My Son, My Sun

by Wordsplat

Summary

Just before the events of Iron Man, a baby is left on Tony's doorstep. He wants nothing to do with it at first, but his time in Afghanistan changes his mind and Tony vows to become a better man for his son's sake.

Notes

This story begins before the events of Iron Man 1, meaning that for a little while, Tony is still his self-centered, party-hard, womanizing, pre-Afghanistan self. Beware of asshole behavior. Also, these first few chapters will technically speaking take place during the events of Iron Man 1 & 2 as well as The Avengers, but I skim over things that occur the same as the movies and write a lot about Tony's burgeoning relationship with Peter during the movie events, so I highly suggest you not skip these chapters, because they are not, I repeat not, a recap. There are more than a few changes, and they get bigger and more important as things move along.
Tony Stark never wanted children.

It wasn't that he didn't like them, not exactly, though he'd never been particularly fond of them either. It had more to do with his own childhood, his own insecurities, his own unresolved issues, all of which would interfere with the proper and healthy raising of a child.

Even if he was a stable and balanced person, which he knew full well he wasn't, children were schedule-oriented beings. Tony was not. He slept sporadically—almost never, if passing out at the workbench didn't count, which Pepper had informed him snottily on a number of occasions that it did not.

He rarely ate anything that wasn't coffee or alcohol, and of course he drank both in extreme excess. Come to think of it, he did everything in excess; women, gambling, building, swearing, you name it. How was he supposed to teach some snot-nosed kid things like self-control and manners and kindness when he didn't have any himself? He was sarcasm and rough edges, weapons and booze and sex.

He wasn't kid-friendly, and he didn't desire to be.

So he had no idea how to react when JARVIS informed him that someone had just left a baby at his front door.

At first, it didn't quite click. He thought JARVIS was being a snarky little twat as per usual, or Rhodey was playing a joke on him, or something. So he laughed, commented about JARVIS having a weird sense of humor, and went to open his front door without any expectation of actually seeing a baby.

But there it was.

It was very young and very small, the pink and wrinkled stage of life where everyone looked pretty much exactly the same, but the eyes...those were all Tony. They were the same hazel-flecked, coffee-brown, and were blinking up at him inquisitively. His nose had a distinctly un-Stark-like button quality, but then, that might have come with baby territory.

"What the fuck?"

And maybe he shouldn't curse around a baby, but then, that was just reason 4,792 why he should not have them. Also, Tony kind of figured the thing wouldn't exactly go repeating it anytime soon.

"JARVIS, who left this?" Tony demanded with a scowl, "Uh, it. Him. Her?"

Fuck if he knew what the thing's gender was. It had a blue blanket, but it wasn't as if the face was particularly male or female looking. Just...pinkish, and sort of smooth-looking, at least until the baby scrunched up it's nose, then it looked wrinkled and disgruntled.

"Do not start crying," he ordered.

The baby didn't seem keen on taking orders, because Tony's harsh voice only seemed to upset the baby more.

"Shit, I mean, don't cry please," Tony amended, trying to make his voice softer, a bit more soothing,
but the undertone of mild panic was still prevalent.

Which might have been why the baby started making noises. Not quite crying, but upset little hiccup-y sounds, a persistent sort of whimper that only made Tony panic more. He had absolutely zero idea how to comfort a baby, other than you were probably supposed to pick it up, and that was most definitely not happening.

"I have identified the presumed mother from the security footage, sir," JARVIS said over his growing panic attack, "Lydia Burnes, age 24. Current residence unknown, occupation, artist. You brought her to the premises nine months prior, after the BlueDot gallery opening you attended with Miss Potts. She does not own a license, nor is contact information listed on her website. This is all data available to me, sir. Shall I call Miss Potts?"

Oh god.

Pepper was going to flay him alive.

She'd warned him. To be fair, half the country had counted on this happening at some point, the way Tony went around. He'd always been careful, safe sex and all that jazz, but apparently, not safe enough. Tony remembered that gallery, a woman with an "L" sounding name.

She hadn't been particularly remarkable looking, but she'd been some kind of wild child artist, all fire and sass. They'd met at the opening of a gallery that displayed her work, something Pepper had dragged him to in order to expand "his" (her) art collection and impress upon their investors that Tony was a cultured and art-minded man.

Tony had been bored out of his skull until he'd met the artist. She was entirely unimpressed by both his wealth and fame, which, because Tony had never been one to turn down a challenge, only served to stoke his interest. They'd ended up in bed within hours, and though her looks were somewhat forgettable, he most certainly remembered her mouth.

In more ways than one.

"Yeah. Call Pepper."

Pepper is dead silent for almost a full minute, then begins shouting at him, full stop, for almost five, and nothing he said or did could get her to stop. After the shouting toned down, she gave a very tired, very aggravated sigh.

"Bring him inside, and-"

"I'm not picking it up!"

"Anthony Stark, so help me-"

"I don't want to drop it-"

"You're not going to-you know what, I'm not getting into this right now, just pick up the basket then and bring him in before some gutsy paparazzo snaps a picture."

Tony very carefully, very hesitantly, followed Pepper's instructions, carrying the basket by the handle, one hand under it, while the thing continued whimpering.

"Tony, for god's sake, I can hear him through the line, if you won't pick him up, try and calm him down at least."
"Calm down, baby," Tony told it, trying to maintain eye contact in order to impress upon the thing's small mind how serious he was, "It just keeps drooling. And whining."

"Well, the drool's not going to stop. The whining might if you picked him up."

"Pass."

"Tony-"

"Pass."

There was a sigh over the line, a crackly burst of static, and Pepper gave in. She was his pushy PA, and she knew him better than perhaps anyone alive, but that didn't mean they were friends, and that sure as hell didn't mean she could tell him what to do.

"Right. Well, I'm already on my way, so I should be there in a few minutes. You're going to want a paternity test of course, then we can go about trying to track down the mother, get her to sign a custody agreement so she can't go changing her mind in ten years, and-"

"You can't really think I'm keeping it," Tony laughed in spite of the utter un-funniness of the situation, and he could practically feel Pepper bristle.

"He could be your son-"

"I don't even know if it's a he, I just assumed cause there's this blue blanket-" Tony pointed out, but Pepper was not to be deterred.

"You can't tell me you honestly want nothing to do with him-"

"I honestly want nothing to do with it," Tony insisted, making a face, "My life's not exactly child-friendly, Pep."

"No one's ready for kids, not even people who think they are. You're just a little…less prepared than most."

"I still can't even remember what it's mom looks like! Besides, I can't raise a kid on my own. I drink too much and work a lot and I'm never around and-" Tony came to an abrupt stop, a cold, painful thought hitting him below the belt: *I'm too much like my father."

"Tony?" Pepper called, trying to get his attention, "Tony!"

"I'm not raising this thing, Pepper, I'm not," Tony decided then, his voice leaving no room for question or argument, and that was the end of it.

Tony paid Pepper triple overtime to hold onto the kid until it was all sorted out, because she was good with that sort of thing, and if it were anyone else the news would leak to the press. She was being stubborn about it though, refusing to let him give it up yet without "thinking this through". Tony had tried to push for just leaving it at a police station and being done with it, but Pepper had given him the single most withering glare he'd ever received in his life, so he'd allowed her to think he was considering it. She had people working to track down Lilly-Lyssa? Lyra? Whatever, the mother's-location. Pepper wanted him to get a paternity test; Tony absolutely refused.

He didn't want to know.

He wanted to forget.
So he did; he went about the rest of his week as per normal. He spent time in the lab, met with a couple investors, and, at the end of the week, went out to Vegas for some award ceremony he couldn't remember the point of. He ended up blowing it off to hit up the casino, deciding that potentially having a child was reason enough for some R&R, in the form of gambling with a pair of gorgeous brunettes.

Until, of course, Rhodes interrupted to hand him some award and remind him about the Jericho presentation.

After Rhodes ruined his roll-honeybear claimed he didn't blow on other men's dice-Tony got bored. He passed off the award to some guy in a Caesar costume and almost picked up a pretty looking reporter with a mouth, until he remembered the last woman he'd picked up with a mouth.

He got in the car without another word to her or to Happy.

Happy may have guessed something was up, but because he was Happy and he was awesome, didn't mention it. The drive back to Malibu was uneventful, and Tony found himself wishing he was a hell of a lot drunker. He spent the night in the workshop, doing anything he could to keep his hands busy. In the morning, Pepper shut down his music, questioned him about appointments, harangued him about making Rhodey and the pilot wait, then tried to get him to talk about the baby again. Tony ducked right out the door, which may or may not have been her plan, because Pepper may or may not have been a genius.

After the flight, during which he got Rhoddy gloriously drunk, he field-tested the Jericho in Kunar Province, some god awful, hell-hot place he never wanted to see again, ever. After the demonstration, he threw on Back in Black and nursed a scotch as they drove him back in the Funvee-yeah, that's right, fuck you, Rhodes-trying to forget he was here, forget what waiting back in America, forget everything, if he could.

Then there was a burst of gunfire and explosions. The soldiers were taken out one by one, and the blood was pulsed in his ears, eyes wide as he took in the warfare around him. His fingers itched for a gun, something to defend himself with; he'd never felt so utterly helpless in his life. He ducked out of the vehicle, stumbling through fire and smoke to get anywhere but there. He ended up scrambling for cover behind a rock, whipping out his phone, fingers darting over Rhodey's number, but not before a heavy, jet black bomb dug into the ground next to him.

Stark Industries.

The sleek, pointed logo was the last thing he saw before his world was nothing but a blistering blur of stifling heat and pain exploding like wildfire in his chest. He could still hear the echo of barked orders and gunshots in his ears, the sting of sand in his wounds as he bled into unconsciousness.

He drifted in and out of consciousness for a while, waking up from pain only to pass out again from too much pain. It was all a blurry, astronomically painful experience. He remembered very little, hazy flashes of a man he'd later come to know as Yinsen, flashes of blood and medical supplies and huddled, sweat-soaked faces, his own screams echoing in his ears for months to come. When he finally came to, really came to, he was still in pain, and more panicked and terrified than he'd ever been in his life. He and Yinsen talked briefly, their captors interrupted, he refused to build them the Jericho, and was water-boarded until he screamed.

They were sloppy, held him under longer than they should have, long enough for him to hit the brink of unconsciousness. He saw lights then, dancing around the edges of his eyes, and heard voices; a woman's soft, pleading voice for him to stay out of his father's study, a man's rough, alcohol-soaked laugh as he said it would put hair on his chest as he shoved the glass into his too-small hands, the
whimpers of an infant without a name.

He passed out.

When he woke, he had an idea.

He shook hands with his captor, pretending to give in, and gave a list of materials he'd need to build the Jericho. He had a month, maybe a little more, and he had a lot of work to do. His head spun, his chest ached, he was bruised and bleeding in more places than he could count, and he couldn’t stop thinking the same thought, over and over on loop.

_I need to get back to my son._

It was the wrong time for the sudden realization that this was something that mattered, something he _wanted_, but later he’d wonder if, without that experience, he would have ever realized it at all.

Weeks passed, weeks of secretive building and sloppy torture and learning to be a better person from a man named Yinsen. Once, Yinsen asked if he had a family, and Tony almost dropped his welding torch, because, god, he did. For the first time since he was seventeen years old, he actually had a family.

And his first thought had been to abandon it.

Tony’s resolve hardened, tempered as the palladium under his gloved fingertips. He’d been wrong, he knew that now. He’d been wrong about not wanting the baby, wrong about building weapons with nothing but a callous, unrepentant smile, wrong about the way he wanted to live his life. He was a drunkard playboy with the blood of millions on his hands, but he wanted to be more than that.

So he finished development of a miniaturized the arc reactor and detached himself from the car battery, eventually using the reactor to power a prototype metal suit that enabled his escape. He tried his level best to save Yinsen, but in the end, yet another life slipped through his fingers.

_Don’t waste your life._

He wouldn’t, he refused to. He made his escape into the desert, fueled by thoughts of a baby he’d never even held, a baby with eyes that mirrored his, a baby with small hands and chubby cheeks and a button nose, with a voice he’d only heard once. Rhodey found him, brough him home, helped him as he hobbled off the plane. Pepper and Happy were waiting, Pepper with red-rimmed eyes, Happy with as close to tears as Tony had ever seen the composed man.

"Your eyes are red," Tony sniffed, giving Pepper a once-over, "Few tears for your long-lost boss?"

"Tears of joy," she countered easily, her lips tugging into a bittersweet smile, "I hate babysitting."

"About…that," he was careful with his words, there were too many people hovering around not to be cautious, "Remember what I told you not to do? Do it."

Thank god for Pepper, who didn’t even miss a beat at his muddled phrasing.

"I already did," she smiled softly, and Tony’s heart stopped, his entire _life_ stopped to wait for this answer, "He is."

No one else knew what they were talking about. No one could have known, because his face was impassive, the poker face he’d perfected for his first interview at age four, but in that moment, Tony came the closest he ever had to breaking down in public.
I have a son.

Tony Stark never wanted children.

Until he did.

He shut down weapons production immediately. He debated telling them in his speech that he didn't want that to be SI's only legacy, that it wasn't the future he wanted for his son, but was smart enough to keep his head on straight and know that he needed more time to settle into the fatherhood schtick before he went about announcing it.

He debated telling Obie, a father figure of his own, but decided against it after Obie clearly disapproved of the new direction he was taking the company. Again, there'd be time for that later. All Tony wanted to do now was go get—meet, really—his son.

Pepper brought the baby to him. Tony was supposed to be resting at home, but waiting for Pepper to arrive with his son made him anything but restful. He paced, tapping his fingers against every available surface, thinking about names and supplies he'd need and all the ways he'd have to reorganize his life.

But he could do it, and he would.

When Pepper returned, he'd made up his mind.

"Peter Parker Stark," he announced, all but ambushing her by the door.

"Christ, Tony," she held her free hand to her heart, "I've told you not to startle me like that."

"You kept me waiting," Tony shrugged, already moving on from her to his son, bending down to peer into the carseat Pepper was carrying, "Hey there, Peter. You like that?"

"Peter Parker Stark?"

Tony nodded, not taking his eyes off his drooly, wide-eyed baby boy. Peter looked older, of course, babies did a lot of growing in three months. He seemed more filled-out, more alert, and he had a bit of light brown fuzz on his head now. He waved a finger at him, letting Peter curl his little fingers around Tony's own. The grip made something grow warm and tight in his chest.

"It's a good, strong name," Tony explained to Pepper, still with eyes only for Peter, "No weird celebrity name, no old man, been-in-the-family-since-the-dawn-of-time name. It's simple, easy, and it rolls off the tongue."

"You've thought about this," she looked at him curiously, which, to be fair, he rarely gave anything more than a second's thought.

"Three months," Tony answered lightly, not letting the weight of the statement sink in before speaking up again, "Got any other baby supplies for me, or am I going shopping?"

"I've got the basics," Pepper put the carseat down and shrugged off the diaper bag slung over one shoulder, "But I'm sure you'll want more."

They were quiet a moment, Tony drinking in the sight of his son, the sight he'd been literally living for, with fervent hope and deep adoration. Then, in spite of how he'd tried to bypass it, Pepper asked gently,
"Three months?"

"I had time and reason to rethink my priorities," Tony answered simply, not ready to talk about it anymore than that, and Pepper seemed to understand, "And Peter is my priority."

"I'm glad, Tony," she smiled softly, then, with a hint of humor to lighten the mood, "Would like help holding him, or do you think you can manage?"

"Is that sass I'm hearing, Miss Potts?" Tony tore his gaze from Peter long enough to give her a baleful sort of look, and she just smirked, "I am perfectly capable of holding my son, and I will do so soon. No, now. No more waiting, ever, I should be doing this, now."

He was mostly talking to himself, babbling a bit at the end, convincing himself to reach forward. He carefully scooped his hands under Peter, one hand careful to mind his neck, the other behind his back.

He was a bit hot from all the blankets, with smooth, somewhat clammy skin. He clasped him to his chest regardless, mindful of the reactor and it's bumpy edges, anything that might disturb the baby. He rocked on his knees a bit, lightly, gentle as could be. Thin, fuzzy hair tickled his cheek as Tony rested his head against Peter's.

Pepper was about ready to melt into the ground at how adorable they looked, but Tony didn't take notice of any world outside the warm, tiny bundle of pink skin and blue blankets in his arms.

"What do you think, little man?" Tony murmured, "Peter Stark has a nice ring, doesn't it?"

The baby made a gurgling sort of noise, and Tony smiled bright as the sun.

"Yeah. Yeah, sounds good, huh?"

He pulled his arms back a little, enough to look at Peter's face again. The boy just blinked up at him, not cautious, but not overly enthusiastic either, simply…content. Peaceful. He yawned a bit groggily, an squeaky, adorable sound Tony committed to memory on the spot, then managed to edge a thumb into his mouth.

Tony had sucked his thumb until he was four.

Something in Tony ached at that, ached in memory, in hope, in love. He kissed Peter's forehead before holding him against his shoulder again, not putting him down for hours after his arms began to ache from the weight.

He helped Pepper with what he could one-handed, and they slowly moved the supplies inside. She had the basics—a collapsible crib, a car seat, a stocked diaper bag, plenty of formula—but she'd been right, he wanted more, was already mentally cataloguing all the different things he wanted and how he planned to improve on them.

There were plenty of guest rooms he could turn into a nursery—it was a Malibu mansion, after all—even one close enough to Tony's room to hear a baby's cry, but Tony wasn't comfortable putting the crib anywhere but his room. Once he dismissed Pepper, he gave Peter the grand tour.

"JARVIS, you up?"

"For you, sir, always."

"Good. As I'm sure you've collected, this is Peter Parker Stark," Tony stroked a thumb over Peter's
cheek, "And he's your new number one priority, above even me, you understand? Primary objective, JARVIS, is his safety. Anything happens with him, I know about it. You got me?"

"Of course, sir."

"We're opening a new project file, indexed under his name. Pepper'll be back with the physical results of the paternity test, I'll want that scanned and committed to file. Also, I'm going to give you a list in a minute, I want you to go through customer reviews on all the parenting websites you can find and order me the best of all of these items using the black Amex with the false name, priority shipping, then keep copies of the receipts for these items in the Peter folder. I want to be able to go back and see what I'm buying for him, what he likes, where to get it again."

"As you wish, sir."

"Good. Go with a blue and green color scheme, and let's start with a crib, a changing table, a carseat, one of those baby bouncer things—actually, make it two—a stroller, one of those things you can strap on and it holds the baby while you walk, a high chair, the top fifty recommended children's books for Peter's age, the top fifteen recommended parenting books, top ten children's psychology books, let's see, what else we got here…"

"Clothes, sir?"

"Eh, not trusting your judgment on that one, JARV," Tony decided, "I'll do that later, Pep's got plenty of baby clothes jammed into the diaper bag for now—oh, throw a diaper bag on the list, the one she brought is an eyesore, and—"

Peter gummed his shoulder, and Tony's train of thought was temporarily derailed as he softened, observing his son's cuteness.

"And, sir?"

"And future note, don't interrupt me when I'm observing the perfection I've created, JARVIS," Tony huffed sarcastically.

"Of course, sir," the AI replied in a tone that implied it would have rolled it's eyes if it had any.

"And throw in a handful of pacifiers. I never used them, but who knows. Also, more bottles, Pep got the cheap ones."

"I doubt Miss Potts thought she would be caring for a child so suddenly, or for so long," JARVIS pointed out, and Tony nodded.

"Right. Order her flowers, chocolates, the works, have it delivered. Also, remind me to give her a bonus, an astronomical one."

"Noted, sir," JARVIS replied, this time without a trace of sarcasm.

"Project Peter is to be saved to the personal server, JARVIS," Tony added, "Not sure who to trust at this point, so let's play it safe with a solid nobody."

"That seems wise."

"Aren't I always?"

The gear arrived in less than two days, and though Tony made sure to have Pepper on lookout, there
was no media story about Tony Stark ordering baby stuff. They bashed him relentlessly for his decision about the company's new direction, but then, he'd known they would.

He hadn't made the decision for them.

He'd made it for himself and for Peter, and he was standing by it. He spent the next two days reading every book he'd ordered from cover to cover, between feedings and diaper changes and shared naps. He already had JARVIS prowling the interwebs and keeping him informed about all developments on the childcare front, and by the end of the reading binge he considered himself as informed as he'd ever be without proper firsthand experience.

Though his decision to keep Peter didn't waver, those first few days were nothing if not awkward and difficult, and Tony was forced to deal with a number of unpleasant realities he hadn't quite prepared himself for. Part of it was a mental adjustment, shifting from gears from fast and furious playboy Tony, to slow and cautious father Tony. He wanted to change, but that didn't necessarily mean it was easy, didn't mean there were nights he wanted to go out and drink and gamble and fall into bed with some lusty blonde and forget everything.

But then Peter would grasp his finger or flash him a gummy smile or even just look at him with those eyes, nothing but pure adoration and trust, and he lost any desire to be anywhere else. If anything, it was Peter who helped Tony, not the other way around; Tony had never felt so loved in his life. It was new, but it was wonderful, and Tony wouldn't have traded it for anything.

In spite of this, they had their bumps.

His first diaper change was, frankly, a traumatic experience. It involved piss on his shirt and shit hitting the fan, unfortunately both metaphorically and literally, and Tony was never, ever going to get over it. Feedings were difficult too, since Peter seemed to only ever want bits and pieces of a bottle at a time, never quite getting full and therefore pretty much constantly hungry. Hungry meant whiny, whiny meant eating less, which meant being hungrier, which meant being whinier, until he was finally hungry enough to drink the whole thing. It wasn't a fun cycle, but it was one Tony eventually learned to navigate.

After finishing his reading and once he finally began to feel just the littlest bit comfortable in the role of parent, Tony gave Rhodey a call. He intended to invite him over for a drink next time he got leave, hoping to introduce his best friend to Peter. Before he could drop a hint about it however, Rhodey realized he wasn't calling to say he'd resume making weapons, and told Tony he needed to get his head on straight.

Tony hung up, and Rhodey didn't call back.

Tony adjusted to Peter's presence faster than he thought he would. He'd been prepared to have periods of regret, of second-thoughts, but they didn't come. There were rough times, certainly, sleepless nights where no amount of cajoling or bouncing would soothe Peter's wails, endless diapers Tony would never enjoy changing, fussy moods where he refused to drink his bottle then cried about being hungry for hours. It was hard, yes, and there were times Tony wanted to pull his hair out, but he never found himself actually regretting his decision.

Peter was worth every minute.

Peter, with his gummy smile and pudgy fingers and wiggly toes. Peter, who giggled when Tony crossed his eyes and always reached for Tony's finger when he saw it and watched Tony like he was a god, a hero, the end all and be all of his world, brown eyes wide in wonder and pure, unadulterated love.
Tony didn't part from Peter if he could help it. They had tummy time on the playmat like all the books suggested, but even then Tony didn't walk away, just laid down in front of Peter and made faces, waggled his fingers, crossed his eyes. Peter gurgled and giggled and made grabby hands at him in turn, able to hold his head up enough now that he could see Tony cooing at him.

Peter couldn't quite roll over yet, only just barely four months old, but he gave it a valiant effort. Tony talked him through it, talked to him constantly, about anything and everything just so Peter could hear his voice, feel his presence. It was a somewhat silly idea, but Tony wanted to impress upon Peter that he was here, not just physically like his father been, but invested. Emotionally present, to borrow a phrase from Parenting Book #4.

They did a lot of reading, too, something Peter seemed very interested in, thought that may have just been the colorful pages of the books. Tony was impatient at first over having to read the same books again and again, but eventually he grew to like it, got into using funny voices and letting Peter turn the pages, making up a different story since Peter turned the pages too fast for Tony to read them.

What Peter loved most, and what never failed to soothe him, even at his fussiest, was baths. He loved the water, could sit contently in his little baby tub chair for hours if Tony let him. He never whined when Tony washed him or shampooed his hair, just splashed at the water gleefully and grabbed at his rubber ducks.

In fact, Peter was making attempts to grab at pretty much everything, which prompted Tony to baby-proof as best he could. Considering the baby couldn't crawl yet he kept it simple for now, mostly just putting things out of reach, making a note to hire someone to give the place the works once he went public with Peter's existence. Which he intended to do soon, though not quite yet. He had other plans first, plans that he would feel much more comfortable executing if he knew Peter wasn't something enemies would know to target.

In the meantime, he carried Peter in his arms whenever he could, and in the carrier he strapped to his chest when his arms grew tired. Sometimes, when he didn't feel like losing that skin to skin connection quite yet, he just moved to the couch, letting gravity do the work for him while Peter lay against his chest. Sometimes he'd let the tv lull them both to sleep, sometimes he'd read to Peter, but more often he'd work on the Mark II designs on his StarkPad.

He had plans for the Mark II. Those bastards had his weapons, and they were being used against soldiers, soldiers he'd spent his life trying to help protect. There was no accountability anymore, and if no one else would step in, he would; he had a son that was going to grow up in this world after all, and Tony would be damned if he wouldn't do his level best to make it the best possible world for Peter he could.

He worked on the plans whenever possible. It was pretty much the only thing he did outside of spend time with Peter; all other work was abandoned while he completed the Mark II. When he finished the schematics and had to actually start work in the lab, he cleared out a large space in the workshop and built a solid, bulletproof-glass wall of defense around it. He had JARVIS specifically lock it so that Dum-E, Butterfingers, and You were all prohibited access; they pouted, but Tony wasn't letting the often clumsy robots anywhere near his still fragile infant.

It may have been a little excessive, but his work was dangerous and his son was precious. He set up one of the baby bouncers in there, and let Peter giggle to himself while he worked. He was aware of how lost in his work he got, and had JARVIS set to permanently remind him if he didn't check on Peter every twenty minutes.

He couldn't go five without looking over his shoulder.
He could see Peter from every angle of the workshop, which was the point, and thankfully Peter seemed perfectly happy to watch Tony work, gumming on his toys or playing with the rattles on the bouncer. They were noisy, but Tony liked it; he didn't have his music playing, too wary of damaging infant ears, so the rattles reassured him of Peter's continued well-being even with his back turned.

Days became weeks that became a month, and Tony couldn't remember how he lived without this.

Peter was sitting up all by his little self now—admittedly, only for a few seconds or so, but Tony was blisteringly proud nonetheless. He was also ridiculously happy to see Peter start rolling over, pushing himself off his tummy and onto his back. He couldn't quite manage to get back over, but when he seemed frustrated Tony just blew raspberries on his tummy until he giggled wildly and forgot about it.

He babbled constantly now, rarely seemed to stop, which Pepper declared made any doubts that Peter was Tony's child zero. No real words yet, though Tony kept up a nice stream of "Da da da da da" every chance he could. He turned his head at his name now too, so Tony tried to say it as often as possible. Peter also loved music, though the one thing Tony refused to buy was baby music. He kept it low-key, no blaring rock guitars or thumping basses, but played regular music for Pete, who clapped and smiled and babbled along to the sound. His grasp was getting stronger too, almost able to hold his bottle up on his own at this point.

He was sleeping through the night most nights, which Tony appreciated greatly. It helped that they'd established a bedtime routine as the books suggested. He gave Pete a warm bath, read him his two favorite books, then rocked him while humming various ACDC tracks, because the boy needed to know his basics even if his eardrums couldn't afford to hear them yet. He put Peter in the crib when he was drowsy—something Parenting Book #7 had suggested, so he learned to self-soothe—and stayed in the room, either reading in bed or working on schematics on the StarkPad until he was certain Peter had fallen asleep, not just stopped crying.

He did all the testing work for the Mark II after Peter was down, because despite the bullet-proof glass, he wasn't comfortable with his son being in the same room when he ran his tests. God forbid a repulsor blast manage to shatter the glass, send it crashing down…

Tony shook his head, such thoughts making his skin crawl.

It was one such night that Pepper dropped by while he was testing a gauntlet.

"I've been buzzing you, did you hear the intercom?" she deposited a coffee on his desk and sliding over a package of files.

"Pete's sleeping, I shut it off," Tony answered distractedly, flexing his hand to see the gauntlet reach, "What's up?"

"You can't keep putting Obadiah off, Tony, he hasn't seen you since you came back. It's been almost a month, he's getting insistent."

"Right," Tony hummed, thinking a moment, then, "I'll put Pete's stuff in a back room, send him over in an hour."

"I thought you said you were done making weapons," she looked pointedly at the glowing light in his palm, the metal wrapped around his arm.

"It's just a flight stabilizer," Tony waved her concern off, hitting the power-up button, "It's completely harmless."
He aimed it at a wall to prove his point, and the resulting blast of energy sent him flying into the wall behind him.

"Okay," he groaned, "Didn't expect that."

Pepper winced, helped him up and get disentangled. While Pepper let Obie know Tony was free to see him in an hour, Tony went and cleared out all of Peter's gear. It wasn't as bad as he'd thought it'd be; he'd bought the absolute top of the line items of course, but not actually all that much. There weren't that many toys, just lots of books, but most of them were kept in their bedroom anyway. It was the playmat and high chair he needed to move, along with a handful of toys and making sure all the bottles were put away in case Obie felt the need to wander into the kitchen.

The meeting went about as well as Tony had expected. Obie had been in New York recently, talking to the board of directors, and that could only mean bad things. Tony himself had been supposed to go, but he'd told Obie he was just doing what he'd told him to, lying low. He didn't regret it, it was time much better spent with Peter, but that didn't mean he wasn't pissed the board was filing an injunction.

They claimed post-traumatic stress, which, to be fair, he had announced a halt on weapons development and then promptly stayed locked inside for the next month, so yeah, he could see how that looked PTSD-y.

But still.

Pissed.

Obie of course wanted to bring the arc reactor tech to the board to appease them, and Tony of course denied him. He made a quick exit soon after, trusting Pepper to usher him out post haste. Soon as Tony was down the stairs, he questioned JARVIS.

"Peter's fine?"

"Young sir is sound asleep."

"Good. Note for the future, if I'm with Obie, or anyone else who doesn't know about Pete, say there's a project going wrong in the shop, don't mention Pete or anything baby-related."

"Of course, sir."

He spent another few hours doing flight work-ups and rendering the rest of the aesthetic parts of the armor now that he had the functions working how he wanted. He checked the time—Pete would be up at seven on the dot, no chance of sleeping in with that one—and figured he could afford one quick test flight before heading to bed.

Conclusion? It was terrifyingly awesome.

When he returned he iced his head and went to inspect the package Pepper had left him earlier, unwrapping it to reveal a glass case containing his first arc reactor, the one he'd had her change. It was encased in silver plating now, with the inscription, Proof that Tony Stark has a heart, a picture of Peter he'd taken a few weeks ago printed out and taped over the center.

Tony rubbed at his eyes, which were clearly only bleary with sleep, nothing else.

The next night he was rendering the fixes he'd made after the flight test when the something the tv announcer was saying caught his attention.
"-red hot carpet right here at the Disney concert hall where Tony Stark's third annual benefit for the firefighter's family fund has become the place to be."

"I don't recall turning down an invite for that," Tony frowned, "JARVIS?"

"I have no record of an invitation, sir."

"-hasn't been seen in public since his bizarre and highly public press conference. Some claim he's suffering from post-traumatic stress and has been bed-ridden all these weeks. Whatever the case may be, no one expects an appearance from him tonight."

Tony scowled at the screen, already considering it. He may be a father, but that didn't mean he wasn't the same guy he'd always been, and he'd never been one to do the expected. Peter was already down early, Pepper was doing work upstairs, he could been in and out long before she was supposed to leave for the night, and JARVIS would alert him if Peter woke up…

"Render complete, sir."

The gold, shiny image on the screen spun for him, and Tony gave it consideration.

"Little ostentatious, don't you think?"

"What was I thinking? You're usually so discrete."

"Tell you what," Tony glanced over at his Roadster, "Throw a little hot rod red in there."

"Yes, that should help you keep a low profile."

"I really need you adjust your sarcasm levels."

"Render complete."

"I like it," Tony nodded, "Fabricate and paint it."

"Initiating automated assembly. Estimated completion time is five hours."

"Don't wait up for me, honey."

Tony told Pepper he was stepping out, and she gave him a strange look but didn't ask too many questions, since she'd been trying to get him to do so for weeks. He changed into a nice tux and hopped in his favorite car, hitting the road and burning rubber on his way out.

Obie's surprised face was well worth it. After surprising as many people as he could, Tony made his way through the crowd and over to the bar. God, he hadn't a had a drink in weeks; he hadn't wanted to do so around Peter, but a little nightcap couldn't hurt, and he'd be long sober by the time he returned home. An off-putting man in a suit approached him, an Agent Coulson of Strategic something for something and something Division approached him, rattling off something about how Tony needed to be debriefed. He nodded to whatever the guy said before being ambushed again, by the blonde reporter he'd abandoned that night in Vegas.

Her name escaped him. She reminded him, he made it a point to forget it again immediately, because his brain was frankly much more devoted to other things. At least, it was until she showed him pictures of his weapons, pictures taken just yesterday of StarkIndustries shipments in Gulmira.

The town Yinsen had been from.
Tony abruptly excused himself to accost Obie, who shrugged him off with a wide grin to the press as he told Tony he was naïve, that Obie himself had been the one to lock Tony out of the company for his own good. Furious and betrayed, Tony started staying up later and later, perfecting his armor and watching news about Gulmira and its tyrants, an organization known as the Ten Rings, late into the night.

Less than a week after Obie's words, Tony asked Pepper to watch Peter while he went out. He'd liked to do it at night while Peter was sleeping, but the attacks were during the day, and he could get to Gulmira and back in half a day, max. Pepper didn't like his sudden secrecy about where he was going, asking question after question, and insisted that she wasn't a babysitter, that she didn't enjoy kids all that much, but Tony deflected, asked her to do this one thing for him.

Eventually she agreed, and Tony was gone.

He took out the people terrorizing Gulmiran citizens and destroyed all of his weapons he could find. He ran into trouble on the way back, interference from the military that warranted a call from Rhodey, which warranted explaining the truth to Rhodey. Fortunately, he made it out just fine, though the suit was going to need a hell of a repair job.

Unfortunately, Pepper caught him taking off the armor.

They had a shouting match, Pepper berating him for making such dangerous, irresponsible decisions when he had Peter to look after, and Tony coming back with the fact that he was doing this for Peter. He explained what he was doing, that SI was dealing under that table and that he needed to find and destroy his weapons before anyone else got hurt, needed to create a better legacy for Peter and himself, than the one he'd inherited from Howard.

She almost quit on him, insisting she'd rather quit than watch him kill himself over this, but he pushed back, maintaining that he knew in his heart that this was right. She gave in, and he sent her to retrieve the files he needed from Obie's computer while he reunited with Peter.

"Miss me, buddy?" Tony hoisted Peter up into a hug, and Peter clasped his hands around Tony's neck as far as they'd reach.

"Aghaba!" Peter babbled happily with wide smile.

"Yeah, I bet you did. I'm sorry little man, Daddy had some work to do today, but I'm gonna make it up to you, I promise. How about some reading time? Just you, me, and Thomas the tank engine."

They read until Peter got hungry, and just when he'd settled on the couch to feed Pete his bottle, Pepper called.

"Think you can hold the bottle?" Tony chuckled at Peter, "Not yet, huh? Soon, little man, soon. If you'll be kind enough to budge that arm of yours, I can get my pho-"

Before he could answer it, before he could even finish his sentence, there was a ringing in his ears and he stopped cold. Peter was at angle in his lap that he stayed put though Tony's arms went lax, but the bottle dropped from Tony's hands to the floor.

"You're better at keeping secrets than I thought, m'boy."

Tony knew that voice, that rumbling chuckle, and he didn't need to see the man holding a sonic paralyzer to his ear to know who was standing behind him. His mouth went dry as he looked into Peter's wide, confused eyes. He'd had many terrifying moments in his life, most of the top contenders recently, but this shattered the competition by a long shot.
It wasn't fear for himself, but fear for his son that left him absolutely gutted.

"I have to say, of all the things I expected of you, this wasn't one," Obie—Obadiah, never Obie, never again—gave another dark chuckle, "Having a baby to deal with wasn't in the plan, but then, you clearly have problems sticking to plans, don't you?"

Peter was starting to fuss, and Obadiah reached a hand toward him.

Tony wanted to scream.

All that left his lips was the beginnings of a "no", just an "n" sound, raspy and choked. Obadiah was touching his son, cradling the boy's head as he eased him off Tony's lap and onto the couch. Tony wanted to move, to snatch Peter back, even just to curl his fingers enough to hold onto Peter's hand, something, but the paralysis was still too strong, and Peter's hand slipped away.

"Don't make those eyes at me boy, I'm not so vile as to kill an infant. Besides," he cocked his head in thought, "I'm sure there will be plenty of people willing to pay high prices to raise a Stark child… after your tragic death, of course."

No. No, no, no, he hadn't fought torture and captivity only to abandon Peter like this. He hadn't, he couldn't. He ached to move, but the only thing he could manage was slightest twitch of his fingertips.

"You know, when I ordered a hit on you-

He'd suspected, but fuck if that wasn't another punch to the gut.

"-I worried that I was killing the golden goose, but you see," Obadiah pressed a silver device up against the arc, "It's just fate that you survived. That you had one last golden egg to give."

With that, he yanked, and Tony's body arched forward as the reactor was plucked from his body, still glowing like the metaphorical golden egg.

"Tony, you fool," Obadiah sneered, "Did you really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you? You father helped give us the atomic bomb. Now what kind of world would it be today if he was as selfish as you?"

He ripped the cords connecting the reactor out, and Tony let out a hiccupping gasp. To his side, Peter was trying to roll, trying to see, but if nothing else, Tony was thankful that he couldn't.

"Oh, Tony," Obadiah murmured, "This? This is your ninth symphony. A masterpiece."

He settled on the couch, an arm around Tony in a bizarre, invasive sense of closeness. Tony could almost get his hand to twitch now, and he longed to reach for Peter; he resisted, knowing that if he did so, Obadiah would see, and that would seal any possibility of their survival. Tony worried about Peter rolling off the couch while Obadiah kept talking, about the future of weapons with arc technology at the heart, and it wasn't until Obadiah mentioned killing Pepper that Tony's attention was once again caught.

But he was already leaving.

It was 37 more seconds until he had the motor function to stand, each one worse and longer than the last. It was more of a slump when he could finally move, but it was enough for him to carefully, painstakingly move Peter from the couch to the ground, kissing him on the forehead before heading for the elevator. Peter began to wail as he left, but he couldn't afford to stay if he wanted to live long
enough to comfort him again.

He lost his energy in the elevator, and when the doors opened to his lab, he had to crawl to get the reactor Pepper had given him, the one in the glass box. Dum-E handed it to him when he couldn't make it, and Tony had never been prouder of his beloved bot. He smashed the glass and slammed the reactor into his chest, just in time for Rhodey to burst in through the doors and roll him over.

"Peter," he gasped, clutching Rhodey's jacket desperately.

"Pepper? She's with some agents, they're-"

"Peter," Tony insisted, still gasping, "Baby, upstairs."

"I thought I heard something upstairs, figured I was crazy. What the hell are you doing with a baby? Is that why there's a picture of one on your new react-?"

"Help me up," Tony interrupted to grab at him, using Rhodey as leverage to hoist himself up. He'd forgotten about the picture on the new reactor, and he peeled it off, tucking it into his pocket, "Explain later, get me to him. What were you…about Pepper?"

"She and five agents are on their way to arrest Obadiah."

"That's not gonna be enough," Tony shook his head, "I need…fuck, 'm asking a lot, but I need you to watch after Peter, I've gotta go after, after them, Obadiah's got…they're not prepared."

"You're asking me to babysit the kid you didn't think to tell me you had?"

"Time, essence," Tony waved a hand insistently.

Rhodey nodded then, giving him the benefit of the doubt and helping him over to the armor station before going upstairs to get to Peter. Every cell in Tony's body wanted to go after him, but he knew he couldn't, not until he took care of Obadiah.

Not until he was sure that bastard didn't have the hands to touch his son with ever again.

The suit was difficult to maneuver with the reduced-power reactor, but Tony managed. The resulting battle was lengthy, rough, and destructive, but ended with Obadiah's electrocution and Tony's painful but continued existence, so all things considered it went about as well as he could have hoped.

"Iron Man, huh?" Tony observed the next day, flicking through the paper before his press conference while Pepper tended to the scrapes on his face. He had ten minutes left until camera time, "Not technically accurate, the suit's a gold-titanium alloy, but it's kind of evocative, the imagery. What d'you think, Petey?"

Tony reached down to the car seat at his feet, letting Peter grasp his finger. Peter babbled happily, though he reached both hands out in a grabby motion for Tony to hold him.

"Daddy still needs a few more band-aids, Peter," Pepper told the baby seriously, pressing another to the gash on Tony's forehead, "Then he'll hold you."

"Aunty Pepper's a slave-driver," Tony fake-whispered to Peter conspiratorially.

"Here's your alibi," the agent from name-as-long-as-fuck division informed him, passing him a notecard.
Apparently, he'd been on some yacht having a party. There was nothing about Stane, and the agent informed him it'd been handled. Tony complained that the bodyguard story was flimsy, and was assured that this was not the agent's first rodeo.

Eventually, Tony picked Peter up, held him tight against his hip, and walked onstage.

Every camera in the room flashed, every reporter instantly began talking.

"Ah ah ah," he waved his free hand, "Patience is a virtue, or so I'm trying to teach my son."

A thousand more questions, as expected, all of which Tony ignored. He continued talking, knowing from experience they would fall silent to hear him.

