The Monster In the Closet

by scifigrl47

Summary

In "Rescue Missions and Mistaken Identities," Phil asks if DJ can swim. And DJ says he can. So how does a child who hates baths learn to swim?

In a way that terrifies his parents.

In which DJ learns to swim, and meets the last of the Tower's residents. Both activities go bad before they get better.

Notes

Just a short piece, but not as short as I intended.

Warnings for child endangerment, near drowning, and scary situations. Don't worry, everyone will be fine.

Tony should've realized there was going to be a problem when he showed up for the meeting and everyone else was already there. Sure, he was late, but usually, everyone was late. Steve showed up on time. Coulson showed up on time. Usually Natasha showed up on time. Bruce got distracted and Thor was a little unreliable and Clint was amazingly unreliable. Which meant that usually he could wander in, fifteen or twenty minutes late, and they'd all be still taking their seats, chatting and having coffee and jockeying for seats.
Today, everyone was already there. Already in their seats. Staring expectantly at the door.

Almost as if they were all waiting for Tony to show up.

“What?” Tony asked. He heard the defensive note in his voice and considered leaving before this got bad.

“You're late,” Steve said. He waved a hand at the only open chair. It was next to him. “Have a seat.”

“I think I'd prefer to stand,” Tony said, his eyes narrowed.

Steve gave him a look. “Really?” he asked.

Tony stomped over to the empty chair and dropped into it. “What?” he repeated.

Steve took a deep breath. “I think we need to teach DJ to swim,” he said.

Tony gaped at him. “Okay, wasn’t expecting that. Why?” he asked at last.


Tony looked around. “Why would I possibly do that?” he asked, spreading his hands wide.

“Well, the general reasoning tends to be so that the child won't drown if and when he is exposed to large bodies of water,” Coulson said, his voice dry.

“Yes, that being said, we have to force him into the bath tub basically under threat of horrible things that he knows we'll never do so the threats are not particularly effective,” Tony said. “He's not going to choose to throw himself into water.”

“Someone else may make that choice for him,” Steve pointed out.

“That's taking worst case scenario to the illogical extreme,” Tony said.

“I'd prefer to plan for the things that we can easily protect him from.”

"Wonderful, how do we think this is going to work? Seriously, am I enrolling him for lessons at the local Y? That's hard. In that he won't leave the damn tower." Everyone was staring at him with varying expressions of confusion and pity. Tony spread his hands. "What?"

"You have a pool," Steve said, very carefully. "We. We have a pool. In this building."

Tony looked at him. "No, we don't."

"You totally fucking have a pool," Clint said. He braced his chin on one fist. "How do you not know you have a pool?"

"It's a big building, and I do not have a pool. I mean, we discussed a pool when we were rebuilding," Tony said. He frowned. He did not have a pool. He was certain of it. Pepper had nixed that. "Pepper wouldn't let me have a pool."

"While we all have a great deal of respect and admiration for Ms. Potts," Phil said, "she's often ineffective in stopping you from carrying through with some of your-" He paused, his lips going thin as he considered his words. "Less practical ideas."

Tony frowned at him. "Like what?"
"Like buying that hotel in Memphis because you were annoyed at the concierge," Natasha said, her arms folded on the table.

"And then promoting the concierge to hotel manager when the manager yelled at girl at the bar," Clint added.

“Or flying to Vermont when the local grocery delivery service was out of Coconut Seven Layer Bar Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream,” Bruce said.

“Or drunkenly challenging that Russian tech guy to a cage match,” Coulson said, rubbing his forehead.

“Or the street racing incident in San Paolo,” Thor said.

“Or approving those rather regrettable plush toys,” Steve said, and everyone winced as one.

"AND," Tony said loudly, drowning any further examples out, "letting all of you move in."

"That, too," Bruce agreed, a faint smile on his face. "Though Pepper seemed okay with that."

"Only you. Well, and Thor."

Thor inclined his head. “She is a most gracious lady.”

“And Steve, everyone likes Steve. And she already knew Natasha,” Tony said, considering. "And I think she was just grateful when Phil moved in."

