for the others, he switched Bucky over, too, settling him right next to Darcy in the middle of the bed. With a testy pair of grumbles, they shifted to face each other. Bucky flipped his pillow over to find the cold side and Darcy started struggling to pull her undershirt off. Willing to do whatever it took to make her comfortable, Tony stripped Darcy down to her Mjolnir-emblazoned Thorties and flicked open the lightest, thinnest sheet available from the stack of linens brought down by housekeeping. That seemed like a fine idea to Bucky; he grunted and huffed until Steve sat on the edge of the bed to lend him a hand removing his undershirt, too. Down to just his Hawkeye boxers, Bucky’s fever became even more apparent. Covered with sweat, his skin looked mottled and red everywhere.

“We’ll do what we can to bring down his fever without disturbing the body’s natural process of fighting off illness,” Dr. Lin warned. “I know it’s tempting to give them antibiotics or Tylenol or some such, but the fever is beneficial to a point and antibiotics should be reserved for an infection the body won’t easily overcome on its own. We’ll work with the fever.” He eyeballed Tony. “And keep our heads.”

“Dr. Lin,” Jarvis’ volume matched the quiet of the sickroom, “Medical reports a positive match for the early strep test. The lab suggests it’s likely a mutant strain of streptococcus tachenarxis and the worst of the symptoms should clear up in a few days, though the children might be contagious for up to another week.”

“There, see?” The doctor pointed to the ceiling, indicating Jarvis’ good news. “Just the good word we were hoping for.”

At that precise moment, something flickered across Darcy’s face. Something painfully familiar to Tony. He snatched up a basin and lunged across the bed just in time to catch a veritable waterfall of puke. Rogers, thankfully quick on the uptake, assumed the sight-slash-smell-slash-movement of the bed would lead to worse yet and scrambled to the other side of the bed in the nick of time to catch Bucky’s response in the bedside trashcan.

“Ha!” Dr. Lin laughed, clapping his hands in delight. “You’ll be fine! Excellent. I’ll be back this afternoon to check in on our patients. Jarvis will keep me posted if anything comes up in the meantime.” He jiggled his Starkphone at the security camera beside the door and swept out of the room like a man on a mission.
A man on a mission to never rinse out a sick bucket again.

“That was … impressive.” Romanoff stood at the end of the bed, arms folded over her chest.

Tony shrugged. “I’ve seen plenty of people about to puke; I knew it was coming before Darcy knew she needed to,” he said, exchanging basins with the nurse who helpfully offered a fresh one and a wet cloth to wipe down Darcy’s face. Laying the basin by her side, he brushed the hair from her eyes and cleaned her face and chin. Another exchange with a nurse—more wet cloths—and he started in on the layer of sweat clinging to her neck and chest. Carefully, propping her chest against his wide palm, he bent her over his forearm as little as possible to run the cool cloth over her back.

When he was done, her eyes popped open and she whined, “Miss Pepper said you hab a surprise for me. Can I hab it noooow?”

Grabbing another cool cloth, Tony settled on the bed and pulled Darcy into his lap. “It’s not the kind of surprise you unwrap.”

He looked around the room, not unsure, but a little uncomfortable announcing his news to their friends and family all at once. Bruce, Clint, Sam, and Rhodey were gathered in the common room, in the seating area closest to the guest room housing the kids. Rogers and Romanoff sat in a pair of chairs on Bucky’s side of the big adjustable bed.

Pepper knew he had the paperwork, of course—not that he’d already signed it.

“But it’s a good surprise, I think.” He set the cloth aside and relaxed into the raised mattress at his back, smiling faintly when Darcy stretched out the full length of his forearm to cool off. “Before the lab accident that made you and Bucky little again, you asked him to have lunch with you because you were nervous I’d change my mind and cancel the meeting I had scheduled with the lawyers after lunch that day.”

“What’s a lawler do?” Darcy grumbled.

“My lawyers were supposed to meet me to finalize an order of adoption grownup you and I filed a few months before that, for me and you to become a family. Jarvis hasn’t said anything, but I think you and Jane were talking about it that day in the lab, and the lawyers had to wait because you were suddenly little and you needed me to act like a dad right away.”

“I ‘member. You said we be famiwy. I want’d to,” she murmured. It was an odd quirk of the regression that both kids seemed to remember the events surrounding the lab accident with startling bursts of occasional clarity. “Da lady doctor said mean fings, sell out — real mean — mid-wife cwisis.” Her brow puckered and an angry tear spilled over her cheek.

The words may have been garbled, but Tony got the gist of Foster’s insults and Darcy’s lingering disillusionment and anger for her friend, but he’d deal with whatever demonic space viking crap Foster had pulling her strings later.

“Dr. Foster is very single-minded and driven.” Pepper tried to reassure Darcy. “I think it hurt her feelings when you told her you were coming to work for me and Tony, sweetie, but you didn't hurt her on purpose.”

“Didn’t mean to…” Darcy whined, curling in on herself to rub her forehead against Tony’s bicep.

“We know, kiddo.” He squeezed her gently. “The surprise is that I signed the papers today and made it official so I can be your dad for real, and not just because you’re little. The lawyers are filing the paperwork right now. Jarvis?” he asked. A digital copy of the document appeared on the TV on the
wall opposite the headboard, proclaiming Darcy Morgan Stark the legal daughter of Anthony Edward Stark. (The signatures of Clint Barton, under Darcy’s name, and Steve Rogers, under Tony’s name, were signed with a great deal more enthusiasm than the average legal witness and were sure to make Darcy laugh when she was grown again.)

“See that?” he asked. Darcy tried to raise her head, but exhaustion won out. She grunted and shook her head, so Tony lifted her high enough to show her the order of adoption. “That says you’re Darcy Stark now. No take-backs, squirt. It’s you, me, and your brother bots against the world.”

She smiled, said, “’kay,” twisted her hands into Tony’s ragged T-shirt, and passed out cold.

Dipping his head in thanks at the round of whispered, “Congratulations, man,” from his friends, he shifted to lay Darcy back down on the bed beside her feverish best friend. Poor Bucky was soaked, despite the recent sponge bath Steve and Natasha gave him while Tony spoke to Darcy. It was going to be a long few days.

Really, the first twenty-four hours weren’t so bad. Darcy and Bucky were so out of it, they couldn’t do much more than drink cool water through a straw and sleep, piled up together in the middle of the bed like puppies.

The next forty-eight hours were a completely different story…
“How’s it feel?”

“How’s it feel?”

“Hmm…?”

“Being a father,” Steve elaborated as they watched over their charges from opposite sides of the bed.

“There, same as yesterday.” Tony scratched his stubble. “But with more terrifying responsibility and a sudden, intense, blazing distrust of all teenage boys.”

Pepper snorted and made an effort to disappear into the work on the StarkPad in her lap.

Tony’s hair stuck up every which way and he looked like something scraped off the bathroom floor of a dive bar. Worrying always reduced him to the pre-Iron Man guy who frequently forgot to brush his teeth and what day it was, but he was managing this newest crisis well, under the circumstances.

Darcy spoke very little during the first day and a half of their illness. She answered questions when directly spoken to, but otherwise didn’t cry out from discomfort or seek comfort from any of the adults. She received comfort nonetheless. Tony rarely sat more than an arm’s reach away. He pulled a chair up next to the bed to fidget with some small gadget for Darcy while the bots brought him everything he needed from the temporary workshop next door. (Dum-E made a special trip up to Darcy’s room to retrieve her Bucky Bear and Thor’s cape, which was accidentally sent upstairs with her coat when they disembarked earlier.) When she wasn’t draped over, wrapped around, or buried under a delirious, sweating Bucky, Tony held her, offering cooling sips of water from a cup with a straw and running a hand over her hair or down her back, just offering whatever comfort she might accept.

Bucky cried for his ma.

At first, Steve almost missed the strange, lisping litany. Growing up, determined immigrant parents encouraged Bucky to speak in English as much as possible. In fact, Steve didn’t know Bucky even spoke Romanian until they were twelve. Buck’s ma was first generation Romanian-American. Buck’s pop was Irish-Romanian-American, second generation, and very proud of being born an American. Though they spoke Romanian at home, they rarely did so in front of non-Romanian friends.

Meaning Steve.

So he didn’t recognize the plea for what it was until Nat nudged him with her boot and gave him the ‘do something’ look.

“What?” he hissed.
She made a big, exasperated face at him. “He’s crying for his mother, Steven. You could hug him.”

Steve shifted forward in his chair, gripping the armrests. “Is that… Is that really what he’s saying?”

“You didn’t know?”

“I speak a lot of languages, Nat, but Bucky rarely ever spoke Romanian when we were kids, and never to me. Lisping Romanian isn’t exactly in my repertoire.” He grabbed one of the ever-present cloths and dabbed Bucky’s flushed face. “I can’t give him his ma. I can’t make it better. I can’t even understand what’s he asking for when he does get a few words out. I haven’t felt this useless since before I met Erskine.”

“May I?” she asked, pointing to the space between Steve and Bucky.

“Please,” he begged.

With years of training that made it second nature, she deliberately softened her features like slipping on a mask of loving motherhood and eased into the space by Bucky’s side of the bed. In a surprisingly tender alto voice, she crooned—a song that could have been a Romanian lullaby, but she’d never tell and Steve would never ask. Drawn to the familiar sound, Bucky blinked in confusion, but slid off the bed and into her lap, and there he stayed for another hour, murmuring nonsensically against the Black Widow’s breasts.

Surreal though it was, it looked kind of right, like Nat knew what she was doing and Bucky was feeling it, and Steve’s stomach did a weird thing that made him envious of Tony all of a sudden. Tony who had no family, so he adopted a like-minded young woman who needed one, too. Why shouldn’t it be that easy?

Eventually, Dr. Lin returned and requested his patients be returned to bed for their checkup. Nat struggled a little under the weight of lifting a solid six year old Bucky, but she managed, and before Steve could open his mouth to offer help.

He had to give Tony all the credit in the world, not once did he give either Steve or Nat shit about how they responded to caring for Bucky. Fatherhood was already working wonders on Tony.

Reassured by the elderly doctor’s presence and confidence, Steve asked if there was anything he should be doing. He felt worse than useless; he knew Bucky didn't want him anyway. He wanted the one person Steve couldn’t bring him.

“You’re doing just fine,” the doctor repeated. “And no—you can’t give him his mother. I’m sorry for that. I know it must be very difficult, but you can show him he’s loved by you and these others here.” And, of course, Steve knew the doctor spoke the truth. Sam and Clint hadn’t moved except to fetch fresh pitchers of water and snacks from the kitchen in hours. Rhodey sat in a few meetings for Pepper, who set up a kind of SI triage area out in the common room for her assistants with U as the go-between. (Bruce, he assumed, was sleeping like the dead after a week of hard play as the Hulk.)

And Nat… She stayed by his side, as much for Bucky as to keep Steve from crawling out of his own skin from the need to do something.

“Clint,” she called to her partner. “Sit with Bucky for a few minutes? Steve needs some air.”

Okay, then. Air, it is.

When the cool winter air of New York hit him in the face, he took a deep, cleansing breath and chanced a glance at the pretty redhead out of the corner of his eye. “Thanks. You’re right. I needed
to take a break."

“Maybe you should give yourself a break, too. Do you know how many times I’ve sat by actual human disaster Clint Barton’s hospital bed, feeling like the worst, incompetent, hopeless excuse for a friend? He’s held together with bubble gum and wire hangers at this point and it never gets easier. I can’t imagine how hard it must be watching your partner—your suddenly six year old partner—in the same position, but begging for a mother who died half a century ago.” She crowded him, daring him to push her away even as she wrapped her arms around his waist. “You do what you can with what you have, Steve. It’s all anybody can ask of you.”

“Thanks.” The word caught in Steve’s throat at the memory of Natasha singing to and rocking his tiny best friend. “Thanks—for all of this. I never even asked. I’m selfish, but I just… I was so relieved when you stuck around to help. I never thought about how hard this would be for you.”

“This isn’t difficult for me,” she soothed. “I owe him a debt. You forget—Yasha was there when I was a small child, too. He taught me things that kept me alive. A song his mother might have sang for him is nothing compared to what he gave me.”

“He loved you, you know.”

“What he was enjoyed me. I was an immaculate kind of protege, a point of pride to a person who had nothing else, not even the knowledge that he was his own person. He was Yasha—Soldat, first and foremost.” She pressed her head into the tender underside of Steve’s jaw. “This … with James. It’s more personal, more important, like giving something back to both of us that we lost, like learning how to be people and family again. It’s precious to me.”

“Well, I’m grateful, whatever your reasons. Thank you.” But when their eyes met and hers shimmered with unshed tears, he had to say it again, once more with kisses. “Thank you,” he murmured, tasting her soft lips, gently suckling the bottom lobe and siphoning off what sadness remained. Then another and another, until they were out of breath, her face rubbed red from his beard. When the tears dried and composure returned, she nuzzled him like a friendly feline, seeking more. He’d give her all of it and then some, if she let him. Someday, he hoped she’d let him give her everything.

When the fever finally broke a few hours later, Bucky lay limp and soggy, and definitely not in a mood to talk with his sore throat, so Jarvis queued up a movie while Darcy and Bucky drifted back to their little nest in the middle of the pillows and cape at the top of the bed. Some of the others joined them. Bringing low chairs and cushions from the common room to pile up on the floor together for the day.

They started with the original Batman movies. Bucky, it turned out, loved Catwoman, rasping as the end credits rolled, “Ith thee a goo’ guy? Ith thee a ba’ guy? Don’ know. Betht part. Thee’th mytheriouth.”

Steve didn’t miss the pointed look Clint threw at Natasha, but he ignored it just the same.

"So you like cats, huh,” Sam asked Bucky.

Bucky stared at him, eyebrow cocked as he tried to understand some deeper meaning behind the question, then shrugged. "They're okay."

Steve stared at Sam, like, "Really, Sam?"

“What? I always thought he’d be a cat person. Confirmation!” He raised both fists in victory.
“I like puppies,” Darcy piped up from her spot smooshed against Bucky’s side with the Bucky Bear between them and Thor’s cape wrapped around them like a burrito. “And robots,” she assured a dejected Dum-E. “And bunnies and horses and cows and camels and fishies and unicorns, but mostly puppies. Do you have any puppy movies, Jarvis?”

“Would you prefer the Beethoven series, Air Buddies series, or a selection of Disney classics, Miss Stark?”

She started in surprise at the ‘Miss Stark’ until Tony leaned over to whisper in her ear.

“I didn’t ‘member that part. Stark,” she rolled the name around in her mouth like she was tasting and feeling it with all of her teeth.

“He can call you Darcy, instead, if you want,” Tony offered, but Steve saw the poorly masked cringe.

“No, no, I wanna be Stark so we belong toge'ver. I ‘member dat,” she promised Tony before kissing him on the cheek and wrapping her little arms around his neck in a tight hug. Pepper looked like she might burst from happiness.

“So.” Tony plucked Darcy out of their nest and climbed onto the bed beside Bucky. “While Jarvis queues up Beethoven, tell me more about puppies and horses. I was just thinking earlier—we’ve got a farm upstate, be a great place for the next Stark to ride a pony, if she got one for Christmas.”

“Tony! You can't just buy a pony!” Pepper gasped, more out of habit than anything else, Steve suspected.

He waved her off. “We’ll adopt the pony. I’m sure there’s a shelter somewhere in the state for horses and circus animals. In fact.” He pursed his lips. “The Darcy Stark Foundation has a nice ring to it. Fundraising for animal shelters would be a good platform for the newest Stark to get involved in charity work. Learn how to Stark from the ground up, so to speak, but only if you want to,” he vowed.

“Will there be puppies?” This was the sticking point, apparently.


“And bunnies.” Bucky muttered out of the side of his mouth.

“And bunnies,” Tony nodded in agreement without batting an eye.

The robot spun in a slow circle, as if looking for a pencil. It whirred in excitement, then bolted out of the room.

“Dum-E!” Pepper’s assistant bellowed as the unmistakable sound of reams of paper fluttering to the floor could be heard.

“You better start building a robot to clean up after the other robots,” Pepper muttered.

“Jarvis,” Darcy called out to the A.I. “Write dat down.”
“Did you know …NATHA maketh thpathethuith ta protect athtronauth from nuffin’?” Bucky asked of no one in particular as he paged through a Space Camp brochure helpfully provided by Jarvis to stave off boredom during day three of their quasi-quarantine due to strep throat. His reading program was coming along quickly thanks to Jarvis, though the A.I. and Darcy still had to help him with words longer than four letters. The kids had been lying in bed on their bellies, heads tilted, sucking on popsicle after popsicle, reading through the thick stack of space magazines and information for hours.

Out loud.

“I… What?” Steve asked, shifting to stare at Bucky’s lips and willing him to repeat it so he’d have another crack at figuring out what he just said.

“NASA makes spacesuits to protect astronauts from nothing. Neat, huh, Captain Steve?” Darcy’s faint whisper was only marginally easier to understand.

“It sure is.” He nodded, trying to drum up some new enthusiasm for space facts. Because science fiction nerd Bucky Barnes knew lots of science facts and he was sharing them whether you’re interested or not, if you were stuck in this room. And Steve loves Bucky, he does, but the other adults abandoned the sickroom after the seventeenth or thirty-sixth, or whatever it was, space science fact to which they’d been treated, and apparently, that was everyone else’s limit. Steve had long since reached his, but his stubborn determination to stick it out had bitten him in the ass and everyone else was tucked safely out of hearing range of space fact number whatever in the kitchen, probably drinking all the coffee and not saving Steve any waffles.

In his life since coming out of the ice, Steve had never wished so hard for an assemble call, so he suffered a moment of stuttering disbelief when the siren actually sounded.

“Shit,” he swore, launching out of his chair to grab the nearest StarkPad where Jarvis brought up security footage of… “Ugh. Doombots? Again?” Steve groaned.

“Thteebie?” Bucky worried.

Taking a deep breath and composing his features, Steve turned around with the most encouraging expression he could muster. “Hey pal, I gotta go do my Captain job for a little bit, but it’ll be okay because Pepper’s going to stay right here and Rhodey and Sam will swap out as air support is needed, so one of them will always be nearby, too, okay? Remember we talked about how this might happen?”

“It’s okay, Bucky,” Darcy soothed her friend. “Tony will be wif Captain Steve and Miss Nat. He’ll watch deir backs above deir heads!”

“Thteebie, what about… What happenth if ya get hurt?” Bucky’s lip wobbled and Steve kind of
wanted to cry himself. Had there ever been a time when Bucky Barnes hadn’t been worried about his health and safety first?

“I heal real fast, pal. Real fast. I probably won’t be gone more than a few hours. In fact, I bet Nat comes to—"

Right on cue, Nat and Tony burst into the room, followed by Pepper, concerned, but calm, cool, and collected as ever. Tony swept Darcy up in a hug and pressed kisses all over her face, promising to be home in a few hours, then they’d have some more popsicles and a Mythbusters marathon.

“‘kay,” she replied. Confident in Tony’s tech and knowledge of robots, she kissed his cheek and told him to have fun and be safe and bring her home a robot, please.

How is this the same child who couldn’t say ‘boo’ to Pepper twelve days ago without Tony’s support?

Bucky, meanwhile, wore himself down to a nub with worry as he hung onto Natasha for dear life and begged, “Ththeebye hath aththma weal bad. Ya gotta keep an eye on ‘im tho he doethn’t overdo it fightin’ bad guyth, okay? Becauthe it hurtth hith heart thometimeth, too.”

But Nat didn’t remind him about the serum or that Steve had been cured of all his childhood ailments. Instead, she promised she would watch his back and bring him home as safe as she could. They both might be injured, but Tony had wonderful doctors on staff and the Avengers trained every day for emergencies like this one.

Then Pepper found the right combination of words to add when she reminded Bucky, “Hulk is going along, too. He’ll keep an eye on your parents.”

Bucky blinked at the mention of parents and swallowed hard, but nodded and eventually let go of Nat to accept a fierce hug from Steve. “Promithe you’ll be carefu’, Ththeebye.”

“I promise, pal.” He kissed him on the head and reluctantly let go.

“We’ll be fine. Rhodye’s taking the first shift, so Sam will stay here with us,” Pepper called after him as he kicked off his boots and hurried to the locker room, taking the stairs three at a time.

But when Sam sat in, and Bucky had a new ear to bend, all he could think about was Steve and Steve’s health because Rhodey cut into the comms with a resigned sigh and a message from Sam through Jarvis. “Man, how sick were you before the serum, Rogers? This kid is freaking out, like you’re coming back in a pine box, accompanied by a priest with a sad telegram. I now have a list of all of your known infirmities, as well as your food allergies, and a list of things that are too fibrous for you to swallow without choking. Dude, there are conditions on this list I’ve never heard of!”

“Remind them about hith aththma, though, Tham!” a voice insisted in the background.

“Avengers,” Sam raised his voice. “Please be advised that you will face the wrath of one very angry six year old best friend if Captain Steve Rogers returns to the tower with so much as a hair out of place on his delicate, wheezy head.” He paused. “Happy now?”

“Yeth.” A pause. “Wait—”

Sam sighed.

“If hith back thhtarth to hurt, remind him to way down on da floor and bend hith kneeth and to breave thlow until hith heart thtopth rathing. That’th i’portant.”
“Got all that?” Sam asked as Rhodey swore ripely and dodged a Doombot with laser eyes.

“Thank you for humoring him, Sam. He means well.” Steve laughed to himself. “I think he forgets sometimes that I’m not six, too.”

“It’ll get better,” Pepper assured Steve. “Happy used to all but strip-search Tony when he came back to the shop in Malibu after a fight with armor falling off as he touched down on the landing pad. When he was thirty-five. Best friends worry; that’s all.” But she said it with a smile in her voice and Steve knew she was laughing quietly at his expense.

It did get better.

They had a rush of assemble calls within three or four days—Steve honestly forgot how long it had been since the first assemble. Hell, since he’d slept in his own bed. Bucky and Darcy were on the mend, chomping at the bit to get out of bed and play when they weren’t napping from all the energy it took to complain about being bored and sick.

Pepper was right, of course, in that the first return from an assemble was the most difficult. Jarvis played a carefully selected montage of footage from the fight intended to console a worried Bucky. It helped a lot, but that first time, Steve capitulated to the well-meant bullying and suffered Bucky giving him his own thorough checkup, including his temperature, heart rate, and peering into his ears and staring into his pupils.

Somehow, Steve managed not to laugh.

Whatever Bucky saw there seemed to satisfy him because his only recommendation was lots of rest in the sickroom (where Bucky could keep an eye on him).

Natasha watched over the entire process with amusement, kissing him breathless later, during Bucky’s nap when Steve moved to the chair by the bed so she could climb into his lap, fresh and powdered from her recent shower. And she brought vodka.

“You’re the kind of father I can only imagine most children wish they had, even if Bucky looks at you and still sees his little buddy.” It was said with a smile and unmistakable love in her eyes. He loved her and said so often, but never felt it more so than when the contrast between the sweet, softer Natasha who sang to a little boy and the one with all the hard edges and brash confidence blurred to make this lovely in-between.

He loved the in-between best.

Two missions and three days after the first big, post-lab accident assemble call, they returned home, dirty and disheveled, to an empty sickroom. Darcy, Jarvis reported, was playing with a water-proof bot prototype in Tony's massive shower while Pepper worked on her StarkPad, watching over the little one from the room next door.

Bucky, on the other hand…

“It appears Master Barnes has discovered one of Agent Barton’s many entries into the ventilation system. How do you wish to proceed, Captain Rogers?”

Steve turned flinty eyes on Barton who was currently in no condition to crawl into the vents after a child: barely conscious, drooling, and flirting with the nurses. Badly.

“Perhaps if you prepared one of Master Barnes’ favorite meals in the apartment nearest his location, he would venture forward on his own?” Jarvis suggested.
Because no way was Steve fitting in the vents. Barton barely fit through them, and only by sheer
determination in some narrower spots.

“Do we have sensors near enough his location to locate him, Jarvis?”

“Currently, there is a heat signature similar to a slightly elevated human body temperature registering
in the vicinity of Agent Romanoff’s dining room.”

“He’s crawling around above my apartment?” she asked, surprised.

“He appears to have disabled all of the tripwires and is quite safe, I assure you.”

Tripwires. Steve blinked at Nat. She shrugged. “Early warning, non-lethal. Mostly to deter Clint
from snooping and playing pranks.”

Alrighty then…

Employing Jarvis’ advice, they pulled together the makings of Bucky’s favorite meal—grilled
pepperoni and mozzarella sandwiches (thanks, Barton), sliced apples, and homemade caramel sauce.
Steve popped open the kitchen ceiling vent and Natasha waved the steam from lunch towards the
opening with a thin cutting board.

Thirty seconds later, Bucky came scrambling toward the smell like a rat to the tune of the piper.

“Hey pal, whatcha doin’ up there?” Steve asked when the top of Bucky’s head and eyes appeared
from the recesses of the ventilation system.

“Readin’...?” But he phrased it like a question and if Steve had spidey senses, they would have
tingled, especially when Buck disappeared and Steve heard the sound of something being folded and
shoved in the back of his pants.

Sneaky little shit.

With a bit of help, he managed to climb down to Nat’s kitchen island and grab a seat in the breakfast
nook, pressing his back solidly against the chair.

Ah. The game is afoot, then…

Steve served up lunch and bided his time.

With his belly full and the carbo-load sitting in his belly like an anchor, Bucky just about dozed off at
the table, leaning forward far enough for Steve to catch sight of the magazine sticking up out of
Bucky’s waistband.

“So, Buck… What were ya readin’ up there that required such a quiet spot in the middle of Nat’s
booby traps?”

Like a deer in headlights, Bucky sat up, eyes wide, frozen with the last bite of pizza grilled-cheese
half-chewed in his mouth.

“Hand it over.” Steve held out a hand and waited with that look on his face his ma always gave him.
The look that meant you were either going to end up on your knees scrubbin’ or prayin’ away
whatever put that guilty look in your eyes in the first place.

“I wike da theiling ventth. It’th pwivate,” Bucky answered with a mutinous look and a huff, and
crossed arms for good measure.
“You're six. Why do you need to be that private?”

With a resigned grumble, Bucky handed over his prize.

A skin mag with Barton’s name printed in the address window.

"In my defense, Theteebie, this book is full of naked ladies! There’s a whole library of ‘em in a closet that nobody’s readin’!"

“Buck, this is pornography.”

“Yeah, the future there is swell…” he said with a dreamy look into the distance.

Steve snapped his fingers in front of Bucky’s face to call his attention back to the matter at hand.

“Where’d you get this, Buck?”

“Mister Hawkeye’s apartment.”

“How’d you get in?”

Bucky shrugged. “Jimmied da lock.”

Steve took a deep breath. He didn’t know where to begin. Pornography certainly wasn’t meant for children in any century, but there was nothing inherently wrong with the human body. Times had changed and he needed to discipline Bucky appropriately, but on the other hand, they were both raised Catholic, and what would Father Brennan say if he were still alive?

“I know you knew what you were doing was wrong because you tried to hide.” He leaned over to look Bucky directly in the eye. “Do you know the kind of penance Father Brennan would give you for this?”

But somehow, Bucky managed to turn the tables and leave Steve floundering again in the next breath. “Hey, Theteebie? How’s come we don’t gotta go through no more?”

Steve swallowed the ball of guilt that welled up out of the ether—guilt he hadn’t felt in years, his thoughts racing a million miles an hour as he tried to come up with an excuse for really and truly failing in his duties as the guardian of a child raised in the Catholic Church. Why don’t they go to church anymore, indeed.

Nat’s eyes met his over the table and he saw the warning there— “He’s playing you; don’t fall for it.”

But, shit, who dropped the ball here? Not Bucky. Little boys are curious and they get into all kinds of trouble. Sometimes, Catholic and mom guilt were the only things in their lives to keep them on the straight and narrow back in their day. They were still training up to be good men at Bucky's age.

After a handful of steadying breaths, he turned to his best friend and agreed, “You’re absolutely right, Buck. It’s time to go confess.”

“What? No. That’s a terrible idea!” Bucky back-pedaled in every way, pushing out his chair in a rush to clamor up onto the kitchen island toward the vent and escape.

“Nuh, uh, uh, pal. If you’re well enough to crawl through the vents reading Barton's skin mags, you’re well enough to go to confession. Let’s go put on our church clothes.”

“Traitor,” Bucky grumbled as Steve tossed him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “If you
wath thill wittle, you’d a been in the venth wif me and you know it.”
“How did it go?” Natasha asked as Steve and a notably subdued Bucky returned to their apartment hours later. Bucky made a beeline for his room and closed the door with a quiet click. Staring down the hall, Natasha waited for the usual sounds of boy chatter: Bucky yammering at Jarvis about his day and what story he’d like for bedtime, talking to himself as he got ready for his bath, the sounds of pretend explosions as he crashed his Matchbox cars into each other, but there was nothing. No sound at all.

When she turned back to Steve, his face was an inscrutable mask. She didn't know this Steve without his heart in his eyes.

“No good, then,” she surmised, setting aside the busywork she’d brought along to wait for their return.

Steve snorted and she noted his shaking hands. Steve Rogers did not shake over a little boy’s confession of barely existent naughtiness. “Scratch that—really not good. Steve, what’s going on?”

“Father Michael thinks I might not be the most suitable choice to raise Bucky, especially if he’s stuck like this for much longer. I’m supposed to pray on it this week and think about what’s best for Bucky’s spiritual well-being. He was particularly annoyed that he couldn’t give me proper penance because my confession wasn’t as contrite as it should be about distancing myself from the church and its teachings.”

“I thought this confession thing was just a guilt-tactic to remind Bucky that Santa’s watching. Why were you being lectured about his spiritual well-being?”

“Bucky’s only six. The church requires that children wait until the age of reason for first communion and there’s no point to a child confessing without the benefit of reason. Next year, maybe.” Steve leaned on the counter, the marble creaking under the pressure of his grip as he wrapped his fingers around the beveled edge.

“Okay,” she prompted, prying his fingers from the beleaguered counter and ushering him toward the living room so they could sit close together and keep their voices down.
“The things Buck did today—breaking into Clint’s apartment, snooping through his things, stealing, lying to Pepper to sneak away, hiding in the vents, the pornography, then trying to hide it from us—those are all on me. I haven’t been keeping up with his spiritual education and proper discipline—”

“Bullshit.”

“Natasha—”

“No. That’s bullshit. He’s a happy, healthy, curious little boy. A normal little boy. His family—such as it is—hasn’t set the best example for him and that’s not on you. We need to step up our involvement, too. Clint doesn’t even lock his door anymore because I break in all the time to remove his light bulbs and rearrange his furniture when he sleeps without his hearing aids."

That surprised a laugh out of Steve. Encouraged by the slight shift in his dark mood, she began listing the steps that had been taken in his absence to prevent a recurrence of the day’s more troubling events. “We started working on it while you were out. Clint and Tony boxed up Dumbass’ porn collection and stashed it in a weapons locker on Clint’s floor for now. Jarvis ordered a vault to install in Clint’s no-no closet to store all of his adult paraphernalia for the interim, including the weapons he should have secured after the incident in the common room. He has been thoroughly chastised,” she said with feeling. “We also cleared my apartment of all the remaining weapons and booby traps, stored all the nonessentials in another weapons locker on my floor, and I packed up the essentials to move down here on a more permanent basis—if you’ll have me.”

She pointed to the small stack of luggage beside the front door and waited. Steve did not disappoint, scooping her up into his lap for a kiss that left them both panting for air when they parted. “Does that mean you’re movin’ in or that I’m a hopeless mess who needs supervision?”

“Moving in. For as long as you need me."

“And if I need you forever?”

“Forever’s a long time,” she demurred, then smiled, “but I could be persuaded.”

But Steve’s smile was the smile of the truly happy. “I told Sam once I didn’t know what made me happy. I really was a mess back then. God knows what he thought of Captain Sad-sack Everything-is-Terrible.” He chuckled. “But if he asked me now…”

She smiled and touched her lips to his again. “Happy?”

“Happiest, maybe,” He wagged his head back and forth, still obviously troubled by the conversation with the priest.

“I know you’re worried about doing right by Bucky, but Frigga did say the spell would wear off, not that it’s permanent,” she reminded him gently. “We have no evidence to suggest when he returns to his proper age that he’ll even remember what’s happening now, or that he would forget being raised with you the first time. I understand you feel like you need to try to raise him the way your mothers raised both of you, but the Catholic Church is different now. It preaches very different things, things you take exception to. Don’t you think your mothers would have taken exception, too?”

“I wish I knew.” He he laid his forehead against hers and they sat, quietly sharing breath for a few moments. “What do you think I should do? I value your opinion and I know the way I was raised is not the only way to do this.”

“I wish I knew.” He he laid his forehead against hers and they sat, quietly sharing breath for a few moments. “What do you think I should do? I value your opinion and I know the way I was raised is not the only way to do this.”

“An invite was delivered today that might be a good place to start,” she began. “Pepper helped me bring my luggage down earlier. She wanted to apologize for letting Bucky give her the slip—”
“That’s hardly her fault! He told her he was going to the bathroom and his excuse is that he did go, but he decided to go for a walk afterward, to check out the penthouse and that’s when he found the vents.” He shook his head.

“Well, she realized he’d been gone a bit longer than any little boy really needed to be alone in the bathroom and she was just going to check on him when Jarvis notified her that he’d been caught climbing in the vents.”

“Ugh. I should apologize to her. There’s a daycare center for SI employees in the building that he’d have a much harder time sneaking away from. I should have—”

“No. He’s still James Barnes and that puts him at risk, no matter how well we vet people in the building outside the team. Pepper was the right call this time. Next time, whoever stays behind with Pepper will be sitting on top of Bucky the whole time, simple as that. We’ll take turns, if needed—make it work.”

Steve exhaled like he’d been holding his breath for a week. “Thanks, Nat.”

Another kiss, then, “When I told her where the two of you went, Pepper also asked me to extend an invitation to you and Bucky to attend church with her and Darcy, if you’d like to check out some modern congregations. There’s a UUC in Brooklyn that she likes and she thinks Darcy’s been enjoying their Sunday school.”

“UUC?”

“Unitarian Universalist Congregation, an inclusive, multi-faith church with a humanist approach to religion and its role in community. I think Pepper’s right; it might be more in keeping with what you believe now and it could provide a good foundation for you and Bucky going forward.”

“You did all this while I was getting the put-your-best-friend-up-for-adoption talk from Father Michael?”

“Excuse me?” Nat’s eyes flashed with righteous fury, her muscles suddenly taut and ready to spring. Steve glanced over his shoulder toward the hallway. “That’s why Bucky’s so upset, why I came back so upset.” He swallowed and his lip trembled, and Nat seriously considered burning down a man’s church. “He suggested Bucky might be better off with a proper Catholic family, if I’m not willing to do what’s best for his spiritual well-being.”

“Fuck that. No one is taking our—” Her breath heaved and her heart clenched. Absolutely not, not happening. “No one is taking Bucky from us. We’ll all go to Pepper’s church this Sunday. Obviously, I need some Jesus, too, or I wouldn’t be thinking about burning down Father Michael’s demented house of worship.”

“Your restraint is very appealing, you know,” he said, making a conscious effort to switch gears and lighten the mood for both of their sakes. Pressing kisses to the warm flush on her cheeks and down her throat, he slid the light blazer off her shoulders and slipped his fingers under the silky camisole strap beneath.

Natasha groaned, putting her hands on his chest to hold him off a bit longer. “Bath and bedtime, first. Then you can worship my restraint,” she reminded her lover before climbing to her feet.

When they opened the door to Bucky’s room together, they found him lying on the floor under his platform bed, curled in a ball with his quilt, tear tracks staining his sleeping face. His tie was loose and his good church clothes a wrinkled mess.
“Aw, Buck.” Steve slid his arms under the brawny little body of his best friend and hugged him close.

“You’re not really gonna send me away, are ya, pal?” Bucky surprised him in a sniffling voice, shaking with emotion. He slid his arms over Steve’s shoulders and buried his face in Steve’s neck.

“No, Bucky, not ever.” Steve squeezed him just a little bit tighter, swaying gently to soothe away the heartache the artless, single-minded words of the priest caused them both. “And I’m not going to raise you in a church that thinks you’d be better off without your only family because I ain’t Catholic up to snuff anymore. It ain’t right. Miss Pepper invited us to her church and Miss Nat’s going to check it out with us this weekend. It sounds real nice.”

“Tho I can stay?” His worried, little voice wobbled as Steve settled in the oversized reading chair in the corner.

“A’course, pal. That was never in doubt. Miss Nat and I haven’t had a chance to talk about it yet, but I think it might be time to draw up some legal guardianship papers, kind of like Darcy and Mr. Stark’s adoption, just to be on the safe side. It’ll make both of us your guardians, so you can stay with Miss Nat if anything happens to me before you grow up or get big again.” His gaze flickered up to hers in the darkened room.

“I’d like that, too,” she said, perching on the arm of the chair to run her hand through Bucky’s damp hair. “We’d be family, a real one this way, if you like. You could call me just Nat, or Aunt Nat.”

“If Th’eebie’s my betht pal and wike my bro’ver, what’th that make you?”

“Your big sister, Nat, then.” She smiled when his eyes widened in surprise.

“I never had a big thitther befo’.”

“Well, you do now.” She bundled him into her arms and sighed when Steve’s slipped around them both.

Chapter End Notes

Check out the end note of Chapter 13 over on my tumblr for a primer on Bucky's Lisp (because it is ridiculously long for an end note on AO3).
Breakfast the next morning came hours earlier than usual, with a side of painfully awkward.

Not because of their newfound understanding about becoming a family, but because Bucky woke up in the middle of the night and followed the strange sounds that roused him from sleep.

Right to Steve and Nat’s bedroom.

Needless to say, Bucky got an eyeful of his big brother and sister doing a very grownup thing, along with a hard-won lesson about knocking on doors, no matter what he thought might be happening to Steve on the other side.

“I’m reaw thorry, Nat. I didn’t mean to thnap a’ ya wike dat. It’th jutht… I thought you wath hurtin’ ‘im the way Ththeebie wath hollerin’ and breavin’ tho hawd that I heawd ‘im cawwyin’ on down da hall. He coulda been dyin!” he explained at top volume.

To his navel.

Because he couldn’t quite look anyone in the eye just yet. Bucky’s face might have turned permanently red, too, but neither of the adults could tell the way he had his chin buried in his chest and his eyes trained on his lap like his life depended on it.

Natasha sat across the table with a bemused smile in her eyes and a hand over her mouth, elbow on the table, clad only in a thin, silk robe hurriedly donned as Steve hustled a stunned Bucky out of their room ten minutes earlier. Then and there, they decided to sit down with hot drinks around the kitchen table and hold their first family meeting.

Taking a deep breath, Nat started the difficult conversation. “This is a teachable moment for all of us. That’s what it’s called, right, Jarvis?”

The speaker overhead crackled to life, “Indeed, Agent Romanoff.”

“Boundaries and family rules; we need to establish some and all agree to follow them. Do the two of you agree?” She looked from Bucky to Steve, then jerked her head to indicate he should do more than nod or sit there, doing an impression of a tomato, he supposed.

“That’s a good idea. Don’t you think so, Buck?” Steve nudged his elbow, but all Bucky could do was nod vehemently. “Buck?”

With a sudden burst of noise and emphatic gestures, all of Bucky’s concerns for Steve’s eternal soul poured forth, “What about Jethuth’ ruleth? We jutht got back fwom thurthch an’ you an’ Nat awen’t mawwied an’ ya aweady thinnin’ again, Ththeebie! Father Micha’th gonna give you tho many Hail Mawyth and Ou’ Fatherth, ya gonna be on ya kneeth unti’ nextht Chrithmath! We’re a’ppothed ta be on ou’ betht behaviuh and pwayin’ for’ guidanthe!”
“Excuse me,” Natasha whispered with trembling lips, trying desperately not to laugh. She slipped quickly from the room, flame-red hair swinging long and loose to the middle of her back.

“Oh oh. Nat’th not mad, ith thee?” Bucky worried, chewing on his lip with a glance down the hall.

“No, pal. I think she was chilly. Probably went to throw on a sweater.”

“Thee did wook awfuw cold. I mean, befor’, when ya wath hoggin’ all da bwanketth and wifout any of hew clotheth on an’ all—”


“Yeth, thir.” Bucky subsided to glare at the table and trace the whorls in the wood grain with his stubby fingertip.

Leaning forward, Steve propped his arms on the table and steepled his fingers. “Nat’s right about rules and boundaries. We need to discuss consequences, too, I think. We’re not mad about what happened just now. It was our responsibility to remind you to always knock on closed doors and we forgot to do that and lock our door, but you gotta remember what we do behind that door is no one’s business but ours, Buck. I’m an adult now; the condition of my soul is my worry alone.” He tapped Bucky gently on the nose in mild reprimand. “I promise to be more careful about locking the door in the future and I’m sure Nat will say the same—”

“Same!” Nat called out from behind the closed door to the master bedroom. “I’ll do better, too, James!”

Bucky smiled—a faint one, but a smile all the same.

“But that doesn’t let you off the hook for the stunt you pulled yesterday, young man, and we still have to discuss that.” Steve leveled his most serious look on his little buddy. “You have some apologies to make. Who do you think you should apologize to, first?”

“Mith Pepper,” he replied without hesitation. “Becauthe I let hew think I would be wight back and then I weft and she pwob’ly got wowwied when I di’n’t come back.” He rolled his lips between his teeth in a show of nerves.

Steve nodded in encouragement. “That’s right. Who else?”

“Mithter Thtark becauthe I bwoke the bent cober.”

The bent… Oh, the vent cover…

Steve inhaled sharply, surprised Bucky admitted to something he and Nat hadn’t yet discovered. “Good. That’s good. I appreciate you coming clean about that right away, Bucky. Good job. Who else?”

“Mithter Bawton becauthe I bwoke into hith apar’ment and took hith naked lady bookth.”

“Books? More than one?” Steve shouldn’t have been surprised.

Bucky nodded and hung his head in shame. “An’ I’m thorry to Nat, too, becauthe I bwoke all hew fun booby twapth for Mithter Bawton an’ weft a bunthch of naked lady pictthu’ bookth in hew theilin’. Thorry, Nat.”

His bottom lip poked out and his eyes widened in sincere contrition when Nat stopped beside his
chair (dressed more conservatively for the day in dark cargos and a blue sweatshirt, artfully ripped and draped to bare one shoulder and cover the rest).

She offered him a hug as they exchanged apologies. “We’ll all get better at this, James. It’ll take time and patience, just like any family,” she promised. “There’s someone you forgot on your apology list, though.” She pointed to the ceiling as she let go and crossed to the coffeepot.

“Oh, wight.” Bucky looked at the security camera in the corner. “I’m thorry, Mithter Jarvith, that…” He looked to Nat and Steve, trying to determine exactly what all he should apologize for before making his best effort with, “I’m thorry I wathted ya time, yettherday, an’ that Mithter Thtark pwob’ly had ta we-pwogwam ya to tattle when I’m bad.” He looked really, genuinely sad about that part.

Steve’s heart melted when Jarvis replied and Bucky’s shoulders dropped in relief. “Apology accepted, Master Barnes, and you’re forgiven, of course. I trust you’ve learned some valuable lessons from your mistakes?”

“Boy, hab I!” Bucky answered with a deep, heartfelt exhalation, eyes wide and just a little wild from all he’d seen.
The sound of the elevator approaching the foyer made Bucky stand up a little straighter on the step stool Stevie pulled up to the counter so Bucky could get his hands in the wad of dough they were mixin’ up for apology cookies.

Stevie’s ma always said apologies went best with a gift of your time to show you were really tryin’ to make an effort to be good, and Bucky’s ma agreed. That’s how come Stevie got so good at drawin’ pictures when he was five—he had the sassiest mouth in the whole neighborhood, so he got in trouble a LOT and had to apologize to his ma and Bucky’s ma for his bad temper almost every day. He drew pictures inside cards since he couldn’t write his letters yet.

Bucky sure did miss his ma, even if she would have agreed with Stevie’s punish—

No, not punishment. Stevie said he wasn’t bein’ punished. He was learnin’ the consequences of misbehavin’. Consequences were important because it meant you had to pay some kind of penance for misbehavin’ and one of them penances was takin’ responsibility for apologizin’ in person and if you knew the consequences in advance, you was less likely to misbehave in the first place.

So they baked cookies for consequences and Bucky didn’t get to have a single one. Looking at the bowl of soft pineapple cookie dough, Bucky had a pretty good idea how this could be a consequence he’d remember next time he thought about bein’ bad. Not gettin’ any cookies you helped bake was awful.