"I've prepared a statement, so I won't be taking any questions, not that that's ever stopped you from asking, but hey, a man could dream," Tony adjusted his hip, taking Peter's hand in his, "This little guy's name is Peter Parker Stark. He's five months old, and he is 110% mine. The mother has made the decision not to be in his life, so no, there won't be any surprise videos of elopements in Hawaii or fiery custody battles on the Dr. Phil show."

There was a smattering of nervous, surprised laughter, and Tony continued.

"As for the other reason you're here, there's been speculation that I was involved in the events that occurred on the freeway and, uh, rooftops of-"

"I'm sorry," one of the reporters interrupted, not looking sorry at all, "But do you honestly expect us to believe that was a bodyguard in a suit?"

He recognized this one; the blonde he'd turned down in Vegas, the snoop that had found him at Disney concert hall to show him pictures of Gulmira. The fact that she'd given him a heads up that probably saved his life was outweighed heavily by his intense dislike of her everything else.

"A bodyguard that conveniently appeared," she continued, "Despite the fact that you're historically known for despising and refusing bodyguards."

"I know that it's confusing," he gave her a pitying sort of sneer, "But it's one thing to question the official story, it's another thing entirely to make wild accusations, or insinuate that I'm a superhero-"

"I never said you were a superhero," she cocked a smug eyebrow at him.

"Didn't…? Well, good," Tony fumbled, just a bit, "Because that would be outlandish, and uh… fantastic. But I'm just not the hero type. Clearly. With this laundry list of character defects, all the mistakes I've made, largely public-"

"One of them recently," she smirked at Peter, and Tony about lost his shit.

"Peter is not, was not, and will never be a mistake, and if you insinuate so again you'll never find another day's work in your life," he shot back without hesitation, voice thin and cold as ice as he rubbed a thumb over Peter's hand soothingly.

"It's okay, Tones," Rhodey leaned to whisper reassuringly in his ear, "Just stick to the cards, man."

"Yeah," Tony nodded, holding them up to read from with his free hand, "Cards. Right. Truth is…"

He looked out at the reporters, waiting on his every word. He looked at the blonde, her pursed, displeased lips pressed into a thin line, though she hung on his words just like the rest of them. The
woman who thought his son was a mistake, who thought he didn't have what it took to be a hero.

"...I am Iron Man."

The room exploded, but he just flashed a smug grin of his own in the blonde's direction before sauntering off the stage, already murmuring to Peter.

"Vultures, didn't I tell you?"
Chapter 2

Within moments, Tony regretted revealing his identity.

He played it off as arrogant and cocky on camera, but he'd known within moments that he'd made a bad call. If it was just him, sure, he could take it, could go toe to toe with the world and come out on top. Hell, he'd love it—Tony had always been something of a danger junkie. Thing was, it wasn't just him anymore, and Tony was having a more difficult time coming to terms with that than he'd thought he would.

He'd only had Peter a month and a half, after all.

It had been a wonderful month and half, and considering the events of that month and a half it sure as hell felt longer, but the truth was, Peter was still relatively new, and Tony was still learning. He was still learning about Peter, about parenthood, hell, about responsible adulthood in general, and there were moments he was arrogant enough to forget that, selfish enough to believe he could somehow continue his life exactly as it'd been before. Subtract weapons, add a baby, achieve happiness. Simple math.

Real life was never that simple.

It wasn't that he was having regrets; he loved Peter with all his heart, and there was no force in all the world that would convince him he'd made the wrong decision. It was certain decisions he'd made since then that were the problem. Tony needed to acclimate, needed to start acting like a responsible adult, something he hadn't attempted in decades. He needed to make adjustments.

He couldn't jet off to France for the weekend on a whim, couldn't have crazy benders that had him hungover for a week, couldn't go around blowing a secret identity that would have kept his son safe. He'd acted foolishly and impulsively, spurred on by that damn reporter calling Peter a mistake, and he couldn't do that anymore. He had to think of the effect his decisions had on Peter.

Pepper had commented on it too, but Tony, already angry enough at himself, wasn't particularly receptive.

"You can't threaten people on national television, Tony," she sighed at him the moment he came backstage, "You have to keep it together when people call Peter a mistake. You can defend him, certainly, but-

"But nothing, they can't just say things like that, what if he believes it-!"

"Tony," her voice was gentle, but honest, "You can't react this badly every time a reporter says things like that. And they're going to, that's what they do, they pick and prod at all your sore spots, you know this. Like it or not, technically speaking he is--"

"He is not," and Tony was a little ashamed later at how aggressive his tone had been with Pepper, who was only trying to do her job and who did have a very valid point, but he was sick and tired of the word mistake, "He was unintentional, not, not that, that implies regret and that you'd take it back if you could and I wouldn't, I would never. There's a big difference, I don't want to hear another word about it."

Then Peter started to cry, and he only had himself to blame for growling and snapping like that while he was holding Peter.
He really needed to learn to keep his cool.

He tried, and he did get better. He wasn't perfect and there were still a number of snafu's with the press that year, one particularly bad incident where he ended up punching one in the face when he was accosted outside of a baby clothing store and a reporter asked him if he had plans to send Peter to boarding school like he'd been.

It had not been the reporter's fault, and Tony had matured enough lately to admit this. He'd been stressed and exhausted that day—it was the third night in a row he'd stayed up half the night with a colicky baby—he'd already been asked ten thousand other questions, the reporters were far too close to Peter for his comfort, Peter was starting to fuss again because of all the camera flashes, and the question hit just a little too close to home.

Straw that broke the camel's back, and all that.

He called and met with the reporter, Jeff Kalinski, to apologize in person, and paid him more than he would've gotten in court. Jeff tried to turn him down, which Tony appreciated, but it was pocket change to him and he insisted. They actually had a half-decent conversation; Jeff had three kids of his own, and understood the toll late nights took on one's sanity. He actually gave pretty good advice, and when Tony admitted he was feeling a bit worried he was going to fuck up (though "a bit worried" was the understatement of the year), he just laughed.

"You're gonna fuck up," he shrugged, "It's inevitable. You're gonna yell at the kid when he doesn't deserve it cause you're having a bad day, gonna lose your patience over something stupid and trivial, gonna make rules that don't make sense and Peter's gonna fight em and you're not gonna wanna give in even though you know he's right, and you'll both end up steaming mad. No one gets it perfect. Third time around, God knows I'm still stumbling along."

"But I feel like with everything at my disposal, I should be able to come up with an algorithm for this," Tony admitted, "I have the money, the resources, the intellect, given time I should be able to sift through all the available data and find the right way to go about it--"

"All the money and resources in the world aren't gonna make parenting any less hard," Jeff just shook his head, "It'll make it a different kind of hard, sure. You'll never have to scrounge up money for diapers, or cut back to afford soccer teams and ballet lessons and private schools and SAT prep and colleges, but I think when it comes to parenting, there's a bit of a karmic thing goin' on. If one part's easy, another part's hard. You don't have to take pictures of unwilling celebrities who punch you in the face to pay for your kid's college--"

"I really am sorry about that--" Tony winced, though Jeff just waved him off with a wry grin, not even breaking in his sentence.

"But you're going to have to explain to your kid why you won't buy him a Maserati for his sixteenth even though you have the money. Gonna have to explain why you won't pay his rent when he's twenty-four and late for the sixth time and has to learn some things the hard way."

Tony considered this, then, teasing,

"So I shouldn't buy him a Maserati?"

"That's up to you, Mr. Stark," Jeff laughed.

"Tony, please," Tony insisted for the third time.

"Alright, Tony, then. That's up to you, but I tell you, man, remember the karma. The way things
come to him growing up, that's the way he'll expect them to be. He don't ever work for anything, he'll never learn how. We're supposed to prepare our kids for the real world, and I'll tell you one thing, real world ain't gonna hand him no Maserati."

Tony met up with Jeff a number of times after that, every few months or so when he could. They weren't friends exactly, but Tony helped him get his dream job as a photographer for Time, and maybe four months after coming clean about Peter and Iron Man, a month or so after he met Jeff to apologize, Tony let him do the first and only official spread of him and Peter.

That had been great PR, and since Jeff hadn't made a big deal of the punch-in-the-face incident, it was more than enough to make up for Tony's slip. More importantly, his meeting with Jeff had given him a lot to think about, and he began to reconsider certain things. For one, the absolute toy-plosion that had become his house. After coming clean about Peter's existence, there had been no more need to hide, so Tony had all but bought a toy store and brought it home.

Not that doting on his son was a bad thing, but...if Jeff was right, maybe Tony should tone it down a bit. If Peter always got everything he ever wanted, he'd end up pretty spoiled. Hell, Tony himself was a perfect example—and the last thing he wanted was for Peter to grow up like him.

So he cut back on the toys, and became very cautious about not spoiling Peter too much. He didn't use gifts or toys or sweets to buy cooperation, much as he often wanted to. They lived in a Malibu mansion, yes, and of course what Peter did have was of the highest quality, but Tony kept the boy's possessions to an admirable minimum.

Peter did have his own room set up and decorated right down the hall from Tony, but Tony was unwilling to move Peter out of his room just yet. It meant it was impossible to ignore Peter's wailings at night, but he didn't want to—okay, yes, at night he most certainly wanted to roll over and throw a pillow over his head—but when he was thinking straight, he knew that he didn't want to ignore Peter or hire some nanny to feed him at night. This was something he had to, wanted to, do himself.

He continued being Iron Man—he couldn't not, not with his weapons out there destroying families and killing innocent people and being used against the very soldiers he'd tried to protect—but he was careful. He planned his missions in excruciating detail, took only very, very slim risks, and didn't showboat or get flashy when there was actual danger involved. Tony would always love to flirt with adrenaline, sure, but it wasn't just him he was risking anymore. The image of Stane's hands on his son would never leave him, and he considered it a reminder that his actions affected more than just himself now.

On top of that, he had duties as CEO for StarkIndustries. He had tri-weekly meetings, though he generally only went to one a week—couldn't have their expectations getting too high, now, though it was still better than Before, when he only went once every other week at best. He still had occasional meetings with clients too, but he'd always been good at that, it was the meetings that drove him crazy. He had to sit still and sign papers and dumb down his ideas for a bunch of money-minded tycoons while Happy got to play peek-a-boo with Peter instead of him.

No, he was not jealous.

Yeah, okay, he was a little jealous.

Thing was, between Peter and Iron Man and SI, Tony's life had become utterly exhausting, to put it mildly. He woke up tired, spent the day tired, went to bed tired. He'd barely made any progress on the Iron Man specs, since Peter had been having trouble sleeping and SI took up his free time during the day, which was unacceptable.
So about six months after he came clean as Iron Man and revealed Peter's existence, Tony took an hour while Peter was down for a nap, shut down all electronics, rested his forehead in his hands, and thought long and hard about what he really wanted from the future, and the best way to go about it.

As a child, he'd just wanted his father's attention. As he grew older and started to realize he wasn't going to get it, his only goal was rebellion, pushing back, fighting fire with fire. His goals were to sleep around and get wasted and get arrested in as many strange and unique ways as possible, anything to get the attention he still so desperately craved. He'd gotten plenty drunk in his early teens, but it was the death of his parents that brought about a spiral into alcoholism he'd never fully recovered from.

He'd drifted a while after that. Having already graduated MIT and loaded with a hefty inheritance, he almost didn't return to StarkIndustries. Probably would've drunk himself in the grave if Stane hadn't insisted on his return, hadn't dragged him out of the murky depths of his depression and turned him into a war profiteering machine. Tony had latched onto that as purpose, as reason, without giving a second thought to the consequences of his actions. He spear-headed a company, he designed weapons, and he drank. He slept with models, he gambled his fortune away and won it back, he drank. He made business deals, he gave countless press releases, he drank. He drank, and he drank, and he drank.

Tony was smart enough to know a common denominator when he saw one.

Step one to change his life, to shape his future the way he wanted it, would have to be to stop drinking. It was an idea Tony had tossed around before, especially in those first few weeks with Peter. His worst memories of his father were of when he'd been drunk, and Tony knew full well he too could be a vicious drunk when he wanted to be.

The second step…well, that depended on what he wanted, didn't it? He wanted Peter. Peter was his number one priority, the rest of his life could be shaped around that. Balancing the titles of father and CEO and Iron Man was too much, but two…two he could handle. He couldn't give up Iron Man, not with his weapons still out there, but he could renounce his title as CEO. He could still invent things, still do independent contracts with StarkIndustries and easily maintain his comfortable lifestyle, all while having more time to spend with Peter.

He tried to tell Pepper a number of times, but she didn't really get it until he laid it out for her.

"I need you to run the company."

"I do run the company," she rolled her eyes, not getting it, "But I still need your signature-"

"No, you're not listening to me. I'm trying to make you CEO."

Silence.

"Eo!" Peter repeated happily from his baby bouncer, and Tony couldn't help but smile.

"See? Peter agrees with me, don't you, Petey?"

"No!" it wasn't a mad no but a giggly one, and Tony rolled his eyes fondly.

"Work with me here, buddy," he sighed to Peter, turning back to Pepper, "He's starting to hit a 'no' phase, it's oodles of fun."

"Have you been drinking?" she leaned forward, still looking at him like he was out of his mind.
"Of course not," he frowned, a bit offended. He wouldn't have drank around Peter in a million years.

"I just…I don't think you know what you're saying."

"I'm saying that I hereby, irrevocably, appoint you CEO of StarkIndustries, effective immediately. Cool? Cool, done deal."

"Coo!" Peter nodded his agreement, and Tony chuckled.

"You wanna be cool, we gotta get you some cool shades like mine, huh Petey? They you can be all incognito," Tony walked over to tickle him, and Peter shrieked happily. Pepper followed after him, tried to regain his attention.

"Tony, listen to me for a minute, have you even-"

"Thought this through? I have, actually," he interrupted, turning to look at her seriously, trying to impress upon her how much he really meant this, "I want more time with Peter, and I want to recover my weapons. Those are my two big priorities right now, and being CEO interferes with both."

"Tony," she got that look in her eyes, the one where she was reading his mind without his consent, "You are the farthest thing in the world from an absent parent, no matter what you think. You revolve around that boy like he's the sun, don't you dare go feeling guilty just because you have a meeting you can't avoid every once in a while. You're a single parent, it's unavoidable that sometimes you have to pass him off-"

"I'm not saying I've been absent," Tony agreed, despite the fact that leaving his son for even an hour made him feel like scum, and the phrase "pass him off" made Tony want to grab Peter, curl into a ball, and never let go again, "I know I've been doing the best I can, but that's the thing. Pep, I don't want to do 'the best I can', I want to do better. I want to be a good father, not just one that 'tried his best'. I don't need to be CEO to maintain my lifestyle, I can still do help run R&D no problem, and by stepping down I have more time to spend with Peter. I really don't see how this could be a bad thing. You wanna see Daddy more, don't you, Peteroo?"

"No!" Peter giggled, covering his mouth with his hands like he'd been caught being naughty.

"No?" Tony gasped, "Peter, you wound me! I think I'm going to need kisses to make it better."

Peter leaned in and gave him a smacking peck on the cheek.

"Ah ah ah," Tony shook his head, "Not enough, little guy, you hurt me real bad. I think I'm going to need…five kisses."

"No!" Peter declared, crossing his arms.

"I guess I'll have to steal them then," Tony attacked Peter, tickling him silly while stealing the requisite five kisses. Peter squirmed and shrieked delightedly, and Tony planted the last one right on his nose, "Perfect."

"'Gain, ada," Peter snickered, "Do 'gain!"

"As tooth-rottingly sweet as this is," Pepper interrupted, though her lips had a slight quirk to them, "I'm afraid I need to steal Daddy for a minute, Peter."

"No," Peter frowned, this "no" less giggly and more insistent, "No, ada!"
"Sorry, he's been getting a little clingy lately," Tony explained to Pepper, then turned to Peter, "Petey, be nice. Share, remember?"

"Not ada," Peter looked horrified by this concept.

"Yes, you have to share Daddy too," Tony blew a raspberry on his cheek, "You little goober."

"No oober!"

"Sure you're not," Tony chuckled.

"Tony, would you please listen to me for a moment, this is serious-"

"And I'm being serious! I want you as CEO. I thought there'd be a legal issue, but it turns out I'm allowed to name my own successor."

After a few more rounds of back and forth, Tony got her to concede, and two days later she brought by the papers. Tony was in the gym boxing with Happy, Peter in his mobile playseat to the side. He'd was freshly fed and changed, so he was batting at the different rattles and toys and babbling happily when Pepper and a gorgeous redhead entered.

"The notary's here, can you please come sign the transfer paperwork?" Pepper announced.

Tony did a quick one-two, attention distracted by the entrance of the redhead, and when Happy jabbed forward, he instinctively leaned back to let the jab glance before snapping back with an elbow to the face.

"Sorry," he winced reflexively.

"What the hell was that?" Happy grunted.

"It's called mixed martial arts," Tony bounced on his feet, still looking at the redhead, "It's been around for three weeks now-"

"It's called dirty boxing and there's nothing new about it," Happy snapped, "Put em up boss, and elbows in you cheater."

"I promise, this is the only time I will ask you to sign over your company."

Pepper sighed, flipping through the contract the redhead provided and making her signatures where needed. Tony watched them, the way the redhead's hips shifted as she leaned forward to show Pepper the contract, the slender lines of her fingers curled around the pen-

"First rule of boxing," Happy swatted at the back of the head to get him to turn back around, "Eyes on your oppo-"

Tony crouched low and executed a swift kick to his stomach padding, hard enough to send him back into the ropes.

"That's it, I'm done," Happy threw his hands up, "If you're fight dirty like that, I can't teach you anything."

"You," Tony ignored Happy to point at the redhead, "Name?"

"Rushman," she gave him a surprised, demure sort of look, "Natalie Rushman."
"Front and center, sweetheart," he waved a glove.

"No, you're not seriously going to ask her-" Pepper started to protest.

"C'mon, c'mon," he waved again, "Haven't got all day."

"I'm sorry," Pepper apologized, "I wish I could say he's usually not like this, he's very, ah, eccentric-"

Tony held up the ropes, let Natalie step into the ring. He examined her, not *gawking*, mind you, but looked her over. She seemed competent, capable. Pretty face, very graceful and controlled in the way she moved.

"Any good with kids?"

"I love them," she assured him with a smile.

"Huh," he quirked his head, "Interesting. Happy, give her a lesson."

Then he stepped out of the ring and joined Pepper on the couch, right next to Peter's playseat. He let Peter grab at his boxing glove while he talked to Pepper.

"Who is she?"

"She's from Legal, and she's potentially a very expensive sexual harassment suit if you keep ogling her like that-"

"I need an assistant-Peter, don't put that in your mouth baby," Tony quickly pulled the dirty boxing glove away in spite of Peter's grunts of displeasure, and pulled out the cheerio's box under Peter's seat and dumped out a handful, "Here, eat your cheerios."

"I know you need an assistant. I've got three potential candidates lined up to meet you-"

"I don't have time to meet, I need someone now, I feel like it's her-"

"No, it's not."

While they continued arguing, Happy asked Natalie if she'd ever boxed before.

"I have, yes," she gave him a small smile, and he found himself dubious.

"What, like the tai bo, booty boot camp, crunch, something like that?" he teased. She seemed distracted, watching Stark instead of answering him, so he reminded her about to give her a light jab to the shoulder, "Rule number one, never take your eyes off your oppo-"

She grabbed his hand, twisted it, and used it as leverage to flip her legs up, wrap them around his neck, roll forward and slam him into the mat.

"Oh my God!" Pepper shrieked, and Natalie released him, "Happy!"

"'gain, 'gain!" Peter clapped and giggled, throwing a cheerio in Natalie's direction like a prize.

"Now that's what I'm talking about," Tony just grinned, patting Peter on the head as he stood up, "What a show, huh, Petey? Looks like uncle Happy just got his butt kicked."

"I slipped," Happy grunted.
"You did?" Tony chuckled, ringing the bell next to the mat, "Looks like a TKO to me."

"I need your impression," Natalie informed him, ducking gracefully under the ropes.

"You have a quiet reserve, I don't know, an old soul-"

"I meant your fingerprint," she smiled, amused, picking up the contract again and holding it out to him.

"Right."

"How're we doing?" Pepper joined them, raising an eyebrow in warning at Tony.

"Great," he grinned, pressing his thumb down for the last time, "You're the boss."

"Will that be all, Mr. Stark?" Natalie asked.

"No," Tony decided at the same time Pepper said, much more forcefully, "Yes, that will be all, Ms. Rushman, thank you very much."

"I want one."

"No."

Tony hired her anyway.

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Six months later, and Tony was on an unparalleled high.

His son was the light of his life, and Tony had never been happier. Peter was eighteen months now, walking and talking, still a bit wobbly at times and only in short phrases, but Tony was blisteringly proud nonetheless. He'd had the baby checked out by a team of pediatricians immediately after he'd revealed Peter's existence to the press, and they'd kept regular appointments since.

Peter was a bit under the average in growth, but was the picture of health in every other way, so the doctor's weren't concerned. One of them, Dr. Ward, had dared to make a short joke, something about how he was sure Pete would have fun standing on apple boxes like dear old Dad.

They had a stare-off.

Ward won.

After that, Dr. Ward became Peter's primary physician. He had a wry sort of wit, and was never anything but soothing and understanding every few weeks when Tony burst into his office, insisting that he had to cure Peter of some new disease Tony's fears had dreamt up.

Those were some of the tougher parts of parenting, and all the harder for Tony's lack of a partner. He had no one to help balance him, no one to remind him that just because Peter coughed once didn't mean he was getting pneumonia, or just because it took him longer to walk than most babies didn't mean he was going to be paralyzed for life. No one to reassure him was doing fine, no one to run ideas by or seek advice from.

There were ups and downs, rough patches he hit, mistakes he made, times when the task of balancing Peter on top of everything else in his life made him doubt his ability to really pull this off. He still second-guessed himself more often than not, still had nights where he was desperate to drink, just to try and drown out the voice in his head screaming at him that he was going to fuck this up.
Pepper, Happy, and Rhodey each did their best to help. Ironically, the one most enamored with Peter was Rhodey, who was able to see him the least. Rhodey spent more and more of his military leaves coming out to see Tony and Peter, something Tony teased him about to no end, but desperately appreciated.

Pepper was surprisingly ill at ease with Peter. When he'd been younger she'd been fine, but around the time he became mobile, she became increasingly uncomfortable being left alone with him. She still loved Peter, of course, and she could manage, but she didn't like it. She liked children when they were young enough to just carry around or old enough to reason with; this in-between toddler stage was foreign to her.

It was perhaps this that ended any thoughts of romance he might've considered with her. He didn't begrudge her for it in the slightest—Pepper was one of his closest friends, always would be—but he couldn't consider a relationship with someone who didn't like kids.

As it turned out, that was kind of a deal-breaker now.

Happy struck the perfect balance. He was capable and caring, as well as a fully-trained armed bodyguard Tony trusted with his life. Any time Tony couldn't watch Peter, Happy was on duty, along with two other armed trainees as back up. Overkill? Perhaps, but then, Tony could still remember his father's words as he sent him to defense lessons.

*You're going to get kidnapped someday, it's part of being a Stark; the best thing you can do is stop worrying so much and toughen up so you can at least make it inconvenient for them.*

While it wasn't a lesson he particularly wanted to pass on to his son, Tony did heed the warning for what it was and made sure Peter was well-protected at all times.

Natalie had offered, on numerous occasions, but Tony could be a paranoid son of a bitch and when it came to his son he didn't bother trying not to be. He'd known Pepper and Happy almost a decade, Rhodey even longer; they were the only people he would trust Peter with under anything less than an absolute world-ending emergency. He liked Natalie though, and she was a good assistant; efficient, professional, and enough like Pepper that his life didn't feel vastly different. She was much sweeter than Pepper though, almost too easy-going, which was too bad because Tony had grown strangely used to being sassed by his assistant.

Meanwhile, Peter had begun teething, a lengthy, agonizing process that had shed ten years from Tony's lifespan. He ate solid foods now, though he was an extremely finicky eater, and his favorite word happened to be "no". He loved bananas, mostly because he would mush them to bits with his hands before eating them—Tony had tried to stop him at first, before giving up and calling the fact that fruit made it into Peter's mouth at all a win—and cheerios, because he could pop them by the handful, but anything else was an uphill battle. In the snow. With deadweights.

For all the easy-going infant Peter had been, he was proving to be a ferociously difficult toddler.

On the good days, Tony could appreciate that. It meant Peter had fire and spirit, a mind of his own and no qualms about proving it. Peter was already proving to be mentally ahead of the game, his language and fine motor skills impressive for a child his age, so it was no surprise that he could be cheeky, too.

On the bad days, well.

Let's just say there were certain nights in the shop that were a bit more satisfying when something exploded.
Peter never really had a crawling stage; he went straight from scooting around on his tummy with little "uh uh" sounds—that Tony had JARVIS save videos of to Peter's permanent file—to rolling everywhere. Tony found it absolutely hysterical, until he had to install baby gates.

It stopped being quite so funny the tenth time he tripped over the gate coming down the stairs.

There were other things he'd had to get used to as well—he'd had a professional come out soon as Peter became mobile, proof the place from top to bottom—things like outlet covers and cabinet latches and the dreaded toilet seat lock, which drove Tony crazy until he redesigned it and made it actually effective.

This inspired StarkIndustries baby-proofing line, effective baby-proofing that was manageable for a sane adult to operate without wanting to put their head through a wall with frustration. It wasn't big money, but it made a profit, something the company could certainly use while it was coming back from their big hit with the whole Stane debacle.

Though the press was desperate for the scoop on Peter for a while, Tony eventually made it very clear there would be no follow-ups, no photoshoots, no interviews nothing other than the one, all-encompassing piece in Time. He'd given all the information he was going to give. He managed to keep Peter relatively out of the media after that, and eventually, they stopped caring. Tony still took Peter with him anywhere he possibly could, but went to great efforts to disguise them both so there was little chance for photo ops. He still had meetings every once in a while, since he was now technically the head of R&D department, but most of them he was able to attend via videoconference.

So for the most part, Tony's life had smoothed out. He was a doting father, a insanely wealthy businessman, and a superhero in his free time; Tony was on top of the world, until it flipped on him.

He had palladium poisoning.

He was in bed with Peter, reading their second nighttime book when he saw the black marks streaking out in the veins on his wrists. He was confused for a moment, before he put two and two together, then four and four, the eight and eight, and before he knew it his breathing coming short and quick and Peter was blinking up at him, eyes wide and confused and a little bit scared.

"Ada?"

"Daddy's fine, Peter," Tony kissed the boy's forehead to hide the brittleness of his words, "Daddy's going to fix this."

"S'perero!" Peter declared affirmatively, patting his little hands against Tony's arc reactor.

"That's right, Daddy's a superhero. Daddy can handle anything."

Tony wasn't sure who he was reassuring anymore, but he pulled Peter into a hug and didn't let go for a very long time. Peter had always been very affectionate though, and didn't mind. When he released Peter, the boy stayed curled up in his lap, his head against Tony's chest. When they finished their last book, Tony didn't move to put Peter in his crib.

Tony couldn't sleep regardless, so they spent the night like that, Tony watching over his baby boy as he fell asleep on Tony's chest, the warm, solid weight the only thing still grounding him. He committed to memory every shuddered breath, every flutter of dark eyelashes, cataloguing every little way Peter moved and drooled and babbled in his sleep. He'd created this, this wonderful, gorgeous human being. For all Peter's fussiness and picky eating and "no" moods, no one would ever
convince him that his son was not perfect.

He’d already lost the first three months of Peter's life, and he was willing to move heaven and earth not to lose another minute.

Tony set about working on cures and preventative measures, and another week came and went. Stark Expo was set to premiere soon, an event requiring his physical presence. The Expo was too busy and chaotic for Tony to bring Peter to, he was only just eighteen months now, but since he was going to be in New York a while he did bring Peter with him and had Happy watch him in the New York mansion while he put in his required hour at the Expo.

Tony pulled a flashy stunt for his appearance, dive-bombing through the open ceiling to go down on one knee on stage, letting the armor be dismantled while he smirked and waved to the audience, beginning his speech. Thing was, though someone else had written it, he believed it; he was a phoenix metaphor. From the ashes of captivity, Tony had revived himself, reshaped his legacy, reunited with his son, and brought about the longest period of peace in United States history.

So other than the dying, he was doing pretty good.

Then, of course, because his week just kept getting better, he was court martialed for the seventh time. Tony just waved the deputy off and hit the gas, making the bodyguard replacing Happy for the night wince and grab the seat as he broke a number of different laws to get back to the hotel before Peter's bedtime.

The hearing the next day was ten different kinds of boring, and Tony fidgeted throughout the entire thing. He wanted to be home already, wanted to be with Peter, or, considering the time, watching tv over Peter's shoulder while the boy slept on his chest. It was their naptime ritual, and he was missing it.

He wasn't particularly happy about that.

"It's a weapon, Mr. Stark, call it what it is-"

"Please, if your priority was actually the well-being of American citizens-"

"My priority is to get the Iron Man weapon turned over to the state-"

"Well, mine was getting home before naptime, but hey, turns out no one's getting what they want today," Tony snapped, "Because I am Iron Man. The suit and I are one. To turn over the Iron Man suit would be to turn over myself, which is tantamount to indentured servitude or prostitution depending on what state you're in, neither of which is an example I'd like to set for my son."

"Look, I'm no expert-"

"In prostitution? Of course not, you're a senator."

That got a laugh, even if Pepper was shooting him a disappointed look and Natalie looked like he'd just made his life infinitely harder. Tony tried to figure out the meaning of it, but then they were calling in Justin Hammer, and Tony's skin began to crawl instinctively.

Hammer ran his mouth like Hammer did, some bullshit speech about how Tony couldn't anticipate everything, how he insisted the Iron Man suit was a shield when it was really a sword. Then Rhodey was shanghaied into collaborating, and Tony wanted to groan; this was going south, and if he didn't do something, he wasn't even going to be back by the time Pete woke up.
Which was totally not acceptable.

So Tony did a little shanghaiing of his own, commandeering their screens to show how far away everyone was from coming up with anything close to Iron Man. He threw in a couple jabs at Hammer, made a nice broad statement about privatizing world peace, and successfully goaded the senator into saying "fuck you" on national television.

All in all, well, it could've gone worse.

He returned home to Peter, and spent the afternoon with his baby boy. They read some of Peter's favorite books, shared lunch, and even went out to the park as a treat after Peter successfully rattled off numbers one through ten without prompting. Peter was proving to be whip-smart, and Tony couldn't have been prouder.

They managed not to get spotted by the press at the park, a miracle in and of itself, and they spent a couple hours kicking a ball around in the grass, playing on the swings, and holding Peter up so he could pretend he was climbing the monkey bars. They headed back when Tony caught a couple streaks of black inching out from under his collar.

When they got home, he washed Peter's hands, changed his diaper, then put Peter in his workshop playpen—much improved from a simple bouncer, there was now an array of toys and books and even washable markers for Peter to play with while he watched Daddy work. He colored on the books sometimes, but it's not as if the books were in pristine condition at this point anyway, and Peter didn't seem to mind later, so Tony didn't bother stopping him.

Dum-E served him up a smoothie, while he questioned JARVIS.

"What's that make my intake now?"

"We are up to 80 ounces a day, sir."

Tony sighed and downed the drink in one swift gulp.

"Soovie?" Peter questioned, quirking his head.

"Right-o, Pete," Tony chuckled, "This is a smoothie."

"My soovie, ada?" Peter had a habit of dropping the first d in "dada", which Tony found irresistibly cute. But then, there wasn't a whole lot Peter did that he didn't find irresistible, so maybe he wasn't the best judge.

Eh, fuck humility.

He knew his kid was the cutest.

"No, this is Daddy's smoothie," Tony shook his head, "Not for Petey-birds. You wouldn't like it."

"Ucky?" Peter made a face, seeming to catch on.

"Very ucky," Tony nodded seriously.

"Bleh," Peter stuck his tongue out, refocusing his attention on his drum set instead of Tony's smoothie.

"Check palladium levels," Tony instructed JARVIS, pricking his thumb to get a blood sample.
"Blood toxicity is 24%," JARVIS reported, "It would appear that the continued use of the Iron Man suit is accelerating your condition, and another core has been depleted. I have also run tests on all available elements, and none can serve as a viable replacement for the palladium core. You are running out of both time and options, sir. Unfortunately, the device that is keeping you alive is also killing y-"

"Don't say that," Tony shot a glance to Peter, still gnawing the sticks that came with his toy drum, thankfully oblivious.

"Yes, sir. Miss Rushman approaches, I suggest you inform-"

"Mute."

"Moot!" Peter repeated happily, and Tony barely had time to wipe the goofy smile off his face before Natalie came in, reminding him about the flight to Monaco he was three hours late for.

That's right, the grand prix.

The plane flight was obnoxiously long; Peter was not a fan of plane rides, spent pretty much the whole flight wailing, likely because his ears had popped. He probably could have left Peter in New York with Happy, but he still felt extremely uncomfortable with the idea of being in a different country than Peter, even if it meant saving his ears an 18 hour flight with a screaming toddler.

Once they were there, Tony only got an hour or so in the hotel room with Peter before he had to kiss him goodbye and head to the stadium. He dodged Hammer and the blonde reporter whose name he refused to let take up space in his brain, and spent half an hour listening to Pepper snap at him because he'd sold the art collection.

Which, for the record, he had good reasons. If he couldn't find a cure for the palladium poisoning soon, Peter would be left alone. Tony knew as well as anyone that no amount of money soothed the ache that losing one's parents left behind—he hadn't even liked his parents, and he knew Peter was far more attached to him if the stranger anxiety he'd been displaying lately was any indication—but money was all Tony had to give. So if selling the art collection he never even looked at meant Peter would have more when he was gone, he didn't have to think twice.

Pepper wasn't quite so understanding, but then, he hadn't told her he was dying. How could he? How do you even work that into a conversation? So instead of sitting around and listening to Pepper snipe at him and Hammer try to play buddy-buddy and blondie bat her eyelashes at him, he snuck off and took over for his racecar driver.

He was already dying, might as well live a little while he could.

But of course, he couldn't even have a little fun without it all going wrong. Not even one lap in, and some idiot was walking right onto the track, unveiling a prototype arc reactor powering a pair of electric whips that he used to attack the racers. He only just barely got the suit in time, thanks to Pepper and Happy.

He got thrown around a bit, couple scrapes and bruises, and he caught on fire at one point, but other than that it was fairly straight-forward. It wasn't that it was a hard battle, but what it meant that made Tony worry.

This asshole had an arc reactor.

Tony met up with him again in prison. The so-far unidentified man could've upped the cycles, sold it to North Korea, China, hell, gone straight to the black market, but instead had attacked him. That
spoke to something, something Tony couldn't quite yet figure out, since he didn't recognize the man in the least.

"You come from a family of thieves and butchers," the man shook his head, "Now, like all guilty men, you try to rewrite your own history, and you forget all the lives the Stark family has destroyed."

Tony diverted, not willing to discuss his life changes with a criminal, and learned that his father, Anton Vanko, had been the one to pass on the design. This son of Vanko's claimed that his father was the reason Tony was even alive, and that his intention had been to "make a god bleed."

Then, just as Tony was leaving, he'd made one last comment.

"Palladium in chest," he chuckled, Russian accent thick, "Is painful way to die. More painful, I think, is letting down son."

Tony froze, hand on the doorknob, something in his chest raw and tight and for a brief moment, he couldn't breathe. Then he turned the handle and walked out, passing the guards roughly, too trapped inside his own head for excuses.

Pepper tried to talk to him on the flight back, but Tony just shook his head and joined Peter on the playmat. He sat cross-legged in front of Pete, who was gnawing on a block.

Unfortunately, because Peter was the smartest baby in existence and no one was ever going to convince Tony any different, he noticed that his Daddy wasn't quite as happy as usual.

"Ada?" Peter patted Tony's knee, "Pay me?"

"He's your son alright," Pepper chuckled wryly.

"Yes, I'll play with you, Pete," Tony shot Pepper a look, "Do you want drums or guitar?"

"Dum!"

Tony passed Peter his toy drum to smack at, then picked up the toy guitar. He let his fingers go wild, exaggerating the playing to make Peter laugh. At the end of his mock solo, he stuck out his tongue and made the rockstar sign with his hand. Peter didn't quite have the dexterity to mimic it, but he held up a hand too with a laugh.

Then Pepper turned on the news.

Senator Stern, the asshat from the hearing was on, talking about how Tony treated the Iron Man suit like a toy, how it should be taken away for the good of the American people.

"Ada!" Peter shrieked happily, pointing at the screen when they showed Iron Man footage.

"Mute," Tony grumbled, and Peter mimicked that too, "Moot!"

"Tony," Pepper sighed, looking over Peter's head at him. She was giving him a look like she was trying to pin him down, and Tony fidgeted, "What aren't you telling me?"

He ignored her a minute, helping Peter pat the drums, then looked up.

"I don't want to go home. At all. Let's...let's cancel my birthday party. We're in Europe, let's, let's go to Venice."

"Venice?"
"Yeah, it'll be fun, it's a great place, to…to be healthy," Tony finished lamely, ducking her gaze, looking at Peter again instead.

He'd let go of Pepper, romantically. He hadn't thought about her like that in months, not until this palladium poisoning had shown up. It was morbid, but it was the idea of dying planting these thoughts in his head, trying to stir up feelings for Pepper to fix everything somehow, stitch together a family for Peter to lean on when he was gone.

This dying thing was messing with his head.

"This isn't the right time, Tony," she just sighed, "We're in kind of a mess."

"Maybe that's why it's the best time-"

"I think as the CEO I need to show up-"

"As CEO you're entitled to a leave-"

"A leave-?"

"A company retreat-"

And this was how it always had been, how it always would be. The banter of friends who know each other too well to waste air finishing sentences when they didn't need to hear the end to know the other's thoughts. This was him and Pepper, his CEO, his best friend, but not the person he was meant to be with.

Later that night while Peter slept, Tony researched Anton Vanko. His son, the man Tony had met, was named Ivan. Anton was some soviet spy who'd defected decades back, and both were physicists convicted of selling soviet-era, weapons grade plutonium to Pakistan.

"Tony, you gotta get upstairs and-what'd you to your face, man?"

"What? What's wrong with my fa-?" Tony frowned, then realized, "Oh. Yeah. Peter found a sharpie earlier and really didn't want to give it up."

"Listen," Rhodey tried again, "I've been on the phone with the National Guard all day trying to talk them out of rolling tanks up the PCH knocking down your front door and taking these. They're gonna take your suits Tony, okay? They're sick of the games. You said no one would possess this technology for twenty years? Well guess what, somebody else had it yesterday. It's not theoretical anymore. Are you-"

Rhodey shook him by the shoulder, and Tony felt his head loll a bit; fuck, the poisoning was really beginning to take it's toll. Between the palladium and Peter waking up every couple hours and Tony's general insomnia, he was starting to collapse under the pressure. He'd never felt this horrible before in his life, not even in college.

"Hey man, you okay?" Rhodey's bluffing arguments dropped, and he rested a hand on Tony's shoulder, "You look like shit, y'know?"

"Heh," Tony grinned, "Not surprised. Help me up, yeah?"

He moved to stand, but his knees gave out under him. Rhodey caught him, looping an arm around him to steady him.
"Hey, hey," Rhodey quickly went from concerned to touching on panic, "What was that? Are you alright?"

"See that box?" Tony directed him as Rhodey helped him limp over to his desk. He dropped into his chair like a rag doll, boneless, "It's got palladium."

He yanked out his reactor, popping it open to insert another core.

"Is that supposed to be smoking?"

"If you must know, it's neutron damage from the reactor wall."

"And you had this in your body?" Rhodey examined it, then when Tony turned around, he accused, "What about that high-tech crossword puzzle on your neck, that sharpie too?"

Tony resisted the urge to cover the black streak marks of the poison in his veins with a hand. He replaced the core and jostled the reactor back in, patting it down until it clicked into place.

"Road rash," he dismissed, but Rhodey wasn't buying it. Rhodey continued to examine him, until he snapped, "What're you looking at?"

"I'm looking at you, Tony," he shook his head, "You wanna do this whole lone gunslinger act and it's unnecessary, you don't have to do this alone."

"You know, I wish I could believe that, I do, but you've gotta trust me, okay? Contrary to popular belief, I know exactly what I'm doing."

"And what about Peter?"

"Fuck you," Tony snapped, "That's a low blow, even for you, Rhodes."

"I'm serious, Tony, what happens to-?"

"Save it, Rhodes, I don't need to hear-"

"I'm trying to tell you I'd be here for him, Tony, if you'd let someone else talk every once in a while."

And that shut Tony up for once.

"You...what?"

"My sister and her husband are foster parents. It'd never the same as having you around, Tony, but they're great people and it's something. He'd be looked after, loved, and you know I can't resist visiting. I'd make sure he'd be taken good care of, is what I'm saying, if...if the worst case scenario has to happen."

"I want you to have a suit."

It was out of Tony's mouth before he could think about it. He'd meant to give Rhodey a suit at one point, both as a way to shut up the military and because if he wanted anyone at his back it was Rhodey. He'd thought he might hold off a while longer, but the man had just told him he'd take care of his son. Tony didn't really do emotional, but he was so grateful, he had to say something.

"You what?"