"So pretty much just me," Clint said, his grin wide and full of glee.

"No, she likes you, too, no idea why."

"She has a weakness for charming assholes, I'm encouraging her to seek help for that," Natasha said. “Going back to the main bone of contention-”

“Please, let's do that,” Phil said.

“You have a pool,” Natasha said.

Tony looked at Bruce, who nodded. “You do.”

“Tis a very nice pool,” Thor said. He grinned. “There is a slide.”

“How have you not noticed us all wandering around in bathing suits and smelling of chlorine?” Clint asked.

“I try not to smell you, Barton, I've known you long enough to know that's a very bad idea.”

Clint grinned. “Screw you, Stark, I at least know where your pool is.”

“Barton-”

“No, seriously, you put on this big act, big man, right, big industrialist genius, and you have no idea where your fucking pool is.”

“I'll find it, just to drown you in it.”

“I'm feeling safe. No worries on this side of the table.”
“Point,” Bruce said. “Is this why no one else uses the bowling alley?”

“I have a bowling alley?” Tony asked.

“We have a bowling alley?” Clint asked.

“Ha!” Tony pointed at him.

“Did you know about the bowling alley?” Clint asked Natasha.

“You think I BOWL?”

“Steve and I bowl,” Bruce said.

“You bowl?” Tony asked Bruce. “I mean, Steve, sure, but really? You? And bowling?”

He shrugged. “It's very cathartic. If my research isn't going well, it's nice to let off some steam in a way that does no lasting damage.”

“He's good at it,” Steve said. “Let's focus here.”

“Jarvis, do I have a pool?” Tony asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, huh. I could've sworn Pepper refused to let me put that in.”

“She did, in fact, point out that it was a poor choice, from an design standpoint. You did not agree.”

“How do I not—”

“You were putting a team together,” Bruce pointed out, and every one went still. He gave Tony a faint smile. “We all were. And you were under a lot of stress.”

“And fighting about a lot of things,” Tony agreed. He looked at Steve. “Really? Swimming?”

“I think it's time,” Steve said.

Tony considered objecting. It didn't seem worth it. “Fine,” he said. “Jarvis, pencil that in on the schedule.”

“Tomorrow,” Steve said.

“Tomorrow?”

Steve stood. “No time like the present. I'll go over things with DJ. No one has any plans tomorrow, right?” He glanced around the table, but it was clear that the question was a formality. He'd worked all of this out in advance. Tony resisted the urge to throw something at his head.

Clint raised a hand. “I got plans.”

Steve gave him a look. “Really?”

“I'm going to be spending tomorrow searching this building for all of its secret things that Tony added into the plans, possibly while drunk.”

“In my defense, I do some of my best work while wasted,” Tony said.
“That'll just have to wait until Thursday,” Steve said, because he took Clint seriously for reasons that Tony absolutely did not understand. “Pool party tomorrow.”

“Can we not call it a pool party?” Tony asked him.

“I'm fine with the concept of a pool party,” Steve told him. He smiled at Tony, and it was the smile of a man who knew very well that he'd won. “DJ's first.”

“I'll break out the blender and the popsicles,” Tony said.

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"It's a horrible idea," Tony grumbled from his position on the bed.

"It's not," Steve said, toweling his hair dry. He didn't have to ask what idea Tony was talking about, it was pretty clear. "Have you been stewing about this for the entire day?"

"First of all, I am not stewing, that's ridiculous, and second of all, if I was stewing-"

"Which you're not," Steve said, hiding his grin in the fabric of his towel.

"Which I am not," Tony agreed, his voice firm, "it would not have been all day. It would've been a passing thing which came up from time to time after you came up with your amazingly stupid idea to toss my child into a pool."

Steve did his best not to start laughing. He knew from experience that it wouldn't go over well. Instead, he tossed the towel towards the bureau, and took a seat on the edge of the bed. Tony continued manipulating the holographic interfaces that hung around him in mid-air, studiously ignoring him. Steve gave him a minute, then he reached over and pushed the floating panels to one side. “Hey,” he said, when Tony leveled an icy glare in his direction, “I want him to be safe.”

