The Child's Faith is New

by Chandri

Summary

In which Loki is lost in the Bifrost and emerges on Earth as a child, with no apparent memory of the events in New York... or anything else.

And the Avengers adopt him. Because what could possibly go wrong?

Notes

I HAVE FINALLY DONE IT. I have made Avengers fic. It is 36% crack, 31% fluffy kidfic, and approximately 33% angst (in that order). I have never done kidfic before, so the crack content might actually be a little higher than my inexpert estimate.

I blame: hufflepuffia, girlgeek, and fiddleheadsalad, who comprise a significant percentage of the Lady Avengers, also known as You Who Are To Blame, as well as ficsinthebushes, and I will also throw in Trisha and neomeruru because I would hate for them to feel left out.

Blame lies most especially heavily on fiddleheadsalad for emotional blackmail via sketches of Baby!Loki in the early, theoretical stages of this story, which she did with the express purpose of morally obligating me to actually write it, because, after all, she is a Slytherin.
Betaed by artemisiabrisol.

I am breaking my personal rule and posting this one part at a time, because editing is taking a long, long time and I hate editing. But it is done! So there will be no torturous months-long gaps.

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Chapter 1

Someone is crying.

Steve crouches down so that he can breathe and listen. There. A kid, he thinks. Off to the right, in the heart of the debris. Steve can’t imagine what a child might have been doing on that plane. He doesn’t let himself think about it, just starts shoving his way through.

“There’s a survivor,” he says over the comm.

A crackle, and then Natasha’s brisk voice: “Hang on, Cap. Containment will be there in five--”

“No,” says Steve. He’s closer now; he can see a little hunched-over shape through the smoke. “No, I think it’s - it’s a kid.”

A brief silence follows. “Say again?” says Natasha, sounding thrown off (for Natasha).

“I’m going in,” Steve says.

“What?” That’s Tony, loud and incredulous. Steve winces and rubs at his ear.

“Stand by,” he says firmly into the comm.

It is a kid, covered in soot and coughing. Steve doesn’t wait; reaches out, scoops the kid up, and gets the heck out of there.

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“Is he hallucinating? Is it smoke inhalation?” Tony is already yelling as he touches down, the repulsors cutting out as he thuds to the ground and raises his faceplate. Tony wonders if Steve can even really succumb to smoke inhalation. Probably eventually, but it’s only been a few minutes. “He’s the one always lecturing about teamwork and ‘not going off like a loose cannon,’” - and okay, that last part is mostly Tony - “and I’m no expert but probably diving into the burning wreckage of a plane full of supervillains qualifies as reckless, right?”

“He’s fine,” Natasha sounds calm, but she’s got her arms crossed and is standing in the very-relaxed way that Tony has started to suspect is a clever smokescreen for the times when she is not relaxed at all. He’s not sure that Natasha ever relaxes.

“Fine?” Tony says dubiously. “He said there was a kid. How could there be a kid? Unless the... what the fuck were they called again?”

“The Sinister Syndicate,” supplies Natasha, in a tone that shows just how unimpressed she is with the name.

“Yeah. Them. Whatever. Unless they’re recruiting preschoolers, I’d say smoke inhalation is more likely, or maybe he hit his head really hard and--”

“Stark, he’s fine. Give him a few minutes.”
Tony looks towards the debris field, which is still largely engulfed in smoke and flames. He can’t see much with the faceplate up, since Steve ordered them all back to a safe distance before he went back in to rescue imaginary orphans.

“Where are--”

“Thor was following the chutes from the two unfriendlies who bailed out, and Clint went to pick up Bruce,” she says. “They should be here in--” The sound of the Quinjet coming in to land drowns out the rest of the sentence, and she just smiles serenely.

The bay door hisses open and Clint and Bruce tumble out. Clint is strapping his quiver back on and Bruce is zipping up the one-piece flightsuit they keep in the jet for when he doesn’t want to wander around half-naked post-battle.

“What’s happening?” Clint asks. “We got more trouble?”

Natasha shakes her head, but she doesn’t look as sure as she did five minutes ago. Probably because Steve’s been in there five minutes, which is way too long in Tony’s opinion.

There’s the usual disciplined bickering while Clint and Natasha argue over whether they should charge off to the rescue or follow orders and stay back, while Bruce squints towards the smoke and Tony fidgets as much as he can in a highly-articulated metal suit.

And then Steve emerges from the smoke, shield on one arm and in the other he’s...

...carrying a kid.

“Well, fuck,” says Tony.

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Once they’ve all finished gaping (Natasha recovers first), the obvious questions arise, like “what was he doing in there?” and “how did he survive?” (Bruce) and “it’s a trap!” (Tony) which isn’t technically a question but comes up as a general rule. Steve patiently waits them out, and finally holds up a hand.

“Guys, that’s enough. Whatever he was doing there, we can figure it out after he’s had some medical attention.”

Which is apparently the cue for SHIELD helicopters to start circling the crash site for a landing.

Maria Hill listens to a brief report from Steve, and then shoots an unreadable look at the kid. “You’ve got this for now, Captain?”

“IT’s under control, Agent Hill,” says Steve.

Since there’s not much the Avengers can do until the fire is out and the hazmat/bomb/who-the-hell-even-knows-when-you’re-dealing-with-meta-humans team (Fury’s name) is done, they’re left basically standing around while Hill prioritizes and directs disaster cleanup. Clint and Bruce perch on the edge of the Quinjet’s ramp. Natasha sits next to them, wrapping her elbow, which she wrenched during the initial fight with the crazy people before they took to the air and the Avengers had to chase after them.
Tony looks at the kid, who has apparently fallen asleep on Steve’s shoulder.

“You’re sure he’s not just a cunningly-concealed explosive device? Because that would not even be the weirdest thing that’s happened to us this month.”

“He’s not a bomb, Tony,” Steve says, “not according to the cleanup guys.” He sounds amused, his voice a little rough from the smoke. Tony resolutely ignores inadvertently-sexy-Captain-America-voice and studies the kid instead.

The little boy looks maybe three? Tony has no idea how to judge ages in adults, let alone kids. Wavy dark hair. It’s hard to tell much more under all the dirt on his face, but he’s got one thumb in his mouth and sweet round cheeks and looks practically doll-sized in Steve’s arms.

There’s also something… oddly familiar about him, but Tony can’t pin it down.

What’s not familiar is the look on Steve’s face. Tony’s seen Steve with kids before - frequently, even. Not just rescuing them from collapsing buildings and supervillain crossfire but during PR stuff where there are hundreds of sprogs crowding up close to Steve and asking for his autograph, and reporters watching. Cap likes kids. He genuinely believes in all that “children are our future” stuff. He smiles and shakes hands and listens attentively to every six-year-old who tells him he/she wants to grow up to be Captain America some day.

But whenever they’re in public, Tony thinks, Steve is Captain America, wearing the American smile, mask firmly in place. A couple of times Tony’s seen him approached by random people on the street, usually parents using their kids as an excuse, and it occurs to Tony now Steve probably hates all that shit.

Steve looks… worried, maybe. The weight of a three-year-old can’t possibly be a strain on super-muscles, but he looks a little tight around the eyes, like he wishes someone would come and take the kid off his hands but doesn’t want to say anything.

“Are you--” Tony starts to ask, and stops.

Steve looks at him, taking in Tony’s expression, and then looking down at the top of the kid’s head.

“Oh,” he says, “no, I’m fine.” Apparently he’s mistaken Tony’s concerned face with an offer to relieve him of his burden, which, uh, no.

“I think someone should take a look at him. He was coughing a lot,” Steve says for the second time. Steve’s pushed his cowl back, and Tony can see the line where the edge of the mask was, the bottom half of his face darkened with soot. Steve looks over at the little knot of SHIELD agents clustered around Hill and tries to catch their attention. Hill waves at him in a “just a minute” sort of way. Steve makes a face and leans against the side of the jet.

Tony sighs. “Okay, here,” he says, holding out his arms. Steve looks at him in confusion.

“I can scan him,” says Tony. “Or, JARVIS can.”

Steve seems dubious. “The suit has medical scanners?”

“Are you kidding? JARVIS has it built into his basic software. It’s not an MRI, but it’ll be able to tell
if there’s anything seriously wrong.”

Steve looks at Tony, and then back down at the kid. And then back at Tony.

“Or I can do it from here. Fine.” Tony tries not to feel hurt that stupid Captain America doesn’t trust him with a stupid kid. To be fair, he wouldn’t trust himself with a kid either.

“Just hold still.”

“Tony, I didn’t--”

“Hold. Still.”

Steve holds still.

“Awesome,” says Tony. “JARVIS?”

“Scanning, Sir,” says JARVIS, and Tony watches the medical scan in progress pop up on his HUD. While he’s gained some uncomfortable familiarity with the subtleties of various medical scans, he usually leaves the interpretation to JARVIS.

He’s curious, though, because the kid basically appeared from nowhere, and he’s cute and innocent-looking and they all know better than to trust things that are cute and innocent-looking.

As always, JARVIS knows exactly what he wants before he even asks for it. “He appears to be an ordinary human child, approximately three years of age, Sir,” he says for Tony’s ears alone.

“Great, good, carry on,” Tony tells him, tapping his fingers impatiently against his armoured ribs. Obviously they’ll have to do a more detailed scan. Later.

“There appears to be some minor irritation of the throat and lungs, but no serious damage, Sir,” JARVIS says over both comms, and Steve relaxes slightly.

“Thanks, JARVIS.”

Not “Thanks, Tony, for designing a super-smart AI with a medical degree.”

Thanks JARVIS.

Tony isn’t bitter.

“There, see? In one piece.”

“Yeah.” Steve shifts the kid in his arms. “I just...”

There’s a gust of wind as Thor returns, hitting the ground with a minor tremor. Tony just barely gets the faceplate down in time to avoid a mouthful of dust. Steve turns away, sheltering the kid’s head with one hand. Tony raises the faceplate again as Thor approaches.

“My friends!” he booms. “I have dispatched our enemies. One died in the fall, and the other,” he pats the unconscious bad guy slung over one shoulder, “I brought back as a captive. What shall I do with him?”
A trio of SHIELD agents helpfully appears to relieve Thor of his burden. Thor dumps the bad guy into their waiting arms. The agents check him over for major injuries, and then he’s handcuffed and carried off to be locked up in the transport.

Thor turns back to the team, beaming. “I see we have all survived! And did I hear that the good Captain has rescued a child?”

“As far as we can tell, anyway,” Tony mutters, and Steve glares at him.

“I found him in the wreckage. He seems okay, though.”

Thor leans in to peer at the kid. The kid finally stirs, and opens his eyes, blinking up at him.

Two very strange things happen.

First, the kid’s face goes funny: wide-eyed and scared. And then his little mouth screws up and he bursts into tears. It’s the tragic, awful kind of little-kid crying, too - all wrenching sobs and half-completed words.

The second thing is that Thor takes a step back - and this is the first time Tony has ever seen him retreat from anything, including the building-sized, slime-dripping mutant spiders they fought upstate last month.

“Brother?” he asks, in the smallest, most absolutely gutted voice Tony has ever heard.

And then Hill finally shows up and everything goes nuts.

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“No,” says Steve, when Tony gets to the briefing room back at SHIELD after shucking the suit. “No, absolutely not.”

Tony skids into the room to see the entire team, minus Thor and plus Hill, Fury, Coulson (who still looks kind of shitty from his recent near-death/fake-death experience) and a pair of strangers dressed in the blue smocks of SHIELD medical staff. Against the wall behind Fury’s chair are half a dozen SHIELD commando-types decked out in body armour and carrying huge guns. Everyone except for Natasha is in varying stages of confusion.

The kid is still in Steve’s arms, face buried in the front of his uniform.

“Captain,” Fury says, in the voice that means he’s just barely holding onto his patience (Tony has heard it a lot), “we need to consider containment.”

“Of a three-year-old?” Tony doesn’t think he’s ever heard Steve use scathing sarcasm before. It’s kind of awesome.

“Of an enemy alien who has killed a couple of hundred people that we know of and recently caused 60 billion dollars in property damage to the city of New York!” Fury is merely speaking loudly, but since it’s Fury, the volume makes Tony’s ears ring.

The kid starts crying. Again.
“Sir,” says Steve, raising his voice to be heard over the sobbing, “he doesn’t seem very dangerous to me. Even if he is Loki--”


“In this instance I am willing to take his word for it!” Fury tells Steve. “And the last time Loki was on a SHIELD base, he was a source of extreme and lethal chaos.”

“ Appropriately,” mutters Clint, and then looks innocently up at the ceiling when Fury shoots him a Look.

“I’ll... be in my lab,” Bruce says, and runs away. Tony watches him go, and then turns back to where Steve Rogers is disobeying his commanding officer. It’s a good show, but it can’t last forever.

“Sir,” Steve says, “with all due respect, look at him. Nobody else here thinks he’s a clear and present danger--”

“Um, actually,” Tony pipes up, raising his hand. Steve gives him such a disappointed look that he immediately drops it again.

“Okay, that’s enough,” says someone. To everyone’s astonishment, it’s Coulson, who has stood up from his chair, and who is now striding over to where Steve is clutching an increasingly inconsolable toddler.

“Here,” he says, holding out his arms.

“Agent,” Fury begins, but Coulson just looks at him over his shoulder.

“I’ll accompany him down to the infirmary. We’ll be right back. You’ll be fine.” He says this last directly to the kid, who has stopped crying and is staring up at Coulson. He sniffs, and then reluctantly allows his arms to be unwound from around Steve’s neck so that he can be passed over to Coulson with one last anxious look over his shoulder at Cap. Coulson turns back to Fury, kid propped on his hip.

It is possibly the single most terrifying thing Tony has ever seen.

Fury sighs and waves a hand, tacit acknowledgment that if anyone is up to protecting the base from a murderous demigod of chaos and lies, it’s the guy who recently survived getting stabbed through the chest by the same demigod.

Especially since said demigod is currently pint-sized and sucking his thumb, tear tracks standing out on his grubby face.

Coulson goes, jerking his head at the guys with guns, who follow him out in tidy formation.

Fury stares at everyone as if daring them to say something.
When it seems that the discussion is, at least for the moment, over, Steve goes looking for Thor. Tony follows in his wake. “Look—” he begins, but Steve just shakes his head.

“Not now, Tony,” he says, more sharply than he meant to, and Tony falls back, but stays with him.

Steve finds Thor in Dr. Foster’s lab, sitting on an incongruously purple-upholstered desk chair, head in hands. Darcy Lewis is perched on the desk next to him, patting his shoulder. When Steve enters, she looks up and widens her eyes significantly, tilting her head in Thor’s direction.

“It’s okay, big guy,” she says. “Jane will be back soon. She’ll - okay I don’t know exactly what she’s doing but I’m sure she’s got, like, a plan.”

“I do not understand,” Thor says to the floor. “How can this be?”

Darcy looks at Steve and flings one hand helplessly out to the side.

Steve pauses. He was planning on asking Thor some questions but now that doesn’t seem... appropriate. Thor seems distraught, which... fair enough.

“Thor?” he finally ventures. Thor looks up.

“Steven!” he says. “I am sorry. I should be at the meeting.”

“Meeting’s over, big guy,” Tony says from the door, adding thoughtfully: “apparently Fury’s afraid of kids. I would not have called that one.”

Steve fights the urge to turn and glare Tony into silence. It never takes, anyway.

Thor looks worried and asks, in a voice that, for Thor, sounds small: “What was decided?”

Steve isn’t sure what he’s asking at first, but then he hurriedly reassures him: “Nothing’s been decided. He’s in the infirmary getting checked out.”

“He should not be alone.” Thor surges to his feet, but is stopped by Darcy’s hand on his shoulder.

Steve puts a hand on his other shoulder, to reinforce the message that he should just stay where he is. “He’s not alone. Agent Coulson is with him.”

Thor relaxes instantly. “That is well. The Son of Coul will care for him.”

“As long as he avoids any sharp objects,” Steve hears Tony mutter, and this time, he does turn and give Tony a quelling look. Tony glares right back.

“I do not believe there is any danger,” Thor says, and both Steve and Tony turn to look at him.

“Maybe you could explain that?” Steve says.

Thor shrugs. “He is... not the same,” is all he says.
Jane Foster enters the room and everything is derailed for a moment so that Thor can sweep her into his arms. Steve doesn’t know the whole story, but apparently Dr. Foster was not only Thor’s first contact on his last trip to Earth, but has been instrumental in the work to reconstruct the Bifrost. The fact that the U.S. Government now has scientists on payroll at secret facilities to assist in interplanetary diplomatic efforts to rebuild a bridge through outer space is just one more thing about the 21st century that Steve is just trying to wash over him like a tide, in the hopes that when the water recedes, everything will be solid and clear.

When they’ve disengaged, Dr. Foster pulls up a series of incomprehensible squiggly-lined graphs on a gigantic screen at the back of the lab.

“This is what we’ve got so far,” she says, and Tony gets interested and they babble back and forth in increasingly obtuse scientific parlance for a few minutes before remembering that there are ordinary people in the room with them. Well - two relatively ordinary people and one alien demigod.

“You were right,” she says to Thor, who as always, smiles at her.

“Wait, seriously?” Darcy says, and Dr. Foster nods excitedly.

“Could someone clue me in, since I’m the only one who doesn’t...?” Steve begins, but Thor cuts in with:

“It was the Bifrost.”

Steve looks at him. “The bridge through space?”

Thor nods. “The same. It was damaged during the battle with my brother, but my Jane has been working with Heimdall to repair it.”

“Among others,” Dr. Foster points out. “Not that it’s been easy, since communication is almost entirely one-way with only a few exceptions for databurst transmissions.”

“Heimdall sees all,” Thor says in an agreeable tone as though that explained everything.

“We were nearly ready to start testing it again,” says Dr. Foster. “But now we’re getting unsuccessful pings and we can’t get through to Asgard at all.”

Steve glances at Tony, who is still studying the many-coloured diagram. It seems mostly made up of peak-and-valley shapes, with some wavery lines swooping in and out.

“Okay,” Steve says finally, “but I still don’t really know what that means.”

“It means it was working,” says Tony. He’s looking closely at a particular peak on the screen depicted in yellow near the top-right corner. “And now it’s not. Right?” He looks at Dr. Foster, who nods.

“And judging from these readings,” she nods towards the screen, “something came through.”

“Something about this big?” Steve held his hand out, indicating something about three feet tall.

“I don’t know. Not yet,” Dr. Foster says. “I’d need more detailed readings to be sure, but judging
from our data from the first time Thor came through...” She shoots Thor a smile, and Darcy grins and
punches him lightly on the shoulder. “…I’d say it was probably approximately person-sized. Or
smaller. The phenomenon is... similar.”

“But I do not understand,” Thor protests, “how he came to be on the bridge at all.”

“Yeah,” Tony agrees, “wasn’t he, y’know, in jail? On Asgard?”

Thor looks, briefly, a little shifty. “After a fashion.”

When everyone around him draws breath to demand what that means, he rallies, throwing his
shoulders back and raising his chin. “He was kept safe,” he says, seriously. “Of that, I can assure
you.”

From what little he knows about Asgard, Steve’s not sure that they even have prisons. There’s
banishment, and trial by combat, and sometimes the truly terrible criminals are put to death, but
according to Thor that hasn’t happened in centuries - millennia, even. So what, exactly, were they
doing with an incorrigible trickster like Loki?

An incorrigible trickster who is currently three years old and five levels below them.

“So, he came through the Bifrost,” Steve says, trying to get things back on track.

“That’s probably what brought the plane down,” Dr. Foster tells him. “What little they recovered of
the plane showed the electrical systems were totally fried. Not surprising.”

Steve nods. That explains one thing, at least. The Sinister Syndicate weren’t even really supervillains
- just highly talented domestic terrorists. The only reason the Avengers were even called in was
because of the size and destructive potential of the experimental weapons they’d managed to boost...
and because the facility they’d knocked over was one belonging to Stark Industries.

“It’s amazing he survived,” Steve says wonderingly.

Dr. Foster shakes her head. “Not that amazing. I mean, the Bifrost is designed to get people safely
from one point to another. It has extensive safeguards to guarantee exactly that. If it hadn’t been able
to deposit... uh, Loki, safely on Earth, it probably would have jumped to another point on the
network - the World Tree.”

There’s a definite vagueness about the way she says Loki’s name, and she looks sideways at Thor,
who just hangs his head.

“You’re sure that it’s him?” It’s Tony who asks the question. He sounds genuinely curious, and
Steve reflects that it’s probably better that Tony asked the question, rather than Steve, Dr. Foster, or
Darcy, who might have hesitated. Because of tact.

“I am... nearly certain.”

Tony raises an eyebrow. “‘Nearly?’”

Thor sits down again. The purple chair creaks alarmingly, but holds up.

“There is something different, this time.” And he sounds so, so sad.
“Different how?” Steve asks.

Tony goes back to hacking the security feed in the infirmary on his phone. It takes him less than five minutes - SHIELD security is worryingly porous, though it’s probably unfair to compare anybody else’s security with his own. His phone screen lights up with an image of the main infirmary.

“He is...” Thor seems to struggle for words, which is unusual enough that Tony looks up. Thor is staring off into the distance. Then he looks at Jane again. “He has done this before,” he says in a half-confiding tone. “He has always been able to appear as he wished to appear. From the time we were boys. He has been many things.” Thor doesn’t seem inclined to elaborate on this. He shakes his head. “But he has always been... himself. Even when he was someone else.”

Jane rubs a hand in circles on his back. “And he isn’t now?”

“I... I do not know,” Thor admits. He looks up, at Steve. “He is my brother. I know him as well as anyone. Or I thought I did. But it is different. That is all I can say.”

On his phone screen, Tony finally gets the controls right, and zooms in to where their tiny guest is... ...sitting next to Coulson on the edge of an infirmary bed, kicking his bare feet in the air.

“That is so weird,” Tony says, more loudly than he meant to, and everyone else in the room turns to look at him.

Tony considers lying, but changes his mind with a sigh. “Here,” he says, and makes a gesture over the phone that ports the video feed to Jane’s big wall screen. Now they can all see Coulson, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, talking to the possibly-murderous toddler with exactly the kind of open, interested, inviting face that Tony remembers from his less traumatizing nannies. It’s a Talking To Kids face, and Tony would have bet a substantial sum of money and one of his less favoured sports cars that Coulson + adorable tiny children = No-Win Scenario. Except, the kid is actually smiling, shyly, and playing absently with...