"It's good, perfect really," Tony started walking and babbling, trying not to let on how much it meant
to him, "It'd keep the military off my back about turning over a suit, and you can help give me backup, if you want. You'll be the only who can fly it, of course, since you're the only I'll authorize and god knows the military can't hack my tech, but. Y'know. Yours if you want it, anyway."

Rhodey, who knew him all too well, clapped him on the shoulder.

"I got your back, Tony."

Tony gave it a few last minute tweaks before sending Rhodey off in a silver suit. It wasn't quite up to Iron Man quality, a couple Marks back, but it was still a damn good one, had to be if it was protecting his best friend.

The next day, his birthday, Tony found himself asking Natalie what she'd do if, hypothetically speaking, this was the last birthday she'd ever have. The answer she gave him—"I'd do whatever I wanted to do, with whoever I wanted to do it with"—changed Tony's mind. He told her to cancel the party, and tell anyone who came to the door to go home.

He took Peter and went out.

They spent the day in the city. He took Peter to Central Park and the aquarium and the zoo and everywhere else he could think of, trying to make the most out of the day. It probably wasn't his last day alive, but it felt like it. It felt like he was running out of time and energy and he wanted to give every last drop of what he did have to Peter. He had the suitcase armor in the car, and after they got donuts he put it on and slowly, carefully flew Peter up into the huge donut above Randy's donuts, which made Peter, who adored both the Iron Man armor and flying, shriek in delight.

They were eating donuts—well, Tony was eating donuts, Peter was eating baby strawberry puffs—when he was approached by none other than Nick Fury.

Nothing ruined a day faster than Nick Fury telling him to exit the donut.

Although, Peter's excited shout of "P'rate!" made it a little better.

"I told you I don't want to join your super secret boyband," Tony groaned, while Peter drooled on his helmet, "Petey, please don't do that, that goes on Daddy's face."

"Nah, I remember, you do everything yourself," Nick snorted, "How's that working out for you?"

"It's, it's," Tony waved a hand vaguely, dismissing the question in favor asking his own, "I don't wanna get off on the wrong foot, do I look at the patch or the eye?"

Nick's smug smirk soured a bit, and he reached a hand to tug at Tony's collar instead, revealing the dark, angry black streak marks outlined in red now.

"Not lookin' so good."

"Been worse," Tony just frowned back, diverting Peter's attention by giving him a bit of donut so he didn't see what Nick was pointing at, "Don't listen to the angry pirate, buddy. Here, look, donut."

He went to get a sip of his coffee while Peter ate his donut, then almost spit it out when he saw who was approaching them in a skintight leather catsuit.

"We've secured the perimeter but I don't think we should hold it much longer."

"Well you're fired," Tony glared at Natalie.
"Not up to you," she gave just a hint of a smile.

"No wonder you offered to babysit so many times!" Tony accused, about ready to walk out right then, "You wanted to steal my son!"

"We want nothing to do with Peter," Nick quickly assured him, clearly sensing Tony's "flee now" vibe, "I want you to meet Agent Natasha Romanov."

"I'm a SHIELD shadow. Once we knew there was an opening as your personal assistant I was tasked to secure it and keep watch over you by Director Fury," she explained. Then, almost—though not quite—apologetically, "You're inseparable with your son. The best way to win your trust is to win his."

"And you've been busy," Nick added, "We needed that eye on you. You made your girl your CEO-"

"Not my girl, actually-"

"Been selling all your stuff."

"You obviously know I'm dying, if money's all I've got to give Pete I'm gonna give him all I can-"

"You gave your friend a suit-"

"Look, what do you want from me?" Tony interrupted.

"What do I want from you?" Nick baulked, while Natalie—well, Natasha—got up and walked out without a word. But then, apparently she was some kind of spy, so maybe she'd gotten some bat signal type thing, who knew, "Nu-uh, what do you want from me. You have become a problem, a problem that I have to deal with. Contrary to your belief, you are not the center of my universe! I got bigger problems than you in the southwest region alone I've got to deal with-!"

"You maybe wanna take it down a notch?" Tony raised a bored eyebrow, bouncing Pete on one knee to keep him happy, "Peter doesn't really need you shouting in his face."

"No souting," Peter nodded seriously, mimicking what Tony had told him a thousand times.

"I apologize, but your father has become a problem that needs to be dealt with-

"Are you seriously explaining this to him right now? He's a year and a half, he doesn't care what you're-

"Hit him," Fury snapped his fingers, and then there was a needle in Tony's neck.

"Oh fudge!" Tony fake-swore at the last moment, immediately grabbing Peter and moving him to his other side, away from Natasha.

"Fud!" Peter repeated happily.

"Oh my god, are you going to steal my kidney and sell it? Can you please stop being awful, for like, five seconds? What'd you just do to me?"

"What we just did for you," Nick corrected, "That's lithium oxide, and it's going to take the edge off your poisoning. We're trying to get you back to work."

"You don't think I've been working?" Tony's stare was hard, his mouth a thin line, "You don't think
I've done every god dang thing in my power to stay exactly where Peter needs me? Contrary to my personal history, Director, for pretty much the first time in my life, I'm happy to be alive, and I'd like to stay that way. I have tried every possible combination of every last permutation of every known element in existence."

"Well I'm here to tell you, you haven't tried them all."

Nick and Natasha escorted him and Peter back to the mansion, where Nick told him more about the arc reactor. Apparently it was based on unfinished technology, a project Howard hadn't quite finished before he'd died. According to Nick, Howard said the reactor was a stepping stone, that he'd been about to kick off an energy race that would have dwarfed the arms race.

Nick was frustratingly vague about what he meant by he 'hadn't tried them all', something about how Howard had said that Tony was the only one with the means and knowledge to finish what he'd started.

"I don't know where you're getting your information," Tony just shook his head, watching Peter play with blocks at his feet, while he and Nick sat in lawn chairs overlooking the balcony, "But, uh. He wasn't my biggest fan."

"What do you remember about your dad?" Nick seemed to be sizing him up.

"He was cold, he was calculating, he never told me he loved me, never even told me he liked me. So it's a little tough for me to digest when he said the whole future was riding on me, and he's passing it down…I don't get that. We're talking about a guy whose happiest day was when he shipped me off to boarding school."

"That's not true," Nick shook his head, "You think Howard didn't care about his kid just cause he didn't show it like you do?"

"Growing up, my father never once said he loved me. You tell me what you think is better for a kid, that, or…" Tony challenged, bending over to pick up Peter and pull him into his lap. He kissed Peter on the forehead, then, "Baby, who loves you most?"

"Ada!" Peter smiled brightly, replying instantly, just like always.

"That's right. Daddy loves you very, very much. How much, Pete?"

"Heart," Peter patted his chest, right over where Tony's heart was.

He wasn't speaking in full sentences yet, but they'd had this exchange every morning and every night pretty much since Peter was old enough to say "ada". Tony never wanted Peter to have that same doubt, to feel that same desperate need for approval he'd grown up with.

"That's right, with all my heart."

"I'm not saying his choices didn't leave something to be desired," Nick said after a moment, seeming a touch uncomfortable, by the display of baby-love from Tony Stark or from Tony's very valid point, who could say, "But I knew your father very well. He was one of the founding members of SHIELD."

"What?"

"I've got a 2 o'clock. You've got this, right?"
Then people in suits were hauling in a large metal case, dropping it in front of Tony on the balcony and walking away, Nick moving to follow them.

"Wait, what? Got what? I don't know what you're doing, I don't even know what I'm supposed to get-"

"Agent Romanov will remain a floater at StarkIndustries with her cover intact," Nick ignored him completely. Tony stood up to follow him, shifting Peter to one hip, "And you remember Agent Coulson, right?"

"Uh, I think, but-"

"Tony, remember—I got my eye on you."

Then Nick and Natasha were gone, leaving Agent Coulson to eye Peter curiously.

"Stop looking at my kid like you're going to experiment on him."

"He's very well-behaved."

"Yeah, he's perfect, I know," Tony kissed Peter on the forehead, then started giving instructions, "Look, I'll put in a little time at the lab, you go get a squad down to the Coffee Bean across the street for a coffee run-"

"I'm not here for that," the agent interrupted, "I've been authorized to use any means necessary to keep you on the premises. If you attempt to leave, or play any games, I will taze you and watch Supernanny with Peter while you drool into the carpet."

"That's…um."

"Would you like me to watch Peter while you work?"

"You just threatened to taze me in front of my son."

"I did."

"And you really think I'm going to hand him over to you?"

"Supernanny is very informative."

"Literally every parental sense in my body is screaming 'do not let this man touch your son'."

"Your loss."

Tony convinced the agent to let him feed Peter lunch first—god help him if he didn't, a hungry Peter was a whiny Peter was an impossible Peter—and after lunch Peter was more than content to play next to Tony while he went through the metal case. He probably should have gone down to the workshop, put Peter in his playpen and worked there, but he was all too aware that his time with his son was running out. So he and Peter sat side by side, Tony watching old film reels while he flipped idly through his father's old science journals, Peter playing with some puzzles and stacking blocks, occasionally glancing up at the film reel.

"That's grandpa, Pete," Tony pointed out softly when Howard came on, doing a spiel about the Stark Expo, "Can you say grandpa?"

Peter blinked at him a bit before turning to look at the science journal Tony had in his hands,
apparently not in the mood to repeat words. He grabbed for it, tugging it from Tony's hands.

"Petey-bird," Tony warned, "We don't just grab things. No stealing, remember?"

Peter looked down as if to examine it, then passed it back to Tony looking apologetic.

"C'mere you," he pulled Peter into his lap. He looked at his beautiful boy, the dark lashes framing his bright eyes, the flushed, baby pink cheeks, the soft, pudgy belly of babyhood, the tiny little fingers and toes...he pressed a kiss to each of Peter's cheeks, then one to the tip of his nose, "I love you, Peter, I love you so much. You have to remember that."

"Ada," Peter just smiled contentedly, grasping Tony's shirt tightly in his little fists.

Peter had been a bit clingy lately, unwilling to be without Tony, and he remembered reading something about stranger anxiety developing at this age, perfectly normal, yada yada, but Tony could use a little clinging right now. He just hugged Peter tighter to his chest.

"That's right baby, Daddy. You think you can remember me when I'm gone, huh?" he kissed Peter's hair, rubbing the little boy's back softly, "Do me that one favor, okay? Remember Daddy, cause Daddy's always gonna remember you."

"S'perero," Peter patted Tony's arc reactor, his go-to word for whenever he thought Tony was upset.

"I'm afraid Daddy needs more than a superhero," Tony smiled sadly, "Daddy's gonna need a miracle, and I think I used my one miracle up getting you, baby boy."

"S'perero," Peter insisted, since Tony didn't seem to be getting any happier.

"Worth it," Tony just murmured into Peter's hair.

".Tony, what're you doing back there?" Tony startled, then realized it was just Howard talking in the film reel, "What is that? Don't touch my things, put that back where you got it from!"

The young Tony on film, maybe four or five, ducked his head, ashamed, replacing the piece of the model board he'd picked up. Howard ran a hand through his hair, clearly aggravated, as some random person with a headset came on screen to haul Tony away.

"Where's Maria? Maria! Come get your son. Go, go on, go," Howard waved a hand at the tech, who was apparently taking too long to get rid of Tony.

"Never, baby," Tony promised, hugging Peter a bit closer to him, "Never."

On the screen, Howard did a few more takes. There were a few shots of him drinking, and as the reel progressed, he got looser, more snarky.

"So from all of us here at StarkIndustries, I'd like to personally show you...my ass. I'd like to...ah, c'mon, we already got this, didn't we? I can't focus."

Howard was clearly at least somewhat drunk now, wobbling around and making ass jokes.

"No repeating that word, Pete," Tony warned, then a touch bitterly, "Grandpa's a bad influence, surprise, surprise."

The reel clicked and went blank for a moment, then started something new.

"Tony, you're too young for this right now, so I thought I'd put it on film," Howard was leaning
against the model of Stark Expo, gesturing to it with the hand that wasn't holding a drink, "I built this for you. And someday you'll realize that it represents a whole lot more than just people's inventions. It represents my life's work. This is the key to the future. I'm limited by the technology of my time, but one day, you'll figure this out, and when you do? You'll change the world. What is and always will be my greatest creation…is you."

Greatest creation. That was a laugh. His father was decades dead, Tony got one chance to hear from him again, and it was to hear that he was a creation, another project made and designed to fit into Howard's grand plans. Greatest creation or worst, that wasn't love. Iron Man was Tony's greatest creation, but in Tony's heart? Iron Man was scrap compared to Peter.

He could thank his father for one thing though.

"JARVIS, you awake?"

"For you, sir, always."

"I need you to pan camera 3 to me and Pete here, and save this recording to Peter's personal file. I need you…I need you to tell him about it when he's older, okay? Make sure he watches it. Tell Pepper and Rhodey, too, so they can make sure he gets it."

"Sir."

"No buts, JARVIS, don't go getting all sentimental on me. Start recording." Tony shook his head, clearing his too-morbid thoughts, then pointed out camera 3 to Peter, up in the corner, "Can you say hi to your future self, buddy? Wave to the camera, right there."

"I!" Peter waved, his gaze probably not where it should be, but about as close as could be expected.

"You drop your 'h's a lot," Tony gave a wry smile, kissing Peter's forehead, "You're still learning to talk. Still learning a lot of things, and…and I want you to know, without a shred of doubt, that there is nothing in the world I wanted more than to be around to teach them to you. I love you, Peter. I love you with everything I have. You're going to grow up hearing a lot of things about me, and well, most of them are probably true. I wasn't a good person for a long time, and I'm, well, I'm still working on it, but the good things I've done? That's all you. You made me a better person, Peter. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, ever could have happen to me. You're the best son a father could ask for, and I'm so proud of you."

Tony rubbed at his eyes, refusing to cry.

"I mean, try not to become a neo-nazi, or anything, but, um, I mean, if you did, the love still totally applies, the love will always apply, I love you neo-nazi and all, that's just, y'know, not a great life decision, but it's, uh, it's good that you're politically active, I guess? I don't know why I'm assuming you're a neo-nazi, I just, my point is, no matter what you do, who you become, it doesn't matter to me. I will always love you, and I will always be proud of you."

"S'perero, ada," Peter patted his chest reassuringly, trying to reassure him. Which was great, because Tony was about two seconds from crying on a video meant for his future son.

"Daddy's okay, buddy," Tony sniffed, placing his hand over Peter's smaller one on the reactor and pressing a kiss into Peter's hair, "More importantly, you're gonna be okay. You're going to look at this when you're older, and you're going to know just how much I love you. Cause you loves you most, baby?"

"Ada!"
"That's right. Daddy loves you, Daddy loves you very, very much. How much, Pete?"

"Heart," Peter patted his chest.

"That's right, with all my heart," Tony kissed his forehead, "Now and forever."

He reluctantly let Peter get back to his puzzles after that, resuming work going through the journals, new articles, and film reels Nick had given him. It was flipping through one of the news articles almost half an hour later that it clicked.

It was a full picture of the Stark Expo model, with the caption "the key to the future is here", the tagline that had been used for the Expo that year. Something about that, the key to the future, stuck out to Tony. He examined the picture from every angle, but that wasn't good enough, and his hands itched to play with the model itself.

It was somewhere in storage, wasn't it? He dug through storage for another half hour until he found it, spent twenty minutes lugging it up the stairs, and another ten piecing the slides back together. When it was finished, he had JARVIS scan it so he could play with a holographic version while Peter watched, entranced with the blue lights.

"Show me the buildings," he pushed forward, stretching the image out. He snapped his fingers, spinning it as JARVIS eliminated all markers but the buildings, "What does that look like to you, Peteroo? Not unlike an atom, huh? In which case the nucleus would be…here…JARVIS, highlight the inner sphere."

He did number of hand motions, pulling out the inner sphere from the rest of the holograph to enlarge and examine the inner bits.

"Lose the footpaths."

"What is it you're trying to achieve, sir?"

"I'm discovering, ah, correction, rediscovering, a new element. Lose the landscaping, the shrubbery, the trees, parking lots, exits, entrances," all of this disappeared with waves of Tony's distracted hands, his mind running a million miles an hour as he pieced it all together, "Stretch the protons and the neutrons using the pavilions…as a…framework…"

There it was. He threw his hands up, expanding it outward until the glowing blue ball of element engulfed both him and Peter. Peter looked up from his toy xylophone, delighted at the sight, marveling almost as much as Tony was. He clapped his hands closed, holding the element map in the palm of his hand now, as JARVIS announced what Tony already knew.

"The element should serve as a viable replacement for palladium."

Tony spun in his chair, hopping off it to scoop Peter up in his arms and twirl him around jubilantly.

"You hear that, Petey-bird? Daddy's going to live!"

The next three hours were a mad mess of destruction and reconstruction. He had to take out holes in the walls, drill gaps in the floor, pull out old piping and use three different room to set up a particle accelerator. When he was almost done, Coulson entered the workshop to interrupt.

"I heard you broke perimeter."

"Uh, yeah. That was like three years ago, I needed supplies. Where've you been?"
"Been doing some stuff."

"Yeah?" Tony rolled his eyes at the agent's vagueness, "Well, me too, and it worked. Hey, I'm playing for the home team here, Coulson. Now you gonna let me work, or you gonna bust my-" he glanced to Peter, sitting contentedly in his playpen, "Butt."

"As amusing as you are with a child-friendly filter, I-" Coulson paused, seeing something in a box Tony'd dragged up from the basement, "What's this doing here?"

He pulled out a prototype of the Captain America shield. Usually, Tony could remember vividly his father telling him, over and over again, about the time he'd helped equip Captain America with a shield, how it had been tested by Aunt Peggy unloading a clip at the Captain's face. For once, Tony didn't think about that. He was in a zone, his mind devoted utterly to science, and all he saw were the dimensions of the prototype.

"Bring that to me," Tony waved a hand, "I need it."

"Do you know what this is?"

"It's exactly what I need. Lift the coil," he instructed. Coulson lifted it, and Tony shoved the prototype between the toolbox the coil had been resting on and the coil itself, then tested it, missing Coulson's pained wince, "Perfect. Perfectly level. I'm busy, what do you want?"

"Nothing, just goodbye. I've been reassigned. Director Fury wants me in New Mexico."

"Fantastic, land of enchantment."

"So I'm told."

"Secret stuff."

"Something like that."

"Good luck," Tony offered his hand, and Coulson shook it.

"He needs you," Coulson told him after a beat, his eyes lingering on Peter, then, "And so do we."

"More than you know," Tony just nodded, not acknowledging the comment about Peter. He'd had more than his quota of emotional father moments for the day.

"Not that much."

Then Coulson was out the door.

"Well," Tony huffed to Peter, "That was rude. Don't be a Coulson. Be a Peter, they're much better."

"Eta!" Peter giggled to himself, and Tony smiled.

"Bingo, buddy."

Tony soon finished his particle accelerator. For a moment, he had a debate; if he blew up the lab, he sure as hell didn't want Peter in it, but he couldn't exactly let Peter wander around upstairs, either. Peter wasn't going to like it, but Tony put him safely in his crib upstairs.

"I'm sorry, little man, you'll thank me when I'm still alive to thank in ten years," Tony promised, kissing Peter's forehead even as Peter cried for Tony to pick him up again, "JARVIS, keep an eye on
him."

"Always, sir." Then he dashed back down to the lab to start up the accelerator. It was shaky, and he set fire to about half the lab at one point, but in the end, he managed it. The new element glowed bright blue, a little triangle of light. Just as he set JARVIS to analyzing the newly-powered reactor, he got a phone call from a blocked number.

It was Ivan, who sounded pretty spritely for a dead guy. He went on for a bit about the ruining the Stark name, destroying Tony at his precious Stark Expo, making the whole thing go up in smoke, while Tony attempted to trace the call. He couldn't pin it exactly, but it sure was damn close to HammerIndustries…

The time for lab testing was over.

"Assemble the suit, JARVIS, and call Happy, I need him to babysit, tell him sorry about the short notice, I'll pay him triple if he can get here in five minutes."

Sir, the element is untested."

"I don't wanna hear it, JARVIS! Oh god," he coughed as he slammed the new arc into his chest, the energy coursed through him hot and fast, "Tastes like coconut and metal."

He let the suit assemble around him, then waited impatiently for Happy to arrive. He was standing outside, Peter on his hip, when Happy finally got there seven minutes later. Happy tried to get an explanation out of him but Tony only had time to flip up the faceplate, give Peter a quick kiss goodbye, and shoot Happy an, "everyone at the Stark Expo's in danger, I've got to go bye" before taking off.

When he arrived at Stark Expo, he saw Rhodey showing off his newly outfitted suit, apparently by HammerIndustries—they were so going to talk about that later—and came in for a landing. The crowd cheered, and Tony waved while he whispered to Rhodey about his suspicions, but he barely had time to ask Hammer about Vanko before Rhodey was aiming a gun at him.

"That's not me, go!" Rhodey shouted, and then the chase was on.

Tony took off through the roof, leading Rhodey and half of Hammer's other drones out and away from civilians while he tried to hack back into Rhodey's system. The whole thing was a disaster; the software was overwritten, he was locked out of the mainframe, and Rhodey was shooting at him while the other drones destroyed the Expo. They seemed intent on Tony and no civilians though, even the ground-bound ones, so that was one small point in Tony's favor.

Falling buildings and broken glass seemed to be causing the most trouble, and luckily Tony still had communications with Rhodey through the suit's intercom system. They played chase for a while until Tony managed to thin out the herd and Natasha rebooted Rhodey's suit, giving him Rhodey back, which ultimately turned the tides in their favor. Vanko eventually showed up in a suit of his own, some electric monstrosity complete with a pair of those whips he seemed to favor. It was rough going, but with Rhodey at his side they managed to take him down.

There was the slight problem of the drones blowing up after they killed Vanko, but Tony got to Pepper in the nick of time, snatching her right before a nearby drone exploded. They touched down on a rooftop with Rhodey, and she proceeded to read him the riot act. She threatened to quit, he pulled the Peter card, Rhodey called him a dick.
It was surprisingly par for the course.

Less than 24 hours later, Tony was being hauled down into some bunker for SHIELD to debrief him. Bored and left alone, he swiped the folder titled "Avengers Initiative: Preliminary Report" and moved to open it because, really, why would they have left him alone with it if they didn't expect him to read it?

Then, of course, Nick entered and swiped it back. He handed him the folder of Romanov's assessment of him instead, told him to go ahead and read it. Tony flipped through to the end.

"'Personality overview, Mr. Stark displayed compulsive behavior'—though in my own defense, that was last week—'was prone to self-destructive tendencies'—I was dying, if you recall, and I wasn't that bad, I rode a racecar and sold some art, hardly the worst things I've done—'and had a textbook case of narcissism'—okay, agreed—'but has experienced remarkable growth in maturity in the past six months alone and it is my belief he will continue to do so. Recruitment assessment for Avengers Initiative: Iron Man, yes. Tony Stark, yes.' Why are these separate? Hey, wait, the compulsive behavior and destructive tendencies was before I was dying?"

"Before Peter," Nick corrected, "We were cautious about you, Mr. Stark. We still are, but we believe you've become stable enough to be a valuable member of our team."

"You want me in your boyband."

Tony was frozen for a moment. He knew what his answer should be, no matter how much he may have wanted otherwise. He was a father; someone else's needs came before his own now.

"I can't."

"You what?"

"Being a superhero would be...great, it would, and I hope you get your team together, but that would mean always being at the ready, and I can't just leave Peter alone every time you call. He comes first."

"We're prepared for that eventuality, we have agents who-

"Believe it or not, some random assassin of yours is the last person I would leave Peter alone with. Well, okay, other than that asshole Hammer."

"You're saying no."

"It would seem no," Tony winced.

"A consultant, then, a specialist," Nick compromised, "We call you in for nothing less than the fate of the world."

"That's a bit dramatic."

"You'd be surprised."

"Yeah," Tony found himself nodding. "Yeah, alright. Tell you what. I'll be your special consultant whatever, but I want a favor in return. Rhodey and I are being honored in Washington, and we need a presenter."

It was worth the prick of pain when Senator Stern jabbed him with the medal to see the look on his
face as he had to tell the reporters that Tony Stark was a national treasure.
Chapter 3

It was two and a half years until the world was ending and Iron Man was called to duty.

Those two and a half years trumped every other year of Tony's life combined. Peter was almost four now, curious and intelligent and talkative as all hell. He was still on the short side, probably always would be, but was otherwise hitting all the right growth marks and developmental milestones.

Peter had started morning preschool, a terrifying and altogether foreign experience for Tony. He'd had Pepper and Natasha each vet the schools, before going in himself to make the final decision. The principal of Sunnyside Center, the final choice, was about ready to wet his pants by the end of the whole process. The Pepper-Natasha combo alone was enough to reduce any man to tears, but Tony Stark, Protective Father And Part-Time Superhero, managed to top it.

Peter had adjusted to preschool about as well as any kid, aside from the incident where he told his class that his Daddy was a robot that ran on batteries. That had been an interesting talk, explaining the difference between armor and a robot, between an arc reactor and batteries. It had led to the inevitable.

"Why d'you have one?" Peter questioned, quirking his head at the reactor.

They were sitting in the workshop, Peter pulled up into Tony's lap while he explained that, no, Daddy was not a robot. Peter was the only person Tony had ever willingly let touch the reactor, and Peter had done so enough times before that he had no problem reaching out and placing his hand over it without asking. He ran his fingers over the edges through Tony's shirt, prodding at it experimentally.

"My heart just works a little differently than normal," Tony explained, keeping it simple, "This makes sure it keeps beating just like yours."

"Am I gonna need one too?"

"No, Petey," Tony smiled a bit thinly, resisting the urge to add never, ever, so help me god, "I'm the only one that needs it."

"In the world?"

"In the world. It's what makes me a superhero. It helps run the suit, just like it runs my heart."

"Unca Rhodey has one sometimes," Peter pointed out.

"I made one for Uncle Rhodey so he could be War Machine. He wanted to be cool like me," Tony grinned.

"Can you make me one, Daddy?" Peter bounced excitedly in his lap, and Tony swallowed down the immediate, icy panic that gripped him at the thought of Peter running around in a suit, being shot at and fighting terrorists and-

"You're too tiny, Pete," he joked instead, raising a hand high above Peter's head, "You gotta be this tall to ride the Iron Man ride."

"No fair, 's not my fault 'm short!" Peter scowled, "Aunty Pepper said you gave me short genes."
"And Aunty Pepper is a dirty liar," Tony informed him seriously, "It's all those green eggs and ham you keep eating. They're stunting your growth."

"Are not!"

"Are too. Trust me, I'm a genius, remember? I know these things," Tony grinned, tickling Peter in his sides.

"Da-ha-ad!" Peter laughed, trying to push Tony's hands away and failing, "St-ah-ha-op!"

"Why're you laughing? It's not funny, you're a very tiny little Petey-bird," Tony didn't relent in his tickling, though he made his voice mock-serious, "In fact, I bet I can lift you with one hand."

"Nu-uh!" Peter challenged through gasped laughter, and Tony proved it, hoisting Peter up, one hand on the boy's tummy as he pushed him up towards the ceiling.

"Fly, Petey-bird, fly!" Tony chuckled, and Peter flapped his arms. He soon unbalanced himself, and Tony released the hand on Peter's stomach to let him drop into Tony's open arms.

"Caught me!" Peter beamed.

"Always do, Peteroo," Tony winked, and Peter giggled at the rhyme.

It was moments like that he missed something fierce once Peter started preschool. The first month had been rough all around, since Peter had a very difficult time understanding why Daddy had to leave, and Pepper had a very difficult time convincing Tony that no, Peter should not be homeschooled just because Tony was clingy. Peter was friendly and made friends rather quickly however, and soon enough, Tony found himself on made a number of friends, but he had two close ones: Mary Jane Watson, a girl in his preschool class, and Harry Osborn, from his soccer league.

Well, if it could really be called "soccer". It was a bunch of four-year-olds chasing a ball around in the grass for a half hour, but hey, exercise meant Peter slept like an angel and didn't kick Tony in his sleep as per usual, so in Tony's opinion, soccer was great. The press mocked him about becoming a "soccer mom" for a while—and okay, yes, he might have been a little loud in his cheering, but shut up, Peter was awesome—until Tony decided to have a little fun back.

When he showed up to the next game in a red and gold van with the moniker *Iron Van* painted on the side, the press officially gave up trying to embarrass him about his domesticity.

Which was fine by him, because Tony still didn't have a shy bone in his body. He'd never been embarrassed about his drunken stunts, and he sure as hell wasn't embarrassed about driving Peter to soccer practice or arranging playdates or whatever else it was they thought was strange "the formerly notorious Tony Stark" was doing. Eventually, the tabloids had to give in and concede the fact most people had long since realized: this was not a new phase of Tony's, a shtick he was trying for publicity.

Tony had long since committed himself to Peter, 110%.

So the team of armed bodyguards outside Sunnyside Center during morning sessions surprised no one, or if it did, the principal was smart enough not to comment. There was no compromise on that; Tony went on dangerous missions and had enemies around the world. He was not leaving his son unattended with strangers without protection when you had to be brain-dead and illiterate not to know that there wasn't anything more precious to Tony in all the world than Peter and his well-being.
For more than just the safety concerns—though that made him nervous too—Tony had struggled
with letting Peter go off to preschool. Peter could be challenging, and he certainly had some strong
opinions and a mouth to go with it, but Tony was accustomed to being the only constant in Peter's
life.

Don't get him wrong, Peter adored his Uncle Rhodey and Uncle Happy and Aunt Pepper and even
Aunt Natasha, who after a couple months, Tony had learned to trust as well. But Tony…Tony was
omnipresent, the end all be all of Peter's world. Tony was the one who fed him, who potty-trained
him, who put him to bed every night and woke up with him every morning. It was Tony who took
him for trips into the city for new books and clothes and school supplies, Tony who pushed him on
the swings and caught him at the end of the slide at the park, Tony who patiently took him to the zoo
over and over and over again to see the spider exhibits even though they never changed.

It was Tony who planned and prepared Peter's riotously fantastic birthday parties every year, who
took him to the mountains on winter weekends to go sledding, Tony who caved one memorable
fourth of July and took Peter to Disneyworld to see the fireworks like he'd been begging for. Okay,
there were armed guards following twenty paces back on that particular trip, but it had still been
about Tony-n-Pete, the inseparable duo.

It was Tony who knew all Peter's favorite foods (apples without the skin, crunchy peanut butter on
anything, green scrambled eggs and ham), all his favorite toys (his massive train set in the shop, the
plastic backhoe that was big enough for him to sit on, any of the books where he could feel things on
the pages), all his little quirks (still sucked his thumb, scrunched up his nose when he was confused,
always forgot number 16 though he could count past twenty now) and the thousands of other things
that made Peter who he was.

Tony still had Iron Man missions and meetings and tech work to do, but very rarely did he let it take
away from time that could be spent with Peter. Iron Man missions were planned and detailed to the
letter. Before preschool they were executed during mid-day so most of the time Tony was gone Peter
would be napping, but now he just went while Pete was in school.

Meetings were unavoidable, but usually short and often video-conferenced from home while Tony
played with or fed Peter. It wasn't as if the board had ever really required or received his full
attention, even when he'd been CEO. Dangerous tech work was done at night, but when he was just
fiddling around Peter came to the workshop with him and played in his area, or as Peter called it, "his
lab"—the area was still sectioned off with bulletproof glass, but it had been expanded and filled with
more interesting things to do, a play-doh area and a make-believe kitchen and a huge, winding train
set he'd gotten one Christmas that he adored. Peter was more than capable of getting in and out of
this room on his own since it wasn't locked, but JARVIS alerted Tony if—when, really—Peter came
out.

Because though Peter usually gave him a little while to work, eventually the perpetually curious boy
couldn't help but wander out to ask what Daddy was working on now. Tony had been a bit worried
at first, thinking that Peter would get bored, but Peter seemed to have the same curious, tech-loving
streak Tony did, and loved when Tony let him watch him work. Peter had a chair of his own in the
lab, one that boosted him high enough to see, and when Tony wasn't doing anything too dangerous,
Peter loved nothing more than to sit on the chair, watching intently and listening seriously while
Tony explained what he was doing.

A high majority of it probably shot right over Pete's head, but the fact that he was interested at all
made Tony impossibly proud. He tried to come up with projects they could do together whenever he
could, fun experiments he and Peter could put together, anything to show him how cool science was.
Tony had promised himself he wouldn't push Peter into science and tech work like Howard had him,
but Peter genuinely seemed to love it. If the constant begging to go to the workshop was any
indication, Peter wasn't exactly feeling pressured.

Peter had a big boy bed now, but still slept with Tony more often than not. He hated sleeping in the
dark, since he'd grown up with Tony's arc reactor as a nightlight. Though Tony had bought Pete
eight different night lights, Peter claimed none of them kept away the bad dreams like Daddy's
reactor, which had instantly melted every last bit of Tony's resolve to get Peter to sleep in his own
bed.

He knew that, at some point, Peter was going to have to learn to sleep on his own, but for now he
gave in to the selfish part of him that wanted to cling to his baby boy while he could. Peter was still
very affectionate, always had been, but he was opinionated and sassy and Tony was quite sure he
would hit the "Daddy is the most embarrassing person ever to exist" stage soon enough, so Tony
would take as much affection now as he could.

Over the years, Natasha proved invaluable. Tony had been incredibly wary about trusting her after
their false start, and for a few months after the fact, wouldn't dare leave her alone with Peter. He had
Rhodey and Pepper and Happy to help with Pete, his inner circle, his little family of trust, and he'd
been quite convinced he didn't want her to be any part of it.

Slowly but surely, however, his mind changed. Once she dropped the sweet-as-pie Natalie Rushman
act around him, he found he liked her a lot more. She had a dry wit not unlike Pepper, a ruthless
efficiency he could definitely appreciate, and once she started providing backup every so often on
Iron Man missions, he was sold.

She was not, in fact, a kid's person, as she'd once claimed to win his trust. She did genuinely like
Peter, however, who adored her in return. She had stayed undercover as his assistant for another two
months, before informing him that SHIELD was ending the surveillance on him and putting her back
on general rotation.

They stayed in touch—not friends, exactly, that was too weird a term for them, but, well, teammates,
would probably be the best term. She came to Peter's birthday parties and the annual Christmas party,
but other than that, they saw each other when she occasionally helped out with recon for his
missions, and he helped provide backup firepower for hers; soon enough, they had a relationship that
worked well for the both of them.

Tony didn't hear from Nick directly again, not for two and a half years, though Coulson checked up
on him at least once a month. He displayed a strange interest in Peter, something that made Tony
wary until Coulson made some off-hand comment about 'nothing like on Supernanny', and he
realized that the agent just thought his kid was awesome.

Well, well-behaved would probably be the word Coulson would use, but Tony preferred to think it
was the former, because, duh, Peter totally was.

He didn't mind Coulson so much after that. They had a banter-y sort of thing going on, not quite a
friendship, but not quite not, which seemed to be par for the course with SHIELD agents.

Coulson used him for everything from helping design and revamp a Helicarrier for them, fixing some
of the more prevalent bugs in their system—not without leaving himself a backdoor of course, but
then, they had to have expected that, which was basically permission—and providing them with
aerial recons when they needed it and couldn't authorize one themselves.

Coulson just sort of showed up from time to time, generally making himself weird but useful, and
Tony eventually got used to SHIELD people just appearing in his life from time to time.
Then, two and a half years after he became a consultant, fifteen months after the Avenger Initiative was scrapped, and the night before he planned to unveil Stark Tower as a beacon of self-sustaining, clean energy, Nick Fury dropped him a line.

"We're calling you in."

"Well doesn't that just make me feel warm and fuzzy inside?" Tony wheeled around in his chair to face the holoscreen, one arm around Peter in his lap. They were in the middle of putting together their latest project, but it would stay. He patted Peter's hand to get his attention, "Do you remember Nick Fury, Pete?"

"No," Peter mumbled, going all shy and quiet like he did these days when confronted with a stranger.

"Be nice, say hi," Tony prompted.

"Hi," Peter muttered, tugging at his shirt.

"There you go," Tony kissed the back of his head, then, "So, Nicky, Nicholas, Nicholai; how're the seven seas treating you?"

"What?"

"Pirate joke."

"I am so not in the mood for your shit, fuck it, I'm calling in Rhodes."

Tony clamped his hands over Peter's ears, warning, "If you swear in front of him again I'll make the Helicarrier play nothing but the Dora the Explorer episodes over the intercoms for a week."

"Noted," Nick snorted, while Peter wiggled out of his grip.

"Da-ad," he complained.

"Sorry Pete, Nicky's got a potty-mouth. Why don't you go play with your diggers?"

"Wanna keep buildin' with you," Peter pouted.

"We will, I just need to talk to him for a minute, okay? I'll be right over, I promise."

Peter nodded, hopping off Tony's lap to go to his area of the New York workshop, and Tony directed his attention back to the screen.

"You're lucky he doesn't like you enough to mimic you, or you'd be learning Spanish for a week."

"Got an opinion on the existence of extraterrestrials?" Nick ignored his threats completely.

"Oh my god, do I get to see Area 51?"

"I'll take that as a yes. What about Norse mythology?"

"Bit fuzzier."

"Best sharpen up," Nick told him, "Agent Coulson is en route to your location, he'll be there by tomorrow to bring you up to speed."
"Am I supposed to be seeing a correlation between aliens and Norse mythology?" Tony raised an eyebrow, but the line was already dead.

The next day, just after Tony finished getting Stark Tower together for the clean energy reveal, Coulson buzzed him.

"Sir, Agent Coulson of SHIELD is on the line," JARVIS informed him.

"I'm not in," Tony waved it off as he landed on the Stark Tower runway, letting JARVIS dismantle the suit as he walked, "I'm actually out."

"Daddy!" Peter came racing down the runway from inside, Pepper scrambling after him.

"I tried to keep him inside-" she began with the harried, put-upon look she usually had when Tony left her alone with Peter.

He'd only been gone twenty minutes, putting together the last necessary pieces for Stark Tower to go clean with arc technology, and Pepper had assured him she could handle twenty minutes. She could, but racing around after a rambunctious Peter was never going to be her favorite pastime.

"No worries," he waved Pepper off, "He knows not to touch the mechanics. Right buddy?"

"Right," Peter nodded emphatically, shifting from foot to foot, waiting anxiously for Tony to get out of the suit.

"Sir, I'm afraid he's insisting," JARVIS told him, and Tony rolled his eyes.

"Grow a spine, JARVIS, I've got a playdate," and then Tony was scooping Peter up into his arms for a hug, "Miss me, baby?"

Peter nodded happily while Tony let him settle on his hip. He kept one arm around Tony's neck as he put his thumb in his mouth, and Tony crossed over to where Pepper was now examining the Tower specs on a screen.

"Children his age shouldn't suck their thumbs," Pepper pointed out, and Tony waved her off while Peter shot her a sulky look.

"He's fine, he'll grow out of it. How do we look?"

"Levels are holding steady," she replied, squinting at the screen, "I think."

"Of course they are, I was directly involved," Tony chuckled, "Which brings me to my next question: how does it feel to be a genius?"

"Well, I really wouldn't know, would I?" she rolled her eyes at him.

"Please, all of this? Came from you."

"All of this came from that," she tapped his reactor, and Tony resisted the urge to flinch.

"Give yourself some credit, this is your baby we're talking about."

"It's called Stark Tower, isn't it? This was your baby."

"No, this is my baby," Tony made a show of giving Peter a big, loud kiss on the cheek just to embarrass him. Right on cue, Peter squirmed and complained, shoving Tony away.
"Da-ad! I'm not a baby," Peter huffed.

"Don't be silly, you're always gonna be my baby," Tony just kissed him again, and Peter wiggled out of his arms, going to pick up one of his books instead. He couldn't read yet, though he recognized some words, but he liked to flip through books and pretend he could. Tony called after him with a chuckle, "Upside down, Pete."

"I know," Peter huffed, waiting to turn the book right-side up until he thought Tony wasn't looking.

"Little sassmonster," Tony grumbled, and Pepper gave him a knowing look.

"He's yours, what were you expecting?"

"Polite, quiet, charming?" Tony tried.

"Try short and sassy."

"I'm offended-" Tony began, but Peter, who was apparently still listening, interrupted to complain.

"Stark's aren't short, we're c'mpact," he declared, sticking out his tongue at Pepper before looking to Tony for approval.

"That's right," Tony nodded proudly with a grin.

"I see you've been teaching him the art of the last word," Pepper mused.

"Of course. It's very important."

"Right up there with AC/DC and Black Sabbath lyrics, I'm sure."

"Boy needs to know his basics."

"Sir, the phone, I'm afraid my protocols are being over-written," JARVIS warned.

"Stark, we need to talk," Coulson put himself through to Tony's phone, and Tony made a face.

"You have reached the life model decoy of Tony Stark, please leave a message."

"This is urgent."

"Then leave it urgently."

But Coulson was already coming through the elevator.

"Curity beach!" Peter pointed at Coulson accusingly, meaning to say 'security breach', just like Tony'd taught him.

"Amusing as that always is," Coulson just rolled his eyes, "We need to talk."

"Phil, come in," Pepper welcomed him, and Tony raised an eyebrow.

"Phil? His first name is 'Agent'."

"We need you to look this over, soon as possible."

"I don't like being handed things," Tony shrugged it off, though Pepper just smiled.
"Great, I love being handed things, let's trade."

She took it, only to pass it right on to Tony, who grumbled.

"Official consulting hours are between 8 and 5 every other Thursday."

"This isn't a consultation."

"Is this about the Avengers?" Pepper questioned, then, immediately, "Which I of course know nothing about."