“He is safe,” Tony pointed out, folding his arms over his bare chest. “He's here. With us. In the tower. He's completely safe.”

Steve nodded. “He's going to leave the tower eventually, Tony. He can't stay here forever.”

“He's fine. He refuses to leave the damn building.”

“For now.” Steve considered him. “We're not sending him away.”

“Oh, for God's sake, can we not?” Tony held his hands up, as if to ward off any further discussion. “Can you not read things into this that have absolutely nothing to do with what we're discussing? I mean, can we, for once, can we just pay attention to the problem in front of us and not have to make it some big fucking THING?”

Steve leaned in. “Tony. He's going to leave at some point.”

“Really, Rogers? Really? Are you not listening to me at all? Is it not something you feel you have to do?”

“But it's not going to be because we send him away,” Steve continued, unconcerned.

“I swear I will get up and walk out of here.”

“Pretty sure you're naked under that sheet,” Steve pointed out.
Tony gave him a tight lipped smile. “Do you really think that will stop me?”

Steve braced a hand on either side of Tony's hips, leaning in. “I think you shouldn't give Clint more ammunition than he already has,” he said. He leaned in, brushing a kiss against Tony's mouth. “And I'm done.”

Tony's eyes narrowed at him. “No, you're not.”

“I'm done for now,” Steve agreed.

“That'll last ten minutes or so before you decide to start pecking at my psyche again,” Tony grumbled. He put a hand on Steve's shoulder and gave him a gentle shrug. Steve backed off, shifting to the side and settling back against the pillows. “You're-” Tony glared in his direction. “Insufferable.”

Steve smiled at him. “I saw a boy thrown into the Hudson once,” he said, quietly. “He knew how to swim, thank God. But I saw him go in, and that was...” He took a deep breath, the feeling of shock, of fear still somehow fresh in his mind. He wondered, sometimes, what had happened to that boy. If he'd lived a long and happy life, if he'd told that story to his children, and his grandchildren, or his friends, until they were sick of hearing it.

He looked at Tony. “I want DJ to know how to swim, Tony. I want him to have every single skill I can give him, that can help keep him safe.”

Tony stared at the far wall for a long moment. One hand came up, closing out his holographic windows with a flick of his wrist. “He's safe here,” he said.

“Yes, he is.” Steve reached out, cupping a hand on the back of Tony's neck. “He always will be.”

Tony let Steve tug him down. “Are you trying to distract me with sex?”

“Maybe,” Steve admitted. “Is it working?”

“It might, if you tried harder at it,” Tony said, making Steve laugh against the skin of Tony's shoulder. Tony stroked a hand over Steve's hair. “This is your dumb idea,” he pointed out.

“Yes.” Steve smiled at him. “Yes, it is.”

Tony leaned in and kissed him, hard. “Good,” he said against Steve's mouth. “It's your job to make this stupid idea work.”

Steve nuzzled the curve of Tony's neck. “So, I've got to teach DJ to swim?”

Tony pushed himself up, his hands braced on Steve's shoulders. “Your stupid idea.”

“True,” Steve agreed. He rolled them both, pinning Tony under him. “I'll give it my best shot.”

“Looking forward to seeing you introduce the bot child to a pool.” Tony grinned. “Looking forward to watching you try to locate a pool.”

“I'll do my best.”

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“Well, whatta you know,” Tony said. “I have a pool.”
“Who would've guessed,” Bruce deadpanned. He watched, amused despite himself, as DJ did his best to climb up Steve. DJ'd taken one look at the giant expanse of water and had done the non-verbal equivalent of 'nope nope nope nope nope,' seeking the highest ground he could find. That, as it turned out, was Steve's shoulders, and after a bit of desperate clawing and kicking, DJ managed to make the climb. He was now perched on Steve's shoulders, his legs clamped around Steve's neck and his arms wrapped around Steve's head.

Steve put up with this with his usual calm acceptance, his eyes dancing

“Deej, we talked about this,” he said, his voice muffled by the arm that was over his mouth. “Do you remember, we talked about this?”