“Hi Miss Nat! Can Bucky come out to play?”

Darcy!

Bucky wobbled on the stool, but caught himself on the counter before scrambling down the little steps. He was halfway across the kitchen before Stevie cleared his throat. Stopping in his tracks, Bucky turned around and there was Stevie with his eyebrows all the way up his big head, lookin’ at Bucky like he forgot something.

“Buck?” Stevie pointed to the footstool. “We ain’t done here yet, pal.”

Oh. He cast a longing glance at Darcy and her pop standing in the foyer, talking with Nat. Darcy hopped from foot to foot like she was excited and Bucky was just dyin’ to know why. Behind them sat a shiny red wagon with a big, green bow on the handle. A basket full of shiny gold things sat in the wagon, near the back.

He sighed. Bucky sure missed his Radio Flyer right about now, too.
“Buck? Come on, buddy. You can play after you’ve taken care of your consequences.” Stevie held out a fancy scoop with a clicker on the side to make all the cookies close to the same size. “I’ll tell you what—before Darcy and Mr. Stark leave, you can say hi and make plans to play with Darcy later this afternoon, after you make all your apologies.”

Trying to keep a solemn face without letting on how excited he was about playin’ with Darcy later, Bucky nodded real serious like and got back to work, scoopsin’ cookies. The dough smelled so good. Bucky frowned. This was worse than any punishment, knowing other people was gonna eat all these delicious cookies and, even if they offered him one, he had to say “no thank you, I’m not allowed to eat apology cookies”. Every time he even thought about havin’ to say it out loud, he died a little bit inside.

Not that he didn’t love Stevie and all, but he definitely was not Bucky’s favorite person right now. Maybe not at all today, even.

Grumbling, he scooped cookies with a little more force than was probably necessary until Stevie reminded him the cookies had to be edible or they’d have to start all over again.

Bucky wanted to swear SO BAD. He knew some real doozies now, too. Agent Barton said all the best swear words and used a bunch of ‘em every time he got hurt.

Agent Barton got hurt a LOT, too.

But Bucky’d probably have to give away even more cookies if he said ‘em out loud.

Didn’t keep him from sayin’ a lot of ‘em in his head, though! Take that, bossy damn knowitall grown up STEVIE. He scooped a little hard again and angry-snorted loud enough to get a sharp look from Stevie, so he tried to cool it, but … ugh. Cookies.

“Last batch is goin’ in, Buck,” Stevie said as he slid the last cookie sheet in the oven and set the timer. “Go on and say hi to Darcy.” Stevie waved him into the living room.

“Darthy!” he cried, running through the living room to the foyer and pulling up short when Darcy fished a sparkly gold thing out of the basket to hand to him with a pretty smile.

She said hi.

So Bucky said hi and nearly squeezed the stuffin’ out of the sparkly gold thing because he got distracted by the wagon’s pristine white wheels. It looked brand new, like a picture in the Sears & Roebuck at Christmastime.

“It’s a Christmas cracker,” Darcy was explaining the sparkly package while Bucky’s attention was divided. “You pull on da ends and fun stuff pops out.” Game to give it a try, Bucky gripped both ends in his fists and yanked.

**POP!!!** went the glittery cracker.

Everywhere went the glitter.

It was in his eyelashes.

In his MOUTH.

It was not as fun as advertised, that’s for sure.
He sputtered red and green flecks, accidentally spitting some in Darcy’s hair when she bent over to pick up a piece of paper that fell out of the cracky tube. Whoops. Maybe she wouldn’t notice and, besides, what’s a little spit between friends?

“Push da button!” She danced in excitement in a circle around him, pigtails flailing, as he looked frantically for the button on the device fixed to top of the note.

“HO, HO, HO. MERRY CHRISTMAS,” Darcy’s Uncle Colonel Rhodey’s voice boomed from the note.

AND HOLY COW. HE’S LOUD.

“COME ONE, COME ALL, TO A VERY MERRY STARKMAS IN NEW YORK. YOU’RE INVITED TO JOIN THE STARK FAMILY—” Mr. Stark, Miss Potts, Uncle Col. Rhodey, Uncle Happy, and Darcy all chimed in to say their names one after the other on the recording, “Tony, Pepper, Rhodey, Happy, and Darcy for an Avengers family—” The Stark family all chimed in again to name each of their special holidays. “—Christmas, Yule, Chanukah, Kwanzaa — what’s a Kwanzaa? — I’ll explain later, sweetie — and Festivus, the holiday for the rest of us!— in upstate New York at the former Great Camp Stark in the Adirondack Mountains. Pack plenty of warm clothes, books, and toys because we’re staying for the rest of December! Air and ground transportation have been taken care of. All you need to do is pack and arrive on the quinpad at the appointed time. We’ll take care of the rest! HO, HO, HO, and Happy Holidays!”

Bucky stood there, staring at the note for a few more seconds, then asked, “What was that?”

“An invitation to go on vacation wif us, Bucky!” Darcy pirouetted happily around the living room in her blue high-top sneakers with a huge, happy grin on her face. Thor’s cape—wrapped over her shoulder and around her middle—spun out in a wide fan of uneven pleats. “You, and Captain Steve, and Miss Nat, too!” She stopped spinning and rushed Bucky, grabbing him above the elbows and bouncing on her toes. “Aren’t you excited?!”

Please, please, please say we can go, Bucky closed his eyes and wished real hard, even though I did all the bad things. Aw, man… Really a lot of bad things, now that he thought about it.

“I don’t know if I’mma be awowed to go,” he said sadly, retreating a step. “I gotta make awotta apowogies firtht.” He screwed up his face, but tears prickled at his eyes anyway. “An’ an’body offerth me a tweat today, I’m a’ppothed to thay no thank you.” He scuffed his toe against the floor. “I think thith countth ath a tweat.”

And not cryin’ felt a loss worse than cryin’ about it, if he was honest.

“James.” Nat dropped to one knee between him and Darcy. “Once you make your apologies, you’ve made amends for yesterday. We wouldn’t keep you from going on a special family Christmas trip, too, sweetheart. Okay?” Her fingers felt like somethin’ really soft when they touched his chin to get him to look at her.

He sniffled and rubbed a hand under his nose. Mr. Stark handed him a shop rag. That was nice. “Thankth, Mithter Thtark. I alwayth fo’get about da Kweenex and nobody habth hankieth no mo’.” He wiped his nose real good and stuffed the yucky rag in his pocket to put in the wash later.

“Hey, we almost forgot!” Mr. Stark said, turning to grab the basket out of the wagon. “You got a delivery. We took advantage and brought it up from the mailroom ourselves,” he said, wheeling the wagon around in a big circle in front of Bucky.
“Huh?” He blinked in confusion at Mr. Stark.

“There’s a card, too,” Mr. Stark said. He snapped it open and read it out loud, “‘Dearest James Buchanan, I seem to remember every little boy needs one of these to go about the business of being a boy. I do hope you enjoy it, but please don’t knock out more teeth this time. Happy Christmas. Your friend, Peggy Carter.’”

“My teef?” Bucky ran his tongue over the spot where his teeth used to be. “An’ who’th Peggy Cawter?”

“An old friend from the Army, pal.” Stevie stooped down to run his hand over the Radio Flyer. “When you were big, you told her the story of how you knocked out the next two teeth in your mouth. Had a four-wide gap for ages back then.” He tapped the wagon’s plastic side. "They don’t make ‘em the way they used to, huh?"

“Wait…” Bucky stared at the wagon and the note in Mr. Stark’s hand. “The wagon’th fo’ me?”

Mr. Stark nodded. “My Aunt Peggy asked Jarvis to keep her apprised of any news regarding … her friends in the tower. Aunt Peggy is an old friend of Steve’s.” He cleared his throat, then lifted a black case out of the wagon, too. “This is from another family friend, Major Dugan.”

Inside the black case was a real Daisy BB air rifle.

“Wow.” Bucky almost couldn’t talk, he was so excited. “Thith ith fo’ me, too?”

“Yup. We invited Major Dugan and some old friends from the hundred-and-seventh up to Camp Stark for the holidays, too, but they can’t make it. They wanted you to know they wish they could see you, but it’s not possible right now, so they sent their gift ahead with Aunt Peggy’s and they hope to see you next Easter here in New York.”

“I don’ know what to thay. I—I”— Feeling real guilty, he looked at Darcy with big eyes. “We can thare, if you—”

“Darcy got a surprise from Aunt Peggy and the one-oh-seven, too, kid. No worries,” Mr. Stark interrupted. (RUDE, but okay. Not that anyone was gonna make Mr. Stark bake cookies and give ‘em away.) “It’s up in the penthouse. It was delivered yesterday, in fact.”

“What ith it?” Bucky wanted to know.

“A toboggan sled.” Darcy’s dimple deepened in her cheek when she smiled with her eyes. “I never had one before. Aunt Peggy sent me ice skates, too, but I don’t know how ta skate yet. Miss Pepper’s gonna show me at the camp. There’s a lake, but we can’t skate on a lake ’cause not safe, but my— Tony said we can get out the hose and there’s a big spot in the yard that we can fill up with water when it’s not snowing too hard and make a ice rink and play hockey and other stuff on our bacation.”

“I never played hockey.” Bucky wasn’t sure about it—not really, but Darcy got to do all kinds of neat things.

“It’s fun! You take a stick and a little plastic thing and whack it real hard at a net and somebody else tries to stop it and if they’re bad at it, they lose teef! But sometimes, you get to punch when somebody skates by you wrong, or if you just don’t like da look on his face!” She made her hands into fists and put ‘em up, bouncing from foot to foot.

Mr. Stark raised his eyebrows real high. “That is the most precious, blood-thirsty description of
hockey I have ever heard. We gotta shop for more skates and face guards, bruiser,” he said, picking Darcy up and tickling until she squealed.

“We’ll check our schedules to make sure we’re good to come along,” Stevie told Mr. Stark, “but I think it’s safe to assume we all want to go...?”

Nat nodded and Bucky chewed on his lip, trying so hard to be good as he nodded his head real nice and slow so nobody could possibly mistake his answer for anything but ‘yes, please, and I’ll be so good forever and ever’.

“Looks like you have our answer.” Stevie smiled. “Bucky’s still gotta go make his apologies today, though. When do we leave?” He reached for the invitation.

“Sunday afternoon—only takes about thirty-five minutes by quin, if we’re not in a big hurry. Figured we’d head up after lunch, at least. Nat told Pepper you guys were interested in checking out our church—”

“Your church?” Why did Stevie look so surprised? Didn’t ever’body go to some kinda church?

“Used to be just me and Pep, but Bruce, Rhodey, and Happy go with us sometimes, too.” Mr. Stark made it sound like no big deal, so it mustn’t a’been one at all. “S’where Bruce met his yoga friends. Pepper likes the people and the head of the church, Reverend Mother Evelyn. You know me—where goes Pepper, so goes my nation.” He grinned. “She thinks it’s good for me, all those nice people in close proximity rubbing off on me.”

Nat crossed her arms and made the face with the smirk Bucky liked best. “It certainly can’t hurt.”

“Hey, Buck.” Stevie jerked his head at the kitchen. “This last batch is just about done. Come on. You can pack up the previous batch. Should be cool enough now.”

“Whatcha got cookin’ there?” Mr. Stark stood on tip-toe and peered into the kitchen around Nat.

“‘powogy cookieth,” Bucky grumbled, climbing up the tiny steps again and grabbing the flipper thing to move the cooled cookies from the soft towel to a plate sitting on a big circle of clear plastic.

“Bucky’s going to deliver some homemade cookies when he visits everyone he needs to apologize to today,” Stevie explained, pointing to the other plates wrapped in plastic in the box on the table.

“It’th part of my mithb’havin’ contsequentheth,” Bucky mumbled, embarrassed to have to admit again what he did.

“Mm... I heard about that.” Mr. Stark nodded. “Cookies are a nice way to say you’re sorry. I’m sure Pepper and Clint will appreciate that a lot. Good job, kid.” Then he patted Bucky on the back.

Bucky blinked rapidly and dug his toe into the cupboard door. “One of ‘em’th yourth, too, Mithter Thtark. I di’n’t mean to break da bent cober when I foun’ Mithter Hawkeye’th bentilathon ducth. It jutht kinda happened.”

He excused himself through all the people gathered in the kitchen to get to the box on the table and lift out the plate with Mr. Stark’s name on it. “The the ar’ fo’ you. I’m weal thorry, Mithter Thtark. Me and Thteebie aweady talked to maintenanthe to get replathementh fo the hineth I bwoke and I’m gonna pay fer it outta my allowanthe.” He hoisted the plate of cookies up the onto the counter, then climbed the footstool to present the plate to Mr. Stark.

Mr. Stark looked at Bucky like he was surprised, then at Stevie, then back at Bucky. “I don’t
supposed he’s allowed to have—"

But Stevie was already shakin’ his head. “Not this time. He’s not allowed to have any of the apology cookies. Hopefully, this lesson sticks and he doesn’t have to turn down yummy homemade treats again, huh, Buck?”

“Yeth, thir.” Bucky sighed. He supposed that was fair. He’d remember the cookie consequence for a long time.

Mr. Stark thanked him for the cookies and for arranging to fix the vent cover, then he and Darcy took the basket of sparkly tubes and cookies and went to deliver more invitations, but not before Darcy asked him to come over to Mr. Stark’s workshop to play with the robots later. So he had that to look forward to.

“Ready to go make the rest of your apologies, pal?” Stevie asked when they had all the plates of cookies loaded in his new wagon.

“Can I ask ya a quethtion befo’ we go? Um…” He glanced at Nat and ducked his head, then mumbled, “In pwivate?”

Nat kissed him on the cheek and padded out of the room. He waited until he heard the master bedroom door click shut to look at Stevie again. “I… I know it’th pwivate, um… What you and Nat wath doing watht night, but I got a quethtion and, um… If I don’ athk now, it might be wude and mithbehavin’ ta athk later…”

Stevie plucked Bucky up off the floor like he weighed nothin’ and sat down on the coffee table. “You can ask me anything, Buck, and I’ll do my best to answer.”

Settling Bucky on the sofa, Stevie waited until Bucky worked up his nerve to ask, “Ya tho much bigg’a than Nat. How’d thee pin ya when ya wath wrethlin’ wike that?”

Stevie smiled and his chest puffed like he wanted to laugh. “She’s pretty strong.”

“It… Doethn’t hurt, doeth it?” Bucky squirmed in his seat. Askin’ made him uncomfortable, but he needed to make sure Stevie wasn’t hurt and if it hurt— “I mean, I might gwow up again and wanna naked-wrethtle wif a wady or a fella, but I’m not big and throng wike you.”

“No, it doesn’t hurt. When you’re bigger and you love someone a lot and you wanna wrestle with them, too, you come tell me and I’ll explain how it all works, okay, pal?”

“Yeah, yeah. That’th good. Thankth, Thteebie. Thtat’th a load off’a my mind.”

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Corduroyth and Hugathauruth Rexth

Chapter Summary

Saddle up! It’s time for an Avengers mountain adventure at winter camp!

Chapter Notes

Yesterday, I posted a short fic called “Tony’s Brand of Gratitude”. It’s only a few hundred words, written as an addendum to Chapter 15 and Steve’s conversation with Bucky about grownups and wrestling. When you’re done with this chapter—commented, kudo'd, and what have you—go check that out. It’s posted in the Two Front Teef series as a bonus scene.

Barton’s many pizza and beer T-shirts (and the other tees mentioned in this chapter) are all inspired by real T-shirt designs on Shirt Woot. I am not a graphic designer and I know none of the artists personally, but my 14 year old and I buy our T-shirts pretty much exclusively from Shirt Woot’s awesomely creative independent artist collective. I headcanons that Barton and Pepper totally would, too. (^_^)

One-word prompt: corduroy

With every rub, rub, rub, Tony deeply regretted suggesting Darcy wear her corduroy overalls for the day since they were leaving later for the trip upstate. Why were kids clothes so noisy? She had a noisy sweater that disappeared under mysterious circumstances recently, too, not that Tony knew anything about that and no one could prove it anyway.

The quin sat on the roof and the team loaded luggage and other important recreational items while Darcy and Bucky climbed all over a pair of jump seats near the cockpit so they could see all the comings and goings as the team worked to bring up everything they’d need for the next few weeks.

From somewhere in the depths of R&D, Pepper procured a pair of booster seats with seven-point harnesses to put the safety seats on the quinjet to shame for the two children, but it was decided they’d be buckled in at the last minute so they had a chance to burn off some energy. Apparently, Darcy’s noisy little corduroys made Clint’s dog, Lucky bark. Darcy and Bucky thought it was hysterical and Tony suddenly had a deep appreciation for why large dogs aren’t allowed on commercial planes.

It was going to be a long flight.

(Small dogs were sounding better and better, if Darcy had to have a dog. Jarvis could wrap up that little side project once they were settled in at the camp.)
Dr. Lin and his partner, Ben, were the smart ones. They took an earlier flight up north with Rhodey in the commuter plane Howard once preferred.

“Hey, Mithter Bawton, what’th that?”

Tony turned just in time to watch Barton ride a sky blue unicycle up the gangway in a pair of cargos and combat boots with a motorcycle jacket pulled on over one of his many pizza and beer T-shirts. The one he had on today said, “Let’s Get Sauced”, and featured a grinning pizza pie holding a pair of beer steins—furthering Tony’s belief that Barton was secretly the fifth, forgotten Mutant Ninja Turtle in either the worst or best disguise ever. Jury was still out.

Darcy loved Barton’s stupid shirts, so Pepper dove into whatever hippie artist commune he sourced them from on the internet and bought up a bunch for both kids. The shirt of the day became a point of discussion over breakfast every morning and Tony had to give Pep credit—it got Darcy talking about her interests and engaging other adults in conversation. Smart lady. If somebody had to keep a hold of his leash, Tony was glad it was Pepper.

For church that morning, which thankfully had a ‘come as you are’ dress code policy, Darcy chose the corduroy overalls in an eye-watering neon teal, her dark grey Galactic Gumtastic T-shirt with the solar system depicted inside a gumball machine, and a pair of burgundy Chuck Taylors. Pepper topped it off with a pretty, sequined cardigan in matching burgundy. This turned out to be Darcy’s favorite outfit to date, so everyone she passed that day got a smile, a bubbly greeting, and a lengthy explanation about her favorite outfit.

Tony adored every babbling word, even if it took six times as long to go anywhere or get anything done. Deliberately engaging other adults was still such a rare occurrence for Darcy, every time she voluntarily spoke to someone other than himself or Pepper, they counted it a win.

She and Pepper were coming along, too. Darcy was nowhere near as clingy with Pepper as she was with Tony, but she started asking Pepper for bedtime stories this past week and, when the three of them woke all piled in bed together the last two mornings, Darcy had been squeezed in the middle between both of them rather than clinging to Tony like a Facehugger from the far side of the bed.

Somehow, Darcy and Bucky managed to corner Barton near the cockpit to ask him about his one-eyed dog, why his name was Lucky if he only had one eye, what happened to his other eye, why he brought his dog on vacation, why he brought a unicycle, what his archer lady friend’s name was, if he had any more pizza T-shirts, if he liked Darcy’s new shirt, had he seen Bucky’s Hugasaurus Rex T-shirt…

Laughing, Tony returned to stacking and securing luggage in the hold, and listened in as Jarvis, Romanoff, and Wilson went through the pre-flight checklist. Pepper rattled off instructions to her administrative assistants and a pair of VPs assigned to take meetings on Pepper’s behalf until her return. They could conference her in for real emergencies, but it was understood that she was going on a relaxing family vacation. Nothing short of an international incident caused by Tony himself should constitute the level of emergency that would require her to conference in. Her AAs and VPs were more than capable of holding down the fort for two or three weeks. Quick questions could be passed through Jarvis, as needed, but Jarvis had the final say on the expediency of a message’s delivery method on a case by case basis. He was more than capable of discerning real emergencies from officious ass-kissing and unnecessary brown-nosing.

Rogers rolled up the gangway after everyone buckled in, pulling Bucky’s red wagon full of everything a little boy might find essential for a long holiday trip in the mountains. Secured and stationary, the two men left the wagon in the cargo hold and took their spots beside the kids, buckling in wiggling bodies and trying to avoid getting a stray finger in the eye.
Romanoff’s voice cut in over the PA, reminding everyone to remain in their seats during take-off and landing. Movement about the cabin was permitted after the all-clear was given. She reminded the children where the restroom was located and to ask an adult for help if they had to use it. She also reminded them that the shower in the restroom was reserved for post-mission necessity, not for playtime. There would be consequences for anyone caught playing in the quinjet shower without permission.

Bucky slumped over in his seat. “Ugh, not consequenteth. Thothe a’ the wortht.”

Steve laughed and raised a hand in the air, circling his finger overhead to signal Romanoff to take off.

“Ready to go?” Tony asked the kids.

Darcy all but bounced out of her skin and Bucky perked up.

“What’ we gonna do when we get thewe?” he asked.

“The camp superintendent will give everyone a map of the facilities so you know where to find what you need and where to go when we make special plans for the day. You’ll get your guest room or cottage assignment and unpack, maybe have a bite to eat, then go check out the farm and explore.”

“Thewe’th a farm?”

“Sure! A real working one, too, with draft horses, pigs, chickens, probably some peacocks, goats, and sheep. There’s a big lodge with a dining hall, a private movie theater, a brewery that makes grownup beer and a soft drink kids can drink called birch beer, an outdoor bowling alley, a treehouse, a building just for games like billiards and ping-pong, and lots of other fun things. You’re gonna love it,” Tony assured the youngsters. Even as a lonely rich kid with emotionally absent parents, the camp was one of the few places Tony could remember making friends as a child. Come to think of it, he wondered if Rosa ever had kids and whether Bucky and Darcy would find new playmates at the camp, too. If nothing else, Hulk would enjoy the change of scenery when the kids coaxed Banner to transform for playtime.
Sorry for the delay! I had some other holiday writing commitments to wrap up today. Early this morning, I posted my Darcyland Secret Santa fic, *A Good, Old Fashioned Family Starkmas™*. It’s a little funny, occasionally sarcastic, very fluffy, with little bits of romance, angst, and domesticity, and plenty of WinterShieldShock and Tony & Darcy banter. It was inspired by National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation. If you enjoy *this* story, there’s a good chance you’ll love *A Good, Old Fashioned Family Starkmas™*, too.

One-word prompt: pound

Hockey was a complete disaster.

Well, maybe not a disaster, and calling it ‘hockey’ was a bit of a misnomer, anyway. The new, improvised ice rink was mostly salvageable, at least. A little cleaning and scraping, some more water to lay down a fresh layer of ice … good as new.

It started with a request.

“Dr. Bruce, can Hulk come out to play?” Darcy and Bucky chorused, standing by the door to the lodge as Steve and Tony bundled them into their snowsuits. Watching over the process with Natasha, Bruce observed his other self’s playmates with detached amusement. Not that he didn’t enjoy the children, but even if he went out to play with them in the snow, he would do it as the Hulk, and the memories would remain dim and distant. It seemed to be good for the Other Guy, though, and he told Tony as much. His thoughts had never been so calm, the rage never more controlled. The kids were bundled up so tight, they could hardly move. Hulk was going to be very confused if he didn’t immediately recognize them in their snow gear.

Not that getting into their snow gear was going particularly smoothly after pounding down the extra sugary snack served in the dining hall shortly after their arrival. Apple pie and caramel ice cream, both made by Rosa, the camp superintendent’s wife and one of a very few friends Tony could truly claim he grew up with, thanks to the dreaded corporate trips to Camp Stark. They caught up over pie, and Rosa, delighted to meet Pepper at last, happily served up seconds to all of their guests, including seconds of sugary pie and ice cream to two children who’d been cooped up, first, in Sunday School for the morning at church, and second, on a small jet for most of the afternoon. (The trip was only thirty-five minutes, but they circled for another two hours while visibility in the mountains prevented a safe landing and the ground crew frantically cleared fresh falling snow from the quin pad at the air strip.)

Inside the main lodge, where everyone reconvened after unpacking and snack time, Darcy giggled and stomped every time the soles of her snow boots lit up. Bucky wiggled and snorted until Steve had to pin him down to get his hook and ladder suit done up and weather-proof boots pulled up to
his knees.

The plan was to go explore the grounds, let the kids burn off some excess energy between now and dinner, try to wear them out before bed so everybody would sleep well on their first night and wake up ready and raring to go for their first full day at the lodge in the morning. Simple enough, right?

“Okay, but wha' happenth if I gotta pee?” Bucky mumbled into the scarf wrapped around his head until nothing remained visible but his steel-blue eyes.

“Don’t,” Steve and Tony said together.

“Theriouthly.” Bucky quit moving for once and stared at them, conveying as much worry as he could with only wide eyes and stillness.

“Seriously.” Tony took him by the shoulders and turned him toward the fireplace. “If you absolutely have to go, there will be at least half a dozen people in here, sitting around with nothing better to do, drinking coffee and reading books while they decide how much of nothing they’re going to do on vacation tomorrow. We will point you at the door to the lodge and one of these fine people will get you out of the snowsuit in a hurry.” He pointed to the gathering of people sprawled out around the fireplace.

Barton lay on the floor, using Pizza Dog as a pillow, both of them snoring. His friend and protege, Kate, paged through an outdated book on Adirondack winter sports she discovered in the ancient library. Rhodey and Pepper chatted happily with Rosa and her husband, Tom. Sam shared a cozy loveseat with Rosa’s oldest daughter, Emma, home for the holidays from her second year at NYU. Dr. Lin and his partner, Dr. Bennet McCloud, a former pediatric orthopedic surgeon, laughed over a game of checkers at a game table by a picture window. Both technically retired, Tony found it much easier to convince them to come upstate than expected. Though he suspected Pepper smoothed the way with a lucrative contract for their assistance, he also remembered well the handful of severe injuries he suffered at the lodge over the years. Dr. Lin was probably hedging his bets.

Prowling around the grand staircase, Natasha checked her phone several times, clucked her tongue, and gave Tony a look that could mean only one thing: Darcy’s and Bucky’s surprise was here. Natasha made a motion with her hand that he took to mean she was running over to the airstrip to round it up. Unfortunately, Pepper noticed and followed Natasha out the back door. That couldn’t end well.

Well… What’s done is done. Pepper was always going to find out eventually anyway.

“Can we go see da camp now, Tony?” Darcy begged, tugging on his ski pants.

“Sure thing, kiddo.” He swung her up in his arms and held the door open for Steve and Bucky.

“Let’s go check out the Rec Pavilion, first. It’s a funny place. Grandpa Howard used to hunt all over the world and send his trophies back, stuffed and mounted, to display here at the lodge. Grandma Maria hated them, though, so she banished them to the Rec Pavilion—what we’d probably call a rec room or a man cave now.”

“Man cave?” Darcy giggled.

“We’ll clear out all of Grandpa’s dusty old critters and turn it into a clubhouse for you and your buddy. The ceilings probably have high enough clearance for a trampoline. There’s a small theater stage at one end of the room, a ping-pong table, a pool table, probably room for new foosball and air hockey tables, maybe a few pinball machines…” Now that he thought about it, a clubhouse for the kids had potential. Hell, they’d never get Barton out of the building once it was overhauled. He
might string up a pair of hammocks in the rafters for him and his dog so they never had to leave. They’d need to install safety locks with biometric access on the lakeside of the building with the swim and sun dock, but that was only an hour or two’s work.

Curls of dust billowed in concentric circles as they stomped into the darkened pavilion and let the door slam at their backs.

“Is dat an alligator?” Darcy squeaked, tiptoeing around the oddity to poke at the flimsy tray it held out to make a grotesque sort of table. She unwrapped and readjusted Thor’s cape, throwing one end of it over Bucky’s shoulders as they stood in the center of the room, taking in all of Howard’s worst decorating decisions, the thick layer of dust lying on every surface, and the fascinating loft over the pavilion’s rarely used kitchen, strung with pennant flags in a rainbow of faded colors.

Tony curled his lip. “Ugh, I don’t remember it being this bad. We’ll roll up our sleeves and start clearing out all this crap first thing tomorrow, kid. After I put together some locks for the doors here.” He tapped on the door and it swung open, unimpeded by even a basic latch mechanism. “I’ll need to check the structural integrity of the decking, too. This is … a good project.” Yup. And he might have to break out the pair of toolboxes he’d picked up for tiny hands intended as Christmas presents a bit early. Nobody made one in Darcy’s favorite eye-piercing teal, so he painted one himself. Bucky’s little toolbox got a nice coat of Dodgers Blue, too. Heh. He couldn’t wait to set the kids loose on the Rec Pavilion in their tiny overalls and work boots. He always wished his dad would let him make some changes to the old lakeside barn. Now that he had the chance, he looked forward to seeing what Darcy made of the echoing clubhouse space to turn it into her own domain.

(For now, he’d save the news about the cottage he planned on giving her at the lodge for when she grew up again. If things progressed with Big Barnes on the same trajectory they’d set before the lab accident, they might like to have their own place to get away up north from time to time.)

He sent a quick text to Pepper: “The Rec Pavilion is a shit hole. I would not be surprised if animals are currently nesting in here. Barton would love it as is, that’s how bad it is. All of Howard’s taste was in his mouth. How long will it take to get new furniture delivered? 4 sofas, 6 upholstered chairs, a couple of game table & chair sets, a foosball table, and air hockey.”

“Tomorrow morning, if I let Jarvis make all the decisions,” came her reply. “Color preferences?”

“Dark, something that can resist stains, but won’t show much dirt. Outdoorsy, but not Davy Crockett.”

“Natasha wants to know why I’m laughing. No Davy Crockett. Got it. Lakeside boathouse chic. Jarvis can make it happen.”

“Fuck it,” Tony tapped back. “Have him order a new pool table and a replacement for the ping-pong table, too, before someone dies of Tetanus from looking at these dinosaurs too long. And I need some options for an independent heating system, too. The fireplace alone won’t cut it down here anymore.”

“I’m conferencing Jarvis in on this chat.”

The A.I.’s icon appeared on screen. "How may I assist?"

“Jarvis, go nuts: kids furniture, play kitchens, tricked out mini golf carts, the works. I want this to look like Darcyland and Fort Bucky when you’re done. If you think they’d like it, order it. I’ll add more rooms, if need be.”
“Tony, you’re being ridiculous,” Pepper typed. “She’s not going to be five forever.”

“It’s worth every penny, even if it’s only a week. Do it, Jarvis.”

“You heard the man, Jarvis. Use Tony’s slush fund for everything not covered by the lodge’s expense account and I’ll work out the rest.”

“You’re the best, Pep.”

“Don’t think I don’t know it.”

A long pause followed. Tony listened to Darcy and Bucky chattering under Thor’s cape on one of the ratty sofas while Steve wandered into the kitchen. The ladder to the loft above crumbled in his hand when he touched it as he passed by.

“Jesus.” Tony inspected the crumbled wood dusting Steve’s palm. “We’ll look for termite and wood worm damage in the morning, too. Let’s get out of here before someone falls through the floor.”

“Good idea.”

Just as he turned the latch to close the door and look for the empty field they used to fill for ice skating, his phone pinged with another incoming text from Pepper. “Explain to me why a three-legged husky just bolted out of the jet Hill landed five minutes ago. It launched itself at Natasha. She’s baby-talking to it in Russian.”

Tony waited.

Another text: “Holy shit.”

More silence.

Then, “ANTHONY EDWARD STARK”.

Tony turned off his phone. Some conversations were better held in person.

“Let’s see if we can’t find that ice rink. Rosa said Tom filled it in a few days ago before the latest storm. Dum-E should have it mostly cleared by now, unless he ran into—”

Tony stopped, stumbling when Steve and Bucky ran into him and Darcy from behind. Ahead, Dum-E was struggling to clear the ice in the former cranberry bog because one very large, very green person lay in the middle of it in his Loki-branded Hulk-out pants.

Making snow angels.

He coughed a laugh when Steve’s phone click-click-clicked, snapping photo after photo of their teammate playing in the snow with the robots.

Steve shrugged. “Is it weird that I got accustomed to asking Jarvis to take pictures? Now I take pictures of everything he misses,” he explained.

“No arguments here. That’s going on the Initiative Christmas cards this year. Text it to Jarvis.”

“BRONY.” Hulk sat up, shaking off snow like an overgrown puppy.

“Hey, Big Green. Havin’ fun with the bots?”
“SNOW.” He snorted, digging his heels into the ice. “PUNY GOD.” He pointed to the impressions he’d made in the ice that looked suspiciously like the impressions left in the granite floor of the penthouse on Hulk’s favorite day ever.

“Oh… Snow Puny Gods, like snow angels, but with more unconscious Loki?” Tony asked.

Hulk grinned and dipped his head once in assent.

“Good work, Big Green.” Tony held up a hand to high-five. Hulk obliged. “Looks just like the penthouse floor.” And it was only a small corner of the rink that he’d torn up. Control, just like they discussed. And all of it easily patched with a little water.

Darcy and Bucky scooted out onto the ice in their snow boots, slipping and sliding and giggling until they bumped into Hulk’s legs, gripping him below the knees. The tail-end of Thor’s cape swirled around Darcy across the ice, sending little puffs of snow skittering away as the cape’s natural static electricity repulsed the fluffy particles.

“You wanna play hockey, too, Hulk?” Darcy asked.

“HOCKEY.” Hulk’s brow furrowed. “WHAT HOCKEY?”

“Like tennis, but wif sticks and a little…” Darcy looked around. “Oh no! We forgot our stuff!” She turned to Tony. “Daddy, we forgot our—” She stopped and sucked in a surprised breath.

Tony blinked hard, willing away the burn of something ridiculous like tears. He wasn’t going to cry, holy shit.

_Daddy._

All smiles, Steve’s knowing gaze met his over the the folds of his half face mask. A half-mask that looked a lot like something grownup Darcy knitted.

Darcy. Who just called Tony ‘Daddy’.

He smiled, swallowing the lump in his throat. “We did. We forgot the hockey equipment. We’ll have to get one of those temporary equipment sheds set up down here so it doesn’t happen again.” He waited to see what she would so.

Biting her lip, she let go of Big Green and scooted across the ice, Thor’s cape sweeping and bunching the fresh fallen snow in her wake. Tony met her half-way. How could he not?

Hulk watched with growing interest. “WHAT DADDY?” he asked Bucky, but Bucky’s chapped lips puckered in a weird little boy smirk and he shook his head. “CAPTAIN,” Hulk bellowed, gesturing to Darcy and Tony.

Tony didn’t see the gesture, but he could guess Steve stood behind him, waving off Big Green while Tony accepted his first hug as Daddy. He exhaled against her hood and wished there weren’t thirty layers of neoprene and fleece between them so he could feel her heartbeat and breath as he held her tight, but this would do. For now.

But she was getting all the bedtime stories tonight, come hell or high water.

Then it was over like it was no big deal, and Darcy asked if they could make a nice hard snowball to show Hulk how to play, like Pong, but with snow. Tony set her down and she promptly began packing a lopsided lump of her own.
Just … like it was really no big deal. Like … she called him Daddy every day.

“Right.” He clapped his gloved hands together. “Snow Pong. How hard can it be? It’s basically soccer, on ice, with a giant ball of snow. We don’t even need sticks. We can just kick the snowball or push it.” He snorted a laugh. “We’ll call it Hulkey—” Hulk’s challenging roar stopped him cold. “Problem, Big Green?”

“BRONY. CAPTAIN. ONE TEAM.” He gestured to the two adults across the ice. “HULK. KIDS. OTHER TEAM.”

Steve raised an eyebrow and looked at Tony as Darcy executed an excellent running slide across the rink.

*Why you lookin’ at me, Rogers? It wasn’t my idea.*

Down the ice, Darcy and Bucky assumed Hulk-like stances and roared, too.

Fabulous.

Hulk wanted to play, with bonus pants-craping roars from time to time just to keep Tony on his toes.

Steve patted a snowball in his hands, then rolled it in the growing pile of snow on the edge of the rink near where the bots parked themselves to watch the game. Dum-E dropped his plow in the snow, pushing and pulling to clear himself a parking space with room to spare. Butterfingers barged in on it and U barreled in between, like kids fighting for the best spot on the couch.

Meanwhile, Steve rolled and rolled until he had a ball big enough for the bottom section of a really big snowman.

“Ready?” he called, maneuvering the giant ball out to center rink.

What followed could only be called chaos.

Their friends eventually congregated on the back porch to watch the game, calling out helpful advice and really, truly unhelpful razzing.

_Think you can do better, Robin Hood? Because I am absolutely telling Hulk how sad you were that we left you out when this is over. See who razzes who next time, Merida._

Team Greenie Smalls won by virtue of having the most determination and least self-preservation. Also, Hulk picked the snowball up and threw it because he could. So. Woo! Team Greenie Smalls!

Everything was going great. Tony couldn’t remember ever having this much fun at the lodge. Then, Pepper’s voice cut through the cheering like a hot knife through butter.

_“ANTHONY EDWARD STARK. Where did all these puppies come from?”_ Her voice hit a high note on the last word and a veritable herd of puppies swarmed from behind her and Romanoff to storm down the hill towards the kids and Big Green. “And I’m pretty sure one of these dogs isn’t even a dog! It looks like a pig!”

Four of the puppies promptly squatted and peed on the ice.

“He’s an honorary dog!” Darcy insisted, scooping up as many puppies (and honorary puppy) as she could into Thor’s cape. She giggled and fell over until Bucky picked up the other end, closing most
of the wiggling pups inside.

“Wow, Darth! That’s a lot of puppieth.” His eyes roved eagerly over the pack of small dogs: a shaggy chocolate labradoodle puppy with blue eyes, a Saint Bernard puppy with paws the size of the kid’s head, a black & tan dachshund puppy, a brown & tan dachshund puppy, two dapple dachshund puppies, the honorary puppy, and an older pug who’d adopted and nursed the whole lot at the shelter. They came as a set as far as Tony was concerned. He wasn’t about to break up a family of choice.

“One of these is yours, bud,” Tony said, stooping over to liberate the biggest in the group, a Saint Bernard puppy, to hand over to Bucky.

“Wow, fo’ weal?” His eyes lit up as he struggled under the weight of the wriggling pup and tried to avoid having his face licked raw with enthusiasm.

“Sure thing. Figured one big one would probably be about your limit with the one Natasha brought home, too.” Tony winked and Bucky’s toothless grin widened as Natasha’s three-legged husky hopped around the group, barking at nothing.

“Yasha,” she called sharply.

“E tu, Brute?” Pepper asked, hands on hips.

Natasha shrugged. “He reminded me of someone I knew. I couldn’t leave him behind. Yasha, come love.” She patted her thigh and he hopped over, circling her with a proprietary air and scaling her body with one quick hop on the ground, a paw on her knee, and into her open arms. He lay his head over her shoulder, happily accepting her worshipful back strokes and head scratches.

“I’m just glad Bucky only wanted the one.” Steve sighed in relief, casting an amused glance at Natasha, knowing she was in on the surprise pack adoption.

“Oh, there’s only one dog.” Tony assured him, “but the bunnies are all his, too.”

“What bunnies?”

Tony grinned.
Chapter Notes

For the Darcyland Secret Santa fic exchange, Nemhaine42 wrote Base 12, as my fic gift. Make time to read it soon. It’s a time travel fic with the Howlies! *bounces* I LOVE THE HOWLIES! This is such an amazing gift and it came with surprise artwork, too!

Today’s chapter was beta'd by chimyra and the prompt was provided by Musichowler.

One-word prompt: pets

It took all of the adults to round up the puppies and herd them towards the house. Dum-E carried the runt of the dachshund litter in Darcy's scarf suspended from his claw after the tiniest pup got stuck in snow over his head for the third time and nearly disappeared. (What Dum-E lacked in maternal instinct, he made up for with fumbling enthusiasm and a bizarre kind of ingenuity.)

Bucky’s St. Bernard was the easiest, by far. Also, the only one large enough to practically *ride* back up to the lodge. Bucky and Darcy waddled in their snow suits, side by side, gently tapping their puppies’ rumps to keep them hopping through the rapidly accumulating snow. They kept their voices down, but an intense discussion seemed to be underway at the same time. Potential puppy name negotiations were already in progress. Tony didn’t catch all of it, but he got the gist as he rounded up and carried the three remaining dachshunds and Darcy's honorary dog, a teacup piglet.

The cobbled together litter’s mama wobbled along beside the husky and Tony couldn’t tell if she was trying to mother him, too, or a little bit infatuated. Either way, Steve tripped over her enough times that he eventually gave up, scooping her up to carry her the last leg of the trip uphill.

Pepper didn’t pet any dogs, except the touch-starved husky who gave no shits about Pepper’s hands-off vibe. If ever there was a cat person, Pepper was it through and through. Husky Yasha saw her ‘no, down boy’ and raised her a giant pile of ‘make me, princess’, slobbering her from collarbone to eyeball.

Pepper was not impressed.

Don’t get him wrong and he’s said it a hundred times—Tony loved every polished, perfect, pretty part of Pepper Potts (hey, say that three times, fast), but disheveled, steely-eyed Pepper was the most fun of all the Peppers. (Tony saw an endless supply of tasty treats in Yasha’s Christmas future.)

“What doeth Yatha mean?” Bucky asked Natasha as they approached the stairs to the back porch.

“It’s the Russian way of calling him ‘James’,” Nat explained, guiding Bucky up the stairs as he lifted his puppy’s front paws up each step, then gave a little shove to his butt to help him clear each tread and rise.
“You named ya new dog thame ath me?” he asked, surprised.

She smiled. “I did. He’s got brown hair and blue eyes just like you, and he’s very friendly and loves hugs just as much as you.”

Bucky hummed thoughtfully. “He doeth thound a wot wike me. Thankth, Nat.”

“You're very welcome. Have you thought of a name for yours yet?” she inquired, kneeling by his side to dust off the larger clumps of snow clinging to his pant legs and rear end.

Bucky did the same, smushing the biggest clumps of snow in his puppy’s fur to knock them off. “Nuh uh, not yet. Thoon, though. Um… I think he migh’ need ta warm up. Thethe throwballth ar’ thtuck in hith fur weal bad.”

Pausing inside the door, Bucky stomped his feet like Darcy, following Tony’s example under Rosa’s flinty stare. “I’ll get blankets and have cocoa sent up. Boots, coats, and ski pants by the door. I’ll have one of the girls bring down a quilt for the dogs, but you’ll have to warm them up and keep them out of the fire. There’s no proper child guard down here,” the housekeeper reminded everyone.

Not that it turned out to be much of a problem. Rousing from sleep, Lucky the one-eyed Pizza Dog rounded up the canine (and honorary canine) arrivals, deftly herding them toward his own blanket near the hearth and intimidating the St. Bernard pup into a puddle of submission as he cleared its fur of snowballs.

“There ‘a go. Lucky’zzz go’ i’.” And then slurring Clint was unconscious on the floor again, puppies crowding in, around, and on him, huddling for warmth.

“I think I’mma caw mine Ththeebeie,” Bucky lisped through chattering teeth and chapped lips as the puppy crawled into his lap and nipped at his chin.

Steve immediately protested, “Aw, pal. You ought’a name him—”

“Nat named hew new dog afta’ me,” Bucky reminded Steve.

Well, then.

Tony laughed at the resigned look on Steve’s face.

“Dat’s a good idea,” Darcy chimed in. "Dey can all be Howling Commandogs, like mine.”

The engineer laughed, shaking his head. Howling Commandogs. His girl. “You decided on a name for the little guy already?” he asked, tugging off both boots as Darcy lay flat on the wet floor to help the process along faster.

“Da shaggy browned one wif blue eyes looks like Bucky. I’m gonna call him Barky Barnes,” she said, shaking loose of the ski pants and crawling over to join the puppies in their pile on Clint.

With soft eyes full of tender, squishy feelings, Pepper approached Tony. “We should talk about this. Six or seven dogs, or whatever this is, it’s too many.”

“They’re a family, Pep. I couldn’t break them up.” Tony crossed his arms.

She crossed her arms, too. “Tony, no.”

Tony pointed at the happy pile of puppies and kids climbing all over Barton. “Pepper, yes.”
Darcy struggled to her knees with an armful of squirming wiener dog puppies and begged, “Pepper, please?” She really brought it home, though, with the lip wobble.

Together, Darcy and Tony turned sad puppy eyes on Pepper.

With a reluctant sigh, Pepper nodded, but added two caveats, “Fine, but you’re building another robot to clean up after them and they’re not sleeping in our bed.”