"Daddy gonna be a s'perero?" Peter piped up, the word 'Avenger' enough to warrant attention.

"I see you took the confidentiality agreement seriously," Coulson's face gave away nothing.

"Pepper's a genius, and like I'm not going to tell Peter," Tony just snorted at the ridiculous idea.

"But we gonna build?" Peter frowned.

Tony had promised when he finished getting Stark Tower on the up and up they'd have some fun in the New York workshop. He had a cool new project for Peter, and had been hinting about it all week as a present if Peter behaved himself while Tony finished what he needed to.

"Soon, Petey, I promise," Tony said, then to Coulson as he noted the 'A' on what he'd been handed, "The Avengers initiative was scrapped. And I thought we agreed I was on reserve."

Before Coulson could even reply, Tony flicked his hands, throwing all the information he'd been given up on holographics. The screens were divided, showing images of Bruce Banner, a name Tony recognized from the news a while back, turning into the Hulk, images of some blonde guy with the moniker "Thor" wielding a hammer and leveling a town, and then, right in the middle… Captain America.

Holy shit, they'd found him.

"Looks like my cue to head out, you've got homework. I'll be in D.C. if you need me," Pepper noted, watching the screens with wide eyes. She gave Peter a hug goodbye, then was out the door with Coulson, "Any chance you're going by La Guardia?"

They bantered in the background, but Tony was still captivated by the images in front of him. The elevator dinging to signal Coulson and Pepper had left startled him out of his daze, and he turned to go pick up Peter.

"I'm sorry buddy, but Daddy's got work to do, we'll have to play in the workshop another time. You can come watch me work, or I can put on a movie or something for you to watch in the playroom, what do you want?"

"Wanna watch," Peter insisted, so Tony packed up his reading and they headed downstairs.

When his sixth punching bag of the hour went flying across the room, Steve conceded that he may have had a few more anger issues than he'd let on.

The therapist SHIELD had him seeing probably wasn't aware. There were some things you just couldn't talk about. So he stumbled alone between grief and rage, depression and anger, with a heavy sense of confusion just to make it all the worse. Some days he felt so crippled by the loss of
everything he'd ever known he could barely bring himself to get out of bed, others he was too furious
to do anything but hit and kick and punch and destroy something just to keep himself from
screaming.

On the worst of days, they tag-teamed him; insatiable, hot and heady rage drove him to tearing apart
punching bags until his fists bled, while grief holed up in his chest, tight and mind-numbing until he
couldn't see anything that wasn't a memory.

It wasn't the worst day he'd had, but it was one of them, when Director Nick Fury approached him in
the gym at 3 in the morning.

"Trouble sleeping?"

Steve clamped down on his irritation at having to talk to someone. He'd been hoping to just beat the
shit out of something until he was weary enough to collapse into bed and stop thinking, but it seemed
that wouldn't be happening. He hit the bag a little harder while Nick talked, hoping to stop himself
from taking it out on the Director. Steve was irrationally angry at everything these days, but he'd so
far managed to contain it to his mind.

"Slept for 70 years, sir," he grunted, "Think I've had my fill."

"Then you should out," Nick pointed out, crossing the room, "Celebrating, seeing the world."

Steve punched the bag harder, because didn't that just make him want to scream. Celebrating what,
exactly? The loss of his entire world? The death of everyone he'd ever known? That he'd survived?
This didn't feel like survival. This felt like a joke.

It seemed the Director was here to speak to him, so he moved away from the punching bag to the
bench, unwrapping his tape.

"I went under, the world was at war. I wake up, they say we won. They didn't say what we lost."

"We've made some mistakes along the way," Nick admitted, extending a folder to him, "Some very
recently."

"You here with a mission, sir?" Steve glanced at it, hardly interested. He doubted they had any use
for some relic like him, and he wasn't interested in a pitiable attempt to make him feel like they did,
"Trying to get me back in the world?"

"Trying to save it," Nick corrected, opening the folder and pushing it forward.

The tesseract.

Steve needed to sit down.

He sat on the bench, accepting the folder and flipping through its contents.

"HYDRA's secret weapon," he muttered.

"Howard Stark fished that out of the ocean while he was looking for you," Nick told him, and Steve
looked up. Howard had looked for him? Steve appreciated it, but he wondered why, when by all
accounts he should have been dead, "He thought—well, we think—that the Tesseract could be the
key to unlimited sustainable energy. That's something the world sorely needs."

"Who took it from you?"
Steve handed the folder back, unable to keep his face clear of a disapproving frown; SHIELD shouldn't have had it in the first place, and for this exact reason. If someone had it, someone else wanted it. If it could be used for good, it could be used for evil.

"He's called Loki. He's not from around here. There's a lot we'll have to bring you up to speed on if you're in," Nick sighed, "The world has gotten even stranger than you already know."

"At this point I doubt anything would surprise me," Steve moved to go pack up his things.

He had thousands and thousands of dollars in backpay from the military that he could use by swiping a thin plastic rectangle through another plastic device with a tiny screen, he had a mobile telephone that could call anyone in world from anywhere in the world, and he was alive after essentially committing suicide seventy years prior. He certainly didn't know much of anything about this new world, mostly because he couldn't find any desire to learn, but he lacked the energy to find anything truly surprising.

"Ten bucks say you're wrong," Nick shook his head, "There's a debriefing packet waiting for you back in your apartment. Is there anything you can tell us about the tesseract that we ought to know now?"

"You shoulda left it in the ocean."

The debriefing packet they left him was…interesting reading, to say the least. Steve read it all, about the Hulk, about Thor and Loki, about Iron Man. Or should he say, Tony Stark. Steve wondered about him, to say the least. He'd gotten another debriefing packet when he'd first been unfrozen, and he'd debated contacting the Stark heir, asking about what had happened to his late friend. The packet had been thin though, just enough information to know that Howard Stark had died in a car accident, leaving Tony as his surviving seventeen year old.

There had been a phone number and an email, but Steve had no idea what he would have said over the phone, and had yet to figure out the internet, so both options were out. He could have asked someone to teach him, since he technically owned a computer and had an agent assigned to teach him everything he'd missed in the future, but the thing was, Steve didn't want to know. He wasn't ready to truly be a part of this world. It felt like giving up, and that wasn't something he'd ever done before.

So the part about him being Iron Man was a surprise, but Steve found himself hesitant to read any more. He skimmed the basics, something about being kidnapped, creating an arc reactor, whatever that was, and the Iron Man suit from it. Steve knew he should read more, but he didn't want to. As soon as he read something about drunken philandering, playboy ways, reckless behavior, he went and picked up a different file.

It struck too close to Howard for Steve's comfort, and he wasn't ready to face that.

Besides, he supposed it didn't matter if he read about Tony now or later. The man was only a consultant and reserve member, and as far as Steve knew, hadn't been called in. Tony was connected to both Steve's past and his future, and Steve knew that if ever did manage to adjust to this seventy-years-in-the-future business, Tony would be a good person to turn to.

Steve just…couldn't, yet.

He was on something called a "quinjet" headed to a "helicarrier" when he met Agent Coulson, who was very welcoming, if perhaps a bit…gushing. When they landed, he met Agent Romanov, who he liked a bit better. She reminded him vaguely of Peggy—God Almighty, just thinking her name alone
still ached something fierce—part of it was the short, curled hair, part of it was the red lips, though not as red as hers, but most of it was the way she carried herself. She was confident and capable, and she looked to be no man's fool.

He met Dr. Banner shortly after, and made it a point to shake the man's hand, show no fear. He was just a man who'd made a mistake, a mistake that had indirectly been Steve's fault. Then they were heading into the air, and Steve found he could still be surprised after all.

There wasn't much for him to do just yet, so he spent his time with Agent Coulson, who seemed to appreciate it most. He agreed to sign his trading cards, internally disgusted that they'd made trading cards at all. He hadn't been a...superhero, or whatever they were calling him. He'd been a soldier, and a damn good one. He'd died for his country, and they'd dressed him up as a commercialized poster boy on a trading card, turned Bucky—and it hurt, it still hurt, it would always hurt—into an acrobatic twelve year old.

Steve hated the future.

"Captain?" the Director's voice distracted him from his thoughts, "You're up."

Then he was off to apprehend this Loki character, apparently in Stuttgart, Germany. The suit was new, all flashy and spangly and a heck of a lot tighter than he remembered. He managed to wiggle himself into it, wondering in the back of his mind if he'd be able to remember where all the dang zippers were at the end of all this.

In the end, fighting Loki was as disturbingly familiar as it was foreign.

Loki was dressed in gold and green with a shiny scepter, a golden horned helmet on his head. He was strange, but in a way that was vaguely familiar. Schmidt's face had been nothing but a red skull and he'd been intent on taking over the world; Loki was an alien that dressed funny with the same goal.

There would always be strange people doing evil things, they were just different kinds of strange.

Steve hit ground shield up, just in time to block an energy blast that reminded him eerily of Schmidt's weapons. He gestured for the man to get down before engaging with Loki.

"The last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everyone else," he chuckled, a touch darkly, "We ended up disagreeing."

"The soldier," Loki snarled, apparently knowing of him, "The man out of time."

"I'm not the one who's out of time," Steve shot back, not pausing to let the comment sit and sting.

Agent Romanov ordered Loki to stand down from the Quinjet, but Loki just shot at it. The Quinjet dodged and weaved while Steve went after Loki himself. He got in a few solid punches, but he was out of practice—seven decades out of practice—and Loki almost got the better of him.

Then, out of nowhere, something started playing.

It was loud and scratchy, and Steve couldn't pin down the source. He startled, looking around for the sound. He supposed it was, was music, he could hear instruments and something that might have been singing, but frankly it sounded more like yelling. He'd never heard music come from anywhere but a record player or the radio, and he'd never heard any that loud, but the future was a strange place, and he supposed if they could build something like the Helicarrier they could broadcast music too.
Loki, thankfully, seemed startled as well, which bought Steve enough time to recover from his own reaction and make to go after Loki again. At least, he was going to, until a metal suit swooped in out of the sky like a missile, blasting Loki back with some kind of energy. Loki went flying into the steps behind them, and the suit engaged a number of other weapons, popping out from all sorts of places.

"Make your move, reindeer games," the voice is metallic, a bit robotic, and Steve was a bit awed.

He'd never seen anything like it in his life.

"Mr. Stark," he acknowledged when Loki raised his hands in surrender.

"Cap'n."

They didn't speak again until they were on the Quinjet, Loki in custody. Steve eyed Tony carefully, trying to get a read on him. The man had removed his helmet, revealing tousled dark hair, brown eyes, and a styled beard. He was handsome, in a purely objective sort of way, and he seemed preoccupied, fidgeting as he watched Loki, who had remained silent so far. Steve spoke up, assuming Tony was thinking along the same lines he was.

"I don't like it."

"What?" he glanced up, "Rock of Ages giving up so easily?"

Steve didn't know what 'Rock of Ages' was, some sort of reference to Loki he didn't understand, but he got the meaning of what Tony had said.

"I don't remember it being that easy," Steve shook his head, remembering how Loki had almost outmatched him, "This guy packs a wallop."

"Still, you are pretty spry for an older fellow," Tony chuckled, giving him an assessing look that lingered in places that made Steve uncomfortable. He frowned, wondering what Stark thought he was doing being so…open about it, but didn't mention it. Not that he could of, since the other man was already talking again, "What's your thing, Pilates? I can barely keep up with Peter without needing a gallon of water and bed rest afterwards, if you've got a secret I want in."

"What?" Steve questioned, lost after 'Pilates'. Was Peter a SHIELD agent he didn't know, or another Avenger he hadn't met yet?

"It's like calisthenics," Tony shrugged, "You might've missed a couple things, y'know, doing time as a Capsicle."

It probably wasn't meant to be an insult, but there was still a large part of Steve that was angry with the world, and the words were just a little too off-hand for his liking. That, and the way the man had been looking at him, were enough to make Steve go on the defensive.

"Fury didn't tell me he was calling you in," he said at last.

"Yeah," Stark just snorted, unsurprised, "There's a lot of things Fury doesn't tell you."

Thunder and lightning cracked overhead out of nowhere, and Steve caught Loki looking a bit… anxious. It was more of a reaction they'd gotten out of him the rest of the trip, and Steve raised an eyebrow at him.

"What's the matter, scared of a little lightning?"
"I'm not overly fond of what follows."

What?

He looked to Stark, who seemed just as confused, so at least it probably wasn't another future reference he didn't understand. Then something slammed into the roof of the Quinjet, startling Loki badly. Within a minute, Stark had his helmet back on and was opening the hatch to go investigate. Instead, the alien known as Thor used it to enter the aircraft, slam his hammer into Stark's chest and sending him flying back into Steve, forcefully rip Loki out of his bindings, and fly off with him.

Though Steve had read the reports of Thor's strength and flight, he was still flabbergasted.

"And now there's that guy," Stark sighed, disentangling himself from Steve.

"Another Asgardian?" Natasha questioned from the front.

"That guy's a friendly?" Steve grunted, standing up. Getting hit in the chest with the Iron Man suit was not a pleasant experience.

"Doesn't matter. If he frees Loki or kills him, the tesseract's lost," Stark turned to leave, and Steve tried to stop him.

"Stark, we need a plan of attack," Steve pointed out.

"I have a plan. Attack."

And then Tony was gone, taking off out the open hatch. Steve sighed aggressively, because great, it turned out no Stark knew how to take suggestion very well.

"I'd sit this one out, Cap," Natasha warned him.

"I don't see how I can," Steve just grabbed a parachute and tried to strap it on. He tried to slide it up, but that didn't work so well, so he went to pull it on one arm at a time, but that didn't work either. He tried sliding again and eventually got it, but it didn't really go up as smoothly as he'd been hoping. Why was everything so unnecessarily complex these days? All the straps and zippers and cords-

"These guys come from legends, they're basically gods," she insisted, and Steve just shook his head.

"There's only God, ma'am," this century or the next, Steve knew one thing, one thing no alien with some thunder or a magic stick was going to change, "And I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that."

Steve grabbed the shield and took off out the open hatch, following Stark's trail of smoke. When he finally touched down, Stark and Thor were going at it, energy blasts and hammer smashes all but leveling the forest around them. He tossed the shield between his supposed-to-be-teammates to get their attention.

"Hey! That's enough," he jumped down from the ridge, addressing Thor, "Now I don't know what you plan on doing here-"

"I've come to put an end to Loki's schemes," Thor interrupted.

"Then prove it. Put the hammer down."

"Ah, yeah, no, bad call, he loves his hammer-" Steve only had Stark's brief warning before Thor smashed the hammer against Stark, sending him back in the trees.
"You want me to put the hammer down?" Thor roared the challenge, enraged.

He leapt up, slamming his hammer down onto Steve's shield.

The resulting blast resounded throughout the forest, leveling everything in the area, and sent them both flying backwards. They all struggled to their feet, and it was clear the fight had left them all. Thor consented to return Loki's custody to them if they let him come aboard, and Stark complained that there had been no need for a hammer to the chest, him joining them had been the plan.

Loki was held captive aboard the Helicarrier now, in a large sealed container they could drop out of the sky if necessary. His scepter had been taken with Thor's assistance, and now they listened as Director Fury spoke to Loki. Loki didn't give much away from what Steve could tell, just taunted the Director about "real power".

Loki was clearly going to drag this out, and Steve told the others as much. He questioned Thor about what Loki's play would be like, and Thor told them of the "chitauri", Loki's army. Steve wondered aloud about Loki's intentions; capturing him had been easy, and he certainly wasn't leading any armies from there.

Then Stark was blowing into the room, having de-suited, taking it over in a matter of seconds. He told Thor no hard feelings and that he had a mean swing, pointed out some guy playing a "galaga"—Steve wasn't quite sure what that was, but he looked around it didn't seem to be a cause for concern so he kept his mouth shut—then went off a science spiel Steve couldn't quite follow. In a weird sort of way it was kind of comforting—he was entirely sure he wouldn't have followed it back in his time, either. It was genius level stuff, and it was clear the rest of the room wasn't following either, aside from Dr. Banner, who Stark shook hands with, claiming to have finally met someone who spoke English.

"Is that what just happened?" Steve questioned to himself.

Then the Director came in, informing them all that Dr. Banner was only there to find the cube, and that Stark was only there to help with that for the time being. Steve pointed out they should start with the scepter, which may have been magical, but worked an awful lot like a HYDRA weapon.

"I don't know about that, but I'd sure like to know it turned two of the sharpest men I know into his own personal flying monkeys."

"Monkeys?" Thor questioned with a frown, "I do not understand."

"I do!" Steve perked up without meaning to, having spent too much time around Stark and his endless slew of references Steve didn't grasp, "I understood that reference."

He couldn't help it; he turned around in his chair to look to Stark. He wasn't sure if he was trying to prove a point or receive approval, but the way Stark's eyes rolled into the back of his head made Steve feel small, and he ducked his head.

"Shall we play, doctor?" Stark ignored him, turning to Dr. Banner instead, and they were off.

Steve finished up the meeting, talked to Director Fury a bit more about the intel they had, then went to seek out Stark and Dr. Banner in the labs. He wasn't looking for Stark specifically, or anything, he just wanted to know what they had.

He walked in on Stark poking Dr. Banner with a screwdriver.

"Hey! Are you nuts?"
"Jury's out," Tony shrugged, ignoring him to question Dr. Banner, "You really have got a lid on it, haven't you? What's your secret? Mellow jazz, bongo drums, huge bag of weed?"

"Is everything a joke to you?" Steve insisted, trying to get his attention again. What was with Stark? Poking at Dr. Banner like that was going to get them all killed.

"Funny things are."

"Threatening the safety of everyone on this ship isn't funny," Steve just scowled at him, then, realizing he might have offended the doctor, "No offense, Dr. Ba-"

"No, it's alright," Dr. Banner just waved him off with a hint of a smile, "I wouldn't have come aboard if I couldn't handle pointy things."

"You're tip-toing, big man," Tony just waved the screwdriver at him, "You need to strut."

"And you need to focus on the problem, Mr. Stark," Steve tried to get them back to work.

"You think I'm not?" Tony snorted, "I've got other places to be, Cap, believe me. Think about it, why did Fury call us in now? Why not before? What isn't he telling us? I can't do the equation if I don't have all the variables."

"You think Fury's hiding something."

"He's a spy. Captain, he's the spy. His secrets have secrets," Stark popped a mouthful of blueberries, offering some to Dr. Banner too, "It's bugging him to, isn't it?"

"Uh…" Dr. Banner was clearly stalling, looking at Stark, then at Steve, then back to his work, "I just wanna finish my work here, and…"

"Doctor?" Steve questioned, and Dr. Banner relented.

"A warm light for all mankind. Loki's jab at Fury about the cube."

"I heard it."

"Well, I think that was meant for you," he pointed to Stark, "Even if Barton didn't tell Loki about the Tower it was still all over the news."

"The Stark Tower?" Steve laughed, because he remembered that building. He'd seen it, drawn it even, on one of his better days when he'd gone to a little café downtown and tried to get out in the world. He'd actually liked it, all the sleek angles and smooth edges, easy to draw, but it was Stark's, and something in him wanted to jab at Stark just then, "That big ugly building in New York?"

Stark shot him a dirty glare, and something in him gloated.

"It's powered by an arc reactor, self-sustaining energy source," Bruce just nodded, "That building will run itself for what, a year?"

"Just the prototype," Stark pointed out, turning to Steve, "I'm kind of the only name in clean energy right now is what he's getting at."

"So why didn't SHIELD bring him in on the tesseract project? And what are they doing in the energy building in the first place?"

"I should probably look into that once my decryption program finishes breaking into all of SHIELD's
"I'm sorry," Steve frowned, "Did you say-?"

"JARVIS has been running it since I hit the bridge," Stark shrugged, and Steve didn't know who Jarvis was or how he was doing all this, but he knew it was wrong, "In a few hours I'll know every dirty secret SHIELD has ever tried to hide. Blueberry?"

Steve brushed off the package of blueberries. Part of his mind wondered why, since he was actually kind of hungry, but something in him itched for a fight. He wanted to provoke Stark, rattle his cage a bit. He'd been angry since he'd woken up, but this felt…different. He couldn't put a finger on it. Either way, he just jabbed at Stark again.

"Yet you're confused about why they didn't want you around."

"Oh, they wanted me," Stark snorted, "But I have other priorities."

"More important than the rest of the world?"

"Yes," Tony shrugged simply. Steve paused, furrowing his brow in confusion, but Stark was already talking again, "Besides, an intelligence organization that fears intelligence? Historically, not awesome."

"I think Loki's trying to wind us up. This is a man who means to start a war, and if we don't stay focused, he'll succeed. We have orders. We should follow them."

"Following's not really my style."

"And you're all about style, aren't you?"

"Of the people in this room, which one a, wearing a spangly outfit, and b, not of use?"

It was the first time Stark jabbed back at him, said something meant to be an insult, and it made something in Steve feel ominously pleased in a way he wasn't used to. He'd never been one to appreciate hostility and verbal digs, but he was taking pleasure in this, and it confused him.

"Steve, tell me none of this smells a little funky to you?" Dr. Banner interjected cautiously.

"Just find the cube," he grunted, taking his exit.

Stark's words nagged at him though. As much as he wanted to put the other man down, there was a small part of his brain that pushed through that, that reminded him that it made sense. So he went off to investigate the apparently old-fashioned way; he went looking through different levels and decks of storage until he found crates of weapons, all powered like HYDRA weapons.

He stormed back into the lab, to find Fury chastising Stark for getting into his system. He dropped a weapon down on a lab table just as Stark asked what Phase Two was.

"Phase Two is SHIELD uses the cube to make weapons," he growled, then to Stark with a smirk, "Sorry, computer was moving a little slow for me."

Fury tried to divert him, claim they were collected from HYDRA, but before Steve could begin to tell him he didn't buy it for a minute, that he'd seen HYDRA weapons, that these were new and improved, Stark was showing a screen with the weapon designs, found from SHIELD files.

"I'm sorry Nick, what were you lying?"
Then the room began to fill with people, Thor and Natasha following soon after Steve. Natasha tried to convince Dr. Banner that he should leave the Helicarrier, Dr. Banner was suddenly insistent on staying, demanding to know why SHIELD was building weapons of mass destruction, a damn good question if you asked Steve.

The Director blamed it on Thor, who frankly looked devastated, something about a grudge match that leveled a town, proving that Earth was outmatched by aliens. Thor explained that the tesseract was the only thing that made Earth a target, a signal that Earth was ready for a higher form of war. Stark made a snarky comment about nuclear deterrents calming everything right down, and the Director leveled him with a glare.

"Remind me again how you made your fortune, Stark?"

"I'm sure if he still made weapons-" but Steve didn't get to finish his sentence before Stark interrupted.

"Wait, hold on, how is this now about me?"

"I'm sorry, isn't everything?"

Everything devolved from there. It seemed Steve wasn't the only one with unresolved anger issues and sudden urge to unleash them, because within seconds everyone was arguing with each other.

"Stark, so help me God, you make one more wisecrack-"

"Threat! Verbal threat! I feel threatened-"

"Show some respect-"

Stark seemed particularly adept at getting under his skin, and they were so involved in their own argument that they didn't notice anything until suddenly Dr. Banner was declaring them all a ticking time bomb.

"Why shouldn't the guy let off a little steam?" Stark smirked, and Steve had an irresistible desire to wipe it right off his face with his fists. Then Stark had the gall to place a hand on his shoulder, and Steve smacked it right off.

"You know damn well why, back off."

"Oh, I'm starting to want you to make me," Stark was inching closer into his space, toe to toe, and Steve wanted desperately to go to blows with this man, his whole body itching to move forward.

"Big man in a suit of armor," Steve chose to use verbal blows instead, "Take that off, what are you?"

"Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist," Stark rattled off, almost bored, some rehearsed line that made Steve want to shove him up against a wall, shake a real answer out of him.

"I know guys with none of that worth ten of you," he snarled instead, "You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on the wire, let the other guy crawl over you."

"I think I would just cut the wire."

"Always a way out. You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero. I've seen the footage; the only thing you fight for is yourself. I bet you've never given anyone else a second thought in your life."
Then Stark started *laughing*.

It was abrupt and almost hysterical and out of absolutely nowhere. Steve looked around, and though Thor seemed just as confused, Dr. Banner was chuckling, and Natasha shook her head with a hint of a smile. Steve frowned, not understanding, because even Fury was just shaking his head like Steve didn't get it, like he'd made some funny mistake.

"So you didn't read my file."

"I skimmed," Steve was defensive now, wary.

"Someone's gotta teach you how to skim, Rogers," Stark just laughed again, "Never given anyone else a second thought, huh? Haven't been accused of that one, lately."

"You're the most arrogant person I've ever met," Steve defended his claim, while Stark reached into his back pocket, opening his wallet.

"Meet Peter Stark," plastic slides flipped out, half a dozen pictures of a little boy with dark hair and familiar eyes smiling back at him, "My son. My *first* thought, so no, you're right, suppose I've never given anyone a second one."

"You have a son?" and Steve couldn't keep the incredulosity out of his voice.

"You people are so petty," Thor chuckled, "And tiny."

"Yeah, this is a team," Dr. Banner rolled his eyes.

The others seemed to move on, and Stark was rubbing at his head now, a curious sort of look on his face, but Steve was stuck on the thought that his friend's son had a kid, that the most arrogant, cocky son of a bitch he'd ever met had a *child*.

Then Dr. Banner was getting more and more upset, talking about how he'd gotten low, put a bullet in his mouth only for the Other Guy to spit it out. He got more and more agitated, until he picked up the scepter, and Nick and Natasha's hands went to their guns.

Before anyone could say or do anything more, the locator pinged a location for the cube.

Stark went to suit up, and Steve put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"You're not going alone."

"You gonna stop me?" Stark slapped his hand away.

"Put on the suit, let's find out."

"I'm not afraid to hit an old man."

"Put on. The suit."

Then everything was aflame, the lab exploding and engulfing them all in smoke. Steve suddenly felt…clearer. He reached out and helped Stark up, steadying him and aiming them in the direction they needed to go.

"Put on the suit."

"Yup."
Then they were off, snatching up com links and making their way to engine three for repairs. Stark met him there once he’d put on the suit, rambling off a bunch of science things about a relay panel and telling him what engines were in overload, but it was all just a bunch technology stuff he’d never seen in his life. It looked like it ran on electricity, but that was about all he had to say on the matter. Stark managed to clear out the debris while Steve described the panel best he could. Stark then got into the engine to give it a start, telling Steve to stand by a red lever and pull it when he said so.

A couple of hostiles tried to take Stark out with a grenade, but he deflected it and went after them, doing the best with the weapons he had. He slipped and almost fell off the Helicarrier at one point, but managed to grab a wire and hang on as the carrier fell from the sky.

Stark managed to get the one engine up to speed, but his timing wasn't so great.

"Cap, hit the lever."

"I need a minute here!" Steve tried to climb back up the wire but his gloves were slipping.

"Now," Stark stressed, anxiety clear in his voice.

Steve managed to get back on board just in time to hear Stark's shouts of protest and loud swears as he became a pinball in the engine. He raced to the level and yanked it, and Stark managed to slip free and take out the last shooter before he could land a shot on Steve.

They were back on the bridge when they heard Agent Coulson was down, that the medics had called it. Fury threw bloodied trading cards across the table, and Steve picked one up. They were as stupid and cheesy as he'd thought they'd be, but they'd mattered to Phil.

And he'd never signed them.

They were dead in the air. No communications, no trace on the cube, Banner and Thor were in the wind. Fury admitted they were going to build an arsenal with the tesseract, but that he had been counting on the Avengers. That Phil Coulson had died still believing in that idea, in heroes.

Stark stalked away at that.

Steve couldn't help but follow. He'd figured out—and assumed that Stark had too—that they'd been affected by the scepter somehow. It had messed with their brains, made them more aggressive, more hostile, but he still felt bad for the way he'd egged Stark on.

He wanted to apologize, but he asked about Agent Coulson, instead. It was safer territory, somehow, and he didn't know the man like Stark clearly did. Stark feigned nonchalance, pretending not to know much about him, but the grief was in the lines of his face, the turn of his mouth, and Steve could tell Stark had cared.

Stark became upset, calling the agent an idiot for taking on Loki alone, and Steve just shook his head.

"He was doing his job."

"He was out of his league," Stark just insisted, "He should've waited, he should've…"

Stark trailed off, shaking his head.

"Sometimes there isn't a way out, Tony."
It was the first time Steve had called him Tony. He'd meant to comfort the man somehow, but Tony just shoved him off.

"I've heard that before."

Steve hadn't meant to remind him of earlier, and he figured maybe this was his opening to apologize, but instead he opened his fat mouth.

"Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?"

"We are not soldiers," Tony just snarled, something in his eyes Steve couldn't quite identify, there and gone in a flash. He glanced away, caught sight of a bloodstain on a wall, then looked back, onto something else.

He started talking, almost to himself, pulling apart Loki's scheme, piece by piece. There was something about making it personal, hitting them where they hurt, then about Loki wanting an audience to watch, making a show of it.

"-he wants a monument built to the skies with his name plastered on it-"

Steve shot Tony a knowing look, and Tony couldn't help but return it with a look of something Steve couldn't label as anything but pure terror, his face a ghostly pale.

"Son of a bitch."

Tony was on the phone in less than half a minute, shouting at someone called Happy to get Peter—his son, Steve remembered—the hell out of New York, now. Then he was in the suit and blasting away as fast as he could, telling Steve over the com he'd meet them in New York, that he didn't have time to waste here.

Steve wouldn't have protested even if he could have, but Tony was long gone before Steve had time to form a rational thought. He instead went to retrieve Natasha, and Clint, who it turned out was on their side now, and had them suit up. They commandeered a Quinjet—"Son, just don't"—and took off for Stark Tower.

They made it just in time.

A portal had opened above Stark Tower, a bright blue streak of light shooting high into the air. Tony was taking on hostiles when they showed up, doing the best he could, but their numbers were huge. They were scattered across the city, destroying everything they set their sights on. Steve had never seen anything like it, but it seemed this was something new to his teammates as well.

As soon as they were in range of Tony's com link, still in the Quinjet, Steve opened a line. His first question probably should've been about the aliens, but it wasn't.

"Peter?"

There was silence on the line for a long moment, and Steve almost wondered if it was on.

"Safe, out of the immediate danger zone, Happy's working on getting him out of Manhattan. You almost here yet, or what, Steve?" Tony's voice was strange, surprised, and it was the first time he'd called him Steve, probably purely out of the surprise.

Steve figured that was as good a step towards friendship as any.
"I'm glad he's okay. We're coming in now, how's it look?"

"Uh, well, like an alien invasion, you know how it goes. What took you so long anyway, you stop for drive-thru? Swing by Park, I'll line 'em up for you."

Steve lost himself in the battle after that, appreciated the rush of adrenaline and focus of purpose. He could've done without the world hanging in the balance, but he had to admit there was something grand about it all, something that felt right.

It was an alien invasion, and it felt more real than anything else Steve had experienced in this century.

They worked together surprisingly well, better than one would have expected from the way they'd been acting around each other. They were still a bit shaky here and there, but for the most part they were able to get a read on each other's fighting styles and sync up.

They started trusting each other without overthinking it; he took a hit for Natasha without thinking, Clint relied on him for cover without asking, Tony shot at him and expected him to use the shield to throw the beam back at half a dozen chitauri without broadcasting his intentions.

Tony predicted Banner would show, and show he did. They circled up, a true team for the first time, back to back right in the thick of it all. Tony told him to call it, a show of respect for his authority Steve wouldn't have expected from him, but appreciated.

He gave out the orders, and after that, it was just a matter that they kept going. He helped Natasha launch up onto a chitauri cruiser, and she managed to find a way to close the portal. They were about to do so, when Tony came in hot with a nuke ready to blow in less than a minute, telling them to hold it.

"Tony, that's a one way trip."

The photos Tony had shown him of a little boy with dark hair and Tony's eyes flashing through Steve's mind. As far as Steve, as far as Tony knew, Peter could still be in Manhattan, and Steve knew there was nothing else to say.

Tony was going through that portal.

Everything seemed to slow down, everyone looking to Tony, a bright flash of light streaking through the sky as he carried the nuke past the city and up through the portal. The chitauri collapsed, some kind of hive mind Godsend, and they waited. They waited until they couldn't, until a moment more and the rest of chitauri in space would reign down on them, and Steve had to call it.

Tony wasn't coming back.

"Close it."

By some miracle Steve couldn't fathom, Tony slipped through at the last possible second, careening through the sky toward them.

"Son of a gun," Steve murmured, and next to him, Thor began to spin his hammer.

"He's not slowing down."

Thor made to take off, but before either of them could, the Hulk was hurtling through the air, crashing into Tony, plucking him from the sky and protecting him from the fall. Steve ripped off his
faceplate, chucking it aside. Seeing Tony's closed eyes, he listened to the chestpiece, hoping to hear some faint heartbeat through all the armor. The light in his chest had gone dull, and Steve was prepared to rip the armor off when the Hulk roared, and Tony's head snapped forward.

The first word was across his lips before he even took a gasp of air.

"Peter!"

"We won," Steve assured him, "The nuke went through, I'm sure he's safe."

"Right," Tony breathed out, his whole body almost collapsing in relief, "Right, great. Good job, guys. Oh, Jesus, tell me nobody kissed me."

He babbled on, congratulating them, saying they should go out to shawarma, maybe take a day off after this, on and on, and Steve couldn't help but smile. It was probably his first real, honest smile since coming out of the ice, and he gave it to Tony Stark.

Who'd of thought.

They apprehended Loki easily after that; probably their hardest challenge was convincing Clint not to put an arrow through Loki's skull then and there. They really did go for shawarma afterwards, Loki incapacitated, handcuffed, and left to lean against one of the walls while they ate.

They let Thor take both Loki and the tesseract back to Asgard, probably the only thing that put Steve at ease about the whole thing. Fury granted them all a leave of absence, and they split up after that. Steve was the only one to go off on his own, but he was perhaps the only one that needed to. Thor and Loki returned to Asgard, Clint and Natasha went off who knew where, and Tony invited Bruce to stay with him at the Tower. Steve shook hands with Tony before he left, and they parted teammates, if not friends.

"Come by the Tower sometime, Cap," Tony offered, "When your road trip's over, I mean. I'm moving out to New York, and we've got plenty of floors if you ever need a place to stay."

"I'll think about it," Steve promised, "And I'm sorry about the rough start. I know now, I was wrong about you."

"People usually are," Tony grinned, "And I'm pretty sure the tesseract had some influence there. No harm done. Like I said, come out to visit sometime, I'll introduce you to my first thought."

It took Steve a minute to get it, it always seemed to with Tony and his quick wit, but he remembered his comment about Tony never giving anyone a second thought, and Tony coming back that Steve was right, he only gave a first thought, and it was for Peter.

"I'd like that."
Chapter 4

Steve spent four months touring America.

He stayed to edges of society, travelling around the country on his motorcycle with a credit card, the clothes on his back, and not much else. He drifted from motel to motel, and for a while, he'd admit it; he wallowed.

With the battle over and having gone their separate ways, Steve almost felt as if he'd lost everything all over again, and this time there was nothing to stop Steve from drowning himself in self-pity. He probably would have kept on wallowing, dragging his grief with him all through America, if Tony hadn't called him.

When the motel room phone starting ringing, Steve was startled and confused. He knew about telephones, he'd seen them of course, but he hadn't actually worked one before. He picked it up as he'd seen others do, holding it to his ear and speaking into it.

"Hello?"

"Why hello, 'Roger Stevens','" the voice on the other end chuckled, using the name he'd checked himself in under. It had been a few weeks, but Steve recognized the voice almost immediately.

"Tony Stark?"

"The one and only." 

"How…what…this number?" Steve flustered. He'd only checked in three hours ago.

"Very articulate. Genius, remember? I tracked your credit card, it was child's play. Peter'll be doing stuff like this in two years, no problem."

"Your…son," Steve remembered.

"Right-o, daddy-o. So, I'm calling because it has belatedly occurred to me that if you're off touring the world and SHIELD's let you drop off their radar, you're probably not seeing your SHIELD-mandated therapist anymore, am I right?"

"Well—"

"And I'm not saying you have to, or even that you should, since god knows no one's ever been through what you have, and no one can blame you for wanting to disappear for a while. It just occurs to me that you don't really have a whole lot of resources, being new to the world and all, and SHIELD is probably not your first choice for a friendly ear. So. I'm offering mine."

"I—"

"And I know we got off to a rough start, and that you may still hate me or whatever, and that's fine, I'm not saying you need to call me up and tell me all your deep dark secrets and about your dark nights of the soul or whatever, I'm mostly saying that if you, I don't know, don't know how to work something, or get lost, or need help understanding something, you've got a resource."

"Tony, that's—"

"And of course, you're also welcome to come stay with me, Pete and Bruce at the Tower, you and
all the other Avengers have got floors here if you need them. I was rebuilding and I figured hey, we're sort of a team now, and I've got all this empty space I might as well put to use. I don't mean to rush your acclimation to the world or anything either, if you still need time to travel the back roads of the country and, uh, contemplate things, it's fine, you went through something pretty rough, god only knows how I'd handle it—"

"Tony," Steve interrupted forcefully at last, trying not to laugh, "Thank you. For…all of it. I will. Call you, that is. If you don't mind."

He appreciated it more than he could say, probably more than Tony would be comfortable with him expressing. He still felt so horribly alone, and while having someone to call wasn't much, it was something, something Steve desperately needed. The only time he'd felt alive since waking up had been his time with the Avengers, and Tony had been a big part of that.

Over the following months he called Tony more and more. At first it was only when he needed something, and he tried not to abuse it. Then, less than two months after the New York attack, Loki broke free of Asgard and came to wreck havoc on them once more. The Avengers were called to action once again, and they answered.

Loki was easier to take without his chitauri, his chosen army this time being mind-controlled slugs of monstrous proportions. They were messier but less destructive, something Loki failed to calculate, and the Avengers began to work even better together. They were still a pretty chaotic and unpredictable mix off the field, so they split up again afterwards, though Tony took Steve out for lunch. Steve found that they, at least, got along very well when they weren't arguing.

Steve felt something flutter in his chest when Tony teased him now, good-natured and smiling, and he didn't know what to think about that, so he didn't. He hit the road again, not ready to stay still for too long yet, but not before he let Tony drag him to the Museum of Modern Art. Tony had heard mentions of art school in Steve's file—which he'd read, not skimmed, Tony teased—and he claimed it was a must see before Steve left again. They could only spend a few hours since Peter had become exceptionally—and understandably—clingly since the first attack, since apparently he'd seen some of the raw footage, Tony getting thrown around and beaten up and taking a nuke into space.

Not exactly child-friendly, and Tony was still grumpy with Happy about it.

They only had a few hours, but it was some of the most fun Steve had had since waking from the ice. They chatted all through the hours, debating art and battle strategy in the same breath, teasing and prodding at each other good-naturedly like they'd known each other all their lives.

Steve went back on the road after that, in spite of Tony's insistence that he had a floor at Stark Tower anytime, but they started calling each other more often. It turned out Thor had been right about the cube signaling that Earth was ready for a higher form of war, or maybe all the wackos just decided to come out of the woodwork, because soon enough Steve was being called back to New York every other week for some national disaster only the Avengers could handle.

Eventually, Tony and Steve fell into an easy, familiar pattern; save the world, sit through debrief, go out to lunch, spend the afternoon together, part ways. They fought sometimes, on field and off—they were both stubborn and opinionated, and plenty often their views clashed—but they always managed to work through it.

When they weren't saving the world, they were calling each other at least half a dozen times a week, almost everyday. Steve found himself looking for excuses to call, anything to question Tony about, even if he didn't really care about the answer.
He learned about cell phones and the internet and computer programs. Tony walked him through buying and using a cell phone, through buying and setting up an iPod for his runs, and even gave him some playlists to work his way through the years he'd missed. Anytime he heard someone make a reference he didn't understand, he called Tony, long after he learned how to use the google. Tony also recommended books to him that would help him get an objective view of what he'd missed over the decades, a more complete picture of where the world was at now.

Something about being with and talking to Tony loosened the resistance Steve had built up for this world. Before Tony, he hadn't wanted anything to do with the future. He hadn't wanted to learn about what he'd missed, just wanted to stay ignorant of it and pretend it hadn't happened. But that wasn't healthy, and Tony helped him move forward without pushing or forcing.

Some part of him, Steve thought, wanted to impress Tony. He didn't understand why he would feel that way, but the way Tony smiled when Steve got something, even just hearing it in his voice over the phone, made Steve feel…lighter, somehow. Tony made everything easier, and Steve was impossibly grateful for that.

They talked about Peter a lot too, mostly because, as Steve soon learned, Tony couldn't really hold a conversation at any length without mentioning him. Steve didn't mind; Tony was clearly proud, completely in love with his boy, and Steve liked seeing that softer side of Tony.

Later, Tony told him a little about how Peter came to be in his life. He and Steve had been talking more about themselves lately, spending less and less time on whatever Steve's flimsy excuse for calling had been. Steve told Tony stories from his past, told him about Bucky and Peggy, about his brief time in art school, about how Dr. Eskine had believed in him, trusted that he would be a good man.

Tony, in turn, told him about a man named Yinsen, who'd given his life to save Tony's. Tony gave very little detail about his time in Afghanistan, but Steve wasn't surprised and didn't push. Tony mentioned, very briefly, that it was what had changed his mind about fatherhood in the first place, and Steve chose not to say anything else about it. Tony never said directly that he hadn't wanted Peter at first, but it was clear enough from the careful way he chose his words, and Steve let the subject move on to something lighter.