“Are those handcuffs?” asks Darcy, in a very interested voice. “I didn’t know Phil carried handcuffs.” Which is... very interesting, but there are more important things to worry about just now.

Coulson is helping the kid roll up the too-long sleeves on the scrub top some nurse has given him to replace the tattered clothes he came in wearing. Coulson’s hands are moving with what look like practiced confidence, all the while nodding at whatever the kid is saying. Tony blinks at the screen, and then blinks hard again as though he’s hallucinating and that might help. But no; the strange, strange vision persists.

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“Phil’s has six tiny, adorable nieces and nephews,” says Pepper from the door, and Tony jumps, caught. Pepper looks at them all with both amusement and disapproval, the latter mostly for Tony.

Tony considers pointing out that everyone else in the room, including Captain America, was also watching the strange spectre unfold, but changes his mind at the last second. Thor gets up and takes her hands, kissing them in what appears to be a standard ritual for greeting really hot women in Asgard. “Pepper! What brings you here?”
“I was wondering the same thing,” Tony agrees, crossing the room to greet her with a kiss on the cheek that she accepts gracefully enough. The fact that she can still find him amusing after everything is just one more proof that she was always way, way too good for him.

“I came for the briefing on the break-in at the Staten Island facility,” she says.

Because oh, yeah, Pepper Potts: CEO. Somehow, Tony still forgets that. Half the time when he was CEO he forgot that, too, so fair enough. Pepper probably would not agree.

“I didn’t expect to walk in on Tony spying on SHIELD daycare,” she adds, raising an eyebrow.

“I just wanted to make sure he wasn’t... up to something,” Tony says feebly, waving his phone as though it might prove that he had honourable intentions.


Tony clicks the screen on his phone dark, and Jane’s screen goes back to displaying the analysis of the Bifrost rupture.

“Good afternoon, Pepper,” Steve says, stepping forward to shake her hand. Tony watches Pepper turn her sweetest smile on Steve, who predictably, goes faintly pink in response. Steve clearly still hasn’t forgotten the way Pepper pretty blatantly checked him out the first time they met. Steve’s reaction to embarrassment, though, is invariably painful politeness, and he still absolutely must greet her and shake hands every time they meet.

Tony understands. Even at his lowest, most dickish low, he found Pepper kind of intimidating too.

Also, Tony maybe kind of really likes the blush. (He happens to know that Pepper does too, which is probably why she lets Steve keep doing this every time.)

“I should be going,” Steve says, nodding to the ladies and casting a concerned look at Thor, who is staring miserably down at his hands again. Tony, who apparently doesn’t rate eye contact, nonetheless appreciates the value of a good retreat, and makes a break for it through the other door before anybody else can give him more disapproving looks.
Chapter 3

Apparently SHIELD has a child psychologist on staff. Tony can’t imagine what situation might have arisen to precipitate that hiring decision. Apparently the guy has a half a dozen degrees, and this is only one of them, which makes sense. It seems like everybody on staff at SHIELD has about nine secondary fields, from dentistry to taxidermy to basket weaving.

Dr. Halston is a tall, rumpled, elbow-patched academic who exudes confidence and competence and absolutely zero threat-vibes, which Tony figures is what you want in someone whose job it is to get people to answer questions they don’t really want to answer.

Halston, flanked discreetly (or as discreetly as you can flank someone while holding large-calibre rifles) by two SHIELD agents at all times, is the first person apart from Coulson or Steve to really talk to their tiny guest.

“Do you know how you got here?”

Headshake.

“Does anything hurt?”

Headshake.

“Is your name Loki?”

Hesitation, and then a nod.

“Are you scared?”

Nod.

Thor hovers anxiously outside of the interview room but generally declines the invitation to enter. He seems worried about Loki but disinclined to interfere directly with the process. He seems to feel responsible for what’s happening, though Tony can’t see why. If Loki’s gone off and gotten himself shrunk then from his previous track record, it’s probably his own damned fault.

Sometimes Steve sits in on the interviews and these are the only times the kid loosens up at all, sometimes even smiling at Dr. Halston’s lame jokes. For the first time, Tony wishes he had more contact with kids, because he has no frame of reference for whether or not this is normal behaviour - if this is just to be expected from a shy child surrounded by strange adults, or if it might be a ploy, or if it’s trauma, or...

...Tony tries not to think about it too much, because it’s Loki, or at least that’s what he keeps reminding himself. It’s Loki, and no matter how small and quiet he is, no matter how much time Steve is spending with him, he can’t start thinking about their guest as a lost little kid. (Can’t start remembering being small and the centre of attention and at the same time totally adrift in other people’s expectations, because priorities.)

After the first day passes with no explosions or agents turning into Tesseract-zombies or tantrums, people start to relax a little. On the second day, Tony overhears a few agents talking about their own
kids, and how the kid looks so unhappy to be stuck in an infirmary bed all day. Tony stops listening in on other people’s conversations and thinks that he needs to stop spending so much goddamned time at SHIELD when he doesn’t have to be there.

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Steve comes bearing crayons. He isn’t really sure if a de-aged alien supervillain will like crayons, but he hasn’t got any better ideas. It turns out he needn’t have worried, though, because the kid is curled up on his side, facing the door, sucking his thumb. He looks tiny in the adult-sized infirmary bed. He opens his eyes when Steve walks in, though, and looks at him curiously.

“Hey,” Steve says, quietly. He’s probably not really supposed to be here, but the guards don’t really know how to say no to Captain America.

Tony would be delighted.

The kid doesn’t take his thumb out of his mouth, but he cautiously wiggles the other four fingers in Steve’s direction.

Steve glances back over his shoulder before sitting down on the edge of the bed. The kid watches him, warily. Silently. Steve wonders if he even can talk. Phil said he didn’t say a word the three hours he was with him; answered questions by nodding or shaking his head.

“So, they say they’re done with tests and stuff for now,” Steve says. “Um, so they’re going to get you a better room. Nicer bed. Some toys. Would you like that?”

The kid doesn’t react, not even with a nod. He’s looking at Steve’s hands.

“Oh! Yeah, I brought you some crayons.”

The kid meets his eyes, curiously.

“Oh. They’re -- for drawing. You make...” Showing is easier than telling. “Here.”

He pulls the tray table closer, lays out the stack of paper and opens the box of crayons. He takes a green one and looks around, not sure what to draw. It’s been ages since he did this on a regular basis, but he’s not being judged on technique. He glances at -- Loki, might as well start thinking of him that way -- and decides.

It’s a rough sketch, so it only takes him a minute or so. The curve of a cheek. Small nose. Eyes with long dark lashes. Hair in a dark tumble of waves.

Loki knee-walks over to him, puts his elbows on the table, and studies it. He looks up at Steve, thumb still in his mouth. He points at his own chest.

Steve grins. “Yeah. It’s you.”

The kid smiles.

***

A week passes. Director Fury seems to have calmed down enough to agree that Loki - which
everyone seems to have accepted as his identity for the moment - does not plan to kill them all, at least not in the near future. He’s moved from the SHIELD infirmary to a small adjacent room that is surrounded by windows and mirrored on the inside. Someone brings in a bed and some books and a few toys and a brightly-coloured plastic table and chairs set that is sized down for a little kid. Steve visits him and tries to work out his feelings on the matter.

Loki is a criminal. He hurt a lot of people and he did a massive and lasting amount of damage to the city of New York. He led an alien invasion of the planet Earth that might have resulted in the downfall of the human race. He deserves to pay for his crimes, which is of course why SHIELD grudgingly consented - under extreme diplomatic pressure - to allow him to be extradited to Asgard, with the admission that Earth authorities were neither equipped nor qualified to punish or contain someone of Loki’s... unique status. Loki is a liar and a killer and should not be trusted.

The problem, Steve is realizing, is that Loki is also now a child. Apparently helpless, and from what the many and repeated scans have said, unaware of his own history.

It’s troubling. Especially since from the moment he saw him through the smoke Steve has wanted nothing but to protect him.

Steve knows that he should be more cautious. And he’s trying. But if the best scientific minds in the world are growing convinced that not only is this Loki, but he is truly what he appears, an innocent child... well, what else can he do?

As if on cue, Bruce coughs from the door, and Steve turns. Bruce is clutching a computer tablet. He stares beyond Steve, to where the window shows Loki as a sleeping shape, curled up on his side with his thumb in his mouth. There’s always at least one Avenger in there with him or in the observation room, and it’s Steve’s turn. He takes more turns than anyone else.

“So?” asks Steve, and Bruce drops into the chair beside him.

“They’re processing DNA now, but I think they’re running out of tests to run,” Bruce says, showing him the screen of the tablet. It shows a grid filled with fingerprints and green lines pointing to phrases like “likelihood of subject identity match” and “percentage match,” and all of the numbers are high.

“Fingerprints?”

Bruce nods. “I asked Thor, and while he wasn’t familiar with the process, he let me run some comparisons between his fingerprints now and the ones taken when SHIELD arrested him last year. They were a match, so we ran prints on, uh, Loki in there.” He jerked his head towards the window.

“And?”

“Well, they were a match. To the ones taken when we arrested Loki before... well. You know.” He grimaces.

“They were a match?”

“Yes. And I mean, obviously there are plenty of ways fingerprints can be faked, but why would anyone bother, in this case?”

“I can’t think of a reason,” Steve agrees, looking through the window again. Loki hasn’t stirred; is sleeping peacefully.
“How do you feel about all of this, Bruce?” Steve asks. He should have been asking from the start. Tony’s made his feelings pretty obvious, and Thor mostly seems wracked with guilt. Natasha, and then Clint, were last on the roster, but Clint just shrugged and declared himself “fine,” and Natasha said that it was Clint’s grudge to hold. Which... warrants further conversation, really, but for the moment he trusts his team. Most of them keep their watch from the observation room, and Tony hasn’t taken a watch yet. He’s been “too busy.”

Bruce runs a hand through his hair. “I wasn’t sure at first. I mean... “ The way he waves his hand is pretty eloquent, and Steve nods. “But I’ve spent kind of a lot of time with him. And he’s... Thor said it. He’s different.”

“I guess Thor would know.”

“Yeah.” Bruce pauses, then continues. “If he were Loki without his memory, but the way we knew him before, it would be easier. But this is pretty dramatic. It’s really hard to keep it straight in my head, that biologically, that kid is the same person who... did all those things.”

*But is he?* Steve wonders. Because he knows better than anyone that biology is not what makes a person. Maybe it isn’t even most of it.

***

Tony’s on a roll. Better yet, he’s on a roll after only one night without sleep, which is a rarity for him when nobody is around to enforce a schedule. That used to be Pepper’s job; these days, more often, it’s Steve. Lately, though, Steve has been otherwise occupied. Tony has not mentioned this to anyone because he gets a lot more done when he doesn’t have to adhere to other people’s ridiculous, arbitrary notions what is and is not an appropriate rest/activity cycle

And he’s pretty sure it would sound like he was jealous of a three-year-old.

That he’s managed to produce actual results on his current tests to improve the efficiency of the helicarrier’s engines *and* gotten more than four hours sleep in the past two days is... possibly a record? He’ll have to ask Pepper. He’s not sure, but he thinks she used to keep track of Tony’s sleepless-night-to-usable-data ratio.

Riding the high of triumph, he reaches for his coffee... and it’s not there. Steve is there, holding the cup and looking annoyed.

“Uh. Steve.” Steve’s wearing an impatient expression, one that probably means he’s been standing there for a while and has probably said Tony’s name a few times.

Tony mutes the music with a gesture. “JARVIS, why didn’t you tell me Steve was here?”

“You asked me not to interrupt you for anything short of a dire global emergency, Sir.”

“Oh.” Tony leans back from the workbench, wondering why, again, he’d thought it was a good idea to give the rest of the team lab access codes, thereby totally defeating the purpose of having his workshop in the tower’s sub-basement to begin with (Pepper, of course, would have argued that they’d done this because of the expense of transporting Tony’s equipment up thirty-three stories as well as his tendency to blast metal when he was working were somewhat less than considerate of the other people who had to share the building with him). Something about his history of heart problems,
Steve looks like he isn’t going to give up the coffee cup without a fight. Tony slumps a little in his chair. “Fine,” he says, a little moodily. “It’s probably cold anyway.”

“It’s your turn, Tony.”

Tony immediately regrets muting the music.

“I’m busy.”

Steve crosses his arms. Apparently not bothering to try the earnest route first, then. He must have been standing there for a while.

“Clint hasn’t.”

“Clint’s in New Mexico.”

“Neither has Thor.”

“Yes, he has. And he’s got much better reasons than the rest of us.”

“Such as?”

“Tony.”

Tony turns back to the workbench and reaches for a circuit probe. The truth is, he’s been down there to see the kid a few times, usually during Steve’s daytime shifts. He’s seen his teammates - even Thor, though Thor keeps his visits brief. Bruce sometimes goes into the room and sometimes doesn’t. Natasha always does. So does Steve. Steve’s partiality is obvious, and it makes Tony uncomfortable for reasons he can’t quite name.

“What exactly are you still worried about?” asks Steve, voice turning oddly gentle, and Tony drums his fingers on the worktop for a second before turning what he hopes is a suitably incredulous look on Steve.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Steve sighs his most long-suffering sigh. “Tony, it’s been three days.”

“He could just be lulling us into a false sense of security!”

The disappointed look Steve turns on him is completely unfair. As is the fact that Captain America’s disappointment seems to have this much influence on him. Tony tries to rally.

“I don’t see why I need to be on the roster, anyway,” he complains. “If the kid’s harmless, what does he need super-powered babysitters for?”

“Because he spends all his time with doctors and nurses, and he’s a kid, and he needs human interaction.”

Tony rounds on him, filled with something - anger? - that he can’t quite name. There’s just a lot of it.
“Why are you so stuck on this, Rogers?”

Steve regards him steadily. “Everyone else is taking a turn.”

“So I’ll be an exception! I’m good at being exceptional!”

Steve closes the distance between them, leaning in in the way he does when he wants to emphasize that what he’s saying is important. Tony is not a huge fan of having his personal space invaded without invitation, but in Steve’s case it’s uncomfortable for a whole host of more embarrassing reasons that Steve needs to never, ever find out about. “Tony, this is important.”

Tony squints at Steve. Steve is a firm believer in team bonding. He instituted weekly activities to further this goal while the reconstructed tower still had new-paint smell; keeps at it with grim determination even though it’s early days yet and they’re still feeling their way. As far as Steve is concerned, saving the world together made them all friends, and the many and varied personality conflicts that made things bumpy in the beginning apparently don’t count anymore. That could be why he’s so insistent on everyone spending time with the kid, but Tony doesn’t think it’s everything, and he’s an expert in ulterior motives.

Steve was a lot easier to deal with when they hated each other.

Tony’s seen every piece of data on SHIELD’s little houseguest. Moreover, he’s watched the security footage of his team members with the kid; watching him from behind mirrored glass, talking to him (more at him, since as far as Tony knows, the kid still hasn’t said a word), and in Steve’s case, hunched over colouring books. But the more time passes the more determined he feels to avoid getting within arm’s reach of the kid. It makes no sense, because he’s capable of analyzing data - he’s not really worried the kid’s going to turn on them... anymore. If nothing else, Steve’s an impeccable judge of character (with the possible exception of Tony, who he seems to have decided to befriend out of some sense of... duty? obligation? masochism?), and if Steve says the kid is safe, the kid is probably safe.

He can’t explain it, and he’d really rather not think about it. Which is why he came back to the tower two days ago while everybody else was hanging around at SHIELD - so that it wouldn’t become an issue.

Trust Steve to make it an issue.

“As a favour to me,” Steve says finally, putting a hand on Tony’s shoulder. Tony glares at him, because damn it, Steve never asks for favours, for anything, and for all his bad-boy nonchalance Tony is apparently just as much of a sucker for Steve’s earnest, genuine Face as everybody else in the world.

Tony throws down his tools and goes.

***

Because he knows that Tony will duck out of it if given half a chance, Steve shadows him all the way into the shiny black car that pulls up at the curb outside the Tower. Tony is uncharacteristically silent on the ride to SHIELD headquarters, splitting his time between staring sullenly out the window and shooting Steve suspicious looks. Steve wonders at both the resistance and the quick capitulation, but he knows better than to poke Tony when he’s in this state; it just leads to blow-ups.
Not for the first time, Steve finds himself thinking about Howard. He tries very hard not to compare the two men, because in many ways they’re so very different, but occasionally there are similarities that are too pronounced to be ignored. The sulking, for instance. The arrogance, while generally well-deserved, is almost a pitch-perfect imitation of Howard.

He doesn’t tell Tony this, of course.

There are some good things, too; the charm is... well, charming, if sometimes a little grating when Tony thinks it means he can get away with anything. Tony’s jubilation, all-encompassing, when he figures something out and wants to tell you about it in intricate, sometimes baffling detail. The way his mind works and the way he seems to fill up every room he’s in.

Howard didn’t have Tony’s sore spots and he wasn’t nearly as easy to rile, but Steve is starting to think that maybe the former is directly responsible for the latter. Howard could certainly be startlingly careless, or at least it was startling to Steve, but even back then he knew he maybe wasn’t the best standard for measurement when it came to that kind of thing.

He doesn’t pretend to understand Tony’s reluctance here, either. He doesn’t believe it’s all suspicion of Loki’s intentions. Tony’s a smart man, and surely he’s been clandestinely keeping track of every test result that’s been recorded in SHIELD’s computers. Even Fury stopped insisting that the guards on Loki’s room stand with arms drawn, and though they’re still there, and still armed, the atmosphere in the infirmary section has grown noticeably less tense.

Steve wonders what’s going to happen when they finally get through to Asgard.

It’s a thought that comes almost from nowhere, but now he realizes he’s been thinking about it for a few days. The boy can’t stay in a mirrored room forever. Soon they’re going to have to decide what to do with him on a long-term basis, and Steve already knows what’s not going to happen... what he’s not going to allow. He hasn’t figured out an alternative yet, which is why he hasn’t spoken to anyone about it. That, and the person he most wants to talk to about it - the person he feels like he should be talking to about it - is Tony...

...who for the last few days has been avoiding him like the plague.

Six months of fighting evil together and five of what Steve thinks might even be friendship, and half the time, Steve still has no idea what Tony will do or say or think on any given day.

Tony follows him down to the infirmary level, hesitates at the edge of the observation room, hands in his pockets.

“Uh, look. On second thought - actually no, on first thought - I don’t think this is such a good idea.”

Steve shakes his head and reaches out for Tony’s arm, but Tony, to his surprise, scuttles back.

Steve looks through the glass. Loki is sitting at his little table, playing with blocks. On the floor next to his sneakered feet is the stuffed... well, Steve doesn’t know what it is. It has a lot of legs, and what seem to be horns, and big, brown eyes; Steve’s pretty sure Thor gave it to him, but kids’ toys are so weird these days that he has no way of being sure. Loki seems perfectly calm and content, or at least what passes for content when you’re a prisoner in all but name. He looks back at Tony, planning to rib him a little - afraid of a kid? - but he’s surprised at what he actually sees in Tony’s face.

Fear.
It's only visible for a second - maybe more like half a second, while Tony stares through the glass - and then it's gone, wiped away and replaced with an irritated frown. And Steve doesn’t know what’s going on here, but he knows it isn’t about Loki. At least, not the way Tony wants him to think it is.

He opens the door and holds it open. “Come on,” he says, firmly.

Tony opens his mouth, as if to voice another protest, but after a few seconds of Steve staring at him expectantly, he shuts it again, and his shoulders hunch up, and he precedes Steve through the door.

Loki is playing with blocks. It's the most initiative he’s shown so far; most of the toys they brought into the room he played with first with an adult demonstrating. The blocks he picked up on his own, which is apparently significant in some way that means a lot more to Dr. Halston than to the rest of them.

He looks up when they enter, and his eyes light on Steve first. He shyly wiggles his fingers at Steve in greeting, and then ducks down behind the wall he’s building, looking at Tony from behind it, eyes wide. Steve raises his eyebrows in Tony’s direction, and Tony grudgingly takes one hand out of his pocket and waves.

“Hey, kid,” Tony says, and his voice is strange - gruff and brisk at the same time, like he doesn’t know whether he wants to be nice or not.

And then Loki says, “Hi,” and shyly wiggles his fingers again.

It takes Steve a second to realize what just happened, and when he looks at Tony, he sees his surprise reflected in Tony’s face.
Chapter 4

Steve takes this breakthrough as some sort of sign, apparently, because he redoubles his efforts to get the kid - to get *Loki* - sprung from his isolation room. At length, Fury agrees... provisionally. Loki’s allowed out during the day, with a keeper, and with a guard trailing at a discreet distance. And he’s not allowed out of SHIELD.

Tony sees Steve grin at the good news and take the limitations as a challenge. He *sees* it, and wonders when he grew to know Steve well enough that he knows when he’s planning something.

Once he starts, Loki doesn’t stop talking, though he only ever says more than a couple of words if Steve’s around - and increasingly, Tony.

The next day finds Tony in the Scarily Advanced Sciences Lab (Darcy’s name for it) going over Jane and Erik’s blueprints for the new and improved Bifrost receiver. Tony’s not really a physicist, but by now he’s read every paper even related to wormholes and the Einstein Rosen Bridge theory and he’s got what he considers a working knowledge. Working well enough, anyway, to get an idea of whether or not the control circuitry of Jane and Erik’s baby is likely to blow out power for the entire Eastern seaboard.

Darcy has temporarily abandoned him to go in search of coffee (she’s even more addicted than Tony, which is awe-inspiring), and Tony is absorbed in the blueprints. This is the state Pepper always found creepy, because apparently he goes all quiet and still for hours at a time and doesn’t even realize he’s doing it until he snaps out of it aching and hungry.

Usually when he gets in the zone it’s the manic kind of crazy, where he’s full of energy and ideas seem to follow one another like water tumbling down a particularly rocky stream. The other thing is different, and all he’s aware of are the plans, and the machine the plans represent, and how it will look when it’s done, and how it will work, and the hum of the metal and the pulse of power running through it like water...

“...I think he’s busy.”