“Yay!” Darcy cheered, bouncing on Barton’s belly. He grunted and rolled the other way, shaking Darcy off into the squirming pack. “Dis one—” She held up the labradoodle. “—is Barky Barnes. And dis one—” She held up the darker of the two brown dachshunds. “Is Jim Furita. Dat one is Gabe Bones and da spotted one like him is Bark Dernier.” She pointed to the dappled dachshunds, then patted the butt of the fourth and declared, “And dis one is Monty Falswoof.”

“What about the pig?” Pepper asked, snickering behind her hand.

“Dum Dum Piggin’,” Darcy decided on the spot, patting it gently and oinking back when it snorted for more attention.

Suddenly invested in the conversation, Natasha spoke up as she lavished Yasha with belly rubs. “The pig is litter trained.”

Pepper looked slightly less put out at that news.

“And this one’s name?” Steve held up Mother Pug for Darcy, then under his breath, “Did anyone else notice this dog’s only got one eye?”

But Darcy couldn’t be bothered about the dog’s missing eye. Names had to be decided here, Thteeb. She tapped her lips and pointed at the pug. “Dat’s Puggy Carter. She’s the Head Commandog in Charge.”

Smiling from ear to ear, Tony just had to know, “So what’s the verdict on yours, Bucky? He got a name?”

“Thteeb Pawgerth.” He nodded once, decided and done.

Steve Pawgers.

Perfect. Pleased with the outcome of the day’s big surprise, Tony clapped and reminded everyone, “Excellent! We should start to get cleaned up for dinner. Tomorrow’s a big day! Puppies to cuddle, clubhouse to renovate, camp to explore!”

At the prospect of a warm bath, the kids raced up the stairs, puppies in hot pursuit.

Later that night, surrounded by puppies, one teacup pig, and a bunny she was fairly certain did not belong in the Stark menagerie, Pepper’s eyes met Tony’s over Darcy’s head on the pillows.

“It’s only for tonight,” he swore, rubbing a tiny dachshund’s back to lull it to sleep. “Jarvis is already looking for a big bean bag thing to put in the playroom for the Howling Commandogs. One night, promise.”
When she laughed and shook her head, he leaned over, lips puckered for a good night kiss.

Instead, he got a mouthful of pig snout when someone popped out the top of the pile in between. Pepper laughed so hard behind her hand, she snorted. The pig gave a tiny snort in return and nuzzled closer to Pepper.
In the morning, Darcy woke up in bed, surrounded by puppies (and her honorary puppy), but no Daddy and no Pepper. A sound like soft music floated into the room and the puppies stirred, shifting and sighing and snuggling deeper into the thick blanket Pepper called doo-VAY. Darcy loved doo-VAY. It felt like sleeping on a cloud or a marshmallow. Perfect for kids and puppies, and Daddy, who liked marshmallows, especially in his cocoa and in his mouth.

That reminded her—she pulled her dog-eared Howtoons book out from under the pillows to review the plans for marshmallow shooters she and Bucky wanted to build. She added a note to a piece of paper Bucky shoved in the book to mark their page: “make 1 big marshmello shooter for big marshmelloz for daddee or 2 big marshmello shootrz so captin steev can play to”.

Dum Dum Pigin’ rolled over and nosed under Darcy’s elbow, oink-oink-oinking for attention, so Darcy gave his belly a scritch-scritch and dug under the pillows again with her other hand to find the special phone Daddy gave her to use when she wanted to talk quietly to Jarvis. The battery was low, but it was enough.

“Jarvish,” she typed.

“Good morning, Miss Stark,” came the immediate reply on the small screen.

“Good morning, Jarvish,” she copied his polite greeting. “Where can I get PVC piep for marshmello shootrz”

“PVC pipe can be ordered from the hardware store and picked up by a designated person later this morning. What diameter and how many feet of pipe do you require?”

Hmm… Darcy didn’t know. They wanted to make mini marshmallow shooters for the whole family for Christmas.

“In my book,” she typed, then realized she could point the camera in the phone at the book to show the list of materials while she scratched her baby pig’s belly. She scanned the pages for Jarvis to see.

“How many of these PVC air shooters would you like to build?” he asked.

“1 for everbodee in r famlee, and 2 big 1s for daddee and captin steev” She could read better than she could spell, but Jarvis was very good at understanding even when she didn’t know how to spell all the words except for how they sounded out of her mouth when she said them out loud.
“Sir says he plans to make a trip to the hardware store early today and you are listed as an approved account user for the Stark line of credit at all three local hardware stores. You may order whatever you need. Will there be anything else, Miss Stark?”

“Minee and big marshmelloz, lots ov them, at leats 20 powndz”

“Very well. I have added them to the household grocery list. I will notify you when the materials arrive.”

“Thak you Jarvish”

“You are welcome, Miss Stark.”

Pleased with the success of her first order of business, Darcy gave the piggy one more good hard scratch, then picked it up and climbed carefully out of bed to avoid waking the other puppies. With just as much care, she pulled up the bottom of her T-shirt to make a pocket to carry her piggy-puppy and padded to the bathroom to peek inside to see what was making the music sound.

Pepper sat at the counter, singing under her breath and rubbing nice-smelling things on her face. When she saw Darcy in the mirror, she smiled. “Good morning, sweetie. What do you have there?” she asked.

“My piggy-puppy. I gotta go potty, but my piggy-puppy would have woke up the puppies in bed, so I brought it.”

“Here—” Pepper held her hands out for Dum Dum Piggin’ and Darcy passed him over. “I’ll hold him while you use the potty. Do you need any help?”

Darcy smiled and shook her head. “No, I can do it myself.” And she did. The big bathroom had a tiny room with its own door and the toilet was inside it. The toilet was very tall, though, so her Daddy got another stool like the one she sat on in the bathtub, but the new one sat in front of the very big toilet. The stool was her favorite color. Teal. So pretty.

She washed her hands when she was done and watched Pepper smear more things on her face.

“What do those do?” she asked, climbing up on the bench next to Pepper to touch the pretty bottles.

“Most of them help my skin stay soft. This one—” She pointed to a tiny pot of cream, then opened it for Darcy to sniff. Mm. Oranges. “—is just for the skin around my eyes. And this one—” She picked up a larger pot. “—is special. I don’t use it every day, just once or twice a week because it feels nice during the winter. This one helps me feel awake on days when I don’t want to get out from under the warm covers.” She held up a reddish-orange tube with a pump top.

“I like to stay in bed when Daddy stays in bed late,” Darcy agreed. “He’s warm and huggy.”

Pepper laughed and hugged Darcy. “Yes, he is. That’s why it’s hard to get up sometimes!”

“Can I put on some, too?” Darcy asked, touching the tiny orange-scented container.

“Yes, but maybe not that one. Your eyes might not like that. I have one here that you can put on your hands and your face. Your skin will drink it all up just like when you drink water.”

Darcy liked the sound of that a lot. “Yes, please.” She sat up tall and stuck her chin out for face water. It smelled different than the other one. Like honey and flowers. When Pepper was done, Darcy opened her eyes and looked in the mirror. Her skin sparkled as she turned, like the lotion had
gold glitter in it. Nice! “It looks like a unicorn kissed my whole face!” she gasped, standing to lean in with her hands on the mirror and look at herself close up.

“Now your skin won’t be thirsty!” Pepper promised as she recapped the container.

Watching her hands move, the ring on Pepper’s finger that looked like a pink ice cube caught Darcy’s attention. Tentatively, she sat down and touched the pink cube, wiggling it in her fingers to catch the light like the sparkling gold glitters on her face.

“When you marry my daddy, will you be my mommy?” she wondered out loud.

Pepper got very still, like when Darcy and Bucky played the statue game with Hulk back home. For a little while, she didn’t say anything.

Eventually, Pepper took a big, deep breath, like Daddy did sometimes after he had a bad moment that made his heart beat real fast. Then Pepper said, “Your daddy and I plan to get married, but there’s been no rush. Is it important to you? Having a mommy and daddy who are married?”

Darcy shook her head ‘no’. “Not to me, but Daddy maybe. When he holds your hand, he touches your pretty ring and sometimes he looks at it like Bucky looks at cookies when Captain Steve tells him to be patient and he can have some soon, but ‘soon’ isn’t soon enough,” she explained, but she wasn’t sure if that was absolutely right or only close-to-right. She tilted her head sideways like her daddy did sometimes when he was thinking about a big problem. “Are you Daddy’s cookies?”

The top of Pepper’s lips folded over into her mouth like she was biting it and her shoulders shook. She was maybe laughing, but that was okay. Sometimes, Pepper laughed just because she was happy or because she loved Daddy, but didn’t want to encourage him when he did a crazy-fun thing.

Like when Darcy and Bucky showed him their plans for a Hulk swing set with a fort and real lasers on top and when they put dynamite on their material list for building the swing set in the common room and Daddy looked at it with his very serious face and said ‘ok’, but Pepper said, “Tony, no.” Pepper said “Tony, no” a LOT.

“If your daddy and I get married before you’re grownup again…” Pepper started, then stopped, then started again, “do you think you’d you like to be in the wedding?”

Oh. Oh, oh, oh… YES. “YES.” Darcy nodded, then thought for a minute. “Would I have to wear a dress?” That was a deal breaker.

“Not if you don’t want to. We could both wear pretty suits, instead.”

“Will Daddy wear the dress?” Daddy would probably wear a dress if Pepper asked.

Pepper chuckled and shook her head. “No, he would wear a very nice tuxedo.”

“Could Bucky be in the wedding?”

“I don’t see why not.” Pepper smiled and her whole face smiled, too, eyes and everything.

“YAY!” Darcy bounced, but she forgot she was sitting on the tiny bench and fell off backwards, end over end like Humpty Dumpty. Dum Dum Piggin’ tumbled to the floor, too, as Pepper scrambled to catch Darcy and missed them both.

Ow. “Ow.” Darcy tried to rub her head and poked herself in the eye. That hurt. Everything looked
kind of blurry when she opened her eyes and looked up at Pepper’s very close face. A drop of water landed on Darcy’s cheek.

“Darcy, Darcy, are you okay?” Pepper’s voice sounded funny and too far away for her face. “Jarvis, hurry. Page Dr. Lin. Ask him to come to my room right away. Darcy hit her head and she’s not answering me. Her pupils are dilated even though she’s staring at the light fixture. And get Tony if he hasn’t left for town yet.”

The sound of Dum-E whirring and whirring and whirring nervously outside the door made Darcy’s teeth itch.

Daddy ran into the bathroom, first. “Darcy!” He knelt on the floor in his gym shorts and T-shirt. “Don’t move her!” Pepper’s voice sounded tiny, tinny, tinny, like bells.

Darcy closed her eyes, but her daddy’s voice stayed close, saying she was safe and it would be okay and to try to stay still, if she could, and it was okay to cry, if she needed to, and to please cry just a little, anything, so I know you’re okay. Something soft and warm touched her wet cheek and her piggy oink-oink-oinked as big hands tipped her sideways and slid her onto something hard.

She slept for a while, maybe, and dreamed about when she was a grownup. Lunch in the science lab and a pair of Cherry Cokes in old fashioned glass bottles that made her smile, and a kiss that made her belly feel funny because the face she kissed was grownup with fuzzy cheeks, but the eyes were Bucky’s.

When she opened her eyes again, she was in a different room with pastel colored cartoons on the wall. “Wha’ happen’?” she tried to ask, but it came out all garbled and wrong like when Mr. Hawkeye drank lots of beers on Pizza Fridays and talked in his sleep with his head on his dog during the movie after dinner.

“You ask that every time you wake up,” Daddy said softly. She felt the rough calluses on his fingers against her palm.

“Sorry,” she tried to apologize, but only the ‘s’ came out right.

“It’s okay, just a bump and a mild concussion. Bucky’s done worse just riding his bike into a wall at home. You’ll be okay, sweetie,” Pepper’s soft voice came from the same side of the bed and a cool hand stroked the damp hair away from Darcy’s face.

“Mommy.” Darcy’s feelings got real big and crashed into the same place in the middle of her chest all at once and she cried again. “Mommy!”

“Right here,” Mommy Pepper’s voice crooned and the fingers pushed gently through Darcy’s hair, smoothing over her temple with a touch like an angel’s wing feathers.

“Mommy,” she managed one more time before sliding back into the dark, right on the edge of the dark, dark, dark.

“We’ll be right here, kiddo,” Daddy promised, kissing her forehead in between words. “Just rest. You’re safe. We’ll be right here.”

Darcy closed her eyes and slept.
**Chapter Summary**

Darcy's wobbly head recovers slowly and she declares her 'tentions to Mr. Falcon Sam.

**Chapter Notes**

I’ve had a headache all day, so I spent a lot of the day sleeping, trying to prevent it from becoming a migraine. I wrote you all some gentle recovery fluff because I could use a little sleep and recovery myself. Also, SAM WILSON. Here, have some.

This chapter is unbet’d, unedited, posted to get it in under the wire, so please forgive any marked errors or typos. I'm a mess today, yo. Just chuggin’ along, trying to get through this daily writing challenge without missing a day. Plotty things in store for tomorrow! Still with me?

One-word prompt: cocoa

The next few days were a haze of that same fuzzy feeling, waking up to different people telling her it was okay, but most often her daddy and mommy. After the first day, someone must have moved her because she woke up at home at the lodge in her daddy’s big bed with puppies and her Bucky Bear, and all of them were covered up with Mr. Thor’s cape. She loved this room in this house. It looked like a log cabin from a picture book. There was a fireplace and a big, rusty metal chandelier over the bed and furniture that looked like it was made by a person who built barns. The bed had a big, green patchwork quilt and there were fake fur rugs on the floor on both sides of the bed so you could climb down and put your slippers on before you had to step on any cold floors. It was extra cozy.

Noises like Christmas carols drifted down the hall from outside the bedroom door, but Mr. Falcon Sam sat in the reading chair by the bed. His book was very thick, probably about important grownup superhero things.

“Goo’ morning,” she whispered, rubbing the silky inside trim around the neck part of the cape. She didn’t know Mr. Falcon Sam so good. He had a lot of names like Senior Air Man and Agent Wilson and Falcon and Sam Wilson and she didn’t always know what to call him, so mostly she didn’t. He wasn’t like her daddy and Captain Steve and Uncle Colonel Rhodey. He was more quiet, a very serious adult who never had to wrestle Bucky into the tub or bribe Darcy to put on her swimsuit or tell Daddy he had a bad idea. Mr. Falcon Sam read a lot and talked about feelings and joked with Mr. Hawkeye and Captain Steve, but he didn’t say many things to Darcy, so she didn’t say any things back unless she had to be polite. ‘Good morning’ was polite.

“Hey, angel.” Mr Falcon Sam smiled and set his book aside. “How are you feeling?”
“Everything feels wobbly in my head,” she whispered, pulling her Bucky Bear up to hide behind.

Mr. Falcon Sam’s face made a soft smile. “That’s not unusual after a concussion. It’ll start to get better over the next few days, though.”

Oh, good. That was good to know.

“Where’s my daddy?” she asked, inching farther down the bed under Mr. Thor’s cape until Barky Barnes yipped at her to quit it.

“Your daddy?” Mr. Falcon Sam’s eyebrows squished in the middle and his face looked confused. “You mean Tony?”

Darcy nodded.

“He’s been sitting in this chair around the clock since you came home from the emergency room. Pepper’s been up here, too. Everyone finally ganged up on them and insisted they go stretch their legs about…” He looked at his watch. “…an hour ago now.”

“Pepper is going to be my mommy.” That was important, so she said so. The room spun in close and stretched out, making Darcy a little sick to her stomach.

“You don’t say?” He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. His sweatpants crinkled and blurred in Darcy’s vision. She blinked hard, trying to remember what she was going to say.

“She’s going to marry my daddy, and me and Bucky will be in the wedding with the ‘bots. And maybe Jarvis.” Darcy thought about Pepper’s ring. “She has a ring that means getting married forever and she asked if I wanted to be in it, but no dresses.” Darcy blinked again, but her voice sounded funny, wobbly like her head. The dark got close and she felt sleepy.

The next time she woke up, all the puppies except Barky Barnes were gone from the room, but there was a big lump next to her under Mr. Thor’s cape. She put her head under and looked. It was Bucky! He smiled his big smile without his front teeth and his big, fluffy puppy’s head popped up over his shoulder and barked.

“Hi Darth,” Bucky said. “Ith ya head betta’ now? Ya mithed loth o’ thuff. Me and Th theebe and Nat and Mithter Hawkath and Tham wode in a twuck up da moun’in and got thome tweeth and bwought ‘em back and they all gettin’ decowated now becauthe Mith Peppa’ doeth thingth when thee’th wowwied, like decowatin’ and owganizin’. And Th theebe Pawgerth leawned how ta thit!”

Darcy blinked a lot. He said a lot of words and she could usually figure most of them out most of the time, but that last one…

“What did Steve Pawgers learn to do?” she asked.

“Thit down!” A thump came from the far side of the bed. Darcy and Bucky scrambled across the covers to look as the big, fuzzy puppy rolled on its back like a turtle before righting itself and planting its rear end squarely on the floor.

“Ohhh… He learned how to SIT.” That made more sense. “Good job, Steve Pawgers.” Darcy held her hand out and the puppy put his paw in it.

“We’ wo’kin’ on thakin’, too. It’ th till hit or mith, though. Goo’ job, Th theebe Pawgerth.” Bucky patted the fluffy puppy on the head. Steve Pawgers’ tongue came out of his mouth and just hung there. “Yatha!” Bucky yelled, making Darcy’s ears ring as the husky hopped around the end of the
“Darcy, are you feeling up to coming downstairs?” Miss Nat asked, putting her hand on Darcy’s forehead for a second, then on both her cheeks before looking into her eyes. “The Christmas tree is up in the great room and everyone is going to decorate it together while we play Christmas music. Miss Rosa made cookies and hot cocoa. Dr. Lin said you can come downstairs for a few hours, but only if you’re not too tired.”

“My head still feels funny. I might fall again,” Darcy answered sadly because she was very sad. Decorating the tree sounded fun.

“That’s okay. I brought someone strong along to do the heavy lifting.” Captain Steve’s head appeared around the edge of the doorway.

“Why isn’t my daddy here?” she worried when she saw Captain Steve.

“He’s talking to the men who installed the new floor in the Rec Pavilion today because he wants to make sure it’s ready soon.” Captain Steve knelt by the side of the bed and looked Darcy over very carefully, too. “Your daddy forgot to take care of himself for a while because he was so worried about you, so Miss Rosa made pancakes and Miss Nat convinced him to go downstairs for food and some rest. He took a nap for a little while, but when he realized we were getting ready to decorate the big tree, he decided to make plans to make this Christmas very special for you. He’ll be so happy to see you up and out of bed,” Captain Steve promised as he gathered up her Bucky Bear and Mr. Thor’s cape and piled Darcy and Barky Barnes inside it for the walk down the really big stairs. His shirt smelled nice, a little bit like Daddy’s cologne and something sweet, like flowers or Miss Nat’s perfume.

“Darcy!” Mommy’s voice called out as Captain Steve carried Darcy down the stairs. The sound of fancy shoes click-clicked across the floor very fast. Then there was light orangey-gold hair and the flower scent of Pepper as Captain Steve helped Darcy switch to her mommy’s arms. “I’m so happy to see you awake. I kept missing you. You woke up every time I took a shower or ran downstairs for coffee,” Mommy whispered, swaying gently, but not so much that Darcy got sick.

“I’m sorry,” Darcy answered, hugging her arms around Mommy’s neck under her hair. “Love you, Mommy.”

“I love you, too, but you have nothing to be sorry for, sweetie. The very first thing your daddy did was cover the bathroom floor in thick padding and rugs. Then he had Mr. Tom build us a nice, long bench with a high back so we can sit together at the counter, so this will never happen again.”

“I didn’t mean to fall. I was just excited.”

“I know, honey. We won’t worry about it again, okay?” Mommy pushed the hair behind her ear and kissed her head. “Are you hungry? Bucky baked cookies and gingerbread with Miss Rosa today. You can have some with cocoa, if you like.”

“Yes, please.” Mommy set her down on the big couch in the middle corner spot with her Bucky Bear and Mr’s Thor’s cape, and Miss Rosa brought her a thermos of cocoa with a sippy straw. Mommy put two cookies and a gingerbread man on a small plate and sat down right next to Darcy to cuddle under the cape. Mmm. Snuggly. The cocoa was so warm and milky. It made her a little sleepy again. She ate the gingerbread man, but gave Bucky her cookies when he made the cookie face at her plate. Cookies were Bucky’s kryptonite.

Later, she woke up again to the sound of her name being whispered by Mr. Hawkeye. “Darcy. Hey,
Darcy, did you order twenty pounds of mini marshmallows?”

“No.” He eyed her for a minute before she blinked all the way awake and added, “Jarvis did.”

Why did everyone laugh?

The tree was half-decorated when her daddy walked into the room, carrying a box with a pile of plaid blankets on top. “Daddy!” she tried to call to him, but her voice was still whispy from her wobbly head.

He heard her, though, because he turned and his face smiled the very big smile and he said, “Darcy,” like he had a big breath in his mouth before he said it. Then he hurried across the room and put his hand on the back of the couch and hopped over it and he hugged her SO HARD. Best hug ever. “It’s so nice to see you awake,” he said real quiet under her hair by her ear.

“My head doesn’t feel so wobbly now,” she said, hoping to make him feel better.

“I’m glad to hear that. You had me worried when you kept falling asleep,” he said, giving her one more squeeze.

“I’m sorry I scared you.” She leaned against his chest and took a deep breath. He smelled like cologne and oil and that black stuff from the bots that he smeared on everything. Daddy smelled like home.
It Taketh a Viwwage

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Bucky discovers something unsettling. (Bucky is also a Little Shit™.)

Chapter Notes

**WARNING: If you are squeamish about things related to raising a little boy such as bodily functions, this chapter is not for you.**

To all the readers here for fun, to support a writer trying to finish a 25-day advent writing challenge, THANK YOU FOR BEING AWESOME. I'm opening up one-word prompts for bonus scenes in the same series to show my gratitude. Leave your one-word prompt requests in the comments or hit me up on tumblr (and mention your AO3 username so I can gift you the fic) using the prompt link on my blog. Seriously, I need one-word prompts ASAP!

To the anons trying to tell me how to write this fic better/more to your liking, I’ve left a message for you on [tumblr](https://example.tumblr.com).

The shirts mentioned in this chapter are real, too!: Pizza & Capes

One-word prompt: rock

A few days before Christmas, Bucky woke to an odd, new sensation. At first, he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He shifted uncomfortably under the covers, nudging Steve Pawgers and his fluffle of bunnies this way and that, trying to find a more comfortable position, but something just didn’t feel right. Bucky sat up, pulling the quilt up to his chin and blinking into the semi-dark room. The soft glow of his Captain America night light shined through the dark, casting distorted shadows up the bumpy log cabin walls. Everything in the room looked like it should, but something deep down felt wrong. His belly felt funny and something—under the blankets—he lifted them and looked.

Oh.

That was new.

It didn’t do that yesterday. Tentative, Bucky poked it. It poked back with a springy motion. Ok, it definitely didn’t do that yesterday.

“Mithter Jarvith?” Bucky asked, trying to keep his voice from shaking, but he was worried and kind of scared.
“Yes, Master Barnes?”

“Yes, Master Barnes?”

“Coul’ ya … coul’ ya get Thteebie. Teww him … uh … ta huwwy. Pweathe?” It was still early enough to be dark outside the windows. Stevie was probably down in the gym alone, running on the special treadmill Mr. Stark built for him that said sassy things at him every time he beat Mr. Wilson’s time.

“Your respiration and heart rate are elevated,” Jarvis answered. “Are you in distress?”

Bucky licked his lips and buried his fingers in Steve Pawgers’ fur, grabbing at the quilt and piling more of it on top of the problem. Distress. Distress meant upset or worried. Yes, he felt both of those. “Um, yeth. Yeth, that. Juth teww ‘im ta huwwy, pweathe.” Bucky ducked under the covers and yanked them way up over his head and Steve Pawgers.

*Thump, thump, thump, thump.*

Feet banged up the stairs and down the hall before the bedroom door crashed open and Stevie and Nat’s voices jumped all over each other, asking what was wrong.

“Buck?” Stevie’s voice got closer to the bed.

“Ya a’thppothed ta be awone, Thteebie,” Bucky grumped into the covers. Why’d he have to bring Nat? So embarrassin’.

“Jarvis said you were distressed. We thought you had a nightmare,” Stevie said when Bucky poked his face out of the covers to glare at his best pal, surrounded by a bunch of adults with nothin’ better to do.

“I athked ‘im to teww you ta huwwy, not ta get ever’boby.” Bucky’s lip wobbled. He didn’t really wanna talk about the new thing at all, much less with everybody they knew in the *whole house.*

Gosh Stevie. He pulled the covers up again.

Stevie’s voice got real quiet and far away, but Bucky heard him ask the others to wait outside in the hall for a minute. Then there were footsteps and somebody tugged at the corner of the covers. Bucky reached out and slapped at the hand, tucking the corner in and tucking it under his arm.

“Buck?” Stevie waited. “Come on, pal. If something’s wrong, I can’t help fix it if you won’t talk to me.”

“Ar’ ya awone?” Bucky checked to be sure.

“Yes, I told everyone you wanted to talk to me alone. Nat is across the hall in case we need her and the other fellas are down the hall in the den. Mr. Stark said you can ask Jarvis anything you want, too, and he’ll keep your privacy, if you need it.”

Bucky huffed into the quilt. Jarvis misunderstood things sometimes, like when he got everybody instead of just Stevie. Bucky said so and waited.

“Jarvis is an A.I. Sometimes, you have to say a very specific thing so he understands exactly what you’re asking him to do. He knew you were breathing hard and your heart was beating very fast and that you were acting different than the way you usually act. He did exactly the right thing under those circumstances. He let me know something was wrong and you needed help.”

Oh. Well… Bucky supposed that made a lot of sense. He shifted onto his back, but that was worse than laying on his side. He rolled to his side again, but that caused an uncomfortable pain from the
new thing. All of it was terrible. He groaned and wriggled, trying to find a better spot, but the new thing sprang up and he got tangled in the covers. Man oh man, he sure wished he could use some of Agent Barton’s swear words right now.

“Buck, you sound like you’re in pain. You gonna tell me what it is or am I getting Dr. Lin to check you out?”

“No!” Bucky threw the covers down to his waist and sat up. “No doctuhth, Ththeebie. He alwayth wanth to thtick me with a new vaccthine. It’th awful. Rathu’ jutht get the mawawia an’ be done with it.”

“Well, then, no malaria vaccines for you.” Stevie knelt by the bed and crossed his arms on top of the mattress across from Bucky. “Tell me what’s goin’ on.”

Bucky hunched over, willing away the new thing one last time before he had to go through with it, but nothing happened. He pushed back the covers so Stevie could see and pointed to the new thing.

“I don’ know why it’th doin’ that. It neber did it befo’,” Bucky explained, more miserable than ever. “If I mobe wong, it bumpth inta thtuff and eben layin’ unda’ the bwanket feelth wong.”

“I see.” Stevie covered his mouth like he was thinkin’ of all the ways to deliver the bad news.

Bucky sniffled and two big tears stung his eyes. “It’th bad, ithn’t it?”

“No, pal.” Stevie shook his head and crossed his arms again. “I think it’s a normal thing that happens to most boys. It’s called an erection.”

“It’th tewwiboo,” Bucky decided.

Stevie agreed, “They can be uncomfortable.”

“Thith happenth ta you, too?”

“Only since I got real big in the army. Remember how I was always sick when I was little?”

“Yeah.”

“One of my illnesses prevented this from happening to me when I was your age, so it’s normal and healthy that it’s happening to you.”

“Ar’ ya thure?” Bucky leaned in to look Stevie in the eye.

“Pretty sure. There’s some fellas down the hall probably know more about what’s normal. None a’ them grew up sick like me. We could ask ‘em, if you don’t mind. I trust them to tell the truth and keep what we say in confidence, pal.”

Bucky thought about that for a minute, then nodded, twisting his fingers in the folds of the quilt.

“Jarvis,” Stevie raised his voice. “Could you discreetly contact the fellas in the den and ask them if they ever had the same problem Bucky is having right now, and if they have, could they please let us know?”

Why would a fella ever admit to that?

Not even thirty seconds later, Stevie’s phone pinged with four ‘yes’ answers. He held it up to show Bucky. Then, a knock sounded at the door.
“Okay if I let the fellas in? There’s a good chance they’ve got more experience with this than me and can answer your questions better.”

Swallowing the nervous lump in his throat, Bucky nodded. Mr. Stark, Mr. Wilson, Colonel Rhodes, and Agent Barton all stood on the other side of the door. Stevie invited them in and explained the specific nature of Bucky’s problem.

Bucky had to know one thing first. “It’s not permanent, is it?”

“No.” Mr Stark shook his head and leaned against the wall by the closed door. “But sometimes it’ll seem like it is. In a few years, especially. It happens to almost every boy, though. Boys who are sick like Steve was when he was little would be the exception. It’s normal and healthy, even though it’s annoying.”

That wasn’t very reassuring. Bucky set the covers back and poked it again, but it came right back like a spring.

“First things first, pal,” Stevie said, catching Bucky’s hand before he could flick it again. “Quit pokin’ it. That’ll only make it worse, if it’s uncomfortable.”

“Oh.” Bucky stuck his hands behind his back and stared at it. Erection. Sounded like you were buildin’ somethin’ with it.

Mr. Wilson sat down, cross-legged, on the play rug in the middle of the floor. “It probably hurts a little bit, too, huh?”

Bucky nodded and another tear leaked out of his eye. “When I move too much.”

“Well.” Agent Barton sat down on the rug, too. (Today, his T-shirt said ‘Eat Pizza - Sports Are Hard’.) “Steve’s right. Too much stimulation—touching it more—will only make the problem worse.”

“How do I keep it from happenin’? I don’t like it.” Bucky growled and crossed his arms, and tried really hard not to make any more embarrassin’ tears.

“You mean ‘why does it happen?’ ” Colonel Rhodes asked, sitting in the reading chair in the corner. He leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees.

Bucky nodded.

“Lots of things could cause it.” Agent Barton said, holding up a hand and ticking off reasons. “A certain scent, a nice daydream, a dream in your sleep, if you haven’t pooped in a while, thinking a lot about something you like—”

“—or for no reason at all,” Mr. Stark interrupted. “Sometimes a stiff wind blows in just the right direction and it happens and you just have to sit somewhere quiet with your bookbag in your lap to keep it from moving too much and wait for it to decide to go away.”

“Grownups sometimes take cold showers, when it’s convenient,” Colonel Rhodes added, “but I wouldn’t recommend that as a first resort to make it go away. Cold showers are awful.”

“Experts in child-rearing recommend young boys sit in a tepid bath to relax,” Jarvis suggested, “or attempt to distract oneself with a hobby like reading or thinking about something unrelated.”

“Wike what?” Bucky asked, looking up at the ceiling, but Jarvis didn’t answer. The other fellas did.
Right away, Stevie said, “Baseball.”

“Engine schematics,” Mr. Stark and Colonel Rhodes said at the same time.

“Scrubbing a latrine,” Mr. Wilson said at the same time Agent Barton said, “Getting my ass handed to me by Agent Hill in the gym.”

Bucky wrinkled his nose at Mr. Wilson and Agent Barton, but they defended their suggestions the same way. They said sometimes thinking about something you don’t like will make it go away if something you like made it happen in the first place.

“Think about things that make you sad or angry. Can you think of one?” Mr. Stark asked.

Bucky nodded. “Yeah. I di’n’t wike it when Darthy wath in da hothpital.”

Looking real sad, Stevie told Bucky to try thinkin’ about that and see if it helped. If not, they’d try the lukewarm bath.

Bucky tried, he did, but the erection didn’t go anywhere. It was stuck. He really hoped it wasn’t permanent.

“Maybe it’th bwoken,” Bucky said sadly at it with a big frown.

“Come on, pal. Let’s try the bath. We’ll get a book and I’ll read to you while you sit in the water,” Stevie said, helping Bucky out of bed.

“Ow.” Bucky had to stop right next to the bed. He couldn’t even walk. He made a sad face at Stevie, so his pal picked him up.

“Do me a favor?” Stevie asked Mr. Wilson. “Grab him a change of clothes. I’m gonna take him over to use Nat’s tub. There’s a chair in our bathroom. We might be a while.”

Stevie was right. It took a while. Nat put lots of flower-scented stuff in the tub. ‘Lavender Oil’ Bucky thought the bottle said on the edge of the sink. On the upside, they got to read all of chapter ten of the third Harry Potter book and Mr. Wilson picked out soft, comfortable clothes for Bucky to wear after his bath: flannel PJ bottoms, his Black Widow unders, and a T-shirt Colonel Rhodes bought for Bucky that said “Not All Superheroes Wear Capes” and had a bunch of soldiers on it, saluting. Bucky liked it because he knew lots of superheroes who didn’t wear capes, and some who had uniforms and saluted. Neat.

“Ththreebie?” Bucky sat in the tub, thinking about something else that bothered him for a while.

“Yeah?” Stevie looked like he was getting drowsy sitting by the tub, too.

“Why do boyth get erecthionth? What’th it fo’?” Bucky checked out his again. It looked much better. No more springing. He relaxed even more, laying back on Nat's bathtub pillow and waiting for Stevie to answer.

His pal cleared his throat and his face got real red, but he wiggled his lips like he was trying to find the right words. “Erections help grownups … ahh … make love and babies.” He nodded once like those were just the right words.

But Bucky wasn’t buying it. He squinted at Stevie. “You get erechtionth.”

“Yes,” Stevie agreed.
Bucky thought about that for a minute.

“You wewn’t reawwy wrethlin’ with Nat that day, wewe you?” Bucky suddenly realized.

Stevie choked and sputtered. “Nat and I— We aren’t—”

“You thould mawwy hew befo’ you make baieth with ya erction, Thteebie. Thee detherveth ta be tweated wike a wady.” Bucky splashed a little cool water in Stevie’s direction. “Or ya coul’ take more col’ thowerth, inthtead.” He grinned.
In Thuthpenth

Chapter Summary

SMOL!BUCKY BARNES SLEEPING IN A PILE OF FLUFFY BUNNIES.
What else do you even need to know?

Chapter Notes

Chapter beta'd and PR'd by chimyra.
Prompt provided by georgiagirlagain (and I sincerely hope she does not mind that I got inspired to use it for today’s chapter, instead of a bonus scene, but it was too good to pass up!) This chapter is also for all the sadists who requested smol!Bucky had to catch up on his vaccines and shots, you meanies. :P

One-word prompt: nightmares

The next morning didn’t start off much better for Bucky. He was just mindin’ his own business, sleepin’, when a scary dream came about cold and dark, and… and… pain. Someone was in a lot of pain. He woke up with tears on his cheeks and his heart beatin’ real fast.

“Mithter Jarvith,” he sniffled into the covers. “Ya thewe?”

“I am,” Mr. Jarvis’ voice answered quietly. “How may I assist you?”

“I hab a ba’ dweam,” Bucky hiccuped, pressing his face into the pillow.

“Captain Rogers and Agent Romanova received a late call for an overnight mission with Senior Airman Wilson and Agent Barton. They will return in a few hours’ time. If you would like, I can provide you with cartoons to watch or read you a story, or…” He paused. “Per protocol, I have notified Sir of your distress in the absence of the captain and Agent Romanova. Sir says he will come to you, if you like, or you may go to his bedroom to join the slumber party in progress.”

That was a lot of things to have to decide when Bucky felt like his insides were still on the outside. “I don’ know,” he cried harder.

A few seconds later, the door clicked open and Mr. Stark called from the doorway, “It’s just me, kid.” Then, a little bit closer. “Bad dream, huh?” He sat on the edge of the bed and brushed Bucky’s hair back, dabbing at his tears. “Don’t wanna be alone?” he asked like he understood.

Bucky shook his head, but his breath hitched again and more crying came out anyways.
“Sh… It’s okay. You're okay now.” Mr. Stark picked him up and propped him on his hip, hugging him close with a hand on the back of his head. “Come on. Plenty of company in my room for someone who doesn’t want to be alone.” He click-clicked for Steve Pawgers to follow as he grabbed Bucky’s soft blanket, and the puppy and Yasha (who decided to sleep in Bucky’s room last night), and all the bunnies tumbled out of the bed, too. “I wondered where they got to,” Mr. Stark said, clicking some more for the animals to follow. Bucky watched Steve Pawgers and Yasha scamper down the hall after them, the bunnies hippety-hop-hopping along behind.

When Bucky sniffled again, Mr. Stark stopped in the doorway, turned, and grabbed something from a box on the table by the door. He offered it to Bucky.

A hanky!

Boy, nothing felt right like a hanky for wipin’ your nose. “Thankth, Mithter Thark.”

“You’re welcome,” he whispered as they entered the dark bedroom. “I remembered you saying something about missing hankies back in the city, so I packed some in my suitcase, but we’ll get Jarvis to take care of it so you have some of your own, too.”

“Thankth.” Suddenly, Bucky felt very shy. Mr. Stark sure was swell. He carried Bucky all the way over to the bed and tucked him in beside Darcy before stooping down and sliding something—ooh, stairs!—over by the bed for Steve Pawgers and Yasha and the bunnies to climb up, too. They settled in the open space at the end of the bed and it was a very full bed with Darcy’s Barky Barnes and Miss Pepper’s Dum Dum Pigglin’ and Puggy Carter (who usually slept next to Yasha in Stevie and Nat’s room) and all the wiener puppies piled up on Darcy. Good thing Mr. Stark had a very big bed.

Mr. Stark climbed in next and tugged on the covers until all the animals resettled. He pulled the quilt right up and tucked it under his armpit and the edge under Bucky’s chin. Then he kissed Bucky on the head and said, “Wake me up if the bad dreams come back, okay? No need to feel sad alone, kid.”

Bucky laid awake for a little while listening to Darcy breathe and feeling the nice warm feeling of Mr. Stark with his arm thrown over Bucky and Darcy both at the same time. Barky Barnes wiggled up the bed between them and nibbled on Bucky’s fingers for a while until Steve Pawgers got jealous and wiggled up, too. Then Miss Pepper’s hand tapped each puppy on the nose and said a quiet, “no”, and the puppies settled down and Bucky got sleepy and warm … and sleepy…

And then they slept.

Hours later, quiet voices whispered, pulling Bucky from nice dreams about laying in a pile with his bunnies. Then he woke up and he was laying in a pile with his bunnies and Steve Pawgers and Barky Barnes and Darcy and Mr. Stark. Miss Pepper’s side of the bed dipped down and fabric rustled.

Miss Pepper’s voice got a little louder. “Jarvis pinged Tony’s phone last night. Bucky was upset after a nightmare and he became more upset when Jarvis offered assistance, so Tony brought him—all of them —back here. He went right back to sleep.”

“I’m sorry, Pepper—”

“Don’t you apologize or thank me. You’d do the same for Darcy.”

“We’re trying to work it out so we don’t get called out together so often—”

“It’s really no problem. He was out like a light.”
“Thanks, Pepper.”

“What did I say about thanking me?”

“Do you want me to…?”

“Let them sleep. He’s been muttering off and on about bunnies the past hour or so. He’s okay now.”

Surrounded by bunny fluff and the heavy sound of Steve Pawgers’ breath, Bucky dozed off again.

“We overslept,” a deep voice said later. Something like sandpaper scratch-rubbed. “Hey, kid, Rosa’s making chocolate waffles. If we don’t get up soon, she’ll pull the plug on the waffle iron and we’ll miss out.”

Bucky sat straight up. “Thocholate waffleth?” He blinked the sleepiness from his brain and tried to focus on Mr. Stark. “I lub thocholate waffleth. Ith thewe ithe cweam?”

“I don’t see why not. My house; my rules. Let’s go get waffles and ice cream.” Mr. Stark’s eyebrows were pushed all the way up his head. He looked sleepy, too. His hair was a mess.

“Thankth, Mithter Thtark, fo’ eber’fing.” Bucky said, scooting to the edge of the bed and the top of the little staircase the puppies used.

“Ah.” Mr. Stark waved a hand. “Don’t mention it. Everybody has rough nights. And you can call me Tony, you know.”

“Okay, Tony.” Bucky grinned, sliding down the little stairs on his rear end. “I’m a’thpooled to bruth my teef and ge’ dwethed befo’ bweakfath, though.”

“Exceptions can be made in emergencies, like missing breakfast from oversleeping. I’ll take the blame. Come on,” Tony said, grabbing Bucky’s hand and hustling him down the stairs to the dining room.

They ate waffles and ice cream and Miss Rosa served syrupy fruit in a bunch of little bowls. Bucky had strawberry and blueberry syrup-fruit, and even some syrupy walnuts, and a yellow one that he thought was pineapple-n-syrup, too. All the fruits.

“What day ith it?” Bucky asked as he polished off his fourth waffle.

“Christmas Eve. Big plans, today! Big plans.” Tony clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Darcy’s coming down to the new clubhouse to help with some of the last minute renovations. You gonna come down to help before it’s time to get ready for Christmas Eve dinner?”

“Umm…” Bucky thought about it. “I fink I’m a’ppothed ta hewp Mith Peppa’ wif thomethin’, but I don’ ’memba’ what.”

“Well, if you change your mind, remember to tell someone before you come down to the clubhouse, okay?” Tony ruffled Bucky’s hair, but in a nice way, like a hug. “Oh, and Jarvis ordered those hankies for you. Should be here in a few hours. You’ll need somewhere to put them away, so you might want to tidy up and make space in your room.”

Bucky stared at Tony, wondering why he’d need to make space for a few hankies in his underwear drawer where he always put them, but Tony didn’t explain. For the day down at the clubhouse, Darcy had her special teal toolbox and her overalls and work boots on, so it musta been a workin’ hard day for sure. Instead of her regular green coat, she put on a puffy shirt Tony called a shopcoat,
and a pair of work gloves. Then, Tony braided Darcy’s hair into two long braids starting at the very top of her head and going all the way down her back. When she was all ready and buttoned up, he pulled a knitted cap on over her braids and they headed out the door together, a hot rod red toolbox in one of Tony’s hands and Darcy’s free hand in the other.

A few hours later, Bucky found out why he’d need to make space in his room for hankies. Lots of space.

Jarvis announced a delivery for Master Barnes at the door. Miss Pepper and Nat followed Bucky to the window to peek outside. There was a man with a giant box out there!

“Howy cow! That’th a gian’ boxth ou’ dere!” Bucky said.

The man asked Bucky to sign, but Bucky didn’t know how to write the cursive yet. The man said it was okay to write ‘BB’ for Bucky Barnes, if Bucky could do that. Bucky wrote the neatest ‘BB’ he ever made. Nat told him he did a real good job, too. Then, she pulled a knife out of thin air like magic and carefully cut through the tape holding the box closed. when the delivery man left, Nat and Miss Pepper dragged the giant box over to the dining room and pulled back the flaps for Bucky to look inside.

“Whoa,” he said real quiet. He looked up at the ceilin’. “Thankth, Mitther Jarvith!”

“You are most welcome, Master Barnes, but Sir did the shopping himself. You’ll find an array of fine, linen handkerchiefs in many shades of white and ivory for different styles of dress, organic, unbleached, cotton handkerchiefs for everyday use, organic cotton handkerchiefs in fun colors to match your many T-shirts, and a few sets of special handkerchiefs with matching bow ties, suspenders, and flat caps for more elegant dress occasions.”

One of Bucky’s bunnies hopped over to nose at the packaging tape that fell on the floor. Bucky bent down to pat his head. “Hi, Thid.”

“You named the bunnies?” Miss Pepper asked, surprised.

“Thure. Mitther Bawton hewped, too. Thith ith Thid an’ that’th Cwyde.” He pointed to the two grey, male bunnies.

Nat put a hand over her mouth and made a funny sound.

“Mickey an’ Bonnie ar’ under da couthch. They’we spotted all o’vuh. Mawwowy an’ Nanthy ar’ pwooowy thtiww upthtairth. They’we wight bwown.”

“You…” Miss Pepper made a strange face. “You named your bunnies Mickey and Mallory, Bonnie and Clyde, and Sid and Nancy?” She looked a little faint.

“Mitther Bawton came up wif motht of ‘em. I named Bonnie da Bunny mythelf, though.” He smiled real big.

“Bonnie is a wonderful name for a bunny.” Nat praised him and gave him a nice hug.

Then she looked at Pepper and pulled another face and Pepper jumped like she got goosed under her seat. “Right! Bonnie is a wonderful name for a bunny. I’m sure they’ll be wonderful pets.”

“The bunnies are litter-trained, too,” Nat mentioned.