Tony was a fantastic father now, and that was what mattered.

It was sort of embarrassing, so Steve tried not to think about it too much, but he knew this because he'd 'googled' Tony. He'd just been curious about his new friend, and he hadn't expected the onslaught of information. What had been mild curiosity rapidly became an addiction; there was so much information, and he wanted to know. He wanted to know anything and everything about Tony, and he couldn't seem to help himself.

So he sifted through the information, skeptical about anything until at least three other sources backed it up, just as Tony had taught him, but there wasn't any article past around Peter's first birthday that could reasonably claim Tony was anything but a doting father.

Tony himself made it abundantly clear; he couldn't go ten minutes without mentioning the little boy. Tony had Peter say hi over the phone a couple times, if he was around when Steve called—which was always, since Peter had been glued to Tony's hip since the New York attack—saying no more than a shy "hullo" then pestering Tony to let him go play.

Steve found himself growing fond of the child without ever having met him. Peter seemed intelligent and curious, with a snarky attitude to match, very like Tony in many respects.
There was just one problem…

Peter hated Captain America.

Tony couldn't understand it at all. He'd never said two words about Captain America before, but Peter couldn't stand the sight of the star-spangled hero. At first Tony thought it was some sort of "my Daddy's the best hero and all others suck" thing, but Peter adored the others.

He hadn't met most of them yet, aside from Natasha and Bruce, but Peter's new favorite thing was Avengers gear. After the attack, the media had commercialized them, and Peter wanted it all: action figures, bedsheets, plush dolls, stickers, coloring books, you name it. Tony tried to keep it to a minimum, but Peter's bedroom still looked like an Avengers showroom. He'd always had a couple Iron Man toys, but since he'd had the real thing around, it wasn't quite as big a deal as a real live superhero team.

The Hulk was his favorite, and when he finally started sleeping in his own bed, it was wrapped in Avengers sheets with a Hulk plushie to keep him safe. The media had been going back and forth on the Hulk, seemingly unsure if he was a hero or a monster, but Tony put a swift end to any question in Peter's mind. Tony told him that the Hulk was a hero, and not really a monster at all, and that some heroes don't get the respect they deserve but that just made them the most heroic of all.

It helped that Bruce and Peter got along swimmingly. Bruce moved in with them after the attack, choosing to stay in New York and having no other place to stay. Besides, he, like every other member of the team, had a whole floor to their own, so it wasn't like he'd find a better place. For a while, Bruce was cautious about actual physical contact with Peter, still aware of his potential for harm, and Peter was still stranger-shy. Then, Tony had mentioned that Bruce was the Hulk.

Bruce eventually warmed up as well—who wouldn't, with the full force of Peter's adoration turned on them?—and they got along very well. The media didn't know any of the team's identities aside from Tony, but Tony told Peter that Natasha was the Black Widow, and Peter thought it was fantastic that his Aunty Nat was a superhero too.

Peter liked Thor and Hawkeye too, but any Captain America gear was sneered at or thrown away, and Tony absolutely could not figure it out. Peter said Captain America sucked, that he was mean and a jerk and all sorts of other things that Tony had no idea where Peter had gotten. It was about four months after the first attack when Peter called him a bastard, clearly mimicking someone since Tony had never used that word in front of him, that Tony decided it had to end.

Tony hadn't gotten off to the best of starts with Steve, but they'd ended on good terms, and Tony considered him a good man. His first question when they'd met up in New York that day had been to see if Peter was okay; Tony didn't have it in him to hold a grudge for their rough start after that.

So he'd eventually given the guy a call, reminded him that he always had a floor in the Tower, and offered his assistance as Future Guru Extraordinaire. Steve seemed hesitant about calling him at first, but eventually gave in and called him regularly, and now they spent time together whenever Steve was in town to help with the bad guy of the week.

Steve was one of his closest friends, and okay, Tony was mature enough to admit he was kind of sort of attracted to the guy.

Okay, really attracted to him.
Physically speaking, he was the literal peak of human perfection, and the man behind the mask was sweet and charming and kind of a dork and a classic gentlemen and pretty much everything Tony had always considered a total turnoff—if Tony sought out men, it was always the bad boys—but couldn't not find irresistible in Steve.

Steve was...everything. He could be the confident and capable Captain in one minute, shouting out orders and challenging Tony right and left, then charming and sincere Steve the next, with his dry wit and earnest curiosity. They overlapped sometimes, and both sides of Steve could still surprise him, and Tony couldn't have picked a favorite if he wanted to.

So yeah, Tony might of have had a bit of a thing for his friend.

Which only made matters worse that Peter hated him. Which was just beyond strange, because Peter never hated anyone. Sure, he was a kid, he got into arguments with other kids in his preschool sometimes, he could be moody with Tony when he didn't get his way and be upset with Bruce when Bruce said he couldn't help with an experiment, but Peter didn't hate people.

So almost four months after the New York attack, when Peter saw Captain America on tv—some replay of a more recent disaster—and muttered something about "that bastard", Tony was flabbergasted, to say the least. He sent Peter to his time-out room for using a bad word, then gave Steve a call.

"Hello?"

"We have a problem."

"Do we now?"

"Peter just called you a bastard."

"...what?" Steve sounded confused, a bit hurt. He knew that Peter didn't like him for some reason, Tony had complained about it before, but this was definitely an escalation, "Why would he say something like that? Where did he even hear it?"

"I don't know!" Tony threw his hands up, "I don't have a clue where he's getting it. Bruce likes you fine, I haven't said a word other than 'say hi to Steve' when you're on the phone, and the news paints you as nothing less than an angel. I didn't think it was possible not to like you."

"Tony," Steve had that tone of voice that meant he was probably blushing, and Tony just grinned. "I'm serious! So listen, I was thinking, I know you're still out doing that 'see the world you saved' thing, and that's great, but, really Steve, Kansas?"

"Kansas is a part of America too, Tony. Just because it's not New York or California or full of those bustling cities you like so much doesn't mean--"

"Please, you love the energy of big cities too, don't lie. Look, I was going to ask if you were busy, but since you're in Kansas, Dorothy, I know you can't be busy, so why don't you come on back to the wonderful land of Oz already and meet Peter? I'm sure he'd like you if he actually met you."

"I..." Steve seemed to hesitate, and Tony hastened to correct himself.

"I don't mean to push you. If you're not ready, you're not ready. I'm just," he ran a hand through his hair, trying to express something he couldn't even fully identify yet, "You know. Here for you. When you are."
"No, I…I am," Steve sounded more assured now, "I need to stop running away."

Steve refused Tony's offer of a floor in the Tower, something about too much space making him antsy, needing to ease into it—which was ridiculous, but whatever—so he was staying at his old apartment from before Loki's first attack. When Steve got back, Tony spent the afternoon helping him move in, then they headed back to the Tower for lunch, where Steve would finally meet Peter.

Peter was waiting for them when the elevator doors opened.

"You said two hours," Peter had his arms crossed, eyeing Tony seriously. Bruce stood behind him, looking a bit abashed, "Was three."

"Sorry," Bruce chuckled, "He had JARVIS set to tell him when you were on your way up."

"I'm sorry, Petey," Tony chuckled, stepping off the elevator to bend down and ruffle Pete's hair, "We got a little caught up talking. Can you say hi to Mr. Rogers?"

"Hi, Mr. Rogers," Peter smiled shyly from behind Tony's shirt-sleeve, surprising both Tony and Steve.

They exchanged a glance. They'd planned to sit down with Peter, ask him why he didn't like Steve, and explain that it was rude to call people names like that, especially without having met them. They'd thought it would take a few days of Steve being around to get Peter to warm up to him, but…

"Huh," Tony blinked, but Steve didn't miss a beat.

"It's nice to meet you, Peter," Steve squatted down, extending a hand, "I've heard a lot about you."

"You have?" Peter looked at Steve's open hand hesitantly.

"You're all your father talks about," Steve nodded with a smile, "You're very special to him."

"Talks bout you, too," Peter shook Steve's hand at last, and Bruce snickered while Steve shot Tony a curious smile. Tony quickly intervened before Peter could say anything else.

"Well, glad we've got the meet and greet done," Tony stood abruptly, hoisting Peter onto his hip and pointedly not looking at Steve, "Oof, you're getting heavy, Pete."

"Am not," Peter muttered mutinously, still watching Steve warily over Tony's shoulder, "He's bigger 'n me."

"I think your son just called me fat," Steve teased Peter with a raised eyebrow, who blushed and buried his face into Tony's shoulder.

"Yeah, well, I don't have to carry Mr. Rogers around on my hip, so he gets to weigh as much as he wants," Tony laughed to Peter, "You know Pete, Mr. Rogers like to draw. Maybe you'd like to draw with him while I make us lunch?"

"You draw too?" Peter peeked over Tony's shoulder at Steve, who nodded with an easy smile.

"Sure do."

Tony set them up with paper and crayons at the table, while Bruce excused himself to return to his lab and Tony made them all grilled cheese with ham and tomatoes. Tony did his best to not talk too much, let Peter warm up to Steve on his own, and by the time the sandwiches were finished, Peter was drawing a picture of the Hulk while Steve was doing a sketch of the Avengers as a team. Peter
was completely fascinated by Steve's work, and Steve smiled and told Peter he could have it when he finished. Peter, ecstatic at that, had now overcome his initial shyness and was talking avidly to Steve about his fascination with the Avengers.

"An' Hulk smashes stuff with his fists when he gets mad," Peter was informing Steve as he colored in the Hulk's pants with purple, "But he's a good guy, so he only smashes bad guys. Daddy says some heroes dun get the 'spect they deserve, but that makes 'em the biggest heroes of all."

"Your Daddy is a smart man," Steve smiled indulgently, finishing the smooth lines of Clint's bow and glancing up at Tony.

"No," Peter shook his head seriously, almost chastising, "Daddy's a gen'us."

"Of course he is," Steve seemed to be struggling not to laugh.

"Yeah. He builted Dum-E an' You an' Butt'rfling'rs an' JARVIS, all by himself. He won't teach me though," Peter scowled.

"I'm not teaching you how to make a robot until first grade, Peter," Tony interjected sternly as he gave them each a plate of grilled cheese, which both instantly dropped their artwork to grab for, "You're too young to get into all that."

"Didn't you-?" Steve opened his mouth to question, remembering one of the articles he'd read about Tony saying something about building his first motherboard at four. Then he flushed and quickly tried to cover, not wanting to undermine Tony's parental authority, "Uh. *Not* like robots? At his age?"

"You're *really* bad at cover-ups," Tony gave him an amused look.

"Yeah, you suck," Peter mimicked with a naughty grin through a mouthful of grilled cheese.

"Peter, we don't use that word," Tony warned before biting into his own, "That's not nice."

"Sorry," Peter ducked his head.

"I know, it's okay," Steve just smiled, patting Peter's hand across the table.

"Didn't mean it, Mr. Rogers," Peter insisted, "You don't suck. You draw real good."

"Thank you, Peter," Steve tapped Peter's drawing, "You're pretty good yourself. That's a very good Hulk."

"Thanks! We can trade? If you, y'know, if y'want it."

Peter ducked his head at the last bit, and Steve tentatively reached over to ruffle his hair.

"Of course I want it."

Peter brightened, devouring the last bits of his sandwich with gusto.

"Wow, you ate that fast," Steve admired Peter's haste, "Still hungry?"

"Which is his polite way of saying he wants another one," Tony grinned to Peter, standing up to go make more grilled cheeses.

"Sorry," Steve flushed, embarrassed, "You don't have to-"
"Nah, it's fine, Peter eats just as much as you do. You want another too, don't you little man?"

"Yeah!"

"Man, you two, plus Bruce's Hulk-tastic metabolism and you're all gonna drive even me broke."

"Oh please," Steve rolled his eyes, leaning over to fake-whisper conspiratorially to Peter, who giggled, "Your Dad's just a whiner."

"Don't listen to him, Pete. Cap's a dirty liar," Tony chuckled, turning his back to face the stove.

He didn't see Peter's face twist in sudden understanding.

"Cap?" Peter turned to look at Steve, "Cap'n America?"

"Sometimes," Steve flushed, mistaking the exclamation for surprise.

Then Peter kicked his shins under the table and gave him the dirtiest glare Steve had ever received.

"Bastard!" he shouted accusingly, leaping out of his chair.

"Peter!" Tony exclaimed, spinning around to wave a spatula at Peter threateningly, "I've warned you about that word! Why on earth would you call him that?"

"Cause he is!" Peter insisted stubbornly, looking torn between anger and betrayal.

Steve reached out to touch Peter's arm, maybe try and calm him, but Peter just growled, grabbing the hand that reached out to touch him and biting down on it, hard. Steve winced and tried to extract his hand without pushing Peter too hard, while Tony whirled around, abandoning the stove to pull Peter away.

"Peter, oh my god! What are you doing?"

The minute Tony managed to get Peter to release Steve's hand, Peter slipped out of Tony's hands and dashed out the door.

"Um, ow," Steve grumbled in surprise, shaking his hand to get the feeling back, "What was that?"

"You tell me!" Tony threw his hands up.

"He just kicked me, then when I tried to calm him down he bit me, I don't know!" Steve protested helplessly.

"He…" Tony paused, realizing something, "He didn't get that you were Captain America, I must not have mentioned it and he only just put it together."

"What did I do to him?" Steve couldn't fathom it.

"You stay," Tony gestured to Steve, "Sit, I'll be back, then I'm sitting him down and we're figuring this out."

Tony dragged Peter back all but kicking and screaming, but when he sat him down at the table across from Steve, Peter did nothing but glare mutinously at Steve. Tony tried to explain that Captain America was just a hero like all the other Avengers, their leader even.

"You liked him just fine until you figured out he was Captain America, Pete," Tony questioned,
"What don't you like about Captain America?"

Peter glared.

"Peter, this is ridiculous. You *liked* Mr. Rogers, he drew you a very nice picture. What's this about?"

"I don't want his stupid picture!" Peter burst at last, turning to Steve, "It's stupid 'n you're stupid 'n Cap'n America's stupid and you're a jerk and I hate you!"

Then Peter was out of his chair again, racing away, Tony hollering after him.

"You better be headed straight to the time-out room, Peter, I'm not done with you!"

"Can you think of *anything* you might've said to him?" Steve asked, still incredulous at how quickly Peter had turned on him.

"I am completely lost," Tony admitted, sinking forward until his forehead was resting against the table and he was talking into the wood, "He's never bitten anyone before. Sure, he had a hitting phase a while ago, but he never bit anyone."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out, Tony.-"

"He won't even talk to me about it! I've been trying for months!"

"Tony…” Steve changed seats, moving around the table to rest a hand on Tony's shoulder, "Hey. You'll figure it out, okay? I'm sure Peter has his reasons."

"Yeah, well, I wish he'd tell me what was going through that crazy head of h-."

"Don't you touch him!" Peter barreled into the kitchen, this time with a nerf gun in each hand, firing at Steve.

"Peter, what are you-?"

"What the heck-?"

"Leave us alone!" Peter shouted, not ceasing fire until he ran out of ammo, at which point he threw both nerf guns at Steve's head. Steve's reflexes were quick enough that he dodged them both, but Tony was now furious.

"That's it," Tony was out his seat in an instant, taking off after Peter, who yelped and wisely took off running, "That's right, you better run! When I get my hands on you, Peter, I swear-!"

Tony managed to catch Peter around a corner, snagging him in his arms and not letting go, in spite of Peter's squirming protests.

"Peter, that was incredibly rude of you, why on earth would you do something like that?"

Peter just kept shouting about how he hated Steve and that he was a jerk and that he shouldn't touch Daddy ever again and on and on. Tony hauled Peter into the time-out room, closed the door, and had JARVIS lock it.

"Ten minute time-out, Pete," Tony told him through the door. He heard Peter slump against the wall in frustration; there wasn't anything else to do, the room was empty for just this purpose, "I want you to think about how incredibly rude you've been, and how incredibly nice Mr. Rogers has been to you. When you come out, you'd better be ready to apologize."
Tony headed back to the kitchen, and opened his mouth to apologize in advance, when he saw that Steve had cleaned up the nerf mess.

"He assaulted you with nerf guns and you picked up after him," Tony shook his head, "You really are perfect, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't say that," Steve flushed, "I just...I didn't want to follow, or interrupt. So."

"Well, this was officially a disaster," Tony sighed.

Then the smoke detector went off.

"Your grilled cheese is on fire," Steve pointed out, and Tony made an exasperated, half-growling, half-groaning sort of noise as he went to go put it out.

"JARVIS, tell Peter there's no fire, that I've got it handled and he needs to stay put."

"Yes, sir."

"So," Tony winced as he used tongs to drag the grilled cheese off the pan and under the faucet, "How badly have I put you off children?"

"He seems sweet when he's not trying to rip my hand off with his teeth," Steve chuckled.

"I swear to god he's never bitten anyone before," Tony groaned, and Steve just laughed harder.

"I believe you, Tony. I mean it, he seems like a great kid."

"He attacked you with nerf guns."

"So the little guy's got spunk."

"And glared at you like you kicked his puppy."

"You sure taught him how to glare," Steve admitted with a laugh, "For a minute there I was pretty sure I was about to spontaneously catch on fire."

"Not to mention he called you a bastard again-"

"Sounds like a Stark to me," Steve teased, and Tony threw one of the dish rags at him.

"Shut up, Rogers, no one asked you."

"Mhmm," Steve just hummed with a smile, standing up to hand Tony back his dish rag and help clean up.

If their hands lingered as they passed each other dishes, well, neither of them said anything.

Tony couldn't get Peter to talk. In the weeks that followed, he tried bringing Steve over more often, but it always resulting in Peter screaming that he hated him, dark glares he hadn't thought his son capable of, and various, violently thrown objects. Tony was very grateful for Steve's reflexes.

No amount of punishment or discussion would drag the answer out of Peter, and Tony probably should have just given up. Who cared if Peter didn't like one of his teammates, right? Steve stubbornly insisted he live in his own beaten-down apartment anyway, so as long as Steve didn't come around the Tower, it didn't matter. They still saved the world almost weekly now, but Steve
didn't necessarily need to see Peter.

Thing was, Tony wanted Peter to like Steve. Tony…well, he wanted Steve to be around more often, and he wasn't quite sure what to do about that. He didn't even know if Steve swung that way, much less was interested in him and all his baggage, but that fear was compounded by Peter's feelings. Peter came first, Peter would always come first.

Even if he was being completely unreasonable.

Steve was stuck.

The dilemma had been growing under his skin since probably the first moment he'd met Tony, the first time he'd caught Tony's gaze lingering over him in a way that had made him feel hot and uncomfortable. He'd put it out of his mind; he'd been raised that stashing thoughts like that away in a dark corner of his mind was second nature by now. He'd been doing it since he'd given John Robinson in the seventh grade a lingering look of his own, been doing it for so many years he didn't know there was any other way to handle thoughts like that.

At least, not until Making Gay History: The Half Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights found itself in Tony's weekly reading recommendations. Even after moving back to New York, Tony still gave him a list of book recommendations one a week or so, and the list was usually at least ten books long and on every topic imaginable. The fact that there was a gay rights book in there hardly had to mean anything, but Steve heart still thumped a bit too hard in his chest when he saw it.

He still felt a familiar rush of fear, of panic, terror welling up that somehow Tony knew, that he'd guessed the one secret Steve had always kept close to chest. He'd never told Bucky or the Commandos or anyone; he wouldn't have told his own mother, had she still been alive. It was wrong and it made Steve feel unclean, to have such thoughts about any man, much less Tony.

Tony, who'd done nothing but welcome him into his life and help him with his struggles to understand the future. Tony, who'd listened to him talk for hours about the past, about his depression, about everything that threatened to overwhelm him. Tony, who'd been there for him every step of the way, who was his perfect match on the field and his best friend off.

Steve couldn't imagine what he'd do without Tony, and he didn't want to think he'd lose him just because he couldn't curb his impure thoughts. Then, though Steve felt like he was playing with fire just buying the book, he read it.

Steve had a mild panic attack about ten pages in and had to put it down.

Seventy years. Seventy years was enough time for things to change, certainly, but it was still a heck of a lot to open a book and suddenly be told that hey, this was okay. That Steve had spent his entire life thinking he was wrong in the head, that he needed to find a nice girl and fix himself, but that thinking he was wrong had been the wrong part of it all in the first place.

It was okay.

He spent the rest of his day trying to wrap his mind around that, trying to let himself believe, hope that maybe it was all true. That maybe he wasn't a mistake with a devil in his head, but just another fella.

Who happened to like other fellas.
I'm okay.

The thought rang in his head, strange and foreign. He let his mind wander, and it inevitably led to thoughts he usually would have discarded, pushed away, but he stopped himself this time. He dared to let himself think about it, consider what he really wanted for the first in his life.

Tony.

After that, everything became startlingly clear. Steve tried his best to make plans, tried to figure out how he would go about finding out if Tony had any interest in men, finding out if he'd ever considered Steve as anything more than a friend, but in the end, after weeks of increasingly naughty and particularly vivid dreams, all of Steve's plans were pointless.

It happened after they fought a group of velociraptors some mad scientist had accidentally unleashed downtown. It took them three long, grueling hours to wrap it up, and as usual, Steve was the first to get to the debriefing room. Tony followed soon after, still in the suit since it was his transportation home, only the helmet removed. They had a few minutes to themselves as usual, since everyone else showered before meetings. Tony didn't since he went straight home after, and Steve didn't because… well, he supposed he might as well admit it now, he didn't because showering after gave him alone time with Tony.

So they collapsed into their chairs in the briefing room, and Tony bumped their knees together to get Steve's attention.

"Didja see me with that last one? Jesus, Steve. I wrestled a raptor. I'm pretty sure this is the coolest day ever."

Tony shot him a weary grin. It made the lines beside his eyes crinkle up a bit like they did when Tony was genuinely happy, and it somehow made him look younger, exuberant and victorious. Steve was struck then by the thought that he had never seen anyone more beautiful than an exhausted, grimy, battle-worn Tony Stark.

So he kissed him.

It was sloppy and badly angled because Steve had surged over both their armrests and clearly took Tony completely by surprise, as evidenced by the way he lost his balance and toppled back over the other side of his chair.

Steve closed his eyes; that had been an awful idea, his worst ever-

"I take it back," Tony huffed from the ground, and Steve winced in preparation for the rejection, the laughter- "I am one hundred percent sure that this is the coolest day ever."

"What?"

"You heard me, Spangles. Now get down here or I'm dragging you down."

"The others."

"Will not be here for at least five minutes, and if you don't kiss me again, properly, I will die."

"That's a little dramatic-"

"I am in distress here, are you going to keep talking or am I going to have to-"
Tony was lying on the ground so it still wasn't a particularly proper kiss, the angle funny, but Steve knelt on the floor next to Tony and pressed one gloved hand to his face as he bent forward to kiss him silent. This time Tony was the one surging forward, both metallic hands fisting Steve's uniform and yanking him closer, turning the somewhat chaste kiss into something filthier, in the best possible way.

"Not gonna lie," Tony gasped between kisses, "I'm pretty sure I've had this dream like a thousand times, and if I wake up again, I am going to be so unbelievably pissed."

"Not a dream," Steve assured with a bit of a blush, "If this was a dream, I wouldn't have pushed you out of a chair with my mouth the first time we kissed."

"Baby, you can do whatever you want with that mouth," Tony just assured him with a wicked grin, pulling him back into another fierce kiss, before pulling away abruptly to swear, "Ah, fuck."

"What?"

"JARVIS says we've got incoming," Tony tapped his ear, where he had a com link, "Help me up, would you?"

Steve stood before extending a hand, which Tony used to propel himself all the way forward into one last, searing kiss, before he dropped back into his seat innocently, mere seconds before the others entered. Steve was still standing when they entered, hand extended where Tony had just let go, and he flushed when Natasha raised an eyebrow at him.

"Uh," he turned it into a stuttering sort of wave, "Hi."

Tony burst out laughing, and Steve shot him a dark glare before taking a seat.

"Weirdos," Clint rolled his eyes at them, while Natasha watched Steve curiously.

He shifted, uncomfortable under her scrutiny. She always gave him the impression that she knew, well, everything. It wouldn't surprise him if she could read minds, so he made it a point to steadily think,

_Don't tell don't tell don't tell_

Because telling—well, kissing, the telling could come later he figured, though he supposed it was kind of implicit in the kissing, but whatever, he would figure that out later—Tony was one thing. Tony was his best friend, and Steve knew him well enough that, in spite of his fears, he knew rationally that even if Tony hadn't been interested in men, he would never have mocked Steve for his feelings or hurt him unnecessarily.

Not that the others would, he just…he didn't know them as well. He didn't know how they would react, not when he barely knew how to react himself, and he just, he wasn't ready for that, not when he was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that he'd just kissed Tony and Tony had kissed him back.

"Captain, are you with us?" Director Fury was eyeing him impatiently.

Tony was snickering; Steve subtly kicked him under the table.

"I'm listening."

"Good. Because you're one of the holdouts."
"I'm sorry?"

"We've reached the point of no return, Captain," the Director drawled, beginning one of his speeches, and Steve ached for him to just get to the point so he could get Tony alone again, "There's no denying that the Avengers are the only thing keeping this city together these days. What started as a response team has become a necessity just to keep the peace. You're all working together well, but not as well as you could be. Stark has generously offered each of you a floor at Stark Tower in the past; all of you but Banner turned it down for one reason or another, but I'm imploring you now to reconsider."

"You want us to live together?" Clint snorted.

"How long, exactly, do you think that would last before a supervillain burned it to the ground to get us all in one shot?" Natasha raised an eyebrow.

"Or before we brought it down ourselves," Bruce chuckled, "We don't exactly get along outside of work, and you're talking about a man in a metal suit who likes to play with things that go boom, a former Russian spy who could kill us all with her pinky, a master assassin who likes to play pranks involving exploding arrows, a supersoldier who can't always control his strength, and a Norse god who plays it fast and loose with the lightning. Sounds like a stressful environment, and we all know how well I react to stress."

"First off," Tony pointed at Bruce, "You're selling yourself short, and you know it. You've got a way better handle on it than that, or you know I wouldn't let you anywhere near Peter. Second, did anyone even ask me if the offer was still valid? Who says I want all your bum asses running around my Tower, anyway? Maybe I like it just me and Peter and Brucie-bear. I'm not sure I can live with Hunger Games without killing him. Seriously, no promises."

"And I'm pretty sure I still have an arrow in my quiver with Stark's name on it-"

"Maybe because I designed them, you ungrateful little punk-"

"Children, please," the Director sighed, "This is exactly what I want to put an end to."

"Sounds more like we'll put an end to each other," Natasha commented dryly.

"I believe that this will work," Director Fury insisted, the corners of his mouth turning up into just a hint of a smile, more of a smirk, really, "And I know someone else who believes in you, too."

"Got room in that Tower of yours for one more?"

The room collectively gaped as the door slid open to reveal one Phil Coulson, in the flesh, suited up and professional as always.

"Phil?"

"Miss me, Stark?"

"Like the plague."

"You too," Phil's mouth ticked up almost imperceptibly, and Steve couldn't help but blurt it out.

"I signed them."

"Captain?"
"Your cards," Steve ducked his head, "I should've before, but we were all so busy, and I...I'm sorry. But I did, after. There was blood, but I, I signed them, each and every one-"

Phil went very, very still. For a moment, Steve thought he was surprised, or perhaps honored Steve was talking to him, with Phil it was hard to tell.

"There was...blood. On the cards?"

"There were extenuating circumstances, Agent, we were going to explain this to you after the debrief-"

Huh. Director Fury looked about as close to anxious as Steve had ever seen him.

"Those cards were in my locker, Director," Phil hissed.

Everyone fell silent, even Tony, who usually couldn't to save his life.

"They needed the push."

It sounded weak, even to Steve's ears.

"You..." Phil trailed off, then, voice low and dangerous, "Tell me you did not dip my vintage, mint collection of trading cards from the 1950's in my blood."


"It is morbid!"

"You're all excused, we'll resume debrief in ten minutes-"

"You think I'm going to be through with you in ten minutes-!"

"Twenty minutes, now get out!"

Nick was waving them all out the door hastily now, and they all dashed away like their lives depended on it. Clint and Natasha were gone immediately, presumably off to their quarters, while Bruce and Thor sat down on the bench outside the door. Tony looked like the only one stupid enough to try and stay to watch the fight, but Steve grabbed him by the wrist and hauled him away.

"But that looked interesting-"

"Phil looks ready to flay someone alive, I'd rather it not be you."

"Aw, you do care."

Steve hoped his face wasn't as red as it felt.

"Where's the restroom on this ship?" he questioned Tony, hoping the acclaimed genius would get it without him having to make it obvious.

"It's down this way, I'll show you."

Tony thankfully got it, and led him off down the corridor. Neither Bruce nor Thor seemed to think there was anything off about the exchange, mostly because they were already engaged in a debate about who had won the last of the Hulk and Thor's bouts.
Once they were out of sight of the others Steve took the lead, still not releasing Tony's wrist. He looked through each of the windows above the doors as he tried to find one that was empty and didn't have glass paneling for the walls so they could talk in private. Tony, meanwhile, could not stop talking. Loudly.

"Oh my god, are you really looking for a dark corner to makeout with me in right now? I've corrupted you, I've corrupted Captain America, I am such a horrible, horrible person and it's totally awesome, seriously, I'm pretty sure I've been having this dream since I hit puberty, being manhandled into a dark corner by Captain America, god, you've even wearing the suit this is literally the best thing ever-"

"Tony," Steve insisted with a blush, "Please stop talking so loud."

"Steve-"

"Please," Steve turned, releasing Tony's wrist, realizing how that might look to a passerby. He couldn't find a room that didn't have people, so he resorted to the empty hallway, keeping his voice hushed, "Tony, I can't…I'm not…it was an impulse."

"Oh god, we're having the 'it's not you, it's me' talk already?" Tony looked mildly horrified, "I'm pretty sure that's like a record-"

"I'm not saying that." Steve hastily corrected him, shifting anxiously, "I like you, Tony. More than I should, more than I thought was okay until very, very recently. I want to…I don't know what I want. Well, okay, that's not true, I definitely know I want you, I just don't know to what…extent, or how to go about any sort of, relationship, I mean, I've never had one, dame or fella, and I just-"

"Hey," Tony's voice was soft, and he placed a hand over Steve's carefully, seeming unsure if that was allowed or not, "Relax. I didn't mean to stress you out, if you don't want to-"

"I want to," Steve corrected, not even embarrassed at the way his voice damn near cracked, because God Almighty did he want to, that was not the problem, "Wanting is not the problem, I just, I need to…figure this out, and I can't handle any kind of scrutiny about it right now. Can…this, could it stay between us?"

"Is this the 'take time apart' figure it out, or the 'makeout in dark corners of the Helicarrier and don't tell anyone' figure it out?"

"The second one, preferably. Though, I do have a private apartment. With a bed."

There was a metallic pinging sort of sound in the vicinity of Tony's crotch.

"…Tony…?"

"Let's just say this suit is becoming increasing uncomfortable. Also, that sound effect was ridiculously emasculating, and I'm now going to have to prove my manliness to you with increasingly outrageous and dramatic shows of bravado."

"That seems a bit unnecessary."

"I have to prove I'm worthy of Captain fucking America somehow, don't I?"

"Please stop putting expletives in my name. And you don't have to prove anything to me, Tony," Steve felt that now-familiar fluttery feeling well up in his chest, and he glanced around quickly before pressing a brief, chaste kiss to Tony's lips, "You're perfectly worthy all on your own."
"Steve Rogers, total sap," Tony rolled his eyes, though Steve thought he might have seen just a hint of a flush on Tony's cheeks, and he considered it a win, "I never would have guessed."

"Come on, we should probably head back before they wonder why we're taking so long."

"True. My money's on Phil."

"Tony, everyone's money is on Phil."

They joined the rest of the team outside the door. Clint and Thor were engaged in an argument about the validity of the bow and arrow versus the hammer as an offensive weapon, while Bruce and Natasha were talking calmly about Dostoevsky, of all things. No one seemed to have noticed they'd left, much less returned.

When they were finally called back into the debriefing room, Nick and Phil awaited them with shoulders back, his hands tucked away, passive expressions perfectly in place. It looked as if nothing had ever happened, that they'd just been waiting for the team to arrive. Steve was in awe of SHIELD agents sometimes, truly.

"It has come to SHIELD's attention that your teamwork could stand to improve," Phil announced, glancing between them all pointedly, "As could your interpersonal relationships."

"This team is going to last a while; best get used to each other," Nick nodded, "You're all expected to move into Stark Tower by the end of the week. Stark, we're counting on you to find room for Agent Coulson as well."

"I'm a civilian, you can't force me to provide quarters for soldiers, that's against my constitutional rights-"

"We've already spoken with Miss Potts."

"Oh god," Tony groaned, slumping forward until his forehead hit the table.

"So glad to hear you're on board."

The rest of the meeting was standard, going over clean-up and what to do with the velociraptor bodies littering New York. After the meeting finished and the others went off to their quarters to get their things together, Tony pulled Steve aside.

"I think we should talk before…uh, well, before you move in with me."

"Lunch? The Vietnamese place on 5th?"

"God, yes."

They had maybe a few hours before the others would start moving in, and they used it going to one of their favorite restaurants and talking it out. They each had their own set of problems. Steve wasn't comfortable with anything public, or coming out to the team; he needed time to acclimate to the idea, to figure out his footing in their relationship. Tony, on the other hand, was entirely okay with whatever speed Steve wanted to set their relationship to, on the condition that Steve had to start mending the bridge with Peter.

"I know it's not your fault," Tony ran a hand through his hair, leaning back in the booth, "I know this is something Peter's cooked up in his mind for god knows what reason. And I'm sorry about that, I really am, but…even if he's being a little punk, he comes first."
"Of course he does," Steve nodded.

"No, I…look, I don't mean to rub it in or anything like that, but you have to understand the extent to which I mean that. This is going to sound a bit cruel and I don’t mean it to be, but if you…if you really do want to be in a…relationship, with me, which god knows I can barely wrap my head around as it is, you have to understand the fact that Peter is always going to come before you in my life. I know that's a lot to ask of someone, to always be second, and if you…if you don't want that, I understand-"

"Tony," Steve brushed their hands together, their booth secluded enough in the back that he was comfortable with the action, "He's your son. I would never expect anything else."

The way Tony beamed at him in response was more than answer enough.

Tony insisted on paying the bill and they headed out, back to the Tower where Peter awaited them. Peter only kicked Steve once this time, which was improvement, since last time Steve had been greeted with enormous water soakers that Happy claimed to have known nothing about. Though, Steve was pretty dubious about an almost-five-year-old, even one as smart as Peter, filling up the water soakers all on his own.

"Peter," Tony sighed, pulling Peter off Steve before he could kick him again, "You really need to get over this feud thing you've got with him."

"Never!" Peter declared somewhat dramatically, "Get outta my house, Cap'n Jerkface!"

"Oh, you are so not going to like this," Tony groaned to himself, then picked Peter up, throwing him over his shoulder, "C'mon, you. We're going to have a talk, the three of us, like the mature and rational human beings we are, even if one of us is pint sized."

"Yer pint sized!" Peter protested from over Tony's shoulder.

Steve followed quietly, pretty sure anything he said at this point was not going to be helpful.

"Sure, squirt," Tony rolled his eyes as they entered the rec room, and he carefully tossed Peter onto the couch, gesturing for Steve to stay behind him. Peter moved to get up, and Tony fixed him with a Serious Parent Look, "Stay."

Peter stayed.

"Sometime tonight, the rest of the team is coming to move in with us."

"The Vengers?" Peter gaped, little eyes going wide with wonder.

"You got it. They're going to live on different floors though, so it's going to be kind of like we all live in one big apartment building. Which means just like with Dr. Banner, you can't just go to their floors without asking. That's their space, and you have to tell JARVIS to ask them if you want to go see one of them."

"But I can see 'em though?"

"Yes," Tony nodded, "We're supposed to be bonding, so you'll probably see them around a lot. Remember Petey, they're just people, just like Dr. Banner and me."

"What 'bout him?" Peter glared over Tony's shoulder at Steve.
"He's going to be living here too, Peter."

"No!" Peter shot up, "No, he can't!"

"Peter, unless you explain to me what your problem with him is, I can't do anything about it," Tony explained helplessly, "He's our Captain, and he's a very good friend of mine. He's been nothing but-"

"No, he's not a friend, 's mean! He was gonna kill you!"

"What?" Both Tony and Steve exclaimed as one.

Peter made to scoot off the couch and run off again, but Steve dove forward and blocked Peter's way.

"Peter, I would never do anything to hurt your father," he insisted earnestly, "What makes you think that I would?"

"I saw you, you big fat jerk!" Peter just hit and shoved at him until Steve relented and moved out of the way, Peter barreling off down the hallway.

"I don't…" Tony blinked after him, "JARVIS?"

"I have no known data that would suggest Captain Rogers has ever attempted to put an end to your life, sir."

"He sure has an active imagination," Steve gave a weak sort of laugh.

Weak, because the facts were beginning to hit him. Peter couldn't stand him, thought for God only knew what reason that Steve had tried to kill Tony, and if he couldn't get Peter to like him…any chance he had at something with Tony was dead in the water. It was abundantly clear that Tony had feelings for him too, that he wanted to try and sort this out, but nothing was going to happen until Steve could fix whatever he'd somehow broke with Peter.

And he liked Peter. He could be…aggressive, but he apparently had good reason, even if it was based on faulty information. When Peter hadn't been trying to attack him though, in that brief window of friendship he'd had with the boy before he'd figured out Steve was Captain America, he'd had something with him. Peter had been creative and talkative and charismatic, very much his father's son, and Steve had liked him, still did.

He knew Peter had liked him too; they just needed to get back to that.

"Active imagination, that's one way to put it," Tony muttered, straightening up, "Look, why don't you go get your stuff from Brooklyn, start moving in? Take the van if you like, it's got plenty of space. I'll go talk to him again, see if I can't piece together where in the hell he got an idea like that."

"Ah, the 'Iron Van'. I was wondering when I'd get a chance to see that," Steve gave Tony an amused look.

"You should see me drive it. I hear the soccer dad look is super sexy," Tony winked.

"I don't know…I'm not so sure red and gold are your colors," Steve teased.

"Says the man who physically assaulted me in the conference room while I was dressed head to toe in them."

"Fair point," Steve stepped closer cautiously, wanting to kiss Tony goodbye, but not sure if that was
exactly allowed, since Peter still clearly had issues with him. Tony, seeing his hesitance, just grinned.

"You know, you still haven't kissed me properly, Captain."

"Is that…?"

"If you say 'allowed', I might just have to 'assault' you myself."

Steve took another tentative step forward, reaching out a hand to trace his thumb over Tony's jaw.

"Peter still hates me."

"So it's a work in progress," Tony shrugged, raising his hand to cover Steve's, "As long as you're willing to keep trying with him…that's all I'm asking, for now. We'll work it out."

"You think?"

"I'm a genius, Steve," Tony teased, a soft smile crossing his lips that Steve ached to run his fingers over, map out every dip and curve and quirk so he could still see it with his hands when he closed his eyes, "I know."
Chapter 5

Peter adored the Avengers.

Bruce and Natasha he already knew, both of which had earned "Aunt" and "Uncle" status. He didn't remember Phil, he'd been too young, but he quickly warmed up to the agent once he learned that Phil was a master at card games and puzzles, two of Peter's favorite things. Phil was a patient teacher, Peter was a fast learner, and they got on very well.

He'd been a bit shy around Clint and Thor, still hero-worshipping them from afar, but after a few days of seeing them lounging around and hanging out and generally being human (well, human-ish in Thor's case, they still weren't totally sure about that) they were a huge hit.

Thor was big and burly and had to be watched around Peter—well, they all did until they proved themselves, Tony was still a paranoid bastard about his son on the best of days—but was great for the chase-me-and-tickle-me-til-I-collapse games Tony was frankly getting too god damn old for.

Clint was the cool one that helped Peter play pranks and improve his aim with the water soakers, much to Steve's dismay. He was also fantastic at hide and seek, picking places that took just long enough to find that Peter thought he was the best, but not long enough that Peter got bored.

They all fell into a communal pattern quickly enough. Steve and Phil were up the earliest, so they usually made breakfast together, making enough food for everyone. Tony and Peter stumbled in next, Tony woken by Peter—who had started sleeping in Tony's bed again, god help him—and Peter woken by the internal clock that rose every child at the asscrack of dawn. Steve had Tony's coffee ready and waiting just the way he liked it, which Tony moaned orgasmic sounds into in appreciation and thanks.

Peter immediately devoured whatever food was available while Tony gulped down his first coffee, though Peter still refused to touch anything he saw Steve touch, even food. Either Natasha or Clint would be next, making a beeline for either her morning cup of tea or his morning half-gallon of orange juice, with Thor and Bruce soon to follow.

Between Steve's metabolism, Bruce's Hulk, and Thor's…Thor-ness, they went through astounding amounts of food.

They each had certain preferences—Peter still liked his eggs dyed green, Clint went feral if anyone touched his orange juice, Thor needed at least two boxes of poptarts or he was pouty all day—but between Steve and Phil's cooking and Tony's money, they managed to get everyone fed.