Steve’s exaggerated whisper reaches him across whatever distance he’s traversed in his head, and he comes out of it blinking. Steve is standing in the door to the hallway, and he’s got Loki perched on his shoulders like he weighs nothing at all.

Right. Super solider.

“Huh?” is what Tony says. Okay. Huh. How long has he been here? What time is it? And how long ago did Darcy go for coffee? How long does it take to get coffee, anyway?

Steve looks chagrined. “Sorry, Tony, we didn’t mean to bother you.”

Steve’s hair is standing hilariously on end in two places, probably where Loki has had his tiny hands fisted in it for balance. Tony pats vaguely at his own hair, which is probably full-on mad scientist by now.

“You’re not--” *Not bothering me*, Tony starts to say, but stops himself for reasons that are totally beyond him. Instead, he asks, “Was there something you needed?”
Steve shrugs. “He wanted to see you.”

As if on cue, Loki raises a hand clutching a big block of stuck-together LEGO and waves it at Tony.

“Hey kid,” Tony says warily. Steve’s been taking every opportunity to get the two of them to hang out together, he says because Loki likes him and doesn’t talk much around the others. Tony thinks it’s because the rest of the team will do whatever makes Steve happy and Tony is the only one showing resistance to Steve’s weird plan to take in every waif and stray and demigod and hot assassin he comes across. He has to keep suppressing the urge to remind Steve, repeatedly, that the kid’s not a puppy.

They’ve had exactly one conversation about it.

They were testing a new version of the under-armour (that might have applications in protecting poor Bruce’s modesty in post-Hulk situations). Steve had come upon Tony about to take a hammer to his own shin (He was wearing the armour! It would have been fine!) and insisted on playing guinea-pig instead. Then he’d started talking some awesome new thing Loki was learning to do, which comprised roughly 62% of Steve’s conversational topics these days, and Tony listened for almost fifteen entire minutes before he snapped.

“Do you actually hear yourself?”

Steve looked up from where he was flexing one muscular arm in a sleeve of as-yet-unnamed-brilliant-polymer-patent-fabric and looked confused. “What?”

“You’re like those people who raise puppies for the blind. Except not, because you’d want to keep all of them. And then what would the blind people do?”

Steve gave him a look like he was trying really hard to understand, but failing because Tony was speaking in a language Steve didn’t know. “I don’t…”

Tony knew Steve wasn’t stupid. “He’s not a puppy, and you might not get to keep him.”

Steve froze, and turned all the way around. “I know that, Tony,” he said He held himself very still, as if he was expecting an attack. He paused, and then shrugged. “But there’s no way to know, is there? And it might…” He looked away from Tony, his eyes drifting off into the far corner. “…It might work out.” He looked at Tony again. “Okay?”

Tony stared at him for a long moment, mouth still open, and then sighed. “Fine,” he says. “Okay.”

And that, apparently, was the end of that.

Tony let it go. He's had enough of the Disappointed Face to last him for a while.

Loki is staring up at the blueprint projection hovering over the table where Tony's been working, his eyes huge. He reaches out one hand to touch the slowly-rotating lights, but he's too far away. Tony gives in to the familiar urge to show off.

"Cool, huh?"

Loki looks down at him, points at the lights. "Pretty," he says enthusiastically.
Tony grins, and then picks up his tablet. "Yeah, that's nothing. Look at this." He calls up the plans for a mostly-non-classified jet engine he made for the USAF a few years ago. It's pretty boring technologically, but has all sorts of exciting moving parts. Loki is obligingly big-eyed and waves grabby-hands at the projection as it expands around them.

"So what are you two up to this fine afternoon?" Tony asks Steve, who is beaming up at the little boy on his shoulders, and is still wearing a the bright smile when he looks down to meet Tony's eyes. Tony ignores the weird twist in his chest at the sight and shuts down the hologram. Loki makes a disappointed noise.

"Not going stir-crazy, according to Director Fury," Steve tells him, and he sounds kind of annoyed. It's been most of two weeks since Steve's left SHIELD for more than a few hours, and some of those were for the purpose of retrieving Tony from Avengers Tower.

"Still no luck on talking him into field-trips, huh?" Tony asks sympathetically, as Loki pats at the top of Steve's head and demands:

"Down, down."

"Down it is, Shortstack," Steve says to him, and then he's lifting him and swinging him easily down...

...into Tony's lap.

Tony decides not to ask when nicknames entered the equation, and instead hastily reconfigures his legs so that the kid doesn't slide right onto the floor. The kid seems perfectly sure that Tony won't drop him, and totally ignores Tony's discomfiture in favour of reaching for one of the styluses scattered over the tabletop.

Steve smiles proudly down at them. Tony doesn't know if the smile is for him or for Loki, which is... a weird feeling.

"So, kid," Tony says, "how do you feel about Super Mario?"

***

Two solid weeks of what Steve calls campaigning - and Tony calls nagging - finally yields a victory of sorts. Steve comes down to breakfast one morning and announces: “We’re going to the park.”

He looks around at his team - most of his team, as the second pot of coffee is still brewing. The first pot, brewed by JARVIS in the early morning, rarely survives long enough for the aroma to travel and it usually takes at least the smell to lure Tony out of bed on a weekend when he hasn’t been up all night in the workshop. The big table in the kitchen nook is surrounded by Avengers in various states of wakefulness, and Steve feels a warm sense of accomplishment. This is only the fourth or fifth time he’s seen them all around the same table for a meal. Tony gave them each a floor to themselves, but the common floor has a kitchen, a huge lounge, and a home theatre, among other wonders. The refrigerator in here is larger than the room Steve shared with Bucky and two other kids in the orphanage. Not that they don’t need it; a team of superheroes goes through a lot of groceries.

Maybe he should put weekly team breakfasts on the schedule, even though Tony will definitely make fun of him for weeks.
Clint is staring at the wall, eyes open only the barest amount; probably just enough to navigate his coffee cup between the table and his mouth. Bruce is reading the paper and drinking some kind of weird-smelling tea. Thor is, as usual, demolishing a half-dozen scrambled eggs and a small mountain of bacon. Natasha is the closest to her usual daytime self, sipping a glass of juice and eating a plate of toaster waffles in small, geometrically precise bites.

Steve still has not gotten over the incredible convenience of toaster waffles. They’re almost as cool as Pop-Tarts.

It’s Clint who looks up, eyes still half-closed. “Is the park under attack?”

Steve looks at him and frowns. “No.”

“If it’s slug-monsters again, can I call Not It?” asks Bruce from behind his paper. “It took three days to get the goo out of my hair. And it wasn’t even my hair at the time.”

Clint grins. “Yeah, that was a lot of monster slime,” he says, and Bruce just sighs.

“There are no monsters, and nothing is under attack,” Steve says, getting a little impatient (and surreptitiously touching his fingers to the gleaming wood tabletop, because there’s no point in borrowing trouble). “It’s just--”

Everyone is looking at him now. Thor even puts down his fork.

“Don’t you guys ever just go to the park, just to... just to go to the park? See the sights? Enjoy nature?” He can hear his voice growing less and less confident towards the end of the sentence.

“You wanna take the kids on a nature walk?” says Tony’s voice, and Steve turns his head to see Tony himself shuffling into the kitchen. He’s barefoot, wearing flannel pyjama pants and a t-shirt and his hair is standing hilariously on end. The shirt is thin enough that the blue circle of the arc reactor reflects blurrily in the stainless-steel cabinets when he goes to the counter to pour himself a cup of coffee. Steve watches him for a moment, feeling the strange little tug in his chest that’s been happening more and more often lately around Tony.

Tony turns around, face half-hidden behind a huge mug of coffee, and regards Steve over the rim.

“Yes,” Steve says, belatedly.

Steve watches Tony blink, watches his brain wake up, catch up, rewind and process everything that’s been said in the past thirty seconds, and blink again. He lowers the mug.

“You’re kidding,” he says flatly.

The elevator buzzes from the living room, and JARVIS announces that they have a visitor.

“It is Agent Coulson, with a guest.”

“Everybody get dressed,” Steve says, as Tony gives him a complicated look that’s half amusement and half mutiny. “We’re going to the park. That’s an order.”

***
It’s a gloriously beautiful autumn day, the kind that Steve used to like best as a kid. There’s just a little bit of a chill in the air, the leaves are turning, and the sun is out and shining. The quality of light is warm and honeyed, and Steve’s fingers itch for the sketchbook and pencil he has tucked away in his backpack. He’s been drawing again for a while. It took a while for him to feel settled enough to do it - not that he feels settled now - and sure enough that all of this wasn’t some dream he’d wake up from.

They’re an odd party, moving through the park in something between recon formation and a leisurely stroll. They draw a few stares, but nothing intrusive. Steve realizes they make a strange sight, especially with Loki along, orbiting between Steve, Tony, Phil and Bruce as he darts away to pick up a leaf, a stone, a clump of grass, and bring it back to show them. He’s smiling more than Steve’s ever seen him do, and the Avengers are watching him indulgently - except, Thor, who is smiling, but still looks faintly unhappy in a way he often does these days.

Steve looks over at Tony, who is just walking, whose phone is actually in his pocket and not in his hand, watching Loki watch his own feet. Someone got him a new pair of sneakers for the outing, and every time he takes a step, lights blink and flash along the soles and the tongue. They’re possibly the coolest thing Steve has ever seen, even though Tony spent a solid ten minutes laughing at his enthusiasm.

Tony seems unusually at-ease, which he would claim is because it’s not even eleven yet and he’s had only one cup of coffee and therefore isn’t conscious. Steve would actually almost call it relaxed. He’s wearing well-worn jeans and a t-shirt with a logo from some band and a tiny hole in the seam at one shoulder - no sign of his perfectly-tailored suits today - and both look like they might have been in a heap on Tony’s floor before being grabbed up to be put on. This is often as much effort as he puts in when it’s just the team and they’re not going out expecting to need to impress everyone. He doesn’t even have his sunglasses, so he’s squinting into the bright sunlight, and for the first time, it occurs to Steve that Tony’s not really as vain as he appears on first meeting; he just doesn’t like to be unprepared around people he doesn’t know, people who don’t know him, and looking just right is part of Tony’s ritual of preparation. How he feels secure.

Tony glances up, meeting his eyes, and Steve looks away, returning his gaze to Loki’s green sweatshirt. He feels a little embarrassed, because he feels like he caught Tony out in a moment of vulnerability. But even the beauty of the day and the good cheer of his teammates and Tony’s easy smile, when Steve looks back at him, doesn’t make it easy for him to shake the idea that he’s figured out something important; that Tony trusts them enough not to care all that much what they think of him.

At the playground, Loki goes straight for the swings, kicking his legs in an enthusiastic but unsuccessful rhythm until Thor goes over to give him a push. Steve sits down on a bench and pulls out his sketchbook, no longer able to suppress the urge. He does a half-dozen quick sketches of the park, the trees indistinct squiggles mainly for setting; the playground, with its colourful, futuristic equipment; the figures of his teammates standing around him. He draws Loki, head tipped back as he swings up, eyes big and amazed at defying gravity; Thor’s hands big on the chains on either side of him. He considers drawing in the shapes of their probable SHIELD tail sketched in for accuracy’s sake; he can’t see them, but he’s pretty sure they’re there. He understands, though he’d have preferred being informed.

They’re keeping their distance, anyway, as are a handful of what are probably reporters and photographers. They do keep their distance, these days, at least most of the time. They were a lot less polite immediately following the invasion, and Steve thought he was used to being under a
magnifying glass but that was nothing compared to the way the media treats celebrities in this century.

It died down pretty quickly after a pair of incidents involving one particularly persistent photographer on a motorcycle. Clive Ferrazzi, freelance, known for getting his scoops by accosting his subjects while they’re grocery shopping, dogwalking, and out on the town with their kids; he’s well-known for an incident where he made some actress burst into tears, causing her Yorkshire terrier to run out into the street after him and get hit by a car. Steve dislikes him particularly because he rides a really nice bike, and the guy gives motorcyclists a bad name, never mind journalists.

Steve still doesn’t know the details, but they involved a very angry Thor, Dr. Foster’s academic transcripts, and Natasha politely threatening to dismember the guy and send the pieces back to his employers in separate packages, before Phil took over and the mess disappeared overnight. Steve doesn’t really want to know, but he’s still deeply appalled that this sort of thing is apparently commonplace, now; that all the media seems to care about is finding dirt, and that if there isn’t any dirt to find, they’ll just make something up.

When the incident is mentioned, Tony seems to find the whole thing hilarious, mainly because he wasn’t even there and someone else caused a media stink for once.

Natasha comes over and sits with him quietly for a while, chin in hand, elbow on her crossed-over knee. “You’re pretty good,” she says eventually, and he turns his head to see her looking down at his sketchbook. She tilts her head. “Would you rather I not look?” she asks, and he considers, then shakes his head, passing over the sketchbook.

“No, feel free.” They’re just doodles. He hasn’t really worked back up to drawing anything he thought about very hard; these are just random sketches, mostly. He watches her flip through the book from the beginning. There are a lot of nobody-in-particular studies that he did when he was doing it for fine muscle control after he woke up; just to see if he still could. One of the first things they gave him was a pencil and the book, as though familiarity would ground him. He couldn’t bear to draw real things, then, because the only things that still seemed real were seventy years behind him and long gone. Male and female bodies; hands, feet; the curve of a cheek and the jut of a chin. A disembodied nose and three pages of eyes, all different shapes. To a lot of people this might seem unsettling, but he was running through his paces the same way he does when he settles in with a punching bag in the gym.

Then come more recognizable faces. Director Fury, sitting behind his desk, looking concerned. Agent Hill, a few times; her periods of stillness interspersed with efficient motion. More studies and disconnected body parts; the view from the cafeteria at SHIELD. Bruce, half-silhouetted in the window in his lab on the helicarrier, expression thoughtful. It takes a while before Natasha comes across the drawings of her, but there’s nothing too embarrassing. A few profiles; a rare moment of her smiling her odd, cool, small smile at the back of a head that’s obviously Clint’s. There’s one of Clint and Natasha sparring, that he did because their bodies are fascinating, all smooth lines and curving musculature, and makes his face heat a bit, but she just tips her head thoughtfully and considers it, turning the pad to examine it from a different angle.

There are drawings of Thor, mostly smiling; Thor and Jane; Darcy, in a more classic pose, smiling and looking off into the middle distance. That one she sat for. There haven’t been a lot of people Steve has felt comfortable asking. Darcy, though, is so open and so blatantly young that she doesn’t often make him feel awkward, even though she has that quality (one she shares with Tony) that tells him she knows how easy it would be, and she’s holding off, even though it’s against her nature to be so careful with people.
There are, evidently, a lot more sketches of Tony than he thought there were.

Steve thinks, belatedly, that this was a mistake.

The last few are interspersed with drawings of Loki. Loki with blocks. Loki and Tony. Natasha stops on one of Tony with Loki in his lap in the workshop. Not depicted is the projection of an engine floating above and around them; Steve didn’t feel like he could do it justice in pencil. Loki has his hands up and reaching to touch it. Tony is wearing an expression that is somewhere in between affection and uncertainty, and he’s looking not at the little boy, but at the viewer. At Steve.

At the time, Steve just drew it; he didn’t really think about it. Didn’t study it. He rarely does.

“You have an impressive eye for detail,” she says, fingers just touching the edge of the page. She looks at him. “Did you draw this from memory?”

“Oh, it was always - I could always... do that.” He shrugs. “Even... before.”

“You’re very talented.”

He smiles at her. Talent has never been something he really thought he had; the only person who ever used that word with him was his mother, and she was gone long before he was old enough to wonder if that might mean something for him in the real world.

“Thanks.”

She smiles back. Steve exhales, tips his head back a little.

It’s still a beautiful day. Clint and Phil are sitting on another bench, eating ice cream they got from a cart on the path, and Bruce is reading on one of those electronic reader things in a black leather case. Steve really wants one of these, but he doesn’t want to mention it around Tony because Tony will build him one, and Steve just wants the same one everyone else has.

Thor is still pushing Loki on the swings - pushing him awfully high now, actually, the seat nearly clearing the crossbar on the upswing, but Thor is standing right there with hands outstretched every time, and he’s beaming, and Loki looks nervous but mostly delighted, his fingers tight around the chains, and Steve’s just glad Thor looks happy for once. It’s not natural to see the guy so down all the time. Maybe things are getting better.

And Tony... has wandered off across the path to answer his phone.
Steve sighs. At least they got most of the morning out of him before Tony’s attention span ran out.

Oh, well. Steve was about to suggest they go get some lunch.

“Captain Rogers, over here!” says a voice, and Steve turns to see a man standing at the edge of the playground enclosure with a camera aimed in his direction. It flashes, and then flashes again, and Natasha is up and moving before Steve can do much more than blink, belatedly noticing the motorbike half-hidden behind a tree a few hundred yards away. He wonders how he didn’t hear it approach.

It’s Clive Ferrazzi, and Steve gets up to intercept Natasha, but Bruce beats him to it, somehow managing to head her off without looking like he’s yanking her back to prevent her from ripping Ferrazzi’s head off and drop-kicking it into the woods. Natasha’s expression is still stony, but most people wouldn’t notice a difference, and Bruce is herding her back, talking quietly. She stops, but doesn’t look away from Ferrazzi, who is still snapping pictures.

“Is love in the air, Cap?” he asks with a barely-hidden sneer.

“You’ve been asked not to approach SHIELD agents, Mr. Ferrazzi,” says Phil, appearing from apparently nowhere. Steve didn’t even see him get up from the bench. Clint is hovering at his shoulder, not bothering to hide his disgust.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, pal. I’m just out on a walk. Taking pictures of the scenery.” He leers at Natasha, who slowly tightens her hands into fists, and just as slowly relaxes them.

“The scenery is about five minutes away from summoning the NYPD, Mr. Ferrazzi,” Phil says, managing to look menacing and professional despite the fact that he’s wearing jeans and a Berkeley sweatshirt (something that made Tony do an actual double-take when Phil stepped out of the elevator). “And refresh my memory, what are the bylaws regarding motor vehicles on pedestrian walkways?” He pointedly does not look in the direction of Ferrazzi’s motorcycle, but Ferrazzi glances over his shoulder at it and sees two SHIELD agents standing nearby, somehow radiating intent to damage without even looking at the bike.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve sees Thor slowly moving in their direction, his instinct to charge warring with the very stern lecture he got from Phil last time about antagonizing reporters. It’s time to shut this down before it becomes an incident, but apparently Ferrazzi does at least have some survival instincts, because he retreats with only a sneer and a rude gesture, heading for his bike.

Steve turns back to his team. Natasha looks really mad, but has a lid on it. Thor looks angry, but in a muted sort of way that probably won’t mean property damage. Clint and Phil and Bruce have shrugged it off...

“Where’s Loki?” he asks. The swing is empty and Steve can’t see him anywhere. He turns to look for Tony, sees him still standing beyond the footpath, phone pressed to his ear, and then lets out a sigh of relief when he sees Loki, crossing the footpath in Tony’s direction.

Off to the left, there’s the sound of an engine revving, and Steve looks up to see a bright red motorbike barreling towards him at top speed.

The serum did a lot for him. Improved his reflexes. His ability to take in a situation and react to it. But it can’t change the laws of physics, nor can it shrink the space between Steve and the
motorcycle, the motorcycle and Loki, who is heading right into its path.

Steve starts to run anyway. He isn’t going to make it. “Tony!” he yells, and Tony turns round, looks up, sees the bike, the little boy, and what’s about to happen. He drops his phone and lunges.

Steve hears, but doesn’t see, Thor’s shout of fury, and what might be the sound of something heavy striking the front wheel of the motorcycle. There’s definitely a screech and a metallic crunch and a lot of swearing as the same something skids and screeches to a stop. But all Steve sees is Tony’s flight through the air, Loki’s look of terror and surprise. Tony rolling through the scrubby grass beside the footpath; Tony lying very still for the endless moment it takes Steve to reach him.

But it’s okay. It’s okay, because Tony is sitting up, one arm still tight around Loki, who is white-faced and has both small hands fisted in the back of Tony’s shirt, but doesn’t have a scratch on him. Tony is covered in pine needles and grit and has a long scrape down one arm and another on his cheekbone, but he seems otherwise okay. Steve sits down on the ground, very hard, because for just a second it feels like his legs won’t hold him.

It takes Tony a second to notice, brushing leaf litter out of his hair, and sort of half-crawl over to Steve. He hasn’t put Loki down, and Loki is holding on to him tightly, but he isn’t crying. They’re both staring at Steve like he’s sprouted a second head, and Steve is really, really glad that the SHIELD agents have Ferrazzi in hand down the path because he thinks maybe he’s losing it a little, his breath coming too hard, his chest too tight.

“Hey,” Tony says eventually, hesitantly, and he holds out a hand but doesn’t touch Steve until Steve looks up. Then he grabs Steve’s arm, squeezes it, and somehow that makes it easier to breathe.

They were having such a nice day, a minute ago. And then... and then Tony almost... and Loki, who is staring at him with flat-out fear. Tony’s bleeding. Sometimes Steve wishes for the times when he wasn’t always aware of how fragile people are; for the times when he was, too, and it was a lot easier to forget.

“Sorry,” says Steve, quietly.

“Hey, no,” Tony says quickly, hand still squeezing, a little tighter, now. “Don’t be sorry. Nothing to be sorry about.” He sounds freaked-out himself, which goes a long way towards making Steve feel better, a little less like he’s flying apart. He lays his hand over Tony’s on his arm, just for a little contact, just for the anchor, without thinking about it. Tony’s hand is warm and real, and he’s fine, they’re both fine. Tony twitches a little, maybe in surprise, but he doesn’t pull away. He just watches Steve carefully, like he’s waiting for something, eyes intent on Steve’s face.

“Okay?” he asks, after a while, and Steve nods.

“Okay.”

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Steve finds out later that Thor threw his hammer at the motorbike, Clint and Phil tackled Ferrazzi to the ground, and that the motorbike... well. By the time the cops showed up, it had been reduced to a misshapen block of metal, rubber and plastic, and Ferrazzi was yelling his head off. After a few minutes’ conversation with Phil, he calmed right down.

Steve waits for the angry phone call from Director Fury, telling him that all “field trips” are cancelled.
for the foreseeable future, but it doesn’t come. He wonders how much Phil actually put in his report.