“I think there was a difference between the intellectual idea of a metric shit ton of water, and being actually faced with it,” Tony said. “DJ, you're cutting off his circulation.”

“Remember?” Steve said, coaxing DJ off of his shoulders and into his arms. “Do you remember how we discussed that everyone was going to go swimming?”

DJ nodded, but he didn't let go of Steve's shirt. Or take his eyes off the pool.

“Where did he get that bathing suit?” Bruce asked. DJ's suit was kind of adorable, bright red with cartoon pictures the various Avengers on the side of the legs.

“Internet,” Steve said, setting DJ down on the tile. Or, trying to. DJ drew his legs up, avoiding letting his feet touch the ground. Steve looked down at him, and DJ gave him a hopeful smile, his knees up against his chest, his toes curled up tight. “This isn't going to work, baby,” Steve told him.

“Hey, Deej,” Tony said. “Look what I got.” He held up a clear plastic ball. Furbro was sealed inside, safely protected from the water. DJ blinked at it, and held out his hands.

“Remember?” Steve asked, as DJ unfolded enough to rest his toes on the floor.

“I don't require much sleep,” Tony said. Laughing at DJ's wide eyed expression, Tony took a step back, still bouncing Furbro as he went.

“Careful,” Steve cautioned, but he set DJ down so the boy could creep over to the ball. Tony handed it over with a grin, and DJ turned it over in his hands, watching the furby tumble around inside. He took a seat on the tile, folding his legs under him as he considered his new toy.

“How did you do that?” Steve asked, speaking of suits, where's yours?” Tony asked Bruce. “I thought we ordered you a bathing suit. Did we not order you a bathing suit? I'm pretty sure there are extras, that's the sort of thing Pepper would do, cabana full of spare suits for people to wear.”

Bruce held up both hands, not even wanting to consider the notion. “No, no, thank you, I'm not really a big one for swimming.”

“You don't have to go swimming. It appears I've got a nice relaxing jacuzzi there in the corner,” Tony said. “Now that I'm here, I do remember this floor. I think I've been here before. Or at least I saw the plans. I might have seduced someone here.”

“It's so hard to remember all the places you've seduced someone,” Steve agreed, grinning. He caught DJ as the boy scrambled past, turning him back away from the pool. “No running, buddy.” Giggling, DJ scampered off in the other direction, pushing Furbro's ball as he went.
“I can't even remember all the places I've seduced YOU in this building, Captain Sassypants, and I used to drink more,” Tony pointed out.

“The others are coming down?” Bruce asked, because if there was a discussion that he did not want to be in the middle of it, was how many places people had had sex. It wasn't that he was a prude, it just got depressing sometimes.

“Yeah, everyone's on their way. Pepper has meetings, but she said she'd check in tonight.” Tony frowned. “Rhodey, meanwhile, seems to think that being active duty military gives him an excuse to not show up for things.”

Bruce studied Tony for a minute, then looked at Steve. “He's in the middle of a deployment,” Steve said. “And asked that I send him some pictures.”

“Oh,” Bruce said.

“No, what he said was that he couldn't be expected to show up for every damn minor thing that we decided to make a big deal of,” Tony grumbled.

“He didn't say that at all,” Steve said.

“Maybe not to you, he didn't,” Tony said. “He likes you!”

Bruce ducked his head, trying not to laugh. It was harder than it should've been, and he glanced away before Tony caught him smirking and made him pay for it.

He caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, just the smallest hint of movement, but he'd always had good eyes. The reflexes for disaster, those he'd developed later, but by now, that was engrained as well. On the edge of his vision, he saw the ball go rolling over the edge of the pool, DJ right behind it, and Bruce was running before he even knew what he was doing. His feet skidded, slipped, caught on the wet tile, and he was running, he was running full out, just that small distance, he was running as fast as he could.

He heard Jarvis' voice raised in alarm and Steve's yell, and beneath both of them, almost lost in the louder noises, a tiny splash as a little body hit the water. DJ disappeared under the surface with barely a struggle, and Bruce's pulse exploded in his ears, loud enough to drown everything else out.