Even after Tony left to take Peter to preschool, they usually hung around the table awhile, talking and making plans for the day. They parted after that, doing their own thing for a while, having lunch on their own when they felt like it, maybe sparring together or doing something in the rec room if they felt like being social. They regrouped for dinner, ordering out Mondays and after group missions.

They could all cook to some degree and swapped off every once in a while, but Bruce was the best, not to mention he enjoyed it. They generally let him do his thing, except for when Tony had to make Peter something else when Bruce's were too spicy or when Peter was just being finicky.

Things were pretty hectic, which wasn't surprising. They generally hung out in the rec room if they didn't need to be elsewhere, watching movies or goofing off with Peter or playing video games or
any number of other things, which meant the eight of them could get pretty loud. Weekends were busy, since weekends meant trips to the grocery store to stock up and carting Peter to his soccer games and getting errands done since supervillains seemed to prefer weekdays, probably just to be inconvenient.

Crazy thing was, it worked.

They were all getting along better, and there was no question their fieldwork had improved. They had their floors for space, the rec room for company, and a team to rely on. Tony's main worry had been how Peter might adjust, but he was great, happy as a clam, and in love with all of his new aunts and uncles.

Peter adored every Avenger.

Except.

For.

Steve.

It was the only problem, but it was a huge one, and Tony was going up the wall crazy over it. Peter got used to the fact that Steve being around was not going to change, but that was not to be mistaken for liking it. He was quieter when Steve was around, and much clingier to Tony. He never left Tony alone with Steve, convinced that the moment he did Steve was going to suddenly go rogue and chop Tony's head off or whatever it was Peter thought Steve wanted to do.

The others thought it was hysterical.

Tony was not amused.

Peter stopped biting and kicking Steve after the first few days, after the punishment went up to an hour in the time-out room. It was brutal, but so was Peter; the final time they had a biting incident, Steve just made the "mistake" of serving Peter more eggs for breakfast, and his hand was apparently just a lil bit too close to Peter's mouth as he served him the food.

It had taken Tony, Clint, and Bruce to pry him off Steve, because Steve himself refused to push Peter away no matter how hard Peter lashed out, too afraid of hurting him somehow with the super-strength.

Which Tony appreciated, obviously, but it was still completely ridiculous that it was necessary at all. No one could get Peter to say any more on the "Steve wants to kill Tony" matter either, which was just as frustrating. After almost three weeks of living together, Peter had stopping glaring at Steve unless Steve spoke to him, which was considered improvement.

In spite of that, it was beginning to take a toll on Tony and Steve's already very precariously balanced relationship.

They hadn't progressed beyond some shirtless kissing, not for lack of trying, but mostly because they had zero alone time outside of a brief, ten minute window after missions between debrief and going home. They couldn't go out to lunch anymore without Peter being a nightmare about it once they got home—not to mention it would be somewhat suspicious to the rest of the team if they ate out alone too often—and they couldn't so much as brush fingers if Peter was in the room without him wailing like a siren and throwing the nearest object at Steve's head. Which, thanks to Clint's tutelage, he'd gotten all too accurate at.
They didn't have nights to themselves either, because Peter had taken to sleeping with Tony again, unable to sleep unless he knew Tony was safe from Steve The Tony-Killing Monster. They could barely even talk without Peter giving them both a glare, Steve a dark one, Tony a betrayed one. It was beginning to fray at the edges of their new and still somewhat tentative relationship, not to mention their sanity.

"Wait," Steve pressed a hand to Tony's chest, "Wait."

"We've got like seven minutes and counting before we have to go home, you really wanna waste time catching your breath here, big guy?"

"No, I mean, well, yes. I mean, I need to ask you something."

"Now? I'm halfway out of the suit."

"I just remembered," Steve protested, ears going pink, "I was going to before, but you…distracted me."

"Yeah?"

"I want to take Peter out for a day alone, if you'd let me. He loves the zoo, I thought…I thought maybe I could take him, sometime."

Tony fell silent for a minute, then,

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Do you have a better one?"

"Don't get me wrong, I love Peter to death, but I'm kind of afraid he might push you into oncoming traffic."

"Don't be ridiculous, Tony."

"Am I? Because last time he bit you it took three people to pull him off because you refused to remove him yourself."

"It healed."

"I'm not saying it didn't, I'm just saying you don't really seem like you're willing to be tough with him. He can't grow up thinking it's okay to just attack people he doesn't get along with like he has been with you. You're a supersoldier, you heal, but that's not good behavior and that's not something I want him learning."

"You think I'm teaching him bad behavior?"

"Not teaching it per se, but you're sure as hell not helping me put a stop to it. You can't just let him get away with things like you do-

"I don't let him get away with things-

"Steve, yesterday he threw the remote at your head and you handed it back to him."

"It was my fault, I talked to him without thinking."

"Steve, you asked him he wanted lunch, that doesn't even remotely qualify as reason for him to
throw a remote at you! He doesn't even like you and you're letting him wrap you around his little finger-

"Like you aren't wrapped around-

"Of course I am! But that doesn't mean I won't discipline him when he deserves it. He treats you that way because he knows you'll take it and practically beg for more! Not to say that it's good, he shouldn't treat you like that no matter what, but he'd sure as hell do it a lot less if you didn't act like you deserved it or something."

"I just...I want him to like me," Steve's shoulders slumped forward, and Tony sighed, all the steam gone out of his argument, "Please, Tony, you have to let me try."

"I know, babe. But wanting him to like you isn't a reason to let him get away with things. I've punished Peter more times and for far more incidents than I can count, long before you came around as his latest target. He clearly still loves me. Being tough with kids is necessary, sometimes."

"You're his father, it's different."

"Of course it is. But just because you're not his dad doesn't mean you can't tell him not to abuse you. Peter reacts to authority better than you'd think. If you let him get away with things, he does it again. You tell him to knock it off, he usually does."

"He already doesn't like me," Steve shuffled, "I don't want to give him a reason."

"If you really do want...this," Tony made a vague gesture between them, "As a more than temporary thing."

"I know, I have to fix it," Steve finished miserably.

"No," Tony moved forward, placing his hands on Steve's forearms as if to steady him, and frowned at Steve perplexedly, "What? No, that's not...Steve, I don't blame you for Peter's behavior. I told you, it's a work in progress. There isn't some deadline you have to befriend Peter by or I'm dumping you. What I was going to say was that if you were thinking long-term-"

"I am," Steve ducked his head, "If that was something you wanted, that is."

"It is," Tony seemed amused but pleased, and Steve took it as a win, "But my point is that Peter's a part of the Tony Stark package, and if you do intend to stick around...well, eventually, you're going to butt heads with him. You can't keep putting it off."

"So let me take him," Steve asked, all but pleading, "I think, maybe if I can show him that I'm not going anywhere, that I really do want us to get along..."

Tony couldn't resist the hope in Steve's voice.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. I swear to god though, Steve, you've got to watch him like a hawk-"

Then Steve was interrupting him with a kiss, a kiss hard enough to bruise, backing Tony into the boxes behind him in the dark storage closet.

"Thank you," Steve murmured against his lips, "I promise, Tony, I promise, I will, I'll watch him, I won't let anything happen to him-"

"More worried about what he'll try to do to you, frankly, but yes, that too," Tony chuckled, a bit
nervously, before pulling Steve back in, "I believe you, Steve. It's gonna be great."

It was not great.

It was a disaster.

Steve debated if he should just ask where the nearest poisonous snake was so he could just kill himself and be done with it, but the stupid serum would have just flushed it out of his system anyway. Instead, Steve sighed, and grit his teeth.

"No, he is not technically my child, but-"

"Told you! He's tryin' to kidnap me!" Peter tugged on the police officer's sleeve, pointing at Steve, "He wants t'kill me!"

"I do not," Steve insisted, "And I didn't kidnap him, I have his father's permission, he just doesn't want to be here-"

"Cause you're gonna kill me!"

"Because he doesn't like me," Steve rubbed a hand over his face, "We're trying to bond, and it's not going so swell. Peter, will you please-"

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask to see your identification."

"Yes, of course," Steve opened his wallet, then, after a moment's thought, pulled out his official, SHIELD-issued Avengers ID instead of his license, "His name is Peter Stark, he's Tony Stark's son. I'm Steve Rogers, Captain America. We all live together, I know him. I'm not kidnapping him."

The officer examined his official Avengers badge with a thoughtful look, then squatted down to face Peter.

"Son, is what he's saying true?"

Peter ducked his head.

"That was a very mean trick to play on Mr. Rogers here. I could've arrested him if I didn't believe him."

"You shoulda," Peter just scowled, "He d'served it."

The officer gave Steve a questioning look, and Steve shook his head, God, don't even ask.

"Hope you boys patch things up," the officer just nodded, standing up and returning to his parole of the zoo.

Peter returned to the sullen mood he'd been in all day, crossing his arms. He'd shouted and complained and cried when Tony had told him Steve was taking him to the zoo, but Tony had stayed firm, told Peter to be good, kissed him goodbye, and locked him in his carseat.

Peter had spent half the car ride there crying, the other half in dead silence. He didn't play with his toys, didn't shout at Steve, nothing, just sat there and stared out the window. When they'd gotten to the zoo, Peter had tried to run off, but Steve had expected that and stayed no less than a foot behind him without problem—he was a supersoldier, after all—making sure Peter never once left his sight, but letting the boy run himself out.
When Peter was finally exhausted and therefore just the littlest bit more cooperative, Steve fell into step beside him. He let Peter lead where they went, following along and keeping up a running commentary. He had done his research; he'd spent almost all of the previous day reading about animals and different things he could tell Peter, fully expecting the boy to be moody and quiet. So he'd talked enough for them both, about all the different animals and interesting sights, asking which were Peter's favorites and telling him about the ones he liked.

Peter stayed mute, right up until he saw a cop and started screaming that Steve had kidnapped him.

"Peter," Steve kneeled down on the rocky pavement, ignoring the twinge of pain in his knee, "Please. I'm trying so hard. You and your father, all your aunts and uncles… you're my family too, and I love every one of you. I would give my life to protect any of you in a heartbeat."

Peter was quiet for a long moment.

"I like spiders."

It was first thing Peter had said to him that wasn't spiteful or mean or an attempt to get him to go away since that first day they'd colored at the kitchen table. Briefly, Steve was terrified; he didn't know if saying something in return would break the spell somehow, but he didn't want Peter to think he was ignoring him, either.

"Spiders?"

"Yeah."

"Would you… would you like to tell me about them?"

"They got eight legs, six more'n we do."

"That's a lot of legs. I'd trip."

"Yeah," Peter gave him a guarded sort of look, "Me too. An' they got pinchers, sometimes, for bitin' people. Rantulas got real big ones."

"Are they poisonous?"

"Sometimes. Rantulas are, but Miss Becky says theirs don't kill you."

Miss Becky was Peter's preschool teacher, Steve remembered.

"You're learning about spiders in school?"

"Las' week. But Daddy told me lots about em too. Bought me my spider book."

"Spider book?"

"'s a cycl'pedia. 's got all the spiders in the world."

"Wow," they were walking now, side by side, and Steve looked for a sign that would direct him, "Do you know where the spiders are here?"

"Yeah."

"Would you show me?"
Peter led him through a dark tunnel, lined with glass terrariums filled with huge, often colorful spiders. Frankly, Steve hated spiders, but he grit his teeth and trailed behind Peter in silence as the boy went from tank to tank, observing each one carefully. They were there maybe ten minutes when Peter spoke up. His voice was quiet, fragile, and more than a little lost. Steve realized with a start that Peter was crying.

"Why'd you make Daddy do it?"

Steve froze. Every inch of him ached to hug the little boy, but he didn't want to push too far too fast, when this might be it, when Peter might finally explain.

"Do what, Peter?"

Steve crouched down, close enough that Peter could come to him if he wanted. Peter kept his distance, rubbing at his eyes with his little hands.

"The bomb," Peter's lower lips quivered, and Steve was confused. Bomb? What bomb? "You made Daddy take it into space and the 'porter said he wasn't comin' back, an', an' he's my daddy, why'd it have t'be him?"

Then Peter started crying in earnest, hiccupping sobs that shook his whole body, and Steve gave in. He pulled Peter into his arms, and though for a moment Peter kicked and shoved and pushed, it was brief, and then he was gripping Steve's shirt and bawling into it. Steve ignored the snot on his shirt and just rubbed Peter's back, whispering to him soothingly.

"Oh Peter, it's okay…shh, it's okay. That wasn't me, that…that was your Daddy being a hero, just like always."

"But the 'p-porter said you o-ordered him to cause he could f-fly-"

"Reporters get things wrong," Steve brushed Peter's hair back out of his face, "They do their best, but they can't always see what's happening. I promise you, Peter, I never told your father to do that."

"You d-didn't? But Unca Happy saw you on the tv. He, he called you names, he said you were nothin' but a no good ba-"

"I think you've been warned about that word, Pete," Steve warned gently.

"R-right," Peter sniffled, looking up at Steve almost hopefully, "You really didn't? Y'swear?"

"I swear. Anyone who wants to take your father from you is going to have to go through me first."

"S'persold'ers are pretty strong, huh?"

"Very strong," Steve smiled softly, "I'll protect your father or I'll die trying, Peter, you have my word."

"I'm sorry I hit you all those times," Peter shuffled after a moment, toeing the ground with his shoe, "An' bit. An' threw stuff. An'."

"It's okay, Peter," Steve huffed a laugh, "All of it. Just…no more, okay?"

"Okay."

"Are there any other animals you want to go see?"
"Can we lookit the tiggers?"
"You mean…the tigers?"
"No, they're called tiggers. But they don't bounce like on the tv."
"Sure," Steve smiled, wiping Peter's tears dry with his thumb. He then held out a hand to Peter, who took it, still rubbing at his eyes with his other hand, "Let's go look at the tiggers."

"If you don't stop twitching, I am going to shoot you."

Natasha's warning was dry and would have sounded almost apathetic, were it not for the way her knuckles were white around the edge of her book.

"Seriously, man," Clint agreed, changing channels lazily as he talked, "I know he's your kid and he's precious and all, but I gotta say, you raised that kid to be one capable little fucker-"

"Could we maybe not call my four year old a 'little fucker'?"

"A capable little fucker. I'm serious, you've got a damned smart kid on your hands, Stark. Learns fast, too. I was showing him this trick with my bow the other day-"

"I told you I don't want him learning how to shoot people until he's in third grade!"

"I didn't let him touch it," Clint protested, "I just showed him a trick. He seemed really interested—"

"I said no, asshole."

"Fine, whatever," Clint huffed, "But the point remains. Peter is a very capable kid, and he's with Captain America. I don't think you could find a better bodyguard in the world."

"I'm not worried about Peter," Tony insisted, and okay, yeah, he was kind of worried about Peter, he was always going to worry when Peter was out of his sight, but more importantly, "I'm worried about what Peter's going to do to Steve. They've been gone hours. And Peter looked like he wanted to kill me when I left him in the car."

"In the 'Iron Van', you mean?" Clint snorted.

"Shut up, it's family-friendly."

"Peter's too small to cause Steve any real harm," Bruce pointed out, giving him a level look, "Are you sure there's nothing else you might be worried about?"

Oh, only the rapidly disappearing future of his relationship with a man he may or may not be in love with, despite not even having seen him naked which was frankly a new record for Tony, but hey, it apparently didn't matter, because his kid hated him.

"Peachy keen, thanks," Tony waved Bruce off, returning to his tablet.

"Stop tapping your foot or I rip it off."

Tony scooted further away from Natasha.

"Sir, Captain Rogers and young sir have entered the garage."
"Oh thank fuck," Tony discarded his tablet immediately, all but running into the elevator, pressing the button for the garage, "Damage control, J, hit me. Is anyone bleeding?"

"No, sir, they-"

"Bruised, broken, crying?"

"Sir, they seem to be-"

"Hating me?"

"Sir," JARVIS seemed amused, "They're laughing."

Tony paused.

"What? Like…laughing, laughing?"

"There is only one definition of the term, sir."

"Stop being a smartass," Tony grumbled, as the doors opened and he bumped into Peter and Steve on their way in, "Peter! Steve! You're alive!"

"I'm going to be nice and not take offence to that," Steve told him fondly.

"Daddy!" Peter lifted his arms immediately, a grin bright as the sun on his face, and Tony scooped him up without hesitation.

"Hey there, baby boy!" Tony kissed him soundly on each cheek, "I missed you! Were you good for Mr. Rogers?"

"Yeah," Peter bit his lip, then looked over his shoulder at Steve, who gave him an encouraging look and a pat on the arm. Peter ducked his head, "I'm sorry, Daddy."

"For what, baby?"

"Fer bein' mean t'Cap without sayin' why. He tol' me Happy was wrong-"

"Happy?"

Steve made a quick, slicing motion across his throat that only Tony could see: not now.

"Uh. I mean. Yeah. I guess Happy was wrong."

"Yeah. Cap said he'd never do that, he loves us too much."

Steve's face was carefully blank, but Tony could see the tips of his ears go bright red. Interesting.

"Of course he does, Pete, that's what we've been trying to tell you," Tony mussed Peter's hair affectionately, peppering his face with more kisses until Peter giggled, "Silly boy. Now why don't you go on up and say hi to the others? We'll be right behind you."

"Alone?"

"JARVIS will make sure you get to the right floor safely. I just need to talk to Mr…to Cap, for a minute."
"Okay."

Tony let Peter down with one last kiss to the top of his head, and Peter obediently got into the elevator. Tony waited until the doors dinged closed, then turned to Steve.

"Happy?"

"Not his fault, from what I heard," Steve shook his head, "Happy must've been watching the news, and Peter must've seen him. Peter said something about a reporter saying I'd ordered you to take the nuke into space because you could fly."

"Shit."

"Exactly. I told him he was wrong, that-"

"You loved me too much?" Tony cocked an eyebrow.

"That," Steve faltered, "That I loved this, this make-shift family we have, that I would do anything to protect it, and that I would never do anything to take his father away from him. That anyone who wanted to would have to go through me, first."

"Right," Tony observed Steve casually, watching the tips of his ears turn red again, the way he avoided looking Tony in the eye. He couldn't decide whether or not to push it. Steve was funny, with these things, never knew when that 1940's homophobia might rear it's head, "So I see you've got him calling you Cap. That's huge."

"Yeah. We talked quite a bit, too. Little guy just about talked my ear off," Steve smiled though, looking giddy about it.

"Sounds like Peter," Tony smiled in return, leaning against the wall, "So you've won him over."

"I think so."

"Does this mean we can speak to each other in the same room without you being attacked by rogue dishware and pillow cushions?"

"I was sure hoping so," Steve stepped forward tentatively, "I was kind of hoping it might mean something else, too. I…well. Tony, I'd like…that is, if you want, I'm ready to…gosh I should have thought this through on the car ride over-"

"No, you're adorable, keep going."

"Adorable was really not the mood I was going for here, Tony."

"You said gosh. Sincerely. That is ridiculously adorable. You're like a puppy-"
"Cheater."

"Is that a complaint I hear?"

"From me? Never."

"Ah, one thing," Tony pressed a hand to Steve's chest, "And don't take this the wrong way or anything, but I don't want to tell Peter yet. He's young, and believe me, I want us to work out, but...I have to think of him, and if this, if it does go south somehow, I don't want him to see you as a second parental figure of sorts, only for him to lose you."

"We can wait as long as you like, Tony," Steve placed his hand over Tony's on his chest, the other lifting his jaw to kiss him softly, "I'm not going anywhere."

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"Um. Excuse you," Clint protested when Tony swiped the remote to pause Mission Impossible.

"So, we've got news, and we figured since Peter's playing in his room now would be—"

"I knew you two were fucking!"

Steve turned red from head to toe; they weren't. Should they be? Had he missed some future type of cue of Tony's? He wanted to, wanted to with a level of desire that frankly surprised the heck out of him, it had just been...complicated. It wasn't as if they'd had a whole lot of alone time. Or, any, really. Tony didn't seem to taken aback by Clint's comment though, just a little annoyed.

"Don't be an ass," Natasha flicked Clint in the forehead.

"Congratulations," Bruce smiled up from his book.

"Yes, finally," Phil said, "I've had the paperwork for this ready for weeks."

"A most joyous occasion!" Thor agreed.

"Okay, seriously, I waited this long and I don't even get to say it?" Tony complained.

"Did you want to?" Steve looked at Tony curiously, who gave a weird, attempted and failed shrug of nonchalance.

"Announce that I was dating Captain America? Maybe a little, sue me."

"Happy for you, you're perfect for each other, great that you found true love, blah blah blah—now let's talk dates," Clint rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"You want to go on a date with us?" Steve blinked.

"No," Tony just deadpanned.

"As in the date you started seeing each other, you weirdos, like I ever want to be subjected to whatever it is you two do on a date."

"We talk and hold hands, you moron," Tony rolled his eyes, "We're not starring in a porno, we don't fuck on the table."

"Tony," Steve flushed, then, "I don't know off the top of my head, a month or so, maybe a little more?"
"Since February 24th," Tony supplied, pointedly not looking at Steve, "Steve, so help me god, I don't want to hear a word. And stop *smiling* like that, Jesus, it's fucking creepy."

But how could Steve stop smiling when Tony had just casually rattled off their—well, anniversary, he supposed—like it was some fact, some law of physics or Peter's favorite foods or any of the other pieces of important information Tony kept locked away in that brain of his?

"No words then," Steve just nodded in agreement, twining their fingers together and kissing him on the cheek instead.

"Okay, ew," Clint made a fake gagging noise. "But I'll let it slide, since you two little lovebirds just won me and Nat twenties off Coulson. Pay up, loser."

"You couldn't have waited a week?" Phil sighed to Tony and Steve, getting up off the couch to retrieve his wallet from his back pocket.

"So this was a thing? You all just bet on our love life?" Tony rolled his eyes.

"Just us," Clint gestured to himself, Natasha, and Phil.

"If it makes you feel any better," Natasha didn't look up from her book as she flipped a page, "We bet on everything."

"It improves our spying," Clint maintained.

"It's more like they have a gambling addiction," Phil rolled his eyes as he handed Clint a twenty, then Natasha, "But it's occasionally useful, so we let it slide."

"I hear you use 'they', yet you hand them money," Tony smirked.

"Captain, do try and keep a lid on that boyfriend of yours, would you?" Phil sighed, collapsing back on the couch, though he had the traces of what Steve had learned to recognize as the Phil Coulson version of a grin.

"Wouldn't want to even if I could, sir," Steve chuckled, sitting back down on the couch next to Bruce.

He opened his arm up, putting it up on the back of the couch in invitation. Tony took it without hesitation, curling up against him with a smile. Steve hugged Tony to his side, appreciating the simple warmth of having Tony next to him in front of all their friends, no back of the mind worries about judgment or doubt.

"Are you going to tell Peter?" Bruce asked.

"Oh, this I have got to see," Clint piped up, "My money's on bloodshed, man. That little twerp of yours can be *vicious*."

"Actually, we've made up," Steve corrected Clint with a smile, "It was a misunderstanding. He thought I ordered Tony to take the nuke into space."

"There was some news coverage saying that," Phil nodded, "We corrected them after the fact, but Peter likely wouldn't have seen the retractions."

"You two've made up, then?" Bruce smiled.

"They get along great," Tony grinned, poking Steve in the side, "This one's Cap now."
"So you're going to tell him?"

"Well..." Tony shifted against him, and Steve just squeezed his shoulder, answering for them simply.

"Not yet."

"Yes!" Clint whooped, and they all turned to stare at him. "What? It means I won't be subjected to your lovey-dovey schmoo in the common areas."

"You're right. We'll have to get it all out now," Tony agreed, hooking a finger around Steve's collar and tugging him into a kiss.

It wasn't particularly dirty, but it certainly wasn't chaste.

"Ugh, my eyes! I have perfect vision, you assfucks, I didn't need that!"

"Sir, young sir approaches," JARVIS warned, and Tony nipped at Steve's bottom lip one last time before releasing him to return to sitting innocently at Steve's side.

Secrecy, Steve thought as he tried his best to wipe the pleased look off his face, was going to be the death of him.

"Daddy, lookit!"

Then Peter was barreling into the room, side-stepping around Thor and Clint on the floor to hop up onto the couch. He wriggled his way into Tony's lap, holding up a picture proudly.

"Is that...?"

"Yeah! 's me an' Cap at the zoo!" Peter bounced excitedly.

"Wow, Pete," Tony marveled at the drawing appreciatively, "That's very good. You got the spiders in there and everything."

"Yeah, that one's Nat an' that's Bruce an' that's Clint an' the big one's Thor!"

"You named them after us?" Natasha leaned across Tony to look at the drawing.

"Yeah," Peter said in the best 'duh' voice a soon-to-be-five year old could muster.

"And what about me, hm?" Tony said in mock protest, "I don't get a spider-me?"

"You're with Cap," Peter pointed to two blobs close together, "You're holdin' hands cause Cap said you guys were real good friends."

"Oh yeah, they're super duper good friends," Clint snickered.

Natasha threw a pillow at his head, but Peter didn't pick up on Clint's innuendos.

"Then next time, can we go t'gether?" he turned in Tony's lap to plead hopefully, "Please, Daddy? Cap knows lots an' lots about animals, even more'n you, he could teach you!"

"Does he now?" Tony gave Steve an amused look, and Steve shrugged, refusing to be embarrassed for being prepared.
"I did my research."

"Sure thing, Pete," Tony chuckled, kissing the back of Peter's head, "I can't miss out on Captain America, Zookeeper Extraordinaire, now can I?"

"This I've got to see," Clint grinned.

"I don't recall you getting an invite, Hunger Games," Tony said.

"Be nice," Steve rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, Daddy, be nice," Peter giggled.

"Great. Now he's mimicking you," Tony groaned, "This is going to end so badly for me."

They managed to keep the dating a secret rather well. Peter was young enough that if they were more affectionate it went happily unnoticed as long as there was no kissing involved, and any hand-holding or sitting closer than strictly necessarily was overlooked completely. They didn't come out to the media, either; Tony may have lived his life in the spotlight, but he'd kept Peter as sheltered as possible from it so far, and Steve had minimal experience at best, so it was better for everyone involved if things were kept to a need to know basis.

Rumor had it Fury laughed for a solid minute when he saw the paperwork Phil had filed about their updated status, but rumors were rumors and not to be trusted.

Steve and Peter, despite initial bumps, were now the best of buddies, something both Tony and Steve himself were extremely eager to encourage. Steve quickly became a constant in Peter's life, watching him when Tony needed time in the shop, reading him a ridiculous amount of books with an insane amount of patience, doing puzzles and painting with him and playing play-doh and doing pretty much anything Peter asked.

"You're going to spoil him rotten," Tony commented with an idle smile, looking up from the newsfeed on his tablet to Steve, who was at the stove while Peter went and washed his hands for lunch, "It was bad enough you did anything he wanted when he didn't talk to you. Now he knows he's got you under his thumb."

"I could say no if I wanted," Steve insisted, flipping the blueberry pancakes Peter had asked for.

"Steve, you hate blueberries."

"I don't hate them."

"Mhm," Tony put his tablet down on the kitchen table to saunter over to where Steve was, picking up a blueberry and offering it to Steve, "Eat one then."

"Not hungry."

"Really? Because I'm pretty sure that's not what your supersoldier metabolism says," Tony poked at Steve's stomach, earning himself a rumbling sound.

"I'll eat something else, it's fine," Steve shifted.

"Admit it, Peter's got you wrapped around his little finger," Tony grinned.

"Oh yeah, cause it's just Peter," Clint rolled his eyes at them as he entered the kitchen, Natasha two
"It's genetic," she agreed.

"What's genetic?" Tony eyed them both warily.

"Starks have the genetic ability to wrap supersoldiers around their little fingers," Clint shrugged, "We came to that conclusion weeks ago. Man, for a genius, you sure are slow."

"I don't have him wrapped around my finger," Tony huffed, offended, "We are in a mutually beneficial, emotionally healthy relationship, thank you."

"Who makes you coffee every morning?" Clint raised an eyebrow.

"So? He's nice, he makes food for you ingrates too—"

"But who takes you food in the lab? Drags you out of said lab after too long? Not to mention the asshole always makes us fetch you for game nights and movies even though you talk through the whole damn thing—"

"Wait, what—?"

"Face it, Stark, you've got him wh—"

"If you make a whip noise, you're benched for a month," Steve hummed, and Clint abruptly swallowed the rest of his sentence.

"Wh-tcha!"

"Benched!" Steve waved his spatula without looking.

"It wasn't me!" Clint protested.

"Gonna bench me?" Steve turned to see Peter snickering.

"Yep," Steve grinned back, "No fighting supervillains for you, not for a month."

"Not until I'm in my grave," Tony muttered into his coffee.

"Aw, c'mon—" Peter began to protest, turning to Steve hopefully, who shook his head.

"What your dad says goes," Steve just waved the spatula in Tony's direction.

Clint mouthed whipped, and Steve flicked pancake batter at him.

They fell into an easy, comfortable way of life. Sure, it was often interrupted by supervillains causing havoc downtown, but hey, life of a superhero. If Peter went somewhere with Daddy, to the zoo or the park or his soccer games or anywhere else, he wanted Steve there too—not that either man was complaining. It was actually the perfect excuse; on the rare occasion they were asked why it was always the three of them going out, why other Avengers only joined every once in a while, they just shrugged and said Peter liked Steve best.

Calls to assemble were a bit hectic, but not unmanageable. If they weren't all needed, one of the Avengers stayed behind with Peter, and if they were, Happy was on call. There was one near-apocalyptic occasion during which they'd had to all leave immediately and they'd been forced to leave Peter under JARVIS' eye for five minutes until Happy could get there, something that still gave
Tony heart palpitations when he thought about it, but generally speaking they didn't run into too many problems.

For Peter's fifth birthday he didn't want a big party, just wanted to go to the beach with the Avengers and a couple of friends instead. So Tony, Steve, Peter, his friends, and the Avengers packed up into two cars and headed out to the coast. The drive was long and hot and the kids (plus Clint) were crazy whiny until Tony played AC/DC—"You would raise your kid on rock music." "Shut up Steve, AC/DC is classic."—but the beach was well worth it.

After they hauled all the stuff out of the car and applied sunscreen to each wiggly kid, they spent the rest of the day playing in the surf and making sandcastles and picking out seashells Peter insisted on taking home so he could "have the ocean" in his room. Tony even tried to show Steve how to boogie board, though after a particularly spectacular failure that had Steve coughing up a lungful of water and having a minor panic attack, that came to a quick end.

Steve stayed out of the water after that and Tony hovered around him, feeling horrifically guilty, offering towels and water bottles and generally sticking to Steve like glue while the others watched the kids for a while.

"I'm so sorry, Steve, I didn't think—"

"Tony, relax, I'm fine, it's not—"

"It is my fault, how could I possibly have thought that was a good idea—"

"It was a good idea, I had fun, Tony, breathe—"

"Until I almost drowned you—"

"Tony, for goodness sakes'," Steve looped a finger into the waist of Tony's bathing suit, "Come with me."

He hauled Tony away, off behind the large rock formation a little ways away from the party. With a quick glance to make sure the others weren't looking, he pulled Tony behind the rocks with him.

"What're you—?"

Steve pressed Tony up against the rock, kissing him silent. He abused his super strength to keep Tony's wrists secure above his head, something Tony appreciated if the shameless writhing against him was any indication. He pressed back, pushing his hips into Tony's and biting at Tony's lip just the way he liked while Tony did that thing with his tongue that drove all rational thought from Steve's mind.

They may not have found time to have sex yet, but they'd sure turned kissing into an art form.

"Do I seem," Steve panted when the parted briefly, their lips still only just a breath apart, "Particularly upset to you?"

Tony didn't answer, just kissed him again, edging Steve's lips apart with his tongue. Steve released Tony's hands to cup his face, and Tony's hands ran down his chest and ghosted over his abdomen until Steve laughed into Tony's mouth.

"Ticklish, are we?" Tony teased, pulling away to waggle his eyebrows with a grin.

"Tony, no—"
Then Tony was tickling him, pushing him back and not giving up until Steve was falling into the sand in hystericis. Tony just crawled into his lap, still tickling him relentlessly until Steve grabbed him by the wrists and flipped him, about to kiss Tony into the sand when a little voice stopped him.

"Why're you wrestlin' with Daddy?"

"Uh."

"Cap's teaching me how to defend myself. You want me to be able to defend myself, don't you?" Tony piped up from under him, far better at excuses with these things than Steve.

"Yes, that," Steve agreed quickly.

"My mommy and daddy wrestle like that sometimes," Peter's friend Harry poked his head around the rocks with Peter, "They sound like they hurt."

"Does it hurt, Daddy?" Peter frowned at that.

"No, no, of course not—"

"I wouldn't hurt your father—"

"But Cap's a s'persold'er, couldn't he jus' hold you down if he wanted?"

Tony gave an almost imperceptible shudder, but if Steve had doubted it, Tony's arousal was clear to feel under his hips, and Steve gave Tony an incredulous look.

"Shut up," he muttered to Steve, then to Peter, "He could, but he's being very nice and holding back his strength to help teach me."

"Oh," Peter quirked his head, "You gonna come swim s'more?"

"I think I'd like to stay out of the water a little while," Steve answered, and Tony patted his arm.

"And I think I'm going to stay with Steve, bud. Why don't you ask Uncle Clint to take you out on his surfboard again?"

"Okay!" Peter smiled brightly, "I got real good at stayin' on, come 'n see!"

"Yeah, Tony," Steve grinned, shifting his hips enough to tease against Tony's arousal, but not enough for Peter and Harry to see, "Why don't we go see?"

"Don't let anyone tell you different, Peter," Tony glared up at him, "Captain America is evil."

"Da-ad," Peter complained, "He is not."

"You're right, he's just a jerk."

"Is not," Peter wrinkled his nose.

"Peter, you're supposed to be on my side here," Tony sighed in mock disappointment.

"Nu-uh! Cap said you call him a jerk when you really just wanna hug'm 'stead."

"That's very…astute, of Cap," Tony snuck a look at him, "Alright Peter, run along, we'll just finish our wrestling match and be out in a moment."
"My mommy and daddy kiss after they wrestle," Harry piped up as they walked off.

"Ew," Peter made a face to Harry as they disappeared around the corner, "Why would Cap 'n Daddy kiss?"

"Why indeed," Steve smiled down at Tony.

Steve's blonde hair was mussed and sandy, and the sun behind him made it look a bit like a golden halo around the hero's head. Tony took in Steve's soft smile, the fond, open affection in his too-blue eyes, and accidentally blurted out what he'd been trying his best to hold in for weeks.

"Because you love me?"

Steve blinked in surprise, the teasing smile dropping off his face a bit and Tony didn't give him time to do anything else before he was arching up to kiss him. He pulled his hands free from Steve's grasp to tangle his fingers in Steve's hair and tug him back down, cutting off any form of answer. He'd been trying so damn hard not to rush Steve, not push for sex or love anything else, too achingly, blissfully happy enough with what they already had to risk anything that would ruin it.

Peter still slept with Tony, which was pretty much the only thing that had stopped Tony from ruining it all by impulsively attempting to take Steve to bed before he was ready, but the idea that he loved Steve had been weighing on his mind for weeks. It was hard to tell, with Steve; he seemed pretty well adjusted to the future, then little things would throw him off, confuse or frustrate him. Tony didn't want to be that, hadn't wanted to force anything by saying those words and pushing Steve into answering when he didn't know.

"Please don't go," he murmured against Steve's lips when Steve broke away, "You don't have to answer, just please don't go, I—"

"Why do you always think I'm going somewhere—"

"You pulled away—"

"Because I wanted to answer you—"

"You don't have to, it was stupid, I just—"

Steve cut him off with an insistent, forceful kiss, before pulling away to tell him, "Maybe you ought to let me finish a sentence, Tony."

"I might be the slightest bit worried about how you'll finish it."

"I swear, for a genius, you can be the biggest idiot I know," Steve kissed him again, but it was tender, none of the bite or heat from before, just a soft press of the lips, "I love you, Tony. Of course I do."

Tony crashed into Steve, surging up and rolling him onto his back, hands cupping Steve's face as he kissed him into the sand. Steve's hand fell to Tony's waist, anchoring him as Tony curled over him possessively.

"We're going to get caught," Steve murmured against his lips.

"Ask me how much I care," Tony just rolled his hips against Steve's in answer.

They didn't get caught, and they eventually emerged on their own to watch Peter and Harry take
turns on Clint's surfboard—he was surprisingly good with that thing—while the other kids had a sandcastle-making competition. Natasha and Pepper laid out in the sun, Phil and Bruce read under the umbrella, and Thor threw giggling kids into the water.

Steve and Tony stayed up on the beach, helping with sandcastles and watching the kids to make sure no one drowned. All in all, the hours slid by pretty fast, and soon enough they'd finished cake and were packed up and back on the road. Every last last exhausted child fell asleep on the way, even Peter. The boy was slumped and drooling on Steve's shoulder after absolutely insisting Steve sit in the backseat next to him because it was his birthday, and Tony just smiled at them in the rearview mirror.

"Little finger indeed," he teased.

"You're one to talk," Steve snorted. One of the boys stirred in their sleep, and he lowered his voice, "You lathered Peter so thick with sunscreen I thought he'd slip right out of your hands."

"Hey, if he'd gotten sunburned, he'd have whined for weeks."

"And you'd have felt horrible."

"…maybe a little," Tony admitted, "I can't help it, I worry about him."

"Helicopter parent if I've ever met one," Steve teased.

"That's better than…" Tony looked pensive, purposefully looking at the road and not Steve, "I don't know. When it comes to Peter, I'd rather care too much and embarrass him and overparent and be too protective than to not give a crap one way or the other, you know?"

"Well, I think there's a happy medium in there somewhere," Steve pointed out, "And I don't really think you're a helicopter parent. I mean, you can be a little overprotective, but considering our line of work and your general place in the spotlight that's not exactly a bad thing."

"I used to not care at all," Tony admitted carefully, still pointedly not making eye contact with Steve, as if worried about his opinion.

Steve remembered the little Tony had told him about where Peter had come from, about what he'd been like before Afghanistan. He knew pre-Afghanistan Tony had not been the same man, and he knew that Peter had been left at Tony's doorstep before then, so he'd sort of put it together that Tony might not been so keen to be a parent once, but it was different to hear him say it.

"And I just…" Tony continued, speaking faster as he gained momentum, "Remembering it is the strangest thing, because I catch myself thinking that I can't imagine what it would be like not to have Peter in my life, not to love him like I do, but I can, I don't even have to imagine, I can remember too well that state of arrogant, selfish ambivalence where I just wanted him gone."

"Tony, you don't have to tell me this," Steve carefully adjusted Peter so that he wasn't leaning on Steve before moving forward, squeezing a hand on Tony's shoulder. He could see all too clearly the pain on Tony's face at this particular topic, and it wasn't necessary, "You're a different person, a better person. I know you are."

"It's just, you have to understand, Steve," Tony shook his head, trying to make some point, "I was an awful person. I passed him off to Pepper, practically begged her to get rid of him, because it was still all about me. All about how he would affect my life and how with a kid I couldn't drink and party and sleep with strangers and I…I didn't even touch him, you know? God, I was dying in Afghanistan and that was the only thought in my head. I hadn't even touched him. And that's what
scares me sometimes, that…without Afghanistan, I would've been perfectly happy to give him up without doing so. I never would have seen my son again and I never would have held him and I probably wouldn't have even thought twice about him—"

"That's not true."

"It is—"

"No, it's not," Steve was firm, "Going to Afghanistan didn't suddenly flick some switch in your brain that turned you from completely irredeemable, worthless human being to kind and caring father extraordinaire. I'm sure you were a jerk, and it is awful that you didn't hold Peter, but there was a part of you that was good, Tony. They didn't brainwash you, did they? Who you became after that experience, you had it in you before then. You needed a reason to turn your life around and you found one, but even if you hadn't, that good person would've still been inside you."

Tony didn't say anything else, just kept his eyes on the road, but Steve could see through the rearview mirror that Tony had teared up a bit.

"For God's sake, pull over."

"Why?"

"I'm going to hug you, and if you try and escape I'm not afraid to abuse my superstrength."

"You want me to pull over so you can hug me—"

"I love you and you're upset, what in the heck do you think I'm going to do?"

"God, you are such a freaking sap," Tony grumbled, but he pulled over anyway.

Steve managed to disentangle himself from the sleeping children in the backseat and exit the car. Tony got out as well, his face already pulled into a well-practiced mask.

"This is ridiculous, I'm perfectly fine, you don't need to—"

Steve ignored him completely, wrapping him up in his arms as tightly as he could without causing pain, Tony's reply ending in muffled words into his shoulder. They stood off to the side of the road for a long minute, and eventually Tony's hands snaked around Steve's waist. He gave a 'my-boyfriend-is-ridiculous-and-I'm-indulging-him' sigh, like he was merely giving in to Steve's whims.

"You know," Steve murmured after a moment, "Maybe you would've given Peter up. But I know you, Tony. You would've thought about him, would've wondered…eventually, you'd have regretted it. Maybe in a long time, but…you would have. You have too good a heart not to."

Steve said nothing about the way Tony crumpled just a bit in his arms at that, just held him close and kissed his hair.

"You see the good in everyone," Tony muttered at last.

"Then it says something about you that I'm with you, doesn't it?" Steve answered, running his fingers through the soft hair at the nape of Tony's neck, "There's so much good in you, Tony. It was there before, too, you just…you finally let it through."

"Good or not, I'm going to hell for keeping you all to myself," Tony chuckled.