“Lovely.” Miss Pepper looked like she needed to lay down, but her phone pinged with a
notipication. She looked at it. “Uh oh. The children missed their flu shot appointment at the Tower health clinic. I completely forgot. Jarvis, can you notify Dr. Lin so he can arrange to make that up? This weekend, if possible.”

Bucky backed away. “No mo’ thoth! All Doctuh Win eva doeth ith gibeh me thoth! My butt’th gonna be a pincuthion!” He turned tail to run, but Nat snagged him by the back of his pants.

“What are you running from? No one is giving you a shot right now,” she pointed out.

But Bucky’s sore butt remembered the last shot a little too well. “Fine, but no mo’ thoth th in m’ butt. I gotta be able ta thit.”

“Fair enough. Your arm might be sore for a day or two, though.”

“Don’t cawe. Sweepin’ wif an achin’ hiney ith the wortht.”

“I’ll discuss it with Dr. Lin—if you promise not to run away when it’s time for more shots,” Nat bargained.

“Deal.” Bucky held up his pinky for the pinky swear to seal the deal and Nat shook it. Then he leaned over to look in the box again. “It thure wath nithe of Tony to thend me all thith gweat thtuff, but I got nowhewe to weaw all theth thwell thuthpenderth and bow tieth and fwat capth.” He pulled out a red and green pinstripe plaid set with matching hankies.

“You can wear them for the Christmas party and midnight mass. There’s a chapel right here at the camp and an interfaith minister will be conducting the service. We’ll have cookies and cocoa before, and a nice, early dinner and Christmas party that lasts late into the night on Christmas Day tomorrow.”

“An’ we get to dweth up weal nithe?” Boy, that sounded fun! Bucky could wear his new suspenders and bow tie and flat cap! “Will it be a danthin’ party? I don’ know how ta danthe tho good yet.” Bucky scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the box.

“Ask Steve. He can teach you,” Nat said, but she said it in that way that meant she was bein’ cheeky.

“Thteebie can danthe?” Bucky was pretty sure he made a face, even though he didn’t mean to.

“Sure he can. He’s always telling us what we do isn’t real dancing. He must know some great dances. We’ll do all of them, twice,” she insisted.

“Ya thay dat wike it’th twue, but I get da feewin’ ya puwwing my weg, Nat.”

She held up her finger and thumb very close together and smiled the smile with all the dimples in her cheeks. Bucky’s favorite Nat smile. “Only a little. Dancing is supposed to be fun, sweetie, not a competition. Who cares if you do it right? Who cares if there is a right way?”

Bucky cared, but he wasn’t sure why. “Wiww Darthy be at da party?” Another scufflin’ kick to the box.

This time, Miss Pepper made the cheeky smile. “Absolutely.”
Thteebie'th Lieth

Chapter Summary

Captain America is a lying liar who lies, but when he gets caught, his little buddy is no help at all. Neither is Natasha.

Chapter Notes

I think this is my favorite chapter that I’ve ever written, tbh.

Thanks to chimyra for pre-reading.

One-word prompt: candy (provided by blue_magpie)

Shirts that inspired this chapter: Carpe Diem (Darcy’s T-shirt is entirely made up—sorry folks)

Bucky’s Basketball Shoes

“Please excuse the interruption,” Jarvis’ voice surprised Bucky while Nat helped him sort and put away his new belongings. As was his way, Tony went above and beyond, not just slipping a few sets of accessories in with Bucky’s precious hoard of new hankies, but also a pair of neat button-down shirts in steel blue and charcoal grey, and sturdy, dark jeans for him to pair with his snappy new ensembles for the holidays. At the bottom of the box, sat a pair of black canvas basketball shoes that had a vintage 20s look, too. She all but peeled Bucky off of the boxes of things that reminded him of his own time. Tony Stark never ceased to surprise Natasha with his kindness and generosity in the right ways, she thought with an unaccustomed fondness.

For a while now, Bucky’s obvious homesickness for familiarity weighed on Steve’s conscience like lead. Bucky’s ma, his home, Brooklyn, the little day in and day out things people no longer needed to do, thanks to modern conveniences. As small as it might seem to someone else, Natasha knew those basketball shoes and hankies represented a precious link to home for little Bucky Barnes. She’d have to find some way to thank the engineer for his thoughtfulness without letting him think she was softening towards him. She liked keeping him on edge in her company, just a little.

“Master Barnes’ presence has been requested at the boathouse,” The A.I. continued.

“What’th a boathouthe?” Bucky asked, picking at a fresh scab on his elbow.

“The building adjacent to the left side of the Recreation Pavilion, as you face the lake, currently serves as Sir’s and Miss’ workshop.”

Natasha smiled when Bucky held up his hands in front the way Steve showed him to see which
thumb and forefinger made the shape of an “L” to indicate the left.

“The captain recommends you wear garments appropriate for—and I quote—getting filthy. Several projects are currently in progress in the workshop. Thick denim trousers or overalls and a fitted, cotton shirt appear to be the order of the day,” the A.I. informed him.

But Natasha was already pulling out a pair of thick canvas dungarees and a fresh, silly T-shirt with a more fitted shape like the ones Tony preferred to wear to avoid getting clothes caught up in equipment or snagged on sharp objects. The purple print on dark navy cotton proclaimed, “the DIEM AIN’T GONNA CARPE itself”.

Still running on an extreme sugar high from his calorie-laden breakfast with Tony, Bucky could hardly stand still long enough for Natasha to help him pull the shirt over his head and lace up his steel-toed work boots—another surprise from Tony when he began tutoring Bucky in basic programming and robot-building in his workshop back in the city. Somehow, Tony always knew just what a busy little boy needed to keep him out of trouble—the ventilation adventure being the rare exception.

When the two of them reached the bottom of the grand staircase, they spotted Pepper and Rosa in the great room with their heads bent over a large binder.

“The menu is fine, Rosa,” Pepper said, “but in these quantities on the shopping list … I just don’t think this is enough with Steve, Clint, Sam, Kate, and Natasha all coming to dinner. The team is very active. They burn through a lot of calories. Steve consumes nearly eight thousand calories by himself on a normal day with light activity. In fact, with last night’s mission complete, he’s probably done nothing but eat today.”

Rosa looked surprised at that revelation, then narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “I watch to make sure he eats and likes what I make. He eats the same as everyone else.”

Clearing her throat, Natasha gleefully threw Steve under the bus, “He doesn’t like making more work for you with all you have to do managing the estate and feeding so many guests. He’s been going into town twice a day to run errands and stopping at the diner for high-calorie, in-between meals. He tends to snack in the middle of the night, too, so if your leftovers are disappearing…”

Rosa gasped. “He pays to eat Martha’s cooking at the diner when he could be at home being fed good, home-cooked—” She switched to Italian and swore up and down Steve Rogers’ patriotic, lying hide in ways Natasha wasn’t certain the language of the Renaissance masters had ever been used before.

“I’ll talk to him about it,” Natasha promised the housekeeper, extending an olive branch on Steve’s behalf to make up for ratting him out in the first place, just a little. He meant well, after all. “I’ll make very clear to him that you’d rather feed him til he bursts than have your good reputation suffer in the community because he goes into town to eat. The guilt will have him eating extra meals just to make it up to you.” She winked and Rosa subsided.

“Good, you tell him—” She stopped, lowered the irate index finger with which she’d nearly launched her next tirade, and eyed Natasha shrewdly. “Pepper says you burn the calories, too. From now on, you both eat more and you make me a list of your favorites. This one, too.” She cupped Bucky’s chin.

“I think ya waffleth n’ thuga’ fwuitth ar’ thwell, Mith Wotha.” Bucky grinned. Little brown-noser.

“I know you do, luce dei miei occhi. That’s why you and the little wrecking ball are i miei piccoli.
You eat my waffles and sugar fruit all day.” She kissed his nose. Bucky squirmed and blushed to the roots of his hair. “That means—” she began to explain, but Bucky cut her off.

“‘Light’a my eyeth’ and ‘my wittle oneth’.” He grinned his toothless grin, pleased with himself, rocking on the balls of his feet with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“How do you know that?” She tapped his chin like a proud auntie.

“I’m fwom Bwookwyn.” He shrugged as if that explained it all.

It did, Natasha supposed. Steve often mentioned their tenement and the one across the way, growing up, were a mishmash of immigrants from all over Europe which is why he found the western European languages so easy to assimilate when it came time to study a new one. He had an ear for most, if not all of them.

But Brooklyn of the year twenty-sixteen bore little resemblance to the Brooklyn Bucky remembered. Rosa remarked to the women, “It’s times like this it’s most obvious, you know. Sweet boy.” She squished his cheeks. “I’ll make you a big bowl of ravioli tonight, like my grandma made for Antony when he was a boy and she wanted to love on him, too.”

“Thankth, Mith Wotha.” Bucky hid his face in Natasha’s hip.

“You’re welcome. Come, I’ll go with you. We’ll straighten out the captain and this diner business.”

“No,” she cut off the Black Widow. “I’ll tell him, make him look me in the eye when he tells me he ate Martha’s chewy chicken and instant potatoes. Instant. Pah!” she spat as she bundled Bucky into his puffy vest and gloves, and grabbed her own coat. “She buys her pasta in bulk, too, dried, if you can believe it, like a Neanderthal!” She stomped down the stairs and Bucky stomped right along with her, a little ‘somebody’s gonna get it’ bounce in his step.

Waving Pepper off with a smile, Natasha trailed the housekeeper across well-worn paths and down a wide staircase of flagstone to the boathouse. The unmistakable clatter of busywork came from within. Rosa’s nostrils flared like a bull about to charge when she spied Steve through a window, lifting half of a hoagie to his mouth—a hoagie Rosa didn’t make (made with bread she didn’t bake, using God only knows what kind of bottled dressing and limp tomato slices!).

Then, THEN, she threw open the door and gasped at the sight of Darcy sucking on a lollipop from the store!

“Before you yell——” Tony held up both hands in a gesture of supplication like he knew what they did and thought he could still avert the apocalypse about to rain down from on high. “Jarvis bought her the lollipops. They’re organic, made with vegetable coloring and real cane sugar. She likes to chew while she works.” Indeed, the little girl bent over her tiny work bench, observing as U and Dum-E sliced prepared lengths of PVC pipe with a tiny laser cutter. A stretched, knitted hat that had seen better days covered her dutch-braided hair. The “Daddy’s Little Demolition Crew” T-shirt under her overalls wasn’t much better off. Her little brown work boots were scuffed and a smear of axel grease stained her cheek.

“Piccola,” Rosa cooed, smiling sweetly when Darcy’s head turned at the familiar nickname. “You don’t want to eat those. You don’t know who made that, tesoro mia… I make you lollipops, from peaches and grapes and apples I grew with my own hands in my dirt. You don’t know where their dirt has been, cara.”
Popping the sweet out of her mouth, Darcy eyed it like it might actually have been born of tainted dirt. Skipping across the workshop, she placed it neatly in the tissue Rosa held out for the offending treat.

Then Rosa turned on Tony like a pit viper, “You!” She pointed at him like she’d light him on fire with eyes and determination alone. “You don’t feed this sweet baby anything but the best from now on. Or this one.” She cupped Bucky’s chin lovingly again. “He eats my food and I reward him with handmade marshmallows. You—” She stalked up to Iron Man and poked him in the arc reactor. “You encourage your friends to lie to me.” She rounded on Steve and propped her hands on her ample hips. “It's not good enough? What's wrong with my food, Capitano America?”

“Not a damn thing! Uh … ma’am.” He actually tried to hide the half-eaten hoagie behind his back. Limp, shredded lettuce fell to the floor like sad confetti. Butterfingers helpfully pushed a squeegee through it, mashing it to a pale green paste.

Natasha sighed. “The jig is up, Rogers. She knows about the twice-daily runs to the diner.” Then she winked just to screw with his head because they both knew damn well it was more often than not three daily trips to the diner when he cleared out the leftovers at midnight and came upstairs still ravenously hungry, looking for the keys to the jeep.

Captain America, Steven Grant Rogers, quaked in his boots like a misbehaving school boy.

“Tell me.” Rosa drifted close enough to make him very uncomfortable. “You ate Martha’s meatloaf. It was terrible, wasn’t it? Her chicken, an abomination. You can tell me the truth. It stays between us.”

Steve looked to Tony for help, but Stark was a man who knew when to hold ‘em and when to fold ‘em. He sidled out of Rosa’s reach and scurried over to help Darcy and Bucky set up a painting booth for whatever mystery gifts the two of them were building.

“Uh, uh, u-hem,” Steve cleared his throat, glanced at his shoes, pleaded silently with Natasha, and got nothing. Peering down into the soulful brown eyes of a woman who loved Bucky like his own sweet auntie, Steve folded like a house of cards. “I’m so sorry. I’ll never do it again. It’s just—I’m so hungry all the time since the serum and you work so hard with all you do taking care of everyone and I didn’t want to be a burden and I eat a lot and after all those months in the army, I could survive on styrofoam, if it’s got enough calories. My palate is hardly a good judge of wonderful homemade food like yours.”

They stood in humming silence for several moments, staring into one another’s eyes.

Natasha held her breath.

“Good answer,” Rosa said grudgingly, crossing her arms and retreating half a step. “Don’t think I don’t notice how you say nothing bad about Martha’s lousy cooking, but loyalty is an attractive quality. I’ll make you something good, enough that you beg me to stop bringing more. Okay?” She patted his cheek and flounced out of the boathouse.

“Whew! Tha’ wath a clothe one, Thteebie. I wath thure thee wath gonna make ya peel potatoeth a’ thomethin’,” Bucky said, looking relieved on his best friend’s behalf.

A moment too soon, unfortunately.

“You’re right, caro mio.” Rosa leaned back into the room and grabbed Steve by the belt loop. “Come. You peel potatoes, do penance for keeping secrets nobody should keep.”
Steve went.
Camoufwage

This chapter serves as the intro to a fun Avengers-childhood-Christmas clip show chapter next. I GET TO WRITE THAT ON CHRISTMAS! *bounces*

Like many of you, I’ll be joining the Christmas celebrators in my family this evening for a meal, the ritual slaughter of shellfish and other terrifying beasts of the deep, that once swam, burrowed, or scuttled. There will be much melted, lactose-free butter and the shell carnage will be mighty. TONIGHT, WE FEAST!

May your own holiday celebration be merry, bright, or whatever you wish, and your families happy, healthy, and well. Merry Winterfest! (^_^)

One-word prompt: fluffiness (Thanks, seacat! Your prompt inspired the whole Christmas weekend arc!)

“Any idea what it is they’re making?” Natasha asked Tony as Darcy and Bucky sprayed everything inside the painting booth without rhyme or reason.

“No, and Jarvis isn’t telling, either.” Tony winced when the spray nozzle jammed and buckled in Darcy’s hand, but U was already on it, flipping the machine off and replacing the nozzle so the project could be finished in time to dry. “Whatever it is, it required several large orders of store-bought marshmallows, and the only reason Rosa would even let that many verboten treats through the front door is if no one planned to eat them.”

“Interesting.” And darling, really, that the two children wanted to make gifts, rather than go on the shopping spree Tony would have happily sponsored, if they asked.

“That’s one word for it.” But Tony smiled the smile of a new father, smitten with riches that couldn't be counted in dollar signs.

Natasha chuckled and shifted her weight, watching with a small smile, too, as the children argued over which colors made the best camouflage. Despite her love for all things teal, Darcy was solidly in the greens and greys camo camp, while Bucky preferred neon green and electric blue. It made a certain kind of sense—Bucky’s attraction to painfully bright colors. Day-Glo colors must seem like a feast for the eyes, having grown up in 1920s Brooklyn.

“Time to wrap this up.” She clapped her hands, drawing the argument to an end. “We have midnight mass and a late dinner to attend, which means you both need to lay down and try to nap for a bit this afternoon.”

“Can we thweep on da thofa bed in da wost?” He pointed north, towards the Rec Pavilion.

Tony shook his head. “Sorry, kiddo. There’s a project underway in the loft, too, but there’s a brand
new sofa bed by the fireplace on the main floor over there. You sure you wanna do that, though? Might not be very quiet with everyone coming and going.”

But Darcy was already drooping and slurring her words. “Jarvis promised me and Bucky a slideshow ob videos an’ pi’tures from Chrissmsses pas’ if we coul’n’t seep,” she garbled as Tony picked her up and settled her against his shoulder.

“Ah.” Natasha nodded. “Now Jarvis’ request for family Christmas albums makes sense.” She sighed. “I don’t have much, but there are probably a few photos on Clint’s private server in Bed-Stuy of the Christmas after he brought me in. If Clint will give you access to the server, you’re welcome to use whatever family-friendly photos of me you can find from previous holidays, Jarvis.”

“Certainly, Agent Romanova, and thank you. Due to their circumstances, I believe Miss Stark and Master Barnes have been especially curious about how other members of their found family grew up and spent the holidays. When I offered to create this slideshow, I failed to take into account how non-traditional the formative years of the Avengers might have been. It has been ... a challenge.”

“Tell the others all of that and send out the request again, Jarvis. I think I’d like to see your Avengers formative years slideshow, too.”

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“Das m’ Uncle Rhodey,” Darcy said as the team reconvened on the sectional in the rec room after the workshop was picked up and the tools returned to their rightful places along the walls. Even Steve and Rosa joined the group in the rec room, lugging along several pots and bowls full of potatoes for peeling. Rosa’s oldest pressed a peeler into Sam’s empty hand and set a sack of potatoes down between them while Rosa’s younger daughters chattered quietly in the kitchen under the loft, making good use of the canning kitchen to put together some light, pre-dinner nibbles for the impromptu slideshow viewing party.

As the lights dimmed, the image on the silver screen over the fireplace came into focus with sharper contrast. Several photos from Colonel Rhodes’ childhood flickered on screen. Playing with G.I. Joes and Matchbox cars under the tree with children who could only be cousins or brothers, for their similarity of their features. Same nose, same chin, even the same hairline.

Rhodey joked, “My mom and aunts called us the Rhodes Clones for years. These are my cousins, Bobby, Will, and Jeff. We were all born within six months of each other, and all with our grandfather’s face. My mom still mixes us up when we’re all in a room together.” His lips lifted in a half-smile. “She went to Trinidad for the holidays this year, but she’s making noises about a family picnic for Memorial Day. We better save the world between now and then because they all have kids and my mother is going to ask again why I don’t.”

Tony raised a hand and pointed at the groggy little girl in his lap. “Be sure and show her the photos of you helping your goddaughter program her first R/C drone. Should buy you at least another year or two.”

Rhodey nodded and admitted, “That might do it.”

“Better yet, tell her to bring everyone up here for Memorial Day. We’ll do a big weekend thing, open
the boathouse for the summer, all the summer stuff—water slide, rope swing, water skiing, all the kid stuff.”

“I’ll mention it,” Rhodey promised when Darcy’s tiny hand gripped his in lieu of her usual big, hopeful eyes.

“You do that,” Tony insisted as the slideshow progressed to the later years of Rhodey’s childhood. Early admittance to MIT, like Tony, but a bit older and more mature than the fourteen year old wunderkind friend he made over the holiday break that year.

Rhodey explained, “I stuck around campus to squeeze in an intensive winter break session for a science credit. Stumbled across this one, carrying a pair of pizza boxes into the engineering lab with a stolen pass he swiped from our TA.”

Tony joined in, “Things were still a bit tense at home, after a small misunderstanding over the summer.”

Rosa laughed and cast a knowing glance at her employer. Steve wondered what that was about.

Homey scenes of other holiday meals and moments flipped by, all featuring Tony surrounded by people who were definitely not Howard and Maria. Steve felt the same bone-deep disappointment in his former friend he always felt when reminded of how Howard failed to see what his indifference cost his son.

Peggy provided a bright spot in the otherwise disheartening montage, but Tony smiled at all of it, pleased by whomever and whatever he remembered happening in the wordless, recorded moments on screen. The home movies from the late sixties had no sound. Tony, just a baby, in Peggy’s arms as Howard mouthed clearly for the camera, “The proud godmother.” In the background, a rarely seen male figure followed the baby’s movements as he was passed from Peggy to Dugan to Morita to Jones to Dernier, each one laughing and cooing and generally looking like idiotic, doting uncles.

In the next home movie, Edwin Jarvis and Dum Dum jogged alongside a wobbling four or five year old Tony as he kicked off the low curb and away from training wheels he could only have removed himself, judging by the terror on Jarvis’ face. Meanwhile, a very small Tony cackled with glee as he got the hang of the balance needed, and shot down the long alley between Stark House and the Vanderbilt townhome in Manhattan.

Bucky, tucked under Steve’s arm, said with a sleepy, wistful note, “That’s a thwell bithicle.” Tony met Steve’s gaze over Bucky’s head and gave the barest of nods, fishing his phone from his pocket to text a special request to his A.I.

The video featuring the beribboned two-wheeler came to an end when the videographer lowered the camera, revealing the tips of a pair of women’s pumps, scuffed on the left toe in just the same spot Peggy always had from the way she kicked her shoes off under the bed at the end of a long day. Always the left first, right into the back of her footlocker. It was nice to know some things never changed.

“Hey, das my daddy, too,” Darcy’s voice brightened. She sat up in Tony’s lap, giving the screen her full attention as a six or seven year old Tony assembled a complex-looking model train display with Ana and Edwin, once again at Stark House for the holidays. Tony fiddled and jiggered, finally flicking a switch and grinning in triumph when all the tiny buildings and Christmas trees and streetlights in the miniature railroad town flickered to life. Jarvis clapped Tony on the shoulder and it was obvious to anyone with eyes how he congratulated and praised the young genius on a job well done. Something else Howard had failed at time and again, otherwise they’d likely refer to the the
all-knowing A.I. who helped manage their lives as ‘Howard’ rather than ‘Jarvis’.

Another scene faded in, this time of a twelve year old Tony standing in an open doorway in the main lodge at Camp Stark with a brunette girl of about the same age who could have been another of Rosa’s daughters, if not for the telltale beauty mark above her right eyebrow. So this was young Rosa.

To the left of frame, Dernier pointed to the mistletoe over their heads. Tony blushed scarlet, tripped over his own feet, and collided with the doorway. Distracted while he rubbed at the ache in his shoulder, he never saw young Rosa coming before she planted a kiss on his lips that could only be described as life-changing. In that moment, Tony Stark finally discovered the ancient and wondrous mystery of girls, and what a girl to lead him to the light. Rosa looked right into the lens and winked before flouncing away as the Commandos framed in the shot howled with delight. Twelve year old Tony stared after her with a witless grin and stars in his eyes.

Grownup Tony took the ribbing from his friends like a champ, graciously accepting a buss on the cheek from his childhood friend and one-time sweetheart while Pepper claimed the other cheek and Darcy grinned at all three.

Fresh scenes colored in earthy shades Steve recently came to associate with the nineteen-seventies set the new home video stage. A girl with limbs like a gawky fawn moved across the ice, occasionally creating more elegant figures with skates that looked almost too large for her willowy frame. Her cropped, strawberry blonde hair fell short of her ears, styled to slope away from her face.

“The Dorothy Hamill wedge was all the rage. I was so sure I’d be the next great American Olympic sweetheart with enough practice and the right haircut, but along came Mary Lou Retton with her adorable button nose and petite frame, and ‘tall and slim’ went out with the seventies like yesterday’s news,” Pepper lamented with an exaggerated sigh.

“My sweetheart,” Tony declared, laying a hand on her knee in their old, familiar way.

“Daddy’s sweetheart,” Darcy echoed, nuzzling into the tiny space between them.

“One of,” Pepper corrected with a smile, turning into Tony’s side to cuddle the five year old.

The ice skating home movie came to an end and audio playback began of an old conversation between the two lovebirds.

“Whatever you need, Mr. Stark, of course,” younger Pepper’s voice rang out in the silent room. The low lights of the Christmas tree glowed softly in the corner when the screen stayed dark for the audio replay.

“What I need is for you to do your job like it’s your job, Miss Potts,” younger Tony slurred. “Including, in this case, rescheduling this meeting for when I’m less drunk and also not me.”

“You’d like someone else to take a meeting of this importance with representatives of the United States Air Force?”

“I’d like someone else to be me, but, yes, someone else who could sit in on my—hey, you know what? You’re smart. You do it.”

“Mr. Stark, I’m a personal assistant, fresh out of business school. I’m hardly qualified to take meetings on behalf of Stark Industries’ CEO—”

“You are literally the most qualified person I have ever met.” Tony belched delicately and cursed
under his breath at Dum-E. “I said ‘person’; don’t get your rear axle housing in a wad, asshole.”

“Oh… Daddy said a bad word.” Darcy’s sleepy eyes widened in surprise.

“There are no such things as bad words, only limited vocabularies,” Pepper reminded Darcy.

“Daddy used his milited vocab’laries” Darcy promptly parroted, surprising a laugh out of the adults in the room.

On the recording, the familiar sound of high heels echoed, followed by the thunk of a heavy door and Tony’s much less drunk-sounding voice, “Hey Jarvis, let’s find out what kind of perfume Miss Potts prefers, shall we? And clear my schedule for the rest of the week so she has a few extra days to spend with her parents over the holidays. RSVP to that invite to Georgetown. Let’s see if Happy’s in the mood; we’ll go mooch off of Aunt Peg for a few days. She’ll be so happy to fuss over us lonely orphans, she’ll forget to miss Uncle Niel for a while, if we play our cards right.”
Mith Peggy' th Chrithmath Pawty

Chapter Summary

Clint and Tony met long before the Chitauri invasion, but memories are fickle things.

Chapter Notes

I really went ham on these flashback slideshow scenes—there are a few more to come after this, too! (Wherein, readers get to peek at all the loose Chrissi headcanons rambling around upstairs.) Please note that the Christmas party mentioned in this update is NOT the one that Tony attends in the clip from last chapter. This scene includes a much younger, brattier Tony. Btw, my Ask Box on tumblr is still open for one-word prompts for this series! (Or leave them in the comments below!)

“Really, Peg? You invited your pet thug?” The sound of Howard’s voice surprised Steve and Tony when an obviously young Clint Barton appeared on screen next, bracketed on either side by a familiar face. Gabe Jones and Jacques Dernier.

At the end of the sectional sofa at Camp Stark, Barton’s hand covered a pleasantly surprised smile as he watched the scene play out from his youth.

The camera panned to Peggy’s unamused expression. “He’s no thug, Howard, honestly. I’ll grant you ‘delinquent’ at seventeen, but he’s hardly had a good example to live by and he won’t have if he spends every waking hour locked up and treated like a thug with no one to provide a good example from which he may learn.”

“And you’re relying on the Commandos for that?” Howard snickered.

“They do alright with Anthony.”

“Anthony lives well within the law, thank you very much, Margaret Elizabeth Mary.”

Peggy looked into the camera with wide, exasperated eyes before rolling them hard left.

"Well, don't sit him near me at dinner—God, I hope you're putting him in the kitchen with the help where he belongs."

"Now why would I do that?"

"What are the chances the little beast can tell the difference between his salad and dinner forks?"

Peggy snorted. "After your third scotch, can you?"
To which Howard said nothing, turning to his left and pretending the conversation was over while Peggy muttered something like "and they say we English are such dreadful snobs" under her breath.

“Come in, come in,” she called to Clint and her old friends, crossing the elegant foyer of her townhouse in Georgetown to welcome the new guests and take their coats. Steve had enjoyed several breakfasts at the house with Peg and her adult children. Adult children whose own children were closer in age to Steve than they themselves. Perhaps ‘enjoyed’ was too strong a word for those meals. More like ‘tolerated for Peg’s sake’. Those tedious breakfasts never did much to endear Peg’s kids to Steve when they spent the entire meal reminding their mother she wasn’t getting any younger and what a risk living alone with her third husband at their advanced age would soon become. Hale and hearty in her early nineties, Peggy looked nothing to Steve like the frail old woman her children presumed her to be. More than once, she remarked on how she considered selling the old house and just disappearing off the map where Daniel Junior and Anna couldn’t follow and nag her into an early grave, but then there were the great-grandchildren to consider, not that they had much use for her, either, she supposed.

Retirement was the bitterest pill for Peg to swallow, but the official story given out was how the wicked ache in her bad knee couldn’t be ignored with a busy director’s schedule at the agency, so sweet, elder Peggy spent her days making the rounds of charitable foundations in the nation’s capitol and teaching a new generation to wish they’d never met her. Steve attended one of her meetings on the Hill with the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. Showed up, arm in arm with Captain America and squeezed an extra ten million into the budget for the VAs in D.C. and Brooklyn. Steve happily volunteered to attend any future such meetings on her arm as well, if it would guarantee similar results.

“Hill!” Peggy called on screen. A young and fresh-faced Maria Hill rose from the gathering of young and up-and-coming agents by the fireplace to cross the room in slim burgundy trousers and a smart, ivory blouse. At Peggy’s side, she looked a bit less statuesque and overall impressive. Such qualities, Steve assumed, would mature with age. She couldn’t have been more than eighteen or twenty in the home movie. “I’d like to introduce you to young Mr. Barton,” Peggy continued. “Clint, this is Probationary Agent Maria Hill. Maria, soon-to-be Probationary Agent Clint Barton—”

“Your academy provisional this semester?” Hill interrupted, then halted when tense silence greeted her gaffe. “Apologies, Director.” Maria ducked her head and stared at the bottom of her glass, swirling melting ice cubes and trying to disappear into the floor.

But Peggy was quick to forgive and carry on in her way. “My provisional choice for the academy this semester, yes. He’s a helluva shot, whatever we put in his hands. You’ll be partnering him on the range, last I heard.” And oh, what a painful moment to witness. Hill’s face just had not yet developed the skill to hide her distaste for that particular assignment. There was no mistaking her displeasure.

In the rec pavilion, Clint and Natasha both clapped hands over their mouths and choked on laughter.

“You’ll both be working with Agent Coulson, at my behest. He’s well-suited to handling an elite academy team such as yours with unique skill sets. He answers to Agent Fury. Your team won’t be tied down by the typical prerequisites, requirements, and red tape. You’re welcome,” she said pointedly, then smiled benevolently when both of them straightened their posture and squared their shoulders.

Agent Fury, with a full head of hair, stood on the far side of the room, arms crossed, glaring at anyone that moved within striking distance of his personal bubble while he chatted with other members of what Steve assumed must be S.H.I.E.L.D. Academy faculty or senior agents, one of whom appeared to be a young Phil Coulson in his usual suit and tie.
Beyond all of them, in the window of the pass-thru to the kitchen, a blonde head bobbed along to some modern Christmas tune, popping out through the crowd to jabber at Fury.

Blonde, willow slim, and still gawky at thirteen or fourteen years old, Sharon Carter’s lightly freckled face was unmistakable, despite braces with bright red and green rubber bands and a pair of sparkling, holiday-themed butterfly clips holding back the hair at her temples. God, she was just a baby!

“She’s going to kill all of us flatter than dead when she finds out we’ve seen this, you know,” Rhodey pointed out from his spot perched on the back rest of the couch.

Tony craned his neck to cast a surprised glance at his best friend. “And what makes you think you know so much about how Carter’s going to react—”

The rec pavilion door swung open with a cool gust of winter wind and the lady in question stood, silhouetted in the wash of light from the holiday decorations draped along the porch rail. “Because he invited me as his guest,” she said, hefting a box and entering the room, hips swinging in that absolutely assured way all the Carter women moved. “Jarvis said if I hurried I might make it in time to see some old family home movies,” she explained, then stopped and dropped the box with a clatter when she spotted her much younger self on screen. “Where did you get this?” she demanded.

“Major Dugan and Director Carter were most gracious in supplying my request for footage of past Christmases from the S.H.I.E.L.D. and Stark archives,” Jarvis attempted to placate the agent.

Sharon closed her eyes, hung her head, and muttered, “Uncle Dum Dum. Should have known.”

Tony held a fist up to bump Carter’s. “Right? You should’a seen the ones they sent of me.”

“You and Rosa?” Carter’s dimples deepened and her eyes sparkled.

“You put her up to that one, didn’t you?” Tony curled his lip. “Serves you right, traitor.” He huffed and crossed his arms over Darcy’s shoulders.

But the home movie hadn’t finished with them yet. The front door of Peggy’s home popped open again and Tony burst through, arms draped across the shoulders of svelte blonde twins. Models, maybe, or heiress socialites… Steve couldn’t tell, but Tony groaned and mumbled, “Not the Hyatt twins. Ugh. Sorry in advance, Pep.”

The apology was more than warranted. The twins giggled and carried on with little concern for where they were or in whose company. Howard grunted in disgust and stalked off to the bar while Tony made the rounds, saying quick, obnoxious hellos to everyone he knew, including young Sharon.

He ruffled her hair. “Hey, pipsqueak. They finally letting you stay up after The Muppet Show?”

“Fuck off, Tony,” she growled and stomped on his foot, before following Howard to the bar.

“Merry Christmas to you, too, you tiny, judgmental ass— Aunt Peggy!” He threw his arms wide.

But Peggy was having none of it. “Are you stoned, or drunk and stoned?” she demanded.

“Aunt Peggy,” Tony gasped and patted his chest with false innocence. “I would never—”

“Indeed. Please take the DoubleMint Twins and go find a glass of water. Only water. I’ll have Edwards see you home.”
“No need. Happy’s parking the car and Rhodey’s around here—” He looked over his shoulder. Rhodey, in his shiny new Air Force uniform, waited by the door, hat in hand, ready to intervene, if needed.

“Lord…” Peggy shook her head. “Why that young man puts up with you, I’ll never understand, Anthony.”

“I’m lovable, Aunt Peg.” He pecked her on the cheek.

“A good thing, too. Do try to sober up while I offer Mr. Rhodes a break from playing nanny to a nearly grown man for ten minutes, hmm?”

The screen faded to black as Peggy brushed aside Rhodey’s offered handshake to kiss him on the cheek and take his arm. “Come, let me introduce you to some friends. You’ve heard of the Howling Commandos, haven’t you, darling?”

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The next home movie faded in as Sharon climbed over the back of the couch to settle in the spot beside Rhodey.

“Your new friend seems to be adapting about as well the dinosaurs,” Hill muttered on screen, touching a beer bottle to her lips and tilting her head toward the balcony doors of Clint’s Bed-Stuy apartment building.

“I thought the dinosaurs went ext—” He stopped, face pinched, and glared at Hill.

“Twenty says she murders you in your sleep.”

“What even is my incentive to bet with you right now?”

Hill must have made a face because no one said anything for a moment.

“She’s gonna be okay. She’s new to celebrating the holidays. Just give her a chance to warm up.” Clint leaned over and pushed down the camera lens, hissing, “And put that away. I know observation was part of the deal until she’s acclimated, but making her feel like a fish in a fishbowl isn’t going to help right now.” The cameraperson held the camera at their side, but continued to film discreetly. For several long minutes, the group watched as Natasha sat on the lone seat to one side of Clint’s haphazardly decorated balcony with her back to a wall strung with twinkling, outdoor lights. She spoke quietly in unaccented English, offering bits and nibbles from the dish on the table by her side to the one-eyed dog laying with his snout propped up on her leg on the opposite side. Pizza. She was hand-feeding Pizza Dog bits of pepperoni pizza from her own plate.

When the dog settled down with his head on her lap and a full belly, Clint opened the slider and squatted beside his future partner to scratch the dog’s head. “Looks like you made a new friend.”

Nat sighed and trained her gaze on the horizon. “He’s your dog. I wouldn’t expect him to have any more self-preservation than his owner.”

Clint scoffed. “Who’s his owner? He does what he wants. I’m just the guy who pays for his pizza habit.”

“I feel like there’s some metaphor in there I should be taking to heart, but if it’s that I belong to no one, I don’t appreciate being compared to a scruffy mutt.”

“Just pointing out that Pizza Dog is free to come and go as he likes. No expectations there. We’re pals because we both want to be.”

Natasha nodded, murmuring quietly, “You’re too trusting, Clint.”

“Merry Christmas anyway, Nataliya.”

“Natasha,” she corrected him. “Call me Natasha.”

“Any particular reason?”
She shrugged. “Nataliya needs to be laid to rest.”

“Ah, this is a phoenix rising from the ashes thing?”

“A phoenix?”

“It’s a story about a bird that doesn’t die. It probably looks like shit for a while near the end, but then it molts, and like, bursts into flames, and a new bird with new ideas and purpose and no mistakes in it yet is born from the ashes of the old bird. No egg, just a rebirth. Like, um… Fire is cleansing, I guess. I don’t know.” Clint and rousing speeches were like oil and water, apparently.

Natasha smiled. “We have a mythical creature in Russian folklore, The Firebird. I don’t think ours is the same, though.”

Scratching his head, Clint grimaced. “I don’t think so, either. Coulson would probably know. Books aren’t really my thing.”

“It’s okay.” She laid her hand on Clint’s, initiating touch for perhaps the first time. “Fairy tales aren’t really my thing, either.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Natasha.” Clint twitched as if he wanted to hug her, but knew better.

“So … am I.” She squeezed his hand. “Thank you, Clint.”

"Wanna get some cocoa and do this Christmas thing right?"

"There's a right away to Christmas?"

"Yup, and anyone who says otherwise is doing it wrong. Come on. It starts with Fun Size Snickers and candy canes in your mug." He tugged on her hand until she followed him back inside to raid the kitchen for everything they'd need.

Jarvis' voice interjected quietly, “The children seem to have fallen asleep for the time being. Shall I pause the slideshow or—”

“No!” everyone said at the same time.

“What else ya got, J?” Tony carefully modulated his voice to avoid waking the child in his lap. “Anything of Darcy? Probably shouldn’t watch their adult home movies while they’re awake, but if it’s just us…”

“There are some videos of Miss Stark, yes. I hesitated to play them while she was awake due to the presence of Thor and Dr. Foster in the first, and, of course, Agent Barton in the second. It’s … a very informal video.”

Clint squinted at the nearest camera used by Jarvis. “The second one… Is that pulled from the S.H.I.E.L.D. archival footage of Foster’s lab security?”

“It is,” the A.I. answered.

“Yeah, definitely don’t play that while she’s awake, bud. Good call.”

“I’m relieved to know you agree. Shall I play them now, or hold them for later?”

Clint checked to make sure Darcy and Bucky were out. “I think now is fine.”
“Thanks, J.” Tony lifted a hand to signal the A.I. to continue the show, but kept a wary eye on Barton as Foster’s lab faded in on screen.
Darthy Doeth Chrithmath (Poo-anti Antigoo-O Thhtyle)

Chapter Summary

Clint and Nat bring in Darcy.

Chapter Notes

I SWEAR, I have a really good reason for this Christmas Eve slideshow and I’m just going to ask you to trust me to make it worth your time and effort, okay? Because I have a spoilery secret and it is KILLING ME not to tell you all yet, but you’ll find out … umm … next chapter, maybe…? *crumples under the pressure of secret-keeping* Also, I sent the four five-chapter epilogue outline to my betas last night. You guys don’t mind me dragging out the Darcy/Bucky parts of this fic, like, forever, right?

As for this chapter: tiny, little tissue warning, maybe…?

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Once upon a time, Darcy Lewis co-habitated in a rickety old trailer home in Puente Antiguo with Dr. Jane Foster, watched over by a S.H.I.E.L.D. surveillance crew of more than a dozen, headed up first, by Agent Clint Barton, and later handled by Agent Phil Coulson. Taking no chances with the foremost authority on Einstein-Rosen Bridge theory and practical application in the world (and her wackadoodle support staff), S.H.I.E.L.D. covered every square inch of Foster’s lab, exterior, roof, basement, crawl spaces, favorite haunts in town, and even the back alley they liked to take as a shortcut home from the bar on Karaoke Fridays.

No one in the lab had time to make home movies, but S.H.I.E.L.D.’s surveillance was ever-present. Jarvis put together a montage of footage from several scenes over the years before they pulled up stakes and moved to London...

On their first Christmas in Puente Antiguo, S.H.I.E.L.D.’s archives recorded Darcy (née Lewis) Stark, decked out head to toe in blue and silver knitwear. A blue Santa hat perched on her head and she wore long, looping strands of silver pom-pom trim around her neck in the style of a scarf. Her hands kept busy as she watched the readout on an overhead monitor and called out pertinent numbers to her boss while she rigged up lights around a stationary Dr. Selvig, himself reading data from a second monitor.

In the next clip, Darcy bellowed Christmas carols, seated on her desk in the lab beside Barton, until Jane surfaced from the depths of SCIENCE! for Chinese takeout and cookies baked by Darcy in the lab’s tiny toaster oven, using store-bought dough. The S.H.I.E.L.D. team were included, too, happily munching on cookies while they were still hot, despite everyone griping about how bitter the red ones tasted. (Darcy scribbled the brand name of the red ones off of her weekly shopping list.)
In the next scene, she wrapped a hand-knitted scarf at least four times longer than it needed to be around Jane’s head and neck up to her eyeballs, and kissed her on the nose. “Thanks for taking a chance on me, boss-lady.”

Jane’s lips trembled as she tried not to smile and repeated her standard line, “You were the only applicant.”

“We both know that’s a li-ie...” Darcy sang to the tune of some mystery, modern Christmas carol.

Jane sat in silence, refusing to rise to Darcy’s bait, but slightly inebriated Darcy wasn’t done yet. “You think I don’t know you know what you did without thinking I knew.” She stopped and traced back over that sentence, then nodded once in certainty before carrying on, “Somehow, you found out I got turned down for all the other internships I applied for and that I needed an internship this year to finish before my scholarship and housing runs out.”

Foster started to protest, but found her lips smooshed by Darcy’s thumb and forefinger. “No! Don’t tell me how you knew. Just … eat some cookies, Foster.”

Jane ate the cookies.

The film jumped again, this time to the rooftop of the car dealership serving as Foster’s desert laboratory. The buildings in the background all appeared to be of new construction or recently renovated, so this must have happened in the year or two after Thor departed Earth the first time.

On the roof, as the dusky blanket of twilight descended over a desolate horizon, Darcy swayed in Clint’s arms to the tinny sound of a distant radio’s Christmas music. The soft glow of multicolored lights and neon from the surrounding buildings provided an almost-romantic backdrop for what could have been a rooftop date, if the viewer didn’t know both parties better.

Clint, arms full of octopus!Darcy, tried with limited success to pull her back from the choice view at the edge and her favorite spot to sit.

“I’m not dancing with—I’m half-dancing but... Dancing is nice,” Darcy’s words were garbled, face pressed into Clint’s shoulder.

“Ordinarily, I would agree, but you’re dancing drunk on the roof alone while your boss pines and thinks universe-bending thoughts in the desert, also alone. Only one of you is drunk and it’s the one most likely to plummet to her death unsupervised. Please, let me take you home, Darce?”

He tried to boost her up over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry, but she was wily and uncooperative to the end. “You’re not the boss of me, Agent Chicken Bok-bok.” She poked his butt cheek and snorted under layers of hair and scarf and sweater.

“No, I’m not the boss of you, but I’m your friend, no matter what shitty names you call me, and I’m taking you down to the trailer and tucking you in before you live to regret all sorts of terrible decisions.”

“You’re okay, Errol.” Darcy planted a sloppy kiss on his back and Clint laughed.

“We’ll see if you still feel that way tomorrow morning, or if I’m back to being Jackbooted Thug Numero Uno again.”

“Aww... Don’t pout, Chicken Little.” She patted his butt affectionately. "You’re my favorite jackbooted life-butter-inner.”
“Come on, kiddo. Let’s get you home.”

“Wait, wait,” she insisted, wiggling and bucking until he set her down. She ran to the center of the rooftop to snatch up something from the edge of their fire ring. Tilting her head up to the night sky, she called out, “Merry Christmas, Heimdall! Merry Christmas, Thor!” before turning to Barton. “You think he’s okay up there?”

Clint shrugged. “Probably more okay up there than down here.”

“I mean…” She wandered in tight circles, staring up at the heavens, mouth agape. “He was only here for, like, a minute and a half and he got hit by the same car twice.”

“Your car.”

“Jane’s car.” She snapped to a sloppy sort of attention with a finger on Clint’s nose.

“You were driving,” he mumbled around her pressing finger.

“Once, and Jane jerked the wheel. I maintain that she was in control of the vehicle both times she ran down a Norse god with the Pinz.”

“Moot point, anyway,” Clint insisted. “He got better.”

“Yeah.” Darcy’s features softened and she returned her gaze to the sky. “I wonder what Christmas is like up there. Is it homely? Like in those Norman Rockwell paintings, or is it something completely alien? All of it’s alien, I guess.”

Her voice took on a dreamy quality as she wondered aloud, but Clint was looking up now, too, and remarked, “It’s all alien to me. Wouldn’t know a normal, homely Christmas if it bit me in the ass.”