He waits for it to show up in the papers, on TV, on the Internet. But it never does.
Chapter 5

The most notable outcome of their day at the park, as far as Steve is apparently concerned, is that Tony stops trying to duck out of his turns with Loki. More and more, his turns are shared with Steve, afternoons and evenings they spend in Tony's lab at SHIELD, playing video games, or sometimes, on outings further and further afield in the city.

It's the first time Steve's had the chance to see New York since he woke up, and it seems to Tony that they hit every awful tourist trap that Tony has spent his adulthood avoiding. What's more, they do it with a three-year-old in tow, which means that two of the three of them are seeing most of New York for the first time, or seeing it anew, anyway.

Steve says it's good for him; that it gets Tony away from the workshop and out into the fresh air, and forces him to get some exercise. That last part definitely happens, because Steve often elects to walk everywhere. He says it's the best way to enjoy New York, and is impervious to Tony’s protests on the subject.

For Tony, the actual upside is that Steve’s Disappointed Looks taper off, as does about 45% of the nagging, though Tony still hasn’t assembled an adequate argument for why he shouldn’t have to be playing babysitter at all, not in the face of Steve’s Plan, whatever the hell that is. Even Tony has to admit that it’s not to want to give Steve whatever he wants; he so rarely admits to wanting anything. This - dragging Tony on walking tours of the city - seems to make him... happy, in ways that, so far as Tony has seen, nothing else has done. He’s sure as hell never seen Steve smile like that over video games or the big-screen TV.

Besides, if he’s going to get roped into doing it anyway, it’s better that he doesn’t have to do it alone.

Despite himself, he’s actually started to like the kid. Tony tends to think of Loki as “the kid” more often than using his name, even in his head, for obvious reasons. Though even the name is losing its impact as time goes on and they all grow more used to his presence in their lives. And he is in their lives, because he’s part of Steve’s - somehow, inexplicably - and Steve, once he’s decided to share what matters to him, expects to share everything, whether you want to be included or not.

But it’s better this way, because it means Tony rarely has to spend the day with Loki without Steve there as a comfortable buffer.

It’s not that he dislikes kids; kids are the best of all audiences, and Tony loves an audience. Kids are credulous, and interested, and easily distracted by shiny and colourful things - all traits close to Tony’s own heart. Loki is still kind of shy, and still not given to overly-long sentences, but he’s also smart and interested in everything and Tony won’t lie and say getting to show off to someone for whom every awesome thing is 250% more awesome than it is to grown adults isn’t kind of great.

And then come the days when he turns around and it looks like Loki might burst into tears at any second, and Tony has to frantically backtrack over whatever he’s said in the last five minutes to see what he might have done wrong this time, and Jesus, he never signed up for this.

He’s already worked out that his primary methods of interacting with other humans - including but not limited to: sarcasm, arrogance, general conceit and occasional mania - are not really compatible with small, vulnerable people who might actually take anything he says to heart. Especially small, vulnerable people who in previous incarnations decided to exorcise their truly staggering daddy
issues by recruiting an alien army and taking it out on the population of New York City.

There’s a reason why Tony’s only friends are superheroes and crazy people.

Not that any of this is relevant, because Tony is not a parent, and neither is Steve, no matter how devotedly he ignores the reality of this increasingly bizarre situation. Loki is at worst a war criminal in highly unorthodox custodial circumstances and at best some kind of interdimensional refugee, and Tony can’t imagine that even SHIELD will allow this farce to go on forever. Either they’ll decide the kid’s evil after all and make some awkward, unspeakable decision about his future or they’ll decide once and for all that he’s harmless and place him in the care of someone actually qualified to take care of a kid.

Read: Holy Shit, Not The Avengers.

Besides, parents, or so he’s been led to believe, should be warm; should make you feel loved and welcome. Should want you around. Are supposed to be the one place where a kid feels safe and stable. And while his mom fit that bill, at least for the most part, for the last decade or so Dad has existed mainly as a shrinking list of unpleasant character flaws that Tony has thus far failed to duplicate.

Worse, though he’s tried, Tony can’t seem to come up with a single memory of Howard where he wasn’t at least a little bit scared.

It wasn’t immediate, physical fear, of course. Howard Stark wasn’t a pacifist (that would have been ridiculous) but he did have a certain distaste for physical violence. He had a hell of a temper, something Tony does remember being afraid of sparking for most of his childhood. Dad could be fun, and he even remembers a few moments of warmth, here and there - hanging out in Dad’s workshop, or sitting on the living room floor with a model kit spread out before them - but they’re few and far between, and his father’s unhappiness and bitterness were always there, beneath the surface, like a bad smell that never really went away.

Compared to his memories of his mother, remembering Dad is like remembering an angry, distant stranger.

He kind of gets it, now, and he can’t exactly throw stones when it comes to letting anger fuck up your life. While he’s a lot of things, he tries very hard to avoid being a hypocrite.

But that doesn’t make it any easier when Steve dumps Loki into his arms outside an ice cream shop and ducks inside to get them each a scoop.

Today was spent on a whirlwind tour of the Museum of Natural History, the bulk of which was spent in the Discovery Room. For once, Tony got to play the part of the mature adult, standing back while Steve and Loki totally monopolized the giant replica Baobab tree; Loki standing on Steve’s shoulders so he could reach the stuff in higher branches, Steve pointing out interesting birds and animals. “Monopolized” is actually far too mild a term, but both the museum staff and the other parents were apparently unwilling to tell Captain America that it was time to get out of the way and let the other kids have a turn now, please.

Most of the other dozen kids were probably having more fun watching Steve anyway. Tony sure as hell was, especially when they moved on to assembling the dinosaur skeleton and Tony had to take over because they were doing it wrong.
They blew right through Loki’s afternoon nap (and there’s a phrase Tony never thought he’d be personally acquainted with), and now he’s sleepy and warm and loose-limbed in Tony’s arms. Tony adjusts him a little, because he isn’t heavy but he’s just big enough to be awkward, and Loki makes a little noise and opens his eyes.

“Tired?” Tony asks, leaning against the wall next to the shop window.

“M’fine,” Loki says, voice muffled in Tony’s jacket.

“Sure, kid,” Tony says, looking out over the street. It’s Sunday evening, and this side of Central Park is quiet; not much traffic and only a few pedestrians. Tony sits down in a chair at one of the tables on the sidewalk and then waits for Loki to squirm into a more comfortable position on his lap. Tony glances over his shoulder into the shop, but Steve is still at the counter, smiling his “Aw, shucks” smile at the tiny, ancient couple behind the counter. They’ll probably progress to autographs before any actual ice cream happens, which means Tony’s got a bit of a wait.

“So, uh, you have fun today?”

“Uh huh,” says Loki, nodding against Tony’s shoulder.

“Yeah? What’d you like best?”

Loki seems to consider this, and then leans back a little so he can hold one hand high above his head. “Big one,” he says, and Tony nods, somehow knowing he means the gigantic dinosaur skeletons in the Fossil Halls. Which, yeah, were one of Tony’s favourite things as a kid, too.

That was one of the first times Loki’s ever stepped more than arm’s length away from Steve in public, too, as he circled the T-Rex with his face upturned, mouth open in amazement, before turning to Tony and Steve with one hand pointing excitedly up at the dinosaur and his face lit up with excitement.

Steve responded with an enthusiastic “I know, buddy, it’s amazing,” and grinned almost as big as the kid. It kind of made Tony want to ruffle his hair.

When Tony looks down again, Loki is staring at him, eyebrows scrunched up together like he’s thinking hard.

“What’s up?” he asks, hesitantly.

Loki bites his lip. “Sad.”

Tony frowns. “Who’s sad?”

The kid screws up his mouth, thinking, and declares: “Ev’ybody.”

Not for the first time, Tony wonders where Loki falls on the speech-development scale. He hasn’t had a lot of experience with little kids, but the long silences and general stillness seem... wrong, somehow. Maybe just because when he was a kid he was an unholy terror. Maybe that’s all.

“What everybody? I’m not sad.” Tony forces a grin. “Steve’s not sad. Steve had a good time today, right?”
Loki sighs, as though Tony is irredeemably stupid. Tony has the unpleasant feeling that the kid might have learned that from him.

Apparently they’ve encountered another communications roadblock, though, because Loki just sighs and flops forward to press his face into Tony’s shirt again. Tony pats him on the back. “Yeah, kiddo,” he says, “I know how that feels.”

By the time Steve comes back with the ice cream, Loki’s fallen asleep again. Steve consents to calling Happy for a lift and makes Tony carry him back to the car.

Tony never does get his ice cream. Steve eats his own on the way back to the car, and then Loki’s since Loki’s asleep, and then, when Tony’s starts melting down his arm, he eats that one too, despite Tony’s half-hearted protests that are about 30% about Steve eating his ice cream and 70% the positively obscene spectacle of Steve licking melted ice cream off the back of his wrist and Tony not wanting to get caught staring. He’s managed so far to avoid hitting on Captain America with genuine intent and it’s a streak he kind of wants to keep up.

Steve, as usual, doesn’t seem to notice. He wipes his fingers clean on a napkin, folds the napkin into his pocket, and then gets up to fold his long legs up into the seat next to Tony. He leans in close suddenly, and Tony panics for a second before he realizes Steve’s just looking down at Loki’s face, checking in on him the way he checks on the team when they’re in the field. He’s big and warm and close, and Tony sort of closes his eyes and waits for it to be over, and then it is, though Steve doesn’t retreat far. He slouches back in his seat, still pressed up close to Tony’s side, and nudges their shoulders together.

“Not so bad, right?”

Tony considers the sleeping kid, the solid warmth of Steve’s shoulder against his; the warm, close, companionable interior of the car, and nods. “Not bad,” he concedes.

Steve beams at him, the big, almost goofy smile that never comes out around cameras. He bumps their shoulders together again.

“Thanks,” he says quietly, a moment later.

“For what?” asks Tony.

“Tony,” Steve says, and it’s in that gently chiding, come on, now, voice he uses when he’s calling Tony out on his bullshit.

Steve shakes his head, still smiling a little. “I saw you talk to the facilitator this afternoon,” he says. Yeah, Tony might have taken the nice education facilitator lady at the museum aside to talk her out of approaching Steve to gently encourage him to stop monopolizing the exhibits today, but hey, he’s Tony Stark. People do things like that for him.

“So?”

“And I know you’ve been doing other stuff - to make it easier, the last couple of weeks.”

Tony shrugs. He’s gotten used to it - somehow being the only Avenger who knows how to glad-hand with any kind of finesse. Most of them aren’t total PR disasters - Steve does it pretty naturally, but when Steve is doing PR he’s Captain America, not Steve, which was not the point. Really, they
should have been getting mobbed left, right and centre, at least by the less ethical paparazzi, but their outings have gone relatively smoothly. Tony has been hoping Steve wouldn’t notice.

“Yeah, well,” he says, hoping he won’t have to say anything more.

“I just...” Steve pauses, then puts a hand on Tony’s knee, squeezing gently. “You didn’t have to do any of that. And you did. So... thanks.”

“No problem,” Tony says, and he means it, but he still holds himself very still until Steve takes his hand away.

Loki sleeps all the way back to SHIELD.

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The middle of a sparring session is not, of course, the best place to have an epiphany. Steve knows this. He’s known this since he first enlisted and was the smallest slowest guy on the floor. You’d think that the fact that he now spends a not-inconsiderable amount of his downtime training with some of the deadliest people he’s ever met would, by now, have cut down on his tendency to daydream.

Not so much, as it turns out.

The third time he hits the mat, the breath actually knocked out of him, he doesn't get up right away. He lies there until Clint, and then Thor, lean over him.

"Are you well, my friend?" asks Thor.

Steve shuts his eyes for a count of five, and then opens them again. Thor looks concerned. Clint is wearing an expression somewhere between a smirk and a grimace, like he can't decide.

Steve takes the hand Thor is holding out and lets him pull him to his feet. He feels stupid, mostly; stupid for letting his mind wander.

"I'm fine, guys. Just a little distracted."

Thor and Clint exchange a look that Steve can't quite read, like a silent conversation to which he hasn't been invited. Then Clint glares, bares his teeth, and turns to Steve.

"Look, you know Stark's a trainwreck, right?"

Thor smacks him in the back of the head. Clint ducks away, swearing, and dances back out of range. "What? Jesus!"

Thor looks at Steve with a seriousness that has become more common in recent weeks. "We are merely concerned for you."

Steve looks between them. "Concerned about what?"

Thor... hesitates, which is so out-of-character that Steve gets nervous.

"We have noticed--"
"All of us," Clint notes, from well out of range of Thor's long arms.

"--That you have been spending a great deal of time with Tony."

Clint mutters something that might or might not be "is that what they're calling it these days?"

Steve stares at them. "Well, sure. I spend plenty of time with everybody. We're a team." He smiles, hesitantly, because he gets the feeling he's missing something here.

This is not a new feeling. Though it's maybe the first time Thor has known what was going on and he hasn't.

"Guys, you're going to have to be a little more specific," Steve says, even though he's not entirely sure he wants them to be.

"Stark's got a history," says Clint, crossing his arms. "With women." He pauses, then adds: "And men."

Steve knows this. He learned Tony's history chronologically, from wunderkind to playboy to tailspin to Iron Man, long before he ever met the man. He learned about the rest of his team in much the same way. He's always been good at sizing people up, at knitting together what's been said with what he can see; it was what made him a good leader back in the war, and it's one of the only things about the future that hasn't thrown him at all. Summary: he's not an idiot.

It still takes him a minute, though, to realize what they're implying, and he feels his face grow warm.

He levels his best disapproving look on them both. "I have to say, I'm surprised at you guys."

"I would think by now that we've all been through enough together to judge each other on our actions, not what the newspapers like to write about."

Thor's eyes widen, and he looks almost comically distraught. "I did not mean--"

"I know what you meant, Thor," Steve says slowly. "But I think that Ms. Potts would have a thing or two to say about it. Not to mention--" He wants to say he's getting sick and tired of everybody around him treating him at turns like he's both indestructible and hasn't got the basic common sense to know when he's being jerked around.

But Clint holds up his hands, looking horrified. "Jesus Christ, Cap, cool it. That's not what we meant, okay?"

Steve looks at them with narrowed eyes. "I'm waiting."

Thor and Clint glance at each other again, and now Steve wonders how it's these two who are having this conversation with him. He wonders if maybe there was some kind of coin-toss.

Clint casts his eyes ceilingward, before saying: "We just don't want anything..." He pauses again, looking both thoughtful and intensely uncomfortable, and then continues: "...personal to mess up the team." He gives Steve a meaningful look. "Again."
Steve winces. Tony's breakup with Pepper was far from acrimonious, but that was a miserable six weeks that Steve would not like to repeat. Especially since after the second week Steve was the only one who could stand being around Tony enough to make sure he was eating and sleeping. And that was with Tony trying not to be a jackass, not drinking every day away. Pepper called him, and they had a brief, hypothetical, highly uncomfortable conversation about the kinds of things Steve might have to watch out for. Apparently shutting himself away in the workshop and avoiding all human contact was something he did as a favour to the rest of them.

"His parting with Pepper was a dark time," agrees Thor.

Steve doesn’t really know quite what to say. There are so many things wrong with this conversation that he doesn’t even know where to start, although he’d probably start with the assumption that there’s something... going on between him and Tony aside from daytrips to city museums and playgrounds and pit stops for ice cream. Which... he blushes harder, just thinking about that.

“Look,” he says, with just the barest edge of desperation, "I appreciate what you guys are trying to say. But looking out for the team? That’s my job.”

"Hey, I didn't want to be the one staging an intervention to start w--" He's interrupted by Thor, with a half-frozen smile on his face, reaching out to loop an arm around his neck and yank him close.

"Urk," says Clint, from under Thor's arm.

"And as for the rest of it..." Steve continues, ignoring the discomfort because he's more annoyed than embarrassed, "...well, that would be private. And you can tell Bruce and Natasha that, too."

"Of course, Captain," Thor says, with forced cheerfulness. Clint flaps a hand as Steve gathers up his things and backs towards the door.

"I'll see you guys later."

It's the fastest retreat he's beat since he was running from the Nazis.

He had no idea he was being so obvious, is the thing. He thinks maybe Natasha has an idea - she certainly seemed to be making insinuations, that day in the park - but he doesn’t think she’d talk about it to the rest of the team. Tony would, but - Tony’s his friend. Maybe his best friend, these days.

It takes him a minute or two that he’s bypassed the showers altogether and is walking down some random outside corridor in his bare feet. He pauses, looks around, and takes the next corner to the elevators.

A lot of things about this century have shaken him; shocked him even when he read about them, fresh out of the ice. That the people of this time seem to have loosened up a lot when it comes to sex, to who has sex with whom... the fact that the kind of thoughts Steve long ago learned to ignore are now considered A-Okay by any number decent, forward-thinking people... it’s been a pretty big adjustment.

Some things in his re-orientation were given to him with careful context, with painstaking detail and explanation, but gay marriage laws and the bulk of the civil rights movement were presented mostly without comment, for which Steve is still grateful. He can’t even imagine nodding his way through
lectures on half the things he found on Google when the civil rights portion of his required reading left him gaping in shock.

Steve spent the first part of the war as the symbol of American might and freedom, and he knows he still has to be careful. It’s just that he’s still getting used to the idea that he no longer has to be ashamed.

And Tony is… Tony. He flirts with everyone, all the time: Clint, Thor, even Bruce, and especially Steve, who he really seems to enjoy poking until he blushes. He even flirts with Natasha, who at this point just rolls her eyes and smiles her smallest smile. He still flirts with Pepper, despite the wreck he was when she left. It’s like he can’t help it; like it’s a switch stuck permanently in the On position. Steve is constantly reminding himself that Tony does it out of habit, not because he necessarily means anything by it. He likes to think he’s almost getting used to it.

Somehow he finds himself in the kitchen on the common floor, and he’s rummaging through the freezer for the pint of Half-Baked he keeps stashed at the back - ice cream in the future is amazing - when Tony appears at his shoulder.

“Bad day?” he asks, and Steve jumps, fumbling the ice cream carton. Tony catches it, holding it up. “Breaking out the Ben & Jerry’s? Was someone mean to you on FOX News again?”

Steve grabs for the ice cream, and fails; Tony takes a step back, pulling a concerned face.

“Come on, now, Steve, you said we were supposed to talk about feelings. Anyway, Fury won’t be pleased if you start shame-eating and get fat. What would Cosmo say?”

“Tony, please give me back the ice cream.”

Tony raises his eyebrows. “I’m just looking out for you, Steve. Ice cream two days in a row? I’m concerned.”

Steve remembers, belatedly, that he’s bigger, stronger, faster, and also, in charge, and changes tactics, crowding Tony up against the counter and pinning his wrists until he can free the ice cream carton and set it safely to one side.

“Why, Captain,” Tony says in a low, teasing voice, “if I didn’t know any better I’d think you were threatening my virtue.”

Steve feels goosebumps break out up and down his arms, and refrains from making the kind of statement anybody else on the team would make; that Tony hasn’t got any virtue to threaten. He knows Tony only does these things to get a reaction. He knows that.

It doesn’t stop him from leaning just a little closer, just for a second, just on instinct.

“That wasn’t very nice, Tony,” he says, seriously. “You shouldn’t call people fat.”

Tony grins up at him; he likes nothing better than for people to rise to his taunts, especially when it happens without anyone throwing a punch. It’s a strange, dangerous hobby that according to Pepper and Fury has gotten him in trouble before.

“I didn’t call you fat. I was cautioning you against getting fat.”
“And you know how I feel about those magazines.”


Steve pauses to analyze that for sarcasm, but to his great surprise, Tony is being at least partially sincere. Tony, when Steve meets his eyes again, looks surprised too.

A second later, Steve realizes that he’s doing exactly what he was trying to avoid, and imagines the look on Clint’s face if he walked in right now.

He lets go of Tony’s wrists and takes a step back, trying to reach for the ice cream in a way that doesn’t look like a desperate distraction tactic, and sees, when he looks up, that it’s only been marginally successful. Tony hasn’t moved, and is staring at him with unsettling intensity.

Steve turns away to get a spoon from the drawer. When he turns back, Tony is still standing in the same place, but he’s staring thoughtfully at the coffee maker. A moment later, he walks over and punches some buttons, and the coffee maker hisses and starts dripping rich dark liquid into its pot. Tony watches it intently.

“So, no kid today?” he asks without turning around; he is very focused on the slowly-filling coffee pot, arms and shoulders tense with anticipation. Steve wonders how many cups he’s already had today.

Steve pries the lid off the ice cream carton. “It’s Natasha’s day.”

“No doubt teaching the kid how to strangle people with his legs. Important life skill.” Tony nods his head, but still doesn’t turn around. Steve lowers his spoon, noticing that the the tension in Tony’s back and shoulders isn’t anticipation; it’s nervousness.

Or as close to that as Tony ever gets.

Steve is really confused. “Tony?”

Tony doesn’t move. “Yeah?”

There’s a weird catch in Tony’s voice; one whose like Steve hasn’t heard since Pepper left. It’s not quite on the same scale, but Tony doesn’t deal well, or happily, with serious things. Steve knows that. He just doesn’t know when, or how, this became something serious.

He puts the lid back on the ice cream, stows it away in the freezer behind the bags of frozen vegetables, the bottle of vodka, and the emergency coffee canister. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Tony flicking him a brief glance over one shoulder before turning back to the coffee maker. Steve closes the freezer, which puts him within touching distance of Tony, but he doesn’t touch. Tony is fairly vibrating with tension now, and Steve is finally starting to realize that he’s the reason.

Steve leans against the counter. He could do what he’s been doing all along, and walk away. It’s worked so far. But he only did that because he wasn’t sure; because he didn’t think... he’s only ever hesitated when he didn’t know enough. He’s never been a coward. Wasn’t even that back when he was a foot shorter and never won a fight.

“Tony.” Steve dares. He puts a hand on Tony’s shoulder, watches Tony’s eyes flutter closed; feels Tony shiver, faintly, under his palm. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” Steve says, and his
voice sounds strange, low, rough in a way that he doesn’t really recognize.

Tony laughs, low and sort of rueful. His body sways, just slightly, in Steve’s direction, leaning into Steve’s hand.

“That’s really,” he says, “really not the problem.”

But Steve doesn’t get to find out what the problem is, because that’s the moment the alarm goes off.