"Sure, Tony," Steve rolled his eyes fondly.
"I love you, though," Tony tilted his head up to kiss Steve about as chastely as he ever did, "So, I'm thinking it'll be worth it."

It occurred to Steve with a flood of warmth that it was the first time Tony had said that properly, and he smiled, happily capturing Tony's lips once more.

The rest of the ride home was uneventful, though Steve did move to front seat to twine his fingers with Tony's. In the end, Peter didn't even get a tan, and Clint laughed hysterically until Tony gave Peter permission to slap Uncle Clint's sunburned shoulders. Clint fled in terror at that point, and Peter was the one laughing.

He unwrapped his presents once they were back at the Tower and all his friends had been picked up, and his unquestionable favorite was the glass terrarium courtesy of Steve. He hadn't understood what the purpose was at first, but when Steve explained that he'd talked to Tony and they could go to the pet store to pick out one of the tarantulas and make a habitat of it, Peter had all but screamed with excitement.

"Say thank you, Pete," Tony chuckled, "Believe you me, this would not be happening if Steve hadn't fought tooth and nail for it."

"Thank you thank you thank you!" Peter clung to Steve, "I'll take real good care of 'm, promise!"

"And the thing does not ever leave it's tank," Tony added, "You hear me, Peter? JARVIS will tell on you, you know he will."

"He'll stay in, promise," Peter nodded enthusiastically to Tony, still beaming up at Steve, "You're the best, Cap!"

"Well," Steve flushed, "I'm glad you like it."

The trip to the pet store was surprisingly expensive, even to Tony, but they walked away with a gigantic Tarantula named Araña and enough dirt and plants to fill the terrarium. The rest of the day was spent setting up the tank, which Tony left Steve to do with Peter on his own because,

"You're the one that thought he should get a spider for his birthday. I'm not touching that thing with a ten foot pole."

So Tony disappeared into the shop for the rest of the night, only coming up for air to put Peter to bed. Steve moved to leave, let Tony and Peter go about their nightly routine, when Peter piped up.

"Can Cap gimme my bath? Please Daddy please?"

"Let's not scare him off just yet, Peter," Tony chuckled, ruffling Peter's hair.

"I think I can handle a five year old's bath, Tony," Steve raised an eyebrow, and Tony mimicked the gesture in challenge.

"A five year old's bath, yes. A Peter bath…" Tony trailed off innocently, "I don't know…"

"Tony, I have fought aliens, doombots, velociraptors, and who knows what else. I think I can handle Peter's bath."

"Yeah!" Peter wiggled out of Tony's grasp and into Steve's lap.

"Don't say I didn't warn you…" Tony sing-songed, and Steve just rolled his eyes.
In retrospect, he perhaps should have listened.

Peter was giggly and wiggly and impossibly slippery once he was wet, and he delighted in throwing things and splashing water everywhere. Steve eventually gave up on keeping his clothes dry and just tried to make sure there was more water in the tub than the floor; it was harder than he would have thought.

Which only became worse when Steve tried to wash Peter's hair.

As much as Peter loved water, he hated shampoo. He fidgeted and slipped right out of Steve's grip, splashing him with water and laughing wildly as he escaped to the other end of the tub. Steve finally managed to get a hand around Peter's waist and used it to lift the boy clear out of the water and tuck him under his arm in a football-esque hold to rub some shampoo into his hair. Peter shrieked at being taken out of the tub, but Steve just finished shampooing him before letting him back into the tub, where Peter insisted he could rinse it himself.

Steve turned his back for all of two seconds to grab Peter's towel, and when he turned back, there were bubbles everywhere.

"I'm a froggy!" Peter stood up, making like he was going to jump.

"Peter Parker Stark," Steve raised a finger in warning, "If you even think about—"

In the back of his mind, Steve wondered idly how such a little body could make such an enormous splash.

"You little devil…"

Peter tried to say sorry, but couldn't get it out through his giggling fit. Steve eyed him wryly, then grabbed a handful of bubbles and wiped them across Peter's face. The boy shrieked happily, grabbing bubbles of his own and smacking them onto Steve's face in turn. He grabbed at Steve's nose and rubbed it into his hair, styling it into a bit of a mohawk.

"Now you gots a 'hawk," Peter nodded affirmatively, and Steve laughed.

"I think I'll keep my hair the way it is, buddy."

"Cause you're old?"

"What?"

"Daddy says s'metimes you don't get new stuff cause you're old, an' that we gotta be patient wit'you cause you're tryin' your best."

"That's very true," Steve began to give Peter a mohawk of his own, "But I'm learning fast. I know exactly what a mohawk is, little man, I just don't want one. Besides, it looks better on you, don't you think?"

"Yeah!" Peter grinned widely.

"Not to mention, Cap's inner old man requires that his hair be perfectly coifed at all times."

Tony was leaning against the doorway, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Don't listen to your silly daddy," Steve told Peter, still playing with his hair, "He's older than I am."
"Nu-uh! Daddy said you're ninety."

"Ninety-five, technically," Steve admitted with a tilt of his head, "But your father has been awake more years than I have."

"Oh god, I'm simultaneously robbing the cradle and the old folk's home," Tony groaned to himself.

"If it makes you feel any better, after all I've been through, I'd say we're mentally around the same age," Steve only chuckled; he was aware of it, but he'd never been particularly bothered by their age gap.

"You're both old," Peter declared, as if to settle the debate.

"I'm not sure if I can live with that," Tony considered it.

"Well, I can," Steve gave Peter a raspberry on his soapy cheek, "So, did you come to check on all the screaming? I know it sounded like I was brutally murdering him, but we were just having a debate about the necessity of shampoo in the hair-washing process."

"Nah, he always screams like that at shampoo time. Honestly, I would've been more worried if there wasn't screaming. It wasn't a pain scream anyway, I can tell the difference. I just came to see my boys."

"Cap's not your boy," Peter corrected, but before Tony and Steve could even exchange a glance, "Cap's a man."

"You're right, buddy," Tony laughed, "My boy and my man, then. What do you think, Peter, you about ready for storytime?"

"No! Don't wanna get out!"

"Y'know…" Tony mused, "I'm willing to bet if you get out with no trouble, and ask reeeally nicely, Cap might give in and read you a bedtime story. You'll probably have to beg though."

"Please, Cap?" Peter changed his mind immediately, "Pretty pretty please?"

"I don't know, Peter…all that screaming kind of wore me out…" Steve teased.

"I'm real sorry!" Peter sat up, grabbing the edge of the tub to look at Steve seriously, "I won't do it 'gain, I'll be super duper quiet, promise!"

"Well…if you promise," Steve conceded with a sly smile.

"We usually do three or four chapters, depending on how long they are. We could swap off, if you want?" Tony offered.

"Sounds good."

"What do you say, Pete, you want Magic Tree House, or Borrowers?"

"Tree House, Tree House!"

Steve got Peter up and out of the bath, wrapping him up in the fluffiest towel he could find and drying him off while Tony went to retrieve the book and Peter's pajamas. Then Peter dressed himself for bed and brushed his teeth; his shirt was on backwards at first and his brushing was sloppy, but he did it on his own with minimal complaint—"I can do it, Cap, no helping! Da-ad, stop tryin'a fix my
They cozied up in Tony's bed, tucking Peter under the covers, Tony and Steve on each side of him. They swapped off chapters of the Magic Tree House book until Peter's eyes started to droop, and he was leaning onto Tony's shoulder just to keep his head up.

"One more chap' er, Daddy," Peter yawned, "Please?"

"I've told you before, Peter," Tony shook his head, "When you start sleeping in your own bed again, we can read more chapters at night."

"But," Peter's lower lips wobbled, "But nightmares."

"I know, baby," Tony pressed kiss to Peter's hair, "I'm not going to make you. But you can't sleep in here with me forever. I bought you a nightlight, I bought you seven nightlights—"

"They're not my ni' light," Peter yawned again, putting his hand over the arc reactor.

"I know, bud," Tony sighed, "I know. Unfortunately, this one's going to have to stay with me. Can I get a kiss goodnight?"

Peter kissed Tony on the cheek, then did the same to Steve.

"Night, Daddy, night, Cap," Peter turned on his side as they slid off the bed, cuddling up with his Hulk plushie.

"Sweet dreams, baby."

"Goodnight, Peter."

They closed the door behind them, and Tony turned to Steve with a weary smile, their fantastic day catching up with him. It still amazed him that Steve was honestly happy to be with him and Peter, to do birthday parties and bathtimes and goodnight routines, to set up creepy spider tanks and let his hair be styled like a mohawk and do silly voices while reading a kid's book. The contentedness was clear to see on his face in the way he watched Tony when he thought Tony wasn't looking, and Peter, whose opinion meant the world to Tony, just looked up at them both with such awe and trust, his adorable little smile bright as the sun, focus waning as sleep overcame him... it felt like home, like family.

"Is it weird to say I don't think I've ever loved you more than right now?"

"Now you know how I feel," Steve just took Tony's hands in his, "Watching you with him all this time. He's really something."

"I sure lucked out, didn't I?"

"He's a wonderful boy because you're a wonderful parent, Tony," Steve ran a thumb over his hands, "Don't ever kid yourself about that."

"Well, you'd, uh," Tony was not blushing, he wasn't sixteen anymore, damn it, "You'd be pretty good too. If you wanted to be, obviously."

"Of course I do, Tony," Steve gave him a funny look, "I'll admit I hadn't given children a whole lot of thought before we met, but, well. I love you and Peter's comes with you, but more than that, I love Peter. I'm not kidding when I say he's wonderful."
"Good."

Happiness bubbling in his chest, Tony tugged Steve forward by their connected hands. It wasn’t a particularly heated kiss to begin with, but it quickly became so. Steve cupped his face in his hands, and Tony’s hands skinned under Steve’s rucked up shirt. Steve pulled away after a moment, panting just a bit, and Tony found himself rather proud he’d rendered a supersoldier breathless.

"I have to ask, do you," Steve paused a moment to catch his breath, then, "Want to wait, for some reason, or…what?"

"Wait for what?"

"What do you think?"

"What, sex?" Tony gaped at Steve.

"Yes, sex, Tony," Steve rolled his eyes, then softened a bit, "I'm not trying to pressure you, if you want to wait it's fine, you just keep using Peter as an excuse and you don't have to. I'm just curious what milestone we're waiting for here—"

"I'm pretty sure past me is going to invent time travel just to shoot me in the face for being a fucking idiot," Tony muttered, "Are you serious? I was waiting for you Mr. Prim-and-Proper 1940's!"

"Me?"

"You!"

"Tony, I'm pretty sure I've wanted to have sex with you since the first time I saw you in that skintight Iron Man undersuit."

"We weren't even dating!"

"Do you wait to date someone before lusting after them shamelessly?"

"Point taken, I've been getting off to you since I was like sixteen, so—"

"Tony, oh my God—"

"What? I had a very detailed poster of you, it's in a box somewhere—"

"I have absolutely no idea how to feel about that."

"Aw, don't feel bad babe, you're much prettier than the poster."

"That is so not the weird part of this—"

"Wait, wait," Tony interrupted with a shake of his head, focusing again, "So we could've been having sex? For months?"

"I'm sorry, what part of me practically jumping you in the mission room gave you a different impression?"

"I just, I don't, I figured—"

"Since we're all in agreement," Steve kissed Tony's stuttering realization silent, "I vote we move this down the hall."
Tony didn't answer, just shoved Steve back against the wall with fervor. Steve hoisted him up and Tony's legs wrapped around his waist as he made a keening sort of noise in the back of his throat in protest. Tony complained about being manhandled—something about him not being a woman, as if that made a bit of difference—but Steve knew he liked it, if not from the sounds he made than by the growing arousal now pressing into his stomach.

Besides, physically making Tony move was the only way they were going to make it to the bedroom without nudity in the hallway.

"God we need to learn to communicate," Tony muttered when Steve threw him on the bed, "Also, that's hot."

"Mm, glad you appreciate it," Steve descended on him, putting Tony's mouth to much better use. At least, he tried, since Tony kept pulling away to murmur things to him.

"I'm going to take such good care of you, babe, I love you, I love you so much, just relax and let me show you a good time, I promise, I'll make this so good for you—"

"Tony, are you trying to _convince_ me?" Steve laughed when he realized what Tony was doing.

"Maybe a little," Tony admitted, "I have to admit, I might also be trying to convince myself a bit, since, well, it's been…a while."

"A while?"

"A long while. Like, uh…a five-year-old-ish while?" Tony winced, clearly seeing this as some failure on his part, "And you seem really excited and I feel like it's only fair to warn you that since you're literally my teenage wet dream and you _want to have sex with me_ and there's a part of my brain still processing that and like I said, been a while, so I may not exactly be in a great position to make this, um, last, if you know what I mean—"

Steve just smiled, bending down to kiss Tony quiet, trying to pass along exactly how little he cared. He suspected Tony didn't want to hear his sappy assurances right now, about how he could honestly care less if it was five minutes or five hours. How as long as his first time was with Tony, with the man he loved, he couldn't be bothered with the details. How it didn't matter because he hoped, he desperately hoped, that they had years and years and years together to improve.

He ran his tongue over Tony's lower lip instead, softly asking entrance, and they kissed for a long moment before Steve pulled away just far enough to let his forehead rest against Tony's with a teasing smile.

"I'm a ninety-five year old virgin. I don't exactly have high hopes for my own performance here, Tony."

He felt the tension in Tony's shoulders lessen as he laughed at that, and Steve kissed his way along Tony's jaw, under his earlobe, down his neck. That area was particularly sensitive for Tony, and Steve did his best to drive any remaining tension out with nipping, sucking kisses to the curve of his neck. Tony's fingers curled into Steve's shirt for something to grip as he arched up, tilting his head to give Steve access.

"You," Tony paused to give a soft moan that shot through Steve like electricity as he started tugging Steve's shirt up, "Are wearing _way_ too many clothes."
Chapter 6

Five Years Old

Now that Tony had some…incentive, so to speak, to get Peter to sleep in his own bed again, he solved the problem relatively easily. He turned it into a project, and after a couple hours in the shop together, father and son emerged with an arc reactor nightlight. It wasn't actual arc reactor tech, but the color was the same, and it seemed to do the job just fine.

Since five was too young for Peter to really understand what "dating" meant, they didn't tell him. So though they slept in the same bed, there were still occasions when Peter came to get Tony in the middle of the night and it was only JARVIS' quick warning that gave Steve time to hide somewhere. He usually just hid in the master bathroom now, since the one time he'd hidden in the closet ended with Tony teasing him about it for days:

"It's okay, babe, really, you can come out the closet, I accept you—"

"Shut up, Tony, it was four am in the morning."

In spite of this, things between them were going really well. Steve had started to do more and more with Peter, slowly and carefully integrating himself into Peter's life as more than just another friend of his dad's. He knew Tony was still cautious in spite of everything, as overprotective of his son as he ought to be, but Steve had no intentions of disappearing on them.

"Cap?" Peter interrupted his bedtime story to tug on Steve's sleeve, "Daddy says you're a vet'ran."

"I am," Steve told the little boy in his lap, "I fought in World War II, a long time ago."

"What's war like?"

"Well..." Steve paused, unsure how to answer the question without getting into anything unsuitable for a kid, "It's loud. Pretty chaotic, too."

"Didja have to shoot people?"

"Very bad people, yes."

"Can you tell me a war story instead?"

"I suppose so," Steve shifted, putting the Borrowers book on Peter's nightstand and trying to think of a story that didn't involve excessive amounts of dead Nazi's, "How about…you want to hear about the time I rescued my friend Bucky from HYDRA?"

"Isn't a hydra a dragon thing?"

"In mythology, yes. It's the one with all the heads."

"An' when you cut 'em off they jus' grow back?"

"Exactly, and that's why the HYDRA organization calls themselves that. Now, this was just a while after they gave me the superserum..."

Huh.
Tony squinted at the clock; was it really almost ten? Steve usually came to haul him out by now. Then again, Steve was a notorious pushover when it came to Peter, it was entirely likely Peter had fast-talked Steve into reading the entire book to him in one sitting. Tony took off his welding goggles, wiped the grease from his hands, and shut down the lab to go check on them.

"...and then he peeled his face off, and Bucky went 'ah, gross!' cause his skull was bright red."

"He peeled his face off?" Peter exclaimed.

"You bet. Bucky tried to pull my face off in my sleep at least twice afterwards."

"I'm beginning to think maybe I should stick around for storytime after all," Tony laughed from the doorway.

"Oh, hey Tony," Steve smiled up at him, a bit abashed, "Peter wanted to hear a war story, so…"

"So you went with the one involving face-peeling," Tony chuckled, "Nice. That'll put him right to sleep."

"Daddy Daddy Daddy!" Peter pestered, leaping up from Steve's lap to make the motion for 'explosion', "Didja know Cap made HYDRA explode?"

"I did," Tony grinned, "Cap's had a lot of crazy adventures, hasn't he?"

"Yeah!"

"And it was very nice of him to tell you all about it, huh Pete? So why don't we say thank you and goodnight to Cap—"

"But Dad—"

"Y'know," Tony hummed, "If you complain about not being tired, I might not want to let Cap tell you war stories before bed again…"

"I'm tired, I'm tired!" Peter squeaked, all but diving under the covers, "Night Daddy, night Cap!"

"Uh-huh, that's what I thought," Tony chuckled, leaning over to give Peter a goodnight kiss, "Night, Pete."

"Cap," Peter protested when Steve made to get off the bed, sitting up and grabbing Steve's sleeve, "Cap, you forgotta kiss me goodnight!"

"Silly me," Steve smiled, ignoring the smugly pleased look Tony was shooting him and kissing Peter on the cheek, "Goodnight, Peter, sweet dreams."

When they closed the door behind them, Tony turned to Steve with the same wide, satisfied grin as before.

"You're in the club now, Steve," he teased, "No turning back."

"Oh, darn," Steve rolled his eyes, "I was planning to pack my things and sneak out on you in the dead of night."

"Well, that's a bad plan. Considering how latched onto me you are in your sleep, I highly doubt I wouldn't notice."
"I latch onto you, do I?" Steve snorted, "You're like a cuddly octopus."

"What, I'm sleeping with a supersoldier and you expect me not to touch? Really, Steve, it's like you don't know me at all."

"Sure, Tony," Steve just shook his head, wrapping an arm around Tony's shoulders and pressing a kiss to his temple, "Whatever you say."

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Six Years Old

Tony wasn't entirely sure why they were still putting off telling Peter they were dating. Clearly, Steve wasn't going anywhere; they'd been dating for a year and a half now, Peter already considered Steve like a second father, and Tony, well. He wasn't one for all that sappy stuff, but… he'd never felt this way about someone romantically before. Even Pepper, who had been a part of his life for near to a decade, even when he'd considered her romantically…he hadn't felt this kind of close to her. He wanted Steve around…well, forever, if Tony could manage to keep him that long.

In the end, Peter beat them to it.

Tony was making mac n cheese and dinosaur chicken nuggets for Peter's lunch and chicken parmesan for his and Steve's, while Peter colored at the table and Steve got in a workout two floors down. Peter had been quiet for a little while, which usually meant he was brooding over a question.

"Something on your mind, Petey-bird?"

"Is Cap your boyfriend, Dad?" Peter put down his crayon to question Tony with all the seriousness of a six year old could muster.

"He…well, yes, he is," Tony stopped stirring for a minute to come sit across the table from Peter, "Do you know what that means, Peter? To be someone's boyfriend?"

"Yeah. Cap's your boyfriend like MJ's my girlfriend, right?"

"It's, uh," Tony laughed, "It's a little more serious when you're older, but I suppose."

"Serious how?" Peter asked thoughtfully.

"Well…" Tony considered how to phase it to a six year old, "You care about MJ more than all the other girls in your class, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I care about Cap more than all the other boys—and girls—in the world."

"That's a lot," Peter blinked owlishly, "But you haven't met ev'ryone in the world, so how would you know?"

"That's the thing about it, Pete. You just…know. You feel it."

"In your heart?"

"Exactly."

"Like how you know you love me?"
"Different kind of love, but…similar, yeah. It's just intuitive."

"Tuitive?"

"It means to know something without having to think about it."

"So…there's different kinds'a love?"

"Hundreds."

"Really?"

"You bet. Aunty Pepper is my best friend and I love her very much, but in a different way than I love Cap, or you. I love her like a friend, I love him like a boyfriend, and you like a son. I love you all very, very much, but it's different. You can't always quantify it."

"Quantify?"

"You can't always say 'I love this person more' or 'I love that person less'; sometimes…it's just a lot of different love."

"Like I love you, but I love Cap an' Aunty Tasha an' Uncle Bruce an' everyone too. Just different."

"Just different," Tony agreed with a smile.

Peter digested this for a minute, then,

"I think I still love you most, though."

"Good," Tony chuckled, "Because I still love you most, too."

"With all your heart?" Peter asked earnestly, and Tony leaned across the table to press a kiss to Peter's forehead.

"With all my heart."

Steve was lying across the couch while he read when Tony emerged from a 39 hour bender in the shop. He started to walk past the rec room, paused, then backtracked and came to join them. He trudged past everyone to collapse directly on top of Steve on the couch. His face was pressed into Steve's chest, his arm dangled over the side, and their legs tangled together. Steve huffed out a laugh and raised his book above Tony's head.

"I'm not the bed, Tony," he laughed, "This is the living room."

"Don't wanna bed, wanna you."

"Okay," Steve smiled in amusement at his nonsense, shifting his book to one hand so he could use the other to pet Tony's hair, earning himself a muffled, appreciative sound that vibrated against his chest.

"God, it's like you're married," Clint made a face, and Natasha smacked him upside the head with her book.

"Leave them be, дурак."
"Ow, fine, jeez," Clint rubbed his head.

Peter wandered in then, rubbing at his eyes.

"Daddy, I had a nightma—" he caught sight of Tony, and blinked blearily, "What happened to Daddy?"

"Daddy's dead," Tony groaned.

"Dead tired," Steve corrected with a chuckle, "Which is his own fault."

"Shouldn't you go t'bed?" Peter quirked his head.

"Cap is my bed," Tony hummed with a yawn, "My very warm, very comfortable bed."

"C'mon Pete, your Dad's tired. How about I tell you a story? I bet I can talk you back to sleep no problem," Clint hopped off the couch.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So, this one time, me, Aunty Nat, and Uncle Phil were in this place called Budapest…" then they were wandering back down the hall out of earshot.

"Budapest," Tony mumbled into Steve's chest, "The fuck happened in Budapest."

"Go to sleep, Tony," Steve just chuckled, resuming his stroking of Tony's hair.

They really shouldn't have been surprised when, a few days later, while they were watching some tv after lunch, Peter climbed onto the couch and stretched out on top of Steve just like Tony had.

"Theft!" Tony accused from the kitchen where he was putting away leftovers, "Steve-stealing rascal!"

"Oh, hush," Steve waved at him with the book, then smiled down at Peter, "Comfy, Pete?"

"Yeah," Peter snuggled up to him, and Steve did the same as he had with Tony, shifting his book to one hand to stroke Peter's hair with the other.

Like father like son, Peter was asleep within minutes.

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**Seven Years Old**

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Peter was not particularly enthused with grade school.

He was smarter than most of the kids in his class, and already had a grasp on most of the concepts they covered. Tony didn't want him skipping grades like he had though, because he remembered all too well what it felt like to be younger, tinier, and sassier than all your classmates—it didn't end well. So Peter stayed in the second grade with his peers, but it meant occasionally that boredom turned into sass, which more often than not turned into trouble.

Tony was called into more than a handful of parent-teacher meetings where he was told that Peter was a bit of a "difficult child", which was teacher-lingo for "your child is the walking entity of sass". Tony chastised Peter appropriately of course, and supported whatever punishments the teachers laid down, but if he was being honest with himself, he didn't see much harm in it. He and Steve both
agreed it was just the product of too much energy and intelligence bottled up, not an actual mean streak.

There was one time Peter did shove a girl into the mud, but that had been quickly and swiftly put to an end. The teacher was somewhat blasé about it, sighing that "boys will be boys, won't they?" while Peter waited outside, but Tony left relatively abruptly after that and made himself very clear to Peter on the car ride home.

"Peter, I don't want to hear about anything like this again, you understand?" Tony fixed him with a look in the rearview mirror, "I know you can get bored in class, and you talk back sometimes, but this is more serious than that. We don't shove people, you know better."

"I know," Peter mumbled, picking at a leaf on his shoe, repeating what Tony had taught him, "Stark men gotta have higher stand'rds."

"That's right. We treat people the way we'd want to be treated. Would you like it if Maisy had pushed you into the mud?"

"No, but she's a girl—"

"There are no buts, Peter. Liking a girl doesn't mean—"

"I don't like her," Peter grumbled.

"Oh, please, don't even start," Tony rolled his eyes, "Liking, or 'not liking', someone is never an acceptable excuse to hurt someone or be rough with them. If you like a girl, or a boy, or whatever it is you're into, you smile at them, you play nice, or give them a flower or something. You do not push, shove, pull hair, anything like that, understand?"

"Yes, Dad."

"I like Cap, but you don't see us treating each other that way, do you?"

"No, Dad."

They didn't have any trouble with Peter being rough after that, though he continued to be a little sassmonster to his teachers. When Tony complained about all the parent-teacher conferences though, Clint just snorted and told him, "He's your kid, what were you expecting?", and the rest of the Avengers seemed to mimic the sentiment. Tony looked to Steve for support, but Steve just patted his arm comfortingy and stayed suspiciously silent.

Perhaps the weirdest call Tony got was just after winter break. He was in the suit at the time, fighting some weird half-reptile half-robot creatures of AIM's creation. Tony always panicked just a little bit when Peter's school called him; no matter how many times they called to tell him about Peter running his mouth or starting a food fight or corralling his classmates into a homework rebellion, there was a little part of him that thought terrorist assassin warlocks have kidnapped my son oh god oh god oh god. So, in spite of the fact that he was currently wrestling a slime lizard in mid-air, he had JARVIS patch the call through.

When Peter's teacher informed him that his son had scooted the giant red bucket they used for time-outs halfway to the parking lot in an attempted break for freedom, however, Tony laughed so hard he dropped the robo-lizard.

"Oh, shit, sorry, I dropped the robo-lizard, hold on—"
"Robo-lizard?" the woman sounded startled.

"Yeah, no, superhero, I think I put that on a form somewhere. Hold on, I have to catch the thing before it gets loose again…yeah, so what exactly is the problem? Sounds to me like he didn't leave the bucket, right?"

"Funny, that's the same excuse Peter used," the teacher said in a way that made Tony think she really didn't find it all that funny.

"Yeah, you have to be really, really clear with him. He listens, you just have to cover all your—ow—uh, bases."

"Peter is surely smart enough to know that moving the bucket is against the rules—"

"Did you ever tell him though? Don't get me wrong, I'm sure it is, he just…he's not really a rule-breaker per se, he just likes to find out exactly what he can get away with."

"Well," she sighed, "He's certainly creative."

"Hate to cut this short, but do you need me to pick him up or was this just informative? Cause I'm a little busy trying to take down AIM at the moment—"

"Purely informative, Mr. Stark," she answered with a bit of a sigh, "I'll let you get back to your…work."

"See you at three," Tony said, then disconnected, politely ignored her pause over the word 'work' because superheroeing was too work, thank you.

The Avengers managed to finish up by two, and hit the new sushi place a block away before heading to debrief. Fury went on and on, and when 2:45 rolled around, Tony grinned and stood.

"Well, as fun as this all is, I oh-so-unfortunately have to duck out to pick up Peter—"

"Nice try, Stark," Fury waved at him to take a seat, "Agent Coulson's already been sent."

"God damn it," Tony complained, sitting back down, "What's the point of a kid if I can't use him to get out of meetings?"

The meeting resumed and of course Tony's mind wandered off again, and he found himself realizing exactly how long the list of people who could pick Peter up from school was. Pepper, Happy and Rhodey had always been on the list, but in the last two years, he'd somehow managed to acquire all five of the Avengers, plus Phil. He had nine different people he trusted with his child's life; it was a strange thought for Tony, who'd started the whole parenting gig almost completely alone.

He'd had Pepper back then, sure, and Rhodey and Happy, but…it had felt different than this. They were last resorts, far to the back of his mind; for those first couple of years, Tony had considered it to be him and Peter against the world. He hadn't wanted anyone interfering without life or death scenarios being involved, but now…

Steve was almost always around. When the three of them weren't together, it was because Steve had Peter alone while Tony worked in the shop, or Tony had Peter alone while Steve worked out or dealt with SHIELD business. The others weren't as invested as Steve for obvious reasons, but they adored Peter and were just as often involved in activities with him.

He still remembered how worried he'd been in the beginning that Peter would only ever have him to
Peter had a family, a large, chaotic, loving family, and Tony had never been more grateful in his life.

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**Eight Years Old**

"Peter, I can't believe you!" Tony shouted, "You know you can't go in my shop alone!"

"But Dad—" Peter made to stand up off the couch.

"Don't you even think about getting up yet, mister!" Steve sat him right back down.

"Okay, c'mon Dad, you did this sorta stuff when you were my age! Aunty Pepper said you built a circuit board when you were four!"

"My father made me, I didn't want to. That's not what four year olds should be doing, or eight year olds for that matter—"

"But you don't have to force me, I want to do it!"

"I don't need your child labor, Peter, you can build circuit boards and robots and whatever else if you want to when you're older—"

"But how much older?"

"When I say so!" Tony exclaimed, frustrated, "Because that's not the problem here, Peter! The problem is that you went into my shop without permission, you messed with the Iron Man suit, and you almost blew yourselfsky high! If JARVIS hadn't ordered Dum-E to intervene, god, I don't even want to think about what could've happened!"

"I've seen you, I'm smart and I pay attention, I know what I'm doing—"

"You absolutely do not know what you're doing! You're grounded for a week, is what you are, off to your room!"

"Dad, you're not being fair!" Peter complained, "Cap, c'mon, isn't he?"

"First of all, he's being perfectly fair," Steve fixed Peter with a look, "Second, even if he wasn't, I'd still tell you to do what he said, and third, stop trying to play us against each other and go to your room like your dad told you to."

"But I just wanted to surprise him," Peter complained petulantly.

"With what?" Tony threw his hands up exasperatedly, "Your dead body on my shop floor?"

"I've been watching you, I know how not to blow things up—"

"Peter, he still blows things up, and he's the smartest man I've ever met. There's millions more ways for things to go wrong than anyone could ever know," Steve tried to explain.

"Not to mention you're eight!" Tony exclaimed, "I don't care how smart you are, you're not old
enough to be handling weapons!"

"But I heard you tell that reporter the suit wasn't a weapon—"

"And what have we told you about reporters?" Steve sighed.

"Not to listen," Peter repeated the lesson he'd been told a thousand times over.

"That's right," Tony nodded, "Now off you go. Remember, grounded—that means no tv, no video games, no friends over. And no doing hand-to-hand with Aunt Natasha, either."

"But she says it for my health!"

"I don't care what she says! She's not your parent, I am."

"What if Cap says I don't have t—"

"Cap's not your parent either—"

"He's gonna be!" Peter insisted.

"Maybe someday, Peter, but right now—"

"I saw the ring, I'm not stupid, I know that means you're gonna get marri—"

"Peter!" Tony's voice absolutely did not squeak as he grabbed Peter by the arm and hauled him off the couch, "You, me, room, now."

"Tony, I—" Steve started to say something, but Tony quickly cut him off.

"Stay!" Tony yelped at Steve, pulling Peter along with him down the hall, "Peter, what were you thinking?"

"Well it's true, he's gonna be my parent too, isn't he?"

"Maybe, if he wants to be, but you can't just go saying things like that! That's a decision he has to make because he wants to, not because he feels obligated because you want him to be—"

"He does want to—"

"Maybe! But you don't know that, I don't know that, you can't just go blurting things like that out, and not to mention, mister, what were you doing in my room?"

"I wasn't!"

"Peter, that ring was in my sock drawer, why on earth were you going through there?"

"I wasn't!"

"Oh, it just happened to hop out on it's own and roll in front of you, did it?"

"No, I—!"

"Peter, I'm so disappointed in you, that was an invasion of privacy looking through my things, and incredibly rude of you to blurt it out like that in front of Cap, you've gone and ruined the surprise—"

"Da-ad!" Peter shook his arm free of Tony's grip, "I told you I didn't! Cap showed me his!"
Tony froze.

"He what?"

"Cap showed me his ring," Peter babbled while Tony stood stock-still, "He said he wanted to ask you to marry him, said he loved you and me very much and he wanted to spend the rest of his life with both of us, so he was asking if I'd be okay with him joining our family, if I'd share you with him, and I said yeah cause he makes you happy and smiley and stuff and he gives the best piggyback rides and tells the best stories and draws better than anyone—"

"He showed you a ring?" Tony questioned again, almost unable to believe it.

"Yeah, it was all pretty and silver and—"

"Might've looked a bit like this."

Tony spun around to see Steve on one knee, small black box propped open. The ring inside was a smooth bit of silver, and if Tony wasn't mistaken—

"Is that—?"

"Vibranium," Steve's ears turned a bit pink, but he didn't actually blush, "I had Bruce help me skim a bit off the edge of my shield and meld it, I thought it would be symbolic. You already have my heart, this is just a more…physical piece of me."

"Are you really…?"

Sure about me? Ready to spend the rest of our lives together? Fucking proposing to me in the middle of the hallway while my still-totally-in-trouble eight year old giggles next to us?

"Anthony Edward Stark," Steve cleared his throat, beaming up at Tony while Peter fidgeted with a mischievous grin, "I love you with everything I am. You make me happier than anyone alive, and I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with you. Would you do me the honor of marrying me?"

"I…I—"

"C'mon, Dad, spit it out already," Peter rolled his eyes with a grin, and Tony glared at him.

"You're still in trouble, you! Why aren't you in your room yet?"

Peter scampered off down the hall to his room, still giggling like a mad man.

"My knee's starting to hurt here, y'know," Steve teased him.

"Well, get up then," Tony flushed a bit, grabbing Steve by the collar and pulling him up into an intense, biting kiss, "Because the answer's yes, obviously."

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**Nine Years Old**

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Two days before the wedding, they had their first kidnapping incident.

They'd just finished a battle downtown with Loki, a lengthy, exhaustive affair, and were in debrief when JARVIS pinged Tony that they had trouble at the Tower. All electronic feed had been shut
down for an unknown length of time, and had only just come back on to reveal an unconscious 
Happy, a missing Peter, and a letter with coordinates.

Tony was…there weren't enough words in the world to describe Tony. Tony was desperate, was 
manic and panicked and terrified and a wild, ferocious, self-destructive mess, and Steve wasn't much 
better. Tony blasted out of the room faster than Steve had known the suit could go, snarling over the 
comms all the way.

"I don't give a fuck if he's your brother Thor, if that fucking son of bitch kidnapped my son I will 
fucking kill him, you hear me? I will literally gun that bastard down so help me god—"

"Taking a child is beyond even my brother's reprehension—"

"Fucking son of a fucking bitch—"

"Tony," Steve interrupted, "You need to—"

"Do not fucking tell me to calm the fuck down when my son is god knows where—"

"I'm not telling you to calm down, I'm telling you to relay the coordinates to Quinjet 3," Steve 
corrected, already on his feet, "I'm right behind you."

"Fuck," Tony breathed, "I love you, yes, okay, done—"

"Stark," Fury barked over the line, "We've got to think here. I know you're emotionally invested—"

"Emotionally invested? My fucking son, my flesh and blood, has been kidnapped and emotionally 
invested is the fucking best you can come up with—?!"

"Stark, this is their goal, they want you rushing in half-cocked and unbalanced—"

"Well happy fucking birthday to them, then!" Tony shouted, "Cause half-cocked and unbalanced 
and motherfucking pissed is exactly what they're gonna get!"

"I'm going." Steve was already on the move, making his way to the nearest Quinjet, "Anyone else 
with me?"

"All due respect Captain," Fury tried again, "This reeks of a trap—"

"Peter is nine years old," Steve hissed, "And he's about to become my son. If you think for a second 
I'm not going after him, then you don't know me at all."

"Of course we're coming, idiot," Clint rolled his eyes as he stood to join him.

"Whoever so has done this deed shall feel the wrath of the nine realms upon him," Thor thundered 
ominously, standing to join them as well. Natasha and Bruce were silent, but only a step behind 
Thor.

They were halfway to the coordinates when Tony told them the hideout had an anti-communications 
zone around it. Steve didn't bother warning him not to go in until they got there; they all knew it was 
nothing more than a heads-up, that Tony wasn't even slowing down before diving into the zone.

Tony's com line went dead. Natasha had to take over the wheel before Steve cracked it in half.

For a brief moment, they thought they'd arrived in time. The guards outside were unconscious but 
alive, and until they went into the warehouse, it looked like Tony had things under control. But when
they got inside…there was no mistaking what an utter disaster the situation was.

The furniture was upturned, there were bits and pieces of attack robots everywhere, and all the guards were dead or unconscious. Tony himself was a mess, helmet tossed aside, face bloody and bruised, one of spikes from the robots driven through his left shoulder. He was punching an unknown enemy into the ground, swearing and shouting and sobbing unintelligibly.

The body under him wasn't moving.

It took both Steve and Thor to pull him away, and more than five minutes of wrecked, desperate cries of my baby, god, my baby into Steve's shoulder for the word dead to follow Peter and for Steve's world to go hazy.

Tony passed out not long after, likely of the blood loss from his shoulder wounds. Steve couldn't do anything but sit there, cradling Tony in his lap, staring down at his fiancé and trying to fathom it. He tried to think back to less than an hour ago, when he'd been fighting alongside the man he was marrying, fighting to go home to a soon to be step-son he adored. A step-son with a mischievous grin and bright eyes, so creative and brilliant and with such excitement and love for life, for Tony, for him.

God.

He was nine years old.

Distantly he registered the fact that people were shouting at him. Someone was shaking his shoulder, but Steve couldn't bring himself to care, couldn't pull himself out of the wave of grief that threatened to drown him.

"…er's alive, Steve, you've got to listen, he's alive, Peter's alive—"

The wave rushed back and Steve slammed into the present, his head snapping up so fast he almost gave himself whiplash.

"What?" he breathed.

"Fury thought to try and get in contact with Happy," Natasha told him, "Happy says whatever JARVIS relayed to Tony was a glitch, no one's knocked him out and he's got Peter sitting on the couch watching cartoons."

"He's alive, Steve," Clint was kneeling next to him, gripping his shoulder, "He's alive, so you've gotta breathe, okay? You're gonna pass out."

"Right," Steve nodded. He hadn't felt the burn in his lungs until Clint said it, but then he did, and he gave a shuddering breath as he stood, "Trap. It was a trap, of course it was."

"They couldn't break the Tower's security, it's the best in the world," Bruce shook his head, "They probably just overpowered the standalone footage and replaced what they needed to."

"Right," Steve breathed, the world starting to return to some form of sense, "Right. Natasha, Clint, you stay behind, wait for SHIELD backup and help them sweep the place when they arrive. Thor, Bruce, you're with me. Bruce, Tony's losing a lot of blood, I need you to treat him best you can until we can get to medical."

It was all a blur after that. The body Tony had been beating into the ground was too mangled to identify, though they took the few living guards into custody. Tony was put straight through to
critical surgery the moment they got to the Helicarrier, since the spike through the suit's shoulder piece were proving to be a problem. The doctors had to take the armor apart piece by piece, since having it undo itself could jostle the spike, cause more damage. The surgery went on for ages, and though Steve wanted nothing more than to sit and wait outside the door until they let him in, he also needed to see Peter with his own eyes.

So he went home to Peter while the others went through debrief, shrugging Fury off with a concise, nonnegotiable not now. By the time he got home it was almost 9, and Peter was in bed but not asleep. Steve knocked lightly before entering his room, and sat on the edge of Peter's bed.

Peter was crying, sniffling into his pillow, and he sat up when Steve came in. He grabbed to Steve and wouldn't let go, but Steve had no complaints. He just crawled into the small bed and curled around the utterly inconsolable Peter, staying with him all night. Peter sobbed and sobbed, repeating I want Daddy over and over until his throat was hoarse. Steve just held him close, thanked God every way he knew how that Peter was safe, was alive, and hid his own tears as best he could from the boy's sight.

Peter eventually cried himself to sleep, but Steve was unable to do the same.

Tony was put in an induced coma to heal. He was unconscious straight through their wedding day, not that under these circumstances they'd have been getting married anyway. No one was allowed in except medical personnel, and Tony was in too bad a shape for Peter to see him regardless. Steve snuck in to see him on his own a number of times, but he couldn't stay long; Peter needed him, couldn't stand to be apart from Steve as well as Tony.

Problem was, even once they stopped giving Tony the drugs, Tony didn't wake up. Steve had an inkling about why that might be, and he snuck into Tony's room between a staff shift.

"Oh, Tony," Steve murmured, brushing back Tony's hair, "They lied to you, sweetheart. Peter's alive."

Tony stirred at Peter's name, but didn't wake. If anything, he looked more troubled, his face clouding in his sleep. Steve took Tony's hand, clasped it in his.

"He's alive, I promise, and he needs you. I need you, Tony. I can't do this without you."

Tony still didn't wake. Steve hadn't wanted to let Peter see Tony like this, but it was his best shot at waking Tony up. Tony was as cleaned up as he could be anyway, wasn't bloody or in pieces, just a bit bruised and unconscious. So Steve snuck Peter in, let him crawl up onto the cot with Tony.

"Please wake up, Dad," Peter begged, tucking himself under Tony's limp arm.