“Yeah, same,” Darcy replied, sounding a million miles away.

“It’s been better since Nat came along. Me and her, and sometimes, Phil. You could come home with me this year, Darce. I’ll assign a pair of agents to Foster so she can lay out in the desert and think her deep thoughts, and you could come home with me to Bed-Stuy. Christmas with me and Nat could be fun. We’re no Norman Rockwell, but we can make up our own normal.”

Their eyes met as the sun sank below the horizon and Darcy whispered, “I’d like that. Thanks.”

“Anytime, Darce.”

Clint wrapped an arm around her waist and guided her to the new safety stairs installed by S.H.I.E.L.D. where Selvig stood, waiting, with a warm jacket and eyes filled with fatherly concern, but Darcy was already leaning heavily on Clint, relying on him to guide her safely downstairs. He swept her up in a secure cradle hold as Selvig made way, but the elder doctor’s words could clearly be heard as they descended. “It’s settled then? She’s going home with you for the holidays? I’ll see to Jane, but Darcy hasn’t anyone that we know of, and she wouldn’t hear of coming with us, for some reason…”

“She shared the spare room with Nat,” Clint murmured as the scene on screen faded to black. “Should’ve seen her face on Christmas morning, a pile of halfass-wrapped presents under the tree with her name on most of ‘em and a stack of rubbery pancakes for breakfast. You’d’a thought it was her first Christmas morning.”

Tony’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he struggled for words. “It probably was, Clint.” A tear spilled over
dark lashes, falling into tiny Darcy’s curls. “Whenever she talks about Christmas and family traditions, she talks about that Christmas, and the one after, too, I guess, when you two visited her in London.” He met the archer’s eyes over Pepper’s head. “Thanks.”

Clint nodded, head bowed over his bowl of popcorn, swallowing hard against the lump in his throat.

"Another home movie?" Jarvis asked quietly, but no one could do more than nod and swallow and blink until the next Christmas scene faded in.
Chapter Summary

Bruce, Hulk, and Sam celebrate Christmas through the years. Sam and Steve receive a surprise this Christmas *no one* was expecting.

Chapter Notes

Still with me? Buckle up for the long haul, my BBs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The face of a young Bruce Banner lit up the screen next, a series of reserved still photos from long ago Christmases with his Aunt Susan.

“Christmas … was a difficult time. My aunt understood that and kept things pretty low-key,” Bruce murmured, leaning over the back of the couch by Tony’s head. The others had pulled out the enormous sofa bed and rearranged the cushions to make one big chaise lounge for the group to crash on during the slide show. Reticent as ever, Bruce opted to pull up a chair from the nearest game table to sit near the rest of the team and their families with a clear path to the door, just in case.

Tony stretched backward to press a noisy kiss to Bruce’s cheek. “Glad you decided to stick it out with us this year. Hulk would have missed out on giant snowball ice hockey with the kids.”

A small, serene smile came to the fore. Bruce reminded his friend, “I thought we were calling it Ice Hulkey.”

“Yeah, that. We’ll get jerseys made, make it an annual thing,” Tony played along, tapping out notes about Hulkey jerseys, and a few other ideas to go over with Jarvis later.

The ever-ready A.I. queued up the next video, one of Hulk, celebrating his first Christmas with Tony and Pepper at the tower. In the video, Tony climbed onto a chair to set a big, bright Santa hat with a jingle bell on Hulk’s head. With infinite patience, Pepper waited nearby, holding a giant candy cane to surprise the big guy.

Hulk’s eyes widened in surprise when she offered him the candy. “FOR HULK?”

“Yes.” Pepper tugged him down by the wrist to press a kiss to his cheek. “Merry Christmas, Hulk.”

“MERRY … KISSMAS … PEP.”

Hulk grinned at Tony and the engineer’s face lit up. “Close enough, Big Green. How about a Christmas movie? Hmm… Maybe A Charlie Brown Christmas. Everybody should see that at least
once.”

“CHARLIE BROWN DOG, SNOOPY.”

“Yeah! Just like the Red Baron cartoon we watched the other day!” Tony led Hulk around the craters in the penthouse floor (Hulks’ favorite part of the penthouse; Tony would bronze the floor, if Pep let him) to settle on the giant bean bag chair Pepper found for Big Green to use when he made a surprise visit.

The home movie on screen faded to black before a multimedia slideshow of still photos and video began, all of Sam and the Wilson family; his parents Paul and Darlene, and Sam and his three older sisters. Images of snowboarding and tubing in the Poconos on school trips and hiking through the woods to an old tree farm Paul loved from his childhood in the mountains. A teenage Sam rolled his eyes, arguing with his dad over who would have to lay down on the cold ground to cut down the tree.

“ Seems like a fine choice to me. Time for you to learn how this is done, kid.” Paul held out the saw to the young Sam on screen, but when Sam was on his back, hacking away at the undergrowth to get to the sap-soaked trunk, Paul gave the whole tree a good shake, sending boughfuls of snow cascading to the ground in an avalanche of powdery snow and pine.

“Just checking!” Paul cackled as Sam sputtered mouthfuls of old snow and pine needles. “Never know when you’re gonna pick the wrong one and end up with a house full of baby praying mantises or an angry squirrel or some such!”

“Thanks, Dad,” Sam’s resigned voice drifted up through the fresh snowbank.

At Camp Stark, grown-up Sam’s friends laughed.

“Man, Wilson, I thought it was a legit superhero curse, coming from all of our screwed up backgrounds and families, but you’re so normal.” Barton’s lip curled in surprise.

Sam grimaced and arched an eyebrow. “Thanks, I guess.”

On screen, yet another slideshow started, this one of the more unusual of Sam’s Christmases. In the background, surrounded by a dark tent and beige everything, sat a tiny, fake Christmas tree covered in dangling hemostats with a pathetic garland of medical gauze that had seen better days. A pair of old desert-issue, combat boots sat on the floor beneath, each one marked with Sharpie to indicate which was for “Sam” and the other for “Riley”. In the foreground, Sam posed with his arm slung around his best friend, pale as the day is long, with red hair and a riot of freckles. Between them, they held up a small sign that read, “We’ll be home before next Christmas, Moms”.

“Shit,” Sam cursed. “Jarvis, where’d you get that photo?”

“Retired Army Nurse, Lieutenant Colonel Darlene Wilson submitted the photo by email when a request for Initiative families’ photos was sent out before the holidays. It also arrived with an audio file. Would you like me to play that as well, Senior Airman Wilson?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “No need to be so formal, Jarvis. I’m not upset with you. Go ahead and play Mama’s message.”

On the recording, a standalone microphone crackled to life, “I’ve got it, Paul. I know how the damn thing works. You can do your own in a minute here. Now, shoo.” Footsteps padded out of range in the background. “Sammy, now, honey, I know you’ve got yourself some unusual kindergarten-aged circumstances up there at Tony Stark’s Home for Misfit Superheroes this month and all, but that’s no
excuse for not bringing my boy, Steven, and that adorable little one of his on down here where I can
spoil them both right with cookies and cocoa and presents. Your father was all set to build a new tree
fort for the little fellow, too, you know. Broke his heart, you did, Sammy. Do you have any idea
what it's like, watching the holidays come and go, wondering where your child is and if he's well or
warm or safe? NO, YOU DO NOT. So we're expecting you and all the rest of your superhero
friends for Sunday dinner soon. Don’t make me wait, Sammy. If you’re in no hurry to give me
grandbabies before I shuffle off this mortal coil, least you could do is let me spoil your friends and
their babies. Your sisters said to tell you hello--well, they would have, if anyone bothered coming
home for Christmas this year, but off they go with their husbands and babies and here are your father
and I, alone in our old age, not a single grateful child come home to roost for the holidays, now you
don't need us anymore--”

“That’s enough, Jarvis,” Sam’s dry voice cut off his mother’s pining rant. He looked at Steve. “You
heard her. At least fifty percent of this is your problem, Captain You-must-be-Sam's-younger-aunt-
because-you're-too-young-to-be-his-mother-ma'am.”

Steve nodded and tried to hide his laughter. “I’ll call her tomorrow, set something up with the
advance security team for next Sunday.”

“No need, Captain Rogers,” Jarvis cut into the conversation. “Arrangements were made when
Lieutenant Colonel Wilson's audio message was received. Pastor Paul and Lieutenant Colonel
Darlene Wilson are scheduled to arrive at the Camp Stark airstrip in eleven minutes and counting.
Director Hill has offered to accompany them to the lodge herself.”

“Man,” Sam sighed and shook his head at Steve, “are you in for it now.”


Chapter End Notes

When you're all caught up here, go check out the brand new prequel, All I Ever
Wanted, the story of how Tony and Darcy became family.

This story/series is NOT on hiatus. I've been posting pre-written updates to the series for
a few months now. Real life has been a huge struggle for me this year. It's hard to write
humor when your anxiety keeps you from sleeping because your husband is sick, you
know? I've been posting some of the things I had pre-written and I plan to come back to
this story soon, but demanding updates from me or any other author in the comments
section is still really, incredibly rude. Please don't do it. No amount of readers
demanding more free entertainment from me is going to will away my anxiety or my
husband's new diabetes diagnosis. I love this story. I will write more. When I can. Want
to be encouraging? Awesome. I will love you for it forever, but don't harrass me for
updates in the comments section, no matter how polite you think you're being.
Especially while I'm actively posting additional content in this series frequently.
There She Goes Again

Chapter Summary

Long before they became kids again, Bucky flirted with Darcy; Darcy flirted back.

Chapter Notes

I'M BA-ACK. (^_^)

MASSIVE THANKS go to Inkbert for all her help working out the kinks in this story and update until I managed to find my way again. Way back in the spring, she went over the details with me and let me bounce around ideas until I sorted out everything I want to do in this story's future in my head and on paper. Be sure to check out her fics and leave her some love, too, if you'd like to find a way to thank her!

TRIGGER WARNING for the briefest of mentions of suicidal ideation for a scene added after this chapter was originally posted. Please take care of yourself first. If this is a mention that is not good for your mental health, I'm happy to summarize the chapter for you, so you don't miss anything. Hit me up on tumblr, if you need a brief summary of events in this chapter.

Beta’d by: Phoenix_173

Suggested listening: There She Goes by The La's, Cheerleader by Omi, and Rather Be by Clean Bandit (feat. Jess Glynne)

While they waited for Sam's parents to arrive and join the party, the next video flickered to life like an old 8mm film as Jarvis explained, “The video clips in this montage span a range of holidays and events significant to Miss Stark and Master Barnes before their age regression. All have been marked for review as part of the NASA collaboration project with the Avengers Initiative.”


“NASA’s been recruiting—wooing Darcy,” Tony’s best friend explained. Rhodey glanced quickly around the room for reactions before continuing, “Since Greenwich, NASA and the Air Force have been feeling out Darcy’s relationship with Asgard through Thor, looking for an inside man … or woman, in this case. Without consent from Asgard to film wherever she travels by Bifrost, Darcy would only agree to appear on a documentary-style show on Earth with Thor for the time being, as part of a collaboration between the Avengers Initiative and NASA. She’s been reviewing security and social media footage for months, looking for tidbits of everyday life for a ‘normal’ working behind the scenes with the Avengers. The documentary will use the sourced video mostly as B-roll.
footage after filming for the pilot begins, if it ever resumes production, since its primary star is a five year old now.” He grinned widely and settled in, arms stretched across the back of the sofa, nodding in thanks when Sharon passed over a bowl of popcorn. “I’m curious what all she turned up in the Starkives before the accident.”

On screen, Tony watched as Barnes, grown and grizzled, looking every bit the worse for wear, reclined on the tiled floor of the tower’s solarium in a puddle of sunlight like a well-fed housecat finally coaxed in from the cold to warm his bones through the winter months. Propped up on his elbows, knees bent, face cant fixed to follow the sun’s path across the sky, Barnes looked like a man without a care in the world, but everyone watching the artfully edited security footage knew the soldier to be every bit as aware of his environment as he would have been with eyes open, upright and fully alert.

An arc-powered Osprey branded with Stark Industries imagery landed in the background, depositing adult Darcy onto the wide, flight deck on the roof. Smiling and unhurried, she gathered up wind-blown curls into a messy knot atop her head, grabbed the crate by her feet in the passenger area, and skipped down the gangway with a shout of thanks to the co-pilots over her shoulder. When her feet touched the roof, the ramp slid back into place and the Osprey moved silently on to its next secure destination.

Tony couldn’t help but grin. In the months after the Convergence, Darcy and Foster came and went frequently from the tower, making good use of the lab facilities Pepper arranged for their team in the states, crashing in their stateside, tower apartment for a day or two, before inevitably hurrying off to the next science nerd confab or satellite array or agency briefing or weekend away on Asgard.

Portal tech intel became the new field in which every agency needed an expert overnight. Foster and Darcy were happy to provide them with the know-how to potentially close a portal and little more, backed up in that decision by Stark Industries and fully supported in their endeavors by Stark security and Thor’s looming presence in the background of all such discussions.

Pepper and Thor did not fuck around with their safety.

Darcy made frequent jaunts across the pond, commuting between continents two to three times each week to attend classes for which Colombia couldn’t provide a telecommuting option. Some days, Tony remembered, she looked worn to the bone. He’d wheedle and cajole, finally imploring Pepper to intervene with some excuse for the kid to stick around through the weekend to rest up. Then the two of them would convince her to take her books and gear down to the townhouse on Fifth, enjoy the shallow lounging pool deck, maybe order up service from the kitchens or enjoy a meal from a lunch truck provided by SI, parked across the street by the curb at Central Park—whatever her heart desired, as long as she’d sit her exhausted ass down somewhere quiet for a day or two to study and rest before making the run across the Atlantic again to babysit Foster and Thor in the pursuit of more dimension-bending science.

To say nothing of the constant demands and occasionally more polite requests for a meeting, once a government lackey overheard Thor call Darcy his sister. A sister by choice, but saying so made her every bit as legal a daughter of Odin on Asgard as the adoption papers made her a Stark on Earth.

On the roof that day, more than a year before her age regression, she wore her typical, student uniform best suited to Greenwich weather: a long, fitted sweater over skinny jeans with rain boots. Even here, Pepper had her own small way. After weeks of arguing back and forth following Darcy’s acquiescence to take an apartment (to make Tony happy) when she commuted for school, Tony’s lady love insisted Darcy was all but family anyway and Pepper’s stylist would love the challenge of dressing a student like Darcy with so many unique responsibilities and roles to fill in a single week.
Pepper got her way.

Darcy ended up with a designer suitcase full of things she might not actually freeze to death in out in the desert or in the middle of Siberia, chasing cosmic tornadoes.

And Tony got to treat the young woman he already thought of as his daughter of choice as his daughter in fact.

She looked more like a Stark disembarking the jet than Tony had ever managed in his forty-five years.

Her sweater was Missoni, worn over Balmain motocross jeans. The dark cherry leather jacket was a custom piece from Pepper’s in-house Stark-label designer. Burberry rainboots in a classic pattern and color chosen by Pepper didn’t even squeak.

Still, Barnes noticed.

Silent, his eyes slitted open as Darcy handed off the crate to a porter, happy to let someone else do the heavy lifting for once. He watched the gentle sway of her hips, the careless way she flicked a stray curl over her shoulder, the easy smile she shared with the porter, until they both disappeared behind the reflective glass door on the far side of the roof.

More moments like the first one caught on film followed. Jarvis, always sensitive to Tony’s preferences, slowly mixed in a soundtrack to play with the clip montage.

...Darcy in a dark green fitted sweater and skinny jeans, twirling through Tony’s workshop, red-cheeked and wind-mussed, dancing on tip-toe in her rain boots and chattering about a professor’s impressed response to her latest paper.

...Wide-eyed, grinning maniacally, Darcy clung to Thor, squealing with a joyful kind of terror as he swung Mjolnir and darted skyward, a secure arm around his shield-sister.

...Darcy, laughing, clinging to Clint’s back like a spider monkey in faded jeans, battered blue Chucks, and yet another sweater as he galloped through Conference Room A during a meeting with Zombie Fury, right on time. Clint, Darcy, and Tony spilled out of the conference room, sweeping the party of Avengers and agents in the hallway along with them to the nearest balcony for some sunshine, burgers, and beer.

“There She Goes” by The La’s tied Jarvis’ montage together as Barnes cast furtive glances her way from behind shaggy hair time and again.

...Barnes stalking through a doorway, headed to the one quiet space on the medbay floor guaranteed to give him a moment of peace on his difficult days, the afternoons when he worked with the shrinks, when Tony once overheard him admit to Steve it sometimes felt like his skin was too tight, like the vastness of his awful experiences and extended lifespan were more than he could bear, like he wanted to end it all.

But Darcy was there instead of echoing loneliness, waiting for him in the stairwell with a pair of ice cream cones.

“Clint said Monday and Thursday afternoons can be kind of rough for you.” She rolled her lips and offered him the second soft serve twist as Jarvis made the segue from The La’s to Omi’s “Cheerleader” over the sound system. “Ice cream always makes me feel a little better.”

Smiling through suddenly watery eyes, Barnes dropped to the top step beside Darcy and accepted
the ice cream with a rough, “Thanks.”

Darcy tipped her head against his metal arm like it was already old hat. “Wanna put on some ugly PJ$s and veg for a few hours? I love The Muppet Movie when I need a pick me up.”

“What’s a muppet?”

Darcy’s laugh tinkled lightly in the echoing stairwell. “Come on. I’ll show you. Tony probably has the whole series streaming on StarkTV. And I guarantee Clint left some sweats you could borrow in my apartment after that 4th of July thing with the hot tub and the dive-bombing pigeons. Did you hear he rappelled from the roof all the way down to my balcony just to get away from his tiny bird bros?” She giggled as Barnes helped her to her feet and followed where she led.

The screen darkened and, subtly, the music pouring through the speakers transitioned to the opening violin strings of “Rather Be” by Clean Bandit as a new video began to play.

...Finally, Darcy blew through the common room in a pencil skirt, ass-kicking Louboutins (courtesy of Pepper’s bottomless closet), and seamed stockings that went all the way up to her eyeballs.

Barnes leaned out of his seat to watch her wiggle until she disappeared through the double doors to the Avengers-level lobby.

“See somethin’ you like there, Buck?” Captain Upright Citizen asked, eyes on his hand of cards while he waited for Natasha to take her turn.

The soldier hitched a shoulder and smirked, “No harm lookin’ at a swell dame with a pretty pair’a stems, is there?”

Looking wasn’t all he did.

The next video clip to fade in came up in black and white—surveillance footage from the mansion taken later that same day, or possibly another day when she wore something similar. The footage toggled from one camera to the next, following Darcy’s progress as she moved through the Starkives in the basement of the mansion. Well lit, warm and inviting, like a really opulent private school library, the Starkives were designed to draw visitors in to enjoy the wealth of family history stored there, to encourage one to pull out family albums and reminisce over drinks in the well-appointed lounge and bar area. From time to time, Darcy headed down there to study to get away from the mansion’s many luxurious distractions, so it was with some surprise that her shoulders suddenly tensed on screen. She glanced down a row of bookcases, smiled, and shook her head.

Then Tony spotted what caught Darcy’s attention down the row. A certain sure-footed, former assassin browsed the ancient tomes in the next aisle over, occasionally finding an excuse to walk past Darcy’s aisle. They played their version of peekaboo a few more times before she huffed, rolled her eyes, and turned as if to call out, but Barnes was gone. Slack with disappointment, Darcy’s shoulders sagged. She turned to put the folio of papers she’d been idly thumbing through back on the shelf, then jumped and screamed bloody murder.

In the rec room at Camp Stark, everyone watching the video startled, too, hot popcorn scattering in a buttery shower from more than one upturned bowl.

“What on Earth?” Pepper gasped, flinching so hard Bucky grunted and rolled across her legs to sprawl half-across Darcy’s tiny, limp form.

Another toggle of the camera view showed Barnes, grinning sheepishly at Darcy over the books through the bookcase from the next aisle, but Darcy, clearly not expecting him to be right there, lost
her footing. Before her arms had a chance to windmill for balance, Barnes was by her side, an arm around her waist, steadying the bookcase, keeping a decade of family history and Darcy from all going down like dominoes.

“Sorry, doll,” he apologized, looking sincerely contrite. “Forgot to make noise so you’d know where to look for me.”

Weak with unspent hysteria, she pressed her forehead to his shoulder. “Forgiven. Just … next time, maybe don’t do that.”

Barnes stifled a laugh and tightened the arm around her waist. “Sure thing.”

“You owe me a drink,” she warned. “The biggest drink with a tiny umbrella the size of my head.”

“How can a tiny—”

“Okay, Barnes, you twisted my arm—make it a drink the size of my head.” She thumped the back of his shoulder and tipped her chin up. “A drink you’re buying at lunch with me today.”

Barnes’ smiled dropped. “I ain’t cleared for goin’ out anywhere beyond the tower or any’a the properties monitored by Jarvis yet. Couldn’t even take a walk in the sunshine to come down here. Had to ride Howard’s idea of a subway to get this far. ‘Sides which, you prob’ly don’ wanna be seen with me, doll. Bein’ who you are.”

“Being who I am…?” Darcy’s brow furrowed as she parsed his words.

“A Stark, big deal heiress an’ all,” Barnes tried to fill in the gaps, but Darcy wasn’t having it.

“I’m not—not really.” She clasped his elbows, running a soothing pattern up the backs of his arms. “Tony’s all bluster. He’s always talking about adopting me. It’s noise, really. Everyone in the tower is his family.”

Which was bullshit and she knew it. Tony had no interest in adopting Thor or Foster, that was for damn sure.

“Pepper says you’re taking meetings on behalf of Asgard.”

Darcy stilled. Twisting to set the files at her elbow aright, she fussed for a moment, then asked without making eye contact, “She told you about that?”

“I asked her about a job—earn my keep instead’a spongin’ off’a Stevie, you know? The shrinks okayed me for passive work with my skillset for now, runnin’ ops from the control room at the tower, working light, low-stress security gigs, going quietly further out of my head at the tower…” Barnes snorted, disgusted. “Pepper said she’d like someone from the Initiative to sit in with you, lend the appearance of muscle backing you up so none’a those slick lobbyists tries to push you around when Thor can't back you up to stare them down himself.”

“Nobody pushes me around.” Darcy flashed the device she carried at all times: a taser masquerading as a Sonic Screwdriver replica. (“You built me a Sonic Screwdriver?” “Well, yeah, but that's trademarked, so … let's call it not-that.” He flipped it over and pointed out the features like the showman he was, come down through the blood. “With built-in, psychic cloaking tech, so it can't be seen by sticky-fingered, jack-booted thugs when you need it most. Or in case of marauding elves or fire-breathing death mechas or more blond bros falling from the sky.” “Thanks, Tony!”) “But that’s cool,” Darcy continued, “you volunteered for that gig? Following me around D.C.?”
Barnes chuckled. “Doll, I’m the only one Tony didn’t immediately run off when he found out who’d be on your security detail.”
The screen remained dark as the next video began to play while voices Steve would know anywhere snickered and cracked bawdy jokes under their breath. Someone finally had the presence of mind to aim the camera in a direction with enough ambient lighting to pick up the door they stood outside with their ears pressed to it, listening.

The door to Steve’s quarters at the SSR base in London, a week before Christmas, 1944.

“Jarvis, pause the video,” Steve hissed, trying to sit up without disturbing the sleeping six year old spread across his lap and Tony’s (and Darcy’s). Dragging in a shaking breath, he ran a hand over his forehead and eyes, and exhaled an equally shaky breath. “Where did you get this video, Jarvis?”

The AI took a moment to collate his answers and replied, “The original eight-millimeter film reel has been stored in the Starkives at the Stark family home on Fifth Avenue since the year 1946 as part of
a project to collect all relevant public, professional, and personal details regarding the Howling Commandos strike team and their supervising officer, Major General Steven Grant Rogers, details the Howling Commandos, lead by former Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. Margaret Elizabeth Mary Carter, deemed ‘CLASSIFIED - EYES ONLY’ after the loss of Sergeant Major James Buchanan Barnes and the disappearance of Major General Steven Grant Rogers. Copies of the film were created and retained by all surviving members of the Howling Commandos strike team and former Director Carter. Retired Majors Dugan and Jones, Director Carter, and Colonel Morita all submitted copies of the home movie when an email was directed to relevant parties in search of holiday home movies and photos for tonight’s slide show, as well as the NASA-Avengers Initiative collaboration project young Miss Stark agreed to star in before her regression to age five last month."

Steve growled. “Remove it from the collection of B-roll footage for NASA’s reality show. Tag it ‘personal use only’ from today forward, no matter who submits it for consideration of public viewing, unless you hear otherwise from myself or former Director Carter,” he growled, then added under his breath, “Interfering assholes.”

Beside him, Tony closed his eyes, choking, trying to stifle a laugh.

“You’ve seen it?” Steve asked his teammate and friend.

“No.” Tony shook his head. “I’ve heard about it. Dad was experimenting with portable, handheld movie cameras years before anyone else. I heard the Commandos had access to a prototype and made some of the earliest known home videos. Holiday footage from the prototype experiment is sometimes requested from the Starkives for use alongside the newsreel films in the Smithsonian exhibit and in a few of the documentaries focused on the personal lives of the Commandos over the years, but most of those were loaned directly from the Commandos’ personal collections to keep control of the footage in their hands. I’ve never handed over any of those films without the Commandos’ okay. Same goes for Dad, as far as I know.” He nodded at the screen. “No one has ever shared this one, though, for obvious reasons.”

“Steve?” Nat laid a hand on his knee and waited.

“Christmas week of ‘forty-four,” he said under his breath. Her hand tightened on his knee, but she gave no indication to the others she knew what he meant.

But she knew. He told her himself after D.C., when they both laid all their cards on the table: no more secrets, so nothing could come between them when they wiped the slate clean and started looking for Bucky, together.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Steve considered whether his friends needed to know this most personal thing he’d kept from everyone but Nat, or if he’d done them a disservice in not starting on a clean slate with all of them, too. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the feel of Nat’s hand on his knee, the firm, but gentle pressure, the delicate pulse of her wrist through his jeans, remembering the way she’d climbed into his lap and kissed him breathless when he told her everything, through tears and regrets, and so much anger about everything he’d lost.

“Play the video, Jarvis,” he whispered, letting Tony take all of Bucky’s weight from his lap so his arms were empty when Natasha burrowed into them and turned her face alongside his to watch the home movie footage Steve hadn’t seen since it was developed in early January, 1945.

On screen, someone shouldered the door open after a cursory knock. In a slim, single officer’s cot, lay Steve wrapped around Peggy, thankfully both covered modestly with an OD green blanket and the army’s itchy sheets. Peggy’s hand tangled with Steve’s on top of the covers, displaying the glittering icy white of her engagement ring like the sparkle of freshly fallen snow in the sunshine.
The camera panned to show the Commandos, lined up with trash can lids, tin cans from the mess, a bugle, and even a pair of cowbells. Falsworth raised his hand and brought it down, signaling the others to—

CRASH!

BANGBANGBANG!

DONG-DONG-DONG!

“Congratulations!”, “Wakey-wakey!”, “Félicitations!”, came the resounding congratulatory chorus all at once, on top of each other, the way the Commandos seemed to do everything.

Steve startled awake and rolled off the backside of the bed, coming up with both Lugers he confiscated on the raid earlier that week and a knife between his teeth, while Peggy sat up, cool as you please, pulling the sidearm from beneath their shared pillow and leveling it at Dugan with his cacophonous trashcan lids.

“I will kill you, Sgt. Dugan, so dead, your mother won’t recognize what’s left, if you don’t cease that infernal racket,” she uttered just as calmly, pressing the covers firmly over her breasts, though her hair was its usual messy tangle in the morning and pillow creases lined her pinkened cheek on one side.

“Congratulations?” He smiled impishly, but shifted his hold to shield himself with his can lids.

“Dernier, I suppose I have your trading skill to thank for this champagne hangover.” She nodded regally, but Steve saw the pained wince behind her eyes.

“Aw, sweetheart,” his past self said on film, setting aside his weapons and wrapping a spare blanket around his middle before rising to lean over the bed and place a hand on her neck to check her wellbeing like his ma used to do. “Why didn’t you say so? I’ll get you some aspirin.”

“I was asleep, darling, but now I’m awake, I’ll take that aspirin … after you show out this noisy rabble.” She motioned toward the door with her sidearm, then squinted at one of the fellas. “That better not be Howard’s portable film camera I see.”

“Uh, no ma’am,” Jones and Morita chorused, tucking the thing down low between them, but letting it continue to run.

“I better not see that on movie night,” Peggy grumbled. “Or I will know who to come for.”

A hurried collection of “yes, ma’am”s followed.

“Aw, Carter, we only meant ta bring ya a proper engagement breakfast, doll. No need ta throw us out and threaten the kids,” Bucky drawled, leaning heavily on the Brooklyn in his words. From the hallway, he retrieved a picnic basket as the other Commandos filed out. Someone set the camera by the door, still rolling. “There’s a thermos of tea, real eggs, toast, mushrooms, beans, hash browns, bacon, black pudding, and sausages enough to feed you and your personal, one-man army there.” He nodded at his best friend with a smile.

“Thanks, Buck.” Steve nodded at the thing hanging unspoken between them—the “I’m so happy for you, pal.”

“Yes, thank you, Sergeant,” Peggy dredged up a soft, pained expression of gratitude.
Bucky pulled a packet of aspirin out of his pocket from the base exchange. He set it on the	nightstand by Peggy’s elbow, pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, and murmured, “There’s a
canteen full’a fresh water in the basket, too. Congratulations, sweetheart.” Then, he grabbed the
portable camera left behind by one of the others and closed the door in his wake.

At Camp Stark, before anyone had a chance to turn to Steve, eyes full of questions, the scene
changed on screen.

“Big day, pal,” Howard’s voice startled Steve from the speakers in the corners of the room. The
camera was aimed at Peggy, sitting before a dressing table somewhere in the basement of the
London SSR chapel.

Peggy murmured in return, “A day like any other, really.” She clucked in typical British disapproval,
“All this fuss… People get married every day.”

“It’s not every day someone marries Captain America, though.” Howard tipped the movie camera up
at the mirror over her shoulder and smiled his toothy grin behind the bulky handheld. “It’ll be the
biggest thing to happen since the start of the war. It’ll give people hope, Pegs.”

“I’m not marrying Captain America.” She swatted him away from her shoulder. “I’m marrying
Steven Rogers.” She turned when the door opened and Falsworth’s head popped in.

“It’s time,” her countryman announced.

She closed her eyes and exhaled, the only show of emotion she’d likely allow herself on Howard’s
film.

The film cut away to the scene in the chapel nave, every inch of it decorated in boughs of evergreen
and hollyberries, with tissue paper angels and snowflakes made by London schoolchildren for the
special occasion fluttering in the draft caused by a door opening in the narthex. Howard sat at the
front on the bride’s side, beside her only cousin from London, a distant relation who only agreed to
attend when he heard who Peggy would marry that evening. The fella mugged for the War
Department’s film crews and for Howard himself, until Howard elbowed him and told him to mind
his Ps and Qs.

At the altar, Steve waited for Peggy, Bucky grinning ear to ear by his side, as Falsworth escorted the
bride in her SSR mess dress whites down the aisle to a recording of the Wedding March, not a curl
out of place, lips painted her favorite fire engine red. Everyone rose to their feet and Howard cursed
under his breath, “Hot damn, Peg, you’ll melt the fella’s buttons right off.”

Steve, who opted to wear the SSR mess dress blacks, waited for his bride at the altar with Bucky’s
hand on his shoulder—the only thing that likely kept him from running down the aisle to meet her
halfway.

“Who gives this woman to this man in marriage?” Col. Phillips asked.

“On behalf of a proud nation and its allies,” Falsworth’s voice boomed for the benefit of the War
Department microphones and cameras (At least three of Steve’s men, sitting on the groom’s side,
rolled their eyes.), “I present this woman, Margaret Elizabeth Mary Carter, Agent of the Strategic
Scientific Reserve, to Steven Grant Rogers, Captain America of the United States Armed Forces and
Agent of the Strategic Scientific Reserve.”

In the rec pavilion back at Camp Stark, Steve hungrily devoured all the small details: Peg’s seamed
stockings and sturdy pumps, paired with her formal whites; that same scuffed left toe on her service
shoes, tidied with a bit of polish; the way Falsworth fumbled the Christmassy bouquet of holly and evergreens, and swore ripely when Peggy handed it off, drawing catcalls from the Commandos until Phillips turned a beady eye on the assembly and they quieted to a dull roar; the way the light from the altar candles shone off the pomade in his and Bucky’s hair; the sweet curl smoothed and pinned in front of Peggy’s ear that his fingers itched to play with all through the ceremony. Before he knew it, the couple on screen were saying their vows.

And then the worst part, the one thing they both agreed needed to be said, the nod to the war, the understanding that the worst could happen and they were prepared for that duty, too, even while pledging themselves to one another.

“And I solemnly swear, if the worst should come to pass,” Peggy sniffled, fingers shaking in Steve’s as she made this, her final vow, “I will carry on to honor your wishes, life, and sacrifice by living my own life to the fullest today and every day from this day forward, not only in sickness and in health, but together or parted, always honoring my love and respect for you, my beloved husband.”

Steve’s vision blurred, listening to his younger, more naive self promising the same.

“Steve,” Nat whispered.

He shook his head, biting his lip as a tear escaped.

“Excuse us,” she told the others, dragging Steve to the door.

Before they made it out into the biting cold night air, Steve heard a tiny, sleepy voice whisper to Tony, “Can a colonel really marry people?”

“Yes,” came the expected answer.

“So Uncle Rhodey could marry you and Mommy?”

Someone snickered, but Tony must have nodded because Bucky suddenly came halfway to life, posing the next logical question in a child’s mind: “And Thteebie and Nat, too?” he asked slyly.

✿\.

Chapter End Notes

Check back here this Wednesday for Chapter 32!
Natasha followed Steve around the back of the building, settling by his side when he sat on the deck between two unfinished railing posts, feet dangling over the water.

“I just need a minute,” he rasped, temporarily obscuring his face with a puff of condensation in the cold night air.

“We can take all the time you need,” she assured him, leaning into his side for warmth and wrapping an arm around his back as his arm fell across her shoulders and pulled her close.

When his phone pinged with an incoming text, Nat hid her smile against his ribs. He grunted in annoyance, but checked his phone to make sure it wasn’t an emergency.

“It’s Peggy,” Steve answered the question she knew she needn’t bother asking. He growled at the phone. “Jarvis is a nosy busybody.”

Nat couldn’t help the way her torso shook with laughter when the phone rang.

“I’ve just received a text message from a concerned, artificial butler modeled after a very good friend of mine, darling. I assume you’ve received our message loud and clear?” Nat only heard Peggy’s demand thanks to her enhanced hearing.

“Our message?” Steve asked his former wife and longtime friend.

“Yes, ours. Gabe and I have been worried, you know.” She paused, murmuring to someone in the background. “We’ve had a change in plans. We’re coming up for the holidays. Be a dear and let Anthony know we’ll be visiting for a week or so to beat some good sense into an old friend.”

Steve sighed, but a smile curved his lips. “There ever gonna be a time you’re not givin’ me orders, Peg?”

“Seems unlikely,” she hummed thoughtfully. “There ever gonna be a time you’re not a stubborn, pigheaded mule, Steven?” she drawled in an American accent.
“Not bloody likely,” Steve riposted in a surprisingly excellent English accent.

Peggy laughed until she nearly cried.

When her good humor was finally spent, Steve sighed with a wry smile. “When will you be here?”

“An hour’s time; no more.”

“‘Change of plans’, my foot,” Steve grumbled. “More like checkin’ up on me.” But his expression was clear and calm, the worst of the storm past in the aftermath of Peggy’s attempt to huff and puff and blow away the little dark cloud hanging over his head.

“Aw, don’t be sore, darling. You could have avoided this, you know,” she snorted inelegantly, "if only you’d got off your ass and asked the lovely woman—”

“See you soon, Peg.” Steve cut her off and thumbed off the phone. He pressed it to his forehead and laughed.

“Do I want to know what all that was about?” Nat wondered, snuggling deeper under his arm to steal an extra degree of heat, wishing she’d thought to grab her coat before running out with Steve.

“The ring in my pocket,” Steve responded simply, punching the breath from Nat’s lungs. He gave her an apologetic squeeze as he pocketed the phone. “Don’t worry. I’m not ready yet. Sam’s got a friend he wants me to talk to, another shrink, I guess. The doctor I been workin’ with at the VA is retiring and I still got more issues than the Saturday Evening Post to work through. Didn’t think it was fair to ask before I straightened out my head about…” he trailed off, swiping a hand under his eyes.

“Losing everything that mattered while you were in the ice?” she ventured with care, rubbing her temple against his shoulder.

He nodded, but amended, “Used to matter. Times change, and so have I.”

“When you’re ready to ask, I’ll still be here. There’s no rush.” Never any rush. He could take forever, as far as she was concerned. The piece of paper didn’t matter; she was Steve’s best friend and he, hers, and both of them more than best friends, too, no matter his past or feelings about it. She’d long since made peace with the knowledge that Steve was once married to Peggy and still not over the loss or impermanence of it, maybe never would be. There was never any divorce or annulment for closure because, Steve told her, he was pronounced dead before the certificate of marriage had ever been filed. Since Peggy never filed for widow’s benefits, either, the issue was laid to rest with Steve’s empty coffin at Arlington.

Until he woke in the future to find his wife remarried twice, this time to retired Army Major Gabriel Jones—her third happy marriage in a long, storied life. Peggy took her vows seriously, it appeared, moving on after losing both her first husband and her second, Daniel Sousa, to tragedy in the line of duty. And Steve was happy for them. Peggy moved on like she promised.

Steve just needed time to do the same.

He requested and received the original U.S. Army certificate of marriage from Brigadier General Chester Phillips' classified SSR files, but Nat knew that weighty slip of paper sat in a safe, buried deep in a safehouse she helped Steve arrange for Bucky two years ago in Sheepshead Bay. He told Nat he needed to know it was real, since history hadn’t recorded the marriage and the War Department never released the newsreel footage because of concerns for Peggy’s safety for the year after the wedding. If a child had been born of the serum-enhanced soldier and his new wife, Peggy
and the child would have been in great danger, indeed, without him present in their lives to protect them.

But there was no child and, as far as history was concerned, Steven Grant Rogers went into the ice a bachelor hero.

“You should talk to Peggy about it when she visits,” Nat suggested, knowing she was right the moment the words left her lips.

“About what?” Steve’s brow furrowed in confusion and he somehow squeezed her even tighter without crossing the threshold to too much.

“What to do with the marriage license.” She smiled. “Imagine the uproar if the two of you donated it together to the Smithsonian for the Cap exhibit—the miniseries and Academy Award-winning movies that would follow.” She sat up a little straighter and wrapped her arms tight around his middle, sharing her mile-wide grin with her lover and best friend. “Think of the Nicholas Spark movie, Steve! Do it for the romantic drama.”

He rolled his eyes and scoffed, reaching across his lap to slip a hand under her legs and slide her over his so he could wrap both arms around her, too.

“And where do you fit in that story?” he worried, pressing his forehead to hers.

“Right here, where I belong,” she answered without pause, bringing her lips to his. “You’re stuck with me now, Rogers.”

“Like chewed gum on my shoe,” he whispered seductively in her ear, making her laugh into the night as snowflakes began to drift from the sky overhead, blanketing the world around them in glittering white.
Chapter Summary

The first of the Avengers' esteemed guests arrive and Steve discovers he's all thumbs when he experiences the new-dad-struggle-slash-Christmas-Eve-tradition of "why the f*** don't these toys come pre-assembled?" and "whaddya mean, batteries not included?", and that old chestnut, "f*** it, we'll give it to him for his birthday; he's got enough presents from Santa as it is".

Then, BOOZE.

Pulling himself together, Steve rose to his feet, arms full of his favorite redhead, and returned to the rec room where the slideshow party was breaking up, shifting to the latter part of their evening plans: decorating the newly renovated rec room. Bucky was wide awake after his nap and raring to go, darting after Steve Pawgers and Barky Barnes to one end of the enormous room, toward a stately stone fireplace, surrounded by comfortable seating for no less than a dozen people in shades of dark burgundy, emerald green, and navy. To the side, sat an informal family dining area with smaller tables and booths, where they would come together for dinner before attending midnight mass.

Darcy stood on one of the long benches beside Tony, trying to convince him to let her help him assemble gifts up in the loft instead of decorating.

“No can do, kiddo.” Tony kissed the top of her head and handed her a placemat to set down on the far end of the table in one of the booths.

“But what am I allowed to help wif?” she whined, still a little rough around the edges from her late nap.

“You can help me!”, “And me!”, “Me, too!” came a chorus of adult voices in response.

“Fine.” She huffed, crossing her arms, and stomped off to tag along with Pepper.

“Late naps make her cranky,” Tony said by way of apology.
“Thteebie, Thteebie! Gueth what?” Bucky barreled into the group of adults like a bulldozer. “Falcon Tham’th mom and dad are comin’ ta dinner!”

“I heard!” he matched his best pal’s enthusiasm easily, dropping to one knee to speak to him eye to eye. “They’re real excited to meet you. And my friend Peggy is coming up, too. They had a change of plans,” he said in an aside to Tony, who sucked in a sharp breath and stalked off to talk to Pepper.

“Mith Peggy who thent me da wagon?” Bucky bounced on his toes.

“Yup, and she’s going to have dinner with us, and go to mass, and probably whatever else we do the next few days,” Steve confirmed.

“That’th thwell, Thteebie.” Buck danced a little to the Christmas music Jarvis turned on, unconsciously expending excess energy. “Hey, did you know Darthy’th mom and pop awen’t mawwied?” The question carried to the far corners of the rec room.

A hush fell.

Steve nodded. “I did know that. Times have changed. I know it must be confusing for you, pal, but a lot of time has passed since you and I were six together last time. Families are real different now. They're made up of all kinds of people and relationships these days.”

“You mean wike how Natathya ith my thitther, but altho ya betht fwiend and wrethlin’ partner?” Bucky winked, wiggling his butt with six-year-old delight to be in on that grownup secret now.

“James Buchanan Barnes, you little shit.” Steve narrowed his eyes.

“Is that any way to talk to that darling baby?” a familiar voice called from the entryway.

Bucky gasped and spun around to face their newest guest. “Awe you Momma Fawcon Tham?”

She snorted and dropped the bags full of presents she’d brought along at her feet, dusting her hands on her jeans. “I sure as hell am, though most people just call me Darlene or Colonel Wilson. Come gimme some sugar, pumpkin.” She leaned over and held out her arms.

Unable to resist that kind of invitation, Bucky bulldozed into Sam’s mom just like any other adult he knew offering hugs. He really did love hugs.

“Look at you.” She brushed the hair out of his eyes and set him back a few inches to pop the reading glasses from the top of her head onto her nose and check him over with a practiced mother’s eye. “I swear you’ve grown a foot since the last photos Sam sent me.”

Bucky looked down at the floor and asked the only question that really mattered: “Whaddaya mean?” He pointed. “I onwy got two feet!”

Mrs. Wilson threw her head back and laughed until her sides ached. “Lord, boy, you are a treat. I hear we’ve got decorating to do and I’ve got all these presents to go under the tree.” She took his hand in hers and stood, turning a beady eye on Steve. “Don’t you have anything better to do than stand around catching flies with your mouth open like that, young man?”

“Young?” Clint choked and tried to turn it into a cough.

And that's the story of how Steve ended up in the loft over the summer kitchen with Tony, drunk-assembling bikes, R/C drones, and the tiniest Iron Man mockup suits he'd ever seen—drunk-assembling that wouldn’t have been possible under normal circumstances, but Tony and Bruce
helpfully synthesized a super-serum version of rum for the enjoyment of all the enhanced folks on the team. Steve had an Iron Man flask full of the coconut and pineapple flavored devil juice and really no excuse for jabbing himself with the screwdriver the third time he tried to put the goddamned drone together and cram some cheap, Chinese-made batteries up its ass-end, except that the super booze worked and he was tanked like he hadn’t been since little Stevie Rogers was getting his stubborn, sickly ass kicked in all the finest Brooklyn back alleys.

“How you doing up there, boys?” Natasha called after the third litany of shouted curse word combinations no one had heard since Germany occupied Poland.

“Fine, just damn fine, but it’s a good thing I heal fast,” he muttered, dabbing at the gaping wound in his palm with a filthy shop rag until his metabolic enhancements closed the hole.