His vision went out in a green wash, closing over his head with the water, and he was gone.

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There had been a plan, for if DJ ever met the Hulk.

There were rules for DJ, there were rules designed to keep him safe, to protect him. Tony had planned for it, the only way he could, because he'd acknowledged that there was a chance this could happen. That some day, his very small, very fragile, very fearless child might come face to face with Hulk.

Tony had made rules for this.

Those rules included DJ turning back into Dummy immediately. The bot could take a lot of punishment, and perhaps more important, if he was accidentally damaged, Tony could fix him. He could put Dummy back together, and the network would preserve Dummy's intelligence until he could. So DJ knew the rules; he went back to being Dummy. Jarvis had protocols of his own, to summon the others, Clint with his tranqs and Thor with the sheer force to oppose Hulk, and anyone
else to make sure that DJ was all right.

But the first step, the one that had been drilled into DJ all along, was that he went back to being Dummy. Because in the course of everything plan that he'd come up with, every eventuality, every possibility, Tony had never considered that DJ might be underwater when it happened.

He barely understood what was happening, he didn't have time to understand, to comprehend, to even think, before Bruce went crashing into the pool after DJ. Bruce went under, and Hulk surfaced with a roar, displacing the water, shattering the silence. There wasn't time for Tony to do more than scream, his own howl lost beneath the force of Hulk's, and then Hulk was scooping DJ out of the water with one big hand. Water sluiced from between his fingers, and Tony's heart seized in his chest.

But DJ came out of the water already coughing.

He was coughing, his breath coming in rough jerks, but that was fine. As long as he was coughing, he was breathing. For a few seconds, he gagged, water pouring from his mouth. Hulk just held him, his head tipped to the side as DJ got his breath back. DJ's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again on a harsh cough, and he sucked in a deep breath.

And just like that, DJ started to sob. The noise was loud, and harsh, and Tony lunged forward even as Hulk's head snapped back, his face creasing in a broad frown. Sobbing, DJ held out his arms, his fingers clutching at the air.

Not towards Steve or Tony. Towards Hulk.

For a beat, a single heartbeat, Hulk stared at him. And then, the gesture cautious and careful, he drew the boy up against his chest. DJ threw his arms around Hulk's neck, clinging and sobbing as Hulk turned and slowly, carefully, waded to the edge of the pool. The water sloshed around him, sloshed over onto the deck, over their feet. At the very edge of the pool, Tony waited, barely letting himself breathe, as Hulk lumbered over.

He was aware, all of a sudden, of Steve's arms around him, holding him still, holding him in place. As Hulk approached, Steve's arms fell away, and Tony sank to his knees. He reached out, silently, and Hulk handed DJ into Tony's shaking hands. DJ scrambled forward, latching onto Tony's shirt. He was still crying, his face screwed up, his cheeks red, tears mingling with the water that streamed from his hair. Tony's arms closed around DJ in a grip that was far too tight, and he knew it. He just couldn't seem to do anything about it as he clutched his child to his chest.

“Tony.” Tony looked up, and Steve was there with a towel. Tony forced his arms to relax, enough for Steve to wrap the towel around DJ, rubbing at his face and hair, drying him. When he was done, DJ's sobs had tapered away, replaced by the occasional uneven whimper. But he leaned into Steve's hands, into Tony's body, his big eyes blinking owlishly, as he curled up against Tony's chest.

Tony tucked the soft fabric around DJ, still holding on too tight, still holding the boy too close. He looked up, meeting Hulk's eyes. “Thank you,” he said, and his voice was trembling at the edges. Hulk's head tipped to the side, his expression curious, and he sank a little lower in the water, letting out a pleased grumble as the warm water reached his chest.

DJ, sniffling, pointed at the pool. “Furbro,” he said, his voice pleading. Tony followed his gesture to where the ball was still bobbing along the surface of the pool, well out of reach.

Hulk got up, lumbered across the pool, and scooped the ball into the palm of his hand. Then he turned around and returned, water rolling in waves with every step, to the edge of the pool. He held
the ball up to DJ, who took it with a wobbly grin.