Tony stirred, and Steve let out the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

"Please, Daddy," Peter started sniffling, burying his face in Tony's chest, "Please."

"Peter..." Tony's voice was nothing but a raspy breath, but his eyes fluttered open and Steve collapsed into the chair by his side.

"Oh thank God."

"Dad!"

"Gentle, Peter, he's still going to be sore—"
"Ohmygod," Tony breathed out in a rush, "OhmygodPeter."

He must've ignored every injured, aching part of his body because he was up in a flash, shooting forward and enveloping Peter in his arms. His hands trembled but he gripped Peter fiercely, kissing every inch of Peter's face. Peter didn't protest, just hugged him back as hard as he could while Tony talked and talked, voice shaky and rattled as he wept.

"Oh my god, my baby, you're alive, I love you so much Peter, so much baby boy—"

Nothing else was intelligible, just wordless love sobbed into Peter's shoulder.

Tony fell asleep again eventually, Peter cradled in his arms. Steve moved his chair forward, holding Tony's hand and stroking Peter's hair while they slept. The nurses came in to have them removed more than once, but Steve was very clear that unless Tony needed to go into surgery again, Peter was not to be moved.

Peter slept in their bed for a week, and if Tony had gotten his way it would've been longer. Peter was in the fourth grade now though, and hospital scare or no, his pride insisted that he pull away from Dad. It tore Tony up, and he woke up in the middle of the night for months after in a cold sweat, screaming for Peter. Peter was kept unaware thanks to the soundproof walls, but Tony went to check on Peter almost three times a night those first few weeks.

In the midst of all this, planning their wedding was put off but not forgotten; traumatic events tended to bring people together or drive them apart, and thankfully with them it was the former. Tony was anxious and stressed, needing to cling to Peter and hurting desperately when Peter kept trying to prove his independence; Steve was often the only thing keeping him sane.

They were married a few months later. Pepper organized the affair to the letter, Rhodey flew in to be Tony's best man, the Avengers played groomsman/woman, and Peter got to be a ring bearer. They kept the ceremony small, friends and family, then had an enormous reception back at the Tower. They managed to fly under the radar with the press until the reception—but then, it would've been hard to keep the reception a secret considering they had Asgardian guests, more alcohol than Steve had ever seen in his life, and almost destroyed the Tower at least a half dozen times in the first hour. The whole affair was more chaotic than the last alien invasion.

Which was a laughably strange thought, but then again, so was Steve's life, and it meant he had a loving husband and beautiful son and insane friends and it certainly wasn't anything close to what Steve had expected out of his life, but it was a hell of a lot better.

Ten Years Old

"Peter what?"

"I don't know everything, I just got the call," Tony grumbled, "All I know is he got into a fight with some seventh grader named Flash—and who names a kid Flash, anyway? What were his parents thinking, sounds like a bully if you ask me—"

"Focus, Tony."

"Right, right," Tony sighed, "Anyway, they got into it on the playground. Pete's fine, but he flipped the other kid onto a table or something—which, okay, I'm admittedly a little proud he managed to flip a kid two grades up, but we have got to talk to him about not using Nat's training on kids his age—anyway, the 'Flash' kid is gonna be okay and so's Peter, but his teacher said he's really upset and
won't talk about what started it. I'm leaving work as we speak, but I thought you'd want—"

"Of course, I'm on my way," Steve had already grabbed his keys.

When he got to the school, Peter was sitting sullenly in one of the small plastic chairs outside the principal's office door. Tony didn't seem to have arrived yet, but the secretary recognized him.

"Morning, Mr. Stark."

"Good morning," Steve nodded back, still not entirely used to the hum of warmth at being addressed 'Mr. Stark'.

His taking Tony's last name had caused the occasional mix-up, but the confusions were mostly funny and easily fixable. There had been no way they were getting Peter to switch to Rogers, plus the company was labeled *Stark* Industries, and frankly, Steve wouldn't have asked Tony to take his name regardless. He could've just kept the same name, but he wanted to have the same name as his family; there were enough close-minded people who didn't consider him Peter's father, having a different last name would only give them more ammunition.

Plus, Tony got a kick out of it in debriefs.

"Stark, for god's sake, pay attention."

"Yeah, Steve, pay attention to dear old Saint Nick, would you?"

"Stark the first—"

"Howard's here?"

"Stark the pain-in-my-ass—"

"Yes, dear?"

"Peter," Steve pushed his thoughts aside to squat down in front of the boy—there was no possible way his body was fitting into one of those tiny little chairs, "What happened?"

Peter didn't lift his head, just continued glaring at his shoes. He didn't seem to have so much as a scratch, but then, with Nat's training, it was doubtful some seventh grader could've got the drop on him. Steve laid a hand on his shoulder firmly.

"I need you to tell me what happened, Peter."

"How come I call you Cap?" Peter lifted his head suddenly, less asking and more demanding the answer to his seemingly random question.

"I…" Steve paused, admittedly thrown off, "It's short for Captain America. Your dad calls me it a lot when he's teasing me. Why?"

"Billy has two dads too," Peter started to gain speed, "But he calls them Daddy and Papa, and he asked me why I didn't, and I said I didn't know, but then Flash said it was cause you're not my real dad and I said you were too my real dad and he said that you weren't, that you were just stuck with me cause you married my dad, and he made like he was gonna shove me and I was real mad so I flipped him instead."

Steve debated how inappropriate it would be to hug Peter right then.
"Violence isn't the answer, Pete," he said instead, "And I would never think that I'm 'stuck' with you. I love you very much, you know that."

"I know," Peter bit his lip, "I do. And I know he was just saying it to be mean, but it's not true, you are too my real dad, and he shouldn't get to say things like that—"

"Peter…" Steve interrupted softly, "You know I'm not—"

"You are," Peter cut him off to insist, "Dad told me."

"Uh," Steve blinked, "What exactly did he tell you?"

"He said your biological parents are the ones who made you, but your real parents are the people who love and take care of you. He said that he and you love me the most, that he and you take care of me and make me dinner and get me ready for bed and take me to school and soccer and the doctor and he said that makes you my real dad too, no matter what anyone says."

"When…" Steve paused to take a breath, because getting emotional right now would be silly, "When did he say this?"

"When you guys got married," Peter told him.

Steve heard someone clear their throat behind him.

"Well," Tony was looking at Peter sternly, but Steve could see the slight flush of embarrassment to his cheeks that Steve had heard his words, "That's all very true, but I don't remember telling you to hit them if they didn't agree."

"I know," Peter mumbled.

"You've got to use your words, Pete," Tony sat next to him, "You've certainly got plenty to work with, a vocabulary like yours. There's no reason to go flipping people into tables."

"I flipped him over the table," Peter muttered.

Tony paused, and Steve shot him a look that very clearly told Tony to wipe the smug look of fascination off his face before Peter saw.

"Over a table, huh? How far did he go?"

"Not helping, Tony," Steve rubbed his forehead.

"Couple yards," Peter gave a hint of a grin.

"You weigh like ten pounds, how on earth did you—"

"Tony."

"Right," Tony cleared his throat, "That was wrong of you, Peter. Natasha taught you those moves to keep you safe, not so you could be a bully."

"Uncle Clint taught me that one, actually," Peter admitted.

"Oh, good, I've been looking for a reason not to upgrade his arrows—"

"Tony, hush," Steve waved him silent, "Peter, it doesn't matter to me what anyone thinks. What
matters is that you know I'm your dad, that I love you just as much as if you were mine biologically."

"Does that mean maybe," Peter shuffled, looking at his shoes instead of at Steve, "I could call you Papa instead of Cap?"

"Of course, Peter," Steve pulled Peter into a hug, hiding his smile, "You can call me whatever you want to."

It was two days before Peter was in trouble again. This time, it was for swearing, particularly that he shouted at the same boy, Flash something—and Steve did admit to Tony privately that yes, that is a weird name, not that it's any excuse—that "at least my Papa chose me, your parents are stuck with your sorry ass!"

They weren't sure whether to be proud or ground him.

It wasn't a new feeling.

---

Twelve Years Old

For Peter's twelfth birthday, Tony and Steve built him his own shop. Tony did most of it, Steve just helped with the physical labor, but it was a nice, relatively large space with plenty of room for gadgets and gizmos and whatever Pete wanted to get up to in there. It had various safety precautions and of course was monitored by JARVIS at all times, but Peter was whip-smart and extremely capable and there was just no denying his thirst to build any longer.

Twelve, unfortunately, was also the age at which Peter discovered that he was the primary user in JARVIS' coding. Other than a safety protocol that overrode everything if Peter was in physical danger, Peter could get JARVIS to keep things secret from Tony, something Tony had clearly not anticipated when he'd assigned Peter primary user status as an infant.

Which was, Tony and Steve reasoned, the only way he got away with the absolute fiasco that was his seventh grade science fair.

"Well at least he didn't hurt anyone—" Steve pointed out, because thank God for that.

"You put your son in a fucking weaponized suit, it's a god damn miracle he didn't fucking hurt anyone!" Fury shouted, about to blow a gasket.

"Watch the language," Steve shot back as Peter ducked behind him, embarrassed and ashamed in light of Fury's shouting.

He was head to toe in a suit roughly identical to the original Iron Man suit, though bulkier and with the arc reactor protruding more from the suit, probably because his wasn't embedded in his chest. He'd crash-landed in through the ceiling of the gym almost twenty minutes ago, causing mass hysteria, destroying half his classmates projects, and setting off a national alarm that had SHIELD agents streaming in five minutes later.

"You say that like we made it for him—" Tony rolled his eyes.

"You didn't make him the suit?" Fury's scowl deepened.

"Of course I didn't make my twelve year old an Iron Man suit!" Tony threw his hands up, "What kind of a parent do you think I am?"
"Who the fuck did, then?" Fury demanded, "You've claimed only a fucking hundreds times you're the only one who knows the secrets of that technology—"

"Language, Nick, he's twelve," Steve insisted again, at the same time Tony exclaimed, "Who do you think made it? The idiot kid trying to give me a heart attack, that's who!"

"What? Peter?"

"Yes, Peter!" they both answered, exasperated.

"So you're telling me…your twelve year old…designed an Iron Man suit," Fury looked like he was going to burst a vein.

"More replicated, probably," Tony grumbled, "I hadn't thought to hide the schematics from him. That little snitch JARVIS helped you, didn't he?"

"Yeah," Peter examined his feet, "But it's not his fault, I pulled primary user status on him, he warned me it was a bad idea—"

"A bad idea? 'Bad idea' doesn't even come close to covering it!" Tony threw his hands up, "Do you know how bad repulsor burns hurt? Hell, you could've killed someone—"

"It's not weaponized!" Peter protested, "I stripped the original design to the fundamentals, it only flies —"

"But it flies using repulsors, doesn't it?" Steve pointed out sternly.

"Yes, it does, and I should know!" Tony exclaimed, "Because I designed it, and this is my intellectual property you've gone and swiped—"

"But I made changes—" Peter protested at the same time Steve said, "Tony, that's not the problem here—"

"Hey!" Nick shouted, gaining all their attention, "Can we focus for a minute on the fact that I've got a twelve year old playing superhero and breaking ten different laws in the process—"

"He is not going to be a superhero," Tony growled.

"Threat, then—"

"Why can't I be a superhero?" Peter complained, "I could weaponized the suit, I could be like you, Dad—"

"No," Tony and Steve resounded.

"Aw, c'mon, I could help—"

"You could get yourself killed!" Tony exclaimed.

"If you're too young to be a soldier, you're too young to be a superhero," Steve shook his head firmly.

"Oh, I like that rule, that's a good rule," Tony blinked, then nodded, "There you go, listen to Pop."

"What? But I could do good now—"
"Save the domestic dispute," Nick snapped, "You'd be a distraction to your parents, a legal liability to SHIELD, not to mention you're untrained; you're not going anywhere near the field. I want that suit scrapped, and not another word about this, you hear me? God, I deal with monsters and aliens and magic on a daily basis and it's you three that'll kill me, I swear."

"We're going to need to do a press conference," Coulson joined Fury, glancing between all of them, "Clarify the details so people don't panic."

An hour later, they were doing just that. Peter was ordered to keep quiet and look sorry, Steve stood at military rest and looked Supportive Of This Message, while Tony explained that, no, the world was not suddenly going to be overrun by people who could build arc reactors and Iron Man suits, but that Peter had access to technology and blueprints no one else did. Peter had not even in fact built an arc reactor; he'd swiped one of Tony's back-ups, and built his suit around it.

The media had still had a tizzy over it, but they went into a tizzy over everything, so it was really to be expected.

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**Fourteen Years Old**

"Wade's having a party, so I'm gonna head out after dinner," Peter informed them through a bite of lasagna.

"I distinctly recall saying no to that," Steve frowned.

"That was serious?" Peter startled.

"When is Pop not serious?" Tony snorted, "How long have you lived here?"

"Tony," Steve shot him a look.

"But that's not fair—"

"I know what goes on at Wilson's parties," Steve said sternly, "You're too young for that sort of behavior."

"You can't tell me who I can be friends with—"

"You can be friends with him without acting like him," Tony told him, "Or going to his psycho parties."

"I've seen his pictures on the facebook—" Steve started, only for Peter to turn on him.

"What? You're friends with him?!" Peter protested, "That's so not cool, Pop!"

"Of course I'm not friends with him," Steve wrinkled his nose in misunderstanding, while Tony rolled his eyes and explained.

"Peter means friends on facebook. And don't be silly Peter, we can hack into his account without becoming his friend. We just wanted to see what he was up to."

"Dad, that's illegal!"

"So is 95% of what SHIELD does," Clint snorted.
"You're superheroes," Peter rolled his eyes, "It's different."

"Well, technically speaking it's an invasion of privacy either way," Bruce pointed out, "Whether we're using the technology to locate a rogue alien or look up pictures of your friend's parties, we're justifying the same act."

"We hacked into more satellites to locate Loki than to hack Wade's facebook page though," Clint pointed out.

"Maybe, but it's all just more of the same," Natasha gestured with her fork, "Privacy is practically non-existent for your average civilian, regardless."

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't respect it," Bruce argued, "It shouldn't be about whether or not they can keep us out, we shouldn't be looking in the first place—"

"And we should just let Loki run free, then?" Clint raised an eyebrow.

"Can we not get into this discussion at the dinner table again?" Phil sighed.

No amount of arguing could convince his parents to budge, but that wasn't about to stop Peter from attending the party of the century. So Peter waited until Pops made Dad go to bed, then enacted his plan. He hacked into the main security system and looped the security footage so JARVIS wouldn't rat him out; Dad had revoked his primary user status after his last science fair. Which, okay, lame.

God, for superheroes, his parents were so uncool sometimes.

He had to take the bus there, but it was totally worth it; the party was totally rockin'. Wade's parties always were, since his parents were MIA all the time and Wade himself was kind of half-psycho at best. There were no boundaries, no rules, no limits. If Peter was being honest with himself, he could kind of see where his parents were coming from, but he was totally trustworthy, it wasn't like he was going to do drugs or anything.

The cops crashed the place a couple hours in, but Peter avoided detection—he hadn't been training with Aunt Nat and Uncle Clint all those years for nothing—and by then it was almost 4am and Peter figured he should head home anyway. As he was escaping, he heard one of the cops asking Flash if he'd seen Peter Stark anywhere, and Peter groaned.

Turned out those weren't cops after all, but SHIELD agents.

Great.

Peter debated running away, but he knew there was no point. He eventually slunk in around 5am; he tried to go in the back way, hoping he'd misheard the agent and that he could just slip inside and go unnoticed, but there was no mistaking Pops standing at the back door in full Captain America regalia, arms crossed.

"Come here often?" Peter tried weakly.

"Your father and half of SHIELD is out scouring every inch of New York for you," Pop voice was steel, the unflinching voice of command he used in the field.

"Guess you win the scavenger hunt."

"You think this is funny?"
"No, I just-"

"Go to your room."

"It's not a big-"

"Do not tell me that the most advanced security system in the world being hacked and our son disappearing is not a big deal," Pop voice had a hint of pained emotion for a brief moment, before the steel was back, "To your room. I'm going to call your father before he launches an attack on Latveria and causes another international incident."

"He wouldn't-" Peter began to protest.

"If he somehow thought Doom had taken you," Pop told him, no question in his voice, "He would. And there isn't a person in this building that wouldn't follow him."

Peter slunk off to his room.

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**Sixteen Years Old**

There was only one time Peter ever said Steve wasn't his real dad.

As these things usually were, it was over something stupid; Steve grounded Peter because he'd stayed out past curfew. Peter, like all teenagers do, spoke without thinking out of anger. He said a laundry list of things, all the classics: you can't tell me what to do, you're not my real dad and you never will be, I hate you, etc, etc. Upset and furious, Peter had bolted out the door without looking back.

Tony and Steve decided to give him a half hour to cool off and come home before going after him. The time passed, and Peter was still MIA. Tony suited up while Steve searched on foot, and it was another half hour before JARVIS informed Tony that Peter was home. Figuring Steve brought him in, Tony turned back. He took off the suit, went straight to Peter's room, and was surprised to find him alone.

"Where's your pop?"

"Isn't he with you?"

"Call him, tell him you're home. And I want to hear at least three "sorry"'s in there, young man," Tony ordered and Peter winced, but opened his phone.

He had a voicemail.

"Peter, it's Pop...look, I know I'm not related to you by blood and that's a bridge I can't cross, but that's never going to make you any less my son. I love you like you're my own, I always have and I always will. Just come ho-"

There was fumbling, then the dial tone.

"Dad?"

"Christ, you're pale. What's wrong, what'd he say?"

"Listen."
Tony listened, and went similarly pale.

"JARVIS, ping Steve's cell phone and tell the others to assemble in the living room—"

"Dad, I'm sor—"

"Not now, Peter," Tony cut him off, "Stay here, I'm going out to find him. I'll make sure one of them stays behind with you."

"I don't need a—"

"It's not a god damn babysitter!" Tony snapped, then seemed to collect himself, "It's a bodyguard, whoever this is isn't getting you too. Stay here."

Then he was gone, and Peter was left to his miserable, panicked thoughts.

JARVIS tracked down Steve's cell, but it was discarded in a gutter ten blocks from the Tower. The Avengers went out immediately, around 6, and spent the night searching the city for leads, but to no avail. Thor and Tony hit the streets, Clint and Natasha shake down their contacts and Bruce spends his time trying to keep calm and watching hours of illegally obtaining camera footage from the area. They finally managed to drag Tony home to get some sleep kicking and screaming at 4am in the morning.

Peter was still awake.

"Pete," his dad entered the room, but Peter didn't roll over. Dad patted his shoulder softly, "We need to talk."

Peter still didn't turn over.

God, this was all his fault.

"He's going to hate me," Peter whispered, his vision going blurry.

Pops had never done anything but love him and Peter had rejected him, had told him he wasn't his real dad and run out, gone and got him kidnapped, Pop was never going to forgive him, he was going to hate him and-

"When you were four, you bit him so hard it took three people to pull you off."

Peter turned over at that, frowning in confusion.

"What?"

"You hated him," Dad gave a watery laugh, "God almighty, Peter, you hated him ferociously. You shot at him with nerf guns, soaked him with the hose, threw anything you could get your hands on right at his head. Went on for weeks."

"I get it," Peter groaned, rolling back over and pulling the pillow over his head, "I'm a horrible little shit, I know-

"He never gave up on you," Peter peeked out of the pillow at the tone of Dad's voice, and saw that he wore the saddest smile Peter had ever seen as he spoke, "You shot at him, he picked up the bullets. You soaked him with the hose, he lied to me and said he had an accident trying to water the plants. I remember once, you threw the remote at his head because he asked you if he could make you lunch, and he just handed it back to you."
"Oh god," Peter moaned into the pillow. He was the worst human being to exist. *Ever.*

"He had to beg me to let him take you to the zoo. I'm talking begged, Peter, the man was all but on his knees. I was convinced you'd ask him to walk into oncoming traffic and he'd go right ahead and do it, thinking that would somehow win your affection."

"No more," Peter pleaded.

"I finally said yes, and you came home the best of friends. I still have no idea how he managed to get you to finally listen to him. All I know is, he could *never* hate you, not even when you hated him. He loves you more than anything, and I know he would want you to remember that."

"You can't know-"

"I can," his dad's voice was firm, absolute, and Peter peeked out of his pillow to look at him. There was no question in his mind, "And I do. He would never hate you, and he would never for a second want you to think that he did."

Peter was quiet, and Dad dropped his insistence with a bone-weary sigh.

"Peter…the thing is, parenthood has so, so little to do with who contributed some stupid strands of dna."

"I know," Peter mumbled into his pillow.

"Do you?" it wasn't accusing, just…tired, quiet, "You know that your mother left you with me. And you know I love you, you know I love you with all my heart, you're my baby boy, but…once, before…before Afghanistan, I was a different person, you know? When your mother left you at my doorstep, I panicked. I didn't know how to raise a baby, let alone on my own, and I…I tried to give you up, too."

Peter stayed silent.

"I got my priorities in check, and I have done everything in my power since to make up for that moment of weakness since, but…if Afghanistan hadn't happened…I don't know, Peter. I was a wreck. You got dealt a really, really shitty genetic hand, baby. Compare our first impulses with you, to him. He has never, not once, given up on you. There isn't anything that man wouldn't do for you. Lydia may be your biological mother, Peter, but she's not your parent. Your Papa is."

Dad's voice spoke volumes. It was weary and gentle; he clearly hadn't slept yet, Peter knew that much, probably wouldn't until they found Pop. Peter didn't think he would either. He knew that Pop hadn't always been around, that knowledge was what had started this whole stupid mess in the first place, but it had always been vague knowledge at best, ambiguous. He couldn't *actually* remember a time Pop hadn't been around to hoist him up on his shoulders, to kiss away scraped knees and bloody elbows, to make blueberry pancakes on weekends.

All he could remember were family trips and movie nights and birthday parties, help with his homework and cheering at soccer matches and tears on his first day of high school. Pop was inextricable from these memories; he was there, he'd always been there. The idea that he ever hadn't been was just that, an idea, a concept Peter couldn't fully grasp. Pop was one half of a united front Peter couldn't imagine ever having been separate.

He was Peter's *father,* maybe not by blood, but by choice.

And that meant everything.
"Get some sleep, Peter."

Dad squeezed his shoulder and kissed his hair before leaving, and when he did, Peter cried himself to sleep.

Steve managed to escape AIM's captivity in two weeks, which, all things considered, wasn't too bad. They'd been able to develop a drug strong enough to knock him out, but they hadn't compensated for how fast his metabolism adapted. He'd regained consciousness, feigned unconsciousness long enough to surprise his captors, and busted free.

He was out in the middle of New Jersey, of all places.

After escaping the warehouse—why did bad guys always operate out of podunk warehouses?—and hitching a ride to the nearest bar, he used a payphone to call Tony. Though he was tired, starving, and pretty sure he'd fractured his arm, he couldn't help but laugh imagining the look on Tony's face when he got a call from New Jersey.

"If you don't have don't have information about Captain America, stop calling."

"Well, that's a rude answer."

"Steve!" there was a sharp gasp on the other end of the line, "Fuck, are you okay? I love you, please tell me you're okay, I love you, what the fuck are you doing in New Jersey, have I mentioned I love you, I feel like that's very important and I'd like to impress that—"

"I'm okay, Tony, breathe, I know you love me—"

"Don't tell me to breathe, my husband was kidnapped you fucker!"

"Being said husband, I think I got that," Steve laughed; just hearing Tony's voice after all he'd been through was like a shot of pure, palpable relief.

"I know, I just…fuck, Steve, I was so god damn scared. They didn't have a single lead, you just…it was like you vanished, you…" there was a rush of air, a sound Steve recognized as Tony suiting up, "I've pinged the call, I'm on my way, I'm coming to pick you up—"

"I can wait for the Quinjet, I'm not in dange—"

"I am coming to pick you up do not argue with me Steven—"

"Okay, okay," Steve laughed, "Sure thing, 'Anthony'."

"Shut up," Tony shot back in the way Steve knew meant he was grinning, "God, I've missed you. Have I mentioned I love you?"

"You what?"

"Ah, sarcasm. Can I take credit for that? I think I can, I think I ruined you."

"Feel free, I blame it on you all the time."

"That explains the dirty looks Coulson always gives me when you mouth off."

"How are people still surprised? I was in the military, for goodness' sake—"
"I know, I try to tell them how dirty you can be in the bedroom, but—"

"Tony," Steve rolled his eyes, unable not to smile. God he'd missed this man.

"I kid, I kid. Besides, I like it when they're think you're all kittens and butterflies. It means I get the real you all to myself," Tony told him, then, after a beat, "So, it turns out I'm a lot worse at functioning without you than I remembered."

"You won't have to again, if I can help it."

"God, you say that like it's your fault weirdo supervillains fucking kidnapped you—"

"Well, of course not, I just mean I'll be careful—"

"I'm sorry, were you running around with a 'kidnap me' sign stapled to your forehead?"

"Of course not," Steve rolled his eyes fondly.

"Then don't you dare feel bad," Tony told him, then, there was a brief pause before he asked, "Stay on the phone with me?"

Tony's voice was small, as if admitting a weakness, and Steve didn't like it a bit.

"Of course," Steve murmured, "Have I mentioned I love you yet?"

"No," Tony told him somewhat petulantly, and Steve couldn't help but laugh.

"Were you waiting?"

"Of course I was!" Tony huffed, "You disappear off the face of the planet for two weeks, turn up in New Jersey, and I don't even get a 'hey, by the way, oh husband of mine, I love and missed you'?

"I swear, for a genius, you are the biggest idiot sometimes," Steve smiled into the phone, "Of course I love you. I love you, and I missed you desperately, every moment I was awake. I was drugged for most of it, but every time I woke up, I thought about you, Tony. It's always been you, it's always going to be you. You're my idiot, and you're stuck with me."

"Well, good," Tony seemed to be trying and failing to keep his dignity. Knowing this, Steve smiled, just as Tony snapped over the phone, "Oh, stop gloating, I can practically hear it over the phone. You've been gone two weeks, you might've been dead, I'm allowed to be a little emotional that you're alive."

"How far out are you?" Steve just asked, the ache to see Tony again flaring like a physical need.

"Soon, babe, soon," Tony reassured, feeling the same, "Three minutes forty-six seconds and counting."

"And Peter? How is he?"

"He's convinced himself you hate him, despite how stupid I told him he was being," Tony muttered, probably rolling his eyes.

"Why would he think I hate him?" Steve frowned, still a bit hazy, unable to draw any possible connection.

"Technically speaking you were out there that night because of him—"
"Well that's a stupid reason—"

"That's what I told him—"

"Of course I don't hate him, how could I hate him over something so trivial—"

"I told him about how he used to hate you, that you didn't even hate him then—"

"Well no wonder he's upset, Tony, why would you guilt trip him—"

"I didn't mean to, I was just pointing out that, logically speaking, if you didn't hate him back then you'd hardly be likely to now—"

"I cannot believe you told him that—"

"For the record, this is the part of the argument where I'd kiss you to shut you up."

"So hit the thrusters and prove it."

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**Eighteen Years Old**

Peter came home crazy drunk one night the summer before he went off to college, and Tony couldn't even be in the same room as him. It brought back too many memories, too many stupid mistakes. Steve was the one who gave Peter water and put him to bed, then he and Tony had a long talk.

Steve hadn't been around to see that side of Tony. He'd never known the alcoholic, asshole playboy, and that was a good thing; Howard had been a slave to it, and Tony had been following a dangerously similar path before Peter came into his life. But they had talked about it over the years, in casual conversation and in more emotional heart-to-hearts as well. Steve knew what a fantastically touchy subject it was for Tony, knew that Tony would do anything for Peter not to fall down that particular rabbit hole.

So of course, Steve completely supported him in his crusade to give Peter maximum hangover pain the next morning. This came about in the form of a 6am wakeup call, a double lecture at top volume, and hours of classic rock over the loudspeaker on whatever floor of the Tower Peter tried to hide on.

"God, why?" Peter groaned, collapsing facedown on the couch while "Iron Man" assaulted his ears.

"Why do you think, Peter?" Pops just sighed, flicking a page in his book, thinking Peter was talking about the music, "He's Iron Man, he thinks it's funny. Not to mention, aside from the fact that you're too young to be drinking at all, you didn't have a couple beers at a friend's; you were raging, out of control drunk. Did you think we'd let it slide?"

"No, not...not the punishment," Peter sat up to correct himself, staring at his hands. He felt like a child saying it, but it was true, "I just...Dad never gets this mad at me. I mean, sure he gets mad, but it never feels like...this. And I know what I did was stupid, but I don't get why this is any different from other stupid stuff I've done. I mean, I've caused two national crisis', snuck out of the house half a dozen times, even got you kidnapped once—"

"You did not get me—"

"But he never got this kind of mad," Peter tried to explain, "Like he's...I don't know, it just feels different."
Pops gave him a long, examining look. He didn't look angry or upset, just tired, but it was the lingering kind of tired, the kind that didn't come from being physically weary but from something inside.

"I don't think you've ever disappointed him like this before, Peter."

Peter winced; it was true, Pop wouldn't say it if it wasn't, but it still stung.

"You didn't mean to, I know, but you did. It's a touchy subject with him. But you couldn't have known, and he knows that. Just give him a little time."

"So you're on my side?"

"I am always," Pops chuckled, "Always going to be on your father's side."

"Who do I get in my corner, then?" Peter grumbled.

"You get us," Pops smiled softly.

"You're being cryptic again," Peter complained.

"You're never going to play us off each other, buddy. We're a team," Pops leaned across the couch to press a kiss to Peter's ruffled hair, "Just try to remember that we're a team for you, not against you."

"So you're not disappointed in me?"

"Of course I am," Pop gave him a look, "I'm very disappointed in you, we raised you better than that. But...well, this is all something you're going to have to talk to Dad about when he calms down. There's a family history that plays into it."

"Family history?"

"Alcoholism runs pretty heavily in your blood, Pete," Pop sighed, "He only managed to get a handle on it himself when you came into his life."

"Yeah...I've seen some of the articles about Dad before me," Peter nodded.

"You have?" Pop looked alarmed, which, to be fair, was the usual reaction.

"Yeah...I found this video Dad made," Peter shifted, aware now that he probably shouldn't have seen it, "He said I'd probably hear things about him, and that they were probably true at the time, but he'd been getting better, or trying to, for me, and, um, some other stuff. So I googled what he was like before having a kid. It was, uh, enlightening."

"What video?"

"Dad had palladium poisoning, and he thought—"

"You saw that?" Dad exclaimed from the doorway, "You little sneak!"

"I didn't mean to, JARVIS showed me when I turned eighteen—"

"JARVIS! I'll rewire you one of these days, you nasty piece of—"

"Language," Pop sighed, and Dad just huffed, walking across the room to collapse half in Pop's lap,
their legs tangling together as Dad pulled the remote out from the couch cushions.

"You were supposed to see that if I died, Peter."

"Would you really be okay if I was a Nazi?" Peter had to ask.

"You said he could be a Nazi?" Pop exclaimed.

"I thought I was dying!" Dad protested to Pop, then turned to Peter, "And no, you can't be a Nazi."

"You said it was fine as long as I was politically active."

"Yeah, if I was dead!"

"What, I thought 'the love always applies'?"

"Well, yeah, I just—" Dad sputtered a minute before landing on, "Just don't be a Nazi, jeez!"

"Should I be worried?" Pop raised an eyebrow.

"Nah, I'm a Democrat," Peter waved off his concerns.

"Good," Pops hummed at the same moment Dad groaned, "Great, I've lost my husband and my son to the liberal agenda."

"But Dad, how can you—"

"Ah ah ah," Pop warned him, "No political talk."

"Yeah, we banned that around the…" Dad paused, grinning at Pop, "What was it, fifth or sixth time you made me sleep on the couch?"

"You wish," Pop snorted, "Try the ninth. It was right after you threatened to make me live on the streets if I was 'so upset with living off the 1%'."

"Ah, right."

"You threatened to divorce him?" Peter's eyes boggled.

It was a strange thought. His parents argued almost constantly, but it was the weird, romantic-banter-y kind of arguing, not tear-the-family-apart arguing. Besides, they were always holding hands at the table and sitting in each other's laps and groping each other in public and generally being nauseatingly in love; sure, it made Peter want to gag, but at the same time it was kind of hard to see them acting any differently.

"What?" Dad gave him a weird look, "No. I just would've made him live on the street."

"But not divorce him."

"Don't be ridiculous, Peter," Dad only scoffed, "I'd fall to pieces without your Pop in a week."

"A week? You'd come crawling back in under twenty-four hours," Pop snorted.

"Oh, what, and you'd be just fine without me?" Dad teased.

"Don't be silly. I'd be sitting outside your door waiting for you to come to your senses, of course," Pop kissed Dad on the cheek, and Peter made a face.
"Get a room."

"You know, I don't think I've been making out with Pop enough if a kiss on the cheek still makes you squeamish," Dad declared, hooking a finger around Pop's shirt collar to tug him into a full-on kiss. Peter quickly covered his eyes.

"God, you're old, stop it," Peter complained.

"Excuse me?" Dad exclaimed, breaking the kiss to take offense, "What did you just call me? I'm… holy shit, I'm old!"

"It's okay, dear," Pop patted him on the knee consolingly, "I knew you'd figure it out eventually."

"Oh god, I've got a kid and a husband and I'm settled—"

"Dad, I'm eighteen, did it seriously take you this long to figure that out?" Peter rolled his eyes.

"Should I be worrying about a mid-life crisis?" Pop raised an eyebrow at Dad in amusement.

"Well, I've already got fast cars, lots of money, and a hot blonde half my age in my bed, so I guess I've kind of covered all my bases—" Dad mused.

"I am not half your age—" Pop protested.

"Okay, I have a hot blonde who looks half my age in my bed, which is a million times better because I get your brain and a twenty-something's stamina—"

"Oh my god, I'm right here," Peter groaned, face-planting back into the couch cushions as the Advil he'd taken earlier started to wear off and the hangover started to return. His muffled, "I hate my life" went completely ignored by his already bantering again parents.

He needed to move out already.

---

**Twenty-Five Years Old**

Peter had his own place out in Manhattan these days, partially out of a desire for independence, and largely to get some peace and quiet every once in a while. He was StarkIndustries CEO as of his twenty-first birthday, though like Tony, he spent most of his time in his shop. Unlike Tony, thankfully, he had a spotless record with board meetings and investors lunches and press conferences; he had Tony's charm and Steve's kind manner, a combination everyone at the company who'd weathered Tony's tenure viewed nothing less than a God-send. He visited home most weekends though, and he still had a room at the Tower for convenience. He and Tony were in the middle of a movie night on one of these weekends when Steve called, halfway home from a two week long mission with Clint and Natasha in Bangladesh. Tony paused the movie and put the call on speaker so Peter could say hi too.

"Hey babe, how was work?"

"Messy," Steve sighed over the line, "Don't even ask. I'm still too traumatized for that discussion. Anyway, I'm going to need a very long, very hot shower when I get home, and since I've missed you so very much, I was thinking we might make that a two-person activi—"

"Aaaaand you're on speakerphone, Pops, but thanks for that. Really," Peter left with a groan,
mumbling something about childhood trauma and stunting his emotional growth as Tony burst into laughter.

"God damn it, Tony," Steve said in a way that Tony knew meant he was blushing ten ways to Sunday.

"Did I not mention Peter was home for the weekend?" Tony laughed, "Oh, come on, that was hilarious, you should've seen his face."

"No shower sex for you if you're going to be an ass."

"Have I been a bad boy, Captain?" Tony purred, "Perhaps you ought to punish me—"

"It's still on speakerphone, Dad, _god!_" Peter gave a strangled sort of shout from the other room.

Tony just laughed harder.

---

"Dad, we are _not_ playing monopoly," Peter insisted for the third time.

"Well, why not?"

"Last time Pops won, you screamed, 'fuck you, I want a divorce' loud enough for the neighbors to hear."

"He cheated!" Tony accused, poking Steve in the side.

The assorted Avengers minus Thor, who was in New Mexico with Jane, were sprawled throughout the rec room trying to make a decision. Peter was bringing his steady girlfriend to the house that night for a Meet the Parents and Assorted Faux-Relatives dinner. Clint was hanging upside from the couch, Natasha and Bruce were on the small couch, and Tony was lounging against the corner of the couch while Steve massaged his feet. Phil was on Steve's other side, and Peter sat on the floor, facing them all.

"No, Dad, that was you," Peter sighed.

"I most certainly did not—"

"You tried to substitute the monopoly money with real cash," Steve reminded him with a subtle smile.

"That's not _cheating_ that's _improvising_—"

"C'mon, Dad, I really like Emily, can you maybe not scare her off?" Peter sighed.

"I don't know what you expect, Peter," Steve admitted, "You're introducing her to the Avengers, _something_ crazy's bound to happen. You'll be lucky if there's no supervillain attacks."

"Remember the last time we played strip poker? The League of Villains crashed in through the window, I think we had three pieces of clothing between the seven of us," Phil sighed.

"I think we won purely out of shock value," Bruce chuckled.

"The Hulk is always a little more terrifying when he's naked," Steve said thoughtfully.

"Ooh, strip poker, we could do that—"
"We're not playing strip poker, Uncle Clint!" Peter groaned.

"I'm just saying, if you really want to get to know someone..." Clint wiggled his eyebrows.

"I know her plenty," Peter grumbled, "It's you I'm worried about."

"Ignore your Uncle Clint," Natasha elbowed Clint, "He's just a dirty old man."

"I'm forever twenty-five and I don't want to hear another word about it," Clint insisted.

"Right. That's why your last birthday cake had forty-eight candles on it—" Peter rolled his eyes.

"I fucking hate you guys," Clint complained, "That was cruel."

"And a fire hazard," Phil pointed out.

"Anyway," Steve interrupted, "Monopoly and strip poker are out."

"We could play Risk—" Natasha began to suggest.

"No," the room resounded.

"Let's try not to make her cry until the third date, Tasha," Clint grinned, "What about Cards Against Humanity?"

"Not after last time," Bruce groaned, "The way we play that game is a crime against humanity."

"Do we really even have to play a game after dinner?" Peter complained, "Clearly this isn't going to end well for anyone."

"Dominoes!" Steve stopped massaging Tony's feet long enough to snap his fingers, "Dominoes are simple."

"Simple, but untested," Tony pointed out.

"True," Phil agreed, "Thor's going to be in town, this could be like the time we tried to play Spoons without explaining the rules properly."

"I don't remember that," Peter quirked his head.

"You were too young to remember," Tony waved a hand, "It was when these guys were still new to the Tower and we were trying to bond. We told him you had to fight to grab a spoon before they were all gone, and forgot that your Uncle Thor takes the word 'fight' very literally..."

"...so Uncle Thor broke Uncle Bruce, and Uncle Bruce broke the Tower," Steve finished.

"Not the whole thing," Bruce added hastily, "Just the rec floor."

"...yeah, never mind," Peter grumbled, "I think I'm just going to tell Emily my family died yesterday in a horrible fire, no survivors."

"Oh, that's no fun," Tony waved a hand at him lazily, "We've got to vet her before this gets too serious. If she can't handle us, she's not worth your time."

"Dad, if she can't handle you guys, she's normal."

"Eh," Tony shrugged, "But do you really just want normal? No, come on, you want fantastic,
extraordinary—"

"Not everyone marries Captain America, Stark," Phil rolled his eyes.

"Don't be jealous I snagged him first, philbug," Tony grinned, wiggling his toes at Phil.

"Feet out of my face, out of my face—"

"Play nice, Tony, stop gloating," Steve chuckled, pulling Tony's feet back out of Phil's face.

"I married Captain America, I will gloat my way to my grave," Tony just grinned.

"This is hopeless," Peter groaned, "I'm bringing her to dinner, and then I'm hauling her out as fast as humanly possible."

The night went about as well as Peter could've expected. Clint hit on Emily—though to be fair, less than Peter had expected—and Natasha only gave Clint a minor concussion for it. Pops had been totally invasive, wanting to know every little detail of her life, while Dad had been horrifyingly opposite, having already used SHIELD resources to do "recon". Bruce had been relatively sane, other than when he'd asked about her freaking medical history like they were going to have babies next week or something, and Phil had interrogated her like she was on trial, but that part, at least, he'd expected.

By far the worst part was when Thor assaulted everyone's eardrums to announce he was "most delighted that you have consummated your youthful union of love".

Peter had kind of expected Pops to have some kind of heart attack, what with the 40's wait-till-marriage mindset he'd always tried to impress upon Peter, but he'd actually taken it rather in stride.

It was Dad who'd spit his water in Clint's face.

Unfortunately, the whole thing had clearly freaked Emily out. And yeah, okay, his family was totally and completely insane. But they were still his family, still the people who had been there for him as long as he could remember. He knew he'd been raised in an unconventional situation, to say the absolute least, but he loved his family. They were crazy and wild and occasionally out of control, but they were home. He knew they could be a bit…much to people who weren't used to them, but they weren't something he was willing to compromise.

He stayed the night at the Tower a week or so later, the night he finally broke it off with Emily. Clint and Phil bought the ice cream, Natasha put on The Notebook, Thor gave him a Shakespearean-sounding pep talk about the prevalence of true love in the end, and Bruce offered to give him the world's best back massage. Dad just pulled him into his lap in spite of Peter's protests that he wasn't a little kid anymore, and Pop hugged them both tight as they all pretended not to cry when Noah said, "I want all of you, forever, everyday. You and me…everyday."

Peter couldn't imagine his life any other way.

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