“Well, Tony doesn’t heal like you, so mind your step,” she warned conversationally from the bottom of the stairs so he could hear her clearly.

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve snarked, toasting in her direction and swilling another sip from his grownup juice box.

“Hey, Thethebie, whathya doin’ up thewe?”

“None’a your beeswax, nosy!” Steve called back, following it up with a burp that would've done twelve year old Bucky proud.

Tony gave him an unimpressed look. “What are you, five?”

“No, I’m this many.” Steve flipped him off.

The engineer rolled his eyes, but amusement tugged at his lips and he changed the subject without warning, “Has Bucky started asking when you’re marrying Nat yet?”

“But since he caught us wrestling naked.”

Tony choked so hard on the beer he’d been sipping, Steve had to pat him on the back, maybe a little too hard, though, because the other man ended up sprawled across the floor. “Okay,” Tony said, rolling over with a wince, “you’re done here. Go help Rosa peel more potatoes before I end up in traction.”

Steve so surprised himself with that bit of honesty, he lifted the spout of the flask to eye the contents suspiciously before following Tony's instructions. “This shit better not be a truth serum, too.”

But when Steve descended from the loft, Rosa waved him over to Natasha. “No. You’re a menace, Captain Rogers. Go bother your lady.”

Natasha, who bit her lip, trying not to laugh as she strung popcorn with Bucky handing her pieces to thread out of a bowl by her side. “Aw, Rogers, did you get a time-out?” she teased gently.

Over her shoulder, Steve spotted Sam’s dad sneaking up the stairs with a six-pack and a toolkit to lend Tony a hand in Steve’s place.

He sighed. “I guess.”

“Come keep me and James company,” she insisted, patting the sofa by her side, but Steve climbed right up over the back and squeezed in behind his pretty, redheaded doll, pressing a kiss under her hair that stilled her hands and left Bucky grumbling about Steve holding up the whole works.
“What are you so sore about?” Steve peered over Nat’s shoulder at his tiny best friend.

“Ththeeb Pawgerth pooped on da fwoor and Darthy thepped in it wif hew fabowite thneakerth, and now the’th cwanky and maybe mad at me becauthe I fo’got ta walk ‘im tho he’d poop outthide whewe hith poop bewongth.” He pouted, accidentally crushing a handful of popcorn. “Aw, dammit.” He threw the popcorn at Pizza Dog’s feet.

“Buck…” Steve warned the cursing six-year-old, but he cast an accusing eye on Hawkeye who grinned back, totally unrepentant.

“Language!” everyone in the room sang out as they put the finishing touches on the decorations for Christmas Eve dinner.
Nithe Ta Meecha

Chapter Summary

Peggy shows up with a surprise for Bucky, but he has questions. Lots of questions, as it turns out, but he might not be old enough for a while to hear all the answers.... What about tomorrow? He'll definitely be older tomorrow.

Chapter Notes

I hate the shit out of canon, sometimes. Let’s do something about that this chapter, shall we?
You may also note I’ve changed the chapter count today to a question mark. 65 chapters was a wildly inaccurate guess on my part. Surprise! *throws confetti* This story is going to be a lot longer than any of us realized.

Beta’d by the lovely and talented phoenix_173. (I typed this on my phone during a storm and edited it again myself after Nix’s only chance to edit, so any remaining errors are mine.)

Out in the yard, where the snow fell from the sky in big, fluffy flakes like small clouds and Bucky could throw the giantest stick he ever found for Steve Pawgers and Yasha and Barky Barnes to chase (and where he was only hiding for a little bit from the adults who wanted him to take a bath before Christmas Eve dinner and midnight mass), he heard a long, low rumble in the distance. Squinting at the sky, he spotted the slight disturbance in the air around the cloaked jet just like Natasha taught him to look for, but only about a minute before it could land. No time to run to the door and announce they had a visitor, then.

Instead, he pulled the fancy phone Darcy’s pop gave him out of his pocket, pushed the button on the side how Stevie showed him to do if he wanted to use it like a walkie-talkie toy, and Bucky said, “Jawvith, thewe’th a quinyet about ta wand in’a fwont yawd. Thould I teww thomeboby?”

“Already done, Master Barnes. The quinjet is expected. Captain Rogers asks that you please do not approach it until the engines have powered down.”

“Hey, Jawvith?”

“Young sir?”

“How’th come you caww Thteebie ‘Ca’tain Wogerth’? I fought I heawd you caww him annover name duwin’ da thlidethow.”
“I understand your confusion, sir. Captain Rogers has set the parameters by which I may address him. I believe he prefers to go by Captain Rogers in all non-military situations as it’s less confusing for civilians to remember how to address the man they only recognize as Captain America, which is a codename rather than a rank title in the armed services. However, the files that need be accessed for the information he requested during the slideshow listed Major General Rogers by his proper rank, so I must use that rank and name under those circumstances.”

“Huh.” Bucky scratched his chin as the quinjet made a soft thump in the grass. “That’th weiwd. Thankth, Jawvith.”

“You are most welcome, young sir.”

“Buck?” Stevie jogged down the front steps from the lodge out onto the lawn with Bucky’s play coat in his hands. “You’ll catch your death out here in just that hoodie, pal. What were you thinkin’?”

Bucky lifted a shoulder. Hadn’t really thought of that, he guessed.

“Thorry, Thteebie,” he apologized, shoving his arms into the coat his best friend held out to him. Steve Pawgers got a hold of one of the gloves pinned to the sleeves and started tugging on it, so Bucky was distracted when the quinjet landed and the door thing on the back finally opened, but not for real long because a whole bunch of people all tumbled out at once, jogging down the jet ramp towards him and Stevie like they were holding a whole big plate full of cookies.

Stevie shouted in surprise!

With a yelp, Bucky ducked behind Stevie and scrambled to grab hold of Steve Pawgers’ collar and Barky Barnes’ collar so they wouldn’t get smashed flat by all the people running at them. Yasha was on his own, poor, dumb dog who only wanted to love on everybody. It was about to get him squished flat like a bug.

But the only one who got squished was Stevie and he could take it, from what Bucky saw peeking around Stevie’s leg. Agent Barton said Stevie was built like a brick shit house. They didn’t have any of those in their tenement in Brooklyn, but Bucky figured a brick shit house must be like the size of a tank because Stevie sure did seem as big as one sometimes.

“Gentleman!” a loud, lady voice called over the racket all those fellas made, pounding on Stevie’s back and hugging on him and doing their best to knock him right off his feet. When the fellas quieted down to look back at the lady, she said, “You’re scaring James. Now, move aside so I can say a proper hello the boy already.”

They stepped aside for the lady, spreading out from Stevie’s sides like planes flying in fancy formation.

“Here now.” The lady walked briskly down the stairs the way Miss Pepper did sometimes when she didn’t have time for anybody to stand in her way. The lady had brown hair and blue eyes, and she wore a real fancy red coat that matched her lips with black furry stuff at the sleeves of the coat and around her neck, like somebody out of a moving picture, with her fitted pants and tall, black boots.

“Steve,” she said, stopping to hug Stevie, and then she kissed him right on the lips in front of everybody!

“Peg.” Stevie hugged her back like they didn’t see each other in forever and he smiled, but in the sad way he sometimes did when they talked about Brooklyn and both of their mas. “Nat says your security chief checked in with Hill to rearrange your schedule to visit with us for the rest of the
month, at least. I hope that means you’ll be with us a while.”

“It does.” She brushed the hair off his forehead that always fell in his face, then glanced down at Bucky with shiny eyes.

“Wow.” Bucky blinked up at the lady. She looked just like Gloria Swanson in the theater posters back in Brooklyn. “Wow,” he breathed again.

“Hello, James.” The lady squatted down with her knees tucked to the side so she could look right at him in the eye, but Bucky was too starstruck to notice much because she looked just like Gloria Swanson in fur and beads and fancy clothes at fancy parties just like in the moving pictures.

“You wook wike Gwowia Thwanthon,” Bucky barely managed to say the words out loud before he swallowed real hard and shuffled behind Stevie. Butterflies jumped all around in his belly.

“What did you say, darling?” the lady asked, holding up a hand to shush her muttering friends.

But Stevie laughed. “He said you look like Gloria Swanson.”

The lady smiled a smile with lots of dimples and soft lines around her eyes, and all her friends laughed and laughed and laughed. Bucky felt his face turn red and he buried it in the back of Stevie’s coat.

“Oh, darling, what a lovely compliment,” the lady said. Then, she turned and barked at the fellas with her, “Will you lot quit braying like a pack of mules?”

She huffed like she was mad, then returned her attention to Bucky. “My name is Peggy Carter. I’m Steve’s very good friend and Anthony’s godmother. You needn’t come out to say hello if you don’t want to, but I would very much like to make your acquaintance, James. I’ve heard so much about you from Steve and Anthony, and Jarvis, of course.”

With burning cheeks, Bucky huffed into Stevie’s jacket and peered out at the noisy adults. He’d never got so nervous meeting anybody in his whole life, but he’d never met anybody who looked like Gloria Swanson before, either.

Stevie twisted and put an arm around Bucky’s shoulder, squatting next to Bucky. Steve Pawgers and Barky Barnes started nipping at the hem of Stevie’s coat right off.

“I know you don’t remember it right now, but you and I met Peggy a very long time ago. She helped train me when the army picked me for a special project to make me big and strong. She was my best girl back during the war. And these fellas here,” he pointed to Miss Peggy’s friends and Bucky finally got a good look at all of them in the light from the porch, “these are the Howling Commandos.”

“I know who dey are,” Bucky whispered, but he barely made a sound when he said it because he knew who they were! All of them! And he couldn’t believe they were really here!

“They got a TV thow. Tony putth it on fo’ me and Darthy ta wathtch wif Dum-E and Buttahfingahth durin’ lunthch, thometimeth.”

The one who had to be Jim Morita rolled his eyes, “That Howling Heroes sitcom garbage they made in the sixties?” He snorted and shook his head, “Stark.”

“But Ththeebie,” Bucky whispered urgently, half-climbing his best pal, “thothe awe da Howwin’ Commandoodth. I know them. They’we weal hewoes. Ththeebie, that’th Dum Dum Dugan,” he said, so excited, tugging on Stevie’s coat. “And Falthwowth, and Gabe Joneth, and Jim Mowita, and Jock
“Jacques Dernier,” Stevie said the name nice and slow for Bucky. “And yes, they are the Howling Commandos, but they’re our friends, too. Have been since the war.”

Bucky almost swallowed his tongue. He was really friends with the Howling Commandos when he was a growedup?

“Sarge,” the biggest fella, Dum Dum Dugan, removed his hat and saluted Bucky. The other fellas did the same. Bucky just stared. Then, he wondered if maybe he ought’a salute back or something. He rolled his lips nervously and looked at Stevie, unsure what to do, but Dum Dum decided for him, dropping his saluting hand as he dropped to one knee right there in the snow. “It’s real good to see you again … kid. Christ, Rogers, I know you said he was a kid again, but this is somethin’ else…”

“Th’eebie?” Bucky shifted from foot to foot. Everyone was staring at him. Then Bucky remembered something Stevie said. “You thaid they wewe our fwiendth in da waw, wight?” Bucky peered at the growedups surrounding him in the dim porch light. “Why don’t they wook wike they’we a hundwed, then?”

Everyone on the lawn glanced at each other over Bucky’s head and out of the corners of their eyes, but no one had an answer for Bucky, even though they all looked like they wanted to say something.

Stevie scratched his head. “That’s real complicated, pal.”

And Miss Peggy looked even younger than some of the fellas, even though Bucky knew he had seen her picture in books and the newspaper with grey hair and more wrinkles. She rolled her eyes. “It’s not so complicated as all that. These yahoos,” she pointed to the Commandos, “got caught up in a lab accident courtesy of our friend Howard Stark—Anthony’s father—an accident not so very different from your own, James, oh, back in the … late forties, early fifties, I suppose? They’re aging quite slowly, though, rather than turning into children, no matter how much they might act like naughty school boys,” she joked when Falsworth stuck out his tongue. Like lightning, Miss Peggy snatched at it and pinched his tongue between her fingers with a laugh for the surprised look on his face.

“Wow,” Bucky said. Miss Peggy was as fast as Nat. And she seemed to be about the same age, but… something about that didn’t sit right with Bucky.

“This,” she said, motioning to the tall man nearby with very dark brown skin like Bucky’s and Stevie’s friend, Falcon Sam, “is my husband, Gabe Jones.”

“Then howth come you teww peopwe you’we Peggy Cawtuh?” Bucky had to know.

“Do you know what my name would be if I took my husbands’ name and kept them each of the times I married?” she asked, draping her arm over her knee as she lowered the other knee to the snow.

Bucky shook his head. He didn’t know.

“Her Excellency, Margaret Elizabeth Mary Carter-Rogers-Sousa-Jones, Her Brittanic Majesty’s Special Envoy from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United States.”

“That’th a wot of nameth an’ fanthy wordth,” Bucky breathed. He shook his head. “I couldn’t eben thay aww of thothe nameth and wordth, or a’ member aww of ‘em.”

“Well, there you go.” She shrugged and tidied Bucky’s coat and scarf to block out the chill. “A
troublesome, bloody mouthful is what it is. Easier to just use the name my parents gave me, I think.”

Bucky squared his shoulders and finally offered his hand. “My whowe name is Jameth Boochanan Barneth-Wogerth-Womanoff because I got paperth that thay I bewong wif Ththeebie and Nat now, but my famiwy jutht cawwth me Bucky, tho I thuppothe you can, too. Nithe ta meecha, Mith Peggy Cawtuh.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Bucky,” she answered with the cheeky dimples and soft eye lines again, closing her hands around his like a hug from an old friend. “I hear we’ve big plans for this evening. Dinner and church, and then Santa will be coming, of course.”

Bucky’s eyes bugged almost right out of his head. “THANTA?!?” He turned and looked at Stevie. “You don’t fink he heawd abou’ that day in da ventth, do you?”

“Hard to know for sure.” Stevie shrugged. “Better be on your best behavior the rest of the night, though, just to be on the safe side.”

Bucky nodded and crossed his heart. “I thwear, I won’t jimmy a thingle wock or wook at eben one naked wady picturance, Ththeebie, pwomith.”

The Howling Commandos laughed and laughed and laughed forever, it felt like, but Bucky wasn’t sure why.

Adults. He shrugged. So weird, sometimes.

“That sounds like quite a story,” Miss Peggy said. “Let’s go warm up inside and you can tell me all about it. I’m sure it’s nothing Santa can’t forgive. I once accidentally —” she winked at Bucky, “— shut my older brother up in the attic for six hours and Santa didn’t hold that against me.”

“Hey, Mith Peggy? You neber anthwered my whowe quethtion.” Bucky tugged on her hand to get her attention.

“What is it, darling?” She paused on the stairs to look down at him.

“Howth come you wook eben youngah than the Howwin’ Commandoth?”

“That, I think,” she tapped her chin, “is a story better suited for telling when you’re older, but—” she held up a finger before Bucky could interrupt to ask why her face and hair looked so much younger in person than in the newspaper and books, too, “I do promise to explain when you’re old enough to understand. Will that do?”

“I’m cuwiouth now, but I gueth it won’t huwt to wait a whiwe. How owd do I gotta be?” He kicked the rise of the step and snow fell on the tip of his boot.

“Older than you are now,” she answered.

“Tho … tomowwow?” Bucky asked hopefully.

“We’ll see what kind of progress Anthony is making on reverse-engineering the results of your accident first; then, we’ll see to the rest,” she swore, crossing her heart.

Bucky sighed. “Nat and Ththeebie thay that all’a time.” He kicked a big chunk of snow off the top porch step as Steve helped him up the last rise. “We’ww thee.” He rolled his eyes. “That jutht meanth they don’t wanna awgue about it wight now.”
“Clever little monkey.” Peggy patted his cheek. “I’ve made my promise and I intend to keep it. You must practice patience until then.”

Bucky curled his lip and grumped as Stevie hustled him and the dogs into the lodge with all the noisy adults, “Practithin’ patienthe thoundth a wot wike ‘we’ww thee’ from whewe I’m thtandin’.”
Chapter Summary

Darcy looks so pretty in her ugly Christmas sweater and plastic Thor helmet when she smiles, sneaking raviolis to her puppy under the table, and Bucky has a very funny feeling about it.

Chapter Notes

Beta’d by @hkthauer & @phoenix-173

“NATASHA!” the Howling Commandos cried as they pounded up the steps into the lodge, sweeping up Bucky’s big sister and covering her in kisses hello.

“Hey, fellas. Wow, somebody brought the Smithsonian's whole fossil collection this time, huh?” Natasha teased and made sure to kiss every whiskery face and smooth cheek presented to her as they stomped their boots and disappeared inside, until Dum Dum Dugan stopped in front of her, blocking out all the light, except the tiny strand of lights over the doorway, shining on the big ball of mistletoe hanging there.

Dum Dum glanced up at it and wiggled his mustache.

Natasha glanced up at it and her lips twisted like how Stevie made that double-dog-dare face when they were still kids at the same time.

And Bucky held his breath.

“Romanoff.” Dum Dum nodded once.

“Major.” Nat nodded back.

Nobody even breathed.

At the same time, Nat and Dum Dum blinked and went for it face first, just like that time Tommy Mendler ate three whole pies at the pie eating contest. It was AWFUL.

Nat kissed Dum Dum.

Dum Dum kissed Nat.

Right on the mouth!

Yuck!
Then they laughed and Stevie made a joke Bucky didn't understand about Dum Dum finding his own girl, but Bucky didn’t know what got into everybody all of a sudden, kissin’ all the time. One time, he even walked into a closet and turned on a light and Darcy’s ma and pop were in there, right under the grand staircase at the lodge.

Kissing! Where anybody who picked the lock and walked into the closet could see!

Gross!

And Miss Pepper stumbled a little afterward, like she forgot how to walk!

Bucky couldn’t figure why anybody would wanna kiss a girl anyhow. He thought it over all through his bath and even let Stevie pick his candy cane-striped suspenders and bow tie to match the special sweater vest Nat bought him that was supposed to be real ugly.

Boy, it sure was ugly, Bucky thought when Nat pulled the green sweater out of his closet and flicked a little switch inside the pocket so it lit up like a Christmas tree! All six of the original Avengers blinked and moved in slow motion as the lights rotated through the pattern to make the people look like they were fighting real tiny alien space whales and Doom Bots.

“Neat.” Bucky tried to shove his arm through the arm hole, but the button on his red dress shirt snagged and he couldn’t quite get it.

“Let me help.” Nat knelt on the floor and rescued Bucky’s sleeve from the vest, then covered the buttons with her fingers as Bucky slid his arms through. When he was all buttoned up with his new candy cane bow-tie straightened, Nat kissed him on the nose.

“Nat?” It was now or never.

“Hmm?” she asked, brushing a piece of lint from his sweater vest.

“Why do people kith?”

She sat back on her heels and took a slow breath, tapping her fingers on the top of her leg and thinking over her answer. “People kiss for a lot of reasons. Mainly, they kiss to express affection or love, though not always romantically.”

Bucky wrinkled his nose. “Womantic ith wike with hearth and Cupid thooth you wif an awwow that maketh you thtupid enough to wanna wrethle naked and make a baby, wight?”

His big sister pressed her lips together in that way that meant she was trying not to smile real big because Bucky accidentally said something funny.

“Yes,” she finally agreed, “that is one view of how romantic love works. It’s not the only kind of love or the only reason people kiss, though.”

“Why elthe would people kith?” Bucky couldn’t figure out why anybody’d wanna put their mouth on another person’s mouth for funsies.

“There are different types of love. There’s romantic love, like when I kiss Steve—”

“—ow when I tuwned onna wight inna cwothet and yewwed weal woud becauth the Darthy’th pop wath kithin’ Darthy’th ma thtupid,” Bucky added helpfully. “Doeth that mean dey gonna wrethle naked thoon, too, and make a baby with Tony’th erechion?”
Nat blinked at him for a few seconds, then her one eyebrow did that thing where it crawled halfway up her head. “Apparently, I missed a conversation.”

“Ththeebe told me aww about erecthionth and how people in wub make babieth wif dem by wrethlin’ naked. Me and the fellath talked about it. Guy thuff.” He crossed his arms so she’d know she couldn’t get it out of him even with enough tickles.

Nat laughed, but she nodded. “Okay. There’s also familiar love—the kind of love you have for your family, the reason Steve kisses you goodnight or I kiss your booboos to make you feel better or the way Darcy hugs her daddy very close and rubs her face against his whiskers to kiss him through his scruff. It’s all a way to say ‘I love you’ without the words. You’re showing the people you love them or have affection for them, but some people don’t like to be kissed, so you should always ask.”

Bucky thought all that over a minute. “I wub dogth, but I don’t kith Ththee Pawgerth,” he pointed out.

“No,” she agreed, “but the dogs do kiss you with their tongues when they lick all over your face and jump on you and try to knock you down to play with them on the floor. That’s playful love. They’re so excited and happy, they just have to kiss you to share their joy with you.”

"Wike how you kithed Dum Dum at the door?" he checked.

"Yes." Nat laughed again. "Dum Dum and I are friends. We like to tease each other."

Mulling that one over, Bucky thought he might have an idea for a kind of love that meant no kissing. “Agen’ Bawton wubeth awwot and piztha, but he doethn’t kith ‘em.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree there.” Nat rolled her eyes, but she looked like she even loved Agent Barton's silliness. “I’ve seen Clint kiss an arrow for luck, but that’s a good example of a different type of love: obsessive love, usually that’s a one-sided kind of love for an object or an unattainable relationship with a person, though. Not the healthiest kind of love for your heart,” she smiled sadly.

“Oh! I know! Wha’ about when Mith Peggy kithed Theebie when thee awwived? Thee hath a hubthand and Thteebie wubth you, tho why did they kith?” he wondered, really confused, because it wasn’t playful love and it didn’t look like family love or even like Miss Peggy thought Stevie was a swell-looking arrow that needed a kiss for good luck to hit a target…

Nat brushed a hand through Bucky’s hair. “You really are a clever little monkey. Sometimes, people can be in love with more than one person at time, or love people romantically in different ways. What Peggy and Steve have is enduring love. Circumstances have kept them apart and they still love each other and always will, but now there are layers of other types of love between them, too, affection and family love, and another kind of special love called selfless love. Steve loves Peggy so much, he wants her to be happy with her husband and would never want to come between them for his own selfish reasons, even if it makes him sad sometimes.” She took a deep breath and let it out real slow. “It’s a very noble kind of love.” She stopped talking, turned her head, and sniffed.

“Nat?” Bucky moved around to the side to see why she wouldn’t look at him, something pushing him to give her a hug and make her feel better. “Why you cwyin’?”

When his arms tightened around her neck, she squeezed him gently and said very softly by Bucky’s ear, “There are things that remind me sometimes how much Steve is still hurting inside over things he can’t change and, because I love him, my heart hurts because his hurts. I wish I could make it better.”
“But Nat…” Bucky leaned back to look at his sister. “You do make it better. He’s not that bad all the time. Thometimeth, aftuh he kiteth you, he thmileth weal big when ya not wookin’, wike he won a pwizthe at Coney Iwand. And ya make me happy, too. I wath weal thad after the accthident that made me an’ Darthy wittle becauthe my ma wath gone and my who’ famiwy, but den you and Ththeebie made uth a famiwy and wubbed me a wot, enough for my ma and pop and my who’ famiwy, and made me not thad anymore.”

“There’s another kind of love for you,” Nat said, folding her hands over each other on Bucky’s back for another tight squeeze and kiss to his forehead. “Compassionate love. I love you, James. Thank you for reminding me of all the reasons I have to be happy.”

“I wub you, too, Nat.” Bucky puckered up for a kiss and Nat obliged, pecking him on the lips. It wasn’t so bad.

“Thteebie!” The yelp came out of Bucky’s big mouth before he realized it was happening. He got down from the table and set down his napkin where Steve Pawgers couldn’t chew it, then hauled Stevie off to the kitchen to ask his pal some very important questions.

Across the table, in her winged Thor helmet with silver and green ribbons braided into her hair, Darcy smiled right back, already chewing happily on a mouthful of ravioli as the LED scene playing across her ugly sweater displayed a living manger scene of Cap and Iron Man, gathered around the Baby Hulk’s crèche, while the three Wise Ones (Miss Pepper, Rhodey, and Nat) stood off to the side, alternately pointing at either the north star (that looked a lot like Stevie’s shield) or offering gifts of candy canes, Starkphones, and a soothing lullaby to the newborn Baby Hulk. Robots sat on either side of Baby Hulk’s crèche, too, with animal ear headbands wrapped around their top-mounted cameras. On the roof of the manger, Hawkeye and Thor looked down with angel wings sprouting from their backs and funny circles of light around their heads like the saints in the stained glass windows of Bucky’s old church back in Brooklyn. Sauce dribbled down Darcy’s chin and all over Hawkeye’s glowing angel head when a ravioli missed her mouth, but that was okay because she picked it up and snuck her hand under the table to give a bite to Barky Barnes.

Bucky felt a funny feeling in his belly when Darcy caught him looking and she held a finger to her smiling lips. Her eyes sparkled in the rainbow light off of all the blinking ugly sweaters at the table and Bucky felt a swell of something bumping against the bottom of his heart.

Oh.

Oh.

Love.

Bucky loved Darcy.

But… Did that mean Darcy loved him like he loved her? And did he have to kiss her? Would she be expecting him to kiss her? Would they have to wrestle naked when they were adults, too, or was that optional?

“Thereeebie!” The yelp came out of Bucky’s big mouth before he realized it was happening. He got down from the table and set down his napkin where Steve Pawgers couldn’t chew it, then hauled Stevie off to the kitchen to ask his pal some very important questions.
How to Avoid Cootieth and Gamma Raditathion Poithonin'

Chapter Summary

Cooties, germs, and how not to Hulk-out. Important life lessons lie herein.

Chapter Notes

So... I got a ton of requests for a first kiss under the mistletoe way back when I started this story. After a good long think about that, I came up with this. ;-)

Beta'd by phoenix_173, though I've edited it since, so all remaining errors are mine.

Darcy followed her Daddy to the pass-through to the kitchen to hand over the stack of bowls she carried from the table Mr. Dum Dum and Mr. Jim and Mssr. Jacques cleared after dinner. On the other side of the window, Darcy could just see Captain Steve’s blond hair and hear him talking.

“Pal, nobody expects you to kiss anybody.”

“But what about the mithtletoe?” Darcy heard Bucky ask. “When ya thtuck undah it, everboby whithtleth and hollerth ta kith, but what if I don’t wike kithin’?”

Captain Steve shrugged his shoulders. “Then don’t kiss.”

“But…” Bucky’s voice wobbled. “I wike her a wot.”

“But kissin’s a big step, Buck. Maybe you could try tellin’ her instead of worrying about whether she’ll want to kiss,” Captain Steve reminded Bucky. “What’s your hurry, pal? There’s plenty of time for kissing when you’re older.”

Darcy glanced up at her daddy when his hand fell on her shoulder.

“Dr. Bruce said kissing and hugging can spread germs and gamma raditation,” she told her daddy quietly so she wouldn’t interrupt Bucky and Captain Steve.

Daddy laughed, but he squatted down beside Darcy and nodded his head. “I think Dr. Bruce has other reasons for not kissing and hugging very much, but those are good ones, for sure. Wouldn’t want to catch cooties, would you?” He lifted his hands and made them look like tickle claws so Darcy could decide before he tickled if she wanted to play that game. She nodded and Daddy’s hands closed around her ribs, making her scream and gasp for air as he turned her upside-down and made her braids dangle above the floor and made her laugh and laugh and laugh until she couldn’t even breathe anymore.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather stay at the Main Lodge?” Darcy’s mommy asked Senior Airman Falcon Sam’s mommy as Daddy carried Darcy over to the coat closet upside-down while the adults
finished clearing up the table and everyone else found their coats and boots for the snowy walk to the camp chapel up the road. “There’s an entire wing with no children, dogs, or Hawkeyes and several comfortable suites that could be readied in less than an hour.”

“Hey!” Agent Clint complained from his favorite spot in the rafters, knocking an open bag of half-eaten Cheetos to the floor. Puppies swarmed all over it and left nothing but neon orange Cheeto dust on the rug.

“No, no,” Mr. Falcon Sam’s mommy replied. “Sammy was right about that—we like to sleep in now that we’re retired. That guest cottage my Sammy and Agent Hill showed us to is just perfect. Olde Orchard Cottage.” She shook her head. “All decorated in pretty greens and reds and yellows like something out of a magazine. And with its own Christmas tree! It’s lovely. Feels like a fancy bed and breakfast with the apple and cinnamon scent in the air and all those pillows. Damned if I know how you do it.”

“Robots, mostly,” Daddy muttered to Darcy under his breath, making her giggle even more.

“Well, we hope it convinces you to stay with us for a while or at least to take advantage of the lodge on weekends when you can make time,” Mommy said. “If you’d like, we can have breakfast sent up in the morning by drone, too, so you can have the morning to yourselves without all the gift-opening chaos.”

“Drone?” Mr. Falcon Sam’s mommy looked skeptical.

“Tony and I gave the camp and farm staff a few extra days off for the holidays, so we’re employing more of Jarvis’ mobile tools to automate the bare essentials, like meal service and housekeeping for the cabins and cottages.”

Rosa tsk’d and rolled her eyes. “I’m only across the lake. If you’d let me come in for a few hours in the morning, all you’d have to do is check the turkey a few ti—”

“No.” Mommy’s lips made the ‘I’ve already decided face’. “You work hard all year, Rosa. The holiday is for family.”

Rosa tilted her head to one side. “Tony and I have been friends most of our lives and my mother was the Stark family cook at the Fifth Avenue townhouse until Tony went off to college. It’s been long enough since we all spent a Christmas together and his parents’ old friends are here now, too. It’s no hardship to me, Pepper. Nor to Tom. No one’s held a big family holiday here in a long time. Whether we’re at home or here, the children will have fun and I will cook and Tommy will wash dishes. At least at the lodge there are more hands to help and a half dozen ovens and dishwashers to handle all the tedious work.”

Mommy sighed. “When you put it like that … but we’re sending you to one of the houses in the Mediterranean in the spring, just you and Tom, for some R&R, a month of it.”

“I won’t say no to that. A few weeks in the islands sounds lovely,” Rosa agreed and patted Mommy on the arm. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “I’ve always wanted to do a big, family dinner party here for the holidays. It’s what the Main Lodge was built for.” She rubbed her hands together like Mommy just gave her an awesome present.

Darcy turned to Bucky where he appeared with Captain Steve by the racks and racks of boots all lined up by the door. “Adults are confusing.”

“You’re tewwin’ me.” He rolled his eyes. “I athked Nat about kithin’ earwier and it made her thad. If
“I dunno.” Darcy hugged her Bucky Bear close when her daddy dug it out of the pile of coats in the closet and wrapped Thor’s cape around her waist and over her shoulders like a fancy red toga dress. Then, he held out her green coat to put on over top.

“Nat thayth kithin’ ith an exthprethion of lub.” Bucky hopped from one foot to the other like he had ants in his pants.

Darcy wrinkled her nose. “Daddy and Dr. Bruce said kissing causes cooties and gamma raditation exposure, so the best way to invade a cootie infection is to never kiss ever ‘cause that’s how ya get cooties and probably Hulk-out.” She stopped fidgeting with Thor’s cape to eye Bucky. “Why did you ask Miss Nat about kissing anyway?”

“ ‘cauthe everboby’th alwayth kithin’ alla time aroun’ here!” Bucky threw his arms up and his sweater vest started playing ‘Shoot to Thrill’.

Daddy chuckled and Captain Steve groaned.

“It better not do that during the service tonight,” Captain Steve warned Daddy who only shook his head.

“Well, I’m not kissing anybody but Mommy and Daddy,” Darcy told Bucky, just to be clear, as she shoved her feet in her warm winter boots for the walk to the camp chapel, “on account of cooties and germs and raditation poisoning. I don’t want cooties. Or the flu. Or to turn green when I get cranky. Dr. Bruce said you can get the flu just like cooties, from too much kissing and hugging, and that’s why he keeps to himself all the time and only hugs people like Captain Steve who are super immune.”

“But…” Bucky chewed on his lip and wiggled his nose, watching Agent Barton drop from the rafters and wander past, cuddling one of Bucky’s bunnies covered in Cheeto dust and talking to it in a sweet voice. “What if you lubbed thomeboby a wot and they made you weal happy and kithin’ ‘em thow them? What then?”

“If you love somebody and they make you real happy, you can show them by getting married and starting a multinational company one day so you can build robots together forever and ever,” Darcy informed her friend. “And buy companies to fix them and also beat up bad guys together sometimes,” she amended.

Bucky looked like he wasn’t sure about all that.

“What?” she demanded when Bucky kept staring at her. She had a late nap and it always made her cranky like Hulk when Dr. Bruce turned green on accident. She wished Bucky would just spit out what he wanted to say already.

“I don’t wanna get mawwied or or thtart a multinatthional comp’ny yet.” He scratched his head and obliged when Steve Pawgers bumped his free hand with his orange-Cheeto-dusty nose, demanding head scratches, too. “But … I wike you, Darthy,” he said very quietly.

“I like you, too.” Darcy smiled real big. “I don’t wanna start a multinational company yet, either.”

“Or kiss.” Bucky made a face and stuck out his tongue.

Darcy did the same. “Me, neither. Cooties and gamma poisoning? Nuh-uh. No, thanks,” Darcy said real loud and her daddy laughed.
Bucky smiled up at Miss Nat when she helped him into his coat and Captain Steve held out his gloves, but he shook his head. “No, thankth, Ththeebie. I wanted—I mean, Darthy, do you wanna hold my hand? Ththeebie thaid that th a way to thow thomeboby you wike dem wifout kithin’.”

“Okay.” Darcy shrugged and grabbed Bucky’s hand, letting him lead her and Steve Pawgers and Barky Barnes out the door to wait for the adults as snow continued to fall from the sky like it had most of the day. (She tucked her Bucky Bear inside her cape-toga for safekeeping and so Barky Barnes wouldn’t chew on it.) Her daddy ran out after them and pulled a knit hat on her head that looked like the Thor helmet she left by the table after dinner. As they wandered up the road toward the bridge across the lake and the chapel built into the side of the mountain, Daddy grabbed Darcy’s free hand and Captain Steve grabbed Bucky’s. Near the front of the group, the lady Daddy introduced as his Aunt Peggy held Mr. Gabe’s hand and started to sing “O Holy Night” as they walked. Everyone else joined in after she sang the first few lines and the song bounced off the mountain and filled the whole valley around the lake with nothing but the sound of the Christmas carol.

Darcy shivered—in a good way because the singing was so nice—and smiled when Bucky adjusted his hand in hers to warm up her cold fingertips. It made Darcy feel happy and warm all over.
Plannin' fo' da Futhure

Chapter Summary

Tony has an epiphany and comes to a decision. He can only hope Pepper (and their family) is on board.

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by phoenix_173

I made an inspo board so all of you could see what's on my desktop while I worked on this chapter.

With his voice raised in song, Tony reflected happily on the rapid changes in his life over the past year, the changes for the better in his relationship with Pepper, the bright young woman who’d unexpectedly blown into their lives like a vivacious whirlwind, the child she’d become, so desperately in need of unconditional love and family, and the steady, settled feeling growing in his chest day by day alongside the glowing blue light of lifesaving tech only made possible by the sacrifice of a good man and friend.

Tony had a wealth of reasons to be grateful that had nothing to do with his family name or money, and everything to do with accepting the love of the family growing in leaps and bounds around him.

“Your Uncle Gabe said his grandson might be coming up tomorrow, if he can find a ride,” Pepper said, rubbing a hand along his ribs as they meandered through the snow with their arms thrown around one another and Darcy’s tiny hand gripping his index finger. She chattered happily with Bucky, laughing at the antics of the larger dogs while the smaller dachshund puppies got a lift with their Howling Commando namesakes. Tony could be wrong, but he was almost certain Uncle Dum Dum had a piglet inside his jacket, too.

“We keep a spare quinjet at the airstrip here,” Tony considered. It’s not like they’d be using it and all the employees in need of a ride had been sent home the day before by whatever means Camp Stark and Stark Industries had available. “Jarvis and I can remote-pilot it to the pickup point. Trip knows how to fly a quin.”

“You know him?” Pepper glanced up at him in surprise.

“His mom. Muriel. She came up here when we were kids.” Had gone sledding and ice skating over the years with Tony and Rosa after midnight mass, and stayed up late, drinking hot cocoa in the converted apartment over the garage Tony claimed for himself at Camp Stark all through high school and college. She’d been one of the rare people Tony called ‘friend’ in those years. She knew exactly who he was and never expected anything but friendship of Tony because of it.
“Is she…?” Pepper wondered.

“Gone now. Breast cancer.” Dammit. Tony shook his head. He should have been working on a cure for years at that point, but he spent too many self-involved years perfecting all the skills his father reviled most. Robotics, programming, artificial intelligence. Not a skill among them that could save Muriel, though. He made a promise to himself when she died, then: a cure for cancer in the years he had left, and better, safer ways to treat it in the meantime.

Muriel raised Trip alone, Tony knew that much. The kid went to live with his granddad and Aunt Peggy after his mom’s passing twelve years back. Tony did the only thing he could for the boy at the time: set up a trust fund to cover college and other expenses, and made sure he’d never want for anything. It was the very least he could do for Muriel’s son and still light years away from enough. He’d wasted too many years chasing his old man’s ghost for approval or ignoring it out of spite, and he’d lost a lifelong friend while he focused on all the wrong things.

Tony was done wasting time and losing what mattered to him most. If he gleaned nothing else from the example of Steve’s lost first life, he’d learned that much.

“Pep, wait.” He let go of Darcy’s hand so she could run ahead up the chapel stairs where Bucky insisted on opening the door for her (with Steve’s help to hold the heavy door). Bringing Pepper around with his arm, he gazed into her striking green eyes and blurted out what’d he’d been thinking about the last few days, “Let’s get married here. Next week. A fresh start on New Year’s Day.”

“In a week?” She screwed up her lips and blew the hair out of her eyes.

“We’ve been talking about it for so long. Everyone we’d invite, more or less, is already here.” He’d need to have one of his better winter suits retrieved from the house in Aspen. Rhodey would need his winter Class As sent up from the city. Same for Steve. Bucky… Well, Darcy was sure to have an opinion on what Bucky should wear. “Unless you wanted a big New York wedding in the spring?” He could see the draw of that, the ultra-formality, the business and political contacts to be made and reaffirmed, the glittering spread in every magazine, newspaper, and social media platform for days. If that’s what Pepper wanted…

“We could do both.” She nudged him with a twinkle in her eye, warming to the idea quickly. “A small family wedding next week just for us and a ball to celebrate in the spring while the cherry trees are in bloom at the townhouse on Fifth.”

All Tony managed to do was nod. It could not be this easy.

“You’re lucky Darcy’s been asking me when we planned to get married. I started shopping for a bridal suit after her concussion,” she informed him as he offered her his arm to climb the stairs after everyone had gone inside to warm up over mulled cider in the entryway. The sound of Darcy’s happy giggles filtered through the doors while the Howling Commandos fussed over her and Bucky.

“Daddy?” she asked, popping the door open just far enough to stick her head out. “Is Steve Pawgers allowed inside? He pooped in the rec room and ruined my Christmas sneakers,” she reminded him.

“It’s fine. All the puppies had a walk back at the lake,” he assured his little girl.

“Okaaay…” she drawled, “but if he poops inside again, Bucky’s cleaning it up.”

“Did Bucky say that?”

“No, I did.” She heaved the door open an extra inch and flounced away.
“God.” Pepper threw back her head and smiled at the stars.

“Don’t blame him. We made this mess,” Tony reminded his fiancé, stuffing his hands in his pockets, warm and content at the evidence of her happiness as her mind worked thirty steps ahead of him at the speed of light.

“What mess?” she asked, her eyes and smile soft and just for him. “This all feels so…” she rolled her hand, trying to find a word for it.

“Normal? Domestic?” Tony whispered with mock horror.

“Yes.” She tipped her chin down and closed the short distance between them to press kisses all over his face. “Yes, to all of it.”

“Yes, we’re getting married next week?” Tony checked when his heart started to race.

“If we keep it simple…” she trailed off, calculating times and schedules and whatever else went into a wedding Tony knew nothing about. “I’ll get in touch with Carolina in the morning, wish her a merry Christmas, then drop the news in her lap, see what she can help me come up with last minute.”

“The Herreras have a place Upstate, don’t they?” On the Hudson, maybe? He couldn’t remember. “We’ll send the jet, if she’s free after Christmas. You think she’ll do it?”

“For me?” Pepper tapped her chin and wagged her head back and forth. “Probably? High profile, secret wedding, with promises of an Instagram announcement and full social media spread to show off her brilliant, last minute genius? I think she can be convinced.”

“Darcy, though…” Tony worried.

“No one has to know who the children are in the photos,” she assured him. “Everyone has children in their wedding, but you should ask Darcy before you assume she’ll want to be that involved. She has no interest in wearing a flower girl dress, so that might be a moot point.”

“Oh no?” Amusement tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“She wants pants and boots,” Pepper informed him as they opened the chapel door and made their way inside to find Darcy. They needed to tell her the good news.

“Very practical.” Tony nodded, searching the room for his little girl. She stood at the back of the nave on a pew, arguing with Barton and a trio of Howling Commandos about how to train Barky Barnes. Bucky laid on the floor under the pew with his head on a hymnal and a blissful smile on his face, puppies climbing and laying all over him.

“G—” Pepper choked, taking in the Commandos and Avengers sprawled all over the nave with mugs of steaming cider or laps full of happy pets. “This place is a zoo.”

“But it’s our zoo,” Tony pointed out happily, waving Darcy over.

“What is it, Daddy?” she asked, bouncing on the toes of her tiny hiking boots. Barky Barnes nipped at her boot laces and circled her feet, growling at the loose loops dangling from her calves. “Quit it, Barky Barnes.” She tapped him on the nose gently and pointed down.

Barky Barnes planted his rump firmly on the floor, tail wagging so hard, he vibrated with the movement.
For his own part, Tony was so impressed, he stared at the dog for a full minute, speechless.

“Daddy?” Darcy asked again.

“Step outside with me and your mom for a minute, kiddo. There’s something we wanna tell you first.”
Memories and Traditions

Chapter Summary

Darcy doesn’t exactly have the best memories of holidays past. She remembers a more difficult time. Nat and Sam know a thing or two about how to help and Darcy’s daddy makes a very important list. Then, Darcy’s mommy slips and lets the cat out of the bag.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for implied/referenced past child abuse. I am not fucking around with this warning. If reading about someone else’s learned response to abuse will hurt you, skip to the second part of this chapter after the second line of snowflakes. Take care of yourself, first, please.

Darcy remembered winters in California. She remembered cold rain and palm trees, sleeping on a bare, musty-smelling mattress and waking before sunrise in the corner of a strange, chilly apartment. Her mommy left the tiny oven on with the door propped open when she went out to work. Sometimes, her mommy was gone from when Darcy woke up until long after Darcy came in after the streetlights came on, when she made herself a sandwich with white bread and carefully unwrapped a slice of cheese from the packet in the refrigerator with the slices wrapped up individually like bright yellow candy.

Memories of Darcy’s other daddy were different, as if she was looking at them in her mind through a window smeared with peanut butter. She remembered the stale cigarette smell and sourness of breath too close and the little spray of spit from someone shouting right there. She remembered the yelling and that she was supposed to hide when it started or there would be pain later.

She didn’t … quite remember the pain, but she knew how it should feel if an adult grabbed her by the arm too hard, if they shook her until her teeth rattled, or hit her with the hard part of the back of their hand. She knew how it should feel, but she didn’t remember.

She didn’t remember much about Christmas, or even much of Hanukkah, but she knew some of her playmates in the motel where she sometimes lived with her mommy celebrated those holidays and talked about Santa and going to see him at the mall to give him their lists. Darcy didn’t know what went on a list or how long it should be. She never had a present because of any holiday other than ‘Mommy scored’, which meant Mommy had money for a few days and didn’t have to be gone all day, and might take Darcy to the diner where they gave her a coloring book and four crayons to use until dinner came on plates too hot to touch at first.

Darcy remembered the other kids riding bikes and she wondered where they came from. She never had a bike or roller skates or a pet chicken like the kids in 3B. She didn’t want a pet chicken or a horse. Horses were pretty, but horses meant cops and the cops weren’t to be trusted. Not the social workers, either. Darcy remembered the social workers. She remembered her mommy telling the
social workers to take the damn kid or get off her back, but they couldn’t have it both ways.