Tony’s eyes fly open and he casts a furious glare at the ceiling. He mouths the word Now?, but Steve can’t hear over the noise, and then Natasha dashes past, followed by Clint, who’s lacing up his wrist guard.

“Our favourite anarchists! Something about a freeze ray and a boat full of tourists!” he yells over the alarm, and keeps running.

Steve and Tony exchange an exasperated glance, and then they follow.

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As chaotic as the advent of a miniaturized Loki has been, it can’t hold off the world at large, especially not a world with superheroes and supervillains in it.

“Like it’s not bad enough that their name is stupid - I mean, the Sinister Syndicate? Really?” he complains about this while he’s flying Clint to a good vantage point above the battle. “But I still don’t understand their manifesto. I don’t know if it’s just me or because it makes no actual sense.”

Clint just grunts and cocks an arrow, sighting along his arm. For him, that’s pretty eloquent.

It turns out that Clint was not kidding. The Syndicate do, in fact have a freeze-ray. This is just about the stupidest thing Tony’s ever heard, and he’s met Justin Hammer.

They have it mounted on an Apache helicopter, which is bobbing up and down and across the river, terrorizing the two frozen-in-place dinner-cruise ships full of tourists. It’s a display of shitty flying that would have Rhodey in absolute conniptions.

Natasha is currently on-board the jet, which is hovering above the chopper trying to get a clear shot that won’t take out the hostages.

Despite their ridiculous and probably stolen tech, it’s clear from the start that the bad guys are badly out-matched, stolen chopper or no stolen chopper. Especially when three of the dozen not airborne actually turn tail and run after seeing the Hulk bearing down on them. But they are, unfortunately, not completely incompetent.

One of them is getting a lot of joy out of taking potshots from the air, trying to hit Steve running across the frozen surface to reach the boats, and while so far Cap’s shield has proved impervious, Tony’s not liking the odds if this goes on much longer.

He likes them even less when the chopper comes in low, the guy on the freeze-ray leaning over to sight on Cap, and Tony swoops in and grabs Steve with one arm, firing his repulsors up at the chopper with the other. Steve makes a breathless noise of surprise, and doesn’t fight when Tony deposits him on the deck of the nearest boat, just starts hacking at the ice with his shield.
It turns out Tony’s talent for irritating people to the point of violent outburst is universal, because Freeze-Ray Guy finally breaks out the Hellfires (Rhodey is absolutely going to *flip his shit* when he finds out about this) and JARVIS warns him just in time that he banks sharply, turning what would have been a direct hit into a glancing blow on his left side.

The explosion blinds him for a second. He hears Steve yell “Tony!” and Natasha yell “Stark!” but he’s already spinning off-course, trying to stabilize but failing, and then it’s a blur of fire, dark water, and betrayal of gravity and the jarring impact as he slams into the side of a brick warehouse on the far shore. He’s got enough momentum going to blast right through the wall and smash into the concrete floor at a seriously unsafe speed. It’s enough to dent even Tony’s engineering. Parts of the suit make sickening crunching noises, and he fades out for a while.

He comes to, some time later, with the sound of Steve yelling into his ear over the comm.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he says, smacking at the side of the helmet as if he can stop the noise that way. This is a very bad idea, because it jars his aching head badly enough that his vision swims a little. Since his helmet is still on and the exterior cams are apparently down, this just makes everything a swirling, darkened nightmare of misery and pain for the thirty seconds it takes for his inner ears to calm the fuck down. He stops trying to sit up after that, and after he realizes that he is apparently buried under a wall. Or most of one.

“Guys--” he says, and no, his voice doesn’t sound panicky or dazed, that’s just his imagination. He just hit a wall going at something like a hundred miles an hour; that would mess up anybody’s sense of perspective.

He fades out again.

He surfaces again with a sudden, intense desire to get the helmet off, because he’s too hot and he can’t *see*, but even with his head spinning he’s aware that’s probably not a good idea. His extremities start twitching with the inability to move, and he forces himself to stay still, because right, wall. On him.

He tells himself that his breathing is perfectly normal, that he’s not panting shallow, terrified breaths. That his team will be here any minute now.

It works. Mostly. Sort of.

“Tony, where are you?” says Steve’s voice again, and Tony let’s out an incredulous laugh.

“How should I know? The cams - I can’t see anything. JARVIS is down.” Okay, no, there’s definitely a note of urgency in his voice now, and he tries to tone it down. It’s not the close quarters, or even the pressure, he thinks. It might be the inability to move. Or the inability to see. Mostly he keeps having to remind himself that the others can hear him, that they’re not even that far away, that they’re coming.

Time passes. He’s not sure how much; he fades out a few times.

Muffled, without the external mics, he hears an explosion close by. And then voices.

“Just hang on a minute, Stark - you’re a couple of layers down, but we can see your light.”
His light? That’s Natasha’s voice. Oh - the arc reactor. Still saving his ass in new and exciting ways even after all this time.

The rumbling grows nearer, and louder, and then suddenly most of the weight is lifted off of him.

It’s a few more minutes before something knocks him, and he doesn’t scream, doesn’t, just because he’s been trapped and immobile for either an hour or an eternity and can’t see or hear anything outside the helmet and has no idea whether it’s friend or foe.

“Tony?” says Steve’s voice, both over the comm and above him.

“Steve,” Tony says on an exhale, and he would go limp if the suit weren’t locked up from the impact and holding him immobile.

The faceplate - goes, and he’s going to have to show the team how to open it with the catch because seriously, Thor, this is the second time, and Tony would be kind of pissed if the suit weren’t probably a loss anyway - and then he’s looking up at Steve, and Thor, and Natasha, and behind them is the Hulk, hovering and looking almost hilariously worried for a big green rage-monster.

Steve’s face is the worst, even though he’s trying to hide it. He looks awful, his face pale and drawn, and tired in a way Steve never looks - Super Soldier Serum and everything.

“Don’t worry, Tony,” Steve says, as the rescue crew finally arrives, crowding around Tony and pushing the Avengers back. “We’ve got you.”
Tony just wants to go home, but even he knows that’s a bad idea. Back at SHIELD it takes two hours to get him out of the suit, with half the joints half-crushed and frozen, and with no JARVIS to help talk them through it Tony’s the one who has to give directions.

“No, ow, no, ow,” Tony says, jerking his arm away from the weedy-looking guy currently wielding a screwdriver way too close to his neck. “Am I speaking English? Am I stuttering? I said counter-clockwise!”

“Tony,” Steve chides gently, and Tony grits his teeth as the tech tries again, this time turning the bolt the right way.

“Look, I’d say I was sorry, but I’m really not. I could do this faster myself--”

Steve comes closer and taps one finger against the suit’s chestplate, right at the edge of the arc reactor. “Tony, you can’t lift your arms above your head.”

“I have - ow! - I have robots for this. There’s a reason I--” He turns his head to glare at the tech again, and Steve reaches out and touches his cheek, gently turning his face back towards Steve. The contact is such a surprise that for a moment Tony goes still, staring at the flush on Steve’s cheekbones.

Steve’s voice, though, is perfectly level. “Just be patient,” he says. “I know that’s not your strong suit.”

It’s really not. Most of the servos are out, so it’s an exacting, manual process with a couple of techs who keep doing the wrong thing, and all the while Tony’s fighting off jitters that come out in his voice more and more the longer it takes. He’d rather not have witnesses for this, but Steve remains matter how many glares Tony sends in his direction.

The warped chestplate finally comes free with a screeching, metallic noise, and Tony staggers a little, off-balance. Steve takes his weight without being asked. It’s undeniably weird, standing in the middle of a SHIELD lab hugging Captain America while a pair of techs circle them with power tools, but Tony doesn’t complain; the suit was never designed to be donned in pieces, no matter how modular he made it, and it’s heavy.

Steve, of course, is immovable, and either doesn’t notice or refuses to acknowledge the weirdness. By the time they get the last piece off, he’s dead on his feet and aching all over and letting Steve’s solid chest and arms taking most of his weight.

Steve’s still there when they roll him into the infirmary after tests; no broken bones, but a concussion and a lot of bruises and his ribs feel exactly like he’s been beaten with bricks. He’s not in much pain.
save for his head yet, but he knows he will be later.

He can feel the shakes coming back when the doctors leave him. He’s torn between wanting to fight it off a little longer and just give in, but he can’t get the privacy to break down, because his team just won’t leave him alone. He can’t sleep, either, not because of the company (Tony has achieved unconsciousness in all sorts of far-more-distracting places, though usually there was drinking involved) but because of the adrenaline that hasn’t ebbed away yet. They won’t give him any sedatives because of reasons, and every time he starts to drift off he jerks awake to find another member of his team there, apparently for no particular reason, and he hates them and loves them all at once. His hands won’t stop shaking, and his voice sounds pretty awful too, but no one says anything.

In the end, what should be a short, sharp shock - a panic attack of the likes he used to ruthlessly smother with alcohol - is a long night of Thor and Natasha laughing at him, and Clint telling him horrifying stories, and actual conversations with Bruce about topics ranging from particle physics to stimulant synthesis to the ongoing improvements to the re-enforcements on the Tower floors - and just... sitting, with Steve. Who is pretty obviously still freaked out over the events of the day, but hiding it better than he was before.

By morning, he’s too exhausted to shake anymore.

Tony is grateful. He doesn’t like being weak, and he likes it even less in front of people he actually respects. Even less in front of people with legitimate superpowers among whom he is pretty undeniably the weakest link. Ironically, these are also the only people who sort of seem to respect him back, these people who are somehow so much more than he is, like Rhodey and Pepper, who’ve seen him at his worst, and stuck around anyway.

He figures: if they’re going to be a team, the way Steve wants, they’d have to get used to it eventually. Might as well get a head start.

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“No,” says Loki stubbornly.

Steve sighs. “C’mon, pal. Just this once. Sleep?”

“No.”

“Please?”

Loki’s lower lip pokes out a little, and his jutted-out chin starts to tremble. Crap, thinks Steve.

“Look, I promise, Tony’s okay.”

“Tony,” Loki says, emphatically, and now his eyes are filling up with tears.

Steve senses he’s already lost this one. He scoops up Loki from his bed and turns towards the door.

The guards give each other a look, but let him go. The various SHIELD agents he passes en route barely even look at him. It’s the middle of the night, but they’re accustomed, by now, to seeing Steve lug Loki all over the base. Even barefoot and wearing his Captain America pyjamas and clutching his stuffed whatever-it-is, Loki’s presence barely raises any eyebrows. Steve doesn’t know who got him those; probably Coulson, who after Steve and Tony, spends more time with Loki than anybody.
The infirmary staff seem like they’re going to protest when he shows up, but take one look at Loki, who still looks like he might let loose any second, and wave him through.

At the door, Steve stops. Tony’s asleep, for the first time since they brought him in - truly asleep, not cat-napping and likely to jerk awake any second. He stills Loki’s squirming with a hand on his back. “Gotta be quiet, Shortstack. Don’t wanna wake him up, okay?”

Loki cranes his neck to look over Steve’s shoulder at Tony, then looks back at Steve, solemnly nodding his head.

They sit down in the chair next to the bed.

Loki looks up at him. "Hurt?"

"Yeah, pal. Stopping a bad guy. Remember I told you we do that?"

"Uh huh."

“Well, sometimes it’s... harder than other times. Like today. But Tony’s going to be okay. Okay?"

Loki holds his gaze for a long time, biting his lower lip, before rubbing at his eyes with one fist. “Okay,” he says, quietly.

He still won’t leave, though - gets all red-faced and squirmy when Steve tries one last time to take him back to his room - so Steve settles in for the night. Eventually, he falls asleep, and wakes up to find his lap empty. He panics for a second, but then he realizes that what woke him was Tony shifting in the bed, and that Loki hasn’t gone far. He’s curled up next to Tony on Tony’s undamaged side, fast asleep.

Steve watches a while longer, watching Tony’s chest rise and fall, and the way his arm’s come up around Loki’s back apparently without conscious direction, and settles back down to sleep.

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Tony wakes up in the early hours of the morning when a nurse comes in to check on him. He scowls up at her from the depths of post-painkiller hangover until she leaves again.

It’s a minute or so before he realizes he’s not alone, and that the reason he can’t move his right arm is because...

...oh.

Loki is curled up against his side, thumb in his mouth, dead to the world. Tony has a hand on his back, even though he doesn’t even remember moving.

In the chair next to the bed, Steve is similarly unconscious, head resting against the wall behind him and one foot propped up on the rail of Tony’s bed.

Well. This is... new.

Tony considers the room, the bed, and does an internal status check. Much of last night is a blur. He
aches in new and exciting places and the fuzzy feeling in his head is probably the remnants of the painkillers, of which they would not give him nearly enough. His ribs are loosely wrapped, and he wonders if that means cracked or broken; he can’t remember and he’s not interested enough at the moment to test it out.

His head feels like he remembers it feeling after the MIT graduation party, a night on which he got so drunk that even Rhodey wouldn’t recount the tale for him. Except worse, because there’s a bandage wrapped around his head, and he raises a hand to see how bad the damage is, because if they shaved his head, then heads will roll.

“It’s fine,” Steve says softly, and Tony turns his head to see that Steve’s awake and watching him. “Your hair’s fine.”

Surprised, Tony laughs - and instantly regrets it, because his ribs register a vehement protest at all this moving around and breathing. Tony winces, and Steve reaches out a hand, face worried, but freezes halfway there as Tony tries to relax back into the bed.

“Sorry,” says Steve, pulling back the hand to rub it through his own hair, which is a mess. Steve looks, in fact, more rumpled than Tony’s ever seen him. It’s distressingly adorable.

“It’s okay,” Tony assures him. “As long as you still think I’m pretty.”

Steve blushes and looks away, and Tony feels better.

He looks down at Loki, who slumbers on, oblivious.

“One of the medics let it slip you were up here,” Steve says, “and then he wouldn’t go back to sleep until he saw you.”

“Really?” Tony is absurdly touched. It’s probably the drugs that are to blame for the weird, warm feeling in his chest, because the arc reactor is in perfect shape. He looks down at Loki again, noticing the many-legged stuffed thing he’s holding tightly to his side.

“What the hell is that?” he asks.

“It’s a... okay, no, I still can’t pronounce the name.” Tony and Steve look up to see Darcy standing in the doorway, holding a huge, obnoxiously-pink bunch of Mylar balloons. They say Congratulations on your bundle of joy!

Darcy notices them staring and shrugs. “Look, it’s like five-thirty in the morning, all that’s open are convenience stores. It’s the thought that counts.” She glares at them both until Steve smiles and Tony sighs, subsiding, then comes in and ties the balloons efficiently to the rail at the foot of the bed. She then produces a cardboard coffee tray and hands one of the two cups there to Steve.

“None for you. You’ve been banned while you’re on the good drugs, sorry,” she tells Tony’s scowl.

“Why did you even come if you were just going to make me sad?” Tony demands grumpily.

“Jane sends her love. So does Thor. Well, Thor used more words, but.”

She gulps down half her coffee, and surfaces looking slightly less crazed. Tony would not have categorized Darcy as a morning person, but maybe it’s just more that she doesn’t function well at all
without adequate caffeine no matter what time of day it is.

“Thor gave it to him, sort of by proxy,” she explains, gesturing to the stuffed toy. From Tony’s angle it looks kind of like a brown furry octopus with horns, if an octopus were built more like an elephant. Or if an elephant had eight - is it only eight? - legs.

“What does that mean?” Steve asks, mystified.

Darcy tilts her head, eyes distant. “He described it to Jane, and Jane drew it, and then I took it to a friend of mine who makes plush toys on Etsy, and voila.” Darcy spreads the fingers of her free hand with a flourish. “Weird, many-legged Asgardian comfort object. Apparently he had one as a kid - like, the first time he was a kid.”

“That’s... really sweet,” Steve says, quietly.

Darcy smiles brightly. “Yeah, he’s like that. When he’s not getting everyone drunk and accidentally knocking holes in things.”

Tony nods. This, he knows from experience.

“Anyway,” Darcy says, straightening, “I’m actually here because Erik and Jane are making an attempt today, and they thought you guys should know. Y’know, given Shorstack here.” She nods at Loki, and Tony wonders when everybody but him started using that nickname.

“They got it working?” Steve asks, surprised. It takes Tony an embarrassingly long five seconds to realize they’re talking about the Bifrost.

Darcy makes a vague, provisional sort of noise. “Well, sort of. Maybe.” She shrugs. “I guess we’ll see. It’s a preliminary test, so we might not get anything, plus we might blow out the power plant, which would be exciting.”

“You’ll definitely blow out the power plant. I haven’t had time to finish going over the latest specs yet,” Tony says, trying to sit up again and remembering all over again why that was a bad idea the last time. Steve makes an alarmed noise and leaps to his feet to push Tony back down into the bed, and Tony goes without fighting too much. They were supposed to wait for him. He was helping. Even if said helping as often as not devolved into mostly-friendly bickering with Jane over design details, with Jane complaining his estimates were needlessly conservative and Tony declaring that she was crazy with no sense of proportion and that she was going to kill them all. These are argumentative positions he doubts either one of them ever imagined occupying. It’s all good, though; any time it gets too heated Darcy declares them done for the day and drags them out to the nearest bar.

Darcy waves him back. “Cool it, hot stuff. They seem pretty sure they’ve got a handle on it for now, but I promise I’ll convey your scorn and warnings of doom, okay?”

Tony relaxes a little. “As long as you promise.”

Darcy salutes and leaves.

Not even an hour passes before there’s a buzzing sound, a faint shaking in the floor, and then the lights all go out with an ominous zzzt-clunk.
“And that,” says Tony smugly as the blue emergency lights flicker on, “is why engineers are sexier than physicists.”
They let Tony go home late the following afternoon. Steve and Pepper arrive together to drive him home, which always makes him nervous.

He knows Steve and Pepper talk sometimes, that they have lunch, that she emails him links to articles and funny/bizarre things for sale on the Internet, but he has a persistent, nagging suspicion that their primary topic of conversation is him. He brought this up a couple of times, but both of them just laughed at him. “Tony,” said Pepper, smiling fondly at him, “you always think that people are talking about you.”

Which is, it should be noted, not an answer.

Pepper is her usual post-Tony-injuring-himself self: mocking and affectionate at the same time, which is something that has not changed since they broke up, and he’s grateful. It’s Steve, however, who hovers, they way he always does when one of them is hurt; like he’s suddenly been reminded that regular people are a lot more fragile than he is. Tony wants to point out that he’s not actually completely useless, but the only time he ever snapped at Overprotective Steve, Steve spent the next three days moping around the tower like the time he found out about the Dodgers moving to LA, and Tony’s not a monster.

Besides, he couldn’t convincingly claim that he doesn’t kind of like the attention.

Steve enforces the doctors’ insistence that Tony ride to the car in a wheelchair, and then keeps a hand under Tony’s elbow as he gets into the car, and on the ride back to the tower he keeps glancing over his shoulder into the back seat.

Later, Tony wonders if at least some of it wasn’t a distraction tactic, because when the elevator doors open on the common floor, Steve looks distinctly nervous.

It shouldn’t be this big of a shock, because he knows that that SHIELD downgraded Loki to “protective custody” a couple of weeks ago; at the time Tony thought this might signal an end to the madness, that they might send him away (and he wasn’t really sure how he felt about that), that Steve was going to take it hard, but he didn’t hear anything else after that and he forgot to worry about it.

The thing is, he should have known better. He knows Steve, better than he ever thought he would, and one of the things he knows, something that most people would not believe, is that when he puts his mind to it Captain America is about 200% more stubborn than Tony Stark.

That said, it’s still kind of a surreal experience to walk into the living room and find Loki watching Dora The Explorer from a child-sized inflatable Oscar The Grouch chair.

Tony stops, turns around, and walks back out again, almost colliding with Steve.

Steve grabs him by the shoulders before he can fall over - hi there, concussion-related vertigo, forgot you were coming! - and then looks back over Tony’s shoulder and starts looking nervous.

“Steve,” Tony says, when he’s found his balance again.

“Uh, yes?”
Tony just jerks a thumb over his shoulder and raises his eyebrows.

“Well, it’s complicated...” says Steve.

“It doesn’t look that complicated,” Tony says, looking back at Loki, who is eating what looks like Cheerios out of a green plastic bowl in his lap, eyes glued to the screen.

Steve’s mouth becomes a firm, straight line. “They were going to release him. Place him somewhere.”

Tony feels his eyes widen. “They placed him here? When did we become a certified foster home?”

He’s joking, but Steve reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a sheaf of papers. “The day before yesterday.”

He holds out the papers. Tony just stares at them, his mouth hanging open.

Steve seems to take this for an opening, because he continues, rather hurriedly: “They were going to put him with a family with Top Secret clearance, one they’ve worked with before, and I just... I asked Agent Hill what would be involved in... in keeping him with us, and then the next thing I knew there was a social worker ringing up from the lobby...”

Tony tries to imagine the spectacle of a social worker conducting a home study of Avengers Tower, and his brain stalls out.

“...And there were a lot of questions about daytime care arrangements, and role models, and safety concerns, and reference letters... and JARVIS was a lot of help with answering most of them. Explaining the security, stuff like that.”

Tony finally takes the stack of papers Steve is holding out, and gingerly leafs through them; sees that apparently Steve obtained signed character references from 1. Philip J. Coulson, 2. Virginia Potts, CEO, Stark Industries, and 3. The President of the United States.

Jesus. Talk about covering your bases.

When he tunes back in, Steve is just saying: “So, now I’m a foster parent.” He shrugs, as though this all makes perfect sense.

Tony shuts his mouth and actually thinks for a minute, and privately thinks he should get some kind of prize, because if any moment is ever going to cause an acceptable lapse in his quest to resist his natural inclination to blurt out whatever crosses his mind, this is it.

But he discards his first response - Did they see the Liquor Room? - and his second - Did they meet Natasha? Because really, if any one resident of the tower was going to represent an insurmountable obstacle, it would be Tony, or maybe the Other Guy - and even his third - Are you out of your fucking mind? - and finally all that’s left is an inexplicable:

“Wait, why didn’t you ask me to be a reference?” He writes awesome references. Ask anybody.

Steve looks immediately guilty, which just shows good judgement, if Tony’s being honest with himself, and says: “Residents of the home can’t be references.” Which is possibly a lie, or maybe a
lie of omission, judging by Steve’s face, but Tony’s not going to call him on it.