“What do you say?” Steve asked him.

“Thank you,” DJ said. He held up a hand. Hulk considered it, his mouth pursed. Then he held out a massive hand, his fingers pushed flat, his arm still. DJ leaned forward to tap his palm against Hulk's. Giggling, he wiggled in Tony's arms. “Get down,” he said, when Tony's arms just tightened. “Please?”

Tony didn't want to, he didn't want to let go, or even let up, but he let his hands go lax, let DJ's feet come down on the tile. DJ flicked his foot against the water covered tiles, watching as his toes splashed in the small puddles. He pushed away from Tony, kicking at the pooled water.

Hulk grinned, and tapped one huge hand on the surface of the water. It sloshed over the edge, lapping at DJ's feet, and the boy scrambled wildly in a circle, shrieking happily. As the water retreated, he followed it, creeping forward, his feet careful. He looked at Hulk expectantly, his grin wide and easy, the trauma of his all already fading.

Hulk splashed again, setting off another round of screams and giggles as DJ danced around the wet tile, still hugging Furbro's ball to his chest. His laughter mixed with the rumbling chuckles from the pool as Hulk watched him dart around.

“Well,” Steve said, his voice shaking just a little on the words, “that went better than could be expected.”

Tony leaned back against Steve's chest. “Yes. Yes, it did.” He let his eyes fall shut. “Can I have a drink now? I would really like a drink now.”

Steve kissed his ear, the gesture gentle and comforting. “No,” he said, but Tony could hear the smile in his voice. His arms tightened around Tony's waist, hugging him tight. Tony relaxed into the contact, knowing that Steve needed it as much as he did.

DJ came darting back over to them, hopping from puddle to puddle, his hands up over his head. He skidded to a stop against Tony's legs, latching onto Tony's waistband with one little hand. He grinned up at them, his hair in damp, tangled waves around his forehead.

“Hi,” Tony said to him. “Did you make a new friend?”

DJ looked back over his shoulder, to where Hulk was now sitting, low in the water, only his eyes and hair visible above the surface. Furbro's ball was floating directly in front of him. As they watched, Hulk blew bubbles in the water and then sat back up, chortling to himself. DJ nodded, his face split with a grin. He tugged lightly on Tony's shorts and pointed back at the pool. “Oh, you want to give this another try?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” DJ said. He gave Steve a pleading look.

Steve's arms slid away from Tony and he crouched down in front of the boy. “You have to be careful, okay?

DJ's head tipped to the side. He pointed at the pool. Steve caught his hand. “Don't go near the pool without us again, do you understand?” He pointed at the tiles that made up the floor. “Unless one of us is with you, holding your hand, count five tiles away from the edge, and don't go any closer. Understood?”

DJ considered that, and the tiles. He crouched down, spreading his fingers over the tile, checking the
edges, checking how much of the tile he could cover with one hand, and then the other. Finally, he looked up. “Yes,” he repeated. Then he pointed at the pool again.

Steve looked up, and Hulk patted the surface of the water. It sloshed over the edge, carrying Furbro along with it. Steve scooped him up and handed him back to DJ.

“Did we miss all the excitement?”

Clint had accessorized his swim trunks with his quiver and his bow, and Thor was right on his heels, in shorts and carrying Mjolnir in one big hand. Clint grinned. “Hey, big guy. Did you bring your swimsuit?”

Hulk considered him. Then one hand came up, sweeping over the surface of the pool. The resulting wave knocked Clint off of his feet and straight onto his ass. “I guess that's a no,” Clint said, flat on his back. Hulk ducked under the surface of the water, his laughter rumbling the floor.

“Perhaps he does not appreciate your advice,” Thor said, laughing as he dragged Clint to his feet.

“Perhaps he's seen the horrors that you regularly wear,” Natasha said, sweeping in. “Hello,” she said to Hulk, then held out her hands as DJ came dancing over, holding out his ball. “Is Furbro going swimming?” she asked, a faint smile on her face.