Darcy remembered.

But layered over top of remembering was Tony and Pepper—Mommy and Daddy. Her new Mommy and Daddy, a mommy and daddy like other kids had, who hugged her and tucked her in and kissed her head when she had a bad dream, her mommy and daddy who talked to her about Santa and what she’d put on her list. Darcy … she still didn’t know what she was supposed to put on it. Daddy said maybe she’d like a bike, so Darcy put ‘bike’ on her list, but she didn’t know what else should go on it until she read Bucky’s list. He wrote a letter to Santa Claus with Miss Nat’s help and covered the whole top of the page with drawings made by Captain Steve and stickers from Bucky’s Phonics workbook.

And he made a list.

The list was pages and pages long, mostly all toys, but a few other things: a scooter, a skateboard, a wrist rocket, and a basketball.

With Jarvis’ help, Darcy looked up all those things and asked him for ideas—things to add to her list. Jarvis recommended all the popular toys for girls, but Darcy didn’t know who most of the characters were. She knew Legos, so she carefully printed ‘legos’ on her list after ‘bike’.

When her new daddy asked for her list, Darcy shook her head ‘no’. There were only two things on it, nothing like Bucky’s list. Maybe she did it wrong. But Daddy very gently asked Darcy where she put her list, so she showed him the notebook her new mommy gave her to write her letter to Santa. She wrote “Merry Christmas, Santa. Have a nice day.” Then, underneath her letter, she wrote, “I like a bike and legos.” After that, she signed her new name, “Darcy Morgan Stark”.

But when Daddy saw her list, he looked very sad, like she wrote it wrong. Before she could apologize or hide, he squatted down real low. Darcy braced—for what, she didn’t know—but there was no sting on her cheek or throbbing pain like there should have been. Her teeth chattered and her eyes watered. She stared at the floor and tried not to shake. Daddy begged her to say what was wrong, but Darcy only shook harder as tears burned her cheeks and she couldn't even see him anymore.

Then, his arms wrapped around her and Mommy’s heels click-clicked fast across the floor beside Miss Nat’s quieter boots. Miss Nat said a few words as Daddy rocked Darcy and shushed and smoothed her hair. His breath got real choppy and she felt the hot splash of something wet on her forehead. Daddy lifted her up high into his arms and pressed her between him and Mommy. Her teeth wouldn’t stop chattering, so she apologized, “sorry, sorry, sorry” until she bit her tongue, but then Miss Nat said more words and she kept saying them, over and over, until Darcy understood what some of them meant.

“Mishka, you’re safe. No one here will hit. You’re safe. Your daddy loves you. Your mommy loves you. No one is angry, Mishka. You’re safe. No one will hit,” Miss Nat said over and over, running a hand down Darcy’s back.

Darcy shook her head. “No, no. It’s wrong. It’s bad. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Daddy. I’ll make it better, I promise,” she swore, hugging herself hard and pressing the bottom of her head under his chin.

“There’s nothing wrong with your list, Mishka,” Miss Nat continued. “You’ve never made one before, have you?”

Darcy shook her head.
“And you didn’t know how?” Miss Nat checked again.

Darcy hiccuped and sobbed. “I’m sorry. I tried, but I don’t know how,” she wailed, waiting for the bite and sting she knew should silence her outburst. Any second now…

“Darcy,” Senior Air Man Falcon Sam’s voice cut in over the noise. “Your list is just fine. There’s no right or wrong way to make a list.”

“It made Daddy not happy,” she pointed out with a hiccup.

“Give us a second,” Senior Air Man Sam opened his arms to Darcy.

Without looking at her Daddy or the other adults, Darcy crawled into his arms and clung to his chest real tight.

“Were you afraid of your daddy not being happy?” Senior Air Man Sam asked.

Darcy glanced at Daddy out of the corner of her eye and nodded real small for Senior Air Man Sam.

“What did you think would happen if your daddy was unhappy?” Senior Air Man Sam asked very gently.

But Darcy only shook her head. She didn’t know what would happen and that was scary.

“Did you think he would punish you?”

Darcy nodded and burrowed into Senior Air Man Sam’s chest.

“You know Tony is different than your other daddy, right?”

Darcy nodded.

“Has Tony ever hit you to punish you?”

That made Darcy stop and think real hard. She shook her head.

“Did you get confused?” Senior Air Man Sam asked, rubbing her back.

She nodded and rubbed her cheek where the knuckles should have bit into it and made it throb with heat and pain.

“You remember being hit for punishment? By your other daddy?” Senior Air Man Sam asked.

Darcy nodded.

Daddy made a noise like a sad giraffe.

“It’s hard, sometimes, trying to remember that how you live now is different than how you lived before, isn’t it?” Senior Air Man Sam asked.

Darcy nodded.

“What did you think you did wrong?”

“My list is bad. It's wrong and bad,” she whispered, pinching the skin of Senior Air Man Sam’s neck. “I never made one before for Santa.”
“And you think you did it wrong?”

Darcy lifted a shoulder as if to say “I don’t know.”

“Not knowing how someone will react is scary, especially when you remember how other people reacted in a scary or bad way before. Did you think Tony would do that, too?”

Darcy nodded, but her lip wobbled and she started to cry again, pressing her face into his neck real tight where it was warm and safe.

Senior Air Man Sam bounced very gently as he walked in a big circle around the room with Darcy on his hip, rubbing her back. “I have an idea,” he said.

“What?” Darcy sniffled.

“Making your first list for Santa and writing a letter you’ve never written before must be pretty hard, lots of pressure, huh?” he continued to walk and bounce and talk real soft just for Darcy.

She nodded.

“What if…” he drawled, “…you had some help making your list? We could all sit down together and talk about the kinds of things we asked Santa for when we were little to help you figure out what you want to ask Santa to bring you this year.”

Darcy looked at Daddy out of the corner of her eye. His face was all red and he looked like he was maybe crying, too.

*¨*.¸¸.✶*¨*

“Don’t worry about Tony right now,” Senior Air Man Sam said as he walked Darcy right out into the sun room that looked out over the Hulkey rink. The smaller Christmas tree by the breakfast table twinkled with multicolored lights and a paper chain in red and green and white, and all kinds of decorations made by kids Darcy didn’t know, and some made by her and Bucky.

“When I was your age, all I wanted was a saucer sled, so I could race the other kids in the neighborhood down the steep hill behind the auto body shop up the street from my house.” Senior Air Man Sam started swaying and Darcy felt a little bit sleepy. “You ever gone sledding?” he asked before she closed her eyes.

Darcy shook her head. “No, but Aunt Peggy sent me a toboggan sled for Christmas, so I could do it if I wanted.”

“We’ll have to make time for that, maybe a fun family night when we all go find a spot to play on the mountain and race down the hill. Do you think you’d like that?”

Darcy nodded, real sleepy now, with Senior Air Man Sam swaying like a person-shaped hammock. Darcy closed her eyes.

The next thing she remembered was waking up on the sofa at the far end of the sunroom in Miss Nat’s arms. Spread out all over the sofas and chairs and floor, their whole family had notebooks and special stationery and pencils, and sometimes, someone would read a part of their list out loud for suggestions. On the floor by Miss Nat’s leg, Daddy sat with a notebook, making a list, too, but his wasn’t for Santa.

His list said:
“What’s Daddy doing?” Darcy whispered to Miss Nat.

“Making a list of ways to teach you about celebrating Christmas, so you’ll know how to do it in the future and be less scared when you don’t know what to expect. There’s no wrong way to celebrate, but everyone learns the traditions as they grow up, like writing to Santa and visiting him at the mall,” Miss Nat answered, smoothing her hand up under Darcy’s hair and hugging her close. “I had to learn, too. Clint was very patient with me, like your Mommy and Daddy will be with you.”

Daddy added “visit Santa” to his list.

“Senior Air Man Sam said we could all go sledding, together,” Darcy pointed out to Miss Nat.

Daddy tapped that part of his list and turned to smile at Darcy over his shoulder. “Workin’ on it, kiddo.”

Which is how Darcy ended up at the top of the hill behind the chapel after the very late church service on Christmas Eve, smooshed between her Daddy and Senior Air Man Sam on her new toboggan sled, wearing a smaller version of her Daddy’s Iron Man helmet. Snow fell, thick and fluffy, all around. Next to them, Bucky sat in Captain Steve’s lap inside the captain’s shield. Bucky smiled up at Darcy’s mommy when she tapped the other Iron Kid helmet in place on Bucky’s head. He ‘oof’ed and grunted in Captain Steve’s lap. On the far side of Captain Steve and Bucky, Darcy’s mommy climbed onto a sled behind Miss Nat.

“I hope you know how to steer one of these things,” she muttered, clipping her own helmet on under her chin.

“Nope!” Miss Nat called over the noise of the Howling Commandos and Agent Clint, and the puppies carrying on in the woods and waiting their turn to go next. “Never done it before! How hard can it be?”

Senior Air Man Sam cackled like a villain in a cartoon and told Darcy to hang on tight, putting his hands down on the ground on either side of the sled and pushing and pulling them back and forth. She squeezed his middle real hard, even though Daddy’s legs tightened around her to hold her in place.

Captain Steve did the same as Senior Air Man Sam, pulling the shield back and forth until there was a nice, slippery groove in the snow to get them started.

Mommy closed her eyes and buried her face between Miss Nat’s shoulders. “If you put me in a tree a week before my wedding, Nat, so help me…”

“Wedding?” Miss Nat squawked and spun around as everyone but Senior Air Man Sam turned to
stare at Mommy.

The last thing Darcy heard as Senior Air Man Sam pushed off with a “So long, suckers!” was a cheer and people shouting congratulations, and Mommy saying all the curse words that got Agent Clint in trouble for teaching to Bucky.
“But Daddy, I wanna stay awake to meet Santa again,” Darcy grumbled as Tony and Pepper bundled her off to sleep in the playroom with Bucky where Clint’s young, archer friend Kate agreed to keep an eye on the little ones while the adults played Santa downstairs.

“You saw him at the mall on Thursday, remember?” Tony smoothed back Darcy’s hair and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“But I wanna meet Rudolph now…” she whined, giving in and letting Tony pull her ugly Christmas sweater over her head to replace it with her holiday Thor sleepshirt. By her side, Bucky complained just as loudly, but squirmed a lot more, so it took both Steve and Nat to wrestle him out of his sweater and into a Hulk PJ onesie.

“Ththeebie, whataboutathory?” Bucky muttered into the pillows as Steve Pawgers crawled onto the pile of sleeping bags on the dogs’ giant bean bag bed and laid over Bucky’s face.

“Once upon a time,” Steve whispered close to Bucky’s ear with a soft snort and a mouthful of Steve Pawgers’ thick fur, “little punks from Brooklyn shut up already and went to sleep.”

“No, we didn’t.” Bucky grinned his sleepy smartass grin at Steve as Natasha hissed at the older Brooklyn boy to knock it off.

Down the hall, Tony heard Rhodey and Clint heading downstairs with arms full of gifts, swearing at all the bunnies underfoot running from Yasha and Puggy Carter. Then, Sharon showed up in the doorway, laughing, with an armful of wiener dogs, sleepy and slightly flattened in the backpack they’d ridden back in from sledding. Behind Carter, Uncle Dum Dum carried a pig, two more bunnies, and Barky Barnes inside his coat.

“You open a zoo when nobody was looking, too?” the major demanded, dumping the whole furry, oinking bunch between the kids.

“Not yet, but give him a minute,” Steve joked under his breath.

“One pony,” Tony insisted. “That’s it. That’s all I wanted to get, but then Nat saw these guys on the inventory list from an FBI raid on a terrorist AIM cell’s base.” He gestured to the menagerie on the floor.

Kate shooed the adults toward the door and dimmed the lights, whispering, “You’re lucky if you have three or four hours to finish putting those bikes together before they wake up. Don’t stand here arguing. And send Clint up with some eggnog when he’s got a minute.”

“How old are you again?” Tony eyed the younger woman over glasses he’d swear every which way weren’t for reading.

The teen rolled her eyes. “Old enough for a shot of booze in my eggnog if I’m old enough to stay up babysitting the younger kids, DAD.”

“Bullshit,” Carter coughed into her fist.

“Dad.” Tony’s eyes bugged out of his head, his chest tight with shock. Dad. He was not prepared for
“You know, I could be back in Bed-Stuy at Clint’s place, raiding his liquor cabinet right now,” Kate pointed out.

“You forget—I’ve seen his apartment.” Nat raised one eyebrow. “You’re here because no amount of liquor could make up for the empty fridge he left behind, so stretch out on the couch and get some sleep. You can have one very civilized Bloody Mary or Mimosa with breakfast while we discuss Pepper’s wedding plans, if you behave.”

“Fine,” the teen huffed and collapsed on the couch.

“And I’ll take you to that spa at the mall the day after tomorrow, no kids, no Clint,” Natasha promised.

“YES!” Pleased with the negotiations, Kate followed Natasha’s orders, kicking off her boots and curling up on the sofa under an electric blanket. She lifted one arm and Lucky leapt over the back of the couch to scootch up under her hand.

“Night, Pizza Dog,” she murmured with a kiss between his ears.

“Night, Pittha Dog,” Bucky murmured, too, already out of it.

“Night Pizza Dog,” Darcy repeated automatically, slipping deeper into sleep.

Something crashed downstairs.

“Small fire! Nobody’s hurt!” Clint called from the great room, knocking over everything that wasn’t nailed down. “So help me, Dum-E, if you spray me with tha—aghghhh!!”

“Let’s go relieve Barton of whatever led to the fire and get the rest of those drones and bikes put together,” Natasha whispered to Steve as they bottle-necked at the door and filed out into the hall. “I’ve got plans for you later.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tony averted his eyes when Steve’s hands closed over the Widow’s very fine leather-clad buttcheeks. “These plans have anything to do with that new silky green thing I’m not supposed to know you hid in the top drawer?”

“Maybe.” She dragged a fingernail down the line of his jaw.

“If they keep it up, we’re going to need Dum-E’s fire extinguisher up here,” Pepper hissed as she emerged from the hall closet, arms full of gift-wrapping supplies.

“Young love.” Tony winked at his fiancé and happily relieved her of half her red and green burden.

“We can wrap in here.” She pointed to the guest room across the hall from their bedroom where they could wrap gifts and keep an eye out for Darcy, in case she came looking for them before sunrise. She handed another two bags off to Sharon and Uncle Dum Dum before leading Tony to the spare room.

When the door clicked shut, Tony turned around in a full circle, looking for the rest of the gifts in need of wrapping before he caught up with the sly grin on Pepper’s face as she dumped an armload of wrapping supplies haphazardly on the floor

“Your uncles wanted to fight over who got to test the drones and finish putting the bikes together,
and Peggy promised to keep Barton from setting himself on fire, so I … took advantage,” she admitted with her back pressed to the door. “Everything else is already wrapped, stockings stuffed and hung by the chimney with care,” she swore, patting the blue light of his arc reactor when he dropped his wrapping supplies, too, and got with the program. “So we’ve got a few minutes.”

“We’ve got three or four hours,” Tony reminded his love, crowding her against the door.

“Not enough by half, but it’s more than we’ve had in a month,” she sighed when Tony nibbled a line of stinging bites up the slender column of her throat.

“I don’t suppose you’ve had any deliveries of the silky green kind this week?” he checked, pulling the neck of her blouse out to peer down. A frothy cream and rose gold confection twinkled back in the low light.

“Not green.” She shook her head, chewing her bottom lip and catching at the button of his pants to start working on them.

“Pepper…” Tony groaned, closing his eyes against the promise of all that fair skin wrapped in nothing but sheer ivory silk and delicate lace. “Is that for me?”

“For the next few hours, it is,” she pledged, thumbing open the top buttons on his gift.

“Oh, no, no.” Tony’s hand covered hers. “Opening my present is the best part.”

For the rest of the early hours of Christmas morning, Pepper proved him wrong.

There were much better parts.
Can you keep a secret?

Chapter Summary

Darcy finds out Agent Clint’s been keeping a very big secret, but then again ... so has Darcy.

Chapter Notes

I pretty much wrote an entire prequel to this story just so I could include this scene and one more like it later on. *sing-songs* I hope you’re caught up on the prequel!

One-word prompt: dragon

Pre-read by phoenix_173

Suggested listening: Light by Sleeping At Last

>>==========>

It was still dark when Darcy opened her eyes.

Quietly, she gathered up Thor’s cape and her Bucky Bear, and crept out of her sleeping bag on the puppies’ bed in the playroom, tiptoeing past Agent Clint’s friends, Katie and Pizza Dog. Only… Pizza Dog lifted his head and watched Darcy for a few seconds before slipping off the sofa to walk with her down the hall. Pizza Dog didn’t walk like the other dogs. His nails didn’t clack-clack on the wood floor. He walked real quiet like Miss Nat, bumping Darcy from time to time to nudge her around a table she couldn’t see in the dark or herd her away from a tree-scented candle someone accidentally left burning on the chest of drawers full of extra blankets around the corner from the playroom where the hallway opened into a larger room with chairs and a low table. Senior Air Man Sam sat there with Dr. Bruce, sometimes, drinking hot drinks from big mugs and taking naps after lunch.

First, she peered into her own bedroom, checking that everything was right where she left it when she and Bucky played coffee shop yesterday because Darcy and Bucky didn’t wanna play tea party, no matter how many tea sets they found in the old toy chests in the playroom. Her bed was still made, even though she napped in it sometimes when she was up late with Daddy the night before in the shop. Usually, she slept in the big bed with Daddy and Mommy and the puppies. Their room was a few doors down. She almost stubbed her toe and banged up her whole face on the way there, but Pizza Dog suddenly appeared right in front of her and kept her face from smashing the open door.

She peeked inside Daddy’s room, but the bed was empty. No Daddy. No Mommy. No doggies. But she heard a noise across the hall, so she hitched Thor’s cape up over her shoulder and patted Pizza Dog in thanks for saving her face on the way to check out the noise. The door wasn’t closed quite tight, so Pizza Dog helpfully nosed it open.
In the guest room, Darcy’s Daddy and Mommy were asleep, snuggled all cozy together in the middle of the bed where Darcy usually slept. There were only a few candles burning low and no night light to see by, with clothes all over the floor, and the blankets didn’t cover them all up. Darcy looked away, blinking at Pizza Dog, who smiled his big doggy smile.

“Hey, what’re you doing up, Darce?” Agent Clint whispered from a few feet away, peeking into the guest room when he stopped by her side. “Uh oh.” He smiled real big and pulled the door closed as he herded them back out into the hallway, giving Pizza Dog a look like he ought to know better.

“I don’t know why I woke up,” Darcy informed her daddy's friend.

“Bathroom?” he checked, eyeing her suspiciously.

Darcy thought about it. Maybe. She nodded, so Agent Clint picked her up and carried her down the hall to the nearest guest bathroom since she couldn't see so good as him in the dark.

“You need help, or you got this?” he asked when he set her down inside the bathroom and turned the dial for the nighttime lighting on.

“I can do it,” she promised, so Agent Clint offered to wait for her in the hallway. When she was all done and washed her hands, there he was, waiting right where he said he would.

“I was gonna go sit in the sunroom and watch the snow. You wanna come with me and watch, too, until you feel sleepy again?” Agent Clint asked.

That sounded like a good idea to Darcy. She felt too antsy to sleep, so she told him so.

He smiled real big like his doggy. “That’s because it’s Christmas. Everybody is too excited to sleep on Christmas.”

“Not Daddy and Mommy,” she reminded Agent Clint.

He laughed, then poked his cheek with his tongue. “Well, they had a big day. I heard they’re getting married.”

It was Darcy’s turn to smile real big. “Mommy said she’d marry Daddy and become my mommy for real, and we’d be a family forever, and maybe I’ll get to be a big sister!” She bounced in her slipper boots, so super extra excited!

Agent Clint laughed so hard, he choked. “You should definitely remind your mommy of that part at breakfast in a few hours.” Then, he got impatient with Darcy’s very short legs and picked her up for the walk down the stairs. She snuggled him real close and put her face in that same spot where Daddy wore his cologne on his neck above the blue light in his chest.

“You smell nice,” she said, rubbing her cheek against his soft, warm T-shirt, wrapping her legs around his middle when he unzipped the hoodie to wrap around her and keep her extra warm.

“You’re the only one who thinks so, Darce.” He rubbed her back real gently and she started to feel drowsy, petting the silky corner of Thor's cape and squeezing her Bucky Bear between her and Agent Clint. “You want some cocoa?”

She was about to say ‘no’ when Agent Clint carried her into the sunroom and the twinkling rainbow lights bounced up down and all around the room in the dark, lighting up the thick blanket of soft snow all over the roof, and clinging to the window panes, and piled up against the outside of the walls.
“Ohh…” she breathed, reaching out to trace a circle in the little cloud her breath made against the glass when Agent Clint got close enough for her to see beyond the glass. Outside, it looked like something out of a frozen fairy tale. “It’s like magic,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” Agent Clint agreed, and she watched him in his reflection, swaying barefoot in front of the glass with Pizza Dog leaning against the front of his legs. He hugged Darcy real close and kissed her head, and the swaying brought Darcy’s cozy, sleepy feeling right back, except … something tickled her nose. Twice.

“Quit it, Agent Clint,” Darcy muttered, but he didn’t quit it.

“Aw, Birdie, no,” Agent Clint hissed, letting go of Darcy with one hand to pull at something draped over his shoulder from behind his neck.

Darcy blinked her eyes real hard, but when she opened them wide, there was a tiny lizard there, with its very tiny claws digging into the back of Agent Clint’s neck.

A tiny lizard with wings.

“Birdie, we talked about this.” Agent Clint pried the little lizard off of his neck and cradled her against his chest by Darcy’s hair. “Nobody is supposed to know about you,” he scolded the little lizard.

“What is it?” Darcy asked, itching to pet its big blue-ish purple ears and glittering grey-blue-purple scales with a fingertip.

Agent Clint sighed. “If I tell you…” He made a face, like he wasn’t sure he should say anything else. “She’s a secret, Darce. Nobody is supposed to know she’s here except me and—”

“What?” she demanded, giggling when the lizard scrabbled across Agent Clint’s hoodie to nudge happily under Darcy’s hand for soft pats. It made a whistling noise that sounded like Darcy’s name. “She knows me,” Darcy realized.

“When you were big,” Agent Clint explained, crossing the sunroom to settle down under the covers on one of the big, puffy sofas with Darcy and the little lizard (Pizza Dog hopped up after them and curled against Agent Clint’s side), “you and I visited a place called Asgard, where Thor is from, because we were very good friends. While we were visiting, Birdie hatched from an egg in the fireplace. That’s how teacup dragons incubate—near a fire.”

“She’s a real baby dragon?” Darcy couldn’t even believe it, but Agent Clint pulled something out of his hoodie pocket—a funny ring that fit over two fingers. He used it to open a hole right in the air. Then, he reached through it and pulled out a small squeaker toy shaped like a new penny. Birdie squawked happily and made gimme hands with her claws until Agent Clint handed it over from the magic hole in the air. “Whoa,” Darcy breathed.

“It’s magic,” Agent Clint said like he was confessing a secret. Very carefully, he closed the hole so no one could even tell it was there. “The place where we found Birdie—the people there don’t like teacup dragons. They’re messy and they make trouble sometimes, so when you were a grownup, we both decided she would stay with me, instead of on Asgard where it’s not very safe for her as a baby without a grownup dragon mommy or daddy to keep an eye on her.”

“So you…” Darcy looked between the little dragon and Agent Clint and Pizza Dog, connecting the dots easily. “You ’dopted her to keep her safe? Like Daddy ’dopted me?”

Agent Clint smiled real softly and kissed Darcy’s forehead. “Yeah. She probably shouldn’t be on Ear
“— in New York, so I’ve gotta keep it quiet for now, you know?”

“So she’s a secret?” Darcy double-checked.

“Yeah, to keep her safe, she’s gotta be a secret for now,” Agent Clint admitted. "Can you keep a secret?"

She nodded.

“I have a secret, too,” Darcy confessed, feeling very sneaky now that she was in on Agent Clint’s tiny dragon secret.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Darcy reached into the folds of Thor’s cape and closed her eyes, wishing real hard. When her palm got real warm, she smiled and pulled back the cape to show Agent Clint what she could do with Thor’s cape.

In her hand sat a perfect, tiny kitten, no bigger than Birdie, covered in orange and black tiger stripes just like she wished for.

“Holy shit,” Agent Clint swore when the tiny kitten opened its mouth and roared like a life sized tiger.

“I named him Tony after Daddy,” Darcy informed her grownup friend, laying her head on his chest to introduce Tony to Birdie.
"Good morning!" Nat called, coming in from her shift running the perimeter and looking through the early hours’ security feed since Barton’s last check-in at four o’clock.

Usually, he came to trade off with her in person, but with the main lodge bursting with people and nearly a dozen more in the outlying cottages, it was likely he’d become sidetracked and left Nat to wake up with her alarm. Of course Steve woke, too, and insisted on accompanying her for the early morning perimeter check, but she sent him off to see that Bucky’s breakfast consisted of more fruit than Nutella with his waffles while she sat down with Maria, who had her hands full vetting security teams for the children, in case they remained children for very much longer.

Thankfully, with the arrival of the Howling Commandos, the team could rely on a few more trustworthy hands with security experience to keep the secret of the children from any curious reporters and photographers, and both groups far enough from the property line to give the children all the room to roam they would need without feeling hemmed in by that invisible boundary. Dernier, Morita, Dugan, and Falsworth all tracked her down during her morning check-in to volunteer their assistance, and she’d gotten texts overnight from Peggy and Gabe, as well as the younger Carter and Rhodes, to offer the same. Split up amongst more than a dozen people, they could easily give Tony a week off the security rota to plan the details of a last-minute wedding with Pepper.

“Mornin’.” Bucky grinned his sweet, toothless grin, dragging his gaze from the coloring book and waffle remnants in front of him up to his big sister’s face. “Thanta came.” He pointed to the empty bottle of Coke and the crumb-covered plate of cookies the children almost forgot to leave out for Santa the night before at bedtime in all their excitement about the holiday.
“I heard he does that most Christmas mornings.” She gave in to the urge to lean over and ruffle his messy bed hair.

“Aw, Nat, quit it,” he whined for form’s sake, but ducked his head to hide his smile at the familiar treatment.

“It’s almost noon; if Santa’s already been and gone, why are you still at the table?” she asked, leaning back to peer through the door from the breakfast nook in the sunroom out to the great room, where some of the adults had begun to gather with steaming mugs of coffee and cocoa to search beneath the tree for gifts with their name on the tag.

“Darthy’th thtill thleepin’. “ Bucky hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the cozy conversation area at the other end of the long room.

“You’re waiting for Darcy?” Nat was surprised. Christmas had been the only topic of conversation over every meal for more than a week, Bucky and Darcy were so excited.

“I don’t mind.” He grinned his darling, toothless grin again and Nat melted.

“You’re such a gentleman, James Buchanan.” She pecked him on the lips when he puckered up for the expected kiss every time one of the ladies of the household told him what a precious darling he was being.

“I twy.” He shrugged and returned to his coloring book, sifting it to the bottom of the pile and pulling out a drawing full of crayon renditions of everyone he knew.

“You’re missing someone,” she hinted, checking it over carefully for someone Bucky never would have missed as an adult.

Bucky stared at the page, then flipped open one of the Avengers coloring books on the table to page through.

“Oh,” he said after a few moments. “Hawkath.” His cheek dimpled on the word and she couldn’t bring herself to correct the little brat.

“Oh, yeah.” Nat rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“He’th thtill nappin’, too,” Bucky added conversationally, scribbling in a comical image of the blond archer in a purple pizza t-shirt to match the one he wore last night (“Live Free, Pie Hard”) between Nat and Darcy, with Pizza Dog by his side.

“Napping?” Nat turned slightly and tilted her head to get a better look at the sleeping mound of blankets on the sectional at the end of the room. On the floor, a pair of tiny, teal slipper boots sat beside Pizza Dog’s favorite tennis ball. Dangling above them, a calloused, mens size eleven foot hung off the couch beside a long, fluffy tail of the golden variety. Nat rose to her feet with a “Merry Christmas, sweetie,” for Bucky, and went to investigate.

At the top of the covers, in the corner of the sectional, Darcy’s riot of brown curls spilled over the back of the sofa and across the blankets, even covering Barton’s sleeping face. Darcy’s arms were thrown up over her head where she lay on her back on top of Clint with his arms wrapped carefully around her middle to keep her from tipping off the couch or being crushed against the rear cushions if she rolled one way or the other. The remnants of several servings of Rosa’s mocha latte and hot cocoa mix were scattered across the coffee table. Crumbs that looked suspiciously like the ones left out for Santa were scattered across the table, too. Beside one of the mugs, she noticed Clint’s hearing aids.
Cautious not to startle him, she touched his wrist. He came immediately awake without any clue to give away his alert state except the slight change in breathing someone less familiar with him would have missed. She waited while he assessed his surroundings before opening his eyes.

“Good morning,” Nat signed when he blinked awake. “Trouble sleeping?” She pointed to Darcy.

Careful to avoid disturbing the sleeping girl, Clint signed, “She went looking for Tony and Pepper in the middle of the night. Figured they could use the night alone, so I brought her down here to watch the snow fall until she got sleepy again, and…” He spread his hands out to indicate the late night feast and dozing five year old.

Another brown head of hair popped up from under the covers at the end of the couch. Barky Barnes blinked his sleepy blues eyes at everyone before wiggling loose and worming his way up the covers to snuffle at Darcy.

“You doing okay with all this?” Nat signed, gesturing at Darcy and back towards the breakfast table, where Bucky sat, drawing a family portrait in crayon.

Barton rolled his lips, thinking over his answer, before he signed his response, “I just want her to be happy—both of them—whatever comes out of all this.”

“But you miss her,” Nat signed.

“Always,” Clint signed back immediately. “I love this adorable kid like she was my own, but she isn’t my best friend. I feel so … disconnected.”

“You’re the only reason there’s distance between you. If you explained to Tony and Pepper—”

“That I’m pining for my best friend?” Clint signed with a snort of derision, breaking eye contact to pat Barky Barnes’ butt so he’d settle without waking Darcy.

“That, as someone who loves her, you’d like to play a larger role in her second childhood, to make sure she’s as happy and loved as she deserves. You can be more to her than distant, weird Uncle Clint, who juggles and eats too much pizza, and you know it,” she signed, using every nuance of body language to convey her disappointment in his decision to keep his distance.

“What if I’m not good for her?” Clint signed after a minute’s humming silence.

“According to whom?” she demanded.

“Me,” he mouthed, wrapping his arms around the girl and pressing a kiss to the crown of her head.

“And what if you’re being too hard on yourself?” she signed right back. “What if you could personally see to her happiness and you don’t, and she misses out on the experience of knowing and loving you as family now? Or worse: returns to her adult state and ends up confused and hurt by the distance you’ve kept? Stop overthinking it.” She swatted at his arm. “She’d be the best Aunt Darcy you ever had, if your positions were reversed.”

At that, Clint smiled. “Yeah, she would,” he signed with a resigned nod.

“Do better,” Nat signed, rising to her feet as Bucky sidled over to show off his completed drawing.

“It’s lovely,” she praised the boy. “Tell me about it.” She took a seat on the short end of Clint’s sectional and raised an arm for Bucky to crawl under for a snuggle.
“Thith ith our famiwy now. I drawed a pictchure tho I’d a’member everboby’th nameth.” He pointed to the nuclear family at the front. “Thith it you and me and Ththeebie, and Darthy, her mom, and pop, and thith ith Hawkath.” He tapped the purple scribble with the golden yellow scribble beside it.

“Clint,” Nat corrected. “No more Hawkass, no matter how funny you and Sam think it is. Clint is family—”

“Wike I’m ya brovuh?” Bucky asked, incredulous, unaware Clint had put in his hearing aids to listen in.

“Yes. Before I had you and Steve, Clint and Darcy were my only family. They’re very special to me. Clint deserves more respect than you’re giving him.” She gave him a gentle squeeze, delighted when Bucky squeezed her right back.

Bucky bit his bottom lip and glanced up at Nat. “Thorry.”

“Show me you’re sorry rather than telling me.”

“How?”

“How would you feel about calling him Uncle Clint?” Nat suggested.

“Do I hafta?”

“No,” she assured him. “But it’s a simple way to show respect to an adult, especially one who’s such an important part of your family.”

“Why ith he tho impo’tant?”

“A long time ago,” Nat braced herself to tell the bare bones of the story again, for little ears, “before I worked for S.H.I.E.L.D., I made a name for myself. I have a very specific skill set. For a time, I didn’t care who I used it for, or on. I ended up on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s radar for all the wrong reasons. Clint was sent to … to kill me. He made a different call.”

“He wath gonna kiww you?” Bucky’s eyes went round like saucers.

“Those were his orders.” Nat shrugged, knowing death would have been kind, under the circumstances. She was doing more than just taking the worst kinds of jobs. She was courting death, daring someone to do what she couldn’t bring herself to, at the time, with no one and nothing to live for.

Then Clint blew into her life one day with a bow slung over his back and an offer: a choice.

“Why didn’t he?” Bucky demanded, growing impatient with her silence.

“I couldn’t start over like you and Darcy get to by being children again, but I could work to make things right—undo the bad and put some good out into the world before someone else came along like Clint with orders to kill me. He saw that I was sad and alone, and then he showed me that I didn’t have to be anymore.”

“Tho…” Bucky thought long and hard, squeezing Nat extra tight for reassurance. “He thaved you?”

“He did,” she confirmed.

“I gueth I could caww him Unca Cwint, thinthe he thaved ya wife and all…” Then he added one caveat, “But I thill get to pway prankh on him.” Clearly this was a dealbreaker.
“Fair enough,” she agreed easily, then whispered, “What do you have in mind for the next one?”

“Mith Wotha thaid he keepth drinkin’ outta tha pitther of Kool-Aid in the kitthen.” Bucky dropped his voice, so even Clint’s hearing aids wouldn’t pick up his next words. “I wath thinkin’ ‘bout puttin’ jewwo in it inthtead,” he said with a wink.

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Chapter Summary

Bucky finds out there's such a thing as too many cookies, but recovers in time for a big surprise.

Chapter Notes

One-word prompt: overindulgence

“We were thinking you could perform the ceremony, so Rhodey is free to be my best man,” Darcy’s pop told Stevie as Bucky lay on his back inside the train track oval under the big Christmas tree in the great room. The toy train he’d been dying to play with chug-chugged and woo-wooed, but Bucky couldn’t even enjoy it right now.

“James?” Nat called, bending down in her softest soft, purple flannel pajamas that Uncle Clint gave her for Christmas. She glanced around in the higher branches and had to kneel down to peer underneath the branches past the tool set for adjusting his new bike, to look for him.

“Wha?” Bucky grunted, trying not to upset his belly by moving too much. Steve Pawgers was not helping. He kept snuffling at Bucky's face to get after the cookie crumbs on the floor.

“There are a few of these white chocolate macadamia cookies left, if you’d like one. Pepper saved them just for you. There’s chocolate milk, too.”

“No wight now,” Bucky whispered, feeling green at the mention of more cookies and chocolate milk. “Maybe water on.”

Or maybe never.

Bucky wasn’t ever gonna even look at another cookie again if he could help it. Not even the pineapple ones. His belly gurgled in protest.

“Are you feeling alright?” Nat pressed her face to the carpet just beyond the ring of branches and lights.

“No,” Bucky admitted sadly, feeling real sick and sorry for himself. Why’d he eat all those cookies?

“Oh, sweetheart.” Nat made a sad face at him, then turned to speak to someone over her shoulder. “He’s not feeling well, Steve— No, no. I don’t think you can squeeze under. Maybe Butterfingers could…” her voice trailed off as she debated how to retrieve Bucky from under the tree without upsetting his stomach any more than it already was and Bucky just had to tune her out because moving sounded terrible.
“I got ‘im. Hey, kid,” another grownup voice said a minute later, “stay where you are. Just be a sec.” The tree branches shivered overhead and a few pine needles fell. Then, Bucky’s Uncle Clint was there, wriggling on his belly over the train tracks with a small basin and a pillow. He handed Bucky the basin and carefully slid the pillow under Bucky’s head so he could turn on his side. “Just stay right here for a bit. It’ll pass.”

“How’d ya know dat?” Bucky grumbled, crabby and cranky as he’d ever been in his whole life. He clutched his belly and rocked on his side, leaning over the basin as sweat ran down his back and neck and Steve Pawgers licked him again.

“Me and Pizza Dog once split a three-week-old stromboli and we survived.” He sort of shrugged, but he pushed Steve Pawgers away towards someone else on the other side of the tracks who offered to help, so that was something, at least. “All you had was too many cookies.”

“I’m nebuh touchin’ cookieth again,” Bucky swore, and he meant it, too.

“Yeah, that’s what we all say.” Uncle Clint smiled extra big and wriggled some more until he was close enough to rub Bucky’s back under the tree near the big red stand full of yucky water and pine needles. (Usually, he loved playing with his Matchbox boats in the water under the very big tree, but not so much today.) The rubbing didn’t help Bucky's belly much, but it was a nice distraction for a few minutes and he felt a little better just for having company and a grownup so close in case he started feeling even worse. Bucky leaned into the archer’s whole hand on the next pass down his neck and shoulders, and Uncle Clint took the hint. He rubbed Bucky’s back more firmly for a long time until his upset belly settled.

“Better?” Uncle Clint checked after a while, when Bucky quit rocking so much to make his belly better.

Bucky nodded. “Why you bein’ tho nithe when I wath a bwat befo’?” Bucky felt real bad about calling him Hawkass all those times now.

“Everybody’s a brat when they’re six.” Uncle Clint propped himself up on his hand and kept rubbing Bucky's back real gentle like. “I overheard you talking to Nat this morning.”

“Oh.” Bucky turned his head, relieved when his belly didn’t empty itself all over under the tree. “Thorry abou’ that. I’m weal gwad ya wike Nat’th brovuh. Thee needth ta hab a famiwy, too, wike I got and wike Darthy got.”

“I heard Darcy’s gonna have even more family soon,” Uncle Clint said with a smile, just rubbing and rubbing Bucky’s back for what felt like forever.

“Ith Mith Peppuh habbin’ a baby‽” Bucky yelped when he realized what Uncle Clint said.

All the noise in the great room stopped like somebody yanked the needle off a Victrola.

“Uh oh. Did I wet da cat outta da bag?” Gosh, Bucky's voice was awful loud in the suddenly quiet room.

“No, Bucky, it's fine,” Miss Pepper said through the Christmas tree. It sounded like she was laughing. “A wedding is plenty of excitement all on its own without a baby on the way.”

“—Christ. Almost had a heart attack,” Tony’s voice filtered through the pine needles next.

“But…” Darcy whined. “I told Santa I wished real hard for a baby brother or sister for Christmas.”
Uncle Clint clapped a hand over his mouth to keep in the big laugh that wanted to escape. Bucky wondered if Uncle Clint knew what Bucky knew about what happened sometimes when Darcy made a wish while she was wearing Thor’s cape.

“One Ironlette is enough for now, don’t you think?” Tony asked, then he called louder, like he wanted to make sure Bucky could hear him. “In fact, when those cookies settle, you should come on out here so you can see your surprise.”

Surprise? Bucky loved surprises.

Bellyache forgotten, he rolled over and army-crawled out from under the tree with his archer uncle not far behind. Just as he crawled clear, Stevie was there waiting with a bottle of kids bellyache medicine in watermelon flavor. Bucky took three. You could never be too conservative when it came to medicine flavored like candy.

“What is it, Daddy?” Darcy asked over by the fireplace, dancing on her tiptoes to try to reach the thing he held over her head.

“Hang on, hang on,” he laughed, flicking on a switch in the bright silver thing he held that looked like Thor’s winged helmet toy that Darcy wore all the time since Uncle Clint gave it to her. “It’s a scaled-down version of the Iron Man helmet, made just for you, with a HUD that—”

“What’s a HUD?” Darcy interrupted, grabbing for the extra-shiny Thor helmet and plunking it on her head. “Oh…” she said, as if something real special was inside the helmet when an orange-y colored mesh screen flashed across the face part of the opening in the helmet. Barky Barnes barked at the ends of Thor’s cape twirling across the stone part of the floor as Darcy turned in circles, looking around at some somethings only she could see.

“HUD stands for Heads Up Display,” Tony explained, clipping metal things on Darcy’s arms that opened and curved between her fingers and wrapped up high around her elbows. Dum-E pushed a pair of metal boots up real close behind her that opened automatically and closed over her slipper boots, wrapping up her legs to the knee, making her gasp at the feel of the cold metal around her knees.

“These,” he pointed to a second set of hand and leg things in a crate, “are for you, Bucky.”

Darcy’s pop’s other robot, U, and Darcy’s Uncle Rhodey pulled out a black helmet shaped like Stevie’s Captain America cowl. The bot offered it in its claw towards Bucky. On the front of the shiny, black half-helmet, there was a thin outline of a red hourglass shape just like the one on Nat’s uniform belt. The hand and leg things in the crate were black, too, with red stripes going down the sides to match the design on the helmet.

Darcy’s helmet was a little different. A collar thing appeared out of the bottom of it and her pop showed her how to wrap Mr. Thor’s cape over her shoulders so the collar would gather up the slack and make it into a small, Darcy-sized cape.

Clumsy as ever, Butterfingers pulled the other hand and leg things out of the crate and lifted them, one awkward claw at a time, to offer to Bucky, who stuck his arms and legs out as the bot prompted him for each one.

“Now, inside the house, the Ironlette boots have much more limited capabilities: plain boots or rollerblades, mostly. To really see what the boots can do, we gotta go outside.” Darcy’s pop waggled his eyebrows and made a hand motion like Uncle Clint’s sign language in front of Darcy’s Heads Up Display.
Her shiny silver boots lifted an inch or two off the floor and she started rolling towards the door, laughing, “Daddy! I’m not a robot!”

“Nope, you’re Iron Kid.”

“What’th that make me?” Bucky demanded to know as Uncle Clint made the same motion as Darcy’s pop and Bucky started rolling towards the door, too. “Hey, I’m tawkin’ hewe!”

“The Iron Sidecar!” Darcy’s pop called after him as Bucky’s boots rumbled onto the porch and towards the front stairs.

“Uh oh.” Bucky didn’t like where this was going at all. He tried to stop, but the boots just kept on going until he teetered on the top stair and the things on his hands forced his fingers back at a weird angle. Darcy’s Uncle Rhodey popped the half-helmet on Bucky’s head and the HUD lit up like Christmas lights, showing Bucky all kinds of neat stuff inside the mask. Jarvis’ voice warned him to brace himself. Then, a white-blue light got real bright in the middle of each of his hands and his arms shook as the lights pushed against the things wrapped around his arms. The feel of the porch under his feet fell away and more lights shined from the bottom of his boots. He drifted into the yard, maybe four or five feet above the ground, as Jarvis steered him over to Darcy hovering in the front yard, too, with her cape billowing majestically like a magical unicorn’s hair in the wind.

“Howy cow,” Bucky whispered. “I can fwy.”
What’th uphtairth?

Chapter Summary

See, the thing Bucky knows about Christmas is ... a fella might get all kinds'a fun stuff, but it's too cold to ride your brand new bicycle or jump on your new trampoline, and too windy for your new r/c drones, and all your new toys are in boxes that a fella can't even open without an adult and scissors and a special college degree in unstickin' that sticky stuff on the back of boxes tape, so once you unwrapped all'a your new stuff from Santa, you're pretty much stuck waitin' on the grewedups to open boxes with safety cutter things and put in the right batteries, and then there's not even anything fun to do while you wait.

TL;DR: Bucky is bad at waiting.

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to my awesome beta babes, phoenix_173 and Zephrbabe, both of whom make every single update on this fic possible.

Gosh, Bucky sure did love his swell, new Iron-Widow boots and all.

When it got too cold to play outside, everybody headed into the dining hall for coffee and the little colored cookies that melted right in your cocoa and warm milk—the ones Bucky usually loved so much. Only… Bucky had enough of cookies for a while, so he decided to do some exploring. Jarvis promised to keep an eye on him when he tried to go up past the third floor and a real quiet warning sounded in the house that Bucky was too many feet above the ground in his special boots. Uncle Clint came along to check on him, but he didn’t say Bucky couldn’t continue up the stairs behind the playroom, so Bucky figured it must be okay.

(Darcy was havin’ a nap. She ran into a tree while they were playing Iron-tag out in the yard—not hard, but Stevie said it maybe scared her and she needed cuddles and some time with her Mommy and Daddy and her Bucky Bear to feel better. And that’s why everybody started making loud yawns and talking about how chilly they were, and making the cookie face at Miss Rosa about the coffee.)