“Besides,” Steve continues, “the letters were mostly a formality, since Thor’s here.”

Tony bets that was a fun conversation. He just barely stops himself from saying so.

“Most of their concerns were regarding the, uh, home environment.”

Tony glares at Steve, but Steve doesn’t elaborate.

“Why’d you have to go through all this rigmarole anyway?” Tony asks eventually, finally taking in the sheer volume of paperwork. He hates paperwork. “You’re telling me the State of New York was going to declare Captain America an unfit parent?”

Predictably, Steve’s ears go kind of red and his forehead crumples. “I can’t get special treatment like that, Tony. Not when there’s a child involved.”

Tony stares at him, but he’s being absolutely serious.

Tony’s getting a headache, and not just because someone, somehow, got the kid authorized in the security system without Tony’s involvement (probably Pepper, which explains why she dropped them off instead of coming up). This is actually happening, and he’s starting to think it’s better he extricate himself from this situation before he says something mean, insensitive, or otherwise irretrievably awful.

“Okay,” he says finally, shoving the papers back into Steve’s hands and shouldering past him, “I need a nap. Later.”

Tony thinks he hears Steve say his name, uncertainly, as he strides away down the corridor, but when Steve doesn’t follow, he decides he’s imagined it.

***

Steve considers going after Tony - does, in fact, follow a few steps down the hall to make sure he’s walking in a straight line and not likely to veer off-course into a wall - but chickens out at the last second. He knows by now that when Tony’s been blindsided it’s easiest to just give him time to come around. Distantly, Steve hears a door slam. Probably Tony going off to sulk.

Steve realizes he’s still standing in the middle of the corridor, clutching the papers so hard they’re creased and messy. Anxiously, he tries to tap them back into shape, heading for his room to put them away, safely, in his filing cabinet. Everybody keeps offering to show him how to keep this stuff digitally, but digital documents don’t feel permanent to him; lack the significance of real paper with a real signature.

When he’s done that, he heads back to the living room and stands in the doorway for a while, watching Loki watch TV. After a while, the little boy notices his presence - he usually does after not too long - and waves at him, then holds up his green plastic bowl with a hopeful smile. “Can I more?” he asks.

“May I,” Steve corrects automatically, and takes the bowl, absently patting Loki on the head as he passes.
In the kitchen, Clint is slicing tomatoes, a pot of wide, frilly-edged noodles boiling in a pot on the stove. He’s humming along to the radio, a dish towel slung over one shoulder. Steve edges around him to get to the box of plain Cheerios they keep in the cupboard next to the stove.

It’s a new box, and he has to struggle for a minute with the bag inside the box before Clint reaches over his shoulder and does it for him, handing it back apparently without looking up.

“Uh, thanks,” Steve says, a little embarrassed, because he has super-strength but apparently sealed plastic bags of chips and cereal are beyond his powers, at least without splitting the bag down the middle and getting its contents all over the floor.

As he fills the bowl, he wonders again whether he’s made a mistake. Not over the foster care thing. That decision left him with refreshingly few second thoughts. He hasn’t been this sure about anything in a while, and every time he sees Loki smiling as he watches TV or plays with his growing collection of toys, or even laughing, he feels sure all over again that taking him in was the right thing to do.

What he’s still unsure about - as always - is Tony. Steve has wondered, not infrequently, whether anyone is ever sure about Tony. That’s another way Tony reminds Steve of Howard, though he’d never tell Tony that. If truth be told, it was not one of his better traits. Howard could be hurtful sometimes, because he just barrelled right ahead and didn’t really think about how what he said or did might affect other people. Then again, when Steve knew him, Howard was young and brash and brilliant and didn’t have a lot of people relying on him for anything other than those things - brilliance, competence. Steve wonders how that might have changed as Howard got older; married, had a kid. From what he’s heard, and what he’s gleaned from the way Tony reacts to the mere mention of his father, he gathers maybe it didn’t change much at all.

And probably that has something to do with the way Tony has been acting since all this started. At first almost jealous, like he resented the attention Steve and everyone else were suddenly paying to Loki, but first it was an emergency, and then it was an urgent situation, and now...

...And now Steve doesn’t know what it is.

He does know that the - the *something* between them that was there before is... different, somehow, *because* of Loki. That the real reason he didn’t ask Tony to be a reference wasn’t because of bias, exactly, but because of the wild, unexpected worry over how it might look if that same *something* ever came to anything. Which was silly, he knows. It might never come to anything. It probably won’t.

When it came right down to it, what mattered was who needed him more. And that wasn’t Tony.

He probably should have told Tony what he was planning. He knows that.

He’s pretty sure.

He never thought his life would get more complicated than it did after the serum.

“Oh, are you okay?”

It’s Clint asking, and Steve blinks and realizes he’s been leaning against the counter, staring down into the little bowl of Cheerios, for at least a few minutes. He’s still got the box in one hand.
“Oh,” Steve says, straightening up. “I was just...” He sets the box down, picks up the bowl. “I was...”

“I’ll take it,” says Natasha. Steve didn’t even see her come in, but he often doesn’t. She’s holding out one hand for the plastic bowl. He gives it to her.

“Thanks,” he says, and she disappears into the living room. Beside him, Clint hasn’t gone back to his cooking, but is regarding Steve with an expression of vague concern.

“Seriously, man, are you okay? You kind of zoned out there. For kind of a while.”

Steve puts the cereal box back in the cupboard and tries to hide a yawn as he turns back to Clint. “I’m fine. I’m just a little tired.”

“When was the last time you slept?” asks Natasha, coming back into the kitchen. Steve looks past her through the doorway and she waves away his concern.

“It’s fine. He’s fine. Steve. Have you slept?” Natasha doesn’t often repeat herself, and now they’re both looking at him as though he might keel over at any second. Now that they mention it, he can’t actually remember when he last slept. Oh, it was probably the day before yesterday, when he fell asleep in the chair next to Tony’s bed in the SHIELD infirmary. That counts, right? Anyway, he’s gone much longer without sleep.

Natasha seems to be reading his mind, though, because she and Clint share a speaking look over the counter, and then she comes around the island to grab him by the arm and steer him over to the table, pushing him - gently enough - down into a chair.

“I’m fine,” Steve protests. “I don’t--”

“I don’t remember seeing him eat anything yesterday,” Clint volunteers, head and shoulders in the fridge. Natasha makes a noise that in anyone else would be an exasperated sigh. A second later, he hears footsteps cross the kitchen and a glass is set down in front of him. It’s full of chocolate milk.

He’s suddenly so overcome with gratitude that he almost sways in his seat. “You guys are... you’ve all been...” He looks up to see Clint winding the dish towel around one hand, hip cocked against the counter, and Natasha sitting opposite him at the table, one corner of her mouth tucked up in a barely-there smirk. They’ve done so much this week, all of them, without his even having to ask. Clint stocking the cupboard with child-healthy foods, Natasha and Thor making a last-minute Toys R’ Us run to pick up the bare necessities a couple of days ago. Pepper and Thor and Dr. Foster and Darcy and Bruce and... even after all the reservations he knows they still have, they all stepped in when he needed help and didn’t really know what to ask, how to explain why this was so important to him.

“Thank you,” Steve says, quietly.

Clint and Natasha share another one of those speaking looks. Clint rolls his eyes, shaking his head.

“It’s fine,” says Clint.

“Drink your milk,” says Natasha.

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Tony tries to take a nap, and fails. After an hour of staring at the ceiling and finally remembering why he doesn’t nap, he calls Pepper instead.

“Ms. Potts is busy,” says Pepper’s Hot Assistant. It’s been over six months and Tony still can’t remember his name. In his head the guy’s been labelled Hot Assistant from the beginning, and somehow it just never got changed. Now it’s been too long for Tony to ask and he’s been coming up with ever-more-elaborate ways of talking around it. Some time soon it’s all going to come back and kick him in the ass, Tony just knows it.

“Well, so am I,” Tony lies. “But I’m taking time out of my day to call her, so we’re even.”

“I can take a message,” Hot Assistant says, with a serenity Tony has never heard matched, except by Pepper herself. He’s grudgingly impressed.

“No, seriously, it’s urgent. It’s an emergency.”

Hot Assistant is quiet for a second or two, and then says: “I’m sorry, Mr. Stark, but I don’t believe you.”

“What?” Tony sputters. “You don’t believe me? Are you allowed to talk to callers like that?”

“Only you, Mr. Stark. You’re the whole list. There’s also a criteria checklist for determining whether your emergency meets Ms. Potts’ definition of an emergency.”

Knowing when he’s beat, Tony switches tactics.

“Okay, fine. Maybe you can help me. I need relationship advice.”

Hot Assistant is silent for three or four seconds.

“I’ll put you through,” he says, and then the phone is ringing. Tony silently fistbumps the empty air.

When Pepper picks up, she sounds exasperated.

“Stop bullying my assistants, Tony.”

“If he’d just put me through in the first place—”

“They’re not allowed to put you through when it’s a red light day, Tony. I can only waste so much of my time per week on you when it’s not business-related.”

“Waste?” Tony is actually a little hurt.

Pepper just sounds dry. “Tony, last week you kept me on the phone with a forty-five minute speech on why you should be allowed to buy Nabisco so that you could make Iron Man Oreo cookies.”

“I was going to make a variety pack! One cookie for each Avenger. It’s not like we can’t use the positive marketing.”

Which is true. Even with Stark Industries footing a significant portion of the bill, the ongoing reconstruction of Midtown still has New Yorkers grumbling like only New Yorkers can, and the company’s stock prices going up and down like a superball. Not that they’re in any real danger, but
unstable stock prices always put Pepper on edge.

"Tony." Pepper sounds impatient with him, which he thinks is unfair since only two hours ago she was all sweet and indulgent with him, smiling at Steve over his head in a way that he couldn't quite define.

"Did you know about this?" he asks finally. "I mean obviously you knew about it, you wrote him a reference letter. I'm just trying to figure out how apparently everybody but me was involved in this... I guess conspiracy would be the right word? It would, right?"

Pepper doesn't say anything for a long moment, and it's the silence Tony recognizes as mildly guilty - specifically him-related.

"Ah," she says. She must really be distracted, because she seems to have genuinely forgotten that she was colluding with Steve on this. He almost asks if everything's okay at the office, because not a lot else would distract her this much, but he's both too selfish and too determined right now.

"Yeah," he agrees. "So. How long was this in the works? And why wasn't I told? And while we're at it, how come he didn't ask me for a fucking reference letter? I thought we were friends, Pep." And he doesn't know if he means Pepper or Steve.

Another few beats of silence, and then Pepper says: "There was concern that you might be seen as biased."

"Of course I'd be biased! He's Captain America! America is biased. That's the whole point." Tony points his finger as though she's in front of him. "You're a better liar than Steve, sure, Pep, but you're still, you know, lying. What the hell is going on?"

And then she does something unexpected. She laughs. A low, soft, surprised chuckle. "Seriously?" she asks. "Are you being serious with me right now?"

Tony pulls the phone away from his ear and stares at the screen, then brings it back. "What?" he asks.

"Tony. Come on."

Tony doesn't answer.

"I really don't know how you can be this obtuse."

"Hey!" Tony protests.

"Well this has been fun," Pepper says, still laughing. "Thanks. Now, I have about eleven meetings before dinner..."

"Hang on a second," Tony says, feeling the situation slipping out of his control. Possibly that happened five minutes ago.

"Bye, Tony. Go play with the kid. You'll be fine."

"Pepper!"
She hangs up.

Tony resists the urge to throw his phone across the room, instead tossing it onto the bedside table. Then he flops back onto the bed - as carefully as he can, with his ribs protesting - and stares at the ceiling.

"Oh," he says, eventually, and then: "Oh."

He's delighted for all of fifteen seconds, and then sense catches up with him. Pepper must be wrong.

Except Pepper's never wrong.

Shit.

He calls Pepper back.

"Are you sure?" he asks when he gets through, before she's even said anything. "I mean, I guess you're probably sure, given the ten-minute lecture about how if I besmirched Captain America's virtue I'd end up hanging by my balls from the Statue of Liberty--"

"I did not say 'besmirched.' The Statue of Liberty thing was Phil."

"He was dead at the time!"

"We had talks. I was quoting."

"When did you have talks? I still don't--"

"Tony, shut up for a second."

Years of conditioning has his mouth snapping shut on pure reflex, and he hate that he doesn't even resent that anymore.

"Okay. Am I correctly inferring that you're freaking out over the fact that Steve Rogers might in fact like-like you?" She affects a high-pitched, middle-school sort of voice that she only pulls out when she's drunk or mocking him.

"...Maybe?"

She sighs at him. "At least you finally noticed. We were starting to wonder whether you'd gotten brain damage from outer space."

"Noticed - wait, who's we?"

"Natasha."

Tony sputters. "Jesus, are you all conspiring against me?"

She sighs again, the one that means he's being melodramatic and she doesn't actually have to be listening to him right now but she is anyway because she's a good person.

"Nobody is conspiring against you. Honestly, I thought you'd be pleased."
"Why would you think that?" He can hear the slightly crazy edge in his voice, which means Pepper probably can, too.

She definitely can, because her voice gentles. "Because you've had a crush on him since you were eight?"

"You can't prove that."

"And because he's Steve."

He has no real response to that, and swallows back anything he might have said. There's only so much he wants to expose to other people, even Pepper. Even if she already knows.

"It's..." he says, finally, quietly, "not a good idea."

Pepper doesn't answer right away. Then she says, "Tony, turn on your video."

He hesitates, then touches the little camera icon, and Pepper's face appears on his phone screen. She looks put-together but slightly harried, the New York skyline sunny and gorgeous through the window behind her. Her eyebrows are drawn together in the vaguely-concerned face she mostly used to wear when Tony was having one type of breakdown or another. He hasn't seen it since she broke up with him.

"Why isn't it a good idea?" she asks.

He laughs. "Is that a serious question? Should I send you the list? I think JARVIS still has the list."

"Tony." She says it sternly, but she still looks unhappy.

"Okay, how about because he's... Steve, and I'm..."

"Don't." She looks angry now, angry enough that he rocks back a little, surprised. On the screen, she takes a steadying breath, mouth flattened into a tight line. "Just... don't. I'm going to come over there and kick your ass. Steve would kick your ass."

He frowns at her, stubborn even in the face of her only semi-perplexing anger. Yeah, this he remembers. And how at the end he even felt like he deserved it. "Yeah," he says, "that's kind of the problem. And then I would officially become the worst person in the history of everything."

She drops her face into her hands. "You are so frustrating."

Reflex again: he grins. "You love me."

She looks up, and now she looks sad, even though she's smiling. "Yeah," she agrees, "unfortunately."

He smiles back, but it drops off his face when she looks serious again. "What did I tell you, when we started? Do you remember?"

He pretends to think about it. "Was I drunk?"
She ignores him. "You said you were probably going to fuck it up, and I told you if it was going to get fucked up, we were going to fuck it up together."

He sighs. "God, how romantic."

"Nobody fucks these things up on their own." She pauses, and then adds: "Not even you."

"I don't know whether to say thank you or be offended."

"I'm sure you can multitask."

At least after that he's tired enough that he takes his pills and goes to sleep.

He wakes again three hours later - the longest nap he's managed in years, though it probably doesn't count post-hospitalization - when Steve knocks softly on the door and lets himself in.

He comes over to the bed and actually lays a hand on Tony's forehead as if testing his temperature; his palm feels warm and dry. "How are you feeling?"

Tony squints at him, yawns. "Better. I think."

Steve lifts his hand away. "Hungry? Clint made dinner."

That wakes Tony up a little more. "Really?" He sniffs the air. Something smells amazing. It was a strangely unsurprising surprise when he learned that apparently Clint loves to cook. The common kitchen is full of his bizarrely-expensive pots and pans and anybody who tries to re-arrange the drawers is taking his life into his hands.

"Really. Ten minutes. You interested?"

Tony looks at him. He's leaning in close, relaxed and smiling, and it would be really easy to... ...but Tony just stretches and yawns again. "Hell yeah," he says, sitting up - experimentally. The room still tilts, but slower than it did earlier. When he stands up, Steve keeps a hand under his elbow - not actually touching, but close enough to grab Tony if he starts to tip over. He stays close as they make their way into the kitchen, where most of the team is sitting around the table already or following Clint's direction to set the table or pull things out of the ovens. It's domestic to a point that's almost surreal, but what's really weird is how weird it doesn't feel.

Steve shadows him over to his seat and looks him over critically before turning away to help convey dishes from the counter to the table. Tony frowns thoughtfully at his back until somebody tugs on his sleeve. Loki is next to him, sitting on a bright red plastic booster seat and holding out a bundle of napkins. On Loki's other side Bruce is looking at them both with a small smile, and after a moment Tony realizes he's supposed to take one and pass the rest on.

"Thanks," he says, and Loki responds with a shy smile. Then a steaming pan of lasagna is set down in front of them, and Tony reflexively reaches out, jerking back with a curse when he burns his fingers. "Ow, fuck," he says.

"Tony!" Steve says, admonishingly, from across the kitchen. "Language!" Because Loki is staring at him with wide eyes, and yeah, right, kid.
"Sorry," he mutters, sticking his finger in his mouth.

A second later, Loki does the same thing, touching the pan and yanking back his hand with a surprised noise.

Steve's there immediately, crouching down next to the bench seat where they're sitting, and picking up Loki's hand to inspect it closely over Tony's lap. Tony just sits there, feeling obscurely guilty as Steve murmurs soft reassurances. Indeed, Steve shoots Tony an exasperated look, like he's supposed to be setting an example, and he's letting everyone down - it's a familiar feeling.

But a second later, Steve sighs, and Loki is smiling again, sucking on his burned finger, and Steve is standing up, one hand on Tony's shoulder.

"Eat your dinner, Tony," Steve says, smiling, and sits down as Clint starts dishing out.

So apparently this is his life now.

The differences post-kid are mostly little ones - toys in unexpected places; a plastic stool at the bathroom counter; colourful plastic dishes that are child-sized instead of the adult-sized ones they got for Thor in the first few weeks in the tower.

There's a stack of childcare books in constant rotation between the living room, the kitchen and Steve's rooms and a whiteboard in the kitchen with new babysitting shifts outlined in different colours. Natasha's and Clint's overlap. Bruce's are mostly during naptimes.

When he isn't reeling over the fact that he went to bed one day part of a team of kick-ass superheroes and woke up the next signed on for group parenting, Tony wishes he could have been there for that meeting.
A few days later, Tony is still... not himself, Steve would say. Except Tony has so many different “selves,” all of which he embodies so convincingly, that it can be hard to know which one is real.

Steve does know him pretty well after all this time, though, and this Tony is... subdued, which is not a word Steve would ever have expected to ascribe to Tony Stark.

For a while Steve thinks it might just be the concussion, the aching ribs, and the meds that he often has to be reminded to take, and the lethargy and crankiness that come hand-in-hand with a Tony unable to work when he wants to.

That, and the solicitousness of the other Avengers, which Steve fears might be partly his fault. Tony, for all his self-professed self-centredness, reacts unpredictably when other people are obviously taking care of him. The last couple of days have been characterized by wariness and a lot of scowling, the latter surfacing mostly when Tony tries to gain access to his workshop and is denied first by JARVIS, then by whatever team member is nearest ushering him back towards the injured-Tony-approved areas of the tower.

Worst of all, he knows Tony is bored. As they all know, that can be a strange and dangerous thing. Yesterday Tony’s frustration took the form of the most complicated domino course Steve has ever seen - one that took up most of the open areas of the common floor, and probably close to a hundred boxes of dominoes. It spanned floors, tables, chairs, and planks laid across other objects. He spent nearly nine hours setting it up, with Loki following behind him, patiently handing him tile after tile after tile, and then let Loki set the whole thing off while they watched from the mezzanine, both of them laughing in a worryingly maniacal fashion.

“I was teaching him physics,” was Tony’s only defence, before he wandered off to do something else and left the cleanup to the others.

Still, everyone agrees that this is better than letting him tinker with the kitchen appliances again.

Steve finds it’s easier to let Tony distract himself by inconveniencing the team, rather than dwelling too long on the reasons everyone is indulging him. The bruises on his face and arms are harder to look at now that they’re turning yellow-green and black, worse when he knows the size of the bruises covering his torso. Before now Steve never really thought about the way Tony always moves a little stiffly after a battle - never had occasion to see the aftermath of Tony covered in bruises from being rattled around inside the suit.

Not that that makes it any easier to watch. Especially now that Tony, who is on the injured list and more or less confined to the tower, is spending so much more time with Loki. They usually build things on the living room floor or play Lego Star Wars while Tony yells at the screen and Loki yells excitedly at explosions. Steve usually doesn’t interrupt them, but sometimes he watches them together, and sees the way Tony looks sometimes - unsure, or even scared, like he’s going to screw it up, any second now. At all times, there is someone else within earshot - in arm’s reach or just in the next room.
Steve has no idea what to tell him. Or if he should say anything at all.

Today he responds to Loki’s wave around a growing tower of colourful wooden blocks, which is nearly taller than Loki himself. Tony is currently sitting back, studying the structure - which features a number of complicated features Steve didn’t actually know could be achieved with blocks - while Loki watches him patiently, waiting for new instructions. Steve comes in and sits down next to Tony, which Tony registers only when the couch dips under Steve’s weight.

“Oh, hey,” Tony says. “Just trying to figure out where to go from here.”

Often, when he comes across Tony and Loki building something, it’s obvious that it’s Tony doing the building, and Loki acting as his assistant. Steve’s pretty sure that’s not how it’s supposed to work, but it seems to make both of them happy enough.

“Bigger!” Loki volunteers from the other side of the coffee table.

Tony, chin in hand, flashes a brief smile, eyes still on the tower. “Yeah?”

“Bigger,” Loki repeats, firmly, and Tony starts adding something that kind of looks like a flying buttress made of bright yellow blocks, while Loki watches, transfixed.

Steve watches for a while, and then asks: “What are you building?”

“Big!” Loki tells him, throwing up his arms.

Tony nods, focused on the blocks. “What he said.”

Steve chuckles. “I think you’re going to run out of blocks,” he points out.

Tony makes a vague noise and ignores him. Loki peers around the corner of the tower at him and smiles.