Coulson gave Tony a look from the back of the pack, and Tony shook his head. Whatever discussion he had to have, he wasn't going to have it now. “Hail, hail, the gang's all here,” he said, pushing himself to his feet. “Let the lessons begin.”

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Bruce's eyes opened, and for an instant, he had no idea where he was, or how he'd gotten there. He took a deep breath, and the scent of chlorine stung his nose and cleared his head. Terror swept through him, his skin cold in an instant.

“Hey, there, big guy,” Tony said, grinning down at him. “How're-”

Bruce's hand reached up, his fingers latching onto Tony's arm with a death grip. “Did I hurt him?” he choked out. “Is he- Oh, God, did I hurt him?”

Tony blinked, his face going blank. “Of course you didn’t.” He grabbed Bruce's hand, letting Bruce's fingers cling to his. “Bruce. It's all right. You saved him.” Bruce stared at him, not understanding a word of it, and Tony gave him a smile. “You saved him.”

Bruce searched his face, looking for some sign of a lie, but Tony just smiled at him, his grip firm and easy. “It's okay,” Tony said. “DJ's fine. I'll call him up here, if you want to check for yourself. I mean, I'll take that as a lack of trust, but I'll do it.”

The chuckle slipped out, almost against his will, and Tony's smile stretched a bit wider. “Relax. Jarvis, could you send for the ankle biter?”

“Of course, sir. I shall notify Steve that you are waiting on DJ's arrival.”

“Much appreciated, my man.”

“Why am I-” Bruce shoved a hand through his hair, trying to remember. His throat felt raw and dry, and he coughed, trying to clear it. “What happened, why am I here? Did he- Did I pass out?”
“Less 'pass out' and more 'fell asleep next to the pool,'” Tony said, still grinning. He poured a glass of water and handed it over. “After all, you had a very busy day.” There was a glint of laughter in Tony's eyes that Bruce didn't trust.

Bruce scraped a hand over his face, trying to ignore the way it shook. “What happened?” he asked, almost dreading the answer. He remembered snatches of it, bits and pieces here and there, of water and laughter and the smell of chlorine.

“Well, DJ wouldn't go back in the pool unless the other guy was there to be his lifeguard. So DJ learned how to float and dog paddle with Hulk keeping a careful eye on the proceedings,” Tony explained. “He didn't seem to mind the task. Every time Steve or I moved DJ, Hulk just trailed right along behind us, and took a seat within reach.”

Bruce stared at him. “I- What?”

“Pretty good day at the pool, really. There were these really ridiculous pool floats shaped like sea monsters, doughnuts and octopus of various sizes that I know I did not buy, and I will blame on Clint, no matter how much he professes that he had nothing to do with it. DJ really likes them, and most of them did not get broken. We're good with 'most of them.'”

He settled down in his chair. “Then Nat taught him to use the kickboard, and he's really good at that, he figured out it was something close to running, and that was fine by him. And when he got better at floating, we let him try the slide. So we all splashed around a bit and Thor and Clint had a cannonball contest, and then Hulk beat everyone at cannonballs, and since it would take time to refill the pool, we took a break. Then everyone got ice cream sandwiches, and DJ took the paper wrapper off of Hulk’s and they both ate too many and fell asleep on towels next to the pool.”

Bruce looked at him over the rim of his water glass. Tony leaned back in his chair, grinning. “Busy day,” he repeated.

Bruce's eyes shut. “I guess so.”

“Hey.”

Bruce opened his eyes, and Tony's mouth was tight and flat. His eyes met Bruce's for a second, then darted away. “Thank you. For saving him.”

Bruce rolled the glass between his palms. “I love him, too, you know.”

Tony's throat worked, his eyes blinking hard. “Of course you do,” he said, and there was a rough note to his voice. “You're a sensible sort of man.” His mouth twitched. “The kid likes you. Both of you.”

Bruce took a deep breath, letting his chest expand with the force of it. “I thought, before-” He stopped, clearing his throat. He went back to his water, despite the fact that the glass was almost empty. It gave him an excuse to stop talking until he could pull himself together. “Before the other guy, I had thought about having a family.” He missed Betty, all the time. But sometimes, the faint ache was a searing pain that he couldn't suppress. “I've given up on that.” He looked up. “Like a lot of other things. I've given up on that.