“Hey, Jarbith?” Bucked asked the ceiling where he figured Jarvis’ circuits and motherboardy parts lived in the house.

“How may I assist you today, Master Barnes?”

“Doeth thith houthe hab any thecwet pathageth or, wike, fun pwaceth fo’ kidth to pway?”

“Does the playroom on the second level not meet your requirements, Master Barnes?”
“Nah, it’s okay, juth… Me an’ Darthy pwetty much pwayed wif all’a toyth aweady. It’s mothly juth got dem thixth tea thetth and fanthy-fun dweth-up clotheth, and me and Darthy don’t wanna pway tea pawty.”

“Yet you received many new toys and gifts just today, young sir.”

“Yeah, but…” Bucky lifted a shoulder like Stevie sometimes did when he was trying to find a better word or somethin’. “They’we all thtill inna boxtheth and it’s too cold fo’ widin’ ou’ new biketh and pwayin’ onna new twampowine.”

Bucky sighed. Trying to explain to the house robot was real hard—how he was itchy and crawly under his skin to just do something. How was he apposed to esplain?

“Do you mean to say you’re restless from lacking physical activity, Master Barnes?”

“Um, yeah, maybe dat.” Bucky lifted one booted foot and the greaves readusted on ‘im, fitting closer to his shins and around his feet so he could climb the stairs better. “I wath jutht finkin’ about havin’ a wook awound, you know? It’s a weal big houthe and we ain’t eben theen all ob it yet. What’s upthtairth?”

“Do you mean to say you’re restless from lacking physical activity, Master Barnes?”

“Um…” Bucky screwed up his lips and scratched his head under his Iron-Widow helmet. “How many lebelth are dere?”

A nifty 3D hologram of the Lodge at Camp Stark appeared in front of Bucky. He poked at all the walls and rooms, and pulled on the edges of the hologram like he saw Tony do sometimes, so he could peek into the rooms up real close and see what all of ‘em were for. As he touched each one, Jarvis explained:

“The Lodge at Camp Stark is comprised of seven primary levels of living space for its capital residents. Below the main lodge level, there are four sub-basement levels and one full basement level, with a secondary adjunct on sub-level four containing a secure wine vault and silver-polishing room. A tertiary adjunct on the basement level provides access to a root cellar as well as cool seed storage. Armories and panic rooms can be found on all full, sub-, and half-levels, while an underground shooting range and its accompanying outdoor long range are both connected to sub-level two by way of Camp Stark’s underground tunnel system. A retired fallout shelter is also accessible via the basement level tunnel accessway.”

Bucky was about to ask Jarvis a question when the house started talking again, filling in Bucky on the rooms he hadn’t even got to pointing to yet on the hologram:

“Above the seven primary floors of living space, the lodge hosts several half-levels, so-named due to their much lower ceilings and reduced scenic views. These include a staff accommodation level with dormitories for single staff members as well as seasonal staff; another half-level of married and family staff suites, long term, single staff studio apartments, and an uninhabited majordomo apartment; as well as staff recreation areas considered strictly off-limits to capital residents of the lodge such as yourself.”

Bucky blew out an annoyed breath. So a bunch of fun stuff was probably locked up tight and wouldn’t let him in without the fancy finger locks he hadn’t figured out how to pick. Yet.

“Above these half-levels, the lodge has two additional attic half-levels, home to long term and seasonal furniture and decor storage, primarily, with climate-controlled archive, art storage, and trunk
rooms, the doll room, a schoolroom, the lodge’s original nursery, the nursery dining room, nursery staff suites, a nursery staff sitting and dining room, a food preparation area for the nursery, a gift-wrapping room, sewing and fitting rooms, a climate-controlled, textile and linen storage room, and an overflow trunk room that has never been used to hold anything but a pingpong table Sir and his young friends haven’t used since the early nineteen-eighties.”

Bucky blew out another breath because, boy, oh boy, that was a lot of rooms he probably didn’t much care about, but some of ‘em sure sounded like they might be fun to poke around in while he was waitin’ for Christmas dinner to be ready. Stevie and Nat had snuck off for the coffee before Bucky even reached the front door with Darcy earlier, but by the time he climbed the grand staircase, their bedroom door was closed and locked from the inside. Yasha, Puggy Carter, and four bunnies sat outside the door, just starin’ at it, but Bucky had learned his lesson the hard way. You couldn’t even pay him in cookies to open a closed door knowin’ Stevie and Nat were behind it, especially if it was locked.

“There are also, of course, the secret passages,” Jarvis interrupted Bucky’s amemberin’.

That sure got a fella’s attention. He looked up from the holodoohickey.

“Tell me mo’ about dethe thecwet pathageth, Jarbith…”
Chapter Summary

Bucky learns to never hork your cookies into a wicker wastebasket in this chapter, among other things, but he wants you to know that wicker advice is solid and should not be dismissed lightly.

Chapter Notes

I hope you all don’t mind that updating this fic has become something of a holiday tradition. I’d hope to work on it this summer, but I had some heart problems in June that made it very difficult to write, followed by a lot of anxiety in the months since that made writing humor even more difficult. I never forgot about this story, but I did prioritize and decide to work on this when I’m at my best and can give it 100% of my time and effort. I sincerely hope the many updates I’m planning to post this month live up to the long wait. You’ve been very patient, for the most part, and I appreciate every supportive and encouraging note you’ve left on this story without demanding more updates or adding more undue anxiety to the pressure I’m already putting on myself to post more regular updates. It means the world to me to have that kind of fandom support. Thank you.

*stretches and does a few laps to warm up my rusty kidfic humor*

*lubes my funny bones*

*cracks knuckles for good measure*

It's been a while since last Christmas; let's see if I still remember how this goes. ;-)

One-word prompt: elevator

Suggested listening: “The Smithsonian” by Henry Jackman from the Captain America: The Winter Soldier Motion Picture Soundtrack and "Toora Loora Looral", an old Irish lullaby performed by Bing Crosby.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Bucky climbed the back stairway, Jarvis must’a noticed how hard it was for him to climb the stairs in his Iron-Widow suit. The booster boots and gauntlets retracted and folded up even tighter to real small bands around his wrists and ankles. If he had a long-sleeve shirt or a jacket on with his jeans when he went out somewhere, nobody could even tell he wore the gauntlets and boosters the way they folded up so small and neat under his clothes. And they were comfortable, too! Even the cowl helmet he wore folded up real small until he was just wearing something that felt like sunglasses or real fancy goggles.
Tony sure did a swell job designing Bucky’s Iron-Widow playsuit. Bucky wondered if he’d be allowed to help in the shop when Tony decided to fiddle with the designs again. Bucky loved Tony’s shop and playin’ with the bots and all. It was like the comic books come to life, the ones him and Stevie used to look at together.

If only Bucky could learn to behave himself better and not get put in the taped off kidzone with the bots for touchin’ stuff he oughtn’t oughta.

At least he didn't have to wear a Dunce cap like Dummy. That bot was always gettin' into scrapes in the workshop and got put in timeout in the kidzone even more than Bucky and Darcy all put together.

Bucky sighed. He missed playin’ with little Stevie and all the good times they had playin’ stickball out behind the church on Saturdays when the other fellas didn’t give Stevie too hard a time about his wheezin’. Not that playin’ coffee shop and buildin’ robots with Darcy and the bots wasn’t just as good’a fun, but … Bucky missed a lot of things about Brooklyn.

His ma, for starters. His pop, too. And they just brought him home a baby sister not so long ago, except … the way he figured, it must’a been a real long time ago now, since he was a growedup before the accident that made him six again.

“Jarbith?” Bucky asked as he reached the fifth residential floor and wandered down the hall towards the room with the blinking cursor on his heads up display. Inside, the room was neat as a pin. It looked like a dormitory or somethin’, like the ones the kids who lived in the orphanage slept in when Steve and Bucky went over after school to play jacks with Otter MacAdams. (Sometimes, Bucky wondered what happened to Otter, too, and if people still called him Otter as a growedup or used his Christian name all formal and fancy-like.)

“Yes, Master Barnes?” Jarvis replied, flashing a light from the HUD on the catch to pop open a cabinet Jarvis promised led to a passageway to all the good stuff in the attic. Bucky eyed the weird capsule inside that looked like it come right outta the comics like Darcy’s pop’s workshop.

“Remin’ me water,” Bucky said, stepping into the capsule with an arm braced outside to keep it from closing before he was ready. “I wanna know what happened ta my baby thtithter, Webecca Barneth. Thetbe neber thaid anything about her thpethificawwy. I hope thhe’th okay.”

After a long pause, Jarvis replied quietly, “She lived a good life, young sir, and was a celebrated soldier, and SSR and S.H.I.E.L.D. agent in her own right.”

Bucky’s lip wobbled. “My wittle baby thtithter’th gone, too?”

“I’m so very sorry, Master Barnes.” And Jarvis somehow sounded sad even though he was just a robot house. “Records indicate she died in the early nineteen-sixties after a difficult battle with a form of cancer that would likely still be termed very rare today. The records show Sir’s father, Howard Stark, used many of Stark Industries’ medical resources to try to help S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Rebecca Barnes at the request of her former supervising officer, Major Dugan, but the cancer was advanced and her time was much too short for the work needed to find a cure for her rare cancer type. That work continues at Stark Industries to this very day.”

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Bucky bowed his head and said a quiet prayer for his baby sister. He wasn’t so good at prayers, but Mother Evelyn, who Bucky met at Miss Pepper’s church, said what you mean to pray for was more important than sayin’ your prayers real perfect-like during the family service, so Bucky just prayed his baby sister was happy now in heaven with their ma and pop, and Stevie’s folks, too, and not in any pain from the cancer no more, and that she got a chance to
play with his favorite wagon and ride his bike in heaven since he maybe, might have not let her play with it when they growed up together because he didn’t know for sure on account of him forgettin’ everything since he was six last time. And then he added another prayer that she had a real nice Christmas with all their folks in heaven, and got to have a real good, fun time playing with the little Baby Jesus in his Christmas manger in God’s stable in heaven full’a donkeys and fuzzy sheep and probably some cows. That would be swell, too.

“Amen.” He nodded his head once. That would do for now. And maybe he could talk to Stevie about makin’ a novena for Becca later like his ma would’ve. Stevie could help him figure out what to say when he prayed the novena. He stood quiet for a minute, thinking about how much fun him and Stevie and his baby sister might’a had on Christmas when he was six last time, even though she was still just a squishy baby. He hoped him and Stevie ate oranges from their Christmas stockings and sang carols and had dinner and cookies together. It was harder to remember what happened the last Christmas when he was only five—practically a baby, too—so he decided right then and there to write it all down later after he talked to Stevie, so he wouldn’t ever forget again.

With all that big stuff carefully sorted out in his head, Bucky returned his attention to his solo adventure to the attic.

“Jarbith, teww me again what thith thing doeth when I cwothe the doorth?” Bucky kept one hand carefully braced outside the capsule to keep it from closing automatically. It bumped his arm over and over again and he was startin’ to get real sore at it because it wouldn’t quit it.

“The tube containing the capsule is powered simply by a vacuum system, similar to what is used in a neighborhood bank drive-thru to transport paperwork from one location to another. There is plenty of air within the capsule and an emergency life support system is contained within, as well. In the event of an emergency, the life support system will trigger automatically and the capsule will coast to the next closest departure point where you may evacuate once the capsule door has cleared the opening.”

“When’th the watht time thomeboby uthed the tubeth?” Bucky wanted to know, just to be sure it was real good and safe.

“Agents Barton and Romanova have both tested the tube system since your family’s arrival at Camp Stark, as well as walked nearly every foot of secret passage and hidden hallway in the house. There remain a few they haven’t located, but, per their wishes, I haven’t yet disclosed those passages to either of them as they enjoy the challenge of locating all of the passages themselves.”

So … Nat and Uncle Clint did this, too? NEAT. Bucky wondered where this tube would take him, but before he got a chance to ask, his hand slipped and the capsule door closed and he whooshed! away from the little splash of light outside the guest room as the cabinet door closed on its own and the capsule whisked him the last few floors straight up. His belly dropped all the way to his knees and he sat down hard on his butt as the inside of the lodge’s walls whistled past at the speed of light. Before he even had a chance to scream with excitement, the capsule coasted to a stop and Bucky tumbled out, falling to his knees and scrambling for the nearest container to puke up his cookie-heavy guts into.

Holy moly, what a ride, Bucky thought, swiping a sleeve across his mouth and sprawling on his back beside the… He glanced above and behind his head and winced as puke seeped from the bottom of the wicker wastebasket he horked into.

“Yuck,” he grimaced, rolling away so nothing gross got on him.

On the HUD, Jarvis showed him the two cleaning drones the house robot dispatched and warned Bucky to roll clear of the capsule exit. Less than a minute later, two cleaning drones shaped like a
lady’s hatbox zoomed out of the same capsule. They bagged the wastebasket for removal, mopped and disinfected the floor with their tiny scrubber feet, and cleared a path for the bulky, slow-moving body of U, who brought Bucky a portable sick bag and a little baggie holding two of the same bellyache pills he took hours ago. Obediently, Bucky chewed them up while U watched with his camera lens eyeball. Then, Bucky tried to be helpful by lifting the two drone bots into U’s cargo bin along with the bag holding the yucky wicker wastebasket. With a beep and a wave of his claw, U retreated down the hall to the nearest service elevator and disappeared behind the doors.

And Bucky was all alone again with Jarvis on the top floor of the lodge.

Turns out… Bucky loved the attic. It was just bustin’ with lots of fun stuff for a fella to poke around in and explore now that his belly wasn’t rollin’ from so many cookies.

Jarvis told him the room the capsule dumped him into was one of the primary attic storage rooms for seasonal furniture like outdoor tables and chairs and summer lanterns and outdoor heaters and things.

*Boring.*


“It is of little concern, young sir. I’ve dispatched a crew of six housekeeper bots to the attic to tidy up any further messes today.”

“Thankth!” Bucky crowed at the nearest speaker thing for Jarvis’ sound system and followed the cursor Jarvis displayed on the HUD showing him the easiest way through all the piles of stuff to the nearest fun room. There was a pair of double doors in a wide archway just ahead at the end of a long, shadowy hallway. The archway was made of wood, carved with all kinds of silly, cartoon forest animals, all piled up on top of each other like they were a totem pole, balancing the big, heavy branch overhead that made up the curved part of the archway. At the very top, just off-center, a group a fat, happy birds sat on the thick branch. Above them, musical notes were painted right on the wall, as if the birds opened their mouths and sang a whole song, music stave and all. Bucky was surprised to realize he recognized the song, humming a few bars of it as best he knew how from the memory of his ma learning to play it just from his da humming it for her. She even made up a little bit of sheet music from it for their old piano, so Bucky could learn all the notes, too, when she started teaching him to play.

“Toora Loora Looral”.

She sang it to Bucky all the time when he was only little.

“This is the former nursery, young sir. As you indicated a certain restlessness and dissatisfaction with the available toys in the modern playroom, you may enjoy investigating the toy trunks in this room. Be warned however, this nursery has been out of service since before Sir’s father refurbished the property in the early nineteen-fifties. And the Lodge sat rarely used by its former owners for twenty-five years before that, as well.”

Bucky scratched his head and did some quick math. “Tho… The toyth are weal old, huh?”

“I suspect the newest toys in this room would have originated in the mid-nineteen-twenties, young sir.”

Bucky smiled real big. “That’th pewfect, Jarbith!”

He whooped and threw the nursery doors open, standing in the wide doorway for a minute, looking
around for a light or something. Jarvis helpfully traced the HUD cursor over to the toggle on the wall. But … not a toggle switch like in some of the rooms downstairs. This one was real familiar. There were two black buttons in the middle of the cold, cast iron switch plate decorated with flowers. He tapped the top button and the overhead light flickered on with a familiar hum like home.

Like Brooklyn tenements and shoddy buildings, and all the things Bucky really sorta missed.

But for the first time in a long time, Bucky felt like he belonged someplace, too, standin’ in that room at the top of the Lodge, surrounded by all the things he remembered so good. An old rocking horse and a baby pen sat along one wall lined with low bookcases. In front of the bookcases, there were small chairs and tables—kid sized—for playing games. In a room separated from the main nursery by another wide archway supported by carved, cartoon animals, one longer table somewhere between kid and adult sized was set up like a dining table opposite the door to the connecting nursery kitchen. There was even a china hutch in the small dining room, outfitted with fun dishes covered in animals just for kids and a long sideboard filled with dusty serving dishes and gravy boats and funny jelly servers and drinking cups and things Bucky only vaguely remembered from Sunday dinners at his gran and popop’s, all in the same silly animal designs.

On the other side of the large nursery, small iron beds sat all in a row on the wall near the windows looking over the rundown treehouse on the island in the middle of the lake, with a pair of baby cribs at the very end of the row of beds. When Bucky tugged the dust covers free, he found each bed and crib was made up with a matching child-sized counterpane with the words “Camp Stillwater” embroidered on it neatly in a fine hand like Stevie’s ma’s above a patchwork scene that looked just like the Camp Stark Lodge with the sun setting behind the mountains on the west side of the lake. Images of animals with pink cheeks and big cartoon eyes and lashes peeled from the walls and furniture and toy boxes like old, dried up stickers or wallpaper—Bucky wasn’t exactly sure.

But the toy trunks…

Bucky crossed the room to kneel at the end of the first bed, flipping open the catch on the old toy box there and throwing back the lid to peer inside.

It was full of real great stuff! Right on top, there was a whole mess of swell comics!

Buck Rogers, Superman, Flash Gordon… Wow. Bucky never heard of Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon and he only knew a little bit about Superman because of Falcon Sam, but the pictures inside promised hours of fun adventures and X-ray glasses if he could read all the words. He tidied up the stack and set it aside to carry downstairs later. A helpful housekeeping bot rolled up by his side with a carton and a lid just as he was about to start poking around in the toy trunk again.

“Jarbith?” he checked in with his babysitter to see what the little bot wanted.

“Place anything you wish to take to your room or the playroom in this box and U will return to carry it for you when you’ve finished exploring for the day,” Jarvis told him, so Bucky set the comics inside the box and left the top off for now in case he found more neat stuff to borrow from the nursery.

Under the top layer of comics, he found a heap of die-cast toy cars, a yo-yo, a bag of marbles and one of jacks. And under all’a that—a real nice, genuine leather baseball mitt and a ball. It was broken in and everything!

“Wow,” Bucky breathed, tugging the mitt on over his left hand and smacking into it with his fist like a real perffessional ballplayer. He couldn’t hardly believe his good luck!
Then, in the next toy box, he found an erector set and a chemistry kit!

“The chemistry kit appears to contain ingredients that could prove harmful without proper supervision,” Jarvis warned Bucky. The instructions inside the case did promise plenty of fun explosions if he did the science right.

Jarvis made a sound like clearing his throat.

Bucky sighed and set the chemistry set in another box provided by a different bot. A third bot trundled over to write in marker on the box, “‘Adult Supervision Required’”. Then it covered the whole box in warning stickers and wrapped it in the kind of sticky tape Bucky needed an adult’s help to open. Darn it.

But maybe Tony would let him blow stuff up with the chemistry kit in his workshop.

Did Tony count as an adult?

Bucky would ask Miss Pepper. She was the most growedup person Bucky knew (and she reminded him a lot of his ma with her pretty, light reddish hair and freckles).

Either way, Bucky felt real lucky he found so much good stuff so far, but that’s where his good luck ran out. The last three toy boxes all had paper dolls and babydolls in ‘em and Bucky didn’t have a lot of use for babydolls. He was keepin’ the jump ropes from ‘em, though. Darcy might like to jump with him sometime, after the snow melted. He piled it all up in the first box provided by Jarvis and tapped the lid in place. He was real tempted to grab one of the comics and sprawl out on a bed up here to read for a few hours, but then he might miss out on explorin’ more of the attic while Stevie and Nat were busy.

Hitchin’ up his jeans so he’d quit steppin’ on the hems, he poked around the rest of the room, but decided to leave the board games and books where they were. Maybe on another snowy day, him and Darcy could bring some snacks up here and play games at the checker table with the board built right into the wood. She read real good, too, so she might like ta come up here and pick some books and sprawl out on the beds and read together.

Bucky couldn’t help but wonder why him and Darcy had separate bedrooms when the kids who used to live here all slept in the same one. He asked Jarvis.

After a long pause, Jarvis replied, “As only your immediate Avengers family is in residence, the many rooms originally set aside for children have been rendered obsolete and out-of-date, especially in the years since it has become more commonplace for children to have their own, individual spaces.”

Bucky sighed. That’s what he figured, but … it sure would be nice sometimes, just to have a place to go where there weren’t a bunch of adults playing video games and carrying on when he wanted some quiet to tell secrets to Darcy and she could tell ‘em back. So he told Jarvis that, too.

“With your permission, I will bring your concerns to Sir. I believe a compromise can be reached, allowing you and Miss Stark both your own private spaces and one free from most adult interference.”

“Wike a cwubhouthe?” Bucky asked, not sure if he should get his hopes up or not. He loved when Uncle Clint and Sam and the Howlies all came to the playroom to play Mario Kart, but they sure got loud sometimes.

“Something like that, yes,” Jarvis answered.
“Huh.” Bucky scratched his butt and bent over to lift the box of his stuff and set it on top of the housekeeping bot Jarvis assigned to follow him. “Where to next, Jarbith?”

Bucky followed the blinking cursor on the HUD back out to the hallway. He ducked into a few rooms—Doll Room, first.

_Boring._

Also: creepy.

_PASS._

He ducked into the old schoolroom next, but that was less fun. Darcy would have loved it with its six tiny desks and the little coal stove in the corner that probably kept things real toasty up here so a kid could curl up in the window seat and read a good comic or color in a coloring book. Darcy, he decided, would like the reading nook with the window seat best of all. On the blackboard at the front of the room, letters and numbers were printed and written in the fancy cursive across the top. Under that, all over the blackboard, there were chalk drawings and writing. Three names appeared at the end of a complicated coded number message Bucky couldn’t figure out. The names written there were Tony, Rosa, and Muriel.

Bucky wondered if the Tony who wrote on the blackboard was Darcy’s pop when he was a kid, too.

Filing that question away for later, Bucky followed Jarvis’ blinking cursor to a cabinet behind the larger tutor’s desk at the end of the room. Bucky poked the cabinet where Jarvis said he oughta and the door swung open to reveal—

_Another secret passage!_

“Goth, Jarbith, thith thure ith thwell. Thankth fo’ thowin’ me all thethe fun, thecret pathageth today,” Bucky gushed, grinning at the gaping hole in the wall before him. “I’dda never found ‘em all on my own.”

“It is a pleasure, Master Barnes. I’ve found young Miss Stark enjoys exploring the less-traveled corners of the Lodge, as well. It brings me … a kind of joy to explore the building from your perspective. I’ve already identified thirteen access points to be addressed by Security Director Hill on your outing today.”

Bucky grimaced.

House robots sure could suck all the fun out of a grand adventure.

“Ith it anotha capthule tube thingy?” Bucky asked, opting to ignore Jarvis’ overprotective tendencies as he peered into the hole at the back of the cabinet.

“No, young sir. This particular passage is exit-only. Agent Barton has confirmed this exit is a fully functioning chute. Though the walls of the trough are quite high to either side, the trough has been waxed to improve performance at some point in its history, and it is recommended you keep your hands in your lap as the incline is quite steep. This chute is engineered in every way to propel the user rapidly to the first level.”

“Gee whithz,” Bucky burst with excitement. “What are we waitin’ for?” he hollered, grabbing the top edge of the cabinet and swinging himself inside feet-first onto the slide with a screaming, “WEEEEeeeee…..!!!”
“What are we waiting for, indeed, young sir,” Jarvis sighed to no one whosoever.

☆...☆☆☆☆....☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

Chapter End Notes

Any guesses where the chute leads? :D

...and Chag Chanukah Sameach! to all my readers celebrating this evening.
Thoft Landingth (thank the baby jeethuth for dumpthterth and thpieth)

Chapter Summary

Bucky accidentally finds Clint pretty much exactly where one would expect to find Clint (no surprises there).

Chapter Notes

One-word prompt: bird

>>>========>

Bucky screamed and screamed and screamed all the way to the bottom of the chute!

Then the ride ended with an abrupt — *thunk*— and Bucky had to shake himself a little because the sudden stop at the end of the slide sure rang his bell. Wow. Lucky for him, he realized when he looked around, that Jarvis deployed the helmet part of his HUD thingy on the way down and this big green bin here fulla soft stuff broke his fall. Bucky lay back for a minute to catch his breath, gazing up at the grey sky overhead.

Holy cow! The slide shot him all the way outta the house!

Then the soft stuff underneath of him groaned.

“Unca Cwint?” Bucky sat up on his uncle. “Whaddaya doin’ here?”

“Oh, you know, just looking for one of thirty-six thousand roaming pets. In the bottom of a dumpster. As usual,” Uncle Clint groaned, rubbing at his own belly under Bucky's butt. “God, they feeding you bricks, or what?” he grumbled.

“A dumpthter?” Bucky sat up higher on Uncle Clint’s chest, scrambling up to use his shoulder as a step stool and get a good look around. Yup, definitely outside and in a dumpster. “Whatta we doin’ in a dumpthter?”

“More importantly—what are *you* doin’ in the dumpster?” Uncle Clint groused like an old man, but he clutched at Bucky’s leg to steady him anyhow.

Bucky climbed back down to sit on his uncle’s middle and gave him a little shove, then crossed his arms and huffed when Uncle Clint didn’t even budge a little. “I athked you firtht.”

“Well, I asked you last—no tagbacks,” Uncle Clint added for good measure, poking Bucky in the shoulder with his big, bony finger.

“Jarbith thowed me the thlide in the thchoolroom. He thaid it wath waxthed and all, tho I figg’ered it wath okay ta uthe,” Bucky said with a lazy shrug. Not that he really stuck around long enough to wait for Jarvis to tell him whether it was okay to slide, now he thought about it. Whoops. “How
“Because it’s not a slide. It didn’t occur to you that people don’t just randomly install slides in their houses for fun before you dove into one head-first?” Uncle Clint demanded, righting him and Bucky both and dusting them off. Uncle Clint levered himself real easily up over the side of the dumpster, then reached in for Bucky, mumbling all the while about how keeping himself alive was a full time job as it was, much less a six year old hellbent on having a helmet permanently stapled under his chin at the rate he was going.

“Normal people don’t have houthe robotth or vacuum tube elevatorth to thuck you from one floor to another, either,” Bucky pointed out in his defense.

“Yeah, okay, I’ll give you that,” Uncle Clint nodded with a smile and a ruffle of Bucky’s hair. “It’s an old garbage chute, I think. Either they left it in after construction or it was just part of the way they handled waste management in the Lodge before the elevators were installed to make trash removal invisible,” his uncle explained. “I accidentally stumbled across one while I was looking for—something else,” he finished, eyeing Bucky like he almost said something he shouldn’t have.

“I can help you look,” Bucky offered. “Whaddaya lookin’ for ethactly?”

Clint sighed again, real exasperated-like. He gave Bucky a real hard eyeball all over and put his hands on his hips, like he was deciding something. “A missing … pet. She’s a kind of … reptile. Her name is Birdie. Lucky was supposed to be keeping an eye on her for a few minutes, but I guess he got distracted by the puppies.”

“There are a lot of puppieth,” Bucky pointed out helpfully. It wasn’t Lucky’s fault he was the only growedup dog around. He was like a new dad and it was a lot of puppies to keep out of the fire until Mr. Tom put the big gate up to keep the poor, dumb puppies from walking right in to sniff around and burn their noses. Puppies are a lot like kids, Bucky figured.

“Well, Birdie is more trouble than ten puppies all on her own. I shouldn’t have left her with Lucky, but she was sleeping and it was only a few minutes…” Uncle Clint said almost to himself.

“Nat thayth I can find trouble in an empty room in my thleep,” Bucky stated proudly. He loved pullin’ Nat’s pigtails by disappearing before breakfast to play hide and go seek without telling her it was hide and go seek. She always found him, though. Always. She was the best at hide and go seek.

“Okay, so Birdie is like one of you.” Uncle Clint tweaked Bucky’s nose, but he was smiling, so Bucky figured he’d be okay and stop worrying so much.

“Where hab you thecked tho far?” Bucky asked, clomping up the back steps to the Lodge beside his uncle.

Uncle Clint looked up at the Lodge with another real hard sigh. “Only the top four floors so far, but with the garbage chutes and passages, she could really get anywhere she wanted in the house pretty quickly from my room.” He paused, his eyes tracking along the windows on the first floor for a few moments, then the light in them changed and his smile got real sly. “I have an idea.”

“A twap?” Bucky asked, nodding, because he really hoped that’s what Uncle Clint was thinking, but also because it would be a lot of fun to build one—and probably take so long, he’d miss his bath before dinner. And if there was anything Bucky was eager to miss, it was a second bath in the same
day when he could be catching loose reptiles in the house with a carrot and a stick. Or a box! Yeah, a stick and a box, just like in the cartoon shorts they showed between the Saturday afternoon pictures back home in Brooklyn.

“Hmm…” Uncle Clint thought real hard, opening the door for Bucky. He led Bucky down the main hall and off to the side, down one of the long, echoing stone corridors of the wings full of fancy rooms for company. They passed a couple sitting rooms and a smoking room with a billiard table, a couple of rooms of glass cases full of sparkly crystal Bucky wasn't allowed in, and three more filled with good china Bucky also wasn't allowed in, all the way to the one sparkling with silver (nobody had told Bucky he couldn't go in there yet, but it was still early): dishes and utensils and big fancy pots, all in silver, sat all over the room on open shelves and behind glass and on little pedestals. There was more silver than there was spaces for it in the whole room.

“I have an idea,” Uncle Clint whispered, pulling Bucky across the hall to the library, “but first, we need to find some marshmallows.”

Bucky grinned with lots of teeth. “Darthy hath marthmallowth—*lotth* of them.”

>>==========>
Birdie is Not Dog

Chapter Summary

So ... where exactly *is* Birdie?

Chapter Notes

Okay, so I know this is short (and holy carp, it was hard to write!), but I think you'll understand why after you read it. ;-) Have fun! *waves*

Btw, this chapter officially marks the Two Front Teef verse's 100,000-word milestone. There are just over 100K words in this series now! Thank you so much to everyone who has read, left kudos, and commented on this series! All the excitement for new updates and encouragement along the way have kept me updating this story and series for the third December in a row. More to come soon!

One-word prompt: shoes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

>>==========>

Birdie is not lost.

It isn’t Birdie’s fault, though. She was supposed to stay with fuzzy Lucky at naptime, but the small Hawk with long, dark hair opened the door. Called fuzzy Lucky. Fuzzy Lucky’s nails click-clacked, click-clacked all the way around the big Hawk’s nest and disappeared. When Birdie climbed up the covers hanging on the side of big Hawk’s nest, Birdie saw the door was open.

When the door is open, they go outside (*outside* is not *inside*). Usually, Birdie rides outside hidden under fuzzy Lucky’s collar, but sometimes, big Hawk takes Birdie along in his front pouch. *Hoodie*, Birdie remembers him telling her it is called.

“HOODIE,” Birdie hooted, reminding herself and also scaring herself a little when the word bounced back at her from all sides. She tumbled out of big Hawk’s nest on the far side, away from the big, soft nest she shared with fuzzy Lucky at naptime.

*Dog bed*, big Hawk calls the big, soft nest covered in fuzzy Lucky’s fur. But Birdie is not dog. (*Dog* is fuzzy, wears collar, barks, eats pizza, does not do tricks for treats, babysits Birdie.)

On the far side of big Hawk’s nest, it was very easy to see outside the door. Birdie had not been out there alone before. The lodge is very big. Big Hawk showed Birdie what to do in an emergency, where to go, how to get there, but did not say what is emergency.

Big Hawk and fuzzy Lucky are gone. Door is usually shut, but is open now. Birdie is awake, not napping with fuzzy Lucky at naptime.
Is this emergency?

Birdie did not know.

What would big Hawk do?

*Better safe than sorry*, he sometimes says to the human hatchlings when they did not know the answer to questions.

Is this *better safe than sorry*?

Birdie decided it might be. In *emergency*, Birdie should leave room (scratch on door if closed) (door not closed, OPEN), turn left (left is quiver side, right is bow side), walk long hall to intersection (*intersection* is where two [two is more than *one*, less than *three*] hallways meet and make four hallways [*four* is more than *three*]), turn right (bow side), and continue walk to top of stairs. If no big Hawk is waiting there, Birdie is allowed downstairs. Can see front door from stairs. Go there. In *emergency*, door should open soon. If door doesn’t open (door is closed), Birdie is allowed to break window beside door to leave lodge. (Boots break window. Shoes do not. Birdie remembers.)

Before Birdie can throw boot at window, a tiny box rolled up and stopped in front of Birdie.

“*Wat!*” Birdie asked.

A voice. The one in the ceiling. (*Ceiling* is top wall of room. Overhead. *Inside* only. Not *outside*. *Outside* is sky, not ceiling.) Ceiling voice said, “Do not break the window. If you wish to open a door, scratch it, and I will open the door for you. My name is Jarvis and I am at your service, young Birdie.”

Birdie scared. Stepped back two times. Squinted at box. Ceiling voice has never spoken to Birdie before. How does it know Birdie?

“*Wat!*” Birdie demanded.

“Do you need to go outside?” ceiling voice asked.

“*Uck!*” Birdie said clearly. (*Clearly* is not *mumbled*. *Mumbled* is hard to lip-read. *Lip-read* happens when *shinies* are not in big Hawk’s ears. *Shinies* help big Hawk hear, but are also called *ears*? Birdie decides to call them *shinies* so only one thing is called *ears*.) (Also, Birdie cannot say *fuzzy* Lucky yet. *Soon, maybe*, says big Hawk, then, *patience, baby girl*.)

“Do you wish to go where Lucky has gone?” ceiling voice asked.

“*Out!*” Birdie squawked.

“Lucky has not gone out,” ceiling voice said from tiny box. “Do you still wish to go out?”

Birdie sat back on her tail, rubbed her claws together. She is not sure.

“If you climb atop this robot, I can direct it anywhere you would like to go in the lodge. Is there a place or a person you would like to see?” ceiling voice asked.

A place.

Or a person.

Birdie remembers seeing Darcy in the middle of sleeps last night. Birdie has missed Darcy. Birdie
will go to Darcy.

It took her a few tries and some help from another rolling box with claws like Birdie’s, but Birdie climbed up on the first talking, rolling box and laid flat, stretching her legs out to all the sides, wings spread. She tucked her tail in safely so no smoosh or ouch. (Smoosh is when big Hawk accidentally steps on tail, says “Fuck, fuckerdoodle, fuck! Sorry, baby girl! Are you okay? I didn’t mean to smoosh your tail! I’m so sorry. Do you want a kiss to make it better?” Kisses make smoosh and ouch better. Ouch is when tails feels spicy. Spicy is tacos, hot sauce, chili, lady on calendar, bad words like fuckerdoodle. Spicy is a lot of things. Birdie should not try to say fuckerdoodle, though. Too spicy. Ouch.)

“Dar!” Birdie asked, and the talking, rolling box started to roll to a wall. Before they crashed, part of the wall slid away. (Away is not here.) They rolled in a long, dark tunnel. Birdie closed her eyes, scared, but this is the way to Darcy. Ceiling voice talked and other rolling box moved into wall first, turned around, beeped. Two (more than one, less than three) lights shined on the floor ahead. Two more lights shined against the walls, making it less dark and scary. Ceiling voice told Birdie the ride will be short. It will be with her the whole way. She is safe.

Birdie likes ceiling voice.

Ceiling voice reminded her its name is Jarvis.

“Jar!” Birdie asked.

The ceiling voice made a sound like big Hawk’s sigh (sigh is tired). “Jar will do for now.”

Birdie is not lost with Jarvis.

Birdie is safe.

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Chapter End Notes

Update, 3/30/2019: No, I haven’t forgotten about this story! I was having some vision problems way back in December, beginning a few days before Christmas. Recently, I was diagnosed with high blood pressure, which causes vision impairment! So now I know at least I’m not going blind! My vision is slowly returning to normal as I get my BP under control. Thank you so much to everyone who’s asked after my health and well being! I am getting better!

I hope to return to this story soon with updates, but in the meantime, if you enjoy baby animals as much as I do, you should check out this post on my tumblr to get a look at exactly what’s keeping me so busy this spring. 😊

https://chrissihr.tumblr.com/post/183876920719/so-the-hubs-and-i-did-a-thing-today-shes-a
Chapter Summary

Darcy accidentally overhears a private conversation when she takes a shortcut to the library through the vents.

Chapter Notes

Hi. So. Remember how I wanted to post a bunch of updates this winter and that didn't happen?

ICYMI, I started having vision problems the week before Christmas. My eye doctor couldn't figure me out. In February, I was still losing my vision and having a bunch of other health problems that seemed unrelated, including a rapid heart beat. Turns out, vision problems are an early sign of high blood pressure. And mine was dangerously high—strokes-imminent high. Got a 'script for BP meds and the doc upped my anxiety med dosage, told me to learn how to meditate, maybe try yoga or get a dog.

I'm managing my health. I'm sorry my stories had to take a back seat for a while, but I figure you'd all understand why. I'm working on it. And I did get the dog. You can see pics of her on my tumblr or IG, @chrissihr. Her name is Ruth Biter Ginsbark. She's currently an 11-week-old, Old English Bulldog, and she's a *bucket* of work. I love her to pieces. She's very good for my heart.

I'm sorry for the delay, but I'm working on it. My plan is to work on the Two Front Teef 'verse and my Darcy/Clint/Bucky fic, Endless Summer, the next few months. If you're still here for soft, stay at home dad! Tony and tiny Darcy and Bucky, let me know in the comments. I could use the encouragement to get back on track like you don't even know. Thanks for sticking with me.

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Darcy wanted to help plan the wedding.

She really did.

But adults wanted to have boring grown up parties for weddings with tocktails and bored’ourves and fancy, floofy dresses instead of fun stuff like bounce houses and T-shirt cannons and cornfetti and plain old jeans.

If Darcy planned this wedding, it sure wouldn’t be boring.

And there wouldn’t be any floofy dresses at all ever.

So first chance she got, while her Daddy and Mommy Pepper were busy looking at Mommy
Pepper’s tablet, Darcy slipped off the end of the sofa in their big bedroom suite where she’d been napping with her daddy and excused herself to the bathroom.

The one in the hall for guests.

The one with the towel rack like a tall ladder right up to the big vent in the ceiling.

She knew she had at least a ten minute head start because Jarvis didn’t monitor inside the bathrooms except in ‘mergencies.

And the vent over this bathroom led to a secret tunnel.

Which Darcy only found out because sometimes she wakes up in the middle of the night to Bucky hissing at her to see if she’s awake when he’s had one of the real bad, cold dreams and he crawls through the vent and shows up in her room when she’s not in the big bed with Daddy and Mommy Pepper. Bucky’s hands and feets are always real cold after one of those real bad dreams and he likes to climb under the covers with her and warm up and not be sad and alone anymore.

Sometimes, he cries.

But he asked Darcy not to tell because it would make Captain Steve sad. So Darcy keeps extra socks under her mattress for him and she hugs Bucky extra tight when he’s sad and cold and feeling lonely after his bad dreams.

And because he’s her very best friend, he showed her the trick with the vents that he learned in the tower.

But Darcy found the super secret passage to the first floor library on her own.

She was at the bottom of the long, spiral stairway inside the wall, about to push the bar that swings the door open to the library, when she heard hushed voices clear as day through the back side of the bookshelves hiding the secret door.

“Hey, Unca Cwint, how come you don’t got a wady fwiend wike Thteebie and Darthy’th pop got?” Bucky whispered. “Whatcha don’t wanna get mawwied o’thomethin’?”

“Nosy,” Agent Clint whispered back.

“No, no—I’m theriouth,” Bucky swore. “How’th come?”

Agent Clint sighed. “I had a … a lady friend a while back, but it was complicated and didn’t work out, so we broke up and decided to be friends.”

“How come you didn’t twy ta meet anower wady fwiend?” Bucky asked. “Ya an Avenger and ya got a gweat dog and all thothe thwell piztha t-thirtth, and ya know how ta juggle, too! Ya pwolly got wadieth who wike Avengerth fawwin’ all over ya ever’ time ya thtep out.”

“Yeah, well, the cape chasers aren’t interested in me, pal.” Agent Clint sounded real tired. “They all want the money, brains, or muscles of this outfit.”

“You got motht a thothe!” Bucky hissed.

To Darcy, it sounded like Agent Clint was smiling when he said, “Sh! I do my best not to let people know I’m smarter than they think.” He stopped and then said, “And anybody’d have muscles with a two-hundred pound draw on their bow. That’s just practice and routine.”
“Tho ya bwoke up wif ya wady fwiend and jutht dethided it wath gonna be you and Piztha Dog awone fowevah?” Bucky sounded real sad and Darcy wanted to hug him. She hated when he sounded sad.

“No,” Agent Clint snorted. “God, Buck. I date. Sometimes. I … I don’t always date ladies, though.”

There was a long minute when nobody said anything.

“Who do ya date if it’th not wadieth?” Bucky asked and his voice was much louder this time.

Agent Clint shushed him in a hurry. “I had a … a guy friend for a while, but he… It didn’t work out, either. Which is why I don’t usually talk about it or date, okay, nosy?” Agent Clint grumped at Bucky.

“You…” Bucky didn’t seem to know what to say for a long minute. “You dated a fewwa? Ith that even awwowed?” he whispered.

“It is now. People aren’t always nice about it, but nobody goes to jail for it anymore,” Agent Clint explained. “And I liked him a lot. I’dda gone to jail for ’im.”

“What’h hith name?”

“Doesn’t matter, kiddo. He’s gone now.” Agent Clint cleared his throat. “I introduced him to my lady friend. They’re a better match, good for each other.” He sounded real tired again. “They’re both better off now.”

“I’m thorry,” Bucky whispered.

Darcy snuck out of the hidden door and crawled under the table beside Agent Clint. “I’m sorry, too,” she whispered.

Agent Clint’s arms flailed and he hit his head under the table and said a bunch of bad words, so Darcy only got a quick look across the hall at the pile of silver dishes and mini marshmallows all stacked up under a box held up by a stick before the sounds of screaming echoing from upstairs reached the library.

“Shit, shit!” Agent Clint hissed as someone who sounded like Darcy’s mommy started shouting a lot more bad words about a rat that got in the house and came right into her room and all. “I know this looks bad, but it’s not a rat! Don’t kill it!” Agent Clint shouted as he ran down the hallway.

Darcy and Bucky scrambled up after him to follow, but Darcy caught her breath with worry when Agent Clint shouted next, “Her name is Birdie! She’s not a rat!”

End Notes

Look at this sweet frickin' fanart by Nemhaine42, inspired by My Two Front Teef!

Also, check out The Care and Feeding of Hobby Hybrid Teacup Dragons, "A brief taxonomic classification of Pixie Teacup Dragons, along with a basic species description that
overviews life stages and defining characteristics." by biblioworm, inspired by an Aesir pocket book of light reading nonfiction I briefly mentioned in the prequel to My Two Front Teef, All I Ever Wanted.

And this equally adorable fanart by turntostone.

Many thanks to the ishipitpod folks for rec’ing My Two Front Teef on the August 27, 2019 ep of their podcast, #58 - Darcy Lewis Rides Again. Great podcast, though please take my advice and don’t try to listen while you eat breakfast. Eating and laughing do not mix. 😊 https://ishipitpod.tumblr.com/post/187303331717/58-darcy-lewis-rides-again-i-ship-it

And I recently completed a Fic Writer Ask Meme that mentions My Two Front Teef.

❄️

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:
• short comments
• long comments
• questions
• "<3" as extra kudos
• reader-reader interaction
• reaction gifs, pics, or vids

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This author replies to comments.

Note: If you don't want a reply, for any reason ('sometimes I feel shy when I'm reading and not up to starting a conversation', for instance), feel free to sign your comment with '-whisper' and I will appreciate it, but not respond!

My Two Front Teef is a holiday piece I typically work on between December and January. Plenty more updates are coming during the holiday season and occasionally throughout the year. Please do not abuse the comment section by using it to demand more or faster updates. Demanding updates is, at best, incredibly rude, and at worst, guaranteed to drain a writer of any inspiration they might have had in the first place. Be kind to your content creators and we'll return the favor!

Works inspired by this one
Bucky's Two Front Teef (Fan Art) by turntostone

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