At length, Tony stops - they haven’t run out of blocks, but Steve can see they don’t have enough to finish the base before making it taller.

“Sorry kid, this is where we get off,” he says.

Loki frowns at him. “No more bigger?”

Tony shakes his head. “Wouldn’t end well.”

Loki continues frowning, and then picks up another block, reaching up on tiptoe to place it on the top of the stack.

Tony reaches out, saying “Hang on,” but it’s too late.

The tower wobbles, tilts, and then falls with a magnificent CRASH, sending colourful blocks everywhere. Loki ducks out of the way, and when the dust has settled, he peeks up over the edge of the coffee table again, surveying the damage. He looks so disappointed that Steve almost reaches out to scoop him up, but he looks at Tony instead, who is still frozen mid-reach. He drops his hands, belatedly, looks from Loki to Steve, eyes wide like he’s just properly realized they’re both there, and then clears his throat.
“Well, this was fun,” he says briskly, getting up.

Steve reaches out, but Tony evades him easily. “Tony--”

“Stuff to do,” Tony says apologetically, shoving his hands in his pockets. Steve wonders where he’s going to go - he’s not allowed in the workshop, or the R&D floors, or Bruce’s lab, or the gym, and he’s still getting headaches if he reads too long, or spends too long at a computer, so--

Steve doesn’t get a chance to ask, because Tony turns and is gone before he can speak.

Steve lets out a long, frustrated sigh and slumps back into the couch. A minute later, Loki comes around and climbs up, one knee at a time, and holds out one red block to Steve.

Steve smiles at him and takes it. “He’s pretty weird, huh?” he says, and Loki looks over at the door through which Tony disappeared, and looks back.

“Sad,” is all he says, and shoves another brick at Steve.

“Start over?” Steve offers, and Loki nods. They get down on their knees on the carpet and start gathering up the blocks.

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After The Domino Incident and Steve’s discovery that Tony had inadvertently conditioned Loki, with three consecutive days of Lego Star Wars, to gleefully shout “Mofo!” every time an explosion happened on screen, it’s decided that Bruce, Steve and Clint will take Loki to the zoo and out of Tony’s orbit for a day. Tony spends most of Wednesday morning catching up with Jane and Erik’s latest progress on the Bifrost, and ends up colonizing the kitchen because he’s still not allowed back into the workshop. Steve exercised his override and had JARVIS lock down the elevator to the sub-basement. Not cool.

But it’s okay; mostly he’s working with holograms, for which he only really needs a flat surface and a projection pad, which folds out onto the kitchen table as handily as his state-of-the-art workbench. And the pseudo-Bifrost is one seriously sexy piece of engineering, even if he doesn’t really have a solid handle on the underlying principles. It’s cool, though. They’ve almost got it to the point where they can maybe even do a second test run in the next few weeks.

Tony secretly still can’t believe he gets to work on this, even if right now he’s restricted to theory. It’s not like SHIELD has no engineers. They just have a shortage of engineers boasting experience with projects running enough voltage to potentially short out half of North America. It’s a miracle they only shorted out a couple of city blocks with that last ill-conceived test.

It’s a miracle anyone gets anything done without him, really.

He’s not sure how long he’s been sitting there when Thor comes in - possibly because he doesn’t notice Thor until there’s a rustling noise and the smell of coffee reaches him. His head snaps up, and he sees Thor at the counter with an open bag of coffee, setting up the French press.

“Hi,” Tony says brightly, and Thor turns around slowly, coffee in hands.

“Good morning,” Thor says, warily.
Tony drums his fingers on the tabletop. “Making some coffee?” he ventures.

Thor looks down at the bag in his hands, and then slowly puts it down on the counter, shielding it with his body. Tony can see him consider lying, but he doesn’t try it - his shoulders slump a little. “I am.”

Tony starts to get up, but Thor holds out a hand, palm out. “No, my friend.” It’s his usual booming, take-no-prisoners tone, but there’s an edge of mild desperation there.

“No what?” Tony asks innocently.

Thor raises his eyebrows earnestly. “I am sorry. I cannot share my coffee with you.”

“Fuck.” Tony sinks back into his seat. Busted. He hasn’t had coffee in six days, and all the coffee and even the coffee maker have disappeared from the kitchen. From everyone’s kitchens, he checked. It’s a conspiracy.

“I am very sorry. But Steve told us it would not be good for you until you were well again.” To his credit, Thor does look like he feels bad. Tony sighs and waves a hand dismissively. But then he sits up straight again.

“Wait - if you guys are all trying to keep the coffee away from me, why are you making it down here instead of in your own kitchen?”

Thor grins at him. “My fair Jane sleeps - I pleasured her for many hours this morning - and I wish to surprise her. The smell of coffee would awaken her before I could present it to her in our bed.”

Tony blinks at him. At least that explains why Darcy was sleeping on the couch in the living room this morning.

“Um, good for you, big guy. But are you sure you couldn’t...”

Thor clutches the bag of coffee tighter, and shakes his head. “I do not wish to do you harm.”

Tony slumps and says bitterly: “Fine. Whatever. Thanks for protecting my arteries or whatever.”

Thor comes over to the table and stands behind him, dropping both hands onto Tony’s shoulders with enough force that it rocks him in the chair.

“You are troubled, my friend,” Thor says, and Tony glances up at him. Thor looks worried, which is not something that’s part of his usual repertoire. Generally it takes big stuff, like alien invasions or attempted fratricide, and even then he tries to keep a good face on things. Thor is one of the most relentlessly upbeat people Tony’s ever met, and that includes Steve, who spent the first four months in the tower almost constantly depressed and still insisted on everyone participating in movie and pizza nights every week.

Then again, Thor’s been kind of down ever since Steve pulled Loki out of the wreck. Like he’s not sure how he’s supposed to feel. It’s weird.

“Well, yeah” Tony says, “nobody will give me any coffee.”
Thor shakes his head. It looks really weird from this angle. “You are too deep a thinker to be brought so low by a mere beverage.” He bends down. “This is a matter of the heart.”

It’s not a question, not even the roundabout, fuck-this-up-and-I-will-cut-you-but-please-don’t-give-me-any-details kind of question just about anybody else on the team would ask, since apparently every single fucking one of them has known what was - or wasn’t - going on between him and Steve for a while now.

Yesterday an embarrassed-looking Bruce and a deadly-looking Natasha cornered him in the pantry (he was on another doomed search for coffee) and gave him one of the most frightening lectures on “unit cohesion” (Natasha) and “feelings” (Bruce) and “accidents in the home” (Natasha again) that Tony has ever received. That includes the one he got from Pepper’s mom when the tabloids finally figured out they were dating.

This one was scarier, not only because he lives with terrifying people who have constant, immediate access not only to his defenseless, unsuspecting person but to all kinds of exciting and deadly weaponry, but because he came away with no actual clue as to whether they were warning him off or urging him on.

Like then, he now feels the pressing need for a long nap.

Instead, he sighs. “I thought everyone had worked out by now that I don’t have one of those,” he tells Thor. “Seriously inconvenient. Better off, really.”

Thor just shakes his head, and then surprisingly, taps a finger against the edge of the arc reactor. Tony starts, but only a little, because Thor is one of the few people who aren’t careful about touching him, and he’s more or less used to it by now.

“You wear the proof of that lie for all to see.” He frowns. “Why do you not simply come together? Would you not be happier?”

Jesus. Tony looks away, towards his diagram, which is now in sleep mode, still and dim. “I doubt it,” he says shortly.

The kettle clicks, and Thor sighs, his hands lifting from Tony’s shoulders as he goes to pour water into the French press. A few minutes pass in silence, with Tony staring fixedly at his hands in the hologram and Thor staring at him thoughtfully, arms crossed. Eventually Thor turns around again to put the lid on the press, and presses it slowly down with careful concentration.

“It pains me to see you both so unhappy,” he says seriously. “Especially now that my brother is here.”

And Thor really does feel bad about it, Tony can see that, so he dredges up a smile. “Don’t worry about it, big guy,” he says, with a semblance of his usual grin. “It’ll work out.”

Thor looks unconvincing, but he picks up the coffee and mugs, and heads for the door, only to be blocked by Darcy. She is standing in the doorway in plaid pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt that says “Science: It Works, Bitches” and is too-small in a couple of very specific ways that make Tony think it probably belongs to Jane.

“Give,” she says, squinting up at Thor, who smiles fondly down at her. He hands Darcy one of the mugs, fills it, and then disappears towards the elevators.
“Got sexiled, huh?” Tony smirks at her when Thor is gone, and she makes a face at him as she shuffles into the kitchen. Darcy has her own room on Thor’s floor, but Thor and Jane can sometimes be kind of... loud.

“There are so many reasons I hated living in residence,” she mumbles into her cup. She sets it down on the counter, and takes down a bowl and a box of cereal from the cupboards. “Though at least the view is better here,” she adds, with a leer that makes Tony laugh. He likes Darcy. They understand each other.

She brings her breakfast - brightly-coloured and full of marshmallows - to the table, and Tony feels a flare of hope for a second before she positions her coffee mug at her elbow, well out of his reach, before pouring milk into her bowl and digging in.

Tony lets a few minutes pass before he makes a last attempt: “I don’t suppose you could spare a couple of sips of that--”

“Not unless you want to talk about why you and Steve aren’t fucking yet despite the fact that you’re obviously stupid for each other.” She looks up with a single raised eyebrow.

Tony lets her finish her breakfast in peace.

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Steve’s phone rings on his way up to street level from the subway, and when he pulls it out of his pocket the display says “Ms. Pepper Potts.” Steve is suddenly, inexplicably nervous as he answers. “Hello, Pepper, how are you?” He just barely avoids addressing her as “Ms. Potts,” something he hasn’t done in ages.

She picks up on it anyway. “I’m fine, Steve,” she begins, sounding faintly amused, and then pauses, which makes Steve nervous all over again. “Are you?”

Steve tries to relax. Initially, Pepper did make him nervous, and it wasn’t just the easy confidence he’s always envied, or that she was virtually impervious to Tony’s many, many methods of charming his way out of things. It might have had something to do with the fact that Tony very clearly cares what she thinks of him, which makes her a unique individual indeed, and all the more intimidating for it.

“Well enough,” he tells her honestly, thinking of the size of the bowl of ice cream Loki is probably eating right now and how worked up he’s going to be in a few hours when Clint and Bruce bring him back.

A brief, uneasy silence follows, but it’s long enough that he starts wondering why she called. What’s so serious she hasn’t just said it? Because Pepper Potts does not prevaricate.

Finally, she sighs. “Look, are you free for lunch? I’ve got an hour free.”

“I’m free,” he answers, looking at his watch. For a few hours, anyway. “Where should I meet you?”

“I’m out of the office today, I’ll text you the address,” she says, and they hang up.

The cafe Pepper chooses is, like most of the places they’ve had lunch together, both classy and
understated. They sit inside despite the fine weather, because that makes it harder for the paparazzi, but the café’s big sliding windows are open to the warm breeze and Steve’s pannini is delicious. Pepper lets him eat most of it, filling him in on her day so far - full of idiots, she almost misses dealing with Tony - before she gets to the point. She sits back in her chair, dabbing at her lips with a napkin, and asks:

“Look, is he okay?”

Steve swallows, and regards her uncertainly. “Why do you ask?”

Pepper looks at him, gaze steady, though not quite as unruffled as usual. There’s a tightness around her eyes and mouth. “Because when I last talked to him on the phone he sounded... not like himself.”

Steve frowns down at his plate. “I’d noticed that. But...” he shrugs, “he always gets down when he’s hurt. Thinks he’s not contributing or... I thought maybe it would clear up.”

Pepper nods. “So did I. But...” She presses her lips together. “This is different. I couldn’t tell you how... I hoped maybe he’d talked to you. If he was going to talk to anyone...” She trails off, significantly, raising one eyebrow. She’s prim and perfectly-put-together and still somehow managing to convey I know your every last embarrassing fantasy, and I used to work for Tony Stark, your dirty secrets are nothing to me. Steve covers his blush by taking a sip of coffee from his huge china mug. He scalds his tongue, and coughs, carefully setting the mug down.

“No,” he says, voice hoarse, as his throat burns. He swallows, and repeats, “no,” in a more normal voice. “He hasn’t said... much. He hasn’t...” Steve slumps as he realizes the truth of it, thinking of Tony’s apparent self-imposed time limits over the past week, at least when Steve is around, though a lot of it is probably just Tony feeling restless. “He hasn’t wanted to be around me, much. Lately. He sort of... changes the subject.”

Pepper nods, as if that’s just what she expected, though she looks a little frustrated. “Par for the course,” she says. “Tony talks a lot, but he doesn’t say very much.”

Steve thinks about that. “True,” he agrees, reaching for his coffee again.

“He likes you, Steve,” she says simply. “He likes you a lot. More than I think he’s comfortable with. He’s not good with... well, for reference, with us, his first shot over the bow was to make me CEO and pour me a glass of champagne.”

Steve’s surprised into laughter. “That does sound like him.”

She smiles. “Tony’s very... all or nothing. He doesn’t really know how to do things at normal human volume.”

“Was he always like that?” Steve asks, genuinely curious, and eager to direct the conversation away from himself.

Pepper picks at the salad still on her plate. “At least as long as I’ve known him,” she confirms. “Probably always, if I were to guess. It would make sense, given everything.”

She eyes him warily, but apparently decides for rather than against. “I know Howard was your friend.”
Confused by the change in topic, Steve leans forward. A lot of people have talked to him about Howard, but most people are smiling when they do it. Tony doesn’t. And apparently neither does Pepper.

“I don’t know all of it,” she continues, “because Tony doesn’t like to talk about it. I think he’d prefer us all to think he just sort of blinked into existence at around the age he started building robots.”

Steve smiles at this, eyes dropping to the table.

“He always tries so hard. And even Obadiah said—” she cuts herself off, glaring briefly into empty space - the same way Tony reacts whenever Obadiah Stane is mentioned, even in passing on television. Steve doesn’t know the whole story there, only that he was Tony’s friend, almost his mentor, and that he betrayed them. For now, it’s all he really needs to know.

“I don’t think... I don’t think Tony was very happy, as a kid.” It’s enough of an obvious understatement, her words chosen carefully, that Steve stares at her, mouth dropping open.

“You don’t think—”

“No, no, nothing like that,” she says quickly, waving away thoughts of - hell, Howard always did have a temper, and he hated being wrong. But she seems sure enough, and Steve lets himself relax a little. “Once, when he was very drunk, he talked about how…” She huffs out a sigh and meets Steve’s eyes directly. “I get the impression that on top of them never really getting along, Tony was more than a little afraid of him.”

There’s a soft *tink* and he looks down to see he’s cracked his mug, gripping it too hard. “Oh,” he says, carefully setting it down again, embarrassed. He hasn’t done that in a while. At least he’d already finished his coffee.

“I’ll pay for that,” he mutters.

“Don’t worry about it,” Pepper reassures him, smiling a little as a server hurries over to take the mug away, leaving a full, steaming, intact mug in its place.

“I should have realized,” Steve says after a while; a few more sips of good, strong coffee to settle his nerves.

“Realized what?” Pepper asks.

“The way he is with Loki.” Steve sets his mug down again, more carefully than before. He can only break so many dishes accidentally before regular people start noticing.

“Ah,” Pepper says, nodding. “Yes. That was what I’d figured.”

“I’m not sure what to do,” he admits tiredly. He *is* tired, which doesn’t happen often. The coffee helps, but only goes so far when the caffeine is overcome so quickly by his metabolism.

Pepper studies him for a long moment, and then asks: “About Tony, or about you and Tony?”

“Um,” says Steve, glancing at her - he knew this was going to come up sooner or later, he realizes now. It was why he was so nervous earlier.
She grins at him. “Calm down, Steve. I’m not going to warn you off. Just...” Her face grows serious. “Just be careful, okay? He isn’t...”

...isn’t as fearless, isn’t as invulnerable, isn’t as anything as he pretends to be. Steve knows that better than most.

“I do care about him, god help me,” she says, quietly, and when he looks at her again, she seems almost sad.

“I know,” he tells her, and adds, in a lower voice, “So do I.”

She nods, decisively, and picks up her cup again. “And Steve?”

“Yes?”

“I hope it goes without saying that if you break him, I will hurt you.”

It... isn’t a question. It’s delivered in the same cool, serene, perfect-posture tone she uses to talk down investors when Tony or the Avengers in general have done something to make the news. Directed at him, it makes Steve straighten reflexively in his seat, and he has to fight the urge to salute.

“Yes ma’am,” he says, without thinking.

For the first time in a long while, she doesn’t try to correct him.

***

Steve’s heart is full of completely unironic enthusiasm for most of the Disney pantheon. He was totally over the fucking moon when he found out about streaming media libraries and the ability to watch just about any movie you could think of right in your living room, and he once spent most of an evening recounting the time he saw Snow White in the theatres before the war. Even Tony cannot find it in his hear to mock him, and so they spend an entire Sunday on the couch watching movie after movie with Loki sitting in his green Oscar the Grouch chair, eyes wide and his stuffed Whatever-the-hell-it-is clutched to his chest.

The other Avengers drift in and out. Clint sits through Robin Hood. Natasha stays for most of Mulan. Thor comes in during the opening scenes of Beauty and the Beast and steals all of Tony's popcorn. During The Lion King Loki gets bored and wanders off. Tony and Steve stay where they are - Steve because he’s riveted and Tony because he still gets dizzy if he gets up too fast and hurts when he moves wrong.

And whenever he realizes he hasn't seen him in a while, Steve just comes looking for him anyway.

Steve does his headcount on-schedule at the two-hour mark, less subtly with Tony than he does when anyone else is in the room. Usually he’ll get up and do a circuit of the common floor, ask JARVIS about anyone who might be elsewhere, but when he goes to move, Tony reaches out and pulls him back down, flicks his eyes towards the ceiling. No matter what anybody tells him, Steve always addresses JARVIS by looking up, as though JARVIS is some kind of uber-polite, mildly-sarcastic higher power - which, okay, is close enough to the truth.

“JARVIS?”
“Of course, Captain.”

Tony’s not sure whether the rest of the team is aware of this little ritual. Coulson surely is, as well as Pepper, since she was the one who introduced Steve to JARVIS. Clint and Natasha probably are. Thor and Bruce - it’s hard to say. Steve spends so much time looking after everyone that Tony’s not a hundred percent sure he knows he’s doing it, or rather, why.

Probably he does. With this sort of thing Tony is usually the oblivious one.

When JARVIS has located everyone to Steve’s satisfaction, including, Tony notices, the location of Loki on Natasha’s floor - and wondering how the hell Natasha entertains a three-year-old has taken up a lot of Tony’s convalescent thinking-time - he settles back down into the couch with a sigh, briefly covering Tony’s hand on his arm before they both retreat to their own spaces, maybe a little more slowly than they used to.

At some point Tony falls asleep - the painkillers still make him sleepy - and he wakes up to find he’s tipped over and is leaning into Steve’s side. On the screen, Lilo & Stitch is playing: the scene with the storybook. Tony considers the situation: Steve is relaxed and warm and comfortable, and Tony is still technically on the injured list and can get away with a lot more than usual. So he doesn’t pull away immediately. He shifts, slowly, resurfacing, rubs at his eyes. Steve stirs a little, looks down at him, and then back to the screen.

“How are you feeling?” he asks. It’s gotten dark outside, and the screen lights Steve’s face in blue.

“Like I’ve been consistently denied an adequate dose of painkillers,” Tony grumbles. His head does actually hurt like somebody took a sledgehammer to it - or a wall. Whatever. It’s a low, persistent throb behind his eyes, and he’s squinting even in the low light from the TV. He wonders what time it is, and where the others are. It’s rare for the living room to be held by a single Avenger for more than a few hours before someone else comes in to lay claim, despite the fact that they’ve all got perfectly good home entertainment systems in their own quarters.

Steve looks down at him again, wearing the half-frown, half-smile he wears whenever Tony says something to draw attention to his past indiscretions - one so familiar Tony thinks Steve might well have inherited directly from Pepper. There was, after all, a reason why he wasn’t cut loose with stronger drugs, and now that he’s carelessly brought it up he’s sorry he did. There are only a few people whose disapproval can have much impact on him, and Steve’s recently made the top of a very short list.

“Sorry,” Tony mutters, a minute later, going to sit up and pull away.

Steve stops him, pulls him back down and against his side, reaching with the other arm over to the side table where some helpful individual has left prescription bottles and an aluminum water bottle with *Stark Industries* on the side. Steve carefully shakes out a few pills, seals the bottles, and then hands Tony pills and water and watches while he takes them.

“How know,” Tony says, handing the bottle back a minute later, “you’re a natural at this. This caretaking thing, I mean. The State of New York had a lot of nerve asking you for references. All they had to do was meet you.”

Tony is sure Steve’s ears have gone red again, even though it’s too dark to really see. “Thanks,” he says, after a few seconds have passed.
They watch a few more minutes of the movie in silence. “Jesus,” says Tony. “This movie is our life. So which one of us is the blue alien? I think it’s the kid.”

Steve laughs. “It’s a movie, Tony.”

“No, no, I’m serious. And you’re the hot big sister voiced by Tia Carrere.”

“What does that make you?” Steve asks, grinning despite himself.

“Obviously I’m the awesome surfer dude. Swallowing fire and full of brilliant ideas to make everybody loosen up.” This is definitely the weirdest flirting Tony’s ever done, which is saying something. Weirder is how Steve seems to be flirting back.

“The boyfriend?” Steve asks, teasing. “The one who never wears a shirt?”

“That’s the one,” Tony agrees. “Hey, they even rebuild the house at the end, I think. To make room for all the weirdos who’ve crash-landed into their lives.” He pauses. “Okay, actually, the degree to which this is mirroring my life is actually a little eerie.”

“That might be the concussion speaking,” Steve points out.

“No, really.” He turns to Steve, eager to get his point across. “I mean, isn’t that why you kept the kid? So they wouldn’t lock him up?”

Steve’s smile dims a little, and he looks thoughtful. “Partly. Though even Director Fury agreed he probably wasn’t a hazard anymore. I...” Steve shrugs. “I just... he’s all alone.”

Tony frowns. “No he’s not. I mean I’m sure the technicalities are fucking terrifying diplomatically but Thor must count as next of kin, at least.”

Steve shrugs again. “Fine, you’re right. But that’s not what I mean. He’s... he was alone. He reminded me of... of me.”