“So this was...” He met Tony's eyes. “I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd asked me to leave, after DJ showed up. It's a risk you're taking. With your child. You're taking a risk by letting me stay here.”

Tony's mouth got tight. “Bruce?” He stood up, leaning over the bed, his hand coming down on Bruce's shoulder. “He needs you, too.”
“He doesn't-"

“Yeah, look, if there's something I'm not interested in teaching my kid? It's that you get rid of people when they're-” His mouth got tight. “Not easy. Because none of us are easy. None. So you've got your thing, and so do I and so does Steve, and so does everyone.” One hand slashed through the air. “But you're his family, too, and that's-” He stopped. “We don't get rid of people when they're not easy. He needs to believe that.” Tony's lips twitched up in a faint smile. “Because he's not easy, either.”

Bruce's eyes dropped to his hands, and he realized that his fingers were locked on the blankets. His throat hurt, and he swallowed hard, trying to clear it. “He's a lucky kid,” he managed at last.

“Yeah. He is,” Tony agreed. “He's got a good family. Including his Uncle Bruce.”

Bruce's eyes squeezed shut. “I shouldn't be here.”

“Hey.” He waited until Bruce looked in his direction. “Look, Steve... Said something to me, and I think...” His head tipped back. “No one's getting sent away, okay? You can leave. If you think you need to. But no one's getting sent away. That's not going to happen.”

Bruce took a breath. “If I'm a danger to-”

“You can't leave him,” Tony said. “He needs you.”

Bruce's head dropped, too heavy for his neck. "Thank you."

“My apologies for interrupting, but DJ has arrived,” Jarvis said.

“Send him on in,” Tony said, and Bruce scrubbed his hand over his stinging eyes. “Thanks, Jay.”

A moment later there was an odd slapping sound, and then DJ threw himself up over the edge of Bruce's bed. He was wearing a snorkel and diving mask, a pair of shorts, and swim fins. For an instant, his flippered feet kicked at the blankets as he desperately tried to drag himself up. It was a losing fight, and he slid slowly back over the edge, clawing at the fabric the entire way. There was a faint thump as he hit the ground, and Bruce bit his lip to keep from laughing.

“That was dignified,” Tony said, looking down. “I mean, the outfit alone should've warned me that dignity was not your first priority. But still. What are you doing, exactly?” He leaned over to pick up his son, boosting DJ up onto the edge of the bed. DJ, visibly pleased, tried to cross his legs. The flippers made it impossible, and he frowned down at his feet.

“Don't listen to him,” Bruce said to DJ. “You look prepared.” DJ grinned at him and scooted closer, leaning against Bruce's knee. Some hidden strain, some knot in Bruce's chest loosened. He reached out and ruffled DJ's hair. The boy leaned into his touch, grinning. “Where did you get all of that?”

“Steve, to no one's surprise, has all sorts of things ready and waiting for DJ to want to use them.” Tony slumped back in his chair, running one hand through his hair. “Man's crazed.”

“Responsibility is tough,” Bruce agreed.

“I would not know.”

Bruce finished his water and considered putting the glass aside. For some reason, he liked having something to hold onto while he tried to get his bearings again. DJ was still watching him, eyes big behind the lenses of his goggles. Bruce gave him a smile that felt strained on his face, but DJ just
folded his arms on Bruce's knee, resting his cheek on them.

“'You're not scared of me, are you?'” Bruce asked, and he hadn't meant to say that, but DJ just grinned at him. He held up a hand, and Bruce stared at it until his vision got blurry at the edges. Then he reached out, and gently tapped his palm against DJ's.

“What do you say?” Tony asked.

“Thank you,” DJ said. He leaned against Bruce's leg again, his cheek squished against Bruce's knee. “Go swimming?” he asked. There was something hopeful about his voice, about his face under the mask.

Bruce smiled. “Maybe,” he allowed. He pushed DJ's hair away from his forehead. “'If you can do it, I guess I can too."

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