Tony turns to stare at him; can’t help it. Stares too openly, he realizes, when Steve looks away, back at the TV. “Of you?”

“I grew up in an orphanage, Tony. I know what it’s like not to have anybody looking out for you.”

Tony has absolutely no idea where to go with that. He feels like he’s been dropped into the middle of a conversational minefield, with no idea which direction is safe. This is why he usually avoids serious conversations. About anything. He’s terrible at serious.

“I... didn’t know that,” he says eventually. To his surprise, Steve gives him a tiny sideways smile.

“No reason for you to have known. Anyway, it wasn’t so bad. The matrons were nice, they just didn’t have a lot of time for us, you know? And I had Bucky, so...” He trails off, and Tony watches his profile as his eyes go a little distant, a little sad, the way they always do when he talks about the people he left behind; the family he made, and lost.

Steve shakes his head, chuckling a little. “I know you all kind of think I’m crazy for all this. But... he’s a kid.” Steve’s gaze drifts across the living room, where there are toys, books, and a tipped-over child-sized green armchair scattered across the floor. “I thought about it, and I read the reports, and...”
it’s been months, Tony. He’s a kid. And... well. When they finished the tests, the social worker sat down with Thor--"

Tony is still trying to wrap his brain around the fact that SHIELD has social workers.

"--I went with him because he doesn’t even really know what a social worker is, and they talked about... about options. They talked about foster care, and they talked about a lot of other stuff, but I mean, come on. Who’s going to take him? Who are they going to find who can? Who has clearance and everything, and can deal with him if he turns out to be a handful?"

“A handful” in this case meaning “discovers his innate ability to fuck shit up with the power of his mind,” but Steve will always insist on thinking the best of people.

Steve looks at Tony. “I should have asked you. I’m sorry.”

Surprised, Tony frowns and then shakes his head. “What? No. You didn’t need my permission.”

“But you were unhappy when--”

Steve looks so agonized that Tony chuckles. ‘I was surprised! And concussed! Steve - this is your home too. And I kinda gave up the rights to policing the borders when I let Clint move in. Guy uses the air ducts more often than the elevator.”

It’s mostly a lie. Tony only caught Clint coming out of the ducts that one time.

Tony does some mental math, and asks, finally, because he’s been wondering for a while: “So, when did you decide this? That we were going to become the Avengers Home for Wayward Supervillains, I mean?” He means it to sound sarcastic; it comes out sounding genuinely curious.

Unlike all the other times the topic’s come up, Steve doesn’t change the subject. Maybe because Tony’s mildly stoned and hasn’t complained about it for a few days. “I don’t know,” Steve admits. “I don’t know that I thought about it like that, exactly. It started out as... well, he wouldn’t calm down for anyone else. And then when they were sure he was what he seemed to be, it... it was too late, I guess.” He smiles again, this one self-deprecating. “I didn’t really see it coming.”

It takes Tony a minute to regroup.

“So what exactly is the plan, here?” Tony asks him, voice soft. “I don’t think SHIELD is going to let you make him team mascot or anything. And I don’t even want to think about adoption laws between branches on the World Tree. And eventually Jane and Erik are going to get the bridge up and running...” Tony looks back on that sentence, and tries to find any part of it as insane as it definitely should sound. But no, the crazy part is how crazy it doesn’t seem. How is this his life? Life used to make sense.

But Steve shakes his head quickly. “No adoption,” he says, definitively. “Besides, I think Thor would... I think that would wreck him.”

Tony thinks about the way Thor looked when Steve first pulled Loki out of the debris; the way he still looks, sometimes, when no one else is really paying attention and Loki is playing with the others, smiling, relatively carefree. Translation: like someone reached into his chest and squeezed; twisted.

“Yeah,” Tony agrees.
“But Thor is here,” Steve goes on, “with us. And damn it, Tony, where else is he going to go?”

His voice drops a little, quiet and small, and it’s something Tony’s rarely heard before now; something he maybe only heard when he was lying in an infirmary bed after having a building drop on his head. Tony finally looks up, and Steve’s looking right at him with one of those distressingly open looks that he gets, and he looks like he’s on the verge of everything he ever wanted and staring right at someone trying to yank it right out from under his feet.

Tony understands, then. He gets this, the way Steve has been trying to gather them all close, with the forced team bonding and living under the same roof and using the kid as an emotional blackmail grenade on trips to the park and Disney movie marathons. It’s probably the same impulse that drove Tony to nag them all until they agreed to move in, all together in the tower not just because it’s the coolest place to live in all of New York, but because it meant they were all nearby, all the time, couldn’t get away from him - even though he didn’t know, at the time, that that was the reason he was doing it.

Fuck, but they’re terrible at this.

Before he can talk himself out of it, he’s reaching out, and then his hand is wrapped around the back of Steve’s neck and squeezing, gently. Steve just shuts his eyes and lets his head fall forward with a sigh.

Somehow, Tony expected this to be harder.

He doesn’t really know what he’s doing, but he does it anyway, leaning close and whispering, confidentially: “This is a really terrible idea,” and Steve huffs out a laugh, head hanging low, shoulders shaking under Tony’s hand.

“You’re good with those,” he says quietly. “Terrible ideas.” He looks up at Tony through his lashes with a teasing little smile that on anyone else, would be flirtatious, but which on Steve, is simply impossible. If Steve were anyone else, Tony would probably try to kiss him now.

He nearly does anyway, but stops himself at the last second, because this is, in fact, impossible.

And because Tony is trying to be a better person, he just grins back and gives Steve a little shake.

“You are spending way too much time with me,” he says, and lets Steve go.

But Steve grabs his hand, holds it there, against the side of his face, and Tony, after an endless three seconds of shocked paralysis, shapes his fingers around the curve of Steve’s jaw. He stares at his hand as though it’s doing this all without his instruction, and it’s another five, six seconds before he can get up the courage to look Steve in the face.

He’s smiling. Warm and real and shy... and Tony’s breath catches in his chest.

“I think I should be the judge of that, don’t you?” says Steve, quietly.

Tony swallows, hard, and tries to pull his hand away, but Steve’s not letting go.

And then Steve kisses him, and his brain shorts out.
It’s the second time this week, which cannot possibly be good for him. He’s going to end up having a stroke and--

Steve pulls away, looking stricken. “I…” he says uncertainly, “…I’m sorry, I…”

“No, no, shut up for a second,” Tony says quickly, grabbing hold of Steve’s shirt before he can flee in humiliated rejection. “Just... give me a second.”

Steve stares at him, eyes wide and anxious, brow furrowed, still tensed as if to flee at the first opportunity.

“This is a terrible idea,” Tony tells him again, and pulls him back in.

Steve’s mouth is - now that he’s present enough to enjoy it - Jesus. Hot. Soft. His hands, curled around the sides of Tony’s neck, are soft, too; no calluses, even. Tony wonders, idly, if that’s a side-effect of the serum. If Steve can feel the hum of the reactor, something of which Tony has suddenly become hyper-aware. If--

“I think I can hear you thinking,” Steve says, against his mouth. “I’m not an expert, but I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to focus on me.”

Fair enough. Steve’s hesitant at first, careful in a way that makes Tony’s chest hurt a little for reasons he’d prefer not to explore, but after a second or two he gets pushier, and Tony, who’s usually the pushy one, finds himself yielding without really even thinking about it. He likes Steve’s messy, careful, obviously-not-very-experienced kisses. In kissing, as in so much of life, enthusiasm counts for a lot.

But one of the things Tony loves about Steve is that he’s smart, is a scarily fast learner, is learning this with preternatural speed, probably taking cues from Tony; putting his weight into it, sliding curious fingers up into Tony’s hair, which was already a mess when they started and is probably a disaster now and oh, tongue.

“Mmf,” Tony hums encouragingly, and shivers when Steve’s hands get grabby, pulling just a little. Steve’s kisses have already gone from messy to intense, hot and overwhelming and wet. When Tony’s brain finally reboots, he has to make himself pull back, slowly, hands still fisted in the back of Steve’s t-shirt.

Steve’s cheeks are flushed, and his eyes are huge and dark, and his mouth is wet.

Tony, staring at him and trying to catch his breath, wants to ruin him.

“Oh,” says Tony, “okay, I can’t believe I’m the one saying this, but we should really take this elsewhere.”

Because there is, in fact, a “no sex in common areas” rule, which Steve enacted, and yeah, that is definitely what Tony meant.

For a second, Tony thinks Steve’s going to change his mind, but Steve just darts a look around the darkened living room - seriously, where are the other Avengers? Tony wonders, but really can’t be bothered to devote processing power to the question right now - and nods. “Okay,” he says, getting to his feet and offering Tony a hand up. Tony takes it, and Steve pulls him to his feet with barely any
effort, fast enough that Tony has to grab him for balance and cling for an embarrassing two and a half seconds. Steve grabs him around the waist.

“Are you okay?” he asks worriedly, and Tony looks up at him, points a stern finger into his face.

“Do not,” he says. “I am fine. Do not even.”

After a beat, Steve grins at him, face still pink and pleased and Jesus, Tony wants him.

“Come on,” he says, and lets Steve grab his hand and lead him away into the darkened hall.

***

Tony’s bed is ridiculous. It’s absurd. It’s something out of a magazine, at least in terms of size. The room itself is as messy as anybody who knows Tony would imagine, clothes discarded haphazardly and the sheets on the bed crumpled carelessly at the foot.

Not that any of that matters when Tony pulls him down onto the mattress.

He has another attack of wild uncertainty when Tony kisses him again, pulling him down and just *wriggling* under him and -

“Ow,” says Tony, going still, and Steve realizes, belatedly, *ribs, pain*, and pushes himself up on his hands.

“Are you all right?”

Tony lies there, taking shallow, careful breaths. “I hate everything,” he says to the ceiling. “This is a sign, isn’t it? The universe officially hates me and wants me to be miserable.”

Steve eases back down onto one elbow, keeping his weight off Tony’s torso, and lays a light, careful hand on Tony’s ribs. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly, “I forgot.” He shouldn’t have forgotten.

“It’s okay, it’s not your fault, I pulled you - it was reflex,” Tony tells him, looking almost embarrassed. He shrugs. “I like - I’ve been thinking about that,” he admits, eyes on the ceiling rather than Steve, “for a while.”

Steve settles down, leaving his hand where it is. Tony is warm against his side. “There’s no hurry.”

Tony’s face screws up in disgust. “Oh, don’t. That just makes it worse.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t - ‘there’s no hurry.’ Nobody ever means that. *I* don’t mean that. I wanted -”

“I know,” Steve says seriously, politely not looking at where Tony has drawn up his knee a little to hide the fact that he’s still hard. “So did I.” Overcome with shyness, but forging ahead because he’s going to have to say it sooner or later. “It’s probably better to work up to it, anyway.”

Tony freezes, and his eyes slowly track down from the ceiling to Steve’s face. “What?”

“I just-- I haven’t--”
Tony looks confused. “Haven’t what?”

Steve glares at him, sure he’s being facetious, and gestures between them. “I haven’t.”

Tony’s eyes widen, and he blinks again, looking vaguely dazed. “Well,” Tony says, and his voice is a little rougher than before in a way that makes goosebumps rise up along Steve’s arms, “I owe Bruce twenty bucks.”

“Tony!” Steve says, scandalized.

“Calm down, never mind, come here,” Tony says in a rush, and yanks at the front of Steve’s shirt. When Steve resists, Tony makes an impatient noise. “I can kiss you without injuring myself, I promise.”

With the immediate urgency gone - or at least, off the table for the moment - kissing Tony is just... nice. It’s slow and wet and a little dirty, because it’s Tony, but it’s nice all the same, and so is Tony’s hand, sweeping up and down his back, inching up under the hem of his shirt. Tony’s hands are rough. Steve didn’t expect to like that.

Tony moves again, leans up - and tenses, and Steve pulls away. “Ribs again?”

Tony looks pained. “Everything else, actually. I keep waiting for it.”

Steve nods knowingly - remembers from before, stupid fights and asthma and no money for doctors, how his ribs often ached for days; weeks; months. And worse, the anticipation, when just breathing wrong or reaching wrong could set it off, the way his entire body tensed up around the mere memory of pain...

Experimentally, he tucks his fingers under the small of Tony’s back, strokes fingertips along the smooth skin, the hard bars of muscle along the spine. Tony twitches a little, lets out a breath.

“Changed your mind? You know, there are a lot of other things we could--”

“Cracked ribs take six to eight weeks to heal completely,” Steve insists, considering Tony for a moment before tugging on the hem of Tony’s threadbare t-shirt. “Can I take this off?”

Tony gets weird at that, just a little hesitant, then lets go of Steve’s wrist where he’s grabbed it, clears his throat. “Okay,” he says, “just...”

It takes Steve a second to get it, and he licks his lips, meets Tony’s eyes, which are wide and flickering, and somehow he never really realized that Tony almost never goes without a shirt.

Tony squints at him for a long moment, then lets his hands fall to the mattress, gives a curt nod, eyes fixing somewhere above them. Steve pulls the shirt carefully up and off, with care for Tony’s ribs, sets it aside.

With the lights on, the arc reactor is a gentle glow, but it’s not the reactor that catches Steve’s attention - it’s the ring of rough scar tissue around its edges, and the sudden realization of its sheer size. Steve lays a hand on Tony’s chest, thumb and index finger forming a vee around the circle of light, careful not to touch. He’s seen the reactor - seen the spares, anyway. He’s held one in his hand, when Tony took him downstairs and showed him the safe where he keeps them and showed him
how to swap them out if something happens to the one Tony’s currently using. He didn’t think much
of Tony’s manner at the time - cool and clipped and matter-of-fact, with none of Tony’s usual
warmth and bluster - because at the time, they were still new to each other, still feeling around the
edges of what wasn’t quite a friendship yet.

Steve still remembers, though, the way his breath caught in his chest when Tony reached under his
shirt and uncoupled the reactor, pulled it out, then put it back in, the light flickering to life again with
a click-click-click; the way Tony tensed, and then relaxed, the breath going out of him with relief.
And even then, Tony didn’t lift his shirt up any higher than his belly.

Steve knows his anatomy, and now that he’s thinking about it, about the size of the reactor, and the
amount of space it must take up inside Tony’s body, what had to have been done in order to make
space--

“Are you okay?”

Steve looks up guiltily into Tony’s face, which is - complicated. Tony has one arm folded behind his
head, and he’s watching Steve with an expression that is either apprehension or concern or both.
After a second, his eyes flick away. “Sorry,” he mutters. “There’s a reason I--”

“Don’t apologize,” Steve says, more sharply than he meant. He takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I
shouldn’t... does it hurt?”

Tony looks back at him, his mouth twisting strangely, but he shakes his head. The hand lying on the
bed flaps vaguely. “Nerve damage.” He reaches for Steve’s hand, touches their fingers together to
the raised scar tissue surrounding the reactor. “Can’t really feel anything except pressure. I don’t
really notice it, most of the time.”

Steve can tell he’s only telling part of the truth, and wonders what the rest might be. There are so
many possibilities. He doesn’t ask, though. Their hands settle, together, over the light, casting strange
shadows under Tony’s chin.

“You’re taking this worse than Pepper,” Tony volunteers, trying to lighten things up. “Though in her
defense, she knew the details before we ever... and she’d seen it, too. I...” He sighs, heavily. “Sorry.
Not helping.”

“No, I - let’s stop apologizing for tonight,” Steve says, and Tony grins at him, obviously imagining
the kind of mileage he can get out of a promise like that.

Steve shakes his head, and then kisses him, light and soft, before sliding his hands underneath
Tony’s torso again.

“Relax,” he says, and digs in a little with his fingertips.

“Oh my god,” Tony says - groans, really - after a minute or two of massage, “oh my god, why didn’t
I think of that?”

“Well,” Steve says thoughtfully, reaching his hands up to get at the muscles under Tony’s shoulder
blades, “you’ve been kind of out of it. Besides, it’s not like you can give yourself a back massage,
especially when you can’t lie on your front.”

Tony throws an arm over his eyes. “You’re amazing. Keep doing that.”
Steve smiles to himself, and does.

“Are you sure we can’t have sex?” Tony asks later, voice slow and sleepy in the lowered lights.

“I told you, there’s no rush,” Steve says again, though it did take a while to get himself under control after half an hour of his hands all over Tony. Now he just feels warm and content, one arm, slung carefully over Tony’s chest. He thinks he can feel the faintest vibration of the reactor under his arm, but he might just be imagining it.

Tony lifts his head and gives him a dirty look. “You say that because you haven’t actually had sex yet and you don’t know what you’re missing.”

“And because I can wait,” Steve says, patiently. He settles a hand on top of Tony’s head, strokes it back. “It’s okay,” he adds. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Tony lets his head flop back onto the pillow. “You are too good to be real,” he says despairingly.

“And you’re better than you think you are.” Steve wonders why he said that. Maybe he’s been thinking about it for a while. Tony just gives him a funny, unreadable look and then, as if suddenly remembering, says:

“You know, Natasha and Bruce tried to stage an intervention on your behalf last week. Seemed to think I’d break you.”

Steve can’t help smiling, his face going a little red. “I had a similar conversation with Thor and Clint. And, um, Pepper.”

Tony laughs. “They’re probably right, you know,” he says, confidentially.

Steve shakes his head, tucking his face against Tony’s shoulder.

“But no, really,” Tony says, more serious than a moment ago. “I don’t...” His hand lands in Steve’s hair, petting carefully.

“Why are you so determined to assume the worst?” Steve asks. “You’re not usually so...”

*You usually leap before you look*, is what he’s thinking, *you’re usually so reckless*, which are qualities Steve admires but also finds alarming, sometimes.

“Usually I don’t care all that much,” Tony tells him, dismissively. It’s another one of those partly-true things - Tony isn’t careful, not in situations where he can control the variables, or thinks he can. Steve’s seen the video from when Tony was designing the Mark II. *Impatient* would be a better word, or even *careless*, in a pinch. At least when it’s only himself at risk.

“I don’t believe that,” Steve answers, softly. “And neither do you.”

Tony doesn’t seem to have any answer to that.

A minute or two later, he’s asleep, and Steve follows soon after.

***
Steve is still there when Tony wakes up, and Tony wonders what time it is. Usually Steve’s the first person awake, off to do his running/jumping-jacks/pushups/other frightening exercise that has no place in the hours before dawn and eleven o’clock. Tony knows this, because he actively anticipates seeing sweaty post-exercise Steve wander into the kitchen while Tony is still half-conscious and slumped over his coffee. It’s a nice way to start the day.

That he’s still here implies several things. For one, somebody else put the kid to bed last night, which could either mean that Loki will be cranky this morning or that he didn’t care at all and is currently on the couch with Bruce watching cartoons. Tony considers asking JARVIS what time it is, but sort of doesn’t want to wake Steve if he’s not already awake.

That Steve is still here might also mean that he thinks Tony will do something stupid (physically, emotionally or otherwise) if left unsupervised.

Tony decides he’s not awake enough for this existential bullshit. He shuts his eyes again.

“It’s after ten,” Steve’s voice says from behind him, and the arm around Tony’s waist squeezes a little, and preemptively answers Tony’s next question with: “I’ve been awake for a while. I asked JARVIS.”

“Oh Jesus,” Tony says, realizing that most of the others are probably awake and wondering where they are. “I am never going to hear the end of this.” He opens his eyes again. “And I didn’t even get laid! Oh, this is so unfair.” He pulls a pillow over his head.

Steve pulls it away, and Tony opens his eyes to Steve hovering over him, hair sleep-messy, expression fond. “I’ll protect you,” he says, mock-solemnly, and drops a kiss on Tony’s forehead, so sweet and sincere that Tony’s struck momentarily dumb. Steve rolls off the bed, comes around to sit on Tony’s side.

“Ready for breakfast?”

Tony is pretty much starving. He nods and sits up. “There better still be coffee left,” he says without thinking, and then groans quietly when he remembers that none of his friends want him to be happy and that there will be, therefore, no coffee.

“I believe there are waffles in progress, Sir,” JARVIS volunteers, and Steve grins at him.

“See? Waffles.”

“It’s not the same,” Tony grumbles, letting Steve pull him to his feet.

They’re almost to the door when there’s a soft, polite knock-knock-knock from the other side. “Hi?” says a voice, and it’s Loki. ‘Hi’ is his primary method of greeting these days, from “Hi!” (excited recognition) to “Hi,” (go away, Dora’s talking) to “Hi?” (where did you go?). Tony can’t decide if it’s cool or worrying that he’s figured out this vocabulary without any help.

“Coming, Shortstack,” Steve says, apparently not thinking that the kid might be confused to find him in Tony’s room. Loki’s probably not really old enough to understand the significance, anyway. Or maybe Steve doesn’t care, which is... a not-entirely-unpleasant thought.

He stops Steve before he can open the door, and pulls him around. “You know this is going to be
complicated, right?” Meaning: you know I’ll fuck this up, right? Because Steve’s Tony-to-English translator is almost as good as Pepper’s these days.

“Then we’ll deal with it,” Steve says calmly, and Steve is a liar, he’s nowhere near as calm as he sounds, but he still means it somehow.

Steve shakes his head fondly. “Tony. You don’t just stop caring about somebody because you might lose them.”

And Steve doesn’t just mean the kid.

“Sometimes you just have to believe that something will last.”

“I don’t.” It has to be said, because in Tony’s experience, things don’t - but Steve just watches him, steady and unflinching.

“Then I’ll believe it for the both of us.”

And Tony stares at him for a long moment, until there’s another little knock-knock-knock, and Steve tilts his head towards the door, face questioning.

Tony lets out a breath, nodding. “Okay.”

Steve smiles, and opens the door.

Chapter End Notes

The End! Hope you enjoyed.

I seriously had no idea what I was getting into with this fucking story, since much of it was obviously written in some kind of kidfic fugue state. As such, there are about 10,000 words of stuff that didn’t fit in this particular story (not that I’m pretending to anything so lofty as plot or structure or cohesion), but that I really wanted to write down because it was cracky or angsty or adorable or had naked Steve and/or naked Tony in it, so there will, probably, be more of this ’verse, including, but not limited to: babysitting fic, Darcy as an Au Pair, guilt-motivated shopping sprees at Toys R’ Us, and a field trip to Asgard.

Bog help me.

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